

# Beren One Hand

## Volume 6: The Bridestone

**John D McKellar**

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My personal web site is

<http://www.john-mckellar.com/>

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## Prologue

Creation is the goddess of sweat and passion, of ardour and frustration. The grinding labour of months, brief moments of transcendent joy: these are her gifts to those hapless souls whose fates are chained to her will.

Makers make, not from choice, but because they must. But the fiery goddess visits or stays away at her own whim. Her presence consumes everything – time, energy, love, livelihood, sanity. Her absence leaves the maker empty and bereft, rudderless in a cold world, and stricken always with the fear that the blessed, cursed visitation will never return. To be a creator is to plumb the depths of anguish, or to be seared in the white flames of ecstasy; but it is never to be free.

The boy did not think of himself as a maker. There were plenty around him who were such, in descending scales of power from the very highest; but high or low, he considered their outlook too narrow. They all seemed focussed on one area or another, whereas he was interested in everything. As he grew towards maturity, as the fire in his spirit burned hotter and brighter, so the more he came to appreciate the richness and complexity of the manifold world in which he found himself, and the fiercer grew his thirst to understand every part of it, and to master them all.

His peers he found insipid; his elders unimpressive. From the entirety of his folk, only his mother and father commanded his reverence. As for the Valar, they were of their natures more potent than he; he could not but admit it. But until he had run up against his own boundaries, run up hard against them – which he had never yet done – he would not accept that he must always be their lesser.

Thus he learned, and grew, and ventured ever further in conceptions and understanding. Even from the earliest days, he could make things which no other could. The more that he learned of the world and himself, the more wonder new creations of his awoke. He rose early to notice among his folk, and as the measureless time passed, in that Day before days, as the flame of desire blazed ever higher in the young Maker, so gradually their regard for him passed into awe. He waxed in brightness among them like some great planet, burning ever hotter among the lesser stars, as it ascends in majesty against the evening sky.

For his own works of hand he had little regard. He gave them away in indifference. They were not his goal; only tools towards greater understanding, greater mastery. Always glimmering on the horizon beyond his straining spirit was some greater goal, some greater challenge.

All the hours of his life – and behind him lay now the numberless days of unending youth – were as bricks in a tower, steps up a mighty mountain, bright blades forged and laid one by one at length into massed shining ranks of terrible gleaming force. Craft built on craft, and ever as his lore and skill broadened, so saw he ever deeper into the very heart of things.

Such is the slow, hard winning of knowledge. Each work shines, maybe, a little light into a dark corner. The new-won knowledge suggests further works. It is not an aimless progress, although few know where the road will lead at its beginning. There is no oversight, no direction. One takes the step which seems good; then that step suggests another, and another. Only hindsight reveals the line. So with the Maker. Many wonderful things had he made, ever more marvellous and subtle. His craft had ever waxed the greater, his spirit burned the hotter, until he was become the first of his race in skill of hand and mind. But now each work left him the more unsatisfied. Pieces which would have filled him with astonished satisfaction in his early days had sunk to the status of baubles. These small visions and powers – how they bored him now! He could make them in his sleep. But behind the curtains of the sky, beneath the roaring of the mighty oceans, within the earth's deeps, he sensed god-like forces, unimagined possibilities. With the slow penetration of the passing years, as he understood ever more of their outlines, fantasy turned slowly to speculation; speculation became essay; until at last he *knew*. He had, at last, at long last, all the keys in his hand. He could see how to harness the giants of Creation, and make them work to his command.

This latest, most daring, perhaps final work of his had been long in the preparation. Now at last the materials were at hand: certain beakers filled with the holy light of the Trees. Little else there was in his work place that the untutored or mortal eye could have seen. The subtle devices of his art – many of which themselves

were works of such skill as has never been seen outside that place, nor ever will be – rested in the worlds behind or between. These were forms, shields, concentrators, enablers, reflectors, enhancers, callers in careful array, positioned and directed. It was no light matter that he now attempted; a misstep would kill him – indeed, far more than that: what he risked was no less than the eternal persistence of his spirit.

All trembled on the brink. There remained nothing to prepare. The Maker touched loose the latch that held all in check, and waited, sweating.

The initial movement was so slow as to leave him in doubt that he had miscalculated, left out some factor. Gradually, though, the process began. The Maker had unleashed a titanic strength, which slowly awoke. It was moving, now, and its force was so great that no power in Arda could halt it.

Impetus gathered; the pace picked up. The Maker felt himself as a straw whirled high in a thunderstorm. His one hope, or rather his laborious and comprehensive calculation, lay in precise equality. For he had unleashed not one force, but three. They were exactly matched.

Faster, and ever faster, irresistible; the three powers waxing, growing, like torrents in the mountains. The working of power against power began to shake the heavens, shook the earth beneath them. All guides still held; all forces remained matched. Descending now like hurtling worlds, coming together, the Three approached.

They closed; they met.

After the titanic shock had died away, the Maker picked his shaken way out of the ruins of his atelier. It cost him some trouble to heal the manifold disasters his own body had suffered – indeed, a lesser being would have died in that backwash.

He saw that the shattered chamber had become filled with light. As his vision cleared, the Maker made out its source: three great jewels, resting on an undisturbed portion of his work bench. The light from the gems smote him in the face.

The first shone fiercely white as molten iron coiled in the forge. The second shone blinding white as sunlight on sea foam in the morning of the world. The third blazed with the burning white of frosty stars strewn across the midnight sky.

They were the Silmarils, and this was the tale of their making.

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The first thing Blodwis noticed about the tall young man at her door was his beautiful blue eyes. And what a fine, strong face they were set in! She might be old now, but she could still appreciate a good-looking man when she saw one, indeed she could!

She quickly took in more of him, looking him up and down. Just a knife and a bow. No quiver or other bag. No tunic, gods love us, what was a man doing out with no tunic in this sort of weather? He looked as though he had been in a fight with a bramble bush, and more besides. In fact he looked proper used up.

The young man bowed his head to her politely, then in quite reasonable Haladish he said, “I beg your pardon, Mistress, but I seek news of people from the Pine Mountain, the land to the North of here. Have you perchance heard of any?” His voice was firm, but sounded as tired as the rest of him.

There wasn’t enough flesh on his bones, that was for certain; and some of those wounds were worse than bramble-scratches, she saw that now. Something had clawed him on his side, and his left arm was lame.

She opened the door wide. “You’ll be rather wanting some salve and a bowl of stew,” she said to him. “Come on in.”

He smiled, and it was a nice smile. His teeth shone even and clean in his weather-tanned face. "I thank you, Mistress," he said, "but I'll be all right. I really just want news of my people."

"News?" Blodwis said. "Of the Northern folk? Well, I can tell you what I know. But you can hear it just as well over a bite to eat. Come on in now, don't keep me standing in the cold."

Clearly perceiving that further resistance was useless, the man smiled slightly and bent to pass under the doorway. Blodwis made him sit at the board while she busied herself at a steaming cauldron on the fire. She brusquely turned off his offer to help.

A short time later she plonked a bowl down in front of him and laid wedge of bread and a horn spoon beside it. A stout tankard of beer completed the set. "Here," she said. "Get that into you while I seek out some salve. Merseth had it a day or two ago, bless me if I know where that girl has put it, but I'll just go look." She rummaged in a chest in the next room while the man eagerly scooped the thick and savoury brew into his mouth.

"Merseth is my youngest," Blodwis remarked to the traveller as she reappeared, carrying some clean cloth and a squat, opaque jar. "She's off with her young man. Dances."

"I'm glad to hear you are not on your own, Mistress," said the man.

"Well, no," admitted Blodwis, "but I'm loner than I did use to be, that's certain. Just Merseth and my lad Markas now. He's got the next farm but one. The two older ones passed on long time ago, in the goblin wars; and my man went off with the ague two winters past." The stranger made some sympathetic noises, but Blodwis cut him off. "Thank you, Master, but no need. Life is the thing. We're obliged to savour it while we've got it; for tears won't bring it back, nor anything else neither. Now, you just hold still a while, so's I can see what hurt you've taken. You needn't be shy, I've brung three boys to full growth, and nursed my man betimes as well."

She concentrated on his wounds for some moments. Some of them were just scratches, as she had taken them at first, but there were marks that looked more like bites; though what from, she wouldn't like to speculate.

"My faith, but you've been in the wars and no mistake, youngster. Where have you blown in from? Southward, would it be?"

The man shook his head. "No," he said. "From the North."

Blodwis sat back and stared at him. "From over the hills?" she asked.

The man nodded.

"But... that land's been empty, since the wars," she protested. "As tha well knows. Else why would you be wanting the news you said? There's only been that band of brave men held on there, so the tale went, and lastly there was only the one hung on, that lad Beren." Her eyes widened slowly as she examined his face and took in his wry smile. "Oh great Powers – oh stars above. It can't be. You will not be telling me that's *you*?"

"It is," smiled Beren.

Blodwis put her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide above it. "By the Mother of the Forest," she said. "*Beren*? I can't hardly believe it. But it's *true*, I can see it in your eyes. Oh, my son. Oh, my son, I can't tell you what an honour and a glory this is to me. And me just a common farming woman. Oh, my. Let me sit down!" But she found that she was sitting down already.

"Don't fuss, Mistress, please," said Beren. "I'm just a man like any other – only perhaps a little more stubborn than most. It's all over now in the North. I've come away, and I'm just seeking news of my folk."

To settle her flurried heart Blodwis resumed her work on his wounds, sneaking looks at his face from time to time. “Well now,” she said, “let me see. The North-folk. Well, they all came here to begin with. To Brethil, I mean. Late in the year of the Fire, that was. A whole parcel of women and wounded men, it was – not but what there might have been some fit men in among them, but I’d best not be talking scandal. They wasn’t in a good way: they’d caught bad weather in the pass.” It struck her then that this man, this Beren, who she could hardly believe was sitting now in her very own house, must have just come over the pass himself – but in the middle of winter? It defied belief. “We sons and daughters of Haleth helped them as we could of course. Most went on after that, east, away off to that far land where the blond folk come from. Our chief’s lady Glóredhel, she comes from there. There’s only a few that stayed.”

The young man’s head came up at that. “Some of them stayed?” he asked.

“They did,” replied Blodwis. She kept her voice as neutral as she could, and kept the thoughts that arose to herself. “I can point you in that way, whenever you’re inclined to go. But if you’ll be guided by me, you’ll bed down here for the night. You’re welcome to stay; more than welcome. Lad, you don’t know how news of you has cheered our spirits, all through these dark times. It is a tale of wonder you’ve been for us. My boy Markas would be thrilled to meet you, and lots of others too.”

Beren smiled but shook his head. “I’m not very used to houses,” he said. “You’ve been more than kind to me – I’m sorry, might I know your name?”

“Blodwis,” she told him.

“– Mistress Blodwis,” he went on, “but I’ll find somewhere I can curl up in the woods.”

The ageing woman stood back and set her hands on her hips. “What’s that you said about being stubborn?” she said. “I can see that. Oh aye, I can. Listen, lad, there’s snow on the way, can you not feel it? And you’re not in good shape. Now, don’t argue, there’s a good boy. It’s near dark now, you won’t be going further tonight nohow. You just lie yourself on that bed. I’ll throw some leaves onto it if that’ll make you feel better. Come now. Are you going to be sensible?”

Beren laughed and raised his hands in mock surrender. “All right,” he said. “I know when I am outmatched. But Mistress, please, don’t invite the district over to goggle at me while I sleep.”

She put her hand on his strong shoulder. “Never you worry,” she said. “I know you need rest. Now look, I’ll heat some water so’s you can wash first. Should have done that before salving you, by rights.” She eyed his long legs doubtfully. “I’ve plenty of spare clothes, but fitting you is going to be a puzzle. There’s a lot of you, isn’t there? We’re not so long of leg, mostly, in these parts, and my lads are no exception.” She bustled around at these tasks, taking no notice of Beren’s protests.

She had a peep over his gear while he was washing. There wasn’t much of it beside his tattered kilt. The knife was ordinary, but the bow was rather fine. There was a finely worked belt of metal links, and a battered water skin. A little pouch presumably of keepsakes or totems that he wore around his neck. That was the lot – no food, no cloak, no nothing.

After the man was washed and changed – looking, she thought to herself, several shades the lighter for it – he asked her one more question before lying on the pallet she had shown him.

“Mistress Blodwis,” he said, “my mother was leading the people who came over the mountain. Emeldir by name. A tall woman, with red – well, it used to be red hair, but more greying of late. She always wore it in a long plait. Did you ever see her or hear of her?”

Blodwis thought, but shook her head. “Can’t say’s I ever did,” she replied. “Seemed to be several in charge of that lot, or none at all. It was all a bit of a shambles.” She saw the disappointment in his face. “I’m sorry, lad.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “Goodnight to you then.” He hesitated, then added, “I may shout out. I’ve had... rather a hard journey. I’m sorry. Just ignore it if it happens.”

Blodwis came to him and reached up to touch him a little shyly on his cheek. “Sleep now,” she said gently. “Don’t worry about those old dreams. Life’s the thing.”

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Beren accepted gratefully a bowl of steaming porridge in the morning, and in return he carried in some wood for her and fetched water. Blodwis didn’t want him to strain his arm, but he just laughed and did everything with the other. She insisted then on re-dressing his wounds, but he was eager to be away after that and would brook no further delay. He turned off her protests about the weather (it had begun to snow) with his characteristic smile. Observing his face, Blodwis thought to herself: master Beren, you’ve had no maids near you for a parcel of years, if the tales of your northern war are true. But it seems to me that’s bound to change, and the first canny maid to catch sight of that smile and those bonny eyes o’ thine will snap you up, my lad. You see if she don’t.

She said none of that to him of course. After she had told him his way, and as he was dressed in the furs she had pressed on him and was poised to go, she hesitated, thinking of another matter.

“Beren,” she said, laying her hand briefly on his arm, “I don’t rightly know how to say this, seeing as it’s your own folk and none of my business, maybe. But just... watch how you go. All right? Just watch how you go. Maybe you’ll join up with old friends, and everything will be fine; but maybe it won’t, neither. Do you hear me, now?”

Beren stared at the old woman, noting her clouded expression, but unable to fathom exactly what she was getting at. Was there some trouble? Well, he would consider himself warned; which was clearly what Blodwis had intended. He said as much, thanked her again, promising to return the fur as soon as he was able. Then he was off, loping away through the falling snow with a surprising degree of quiet in a man so large.

After he was gone, Blodwis sighed, closed the door, and went to put the kettle on. Markas would surely come by later in the day; should she tell him about her startling visitor? She decided there would be no harm in it; and after all, it wasn’t every day she had such a piece of news. Not but that Markas would be some vexed to have missed meeting the famous One-Man Army of the northern lands; oh wouldn’t he just. He fair venerated that Beren, loved to listen to the stories that went about.

She thought again of what the lad was headed for, and a frown knitted her brows. He would probably be all right – after all, he had held off that Werewolf-devil<sup>1</sup> all those years, hadn’t he? He must be able to look after himself.

She would surely tell Markas of her concerns, though. He might have something useful to say. He was growing quite a good head on his shoulders these days.

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The snow was falling steadily on a slight drift of air, but little of it was yet lying, so the going was easy. As he slipped through the bare trees, Beren looked around the forest with interest. He remembered woods of this sort from his visit years before. They were in every respect unlike his own – the trees were different, even the very air smelt different. Only the creatures were much the same, although there were not many to be seen or felt in the present season.

Felt: that was a very great difference. He had grown up in his own woods, and he knew them in his blood; had again and again felt his way out along the threaded channels of life to sense, even if dimly, the goings on in their farthest reaches. But here, in this strange country, he felt blind and dumb. He tried not to think about

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1 She meant Mairon.

it; his mind shied away from the place. So far he had not felt strong enough to face what he had lost. So he turned away, put it away from his mind, and did the thing that was in front of him without raising his eyes to look further.

When he had to think of something, he thought not of what he had left behind him in the North, but on what he had glimpsed from the cliff during his escape. That land of light had called to him already as a boy, but the busy currents of time had carried the memory far behind him, so that he had come eventually to doubt that the beautiful image could be true; had ceased to quite believe that such a wonderful place could be real. But now he had glimpsed it for a second time, and all the wonder and the longing had poured back into his soul. He wanted desperately to visit the Hidden Realm. He remembered Húrin's discouraging words of long ago concerning the barrier, the exclusion of all strangers; but nevertheless, he resolved to try his luck – some time, somehow.

For the time being, he had other concerns.

He continued to take notice of the country he was passing through. The trees grew thickly, but quite often the woods opened up into clearings where the land was farmed. He met few travellers on the road, and he hid from those mostly, since he had no desire to lose any more time in talk. Once or twice he had to ask people the way. They looked curiously at the tall stranger with the great bow, on foot in this weather. They put him on his way with a word or two, then turned to watch him as he walked on.

Beren saw occasional houses, huddled mostly in clusters behind a stockade; their lighted windows cheered him, kept him company. He was not used to people, and was shy of them, but at the same time he yearned for the human voices and smiles he had been starved of these many years.

He thought about what Blodwis had said about the plight of the refugees. So they had been caught in a storm... He had feared it. No news of his mother, but that was its own news, really. He had no hopes in that quarter; he simply wanted to know. There had clearly been other deaths – how many, how grievous would also not be known until he arrived at the settlement.

That set him to brooding on the farm-wife's last words to him. Still thinking on her warning, he arrived at his destination.

He had passed for a time through untended forest, the bare trees reaching high overhead. This came to an abrupt end as he reached one of the cleared and cultivated patches. The path wound on through the bare fields, covered now whitely in fresh snow. The wind was cold and there was no-one about.

After a few minutes, a stockade loomed darkly out of the failing day. He came up just as two men in padded jackets were in the act of closing the gates. They were large men. Beren hailed them in his own speech as he came up, and they paused and peered at him suspiciously through the remaining gap.

“And who might you be?” the senior of them said.

“My name is Beren,” he said. “I come from the North.”

The gate-wards started a little at the name. The one who had spoken asked him to repeat it, so he did. The two guards looked at each other.

“Are you that fellow what stayed behind?” asked the elder, doubt in his voice.

“I am,” said Beren with the beginnings of impatience, “but could we not continue this conversation indoors? It is a raw sort of day, and I have had nothing to eat since daybreak.”

The guards were reluctant. “Got to send to the Hall,” said the first guard curtly. “Them's orders. No strangers admitted without the Hall gives leave.”

Beren felt the beginnings of anger growing in him. This seemed a very meagre welcome after all his years of loneliness and pain. Striving to keep his voice calm, he said, “Very well, send away. But for pity’s sake, man, let me wait in shelter, will you? I give you my sworn word not to stir further until your Hall allows it. You wouldn’t keep a dog from the door on a night like this.”

After some muttering between themselves, the guards grudgingly pulled the gates back to let him in, before closing and barring them. They led him into a guard room hard by the gate. A welcome, orange warmth streamed from a good fire. A youngster looked up from the table, goggling open-mouthed at the stranger, but a sharp few words from the guard-captain sent him scuttling out. The boy sneaked a final stare as he banged the door to.

“Parl there will take word,” said the guard-captain gruffly. “Just you sit yourself down, mister, and make yourself comfortable.”

“Did you have anybody special you was going to visit?” asked the other guard in more friendly tones.

Beren looked them over in the light. He knew neither of them, but that was no surprise.

“I don’t know who’s here to visit,” he said. “We’ve – I’ve – had no news since the people left, years ago. None at all. I don’t know which of my kin are living, nor where they are. Perhaps you can tell me?”

The junior guard opened his mouth, but the other put a warning hand on his arm and shook his head. “Sorry, mister,” he said. “We’m to hold our tongues with strangers. Orders. But you just rest yourself, I make no doubt you’ll find out all you want to know just as soon as word comes back.”

The three of them sat uncomfortably, nobody caring to say anything. The two guards kept silence out of constraint, Beren from exasperation. The warmth of the fire was welcome, but neither of them offered him anything to eat or drink. Probably orders, he thought sourly.

After a long ten minutes, the lad rattled back in through the door. “He’s to go up,” he said breathlessly.

“Well, you’d better show him,” said the guard-captain. “Now, none of that,” he went on sharply, as the boy began to protest. “He don’t know the way, do he? An’ we can’t go, we’ve duty.”

Grumbling, the boy Parl led the stranger up the street. The snow had stopped now, and Beren could see a little better what sort of place this was, despite the deep blue gloom of the evening. There seemed to be several tens of houses, clustered behind a fence in a few acres of land. Golden light gleamed here and there from windows. The street, if that was a fitting word for it, was a narrow way of deeply churned mud, now covered in a featureless blanket of fresh snow. Even Beren’s sure feet stumbled a little on the rugged pocks of half-frozen marl.

At the end of the street, a larger house loomed. Parl led Beren to the door at the end and thumped on it. A shutter shot back, letting out light. The shivering Parl spoke into it, “Here he is!” Someone inside grunted, and the boy, with a nod to Beren, turned and sped back down the street. The door opened wide; lamplight within shone into Beren’s eyes, so that he could not make out the man’s face. “Come in!” the man said, and as he spoke, memory tugged at Beren. He knew that voice. He stepped into the doorway, and as the light fell on his face, the other exclaimed, “Lumme! It *is* him!”

At the same moment, the man’s face came into focus. The instant it registered, Beren was moving, turning his head. Too late – the blow came from behind and smashed him into darkness.

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Beren first became aware of pain. The cloud of pain settled into his head and his shoulders. The light gathered into focus behind red lids. His eyes fluttered open and the lamplight stabbed renewed pain into his head.



He was upright, held up it seemed by his hands, which were stretched out and above his head at awkward angles. His shoulders were aching from the strain. He flexed his muscles, and at cost of hammer-blows of pain in his head as he moved, he was able to take the weight on his legs and relieve his arms somewhat. Squinting against the light, he lifted his head carefully and peered into the room. The first thing his blurred vision lit upon was exactly the face he had expected to find there – the face he had known he would find from the first startled recognition of the bully at the door.

Girazôn.

The former Blackshirt was seated in a padded chair, turned sideways from a table covered in scrolls. Girazôn was watching him. The smile on the man's face was mild and friendly; but somewhere behind his eyes a cruel glee could be glimpsed.

Beren turned his head around to examine his situation, ignoring the thumping pain this caused. He was tied to an X-shaped piece of wood: bound securely at wrist, elbow, waist, knee and ankle. Was the cross fixed? It felt very firm – better wait to test that. He looked around, but could see nothing within reach. He doubted he would be able to reach the cords with his fingers. There were things he would try when he was alone, but it looked very much as though he was caught fast.

Girazôn had observed him at this procedure with poorly-concealed relish, and now he burst out in a peal of laughter.

“What!” he said, “No greeting for an old comrade? But perhaps you don't recognize me?”

Beren saw no point in replying to him; he simply set himself to listen, to gather whatever slight scraps of information might fall from his enemy's lips. Not that he believed he would hear anything to his material advantage; but one never knew. He eyed his adversary steadily.

Girazôn stood up and sauntered over to him. “Well,” he continued, “you may talk or not as you please. I know *you*, and that is all that matters. Oh, yes. I know you.” He walked away, around the table, as if trying to compose himself. Soon he was back in front of his captive, his blue eyes staring into Beren's. “So, here you are. In my power. Quite unexpectedly! I never expected to see you ever again! One might almost believe that the Powers still work in the world. What a gift!” He laughed again delightedly, then sobered. He shook his head. “But you know, I have to say, it does rather become you. Only Beren son of Barahir could be such a purblind fool as to run his stupid head unknowing right into such a trap – indeed a trap he made himself out of nothing; because *I* did not await your coming. *I* laid no snare at your feet. You did it all yourself. Oh, heavens!” Laughter took him again, so abandoned that he had to bow down under it, red in the face.

Beren took the opportunity to test his bonds: no, no good. The cords were too tight, too strong.

Girazôn gathered himself together after a while and wiped his face. “Ah, me,” he said. “Well now. How to begin? The matter before us is that I have a considerable debt to pay to mister high-and-mighty Beren. Oh, yes. My only problem is just how to pay it. I have thought about this as they bound you, but it needs still more thought. The one thing I don't want to do is hurry the process. The human body is so fragile; one misstep, and you'd be gone, nothing but dead meat. One can kick a corpse I suppose, but there's no great joy in that. But I'll be frank with you: I'll tell you exactly what I want from you, right now. If I tell you so, from the start, you'll resist me all the harder, which will make eventual victory all the sweeter. So let me tell you.

“What I want is for you to beg me for mercy. Blub like a little boy, and beg, *beg* me for mercy. You'll do it. You don't think you will, I can see it in your eyes; but you will. The mighty hero will fold up in the end like a wet piece of paper.

“Now, I've left your eyes free until now, just so you are clear about who has you, and what he means to do with you; but I think we'll try some introductory business with a blindfold. So much worse for you if you can't see the next blow coming, or know where it will fall.”

Beren heard all this with a bleak feeling in his heart. All those years dodging Mairon, only to end like this! A wry smile tugged his lips. Well, he had not wanted to be a hero of fable; it certainly was beginning to look as though he would not die like one.

Despite the appalling prospect before him, he was not afraid. He was in for a dismal, desperate time it seemed; there was no obvious way out of it. But Girazôn could only mangle his flesh; he had no hold at all on Beren's spirit. Compared to Mairon, the Blackshirt's weapons were pitiful.

A guard was called in to bind his eyes. Beren had wondered if Girazôn himself would do it, in which case he would have done his best to catch the man's hand in his teeth, to wreak what petty damage he could; but there was no point in harming an underling. He therefore submitted to the binding without resistance, then waited stoically for what must follow. He was not left long in suspense. A savage blow sank into his stomach, driving the breath out of him and making him retch; then a kick to the testicles flooded his whole being with a red bloom of pain. Beren hung again helplessly on his aching shoulders while sour bile dribbled down his chest.

Well, it was very disagreeable, and it would no doubt go on for a tedious long time; but he knew too that he could lay his own life down whenever he chose. This he would do only when all hope was lost.

The blows, slaps and kicks rained on him, but he never cried out, only voicing involuntary grunts when the nerve shocks twitched his vocal cords. It went on for a long time, late into the night. At last Girazôn ripped the bandage from his eyes and glared at him. "I *will* break you," he snarled. "Resist all you please. It just makes it sweeter in the end." He beckoned a lackey in to extinguish the lamp, then left Beren to darkness.

The night was harder than the day, and longer. Beren wasn't able to sleep. As soon as he slumped forward, the pain in his shoulders woke him again. They had not fed or watered him, which was a relief in a way, because he knew he would not last long without water. Some time soon, too, he would have to soil himself. Well, it was only matter.

Girazôn was composed in the morning. He came in rubbing his hands. "I've given your case considerable thought," he said to Beren. "In fact there are rather a number of things we might try before we have to do irreversible damage to you. We'll do that too, of course – in the end. We'll take your sight, your voice, your manhood – all manner of things. Everything we can take, we will. But not just yet. Let's see how long we can string it out, shall we?"

He got the men to unbolt the cross – Beren had found during the night that it was unmoveable – and lie it on the floor. Four of them held him then while they strapped his head to a frame and bound his jaw over a wooden gag. They began then with suffocation – starting with vinegar or slops poured over his nose and mouth, later simply with a piece of slick hide pressed over his face to cut off the airways. Beren would not struggle, and would not allow his lungs to strain; he simply endured until he fainted.

Girazôn's face swam into his giddy vision. There was wonder and something close to grudging respect written on the man's features. "By the Pit!" he said. "Either you have no nerves at all, or you are made of such stuff as I never dreamed of. But we'll make you wriggle yet. Hodar, bring in the wasps."

The horrible day wore on. They left him alone towards evening to go to their meat. He was upright again, bolted to the wall. He was exhausted, and a terrible thirst racked his body. He had soiled himself, and they had smeared it on his face and into his mouth and nose, but that was nothing. Water was the thing: without it he knew he would not see two more dawns. But he would not stay to endure its last agonies; some time tomorrow he would make the choice.

It looked very much as though this would be his last night on earth. In a way, he was glad of it. He would be glad to lay the burden down. And then perhaps he would see his loved ones again. He wished only that he could savour the forest air again, and see the stars one more time.

A light footstep came into the chamber, but he did not open his eyes until he heard his name whispered.

“Beren!” He opened them then, then reared back in utter surprise. It was another face from deep in his past. Peering at him in fear and horror was the bony, freckled countenance of Parth, companion of his youth, whom he had last seen in the train of fugitives fleeing the North.

Parth. “Can you cut me loose?” he whispered to her urgently. Let him only be loose, and none of these fat townsmen would be able to do a thing about it.

Parth shook her head violently. “No, no, I can’t,” she said. “It would be my death. You don’t know what he’s like. I’ve brought some water for you – quick, take it.”

Confound the girl. “Parth – if you set me loose, I can protect you! Do it!”

“I daren’t. I’m so sorry, Ber, truly I am. I’m sure you’d try; but there’s thirty or so of them, and only one of you. Just drink, now. That’s all I can do for you.”

The agony of this frustration was far worse to bear than any pains the torturers had inflicted. He had given up hope already some hours ago; now to have this true chance waved before his eyes, only to be thwarted by a stupid girl! He was mustering all his powers of persuasion when he heard voices outside. Parth turned in fright, water slopping out of the jug, but she was too late.

Girazôn strode into the room with two of his henchmen. He narrowed his eyes at what he found. “What are you doing here?” he demanded. His eyes went from one to the other, and understanding dawned. “Why!” he went on. “Can it be that you two know each other?” Neither Beren nor the woman replied.

Girazôn lunged forward and grasped Parth’s jaw with his hand, squeezing her cheeks in. “Well, do you?” he said. The trembling girl gasped, then nodded. “How, exactly?” Parth explained in a few trembling words. Girazôn stared narrowly at Beren, while still speaking to the woman. “At the farm together. So. Tell me then, has he had you?”

Parth shook her head violently.

Girazôn examined her expression closely, then Beren’s. Slowly he relaxed again, and let her go.

“Hmm,” he continued. “It seems indeed not. Although I wonder at that, my dear skivvie, since so many other men, with fewer chances, have bucked and grunted their seed in between your willing thighs. But perhaps our hero is more formidable in the field of war than the field of love? Hmm? Alas, it is often so.

“But enough of these amusements. What were you doing here, eh? Cutting your yokel comrade free? Is that it?”

“No!” Parth cried. “I swear! I have no knife!”

Girazôn patted her down to assure himself that this was true. “Lucky for you, trash,” he said. “But you were giving him water. Has he had any? It does not appear so. But stay! Perhaps he *should* drink. Otherwise he will not last out. Yes. Hmm. Do you wish to drink, master hero?” Beren made no answer, but Girazôn took Parth by the hair and thrust her in the prisoner’s direction. “Water him,” he said harshly.

Parth stumbled to Beren and held the jug up to his lips in shaking hands.

Should he drink? It would prolong the agony. But on the other hand, he could still go at a time of his own choosing; and with Parth about, there might still be some sort of chance he could persuade her to cut his bonds. He bent his head to the jug and drank. The relief as the sweet water flooded to every extremity of his parched body was exquisite.

He had half expected Girazôn to crow over such apparent weakness, but the bully was observing them both intently.

"I should have waited until morning," the man drawled. "You would have lived until then, I'm sure of it. Ah well. It's a tedious business, this, isn't it? Why don't you just give me the satisfaction I ask? You don't have to mean it, man: just pretend! I'm sure I won't know the difference. Then we could both get on with our lives. Ha ha. Well, I at least." He tapped his lips pensively with one finger. "I'm going to leave you for the moment, O proud one. I have matters to attend to. But I must say," here he grinned, "I must say, it is nice to know that you won't be going anywhere; that you'll be right there when I want you." He turned, grabbed Parth again by the hair. "If I catch you in here again, slut, your brats will pay for it with their blood. Now get out." He shoved her stumbling out the door, then left himself. A while later a servant came in to extinguish the lamps.

Beren found the second night far harder to bear than the first, even though his thirst had been relieved. His whole body felt on fire and he was desperate for the sleep which the cruel posture denied him. His legs were cramping terribly and his arms felt as if they were being pulled from their sockets. During the long, black hours his mind wandered abroad in dark fields, always to be jerked back again to a world full of pain. He wanted to think of pleasant memories, but he was too tired.

Morning came before he was aware – he was asleep on his legs when a slap pulled him back to consciousness. He shook his head and found the face of his tormentor in front of him.

"Well?" said Girazôn. "Anything to say to me?"

Beren kept his silence, looking away from the man.

A long moment went by. Girazôn screamed suddenly with fury and struck Beren in the face with all his weight; then again, and again.

Girazôn panted and rubbed his knuckles. Beren found a broken tooth with his bruised tongue and spat it out, together with the blood that was welling into his mouth.

The chief turned away, breathing unsteadily. "On your own head be it," he said in a low voice, not looking at Beren. "You have brought this on yourself." He turned to the two guards standing uneasily by. "Fetch the brazier," he snarled at them.

The sight of the glowing coals told Beren that his end was close. There was nothing to be hoped from poor scared Parth; and he would not wait to be reduced to a mangled wreck. Life was very sweet, though, and he held on to it, even as reason bade him let go. Not yet. Not quite yet.

He viewed the convulsions of his own body under the sizzling irons almost with detachment. If he had no hope, neither had he despair.

Girazôn shouted some order, and they left off. Beren hung there dizzily, no longer feeling his shoulders in the general sea of pain in which he was bathed. What had they taken from him so far? What had been burned away? He was not sure.

A woman's voice screamed outside the room: Parth. She was flung in then to fall in an awkward, sliding bundle upon the floor. Girazôn followed close behind her. He clutched a handful of her sandy hair, pulled her terrified head back, and Beren saw the flash of a knife at her throat.

Holding her thus, the Blackshirt turned a face twisted with animal fury toward Beren. "What of this, then?" he shouted. "Your childish playmate? Shall I spill this trull's blood hot on the floor? Or should I start with the sow's litter, to harrow you with her screams?" He let Parth's head fall with a thump to the floor, stepped over the weeping woman, and brought the shining blade in front of Beren's eyes. "I will do it," the man whispered. "You know me. You know I will do it. The blood will be on your hands. Your neck is stiffer than a pig's, outlaw, and I think your skin must be as thick as your skull. But I know you, too: you will not see the infants die, or her. I know you of old; oh yes. Know you through and though. Strong in body, aye, but weak inside. Weak inside. So let me hear your plea, fighting man. Beg to me. Plead to me for their lives. Else they

will lose them, I swear it.”

All Beren’s equanimity was blown away like dust in the wind. Girazôn saw this, and laughed liked one possessed. Beren stared at his cackling torturer, appalled. How had he not seen that it would come to this?

He could not keep silent now. He would not abase himself to spare himself pain, but he could not stand by when others’ lives were at stake. And after all, they were only words.

He opened his mouth to speak, and Girazôn opened his slightly too, waiting for the words; but they never came. A faint noise from outside stopped Beren in mid-syllable.

Girazôn turned to listen. There seemed to be a distant shouting. And was that the clash of metal?

“See what that is!” he snapped to the guards. He walked back to the middle of the room after they had gone out the door and stood there, tense in the silence. Parth lay sobbing quietly where he had let her fall.

The next events happened far more quickly than it takes to tell them. Sudden yells broke out in the corridor. A body thumped against the door. Quick as thought, Girazôn turned back to Beren, blade held high, murder in his eyes. He took the first running step in a line which would have ended with him plunging his knife into his enemy’s heart, but Parth reached out an arm from where she was lying on the floor and snagged her tormentor’s heel. Off-balance, Girazôn fell heavily, partly on Beren’s flank, the knife slicing open the helpless man’s thigh as it passed.

The room was filling rapidly with armed men. When all motion ceased, three men were holding drawn swords to Girazôn’s breast.

The tableau moved again. One of the swordsmen reached down and retrieved the knife from the floor. This man was grey of hair and weathered of face. Beren recognized Haldir, the son of the Warden. Two other Haladin were at Beren’s sides, slicing the ropes that bound him.

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Beren retained little memory of the next few days. He did not remember the trip to Amon Obel in the back of a wagon, heavily padded against the ruts and the cold. Vague faces swam in and out of his awareness, some of them familiar; and there was lamp light.

He came to himself one morning. He was lying comfortably in a bed. There was light against his eyelids, daylight; when he opened them, he saw the grey light of a winter’s day streaming in through a small window.

Parth was sitting in a chair by the bed, giving suck to a baby. When she saw that Beren’s eyes were open, she called softly across the bed, “He is awake, milady.”

There was a rustle from the other side. Beren turned his head to find Glóredhel smiling at him from that side, her hair still a glorious shining river, with only a little more grey in it now.

He smiled back at her. “It lifts my heart to see you, Lady,” he said. “But it seems I am your uninvited guest again.”

“Beren,” she said to him gently, “you would be welcome here at any time, even as you were, in the time when you were an untried boy, before your name was in every mouth; but now, I think there is not a household in the whole of Beleriand which would not be proud to host you. But enough. How do you feel?”

“Sore,” he replied. “But everything seems to work.” He moved his arms and legs under the cover.

Glóredhel called in the leech, a dignified elderly man, who looked in Beren’s eyes and at his tongue.

“It is as I surmised,” the leech said. “He has taken no serious hurt. There will be some permanent scarring of

his torso and legs, but he will heal in all essentials.” He bowed his head to Beren and left.

“There is no doubt much that you will desire to know,” Glóredhel said to him. “But I will leave you first with your landswoman. There will be plenty of time later for talk.” She turned to Parth. The baby had drunk his fill in the meantime and was asleep, milk dribbling from its mouth. “Shall I take him for a while?” said Glóredhel. She took up the baby, kissed its head, and with a last smile to Beren and Parth, she left the room.

Beren indicated the departed baby with a nod and a gesture. “Is that...?”

“His,” she said, raising her chin and looking defensive, pink in the cheeks. “It’s not true, you know. What he said, about the men. Not of my will, anyway. I, I had to. He made me —”

He raised his hand to stop her. She didn’t have to tell him any more.

She turned and looked out the window. The bruises on her face were swollen and blue in the cold light.

“Why didn’t you leave?” he said.

She turned back to face him. “Where would I go?” she said. She looked down at her hands. “Anyway, he isn’t always so bad.”

Beren could think of nothing he could possibly say to this. “Did they kill him?” he asked at last.

Parth shook her head. “Haldir said it was none of his business how we Northfolk wanted to run our affairs.”

Neither said anything for a while.

“Parth,” he said at last, “what happened to my mother?”

She put her hand to her mouth, her eyes wide over the top of it. “Oh Beren, didn’t you know? She died in the mountains, before we even came here.”

“I don’t know anything,” he replied. “Of course we’d guessed that she’d... she’d... well, when she didn’t come back, you see... but we knew nothing for certain. We never had any news at all. Some Elves came once or twice after Father was killed, but they didn’t have much news about our own folk.”

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

He stirred himself. “It’s long ago. Don’t be concerned, we knew all right. Just tell me how it happened.”

“Well,” she said, thinking back, “we were caught by a storm. We were so slow, with all the old and sick people. We were high up, and it was cold. I’ve never felt such cold. A lot of people died, just froze where they sat. Emeldir did her best for us. There were caves there, a lot of us could fit in one, but they had to find more for the rest. We had no wood, or leastways not enough. They pulled the horses in close to the mouths of the caves to block the wind. Most of the poor beasts were dead in the morning, just frozen solid. We came out in the morning, those who lived. The sun was shining, the sky was blue, you could see for miles through the clear air. It was still mortal cold, but at least the wind had let up.” She leaned forward and laid her hand on his. “I’m so sorry, Beren, but we found your mother there, lying in the drifted snow, between the caves. She had done her best for us, going to and fro, but she was overcome maybe, or lost her way in the storm. We had to leave her, we had to get down as quick as we could. They put her poor body in one of the caves, and they put rocks on it, Rhasûl and Faelind did, and that Zalta. Then we had to come away.”

He heard this in silence. “What happened then?” he said.

“Well, we got down, and we got across the empty country somehow, and we met some of the Southerners here, and they helped us then. We had a big camp, and they were very generous, and helped us. We stayed there the winter through. In the spring, though, well, people couldn’t agree. Most wanted to go on to the

country of the fair-heads<sup>2</sup>, where some had kin. Others had relations here, or just wanted to stay. There was a lot of silly talk – men who said they were tired of being bossed by women. The Southerners gave them land, where you saw. They had a big meeting to decide how to run things. My... er, Gir ended up in charge, somehow. And that's how it turned out."

He eyed her. "You didn't want to go on with the others?"

She wouldn't meet his glance, but looked down again. "I was carrying my Brugil by that time," she said softly.

There seemed little more to say on that topic. He questioned her a little more, finding out more details of who had lived and died. Then the baby began to cry elsewhere in the house, and Parth stood up.

"I thank you for my life, Parth," he said to her as she prepared to go. He smiled. "Also for your care. I seem to have had my helpless body once again at the mercy of your ministrations."

She turned and looked full at him. The merciless light shone on her face and in her eyes, exposing the naked feeling that lay there. "Much good it ever did me," she said.

#### Year 464

Beren's body healed rapidly, and soon he was up and about. As for the state of his mind, he was not sure.

As soon as he could, he rode to visit Blodwis, to return the fur, but much more because he wanted to thank her. Her son Markas had raised the alarm – had ridden hard to alert Haldir, as soon as the old woman had told him of her worries.

Blodwis welcomed Beren warmly and treated him more like a son even than before. Her actual son and daughter, Markas and Merseth, were present on that occasion, as well as their partners and a great many other connections both near and far, who all spent most of the time goggling at Beren with varying degrees of shyness and awe. Beren was pleased enough to meet the old woman again but he found it something of a trial to be the target of so much adulation.

The Man from the North could have had adulation in plenty had he wanted it. It was largely to avoid this that he kept mostly to Haldir's house. There was at first a steady trickle of curious and infatuated visitors, but the Warden's son made it clear to them that Beren did not welcome such attentions, and in time these attempts to glimpse the rare beast from the northern mountains petered away to nothing. The standing and respect he enjoyed in Haldir's house, and of course in the whole community at Amon Obel, were substantial; but Beren found these attentions much easier to bear, because they came from people who knew him, and who to some degree regarded him as one of themselves. Their respect was thus expressed as comradely pride, as an increase in closeness, which contrasted pleasantly with the stares of strangers, as at some wondrous phenomenon with which they themselves had no slightest connection.

In the house itself, Halmir the Halad still lived, but he was old now. His hair had turned pure white. He spent most of his days close to the fire, eyes drooping through an apparently endless series of dreamy dozes. Glóredhel and Haldir presided over the board. Beren had remembered it as a happy house, and so it was still. Haldir's cheerful brother Hundar and his wife lived in, as did their children Hunleth and Hundad. Hunleth was a rounded, dark girl of twenty or so, very tongue-tied in Beren's presence, despite – or perhaps because of – his best efforts to put her at her ease. Hundad, seventeen, was a bold, active youth, who reminded Beren of his friend Húrin. Hundad was a little in awe of their famous guest at first but he soon relaxed. Beren enjoyed his company; it made him feel young again. Hundad had been one of the two who had cut his bonds in Girazôn's hellish hall.

Beren had early on enquired about Húrin. The household as a whole had not seen the young man since the

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2 Hithlum, the domain of the people of Hador.

time of what they named the Goblin war<sup>3</sup>, some years before. Glóredhel however had seen him only two years ago, when she had travelled to her homeland after Galdor's death. The loss of her brother had clearly been a heavy blow to her, but no sadness could prevent her smiling over the recollection of her nephew, who was now come into his full growth in body and spirit. She related with pride the great reverence and honour in which Húrin was held by all the people under his chiefdom.

“And now I have some news which may astonish you,” she said with twinkling eyes. “Húrin is to marry. But you will never guess to whom.” After a moment observing his bafflement, she said, “It is your cousin Morwen!”

Immediately to Beren's inner eye came a vivid picture of a fiery, martial girl, her boyish frame clad in worn hunter's clothes. He recalled her wilfulness, and whistled involuntarily. Everyone at the board laughed. They too had heard stories of Morwen.

“That will either be a famous match,” said Beren, scratching his head, “or they will end up killing each other!”

Glóredhel, however, was thoughtful. “I think... I do not know for sure, but I *think* they will do well together. They are both towering spirits, but Húrin was ever as gentle and reasonable to his friends as he is fierce to his foes, just as was his father before him. And Morwen? Morwen has grown up. I saw them together, and I judged them a good match. But the fire burns very hot in both, to be sure.”

Haldir's son Handir, of whom Beren had comradely memories, had been the other man who cut his bonds, although Beren had not recognized him at the time. Beren had been surprised and pleased to learn that Handir had been married for a year to another of Beren's relatives, the girl Beldis whom he had met years before on his first visit to Brethil. They were living now with Beldis's mother of the same name. Beldis senior's husband Enlas had been killed in the Goblin invasion; the head of the house now was her brother Brandir, who had been badly wounded in the fighting, but who now got about with the help of a stick. Beren spent much time also in their house. He liked the two women; he admired his cousin Brandir, who was a strong, brave character; he had a close bond with Handir; but an additional charm of the household, one he did not clearly admit to himself, was the presence of Beldis and Handir's infant daughter. He was drawn back again and again by the warm heft of her soft baby body, the unforgettable scent of the first dark curls on her head, and the way she beamed and held out her arms to him when he put his great shaggy wolf's head diffidently around the door. Whenever she thrust her tiny hand trustingly into his, his heart wrung itself in a most peculiar fashion.

Beldis, who was becoming large with her next child, watching the two of them playing together, would smile softly and secretly. Concerning Beren, she had arrived at the same opinion as Blodwis, although the two women had never met.

Beren felt in himself sometimes like a man whose leg has been torn off, but who has convinced himself that so long as he refuses to think about it, hobbling along somehow regardless, thus long can he put off the catastrophic effects of the wound. His country meant far more to him than simply a birthplace; it was woven tightly into his soul on many levels. To have been forced, not merely to flee from the land he knew through and through, but to endure while every particle of it was destroyed, was a wound of such magnitude that he feared he would not, could not, survive it. He had thrust this thought from him in the first urgent need to save himself, to get away. The horror of the journey through the Dark Country, the Land of Dreadful Death as the Elves named it, then pushed his loss a little further below the surface of his mind. Now there was yet more overlay: his capture by Girazôn, the torture, the rescue. There had been new faces, and old faces newly met.

When he had left Dorthonion, Beren had expected that flight, that loss, to be the death of him. However, when pressed to the edge by Girazôn, he had ultimately chosen life. This seemed to decide the matter; to turn around now and die from the terrible loss, as he had originally supposed that he might, would count as nothing less than absurdity. On the other hand, this freedom from fear of death, if freedom it was, seemed to

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3 The Orcs had mounted a big raid into Brethil in 458.



mean also that he could now allow himself to feel the depth of the hurt. And feel it he did; the pain was behind every thought, every action.

Glóredhel sensed something of this all-but-mortal wound. She sat with Beren often, and gently encouraged him to tell something of his years of lonely struggle. He began haltingly, unused to such talk, but her attention and her tender eye encouraged him. He became animated, voluble. Hunleth joined them. Unusually for a Haladin, she loved letters, and she was eager to record his history. They would sit together for hours, the three of them, while Beren talked. Hunleth would remember it, then stay up in her chamber until late in the night, scratching it all down in her neat, small script.

Speaking of his land helped Beren; and so gradually, day by day, the wound scarred over, smarted less.

There were days however when he could not stand the confines of the house any more and sought the freer air of the woods. The country was strange to him, and it was as though his senses were blunted. He wanted to learn these southern lands better, but it was winter, and therefore not a time to roam widely.

There were Druug about, even in this season. These were of the Reed clan who had been particular companions of Halmir's people from time out of mind. Beren soon grew to know their bright-eyed headman Four Sticks and his son Leaps the Stream. In his restlessness and longing, the Northman took to visiting the Reed people in their smoky lodges. He would take off his thick furs, stripping down to a breech clout in the old way, and sit among them by the fire, listening to their stories, and telling some of his own. But there was a distance between him and them, and try as he might, he could not bridge it. He sat there, tall and pale and alone, in the middle of the squat brown laughing people, always conscious of the wondering stares of the black-eyed children. Four Sticks and his people were courteous and welcoming to Beren, but he was not of them, despite all his ease with Druug ways; and everyone knew it.

He asked early on if they had news of the Holly people. Four Sticks nodded. "Ah yes," he said, "I bring them to mind. We have not seen any here for some few seasons. The drums say they are hunting far away just now, sunward and sunrising." He meant, south and east.

"Do you," Beren swallowed, "do you... know news of any by name? I had... many friends among them. There was one, Carver they called her..."

Four Sticks could not tell him anything, but quiet word passed among the People, and shortly a stubby, dark woman came over and sat down beside them. She smiled at Beren and said, "I know that one, Carver. I had talk with her, some few seasons ago now, when we had the time of the dancing." She observed Beren closely, but made no comment on what she saw in his face. "What can I tell you of her?"

Beren was still having difficulty getting the words out. "Was she happy?" he husked.

The woman looked at him in mild surprise. The Druug did not tend to think in such terms. "I don't know how to answer that," she said. "Carver lives, and if to live is to be happy, then she is happy. As are we all." She shrugged. Looking again in Beren's face, she added, "Carver had a man, a good hunter, a good teller of tales; and she was big with his child."

Somehow this news hurt Beren worse than anything – hurt him worse than Girazôn's brands had done. "That is good," he managed. "But tell me... did she love him, that man of hers?"

"She loved him," the Druug woman said, looking at Beren with compassion in her dark eyes. She touched his hand gently with her own. "In time, you will find love too."

On other occasions among the Reed people Beren made different enquiries, and on a wet day late in the winter these led him to a small homestead not too far from Obel. When he saw the face of the middle-aged man who opened the door to him, he knew at once that he had come to the right place.

The Haladin closed the door on the rain and turned to take in the face and figure of his tall visitor. "Nasty

weather for visiting,” he said pleasantly. “What can I do for you, Northman?” He had seen Beren about and already knew who he was.

“You are the one the Druug call White Cow, are you not?” said Beren, taking off his sodden cloak. A stocky, grey-haired woman appeared silently and took it from him.

The Haladin nodded. “White Cow, yes,” he said. “My name among our own folk is Arthol.”

“I come to tell you of your brother,” said Beren. “Arthad.”

The woman gasped and put her hand to her mouth. The face of the farmer pulled in strange ways, as if he was trying to contain sudden emotion. “You’d better come and sit down,” he said gruffly after a moment. He turned to his wife. “Will you put the kettle on, dear?”

They sat together at the sturdy wooden table, in the snug kitchen, where strings of onions hung low in the corners from stout wooden beams. A black iron stove warmed the room. The little rain-grey light that filtered through the thick bullseye windows could scarcely compete with the candles on the table.

Arthol leaned back and looked at Beren with a faraway look in his eyes. “Arthad,” he repeated, the weight of memory in his voice. “It is many years since I have heard that name from another’s lips. You knew him?”

Beren smiled. “I *loved* him,” he said. “He was one of my father’s men, far away in the North, and long ago. But he was like another father to me.” He told some of his memories of Arthad, and as he spoke, feelings swept across the brother’s face like wind moving a field of wheat. Beren spoke on; and when he left the years of his youth, and spoke of the war, the man opposite him gripped the edge of the table in his hands and breathed hard, eyes wide. When Beren came at last to the end, Arthol covered his face in hands that trembled.

“I knew he must be dead,” he mumbled.

Remembering had rubbed recent wounds with Beren as well. “I am sorry to bring you such tidings,” he said. “After so many years of hearing nothing.”

“Oh, we did hear something betimes,” said Arthol. He took his hands from his face and wiped the wetness from it almost absently with a cloth. “The Druug told us in the early times that he was in the North, and was well placed. And then we heard his name from your folk who fled from over the mountains that time. Do not be sorry, not at all.” He looked at Beren. “It touches my heart that you have told me so much, and what you have told me. I have missed my brother. You cannot conceive how sweet it is to hear such words about him from another.”

“He was a good and brave man,” said Beren, “and it grieved me always to know that he was far from his home, and could not return. Now that I myself am driven from my own, I believe I know something of the true ache of that loss.”

Arthol made no reply for a space of time. He sighed then and said, “I don’t know how much of the story you know.”

“Hardly anything,” replied Beren. “Only that he was Haladin, and could not go back.”

“Yet you knew enough to find me,” said the other.

“I knew he had a brother, no more than that,” said the Northerner. “The Druug led me to your door.”

“Ah.” Arthol looked at him. “Do you wish to know more?” he said.

Beren shook his head. “That is not why I came,” he said. “It is not my affair. I wished to tell you of your brother’s life among us, and of his end; also I have another reason, which I will speak of shortly. But idle

curiosity alone would not have brought me here. I wish to breach no secret, nor stir up old shame.”

The Haladin smiled. “Yet everyone likes to hear news,” he said, “and to have mysteries explained. You loved my brother; that makes it your affair. I will tell you, since the tale is already well known among us. There is no secret to keep, and I would say also, that there is no shame either. But you shall judge.

“I hark back to the long-lost days of carefree youth. My brother Arthad was as you knew him, but perhaps more lively. He was well-liked, by beast as well as man. He had good ways with horses.

“There was a lass he liked, although many others were of the same mind as he. I say not her name, for she lives among us yet. This girl enjoyed having many admirers, as why should she not? If she was rather minded a while to carouse and enjoy the attention than to choose one from among them and become his partner in the hard grind of life, then who should blame her? Not I – life is hard enough, and hard especially for maids, who have less freedom than lads.

“Well, Brother had lost his heart, or thought he had; time has a way of changing the look of that. He knew how things lay, knew that his chances were not high, but he hoped all the same, as men do. Now it came on a time at the harvest, at the feast, that the woman I speak of, the object of Arthad’s dreams, was laughing among her followers as she was wont at such times to do. There was one there, a wilful and powerful man, who was not content simply to hope; he thought to be more active and pressing in his suit. Brother came across the pair behind the hall. The woman called for his aid. There were words; knives were pulled. Before Brother knew what was happening, he was standing over a dying man whose heart’s blood was dripping from his blade.

“Law-breakers among us stand under the hand of our Halad, our Warden. Arthad might have come through that trial, since he had some weight of argument on his side, but the one he had killed was of a family numerous and powerful. They would not have been minded to leave justice to the Warden. Arthad fled to save his head; the rest you know. Yet he might have returned in time. Stories came to light after, and they were not pleasant ones. The one he killed had done things – I will not darken the day by telling them. But many things came to light, and the mood of the people was altered, and the standing and influence of this family were not as they were before. I believe Arthad might have come back and been safe. I sent messages to him through the Druug who used to summer there in the North; but he would not come.”

Beren smiled a little sadly. “He made a new life among us,” he said. “And the past is a country we are all of us exiles from. But I am sorry that you never had a chance to see your brother again.”

Nobody said anything for a time. Arthol stared unfocussed at the scrubbed surface of the table, lost in memories. His wife was glancing with woman’s interest at the face of Beren, who was himself gazing oblivious out the window at the darkening day.

Beren stirred at last and turned to look again at the older man. “Speaking of that new life... Arthad did not marry, but there was one whom he was close to... her name was Lorinis. She came south with the others of my people who fled Gorthaur’s closing fist. I have heard that she lives yet, in the village not far to the North of here, that which is ruled by one Girazôn.”

The farmer grimaced at the sound of that name, and his wife made a sound of disgust. “I have heard nothing good of that place,” Arthol said. “But why do you tell me these things?”

“Well,” replied Beren carefully, observing the man closely, “I just thought that you might like to know.”

The woman leaned forward. “What sort of person is she?” she asked.

“Quiet,” replied Beren. “Industrious. Sensible. And sensitive to the feelings of others.”

“And how is she placed?” continued the farm-wife.

“I think, not well,” said Beren. “I... do not have direct contact with that place, since... well, you will have heard the story.”

“Yes,” said Arthol curtly. “We heard.”

The woman, whose name was Caril, turned to her husband. “Could we take her in here, Tholly?” She looked back to Beren. “That’s what you’re asking us to do, isn’t it?”

Beren raised his hands slightly. “I have no right to ask. But Arthad loved her, and she served my parents faithfully. I have no establishment myself – being, as you know, a mere guest of the Warden – or I would give her a home, without question. But it grieves me to think that she lives the hard life in that place of no sense or joy.”

Arthol was cautious. “Aye, well, I would like to meet her,” he admitted. “Suppose we arrange that, no promises made mind, and see what comes of it.”

“We’ve room enough, anyway,” said his wife, “now the boys have moved out.”

“It is generous of you,” said Beren.

“No promises,” repeated Arthol. “Don’t name me generous just yet, mister. But let’s just meet the lass and see what comes of it.”

Since all was now said, Beren thanked them again and took his leave.

\* \* \* \* \*

A great thing about life on a farm is that there is scarce time for introspection. Once Beren was recovered in body, he joined willingly in the daily life, lending his strength to move forward all the myriad tasks which must somehow be fitted into each day between sun-up and sundown.

One day Haldir invited Beren to ride out with him on Warden business. The grizzled leader was often under way in this duty. There were disputes to resolve, assistance in need of rallying, and patrols to organize and debrief. Haldir gave Beren a pony to match his own and the two set out into the winter landscape. It was a mild day, above freezing; they wore capes against the skeins of misty rain that drifted down.

“Truth is, I wanted some talk with you,” Haldir said to Beren as soon as they were comfortably under way.

Beren was surprised; Haldir seldom wasted many words on any topic. “What about?” he said.

Haldir looked a little uncomfortable. “Well,” he said, “wondered what you had in mind for yourself. Now that you’re healed, and rested.”

Beren eased himself a little in his saddle. He was out of practice with riding, and his scars were tender. “I had been meaning to talk to you about that myself,” he said. “You’ve been wonderfully kind to me, but clearly I can’t stay under your roof forever.”

“Blast it all,” said the older man, “didn’t mean it that way at all. You earn your keep; welcome to stay with us as long as you like. Wife thinks a lot of you, and that’s enough for me. There’s only two fellows standing in your way.”

This approach made Beren curious. “And who are they?” he asked, half smiling.

“Girazôn’s one,” replied Haldir shortly.

“Girazôn?” said Beren in surprise. “Why should he? I never mean to see the fellow again if I can help it.”

“Wondered about that,” said Haldir, giving him a keen glance. “They’re your people, after all. You’re the Bëor, aren’t you? You might think it’s down to you to do something about the weasel.”

Beren was silent for several moments, arranging his thoughts into words. “They chose him themselves,” he said at last. “That has always been our custom. True, the eldest son of the Bëor was chosen, generation after generation; but the freedom to choose otherwise was always there. That was manifest when my father was chosen, when his nephew Baragund declined, who had the formal succession, if you want to look at it that way. But nobody chose me. The village didn’t choose me. I am not their Bëor; they chose another. I have no right to challenge that.”

“Fair enough,” Haldir said. “None of my business either. Else I’d have spitted that varmint when I had the chance. Well and good. Peaceable of you, and sensible too, if you want my opinion. But there’s just this: don’t think, just because you want no more truck with Girazôn, that he’ll be just as happy to leave *you* in peace.”

Beren considered this in some unease, because it underlined vague concerns he had had himself. “Do you think he might try something?” he asked.

“Sure of it,” said the other. “I know his type of snake. Seen too many of them. I asked Four Sticks to keep an eye out in that quarter. Doesn’t please me to be proved right. Sticks told me Northerners have been snooping about – twice now. You’re not safe here, lad, and that’s the fact of it.”

“Curse the man,” said Beren, but without passion. “Very well. But you mentioned two who might interfere. Who is the other?”

“Yourself,” said Haldir.

Beren looked at him. “I don’t follow,” he said.

“Who stands in the way of you settling here?” said Haldir. “You do. Beren Northerner.”

There was a short silence. “I believe I must ask you to enlarge on that,” said Beren.

“Better you talk to Glor about it,” growled the other. “Plain as a bunion it is to me, or to anyone with eyes in their head. But I ain’t got the words for it. You talk to Glor.”

Glóredhel sighed when Beren raised the matter with her that evening. “Let me rather turn the matter around,” she said, “and ask you what you had in mind to do with yourself? What comes next?”

“Asked him that,” grunted Haldir, who was whittling a piece of wood by the kitchen fire. “But he never said.”

Beren laughed. “I wish I knew,” he said. “I’ve been asking myself that for weeks. My lady, I feel as though I have been living in a song these past years. The song has ended, but I do not seem to have ended with it. Most untidy of me. So. How to dispose of a hero who has outlived his deeds? Shall I tell you the choices which have occurred to me? You may be able to think of others; in any case, I would gladly hear your counsel.

“Number one would be to stay here, and accept your welcome, the kindness of which I am very sensible. Number two: rejoin my people in the North, in Fingon’s lands. Three would be to seek out Finrod, whom I hold in my heart as my liege lord. Four: the Druug.” He did not speak of the wish which lay hidden in his heart, the bright vision of Neldoreth which had come to him in the mountains; so foolish and vain did he hold it. “What say you to those?”

“The world is wide,” said Glóredhel, “and full of choices. Nevertheless, I would say that you have numbered all that have any particular call on you. I can think of no other such. Before I make remark on them, will you

not say more yourself? What would draw you to each one?"

Beren sighed. "Duty would call me to Finrod, before even to my own folk," he said. "But what would I do there? And the same goes for Fingon. I will not take up weapon in war again. I will not. I have spilled enough blood. This war, if it can be won, must be won without me. I am so resolved."

Glóredhel nodded. "I understand," she said quietly. "But perhaps you could find some other way to serve?"

"Maybe," said Beren, "but it is a poor follower who sets conditions on his fealty. As for the other paths: my heart would bid me seek the Druug. Part of it, anyway... but that is quibbling. Say it were all of my heart that spoke so. But all or part, it is all one, for I cannot, Glóredhel, I cannot go to the Druug, and I do not clearly know why."

The golden-haired woman had been gazing into the fire, but now she turned and looked Beren in the face. "You are determined to shed no more blood," she said, "therefore you feel that you could be nothing in the courts of the Elf-princes but an ornament, and that your duty would but drag you into the dust. Your heart would lead you to the Druug; but at the same time, it tells you that way is closed to you. Have I understood?"

Beren considered. "Yes," he admitted. "You put it fairly. Better than I did."

"That leaves only the last choice: to stay with us," Glóredhel said. Haldir began to shake his head at this, but his wife said to him mildly enough, "Nay, husband, let us talk through everything. Thus will it become clear to all at last." She turned back to Beren. "You have doubted your welcome, but this you are now assured of, or so I would hope. Haldir has mentioned Girazôn; but such problems are not, perhaps, insurmountable. But what is your own mind? Would you wish to stay with us?"

"I know nothing against the notion," said Beren slowly, "and in some ways it might be the best of all the paths. But if I must speak truth, I cannot say that it exactly sets my heart aflame."

"Very well," said the woman. "Shall I tell you why I think you will not stay with us? This may count also for the Wood people. It is because you have outgrown us. You are too big a man for a rustic life in wood or field. Your tale in the North may have ended, my dear hero, but there are other tales. I do not believe the world has finished with you yet, Beren, Soldier of the North. Therefore I counsel you to follow none of the roads you have revealed to me; instead I think you should follow the shining vision in your heart, that which you have not spoken of."

Beren reared back from her almost in fright. "How did you know about that?" he said.

"I do not know what it is, nor how I know of it," said Glóredhel, "but I am sure that you have one."

\* \* \* \* \*

Beren had stopped visiting the Druug, having realized finally that the path was closed to him. He wandered still through the woods from time to time, restless and discontent. There was no pleasure to be had from the bleak winter landscape, and the weather in these southern lands was often chill and wet. The need to keep wary watch for Girazôn's bravos took away any remaining pleasure there might have been in wandering through the woods. He could not sense evil in his own kind, thus must rely on Druug-sharpened normal senses.

Although he had no great desire for company, he did visit some of the people he knew. He saw Arthol and Caril again, and met their sons and their wives. The elder pair had taken in Lorinis, as Beren had hoped they might. His meeting with Arthad's former love was an occasion for tears on Lorinis's side. Beren felt that he had shed all the tears he was going to in life, but a lump came into his throat as he beheld the familiar little woman again, and felt her arms tight about his chest.

He sat with Lorinis and heard also her story of the tragic crossing of the mountains. She had suffered herself

from the bitter cold, the frost having taken several of her fingers and scored her cheeks. She held Beren's hand and cried when she told him of his mother's death; and then again, when it was his turn to speak, and he told her of Arthad's last battle.

"Lorinis," he said to her gently after all tales had come to an end, "you must find another to care for. There are plenty of men in these parts; and after all," he smiled, "you are used to the ways of these Southerners."

He expected her to protest that her scars made her ugly, and he was ready to counter that; but she just shook her head, smiled a little sadly and said, "No. I had my time of happiness. No fair time can last forever, nor should it. I have my memories; and I would rather keep those clear than to write them over with others." She looked at him, unshed tears shining in her eyes. "I am content here. Arthol and Caril have been very kind; and in their voices and faces I see again the one I loved, and now have lost. It is enough.

"But you! My boy, my young master, *you* must not rest on memories. You have your whole life before you. You must stir yourself, and move forward."

"Lorinis," he replied awkwardly, "I am trying to. But I do not clearly see the way."

Before he left, Lorinis gave a sudden squeak and dived into the little room they had given her. Beren and the older couple exchanged puzzled glances, but they were not left long wondering, for the stocky little woman soon came out again, pink-cheeked. She held out to Beren a bundle wrapped in cloth. "These were things of your mother," she said low-voiced. "Some personal things; and many papers, which were writings of your aunt, Caladis."

Beren took the bundle with shaking hands. He had not expected this; had never thought what might have happened to his mother's things. And Caladis! All the things that she wrote, that he had thought all lost, all burned; but these few had survived.

A sudden vision of his aunt's despairing face, the last he had seen of her, flashed before his inner gaze.

It was some moments before he could master his tongue to speak, and then all that he could do was mumble his thanks, before stumbling out the door in flight from overpowering memory.

When he got back to Obel, he gave the scrolls to Hunleth. The small things of his mother he kept close.

\* \* \* \* \*

Parth had fled Girazôn's wrath with Beren's rescuers, stopping only to gather up her four children. These ranged in age from Wamlo, now a sulky, lumpen youth of fifteen, to the still suckling baby. Beren had feared that she might in the end return to Girazôn, on the principle that even an evil-tempered and vengeful man was better than none, but lately she had fallen into better circumstances. Glóredhel had asked her to help a man who lived nearby, Vindar, whose wife had died a few years previously in birthing their third child. Vindar had his hands more than full with three children younger than six in his house, while trying to make a living at his trade of wood-cutting. Parth began by cleaning and cooking occasionally, but Vindar's children liked her, one thing led to another, and inside of two months from their first meeting, the man asked her to be his wife. Beren met him at their betrothal feast and liked him well. Vindar was an ugly-faced man, but well set up in the frame, and he was of such a kind disposition and had such a dry turn of humour that it was impossible not to like him. Beren spent far too long in talk with him on that first occasion and visited the pair often in the weeks that followed. It pleased him immensely to observe the love which had blossomed between the couple. And it seemed that love was not the only thing which had blossomed: Parth had found the role she was born for. She made the sizeable task of bringing up seven children appear amazingly easy. The evening board in that house was a happy, uproarious occasion. Beren became a frequent guest when it was made clear to him that he was welcome. He loved having the children climb over him, pulling his hair and ears, or simply begging for stories at his knee. Parth, able to see him clear-eyed at last, her own infatuation blown away by genuine love for another, saw in him also what many matrons lately had seen.

Parth and Beren talked often. Most times they spoke of the happy times before the war, since for both of them the other was now the only person within reach who fully shared those memories. So they laughed over Hrotha, shook their heads sadly over Gorlim and Eilinel, and remembered incidents and stories leading far back into the past.

Zalta's name came up once. Parth said then, "That's right – I never told you. Zalta has a new inn! Just a small place. It's west, on the road from the Crossings."<sup>4</sup>

"Zalta is alive?" said Beren in surprise.

"Of course she is, silly! Otherwise she couldn't run the inn."

Beren turned this news over in his mind. "I'd like to see her," he said. "Show me on the map where it is."

Parth finished tying the cloth around the infant she had been changing, set it on its legs, and gave it a pat on the rear. "Oh, maps," she said. "I'm no good with maps. Get Vin to show you."

\* \* \* \* \*

A path led up from Nargothrond, over the last ford on the river Teiglin, and on north into the Vale of Sirion. Another crossed it from the East before turning up toward the passes in the Shadowy Mountains, and thence to Dor-Lómin and the lands beyond. There was still trade on all but the northern trail, and it was here, again, at the lucrative crossroads, that Zalta had built her hostel. Beren, coming up the pleasant tree-lined trail from the South, found the sturdy log-built structure in middle of a wide cleared area, carpeted on this mild day with purple and white crocus everywhere, mottled here and there with glorious golden patches of narcissus.

The old building had not been fortified; this one was. The bluff wall facing Beren was windowless on the lower level but had arrow-slits just over head height. Corners ensured that attackers everywhere would be subject to enfilading fire. There were blackened patches on the wood: clearly the structure had already seen some action.

Beren rode in through a gate in the stockade and found himself in a small court. The hostelry itself was the largest building, but there were also stables and a blacksmith's shop, and what looked to be a sawmill. Three wagons were parked to one side, one of which was being prepared for departure by a team of Dwarves. One or two of the Dwarves glanced at Beren and exchanged nods with him when he met their gaze.

After a wizened and ageless ostler had come out to take charge of his horse, the man made his way into the conversation and fug of the common room. The noise fell away as seated drinkers twisted and leaned to see who the newcomer was, then resumed again after they found that it was nobody they knew.

The cheerful girl behind the bar was unknown to Beren. As she brought him the tankard he had ordered, he asked if Zalta was around.

"Who shall I say?" said the girl.

A smile twitched on Beren's lips. "Just tell her it is the wild boy," he said. "She'll understand." The girl retired, forehead wrinkling over this answer. Very shortly Zalta's surprised face popped around the door-frame.

"Bolsters and bedknobs!" she exclaimed. "Is it? Is it? Oh, glory be, it is! Oh, boy! Oh, how you take me back! Wild boy, hah, indeed."

Zalta was looking old. Her figure had lost shape and her face was scored with deep lines. Her unruly hair was as black as ever, but Beren became aware after some minutes in her presence that the colour now owed heavily to art.

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4 The Crossings of Teiglin.



She pulled him into a small room, tankard and all. "I must have some talk with you," she said. With the door closed, she looked him up and down. "Lordy, I forgot you was so big," she mumbled.

Beren smiled at her quizzically. "It is glad indeed I am to see you, Zalta," he said. "Is all well with you?"

She sighed. "Aye, well enough," she said. "There's plenty of trade, praise to the gods." She spoke for a while about the business, how it had been founded as a group enterprise among tradesmen, and built with a loan from the Dwarves. "But enough of that," she said at last. "You won't be wanting to know that. Can you stay? I'd dearly like to talk over things with you, hear how it is with you, everything. Evening's the time for it though, I'm off my feet the day long. Will you stay the night? Can you?"

"With pleasure, Zalta," he said. His eye twinkled a little. "Just an ordinary room will do. No extras required."

She laughed delightedly. "Aye, it is grown you are now indeed," she wheezed, when she had breath again for speech. "I wonder how old you were when you worked that one out." She wiped the mirth from her eyes, looking him over again, with something of a gleam of impish mischief showing in her dark eyes. "You're a strange one, master Beren. It's a grand big lusty chap you've grown into, yet seemingly you don't want what lusty chaps mostly hunger for. None o' my business o' course, no call for me to speculate, 'cepting I will anyway; and having known you since you was knee high, maybe I can lay hold of a bit of motherly rights in the matter too. So, now. Maybe you're taken; but I'd swear not. Swear it, I would. Or maybe your fancies lie nearer to home, as it were; but I can smell that one too, and it ain't so. So what is it then? Just what flavour of cat are you, master Beren, that you don't want what lusty fellows come looking for under my roof? Putting it straight, what do you do for squeeze?"

He grinned, then laughed. "I'll return you the answer you gave me so long ago, time I asked you the same," he said. "You're welcome to find out if you can, but it won't be through me."

She leaned back and laughed until the tears ran down. They settled arrangements then, she showed him his room, then went back to her daily affairs in bar and kitchen.

Late in the evening they came together and talked. Irma sat with them as well. Beren had never had much to do with her in the old days, but he found himself enjoying her quiet presence, her smile, the few words she spoke, the soft voice she spoke them in, and the light in her eye whenever she glanced at Zalta. She had been a pretty girl, and had now become a handsome middle-aged woman, with an open, well-shaped face; her short, honey-coloured hair was only a little faded with grey.

Zalta had known that Beren had escaped to Brethil, indeed she had heard quite a lot of news about him from talk among the travellers and traders. Of his long war in the North however she knew no more than the half-legends and songs which were current in the land. Beren told her much more, avoiding only the parts which were still too raw. She paid particular attention when he told her about Carver, and of the beauty and tragic end of Glith. She asked him no more questions, but the puzzled look at the back of her eyes deepened.

"And what will you do now?" she asked after Beren had come up to date in his story.

He stared blankly at his hands. "That's exactly what I don't know," he said.

Both women looked at him pensively for a while. Zalta voiced what was in both their minds. She leaned forward and laid her work-worn hand on his broad one. "Give up the heroing," she said impulsively. "You've done enough. Find yourself a girl and settle down. You've earned it. And that's what you want, isn't it? Isn't that the solution to the riddle?"

Beren raised his eyes to hers. "I can't deny, it sounds pretty good," he said slowly. "I just don't think it will be that simple. There's other things afoot, other currents."

Pity and concern were in her eyes. Nobody spoke for a while. Zalta broke it off suddenly. "It's late," she said briskly. "Time for bed. Will you be going on in the morning?"

“I’m not going on anywhere,” he said. “I came to see you.”

She flushed slightly. “It is kind in you,” she said.

“Not all that kind,” he said, shaking his head. “I had another reason for coming.” Zalta made no reply, just looked the question at him. “Zalta,” said Beren, “I want to find where my mother is buried. Can you help me?”

Her face changed, and she sat back in her chair. The pain of the memory was apparent also in Irma’s face.

“Oh dear,” Zalta said softly. “Oh dear. That was a day of a sadness beyond my power to tell. Where we laid her? Yes, I can tell you that. My poor boy. Yes, I can tell you where.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Beren took his leave from Halmir’s house on the first truly warm day of spring. The leaves were springing out everywhere and the snows had retreated higher in the mountains. The weather looked set for a fine spell for some days; his long time of waiting was over.

He had said his goodbyes to Parth and Vindar the previous day. He had a gift for all the children, carven figures or baskets, made with his own hands during the fallow months of winter. To Wamlo he gave a bow, suited to his height and strength. The boy flushed and grunted awkward thanks.

Parth had wept. “I won’t ever see you again,” she said. “I know it.”

“Who can tell?” he replied, but she would not be persuaded.

Now it was the turn of Halmir’s household. He made it as quick as he could, shaking hands with the men and embracing the women. The younger ones went in then, leaving him outside with Haldir and Glóredhel, and the old Warden himself, bent over a blackthorn stave.

“Words are no help at such times,” said Glóredhel sadly, “but with what power there may be in me, I bless your path.”

Old Halmir’s handclasp was still hard. “Go with fortune, lad,” he rasped. “And should your steps lead you this way again, you are always welcome in my house. Remember that.”

Last was Haldir, the morning breeze tugging at his iron-grey hair. “Go with the blessing, wanderer,” he said gruffly, but his eyes held many thoughts that he did not say.

Beren headed north until he struck the road, only a short distance before it crossed Sirion at the broad gravelly ford called Brithiach by the Elves. The wagon road continued to the East, but he left it there and headed towards the snow-topped heights which walled off all the North. There was no road as such to the pass, but the way was not hard to find, being still marked by the tracks of previous travellers: faint, but easy to follow for someone raised with the Druug. The path followed close under the skirts of the mountains as if it shrank from the dark lands to the East. This perfectly suited Beren’s own inclinations.

He travelled very light. Save his knife, he carried no weapon or arms of any kind. The great bow of Finrod he had left with Haldir. It was a war-bow, he had said; unsuitable for hunting. But he was finished with war. Maybe someone could find a use for it.

The Haladin had admired the beauty of the bow and had marvelled at its power. None of them could bend it. They asked who made it, if it was an heirloom. Beren had been embarrassed at the fuss they had made, and at the same time sad to leave the bow. He had not told them that Finrod had made the stave for him with his own hands; had said as little as he could about it, simply wanted the whole business over with as soon as possible.

He had lost Telchar's byrnie somewhere in the Dark Lands, along with the rest of his things. He mourned its loss extremely – the wonderfully tough, fine-wrought mail; such a princely gift, and from the hand of his friend. He had told himself that at least he had not now to decide how to dispose of it, but he found that thin consolation.

On the third day he began to climb. He spent the whole day climbing, slowly raising his body into the steadily widening blue openness of the heights. One patient thrust of calf followed another; always upward. He knew not to hurry – mountains must be allowed to set their own pace.

Beren halted for the night not far below the treeline. He had met no-one all day; he was the only traveller in that vast wilderness. He made a fire, but found small consolation in it. The flames seemed wan and feeble, as if sensible that the tiny winking light was lost in an immense silence, in the unpeopled space that spread for miles around.

He huddled that night in a mess of needles and trash, but there was little sleep in him. He would doze for a while, then wake shivering. He blew up the embers at such times, would lay on more fuel, sit nodding for a while before turning back to his chill and cheerless nest.

The day dawned fine and mild, with little wind. The white heights of the Crissaegrim reared their horns and teeth now to his left, impossibly high; sharp against the blue bowl of the sky. Their ragged edges seemed as if torn from clean ice, gleaming white under the sun, blueish in shadow. The snowy peaks were mottled with dark flecks which tended to emphasize rather than detract from their clean, inhuman whiteness. His reason told him these far-off patches were each a sheer cliff of rock, hundreds of feet high.

He drank gratefully from a trickle cold enough to make his teeth ache, then set out again on the path.

He climbed all day. He soon left the world of living things behind him. There was nothing to see now, nothing around him but an immense waste of rock. Rock: grey, brown or black, it lay strewn everywhere in blocks and rounds. Rock in all sizes from pea-sized pebbles to great sheers thrusting harshly into the thin air. Rock cut short all lower lines of sight. He was in the gorge now, and lesser peaks rose darkly on all sides, shutting out the icy heights from view. Looking down, there was only the monotonous crunch of the foot on the rough path, the endless cruelty of stones, and no life to see. No life anywhere.

White. Bones. A horse from the look of it. But not far beyond that, a few hundred steps further and higher along the winding, ever-climbing path, the man found others.

He knelt by the skull, the wind-scoured ribs. Human or Elf, who could tell? He squatted there, without firm thought, simply listening to the restless moan of the wind as it rose and fell. The wind whispered in his ears, but it was a thin veil over a great silence.

Nothing to do but go on. As he trudged ever further, he encountered more bones, and more still.

By nightfall he was approaching the crest of the pass. The weather had held, but the air had become very cold. He huddled the night over in a sheltered niche. He had no furs, no fuel, but he was able to warm himself by calling on the power of Finrod's ring.

Sleep refused to come. He was too near his goal for one thing; but that was not all. It was no quiet place he had come to. Too many people had died here – nay, worse: had fallen unwilling into death. Unfulfilled, ensnared, unlucky; unfairly and untimely pulled to destruction. This was not Aeluin, and here there was no serenity to soothe the disquiet of the unhappy dead.

He lay the whole night awake, listening to the sounds outside in the darkness, which sometimes he thought were the wind, and sometimes not.

The day dawned brilliant. The sun shone hot on his skin, but it glinted off innumerable tiny crystals of ice drifting in the frozen air. In the blue shadows where there was no sun, the touch of the air was numbing to

the face.

He went on, uncertain here, trying to match the terrain with Zalta's description. The rocks watched his fumbling progress in a vast silence.

There were caves here in the rock walls, dark mouths of unease. The Dead were here too.

With limbs that shook, he went on.

At last he found the place he sought; it was unmistakable. He forced himself to enter the black opening. In the dimness of the cave, there were the stones, just as described. Large ones, as large as two women could carry; laid in a mound, longer than it was broad. At the head of it, as Zalta had told him, a bow had been thrust into a crack between the stones. The wood was split and grey, but he had seen it before. It was his mother's bow.

Beren stood and listened to the thronging silence. He cleared his throat, felt the air cold in his lungs. "Mother," he said hoarsely, "I have come to you at last. I do not know if I do right to leave you in this lonely place. Perhaps it does not so much matter. I cannot in any case lay you with Father; that way is shut to me. Alas, however the world turns, we cannot now all lie together as is proper.

"One thing I can do to ease your aloneness – Hiril. I found her, Mother, and I laid her remains by Father. What comfort the Dead can take from that I do not know; but they are together. And for you, Mother, I have this." He reached into the pouch that hung around his neck and brought forth the small thing he had carried so long, through battle and fire and peril of dreadful death. It was the shell necklace that Hiril had worn and treasured from childhood: the strange shell of the distant sea, the fine gold chain. "It is Hiril's shell, Mother. I leave it with you." He found a crevice between the stones and dangled the delicate pendant into it. He let go, and it slithered down with a faint sound, hidden now under the stones.

Beren straightened up and listened. The silence was total. He could hear his own heart beat.

To the North he could sense only death and madness. There was nothing there any more. All the lives, the scenes, the days: gone.

He spoke again. "This is the end of the old life, Mother. It is time for something new." He laid a hand on the cold stones. "Until we all meet again." He turned then, and stumbled away.

\* \* \* \* \*

A roar of carousing voices echoed through the wide hall, where the golden light of many clustered lamps shone off the peacock swoop of hangings along the arcaded walls, caressed the clean curves of the arches rising above, and glittered off glazed figures set into the stone.

"It is not that I begrudge anyone a feast," said Edrahil to his companion, "but we of Nargothrond have our orderly ways of proceeding, which have not been followed."

The pair of friends were sitting at a side table, one of several arranged on that side of the spacious chamber.

"There has been no conflict, no open flouting of our former customs," the other replied.

"You say 'former', and it is well said so," said Edrahil. "They are no longer as they were. Well, all right, customs change. I admit that our people have not been unwilling to change them. These Fëanorians make a great show; I know they have made a deep impression on our folk. The people seem drawn to their pageantry like dazzled moths to a flame."

"Because they are tired of lurking, deedless, like so many secret moles," said the other, whose name was Drambar. "At least Celegorm ventures outside, carries battle to the enemy. That has fired the blood of many. I feel this myself."

“He hunts the occasional solitary wolf or Orc,” replied Edrahil dryly. “And with Huan at his side, our valiant Celegorm need fear very little from foes in such meagre strength. If he truly lusted for battle, he would not have abandoned his proper position in the East. Wide swathes of land there lie open to the Enemy, while this son of Fëanor wiles his time on our cost, doing just that which pleases him best.”

“I argue no claims for Celegorm’s boldness, or policy,” said the other, “but the effect on our people is the same. He ventures out, with blade and bow; we do not. That is the meat of the nut. Is it any wonder that we are restless?”

“The time is not ripe,” said Edrahil. “You know the arguments for patience and discretion as well as I. You have heard the King rehearse them in council, more than once.”

“So speaks reason,” said Drambar. “And I am with you. You will note that I sit with you, not at yond table of sodden and roaring bravos. But you sought reasons why the Folk have fallen under the sway of these newcomers. There you have it: glamour. Not all heads are strong enough to keep the heart under rein. And do you know, I am not at all sure that the King has the right of it either. Bethink you how mightily Maedhros has fought on at Himring, and Fingon in the West. And these Atani<sup>5</sup>! Galdor, and Húrin, and Beren! Who would ever have believed it? They burn with as hot a flame as any of the Eldar. I tell you truly, Edrahil, it grieves me as much as any to sit here and chew my nails in inaction. I do not say that we should emulate Celegorm and his followers, with their boasts and empty swagger. But outside of our strong walls, the world has not stopped turning. Think of the waste, think of the shame, if all were lost, while we lurked bootless here, waiting for the ‘right time’. Perhaps there is no right time, have you thought of that?”

“The King,” muttered Edrahil, declining to answer the remainder of Drambar’s remarks. “Aye, there’s the matter. Where is he?”

Drambar’s voice hardened. “Our lord King busies himself with his handiwork,” he said. “Just this dawn I saw him at it, with his little team of artisans. In the Hall of Silver he was, high on a pillar, carving the capital.” He paused, then added in yet bitterer tones, “Of most surpassing beauty was the work.”

Edrahil moved uneasily on his seat. “No ruler is perfect,” he said. “I do not say that I would always choose as he does, were I in his place. But he is our King.”

“If he wants to remain so, then he should look about him,” said the other. “Nay, comrade, no need to bridle at me; I speak no treason. It is but bare reality.”

The two were distracted at that point by the entry of a gowned lady who passed with elegant pace close to them on her path to the great table about which the Fëanorians and their followers were gathered. Both of them noted well the richness of her attire, her grace of movement, the beauty of her dark tresses of hair; and both marked the hint of sadness that sat upon her noble brow.

“Idhren,” commented Drambar. “The spouse of Curufin; but he cares little for her. Look, she seeks him out. She would speak with him. Ah! The mannerless cur. Did you see that? Has he no shame, to turn her off so? Much more of that, and master Curufin and I must have words, I think.”

“Leave that, by my rede,” said Edrahil. “You would have no luck by that encounter. And it is not your affair. Not but that the sight grieves me too. I have heard much of the lady, although I had not seen her before now. They say she keeps mostly to her chambers. They also say that she is a woman of rare powers; more so, perhaps, than her spouse, his mighty sire notwithstanding.”

“I ween the son had more from her than from the father,” said Drambar. “The more luck to him. Have you met him?”

“Celebrimbor?” said Edrahil. “No; and seen him seldom. I have heard that he keeps company mostly with the Dwarves.”

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5 The Quenya name for Men of the Three Houses.

Drambar sat back in his seat and laughed. “That crew!” he said. “Those thick-thewed and bearded hammerers! We should hale them oftener out of their smoky smithies, to make show for the Folk in more gentle spaces. Have you heard the latest of their doyen, this Telchar?”

Edrahil smiled to keep concord, although his opinion of Telchar and the dwarvish smiths was very different from his friend’s. “Tell on,” he said, but watching the retreat of Idhren the while.

“He has a forge on top of the hill,” said Drambar. “He goes there every moon and sings over a pot of molten iron. He has some wild notion to make a sword – the blade of ages, no less, fit to cleave Morgoth from head to heel.” He laughed again at the idea.

“The King thinks much of Telchar,” remarked Edrahil.

“The King!” exclaimed the other, with a twist to his lip. Seeing Edrahil’s frown, he turned aside from what he had first thought to say. “Well, what do I know. Perhaps this agéd Dwarf *can* make such a sword. Perhaps stones will turn to gold. Perhaps the sky will fall, and we can all go back to Valinor and spend eternity wandering its groves and gardens.”

“I hope we will do that indeed, when all is played out here,” said his companion. “But the sky, the stones, no. As for a blade that could cleave that dark Vala: neither Dwarf nor Elf can make one such. The power lies not within us.”

“Said I not so?” said Drambar, waving his hand dismissively.

Edrahil shook his head. “But there is a world of possibility that you have left unsaid.”

Drambar looked at him. “What do you mean?”

“We may not reach to heaven, we who stand at the feet of the Powers,” said Edrahil soberly. “Yet for all that, we may reach very far. Those are the heights to which Telchar is stretching.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The river called Mindeb is a vigorous stream at the point where it joins Sirion. Beren, standing on its western bank, contemplated the high wall of trees across the water. Their greening branches reached joyously toward the sky, and birds sang everywhere.

He knew well that no-one of his race had ever set foot in the Hidden Kingdom. People who made the attempt grew confused, could not find their way. Most turned back, discouraged; a few were never seen again. Beren could think of no particular reason why he should succeed where others had failed. Even supposing he could, since such difficulties were but the will of King Thingol made manifest, might one not expect harsher sanctions to await any who penetrated the initial barrier? It seemed most likely that he would either fail, or in succeeding, die. An uninviting prospect.

Beren had spoken to Haldir and Glóredhel of the several paths into the future from which he might choose. When he had come down from the mountains a few days ago, he had believed he was still undecided which to take. Yet here he was; his feet seemed to have chosen for him. Perhaps these humble appendages had realized what he himself had been reluctant to admit: that the hidden land, whose far-glimpsed glory had never left his mind, was now the only place he really wanted to be.

Time to cast the die. He stripped off his scanty clothes and made a bundle of them with his other meagre possessions, which he held over his head as he waded into the water. Mindeb was snow-fed in its upper reaches; although two days’ journey through the mournful vale of Dimbar had blunted a little of its chill, the surging water felt cold on his body nonetheless. But Beren, his mind fixed on the land ahead, paid small mind to such sensations. The whole wonderful prospect in front of him was growing greater and brighter in his mind with each fumbling step across the stones that underlay that loud and joyful water.

Finally, arriving dripping on the far bank, he stood for a while in stark wonder, simply breathing and taking in the sensations.

The spaces under the trees were green and secret. Here and there, butterflies danced in golden patches of sunlight.

The shivering of his body brought Beren back to himself. The man dried himself with grass as best he could, then bound his clout about him. Taking up his things, he advanced with cautious steps beneath the trees. The going was not difficult, but doubt grew in him after a time, because he never seemed to advance. The promise he felt so strongly remained just that – a promise; the glorious reality he seemed at each moment on the brink of reaching remained tantalisingly out of reach.

He could see an open space in front of him now, and he heard and smelled water. He emerged after a moment on the banks of a considerable stream. The far bank was treeless.

Confusion struck him suddenly. The sun was *there*? Water flowing to the *left*? His head spun like a top; then suddenly everything coalesced, and he knew where he was.

This was Mindeb again! He had come right back on his course.

Beren sat on a rock and laughed from sheer delight at it. Oh, here was a worthy trick indeed! But he would see if their wives were any match for a Druug woodsman.

He started into the woods again, this time with his perceptions tuned to the utmost. He paid the closest attention to the sparkle of the sun between the leaves, the lay of the land as he glimpsed it on either side, and the very air and feel of the woods. But it was no good. Even sooner than last time, the stream appeared across his path. The sun stood to his left, and it seemed to him now that it had done so, unregarded, for some time past.

Beren found his rock again and sat long in thought. He felt perplexed to his core, and chagrined to boot. He had not believed that any forest puzzle could defeat Druug knowledge, Druug skills.

He could *feel* the land to the South. It called to him. He stood suddenly and closed his eyes, the better to read that inner sense. Carefully then, step by step, feeling his way, ignoring the calls of all other senses, he walked his way steadily into the dream.

When he had swum with Glith, they had explored some deep waters together. There always came a time when one rose again from the lifeless chill of the dark, ascending through layers of increasing light and life; the sparkling sun reaching its welcome down through the heavy weight of water, growing ever clearer and brighter as one rose into lightness. It was the same for Beren now. He felt he had not known what a weight of gloom he had lived under until this point. He was shedding it now as a dragonfly sheds the clinging shards of its ugly pupal prison. He was climbing at last into the sunny uplands he had glimpsed from the far mountains, and his heart sang within him. His eyes were open now again, but he walked as one in a daze, ever deeper into this land that seemed alive, that pulsed at some vast, slow beat of breath and heart.

New visions, high and low, opened before him as he made his way further in. Wonders passed before his gaze as he went slowly on, walking as one in a dream. He passed through caverns of sweet growth in which spark-motes danced on air like finest wine; tender mosses caressed his feet, their tiny leaves a-glimmer with glow-worm fire.

The man wandered the whole day, lost in his happiness. Night came, and birds of evening came out and sang to him, their voices of a sweetness to pluck the heart. Here were secret perfumed flowers, and great pale clustered flowers, and tiny flowers that glowed red as gledes; and everywhere the hypnotic dance of moon-drugged moths.

Towards dawn, overcome at last by sleep, Beren curled up in the soft embrace of some ferns, kissed already

by a gentle dew.

The weeks passed, the summer waxed. Beren wandered entranced in Doriath. Elves lived in the woods, but they were unwary, and thus possible to evade, although it needed all his secrecy and skill. They were a part of this land, part of its magic, and their laughter and their music pierced his heart. He should from policy have made wide ways around them, but he found that he could not leave them alone. Often the man hid, overcome by beauty, as a party sang or played in some secret glade among the living green. Each music was different, but each time, when it was over, he longed to hear it again, to fill the crying gap in his heart. Then he would hear some new song, of a different magic, carrying him in a different direction; but it would not fill the old loss, and Beren at such times did not know whether to laugh or cry. It was a strong drink that turned the head, but one which he could not forego.

High summer lay on the land. Beren dozed during the heat of the day – the height of noon, when all living things seek the solace of shadows, far from the furnace glare of the sun. Nothing moved or sang; there was no sound but the sleepy zither of cicadas.

The day slowly waned, the heat retreated, the blue shadows lengthened. The man woke in the red sundown. He drank crystal water from a brook that laughed nearby, splashing the day's heat and dust from his face and chest with its sweet water. He sat, full content, enjoying the first breath of cooler air as the sky deepened its tint above him.

He stiffened suddenly, as one electrified. A faint melody was reaching his ears. It curled its way into his senses, and he could do nothing, nothing, but stand and seek its source. Nothing. He had never heard such music in his life.

Doriath had been like a dream to him; the kind of golden dream from which one wakes, clutching at the vision in vain despair, even as it fades, leaving behind it nothing but an intensity of longing, bleak amid the waking world. But his present life had been a living dream, with no cruel awakening, and each day that dawned left him only the gladder. But this, this which his ears were now gifting him, this was the centre of everything. Here was the beating heart. Here was the summit of being, of living, against which the whole sweep and power of Doriath seemed as only foothills.

Beren's enraptured steps led him one by one towards the night about which his whole life would turn.

He came to a lawn, touched still with twilight. A pale mist of hemlocks garlanded the feet of the dark shapes of elms towering around the glade. The hidden piper played, played on Beren's heart. The very leaves shivered in rapture at the sound.

Movement. A slender figure slid soundless out of the shadows. He saw it was a maid; and her beauty as she turned to face him clove his tongue to his mouth.

The wood-spirit began to dance, and the sight of her smote the impassioned watcher at his root, so that he could not tell if he was living or dying. Slowly she began, her arms caressing the air. Her feet made delicate movements among the tiny flowers on the sward. Oh, the piping, the dance, the summer's night! The girl's arms gleamed bare, curving in soul-beseeking rhythms with the unearthly music. The moon peeped above the trees at the scene below, touching the glade with silver. The light glimmered in the dancer's dreamy cloud of hair, which was never still, but slowly traced her every curve and twist. Moths danced with her, their tiny eyes kindled by the moon to sparks of fire. The piping music sang to the moon, and the whole land held its breath. Owls lined the branches, bewitched; voles crept out of the woods to listen.

Emotions Beren had never known welled up inside him. Smitten in his whole body, he clutched the tree beside him like a drowning man. Wonder and desire fought within him. Songs of his own formed in his mind, songs which burned in his thoughts like fire. The pain and suffering of his former life was washing from his heart like a casing of ice under poured and heated water; but at the same time new bonds were wrapping it, hot as burning whips.



In the glory of the blue night, the maid raised her ivory-pale arms again to the sky and sang to the moon. Her voice burned the helpless listening man like a flame. Reeling, he could not tell if there were words or not. Suddenly though he understood:

*“Ir Ithil ammen Eruchín,  
Menel-vîr síla díriel,  
Si loth a galadh lasto dîn!  
A Hîr Annûn gilthoniel,  
Le linnon im Tinúviel!”*<sup>6</sup>

Twigs cracked. The flute stopped as suddenly as a grasshopper that ceases his song, huddled in silent fear at the passage of heavy feet.

It was the sound of Beren, lurching out of his cover, all but mindless. His shadow blotched the silver lawn as he staggered forwards. The maid turned her startled face to him, pale beneath the moon, but a voice hissed from the bushes: “Lúthien! Drego! Drego!”<sup>7</sup>

She stood motionless, disregarding, watching with wide and fixed gaze the stumbling approach of the shaggy figure.

He came a step nearer, and a step nearer again. Still she stood, arms at her sides, alone, like a slender moonlit flower; watching him.

He was so close to her now, he could see starlight gleaming in her eyes.

The voice from the undergrowth came again, urgent: “Lúthien! This should not be here! This is danger! Run! Run *now!*” At last the girl turned to flee, just in time to escape Beren’s clutching grasp. She twisted away and vanished soundlessly among the thick growth.

The man turned this way and that, distraught; tasting in his sudden burning loss the first of the anguish his new bonds had prepared for him. Where had she gone? Where? In the fragrant woods surrounding the glade, moonbeams dappled everything to a puzzle of black and silver.

Lúthien felt no fear of him, for she had never known fear. She had run at Daeron’s urgent bidding, but she had not gone far, and crouched now beneath the hemlocks, peeping at this new thing. What was this figure which thrashed now despairing through the undergrowth? There was something about him which moved her strangely.

The man-thing was close now in his search. Too close; she should go. But something held her, made her hesitate.

Closer still the plunging figure came. She glimpsed his face, wrung as if with pain. The man’s hand swept through the stalks, a bare pace away. He came on; the hand swept closer, then back, and glanced off her bare arm. Both of them felt the shock of the touch.

Lúthien, without a word, sprang up and ran. He was behind her now, and for a long time she could not lose him, however she slipped and twisted. She gained, though, at last, fleeting always further ahead, running out of touch. At length Beren’s desperate steps led him headlong into a river, and there he halted, for the chase had vanished out of his sight and mind. She must have found some way to cross; but what did that matter? She was gone.

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6 “The Moon, having watched for us, the Children of the One,  
Shines like a jewel in the sky;  
Here let flower and tree listen in silence!  
O Lady of the West, star-kindler,  
To thee I sing; I, Nightingale!”

7 Flee! Flee!

He stood there in black despair, knee-deep in waters whose sweet voice carried the very heart of the enchantment of this land. No consolation had they for him – the dream was shattered. Without the maid, he knew he could never find joy in this place again.

Each day thence dawned, waxed, waned to red sunset in a remorseless chain that seemed to stretch until the very ending of the world. The days had become a burden to him, each one hanging around his neck as a weary weight. Food was turned to ashes in his mouth, and he found no more delight in light, song, air or anything. In the darkness of the night he cried out wordless in his pain, because his tongue had forgotten its words. The man from the North became like a beast haunting the thickets of Doriath, like a wary wolf, the outcast of his tribe; and he evaded the carefree Elves now with a wolflike cunning. He gobbled the berries and fruits of that land to still his hunger, but paid no more heed to their sweetness – those sublime fruits which have perished with the ancient world, leaving only flatness behind them. He desired only one thing: to see the maid again. Tinúviel he named her in his heart, which signifies Nightingale, daughter of twilight; since he knew no other name for her.

Many times he heard music, but it was not the music he sought; many fair faces he saw, but not the one he yearned for. And so the aching days wore on. Summer turned to a red autumn, fruitful below and fiery in the tree-tops above. Despair would have dragged Beren to death, had not wild hope held him from it.

Winter came. Grey and bare were the trees of that land now, and red the carpet beneath. Still the wanderer trod shivering through the indifferent land, through days of dripping mist when the only sound was the heavy tread of his own feet on the sodden leaves; and through nights of crystal, the fire of the stars blazing in a velvet sky reflected in the million frosty crystals of the frozen land beneath. Ice locked the streams to silence on such nights, crackled underfoot, and caked in the man's matted hair.

Twice he glimpsed her brightness. Once far off through the flying leaves of autumn; but when he hurried to the place, she was gone, and he could find no track, although he combed the grass with fingers that bled. Then, on a night in the dead of winter, a moment came that he would have spent his whole life to buy. Like a star on a hill he saw her. Heart thumping in his mouth, not daring to hope, he crept nearer, using all of his skill. The distance shrank, and ever closer he glimpsed her. He came at last to the edge of a thicket, and there he saw.

On a knoll of agéd stone she danced alone. The frosted light glittered off white jewels sewn like the stars of heaven on her blue mantle, answering the stars strewn blazing on the velvet dome above. Beren stood there in his hide, his heart on fire; drinking in the sight of her, her glory and her loveliness.

Down the hill she came now, noiseless, her feet twinkling beneath her dress. The utter grace of her arms and hands caught the breath in his throat. White in green gleamed around her feet, and Beren, wondering, saw that snowdrops sprang up wherever she trod, nodding their pale bells in greeting. Nearer and nearer the maiden came. A startled bird twittered its song above her; then another. She laughed and stretched her hand out to a branch, bringing the fat buds bursting into green; then she shushed it again with a blown kiss, and it fell back into sleep. Small waters threw off their icy bonds as she came by and chuckled gladly into song.

She came right past Beren, wafting warmth and a heavenly scent. He looked into her face, smitten with wonder. He could neither move nor cry out. The shining maid passed on, moving away, her light vanishing at last between the trees. Gone.

The bonds fell from Beren's limbs, but all he could do was fall groaning to the earth. "Tinúviel!" he cried in the silence of his heart, that he could not speak with his lips. The winter ice was back, the birds had fled. The lonely days took up once more their silent procession.

#### Year 465

The year turned. There came a time near dawn on the eve of spring, when the maid danced upon a green hill; and suddenly she began to sing. Keen, heart-piercing was her song as the song of the lark that rises from the gates of night and pours its high voice among the dying stars, seeing the sun beyond the walls of the world;

and her song released the bonds of winter, and the frozen waters spoke, and where her feet had passed, the flowers sprang with the tender grass out of the cold earth. This time the blooms remained; and the rising light over all the East spoke the promise of the returning year.

By purest chance, Beren was near. From him, too, all bonds now fell. Where before her song had bound him, now it loosed him. He surged out from the bushes. She turned to flee, but he called to her now with a great voice, his throat at last recalling its power: “Tinúviel!” he cried, “Tinúviel!” and the woods echoed to the name. Then she halted in wonder, and fled no more.

Beren mastered himself, made himself step slowly towards his heart’s desire, holding his hands wide, palm out, in sign of peace. She stood there lit with the light of dawn, but the dawn had no glory to match her.

“O Tinúviel,” the ragged wanderer croaked. “Do not fear! I will not harm you.”

She felt no fear, but unaccountably her heart began to thump in her chest. The great thing – more beast than man he seemed – stepped slowly closer. She could see his face now, see his eyes. Something strange seemed to be happening in her throat. Tendrils of fire crawled through her mind. Who was this? Who was this?

He stopped two paces away. They looked into each other’s eyes. Beren saw a maid, cloaked with dark hair like a great shadow of dusk, fair of face beyond compare; yet he looked past her fairness, into her eyes, and he saw the person behind them, and it was as if he had found his way home.

She on her side saw a tall man under a great mane of matted hair. She looked past his rags, and the hair, and the dirt on his skin, and she saw a strong man and bold. A handsome man, with a noble face, and eyes as blue as the summer sky. But she too looked within, and what she saw made her limbs tremble and stole the breath from her body. She brought a hand to her mouth and stared at him like one possessed.

Neither spoke. The man stepped nearer. Nearer yet. There was a roaring in Lúthien’s ears; she thought she was going to faint. His face was above her now. Slowly he bent forward until his warm lips touched hers.

A moment out of time they held so; then she gasped, and turned, and was gone.

Beren fell to the earth in a faint. Were he not hammered to the toughness of old oak by his years of suffering, he would have died in that moment; and whether through bliss or grief not even the wisest could have said. He fell into an abyss of shadow, and waking he was as cold as stone, despite the morning sun, and his heart within him was barren and forsaken. He wandered then in his mind through cold lands, groping as one who is stricken with sudden blindness, who seeks with hands to grasp the vanished light.

Her voice came to him in the midst of his pathless loss. Not in a thousand lifetimes could he mistake it. Throwing off the dark mists, he shook his head, and woke again to the day, to find her crouched at his side where he slumped listless on the grass. There was distress on her face, and her eyes were full.

“I could not leave you,” she stammered. “I cannot leave you. Who are you?”

He reached out his hand; trembling, she laid hers in his. They spoke then, few words and stumbling. Their hearts were too full; and his tongue was awkward, rusty from lack of use.

She brought him water. They sat and felt the day together, listening to the birds, side by side, each feeling the thrill of the other’s warmth.

Towards evening she tore herself away; but she promised to come back. He saw the truth in her eyes, and set himself stoically to wait out the hours.

Thereafter she met him often in the woods, many days, in the waxing of that most joyous of springs. They learned each other in the way of all lovers. He found how to make her laugh; she sang to him to sooth his heart. Soon she grew bolder. She cut and washed his thick hair, then combed it and braided it, marvelling at

the rich colours revealed in its darkness. Clothing she made for him in secret, until he was clad in glory; and when he laughed, his teeth flashing even and white in his weather-bronzed face, as an Elven prince he seemed, a noble among nobles. She looked at him then with a pang in her heart, and each day bound him closer to her, and she to him.

She knew he was mortal. From the first moment she had looked into his eyes, she had known that. In that one instant she had understood all the grief that lay in store for her; and in that same instant, she had set the knowledge aside. The only thing that mattered was the Now.

She marvelled at the things this son of Bëor told her of his life until that time – marvelled, and grew to feel ashamed. This mortal had packed more fight into his short time on earth than even Celeborn had accomplished during his whole long life.

Beren told her of Glith; finally, he told her about Carver. Lúthien cried for an hour, while Beren sat silent and stricken, the sight of her tears rending his heart. But then she understood that she could no more rule the past than she could determine the future. There was no such thing as possession for all time; and more firmly even than before, the power of the present laid hold of her heart and mind. So she dried her tears and mended his heart with gentle caresses. The Now was all that she had. It was all that anybody ever had.

Lúthien laughed at his stories of the Little Folk, cried over the deaths at Sightfoot and Aeluin, and listened with round-eyed wonder to his tale of the raid on the Tower, and then to that of the last battle, in which he had wounded Gorthaur on the hand. Yes, even Gorthaur, the fell Master of Werewolves! What *was* this man she had found? He was her man, and that was enough – but it became clear to her that he stood equal ranked with Fingon and Maedhros, the greatest heroes of the age. Her breast swelled with pride, and her heart was filled with emotions she could not name.

When he on his side learned that she was the daughter of Melian and the King, he trembled within himself. This was aiming very high! Nor would they look with favour on their deathless daughter joining herself with a mortal, whatever claims of lineage he might make. He thought of Andreth's wasted life, and of Aegnor's grief, and he trembled too for the future.

His conscience began to trouble him too about smaller things as well as great. It was the custom among all gentle peoples, he knew, to seek the approval of the parents before a wedding – and there could be no other destination than this for him and Lúthien. He spoke of this to her on a time. She sat in silent thought a moment, then looked up at him with troubled eye.

“Yes,” she said, “thou art in the right. I too have suffered unquiet in my conscience over this. But it is no light matter, as thou well knowest. I must think on the easiest way to break it to them.” But she could not find any form of speech which would deflect her father's anger, and so said nothing; and the weeks went by, as the spring blossomed into a golden summer.

Daeron had always known that his love for Lúthien was hopeless. He had accepted this early, and as time went on, he found that he was content enough as things were; with much practice, he could put his pain to one side, and take joy in her song and company, almost as one unsmitten.

The scholar and minstrel was a true heart and a mild one, who bore no ill feelings to any man, not even towards the warriors who were eager enough to hear his music but paid him scant regard as a person. He had been troubled by the intrusion of the rough stranger the previous summer, but he turned his face from telling tales; it was up to the guards and the Queen to detect and deal with such things.

Now, though, this same coarse creature – he appeared to be a mortal man – had taken his little bird away from him. No more interest had she in Daeron. His beloved would wander pensive and alone during the days, then slip away in the dusk to consort once again with this... this person. Daeron followed her, often, and would watch from concealment, consumed in a fire of jealous rage, as the pair laughed, talked or danced together under the tender sky of the summer nights. No more joy could he take in his music, or in anything. Food was as ashes in his mouth, and he cast the dry and prolix scrolls from him in impatient fury.

This maker of music had been wont to wander the land as his fancy took him. It was natural then that dwellers in various parts of Doriath might go some time without the beauty of his playing reaching their ears. Its cessation therefore caused no immediate surprise, but as time went on, the people began to wonder. The whole forest seemed quieter, as if poised, waiting; birds sang more hushed, the very babble of the streams themselves seemed subdued. An unease came among the folk, and strange rumours began to be muttered from mouth to mouth; but none dared voice them to the King.

High summer arrived. The King and Queen held court on thrones built of green turves on the sward that sloped down from the gates of Menegroth to the Esgalduin, that enchanted stream. On that lawn grew Hirilorn, queen of trees; and the thrones were set between the slanting walls of two of her vast root-toes. The smooth grey bole, wider across at her base than a team of horses was long, rose up and up to a colossal height in the dizzy air, until capped by a vast, spreading canopy of shimmering green whose individual leaves were too far off for mortal sight to distinguish.

Lúthien attended, but she took no part in the occasion, her mind turned to Beren. Melian sat silent on her throne, listening to the talk, but her glance rested often on her daughter's indrawn face.

Daeron was also present; he sat a little apart, looking down at the ground.

Thingol was puzzled. The life of the court, normally joyous and lively, was somehow missing fire. His jests with his men fell flat, and his attempts to get up a song had little more success. Men brought out lute and pipes willingly enough at his suggestion, but there was no harmony or joy in what sounds they brought from their instruments. After a moment he bade them sharply to stop.

“What is wrong with everyone?” he demanded. “Nobody has any music in them lately! Why, the very woods seem hushed. It is as if they were waiting for something. Why, I might almost fancy they await the approach of Oromë and his Wild Hunt, whose advent these lands have not seen for many a long age. Well I mind the glory and the terror of his onset, the splendour of his golden-shod steed; and I can hear still his horn that shook the heavens – yea, from vault to base.

“Daeron Lore-master! Leave aside whatever dismal thought furrows thy brow. What say you, hey? Comes Oromë, with his horse and hounds?”

Daeron looked up, and no mirth was in his eyes. “Nay, Lord,” he said, “the stars foretell nothing of the like. As indeed could scarcely be – since the paths from the West are closed, and shall remain so, until many evils not yet wrought are come to pass.”

“Why, you are as flat as all the rest,” said the King. “Cheer up, man! Is it not said that any woes in this magic land of ours must be fleeting ones? And if they are not, by the breath of Manwë, I will know the reason why. Tell me then, of your art, if not the mighty Hunter, of whom I did indeed speak half in jest, what cometh? What passeth in this land of joy, that all walk so quiet about, with the drawn faces of those who await some stroke of doom? Why does the stream whisper so low, why do the birds not sing?”

Daeron struggled with himself, then burst out, “The woods are still indeed, lord King, but not from waiting! Say rather, from shock at scenes they have witnessed.”

Thingol sat back in his mossy seat, eyebrows raised in surprise. “What is this? I think you must say more, Minstrel. What scenes?”

“Strange ones – where a stranger plays a role.”

“What are you talking about?” demanded the King. “Speak not in riddles! What stranger?”

Lúthien sat up suddenly, her attention snapped back to the urgent present.

“One whom kings see not,” said Daeron, glancing under dark brows first at Melian, then at Lúthien, “but

queens may guess at; and maidens, maybe, know. Where once wandered one alone, now there are two!”

The King’s face turned first white, then red. Daeron could not remember having seen him look so ugly.

Thingol leaned forward, and when he spoke there was anger in his voice, and menace. “Tell me what you know,” he said.

Daeron, however, glanced at Lúthien; and seeing the anguish written on her face, he cursed himself in his own thoughts for speaking at all. He turned back to the King, set his face, and shook his head; and not one more word could Thingol get out of him.

Lúthien stood up. She stood there, fair and straight as a lily, and looked her father in the eye. “My father,” she began, “I beg thy forgiveness; I should have sought thy countenance in this matter. Indeed I meant to, and it is my fault alone that I have delayed. I humbly beg thy mercy for the discourtesy. If it is thy will, I will tell thee now something of this stranger of whom Daeron speaks, and with whom I have indeed spent many hours of bliss.”

“Tell, then,” said Thingol in a voice thick with suppressed feeling.

Lúthien told him then something of Beren, of his lineage, and of his great deeds in the North. Towards the end her voice faltered at the look on her father’s face. “I hope you will receive him, if not with joy, then at least with honour?” she finished.

The company had all risen and were standing back from the scene, tense and uncomfortable. Thingol turned and beckoned to his guard-captain. “Do you arm a company and fetch me this intruder,” he said harshly.

Melian had until now neither spoken word nor given sign, but her eyes had flickered from face to face, taking in everything that was said. Now she leaned forward and said, “No use. They will not find him. Wood-wise is he, more even than they.”

Thingol, red-faced, was about to make some intemperate reply, but Lúthien ran forward and laid her hand on his knee. “Father, please,” she said. “There is no need for this. Beren will come to you willingly! I will lead him to you. But I will not have him insulted. You must promise me to treat him well.”

The King leaned toward her, and when he spoke, his voice was quiet; but such tones were in it as to make every listener there, save the Queen, quake in their boots. “I had already reason to be aggrieved,” he said, “had you chosen for your lover one of our own people, without once doing me the bare courtesy of speaking of it. But this man is a stranger, and he is in this land uninvited. I know not what guile or sorcery he has used to enter where the Dark One himself cannot. I further learn from thine own lips that he is not of the Firstborn, but a mortal man; one of these latecomers, these sickly ones, who live briefly in squalor and then cough out their feeble lives in the same. Have you the slightest idea what that means, you giddy fool? Well, have you?”

Lúthien answered quietly, “He is my match, Father. I fit him as the fingers fit the glove. It does not matter that he will grow old and die.”

Thingol waved this away with an impatient gesture. “Do not spout such nonsense. It is against reason. How could such as you be matched with this... this...”

“He is a prince, and a hero,” said Lúthien, a glint awoken in her own eye.

“He is mortal!” flared the King. “All your proud claims touching his birth are but empty words. Prince? One might as well speak of lords among the beasts of the fold. The generations of these beings come and go before one has caught one’s breath. What can lordship mean to such as they? And what care I what kind of brigand’s life he has led in the wastes of the North? Nay, daughter mine, light of my life, thou hast not simply aggrieved me; thou hast shamed me, and that to the depths. This rascal consort of thine should merit death, not honour.”

Lúthien stood up straight, and now her own anger was plain to see. “I will not suffer him to be spoken of so,” she said. “And Mother is right: you will not find him, if he does not choose to be found. If you want words with this my man, as is indeed your proper right, that my sloth and cowardice has long delayed, which I do freely admit, you must nonetheless promise to do him no harm, and to let him go free afterwards.”

Thingol sat silent for a long moment, tasting the bitter force of her words. “Very well,” he said through gritted teeth. “I so pledge. Let the stream and the tree bear witness.”

“I will go to him,” said the girl. She touched her father briefly again on the knee. “Father, I own the fault; but I am trying to mend it.” She turned then and ran lightly out of the clearing.

Thingol turned again to his guard commander after she had gone. “Go ye now and do as we have commanded. Harm him not, since we have so sworn; but bind him, and bring him to us. Maybe Lúthien would fetch him, were she let, but it will please us far better if this miscreant be hauled before us, rather than that he strut in like a peacock, defiling the arm of our dearest treasure.” He turned suddenly to Daeron, who was glowering sadly on the edge of the group. “And you! Since it seems you know their movements better than any, go you with them and guide. Do not think to refuse!” The King now turned to the shocked courtiers. “We will receive him in the throne room. Make all ready.”

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Daeron went with the band of guards as the King commanded, but he was sick at heart, most of all at himself; thus he led them purposely astray. They did not find Beren, whom Lúthien was therefore able to lead to Menegroth unmolested. A shining moon was rising in the warm blue evening as they reached the bridge across the magic stream. The wide lawn rose in curves beyond, striped silver by the waxing moon.

There were guards on the bridge, but they dared not waylay the King’s daughter or bar her passage, so they brought their spears clashing to the salute and stared wide-eyed straight ahead as the pair passed between. Lúthien led Beren over the tender grass, beneath the mighty tree, and there it was: the gate to Menegroth, doors thrown wide, with the wooded hill rising steeply behind. The moon picked out all the shapes of the mighty portal but could not reach far into the dim interior.

They passed more guards at the door and entered beneath the high and looming arch. Beren found himself descending a long series of steps which fanned out and down – but such steps! How was the glow trapped within the stones? Radiance flashed from each step and spread in arcs across the surface.

He halted at the bottom, despite Lúthien’s urging, and looked about him. He found himself at the threshold of a vast hall. The broad way, set with mosaics of cunning artistry, led between spiral-carven pillars which supported the vaulted ceiling high above. The space was but dimly lit, but he had never seen such lights. Red dragon-flames glimmered high along the rows from silver cressets, but lower on the pillars and walls and in the floor itself were sparks and twists of fire, as on the entry stairs, set by some unknown art within the stones themselves.

Lúthien tugged his hand gently. “We must not dally,” she whispered, so Beren suffered her to lead him further. As they went on, deeper into the hill, wonder succeeded wonder, too many for his eyes and mind to take in. The halls of Tumunzahar had been vaster, maybe, but not more beautiful. Some high chambers had butterflies of coloured lights which wove between the vaults; in another, rills of water fell from above, and each had sunlight trapped within – and whence came that in the night-time hours? – which shattered with the drops in joyful rainbow sparkles. Other spaces were lit above by a thousand varied sparks like stars. All these things passed before Beren’s eyes like a dream.

They came at last to the greatest cavern of all, and the most wonderful. Vast pillars like marble trees reared high above. The roof shone like the leaves of spring, so green and fresh was the light that filtered down. Jewels glittered like living stars; birds sang and flitted between branches of winding gold. Fountains burred quietly on every side. The forest-scented air was fresh.

The rumour of Beren's coming had spread like wildfire among the Elves, and many had gathered to witness. They stood now crowding on every side behind the ordered rows of guards in their high-polished armour. Beren eyed these people as he passed before them. These were wild Elves, people of the shadows beneath the stars. They reminded him of the ones he had first met in Celevir's company. The immortal Light of the West<sup>8</sup> was not in their faces; they had never beheld it.

His eye was caught by a tall, striking-looking woman with a river of hair having the same colour of sunlit gold as Finrod's. She stood out from the whispering ranks of twilight Elves as though she stood under a lamp – but there was no lamp. As Beren drew level with her and caught her eye, she inclined her head to him. It was a motion something more than a nod, if not quite a bow. He guessed who she was, for Lúthien had spoken of her. This must be Finrod's sister, Galadriel.

At the end of the long hall, cones of golden light slanted from high above to illuminate two tall thrones, glistening with silver and mirror-polished wood. A pale-haired king sat on the one, his dark consort upon the other. The Light of Aman lay on both their faces, and as Beren approached on knees that were none too steady, two pairs of keen eyes sought to probe his soul.

The appearance of the man was not what Thingol had expected. The intruder was tall, broad-shouldered; graceful of build and carriage. The line of his jaw was clean. The face – but what was this? Could it truly be in Men to show so resolute, to return searching glance with such a clear and challenging eye?

Why, if one did not know better, one would take this Man for one of the Firstborn – and no mean spirit among them either.

Through the red curtain of his deep anger, the King was appalled to recognize in himself a grudging regard for the approaching mortal. There was a traitor part of Thingol that liked what he saw and felt of this young man; liked it very much. He thrust the imbecile thought from him in a blaze of fury, and was about to speak, when Melian leaned across to him and spoke low into his ear.

“Choose your words with care,” the Queen murmured. “There is a greater coil of twisted fate in this chamber than I have ever felt before. Choose with care!”

Thingol stared at her a moment without reply, then looked back at the intruder, standing halted now before the thrones, hand in hand with his daughter. The King got up and stepped slowly down from the dais and came forward until he stood before the couple. “Unhand him, and step back,” he said to Lúthien, and this she did without a word. Thingol looked back to Beren and considered the man for a time in silence.

Beren in his turn took in the figure standing before him. The King was taller than he. This Elda was very beautiful. His long cascade of moonlight-silver hair, clasped to his head by a coronet of dainty silver leaves, hung unbound almost to his knees. He was clad in a silver-grey robe which glimmered like the stars on a northern mere. On the middle finger of the King's long hand Beren saw a broad, rune-graven ring set with a great central stone, luminous as sea-foam under the moon.

But the face! It was a strong face; a wild face. The sea-grey eyes, filled with a fierce light, seemed to scour Beren to his marrow.

The man felt abashed. Here was one who had lived longer, wider, deeper than he could imagine. What had he done by coming here? What could he say to such a one? He glanced now at the Queen, and the instant sight of her face, close now to see, shook him like a blow. He knew that face! Memories rushed through him: a lake under starlight, night birds, the scent of beauty. Dazzled, confused, he lowered his eyes to the floor.

Thingol spoke. In a deep and measured voice, he said, “Who are you that stumble into this realm, or creep in as a thief? Do you not know that none return again to light and life who have once unbidden stood before this throne?”

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8 Those who had seen the light of the Trees of Valinor in their glory retained ever after an echo of it in their eyes.



Beren's tongue clave to his mouth, and he could find no words to reply.

Lúthien spoke in his stead: "His name is Beren, Father, as I have told you," came her clear voice. "The son of Barahir, lord of Men. He is a mighty foe of our foes; even here the songs of his deeds have been heard. He stands here now friendless and alone. I pray thee, remember thy promise!"

"Let Beren speak!" said Thingol sternly. He turned back to the man. "Speak, Mortal. What think you to do here? Why have you left your own land to come to this, which is forbidden to such as you? And by what trick did you gain entry? Can you show reason why my power should not be laid on you in heavy punishment for your insolence and folly?"

Beren, looking up, saw the eyes of Lúthien on him, felt her anxiousness and pride. His gaze then swung back to the Queen. No sign he saw in her impassive face, he read no open word of her thought, but memories surged back to fill him again – memories of his long struggle and his many griefs. The pride of the eldest house of Man returned to him; he cast aside his fears, and felt himself again. Setting his feet slightly astride, he clasped his hands together behind him and stood now tall and poised.

Beren looked back to Thingol and met his eye now unflinching. "Lord King," he said calmly, "I would not have left the land of my birth save in uttermost need; when to remain would have meant consigning my soul to oblivion. I had no design in your realm except to seek that Light which all hale creatures seek by their natures. If you hold this ill to desire, then I know not what ye do sojourning here. You ask how it is that I succeeded where all other strangers have failed, but I cannot answer, for I do not know. Fate may have its own reasons."

Thingol snorted. "Fate," he scoffed. "A bold word for a houseless wanderer. Any brigand might so handily underlay his misdeeds. You sought here naught but light, you say. How is it then that reports come to my ear that you waited not a moment before you commenced with chase and harass to plague one of my flesh – yea, my own daughter here? Do you deny that you have so confused and cozened the maid that she now speaks your cause? What does that say to your vaunted quest for light?"

Beren raised his chin. "I have found here... in your daughter, such a treasure as I could not tally in a thousand years," he said slowly. "This is truth. I found it, having sought it not. But now that I have found it, I will not give it up. I will not. Your words concerning cozening, my lord, if I may speak so, are ignorant. If you will reject your daughter's word for that, and mine, then you had best ask the flowers and the birds. They will make me a true witness."

Thingol began to pace back and forth. "Your words enrage me," he ground out, "as doubtless is their purpose. Very well, reprobate. Speak your price. You shall take away as much gold as you can carry, and your miserable life as well. What say you to that?"

Beren flushed with anger, but he strove to keep his voice level. "You have not listened. Do you think my affections so weak that you can buy them off with gold? There is nothing that could do so, nothing. You cannot keep me from my heart's mate with any coin short of death, King; and you shall not!"

Thingol's eyes flashed in anger. "Your 'heart's mate', as you name her in your insolence, is my daughter. My daughter! It is impossible that she should wed to such as you – grotesquely and scandalously so. Your suit, if such affront as this may be so dignified, is summarily refused. If you will not take gold, then you have here no more business. Now will you take yourself out of my sight, or shall my soldiers show you the path?"

"You do but pour out the insults of your tongue upon the rock of certain fact," said Beren with rising heat. "Suit? Your daughter and I are already one. We will not live apart; that which joins us cannot be sundered by any ill-thought words of yours, Thingol. Your only course was to accept with grace that which you cannot alter. But you have spurned that path of wisdom and courtesy; cast it aside in your petulance."

"Know this: not rock, nor steel, nor the powers of all the Elf-kingdoms in one; yea, not even the fires and torments of Morgoth himself shall keep me from the jewel of my heart's desire. For your daughter Lúthien is

the fairest and best thing God made. She shall be mine, and I hers.”

Thingol thrust his face close to Beren’s and ground his teeth together. “Thou brass-necked varlet!” he hissed. “Thou hast spoken of death, and death thou hast earned, and shouldst surely find, had I not given my word, of which I now sorely repent. How dost thou dare? Thou mortal! Thou libertine, thou spy, thou baseborn thrall of Morgoth – what have *we* to do with cattle such as ye?” He turned to his guards. “Take him!”

Beren’s eyes blazed. “Touch me not!” he cried, and he held up his hand wearing the ring, which flared a tower of green fire in answer. The clutching guards shrank back again and all the watchers cried out in amazement. “Cattle, are we?” Beren shouted. “Your kinsman Finrod thought not so, when my father saved his life in the field of the North, and he bound his house to ours with *this!*” His voice sank to a more measured pitch, but determination remained stamped on his features, and the green brilliance flickered still over his raised fist. “I stand in your power, King. If you will kill me, I cannot prevent it, whether I have earned such or no. But I will *not* take from you the names of baseborn, nor spy, nor thrall!”

The King raised his own hand, face working with fury; but before he could further speak or act, Melian stood in her seat. “Stop!” she cried; and such was her power, in this the centre of her realm, that all fell silent and paid heed. “Now shall ye all take pause and cool your wrath!” she commanded. “Hot words work ill deeds. Ye should save your anger for our common foe.”

She sat down again. But in the privacy of their minds she spoke to Thingol: *Once more I counsel you to take care what you say! Beren’s doom is not yours to rule; yet it is entwined with yours. His fate indeed led him hither, and destiny has a long road prepared for him yet, which leads far from these halls. My lord, calm your anger. Consider only what is best to do.*

*I wish you would tell me all that you know of this affair,* replied Thingol peevishly.

*That may not be, as you know,* replied his queen. *Would you live as a puppet? You must make your decisions freely and alone.*

Thingol returned to his throne and sat upon it. Beren had lowered his hand, but the ring burned still on his finger as a band of white fire. As Thingol’s anger cooled, again the grudging thought came to him that this man might have merited consideration as a son – nay, be honest! Surely would have – had he been other than mortal. He had heard the tales of the man, had marvelled at them with the others, even though he had shrewdly set aside the highest flights as mere bardic fancy. Looking now in the stern face of their subject, he could no longer make himself believe so.

The words he had spoken in his wrath returned to him, and he suffered some pricking of his conscience. He had perhaps gone too far, spoken in too great haste... His eye lighted on the face of his daughter, gazing still at Beren, and the love he read there smote his heart. How could he allow her to undergo this pain? No, he *could not* allow it. The quicker it were ended for her the better. As he pondered, thinking over Beren’s words, a great and luminous idea dawned upon him. He almost laughed aloud, so fitting was it; so neat a piece of surgery.

*What are you doing?* came Melian’s thought to him.

*Deciding,* he replied. *You were right: cool thought has cut the knot which anger could not unravel.*

*Do not dishonour yourself,* she said.

*No, no. Have no concern. I am leaving all to fate.*

The King leaned forward and addressed Beren again. “I see the ring, son of Barahir,” he said, “and I perceive that you are proud, and deem yourself mighty. And it may be that you have some right to think so; it may be that my words to you, spoken in haste, were not quite just.” He smiled then, but his eyes remained hard. “Although a father’s deeds, you know, even had they been rendered to me, would not help you in your own

suit. But set that aside. I regret my former temper; but my heart has cooled, and you will see that I can be reasonable.

“Hear me! I too desire a treasure, a jewel of price; and this is guarded by rock, and by steel, and by Morgoth’s fires. Yet I hear you say these things do not dismay you. Very well then! Bring to me a Silmaril from Morgoth’s crown, and Lúthien’s hand is yours, if she wills it so. Then you shall have *my* jewel; and though the fate of Arda lie within the Silmarils, yet you shall hold me generous.”

Utter silence lay on the hall. Some there who had senses for such things felt the world turn around the fateful words. All perceived that Thingol would thus save his oath, yet send Beren to his death in its despite; for they knew that not all the power of the Noldor, even before the Siege was broken, had availed even to see from afar the shining Silmarils of Fëanor. These were set in the Iron Crown, and treasured in Angband above all wealth; Balrogs were about them, and countless swords, and strong bars, and unassailable walls, and the dark majesty of Morgoth.

The Queen had covered her face with her hands.

All eyes turned to Beren to await his reply. A smile broke slowly across his face, and it was a smile of contempt. Seeing this, Thingol flushed anew.

“What bride-price is this?” Beren mocked. “I had expected a challenge to some work of note; but I looked far too high. Nay: for footling price, it seems, do Elven-kings sell their daughters – for gew-gaws, and for gauds; more fitted to delight the jackdaw, I would have thought, than a prince of the Eldar. But if this be thy will, Elwë Grey-cloak, I will perform it; and that with celerity, that I may the swifter see again the face of her I love. I bid ye farewell, O mighty King and Queen, O nobles fair – farewell, but not goodbye. For ye have not looked your last upon Beren son of Barahir.”

He turned to go, but Thingol sprang once again from his seat, eyes glittering anew.

“Ever the braggart,” he said. “Go then, as thou listeth. Just remember this, Mortal; show thy face in here again without a Silmaril in thy hand, and thou art a dead man.”

Beren nodded stiffly. “Be it so,” he said.

As he went to pass the first rank of guards, some of them made to grab him. They had not relished his words to their lord, and proposed to hustle him from the chamber with scant regard for his dignity. Beren seized the first to lay hand on him, lifted him entire, and cast him bodily into the advancing rank of his fellows. A general shout rang out, and other guards ran up, drawing their swords as they came. At this, Galadriel could no longer restrain herself, but stepped forward from where she stood along the side.

“For shame!” she cried, her clear voice ringing in the hall. “For shame! Would you draw against an unarmed man? The King’s grace has given the man leave to go, unless my ears deceive me sorely.” She turned to the King. “Lord King! Do you permit this dishonour, this disgrace?”

“Hold your tongue!” replied the King angrily, but even as he spoke, Celeborn stepped also from the ranks of appalled watchers to stand beside his consort. Seeing the quiet resolution on the face of his own close kinsman, Thingol swallowed the hot words he had been about to say, turning his fury instead on his guards. “You there!” he shouted. “Put up your blades, curse you! Escort him from our lands, but molest him not, on pain of punishment.” The King turned back to Galadriel. “This is a day of boldness, to be sure,” he said, still red in the face. “Is it the feast of impertinence, and none told me? Or must I now be lessoned by every chit who feeds upon my cost?”

Hearing this last, it was Galadriel’s turn to flush hotly.

“Had you but drawn one temperate breath, Galadriel,” continued the King, “you would indeed have heard me forbid it.”

Galadriel bowed minimally and stiffly, then stepped back into the line.

Unhampered now, Beren cast a final glance toward Lúthien and strode down the passage. The maid cried his name, and would have followed; but Thingol had her restrained.

The guards accompanied Beren out into the moonlit night. They halted before the bridge.

“There are many ways out of this land,” the captain said to Beren with mocking geniality. “Which point of the compass do you choose?”

Beren hesitated, then said “South.”

The guards looked at one another and grinned. “Very wise,” replied the captain, his teeth gleaming pale in the moon. “Furthest from Morgoth.” Beren flashed him a glance of contempt, but did not deign to reply.

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“I cannot in the least understand why you are so upset,” protested Thingol in the privacy of their chamber. “I thought it was a quite famous solution.”

“Oh, famous indeed,” Melian replied. “But I think it will go ill for you, whether Beren fails or succeeds. By your ‘famous solution’ you have doomed either your daughter, or yourself. To even name the Silmarils is to wake a great power of wrath. You have bound your neck to a weighty stone; now you can only hope that it does not slip.”

“Oh, pshaw,” replied Thingol. “I will not dignify your second fear with a reply – it is too absurd. Stone, hah! No stone could be more firmly fixed. My neck rests quite at ease. But tell me, do you truly believe I would sell one whom I love for any thing of price? You insult me, so.” The look on his face hardened. “No – were there the least danger that the mortal might achieve this quest, I would have killed him on the spot, sworn word or no.”

“You set your own honour so low?”

“I set it below the happiness of my daughter,” said Thingol. “She has unhappily fallen into this infatuation; her quickest way out of it is his death.”

“You cherish her happiness – and for that you will kill her beloved,” said Melian.

“Melian,” he said, with forced patience, “he is mortal. He will age and die. I have not seen this occur for myself, but Daeron has gathered reports. In scant ten years from now, the early snow will speckle his hair; the first small gullies will carve in his face. Ten years! I can hold my breath that long. A few summers further, and he is gone. I do but slightly hasten an inevitable process. She has brought this grief upon her own head, it is none of my doing! Ask yourself only, is it better that things end now, when she has fair memories only of his youth and strength, or must she pass through the harrow of his drawn-out decay? Do you wish that horror upon her?”

“I wish her the freedom to choose, as I had,” replied Melian.

Thingol was silent a while at that. “I am responsible for her,” he said at last coldly. “I have repaired a disaster as best I could. The man will die, and she will forget. The time will come when you will admit that I was right.”

She shook her head sadly. “I believe you are wrong,” she said, “and I fear you will pay for your mistake. Time will render the account.”

They parted in disunity, and spoke no more on this for the time.

\* \* \* \* \*

A few days later, Galadriel came to see Melian to tell her that she would presently depart.

Melian looked deeply into her eyes. "I will not ask if it is a flight in anger from his hasty words," she said, "for I see that it is not."

Galadriel half-smiled. "No," she said. "I forgive him those. He is sore tried – and it is the harder for him that he has chosen the wrong path."

"You think so?" asked Melian, her head on one side.

Galadriel sighed. "It is an unhappy chance," she said. "I have heard of two more such affairs – indeed, both were among Beren's own family. I would have said it is but one more such mis-alliance, except there is an air about this man. He is not ordinary."

"He is very ordinary," smiled Melian.

"Well, all right. But are we not all?" replied Galadriel. "In the sense that you clearly mean? We all crawl humbly about this Middle-earth like so many ants. I meant rather that there is a potential in him. A very great one. Do you know, I am far from certain that this quest is beyond him? All reason tells me he rides to his death; but my heart will not have it so."

"You see the same in him which I see," said Melian soberly. "The tragedy is that Thingol does not."

Galadriel was silent a while. "Well," she said at last, "this touches me not closely. I must go. I was waiting for something, I knew not what. Now I do not see that any something has come, but I know I need wait no more."

"And Celeborn?" asked the Queen.

"He will be glad to go," replied Galadriel. "He also hungers for new horizons."

"When you first came to me," said the Queen, "you had a horror of Arda Marred. What say you now? Can you stand it?"

"I mourn the marring still," replied Galadriel slowly, "and my longing for lost beauty will never fade. But you have taught me to see the shadows of that beauty in the poor husks that remain. I will never set aside the hope to wake the embers to new life."

"You have learned much here, Galadriel who was Artanis."

"Say rather Nerwen, the Man-maiden," smiled Galadriel.

Melian laughed. "No, no; I will not admit that name. A delight in prowess of the body can never be held unwomanly. So, from Noble Woman to Shining Crown; it is perhaps not so ill a change."

Galadriel, overcome by a sudden emotion, knelt before the Queen and bowed her head. "If I have learned anything, it is from you, O Melian the most wise. As a mother you have been to me, in place of she from whom the wide Sea sunders me. It grieves me more than I can say to bid thee farewell."

Melian laid her hand in blessing on the golden head. "Depart then in wisdom and good fortune, guest dear as daughter. But Galadriel, I pray thee, hark to this last motherly admonition: do not forget us! Much indeed you have learned, but there is much to learn from us still, and you will find those lessons in your memories. Think, and try always to see clearly, and do not neglect the small things in striving for the great."

Galadriel rose and smiled. "I will remember. And now we will away! The road awaits, and who knows where

it will lead?"

"Who indeed?" The Queen smiled sadly.

But the golden-haired woman's thought had turned inward, dreamy. "But perhaps – a home for me awaits at road's end?"

"All roads lead home at last." Melian laid a last gentle hand on the younger woman's arm. "Galadriel. Do not be dismayed if I forewarn that your road home may be long."

\* \* \* \* \*

It was a hard journey to the South, and a lonely one. The palace guards did not come far on the road with Beren, but handed him into charge of a company of rangers. These new escorts were not unfriendly, but they kept to themselves, and offered the stranger neither shelter, food, nor company. He would hear them at halts as they laughed and sang, while the merry red flames of their fires crackled and sent embers wavering into the air.

He could perhaps have left his escort and gone forward on his own, but he was not certain he could give Elves the slip in their own land, which they knew intimately, but he hardly at all. Besides, he needed their guidance: the shape of the land to the South was strange to him, and he did not know the way. He knew that he would have to cross the great river, and he would fainer do this by boat than swim, since he knew that Sirion grew to a great stream this far south of the mountains. Both the Druug and the Haladin he had spoken with in Brethil had assured him that it was already perilous to swim it even above the place where Mindeb poured in to swell its flood, and his own memories bore this out. So he put up with the guards, with the aloofness of some, and with their choices of path and of times to stop and go on.

He had brought away nothing but his clothes, his ring, and his knife. Doriath was the kindest of lands, and there was always food to find, if not in abundance. Strange and sweet were its fruits, which now are lost, since they passed away in the ruin of that country, sunk deep now in time. He soon put off the comely raiment Lúthien had made for him and went again as one of the Druug, bare except for a cloth tied around his loins. One or two of the guards would have raised a sardonic eyebrow at this, but there was something about the grace of the man's figure and stride, and about his unaffected comfort at slipping free through the green woods, which made them think twice.

Strange perhaps to say, Beren had no fear of Morgoth. Nine out of ten men would have quailed at the dreadful prospect which stood before him, turning away at last in humbled shame to live with what poor shreds of self-regard they could scabble together; the tenth would have firmed his jaw and marched with fierce-clutched courage to his death. Beren however had faced death already in so many forms, and had learned so well to master his body and mind, that the perils he had now set his face towards seemed unexceptional, almost familiar. He was, on the other hand, in great agony of mind over Lúthien. He missed her almost beyond his power to endure. He felt as if half of his soul had been torn away, and he did not know how long he could continue to live in that state. But whether by death or success, his only road out of his present misery lay through the gates of Angband; therefore he went not shrinking, but almost eagerly.

Of course he wished to live if he could, and at present he was puzzled to see how he could manage it. He badly wanted advice, and he could think of only one possible source of it: Finrod. This thought had guided his choice of direction from the gates of Menegroth.

So the slow, hot days dragged by, and the sleepless nights, during which the man lay with leaden heart thinking of Lúthien, and listening to the laughter and the singing of the carefree Elves.

The final days of the dying summer brought the party to the marshes at the end of that land. His escort led him in discreet paths through the willow and reeds to a narrow haven where several reed boats were moored, hidden from casual gaze. Here they met with a check. The master boatman, Gwael by name, who was, it seemed, a connection of the King, was zealous in nursing to his own breast his august relation's affronted

dignity. He had heard a colourful tale of Thingol's encounter with this northern wanderer, and in consequence was disinclined to allow the king's adversary passage on any craft under his command. Hobas, the captain of the escort, argued with him, but he was obdurate. The king's command, Gwael declared, had been to escort this vagabond to the edge of the land; well, here he was. He was perfectly free to swim or starve. There was no obligation on Gwael to take him any further.

Hobas, red in the face from chagrin, took Beren to one side. This Sinda was a youngish fellow, not yet come into his full breadth of body, but he had a fresh colour in his cheek and a flashing, honest, kingfisher-blue eye. He had kept dutifully to his task during the days of travel, but once or twice Beren thought he had detected signs of warmth beneath the captain's official reserve.

"Now I do not know what I am to do," Hobas said. "This fellow is wrong – you are not out of the Girdle until your foot touches the other bank. Alas, I do not command him. And without boats, I do not see how I can carry out my orders."

"Is it possible to swim?" asked Beren, vexed on his own account, but finding room for some sympathy for Hobas as well. "I can make my way well enough through water."

"Not Sirion," replied the Elf with a decided shake of his head. "Unless you were a fish, maybe." He looked Beren over thoughtfully. "You might manage Aros."

"What is Aros?" asked Beren.

"You do not know these lands?"

"No!" replied the man with a grim smile. "Else I had given you carriers the slip long ago, and made my own way."

"Hmm," said Hobas to that, a little uncertainly. "Well then! Let me show you how the streams lie." He took up a stout twig, squatted down, and scratched lines in the soil. "See! Only a little way south of here, Aros comes in from the East and joins father Sirion. We stand almost on the spit, so. The King's domain ends on the far bank of either stream. Aros is a joyful water, but he has not a quarter of the power of his partner; and here, where he begins to feel the marshes, he is broad and slow. If you are as capable in the water as you claim, it should be no overwhelming task to swim him."

Beren was dubious. "I do not see how that gets me much further on my way," he said. "I still must cross Sirion. Or must I?"

Hobas hesitated; when at last he spoke, he was clearly choosing his words with care. "Once you have crossed Aros," he said slowly, "you have left the King's domain. That is as far as my orders run. But where orders fail, good will may yet go some way further. If you choose to tell me your destination, maybe I could give you guidance."

"Nargothrond," replied Beren.

"So much I had guessed..." said the Elf. "In that case, a way is open to you, as easy as the ferry, if not so short." He bent again to his scratched map. "We stand at the edge of the great Marshes of Sirion. They broaden out south of the junction, and that is all a trackless land of bog and pool; a paradise for the bird-kind maybe, and for frogs and midges, but no place for heavy creatures who must go by foot. At the end of the marsh-country, perhaps seven leagues to the South of here, all the waters gather together and plunge into the earth in a mighty cataract. Now for some way after that, Sirion has a roof, over which you may tread in ease and leisure."

"I have neither," replied Beren curtly. "How do I find this roof?" He was angry, because had he known of this, and known the boats would refuse him passage, he would have struck out on his own, and saved many days.

Hobas, sensing something of this, eyed him with sympathy. "I will take you to a point where you can cross Aros," he said. "After that, head south. Most of a day's brisk travel should bring you to a line of small hills. There you may turn west again. Skirt the chasm where the waters thunder into the earth; from there it will not be long before you begin to sight the dark hills of Taroth rising blue in the West before you. In their midst is your goal. By my counsel, you will avoid the hills themselves, which are trackless and sheer, but turn rather somewhat to the North of them, to seek the path that runs west from the ferry here."

Beren perused once more the lines scratched in the mud, then stood up. "Understood," he said. "Now let us be doing."

Half an hour brought them to a sandy beach bordering a stretch of slow water. Beren looked around. Behind him was the living land of Doriath, and standing now as he did on its edge, he felt most reluctant to leave it. Here was light and life; and here he had found love, such a love as had knitted itself with threads of fire into the very fibres of his being. To go forward was to leave that love ever fainter behind him. Every step on the way had meant pain to him, and there remained many, many steps on the road before him. While he thought these things, his eyes cherished the panoply of greens in the canopy, now fading a little here and there with the lateness of the season, but losing nothing of their sweetness; the pure light played on their outlines, and on the fat berries which peeped shyly between, red and glossy black. Birds like living jewels flashed from perch to perch, fluting cheerful remarks in the waxing of the day.

He looked forwards, across the river, and it was as if the light went out. A tired, dull land spread before his eyes beyond. The trees looked withered, blighted, with leathery leaves, much galled by insect gnawers. What few birds could be glimpsed appeared dirty and furtive. The sun shone on that bank, true, but with a brassy glare that stung the eyes. A dark stain seemed to overlie everything in sight.

Beren was appalled. "What has happened?" he muttered to Hobas. "Has there been some blight?"

"You perceive the darkness?" replied Hobas grimly. "Nay, that has not grown – it was ever so; but you have found now eyes enough to see it, maybe. It is the venom of the Black One, which is mixed with all the world; save only here, in the Queen's realm of Doriath."

Beren stood a while in silence, looking into the dullness. "I wonder that you who live in this land can ever bear to leave it," he said at last in a low voice.

"It is hard," agreed Hobas, "but I hold it better to see only ugliness than to have no eyes with which to see at all. Better to have lived with light and lost it than never to leave the dark."

Beren sighed. "Well, perhaps you are right," he said, "but right or wrong, here I must leave you, master Hobas. I thank you for your words of guidance."

Hobas looked uncomfortable. "They were little enough," he said. "Indeed I would go further, both with words and deeds. The word is, have a care! The folk of Nargothrond are strange to us, and perilous. They are wary and secretive, and look inward. We say among us that they spend too many hours in their Dwarf-dolven holes and too few in the sweet airs under heaven. They are no danger to those they know; but you, they do not know. Tread with care, lest they shoot you without even the bare courtesy of a warning."

Beren heard this with dismay and some surprise. "They do not sound much like their leader," he said after chewing on the matter for a moment.

"No indeed," replied Hobas drily. "You may discover reasons why, should you reach that place. Now, as to deeds! You have no food, and neither bow nor snare to catch it. You will not find the forests of Outland so kind as ours, so rich in fruits and sloes. Will you consent to take something offered from our store?"

Beren looked askance at the escort commander. "That sounds some way past the end of your duty, friend," he remarked.



The young Elf flushed. "I dare not name as 'friend' one whom my master has proscribed," he replied awkwardly. "I must be faithful to my lord's commands, whatever I might think of them in the privacy of my own thoughts. But I will go so far as to say that I wish things had been otherwise between us."

Beren thought about it for a moment. He looked up then into the Elf's face, and his face lit with a smile. "I am under no such constraint," he said, "and although I spoke the word at first lightly, I do name you 'friend'. Friend Hobas, I do not desire a bow, for I mourn still the great bow of Finrod, which he made for me, and which I chose to leave behind me. I can, maybe, find more food in the wilderlands than you guess; but something extra would not go amiss, supposing I had a pouch to carry it in."

Hobas beckoned to one of his troop, who had been standing silently back among the screens of osiers. The man came forward carrying a small leather satchel. Hobas took this from him and held it out to Beren. "Glad I am that you said yes," he said, "for I do not know how I would have faced the Queen otherwise. She gave me this for you with her own hand."

"The Queen?" Surprised, Beren took the pouch, weighing it in his hand. "What is it?" he asked.

"Waybread," replied Hobas. "It is an unheard-of honour; a queenly gift indeed. Those fools on the boats might have changed their faces, had they known of this; yea, and some of my own men too. But it was laid on me not to speak of it. Keep it from water, and keep the wrappings undisturbed, and the biscuit will stay fresh for many days. One wafer suffices for a long day's walking."

There was nothing more to say. Beren smiled at the young captain and briefly clasped his hand; then he turned away and waded into the water, the bag held high over his head.

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The passage of the Aros was easy; almost pleasant, so warm and smooth was the water. Climbing out on the far bank was a shock. Beren felt then with all of his senses what his eyes had forewarned him of: he was back in the outer world. Drear and grey it had looked to him a moment ago, and now the darkness of it sat like a weight of foetid mud on his heart and mind.

After a wave to reassure Hobas where he waited on the far bank, the man turned away. Setting his mind grimly to the task, he went on.

Unaccompanied now for the first time in days, Beren went with speed. He ran the whole long day. The sun was still high on his right-hand quarter when the ground began to rise into a series of rocky hummocks, sparsely covered with low-crowned oak and rowan.

The massed scarlet berries held no charm for him; all too clearly to his mind came memories of purer, brighter colours, and laughing eyes beneath them.

He climbed the highest of the mounds nearby and looked about him. He seemed to be in a line of hills which stretched out to East and West as far as he could see. Where the sight-line was open, to the East or South, the view faded into dimness, with little to engage the eye. He thought he could make out the dark beginnings of the swamp to the North-west. Only in the West, along the line of the ridge, was something striking to be seen: a great mass of pale mist, like a cloud roosting upon the ground. That must be the falls. He had evidently followed too strict a line to the South; better would have been to trend a little west. Sighing at yet more delay, he scrambled down the hill and trotted west.

He felt the waterfall long before he heard it, as a tremor in the ground. He could see the tower of mist close now, looming ahead of him. Soon his ears caught the first faint murmur, which every step brought louder. The sunlight faded, brightened, faded again as outgrowths of mist drifted through the path of the rays. The sound rose now rapidly to a roar; then the roar increased to a sound which was simply too loud to hear: an insensate thunder which shook his whole body.

Suddenly he had arrived. He halted on a ledge of rock that trembled under his feet. Before him, the massed waters of Sirion poured over a lip into a dark chasm filled with pale and churning vapours. The sheer volume of noise was like a living thing. It seemed to curl a hand about the heart and squeeze. Speech, even thought, was impossible. The waters seemed motionless where they curved over the lip, as if carved from green glass, but islands of crisp white foam gave the lie to this as they sped over the curve and disappeared into the gulf. The vast hole into which the roaring waters fell was as a cauldron filled with towering clouds – white clouds which grew, and turned, and merged; never stopping, ever changing. A waft of cold mist blew out of the depths to surround him, bringing a sudden rainbow to sparkle in the air behind him.

Beren turned away, feeling nothing but desolation. Before him was spread a wonder of the world, yet he was unable to taste its glory. There was only one thing that he wanted, and that thing lay unattainable behind him, or at best in a fool's hope far ahead. He had no heart for any worldly beauty.

The sun went in; the weather changed. Rain fell, until his weary feet began to splash in the wet. In the last dregs of the day, he glimpsed hills ahead through the driving rain.

He found the path Hobas had mentioned as the following day approached its noon. It had been a dull passage under a constant and cheerless rain, through scattered trees and sodden growth, all pale and sagging now at the end of summer.

Beren's one moment of delight had come when he nibbled at one of the Elf-cakes in the chill early light. As the morsel dissolved on his tongue, he looked at the remainder of the pale biscuit in astonishment. He broke off and chewed another small piece with more attention. Here was a wonder of Doriath indeed! Not only was it delicious beyond all comparison, but he felt a wave of strength and cheer surging warmly through every cold and aching limb. For the first time in many days his heart rose out of his boots. Perhaps there was hope after all! He was yet free, young and alive; what might he not accomplish?

As if in answer to his change of mood, the rain ceased, the clouds passed, the light strengthened. A watery sun emerged, sinking towards the West before him.

The lands he had passed through had been empty, but he had not forgotten Hobas's warning, and as he made his swift and silent way along the faint trail, an uneasiness began to grow in him. He saw nobody, but he began to feel that he was watched. Beren halted to consider. He could no doubt use Willow's trick to elude the watchers, but why should he? He came not as a spy but as a friend. Indeed, he had a token of this. Reaching into the pouch around his neck, he brought out the ring. The two snakes glittered in the golden light of the westering sun and a flare of green went up from the jewels of their eyes. Hope again rose in the man's breast, and he held the ring high. Pitching his voice to carry, he cried, "Hear ye O watchers! I am Beren son of Barahir, a friend of Felagund! I bid ye take me to the King!" Walking on now slowly, he held the ring high in the slanting light, repeating his call at intervals.

Beren's senses had not lied to him, for he had come into the Guarded Plain of Nargothrond, over which the Elves of that land kept unceasing watch. Its borders were dotted with hidden strongholds, and through all its woods and meadows archers ranged with great stealth and craft. They would indeed have shot him, but hearing his call, and seeing the flash of the ring, and being in doubt over what these signs could mean, they gathered a band of twelve or so, and waylaid him on the path.

Beren learned of their presence only when they stepped from the bushes on both sides of the paths with arrows on the string. Their leader raised his hand and cried "Halt!" He advanced cautiously towards the man now standing passively in the middle of the path.

Beren saw a tall Elf clad in tunic, hood and hose, all of which were woven in marbled, subdued shades of green or grey, difficult for the eye to settle on. This captain bore a long bow, unstrung. There was no polished metal anywhere on his person. His eyes were keen, but held not the light of those returned from over the Sea.

The Elf in his turn looked over the figure before him and wondered what he should make of it. Although the captain had never spoken to any mortal before, he had beheld them from afar, and he knew that he faced one

now. But mortal or not, the man was comely, and well set up, and held his head well, and there was that in his eye which hinted that he was not to be dismissed or taken lightly. At the same time he was half-naked, scratched and dirty. He carried no weapon or other gear save a knife at his belt and a small leather satchel.

The leader looked then more closely at the ring, and as soon as he perceived the device of Finwë, it cleared all doubt from his mind. He bowed low before the man.

“Hail, wanderer!” he said. “The token you bear declares your good character. None may pass freely through this land; but we will lead you to the King, if that is indeed your wish.”

Once more had Beren to suffer impatiently over many days in company with an escort. These folk were not inclined to dally on the way, as had the Elves of Doriath, but they would only consent to travel at night. Everything must be secret; they made no fires and sang no songs. The route led, not west as Beren had expected, but rather to the North. They told him, when he asked, that Nargothrond lay on the far bank of the river Narog, which could not easily be crossed this far to the South. This tale of crossings and diversions sounded all too dismal and familiar in Beren’s ears. Years later, after he had come to a better knowledge of the lands, he realized that he could have crossed Sirion at the rope bridge in Brethil and come straight west; thus taking one week on the journey instead of three. Even at that remote date, long after the quest was over, the shadow of his impatience returned to vex him.

The rivers being crossed at last, they turned to the South. A night’s further travel brought them into a rising, stony land, terraced with cliffs, through which the path wound secretly among boulders alongside the spume and roar of the unruly river. They passed the hours of light in a guard post hidden in a little side-valley, Beren’s presence exciting much wonder among the standing guard. They set off again at nightfall and travelled some hours further under a crescent moon. A last foaming stream was crossed on a bridge, hidden around a bend from casual gaze; the next turn of the path brought them to the doors.

Beren beheld a cliff, many fathoms high. Mighty trees grew on its summit, whose limbs stretched far out towards the Narog, which fell there foaming over tumbled boulders. Everything beneath their dense canopies lay in darkness, untouched by the moon.

The party went on; and only as Beren came under the trees, into the shadow, could he make out the dim lines of the gates on the dark cliff before him. Great stone posts and lintels he saw, with mighty doors between them made of timber baulks, though from what vast trees he could not imagine.

The great doors remained closed: the party went in at a postern. No lights were shown, and talk with the duty guards was conducted in whispers. They came huddled into a dark chamber. The outer door was closed, which shut off the light; but straight away the inner door was opened, letting in light as from many torches. Beren was ushered through; he stepped within. He was in Nargothrond.

\* \* \* \* \*

In her former life, Lúthien had never dreamed that she wanted for happiness. Then she had met Beren; and that which she had found in his face and heart had carried her far above her former plane of contentment into a realm of unimagined joy. She felt then as one who, having spent her whole life by candle-light, satisfied enough with it, but knowing no better, had stepped outside and gazed at the sun.

As her heart, in that lost time of bliss, had soared up for joy as the lark who greets the rising sun above the dewed and dawning fields, so now she had sunk to the very depths of black despair. The sun of her joy was banished, sent to his death. Her happiness was extinguished; like a delicate shape of glass dropped heedless to the floor, it was shattered into a thousand irrecoverable shards. In this toil of unbearable days into which she had been cast, even the rushlight glow of her former long contentment seemed as far beyond reach as the moon.

Her song was stilled; her dancing tread was no more heard. For some days she kept to her rooms, eating nothing, and drinking only a little water from her private spring. She lay in darkness, and refused to speak, or

even to turn her head to the soft voice of her mother at the door. Made desperate at last for fresh air and light, she wandered forth again, but she had no words for anybody, and shunned all company; preferring to sit in gloomy shade, or to revisit the places where she had felt such radiant happiness – gone now, all gone. She slumped by the waters of Esgalduin where Beren had lost her on that first chase, and cursed the enchanted waters, which held no enchantment more for her. He had cried to her, Tinúviel, Tinúviel! Now none was left to call her with that name of sweetness.

Daeron also kept an aching silence, although many times he chided himself for his despair. Be grateful! he would scold in his thoughts. Thy rival is departed, and can never return; things shall be as they were before. But his self-castigations were in vain – hearts have no ears for reason; they have reasons of their own. Daeron's heart therefore remained stubbornly low. He could take no joy in Lúthien's pain for one; and further to that, the honest scholar felt the stab of remorse for his own unthinking words. He felt that he had played a role in doing a great wrong. What harm had the young man ever intended to him? It was not the mortal's fault that he had fallen in love; indeed Daeron was the last person to cast that before him. Beren should have rather been fêted for his mighty deeds in the North, or at the very least treated with courtesy and honour; not tricked like a dog to a shameful death.

The mood of the whole land was dismal – dismal, and something more. No-one was so churlish or so rash as to speak the thought where Thingol could hear it, but the feeling slowly grew that the King had not acted rightly. Everybody had heard the songs made of Beren's lonely fight in the North. He was not of their kind or people, it was true, and no Elf could approve of his liaison with their most precious flower; but if she must ally herself with a mortal, then it seemed to the Sindar that she could hardly have chosen a better, had she searched to the ends of the earth. In any case, the thing was done, the match was made; and as even the simplest among them knew, once forged, no power under heaven could unmake the love-bond. Certainly not the King. But now what did they have? Heartbroken maiden, and swindled swain – the great man of whom the songs still sang, this shining hero, cheated to his death by a mean lawyer's trick. There could be no luck in that; no luck for anyone.

The King very well knew the mood of his people, but refused to give it countenance. He was determinedly merry over his board, and demanded that those who sat with him behaved the same. Therefore music continued at his court, and conversation, and even laughter; but it was all as hollow as a dry and sounding gourd, as fake as a poor paste gem.

Galadriel and Celeborn departed at this time. Thingol was uneasy with them. He tried, as he thought of the matter, to make peace with Galadriel. "Grand-daughter of my dear brother," he said, "I repent of my hot words to you, and would take them back."

Galadriel smiled, but there was formality rather than warmth in her eyes. "They are already forgotten, my lord," she said.

Thingol eyed her. "Yet you will still depart, suddenly, after a sojourn of many years. Do you claim that this is chance?"

"It is not chance," replied the tall woman, "but the connection is not the shallow one you fear."

"What then?"

"The stream of things has changed," said Galadriel, "and will never again be the same. I always meant to leave, when the time came; now it has come."

Thingol moved on his seat in irritation. "You mistake yourself," he said shortly. "Nothing has changed in substance. Lúthien will get over her dismay in time. Then, all *shall* be as it was before."

"Lord King, the course of such events is not mine to order," replied Galadriel, "nor, if I may make so bold, yours either."

When Celeborn made his farewell, the King spoke close to his ear, so no other could hear, "You too, Kinsman? Do you also judge me so harshly?"

"My lord," answered Celeborn, in just as low a voice, "my arm and voice are ever yours to command, as you know; but in all candour, I think you wrong yourself in this matter."

\* \* \* \* \*

Finrod's entry into a room was like the sun emerging from clouds. He embraced Beren long in a tight grasp, then searched his face; his own brows contracting slightly at what he found there.

"Friend, kinsman under the One, dearer than brother," he said, "I bid you hearty welcome to my court! All the more welcome for being unexpected. Are you weary? Hungry? Come, I will take you to your chambers, where you shall refresh yourself at your leisure. When you are ready, we will talk. You have much to say to me, I know that already." Calling for assistants, with an arm around Beren's shoulder, the Elf-lord conducted him to guest apartments, which were speedily set in order.

While Beren bathed, clothes were discreetly laid out in his bed-chamber; wine and biscuits were placed on a small table adjoining. Once clean and clothed, he took a quick sup of wine to still his thirst, but with the black creature of despair crouching ever upon his shoulders, he had no heart for anything but his goal. He looked outside the door and found an attendant. "Could you send word to the Lord Finrod," he said to that one. "Pray tell him that I am as refreshed as I desire to be, and that I await his pleasure?" The man bowed to him and went off to fulfil his errand.

It was Finrod himself who came. He gave orders that they not be disturbed and closed the door behind him. Gazing into the face of his friend, he bade him sit and tell his news. "I heard you had escaped from the North," he said. "News comes to us on the roads. Indeed, just yesterday your name was mentioned... in a strange tale, which has set many wondering. Perhaps I will hear more of that from you? But tell me all that you will, in whatever order seems best to you."

Now that he was here, Beren's tongue seemed thick in his mouth. He spoke briefly of his three years of lonely struggle, of his successes and his narrow escapes. He told his friend and former liege something of the Onodrim and something of the Little People. He told of the strange ways in which Finrod's foretelling had come true. He told of Glith, and of the raid on the Tower. Lastly he told of the coming of the Darkness, and of his desperate escape. From the terrors of Durgortheb he shrank altogether from telling. He brought his tale to the end of the months in Brethil, and then his words faltered and petered to a close.

"It grieves me that you were forced from your home," said Finrod, eyeing him closely, "even though it was not to be hoped that it could have ended otherwise. But at least you have escaped without scathe."

Beren shook his head, his heart lying in his breast like lead. "No," he said heavily. "Not so: I have suffered scathe enough. Indeed, I think I have my death-wound, maybe. But not from Gorthaur, nor any servant of darkness."

"Tell me of it," said Finrod softly.

Beren put his head in his hands, and his voice shook as he spoke. He told how he had wandered into Doriath like a moth to the lamp, and how he had met there more beauty than his mind could compass. He spoke tremblingly of Lúthien, of her laughter, her eyes, of her dancing under the moon, with wild white roses in her hair; of his joy of her, and hers of him. The memories of their days of happiness came back to him as he spoke, and his eyes lit with the fair memory. Sweetness came into his voice, as the words now flowed from his tongue in a stream like honeyed wine. He stood now and paced back and forth before the astonished Elf, weaving to him such a tale of lambent love as to pierce him to the heart. There was fire in Beren's words as he recounted all the days of bliss, the joining of two souls in a springtime like no other the world will ever see again.

He came in his speech to the end of those days of joy, and the fire went out. The man stood there, tall and cold, like a pillar of stone. “Well, we were discovered,” he said shortly. “I stood before the King, and bandied many words with him, but few well considered. I think he would have killed me if he dared. Ah, but it is cunning he is. He found a way to it in the end, without his needing to soil his hands at all. He named the bride-price. I should bring him a Silmaril from Morgoth’s crown, he said, and Lúthien would be mine.”

Finrod drew in his breath with a hiss, his eyes glittering strangely in the sudden whiteness of his face. “A Silmaril,” he muttered. “Then the rumour was true...” He considered a moment, his colour gradually returning. “How much do you know of these things?”

Beren recounted his sketchy knowledge of the history of the jewels.

Finrod sat down again, beckoning Beren to do likewise. “There is more in this than you know,” he said. “That Thingol desires your death is plain enough. The wily fool – woe to him should you cheat his hope! For the Silmarils are bound in an unholy oath, sworn of Fëanor their maker and his sons, and he that even names them in desire wakes a great power from slumber. The sons of Fëanor would lay all the Elf-kingdoms in ruin rather than suffer any other but themselves to win or possess a Silmaril; the Oath would drive them to it. Thingol has woken this oath, which should better have been left alone, and wrought with his words a doom which may go far wider than his purpose.”

“This grieves me not at all,” said Beren. “Why should I care what afflictions Thingol brings upon his own head? I am the one who is bidden to achieve the impossible, or else die from loss.”

“You have come to me for help,” replied Finrod, “and alas! I cannot share your indifference, for reason that Celegorm and Curufin, of Fëanor’s sons, are dwelling now in my halls; and although I, Finarfin’s son, am King, they have won a strong power in the realm, and lead also many of their own people. They have shown friendship to me in every need, but I fear they will show you no mercy if your quest be told. News has lately come from Doriath, a tale which few believed in full, but which you have mostly now confirmed to me. The Jewels were mentioned, and their name passes even now in whispers among the folk. The Brothers are away; I had already dreaded their return; now this.”

Beren was troubled by these words. “Lord,” he said, “I came to you only for advice. I had no thought to involve you in my private griefs.”

“I swore to aid your father, and all his house,” Finrod said firmly, “and I will keep my own oath. Take what rest you can here, for some few days; I will think on this, and consult those whom I trust, and see if I cannot find any way out of this tangle in which we are all ensnared, yet still help you to your goal.” He stood again. “There are some here whom you know, who would gladly meet with you, if it would please you,” he said.

Beren’s expression lightened and a smile came to his lips as he remembered old comradeship. “Celevir,” he said. “Aramil and Pergas. Edrahil. But tell me, my lord, does Telchar yet live, and house among you?”

“He does,” smiled Finrod. “You shall see him when you will. Rest now! We will speak soon again.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Beren’s reunion with Celevir and his other friends had been a muted pleasure, since their avoidance of certain questions was so scrupulous, he could only suppose that Finrod had prepared them ahead of time. In any case, he had little heart for any pleasure in his present condition. His reunion with the Dwarves was easier, partly because his history with them lay much further back in time, and partly because they concerned themselves but little with the Silmarils or any other business of the Elves. They listened politely to his sketchy account of his flight from the North before turning the theme to their own projects and experiences, which loomed with far greater immediacy and importance in their thought.

Age lay heavily on Telchar. Although his river of snow-white beard was as full as ever, the fringe of hair around the great dome of his head was reduced now to a few silver wisps. The once clear eyes were clouded,

and he could not move about now without a stick. He rose with difficulty to greet Beren, peering at him, and only seemed reassured that the man was the one he knew after he had clasped Beren's hand in his own great, horny, knotted ones.

Beren sat on a low stool, and Telchar lowered himself stiffly back to his own seat. "Master," said Beren, warmed in spite of himself at the sight of the old Dwarf, "it does me great good to see you again."

"I too," rumbled the smith, "although my eyes do not work well these days. I know thee though, sometime apprentice, warrior, man. Thy voice and thy hand are thine alone. Thou hast come to me, as it was designed, now at the end of my days, to see that which I have accomplished for thee – or almost accomplished. Is it not so?"

Beren had never shared Telchar's vision of the connection between them, but he was loth to gainsay the old Dwarf. Therefore he replied with a smile, "It is even as you say, Master."

"So come then!" said Telchar. "I have no time left to waste on chat. Come and see the height to which I have climbed at last, by the fire the Maker set in me, and by the grace of the Powers, who sent you to me, to unlock the gates. Come!" He lifted himself to his feet, assisted by Beren, then led his slow way out of the chambers. Close by, down a short passage, stood a closed door, behind which now the sound of hammer on iron could be heard.

Telchar threw open the door, releasing a wave of heat and noise into their faces. Beren found himself in a wide room, well equipped as a place of craft, with benches, several fires, and gleaming tools racked on the walls about. Perhaps twelve or fifteen Dwarves were busy there, and Beren was surprised to see the tall figures of some Elves among them.

As the two of them made their way down the room, each worker greeted the old smith with respect. Beren in his turn, recognizing some faces from long ago, nodded to these comrades with a smile. They came at last to an Elf who was bending over some work on a bench. The Elf, whose river of dark hair was clubbed behind his head out of the way, straightened and turned his face to Beren. Deep eyes under dark brows regarded him. Beren knew him straight away for a Noldo of great power.

"This is Celebrimbor Silver-fist, who came with his father Curufin to these halls," said Telchar. "He is no mean smith. I have learned much from him – much. And I perhaps have managed to show him a few small tricks in return. Brim, this is the man Beren of whom you have heard me speak." The Elf with the deep eyes smiled and inclined his head to Beren, who returned the gesture. Telchar continued to the Elf, "I go now to show him the work. Is it your pleasure to come with us?" Celebrimbor assenting, the three of them went through another door at the far end of the smithy. In this, which was clearly Telchar's private workroom, there were laid on a low bench some pieces of glittering metal.

Telchar faced Beren with a smile and pointed with his spade of a hand to the bench. "Here it is!" he said.

When Beren approached the bench and looked more closely at the pieces, his puzzlement increased. He recognized a tang, but the remainder of what was there did not look much like a sword. He saw two long rods of gleaming metal, twisted like ropes, but in mirror directions; next to them were two thinner strips, edged on one side, of broadly matching length. There were in addition some odd bits and pieces. The thin strips were grey, but the twisted rods gleamed with almost more than reflected light. Beren glanced involuntarily upwards, seeking some source of light he had not noticed on entry; but there was none.

Celebrimbor now spoke for the first time. His voice was resonant, and his speech that of one who chooses his words with care. "Here you see edges, point, and body," he said. "It remains only to forge the pieces together. That is a work of no more than normal craft, but it is the crowning of a labour long and hard. What you see lying here is already nine tenths of the work, or more. Three years these have been in the making."

Telchar hobbled to the bench and caressed the rods with a gentle hand. "Power of fire is in these," he rumbled, "and power of the earth from which my people came. Power of the skies, and of the eternal waters.

And light, O Man, power of light is in them: the two Lights your kind live by; sun and moon. Sun and moon! I have spent myself on this. It is my last work, and my greatest.”

Beren felt very awkward. He hated to say anything which might hurt the old Dwarf, whom he loved and revered, but things had been said that he felt he must challenge.

“O great Master,” he began with hesitation, “I give you joy, I give you great joy, of your achievement. I know well what it has cost you, through how many long years you have struggled; and I need not guess at your most transcendent happiness, because its radiance from your face must be obvious to all. If my friendship has in some part spurred you to reach that high goal which you have always known was within your reach, then I take humble pleasure in that small and unimportant role. But I must tell you that my own affairs have so moved that they have led me to renounce the shedding of blood. I therefore hope that you have not formed the wish to give this blade to me. I cannot take it, because I have forsworn the carriage of weapons of war.”

Telchar, who had been smiling at Beren through this recital, patted the man on his waist when he had finished. “Do not disturb yourself,” he said cheerfully. “I know all this well. We who stand near the doorway to death sometimes see far. The sword is not for you personally to use; it is for your futurity. An heir of your body will take the sword that these pieces will presently become, and with its aid he will help to complete that work that you have begun. It will be long hence, but it will happen. I have seen this as clearly as one sees hot coals in the forge.”

An heir of his body? Of all the words Beren had heard since leaving Thingol’s halls, these were the first which had lifted his spirits. He had discounted much of what Telchar had said as the ramblings of the old, but he found oddly reassuring the old smith’s assurance that he would have an heir.

Telchar showed him other points of interest on the way back, but Beren was too busy with his thoughts to pay them much attention. But before the smith bade him farewell, the old Dwarf laughed suddenly, and clasped Beren’s hand. “I forgot to tell you!” he said. “My drink-piece is here!”

This meant nothing to Beren. “And what is that, Master?” he asked politely.

“You remember,” said Telchar, “I told you of it before. The knife I made, the forerunner. Sharpness itself! I was drunk, and could never after remember the way of it.” The words from long ago now rose in Beren’s mind. “Hah!” the Dwarf went on, in tones of triumph. “I have surpassed it now, though.”

“Your knife is here?” Beren said. “The one which could cut even iron?”

“Aye!” replied Telchar cheerfully. “Curufin wears it.”

Beren scratched his head. “Have you asked him for it back?” he asked.

“What for?” said Telchar. “I made it; that is the important thing. Whither it goes thereafter is no concern of mine.”

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“I gave my word!” stormed Finrod in the small chamber of counsel. “Would you have me forsworn, a weak reed, an object of contempt in the eyes of all? Do you set all faith and truth at nothing? Is it that you value only miserly expedience, the crinkle-eyed reckoning of one grudging coin against another? Fie upon that!”

Present in the chamber were Orodreth and his wife Gilrodel; his daughter Finduilas, with her betrothed Gwindor; also Edrahil and Celevir.

It was Orodreth to whom the King spoken. This one replied now to Finrod mildly enough. “Brother, you mistake me,” he said. “I do not seek to dissuade you from your word, only to moderate it. You promised aid;



you did not promise your life.”

“I did, though,” said Finrod. “Of course I did. What sort of mean spirit do you take me for?”

Orodreth sat back and peered with vexation at his brother. He was shorter of stature than any of his family, and had weak eyes, set close together on either side of a bony beak of a nose. His brownish hair was cropped close to his head.

“Did you?” he said. “Did you? That was most unwise.”

“‘Unwise’,” scoffed the King. “There we have it again. Must you weigh everything to the grain in those scales of yours? Is there no room for generosity, gratitude, honour? In any case, it is all one. The word was given, and must be kept. Even you must see that.”

Gwindor – a tall, strong figure, with a face full of fire and resolution – now spoke. “Sire,” he said, “your words touch my heart closely, and I could not but feel the same in your place. But not being in your place, I can see the matter perhaps a little clearer. And what I see is, that this would be a fool’s errand. The man rides surely to his death – unless he chooses to turn aside; and that is all there is to it. Nothing you could do can shield him from his certain fate.”

“His death is not certain,” insisted Finrod.

Orodreth raised his hands and eyes toward the ceiling. “Brother!” he said, “There can be few things more certain! One man alone, against Morgoth? Think what you are saying!”

Finrod leaned forward, and his eyes were hard. “You were certain Morgoth could not break the Leaguer, were you not?” he said to Orodreth with an edge to his voice. “Just as you were certain the Tower was secure. Is *that* your certainty?”

Orodreth flushed. “We have been over this. Why do you rake it up again? Any counsel can be upset by unknown factors. But here there is nothing unknown. Death! Death stands before this mortal! And you would throw your own life away too. What you propose is folly pure, and not all your fine words about honour can cover up that fact.”

Finrod got up from the table and commenced to pace. After some moments he said in a calmer voice, “We waste words. I have not called you together to advise me what I should do for myself. My own duty is clear. What I desire from you is stratagems. But what have I received? Much advice not to the point from some; silence from others.” He turned to Edrahil and Celevir. “Have you nothing to say?”

Edrahil stirred a little uneasily, and glanced at Celevir to see whether he should speak for both. Celevir nodding slightly, Edrahil cleared his throat. “My lord,” he said with diffidence, “whatever you choose to do, you have my faith and support. You are my King. I think I speak also for my comrade...” Celevir nodding again, Edrahil went on. “I do not presume to advise you on your honour –” Orodreth greeted this with a tiny snort. “– I would only counsel you not to forget your kingdom or your people. Your duty to them you will, no doubt, recall with a little further thought.”

“Lord King, I would add something to that,” said Celevir. “I was there when Barahir of the North, and his brave men, this Beren being one of that company, despite his tender years, rode off on the venture which rescued your life. For this you would pledge that life to Beren’s aid; and this is honourable and natural. But Barahir’s stroke, although bold and desperate almost beyond reckoning, was yet not hopeless. Only boldness could succeed; boldness, by the grace of the gods, did succeed. I see nothing similar in this present miserable affair. The poor mortal is caught in a trap from which nobody can free him. If an arm at his side could help him, I would go myself. But boldness will not do it; nothing will. He is marked for death. If you cannot turn him from this fatal path, all that you can do is ease his passing.”

Finrod’s pacing became agitated and his glance at the two was dark.

“By heaven, you pair, you stir me to a fury I have not felt in years,” he fumed. “I cannot believe it of you. Is this how I should redeem my oath? To weep a noble tear as I wave the poor wretch goodbye?”

He turned to the two women – the elder sad and dark-haired; the younger very beautiful, with gentle, intelligent features. The daughter had an oval face under a river of glossy hair the colour of ripe corn, in which were set luminous eyes of a fine, clear grey.

“Gilrodel, Finduilas – no doubt you join this doubters’ chorus?”

“I am sorry for the young man,” said Gilrodel. “Also I know what love is; I do not think he can choose, Gwindor, as you hint. But I confess, I can think of nothing which could help him.”

Finduilas now spoke. Her voice was melodious and low; very pleasant to hear. “My thought is rather with the maid,” she said softly. “I know nothing of war, or quests of arms and honour, so I cannot advise on them. This man will do what men do, and I can neither help him nor hold him back. But what of the maid? Is there nothing that can be done for her? How terrible a snare, to be enraptured of a mortal man!”

Nobody said anything for a time. Finrod leaned against the wall, regarding his family and followers pensively. He straightened up and last and left the wall. “I was wrong to call this council,” he said with decision. “The question –” At that point he was interrupted by a knocking at the door. He went and opened it, revealing a page.

“Lord,” said the boy, “the Brothers have returned. You asked to be informed.”

Finrod thanked him, closed the door, then faced the others. “A plague on them!” he cursed. “They are a day before their time.”

“A plague indeed,” said Orodreth drily. “The cat is among the sparrows now. Or shortly will be.”

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The time had dragged for Beren. After the initial greetings with those he knew, he had little appetite for further company. In any case, his former friends and comrades had their own interests and duties to fulfil.

He reflected with some irony that he had visited now three great underground cities, but had seen little of any of them. In the first two he had had scarce opportunity for sight-seeing; now that he had the time to admire the third, he had scant inclination to do so. He wandered thus through Nargothrond’s wide-spaced halls like some disconsolate wraith, passing with a dull eye over the wonders of stone and men. Great many-arched chambers there were, with carven roofs supported by pillars of polished marble, thick and tall as trees, lit by clusters of lamps of rose and gold. The people might also have excited his wonder; for housed within these mansions was such a power of armoured Elvish might as to trouble Morgoth’s slumber. All these things Beren vaguely took note of as he saw them, but forgot soon after, so fixedly dwelt his thoughts on happiness past and lost, and on the threat looming blackly in his future.

He was loitering gloomily in a hall near the gate, watching with little interest the drills of some troops, when there came a disturbance from outside. Elves came running in and the drill faltered to a halt. Some came near enough for Beren to hear the words, “The Brothers are back!”

He followed a general movement toward the door. There in the entry he perceived that a party of stout-bodied Eldar had just entered. They were flushed from the air outside, and fresh-rolled wolf-skins carried over shoulders spoke of their recent pursuits. The leader was a great blond-maned Elf of a fresh, bold countenance. His eyes swept over Beren without interest as he laughed and joked in a loud voice to a companion. The blond captain moved on, revealing another beside him, as dark as he was fair; but otherwise so like him as to make their relation obvious.

The dark brother reminded Beren of someone. Suddenly he knew of whom; and with that, he realized who

the brothers were. This dark Elf here was undoubtedly Curufin, a son of mighty Fëanor, and the blond one must be Celegorm. The person echoed was their brother Caranthir, whom Beren had seen all those years before at the tolls of Gelion.

At the instant of realization, Curufin's gaze fell in Beren's direction, and took the man in. Beren felt himself shaken as if by a blow. There was great power in this Elf, that was certain; but it was all stunted, corrupt, directed inwards. The man had rarely encountered such a twisted soul. The shock of it left him sweating.

Indifferent, the gaze swept on. At that moment something of a hush fell, with heads turning. Beren followed the general gaze, faintly curious; only to receive his second shock of the morning. Into the room a hound was gravely pacing, but a hound like no other Beren had ever seen. A most mighty hound this was, taller than a man, with a great muscled chest, and sides stout as a barrel. The animal's coat was fine and glossy, reflecting the light in a living rippled sheen, but it was hard to say what colour it was – it gleamed silver in the light of the lamps, but it might well look brown beneath the sun; ghost grey perhaps at nightfall. A proud neck led to a noble head, crowned with live and mobile ears; the harmonious lines of its profile speaking of grace and power.

The whole party moved inside now, laughing and jesting. The hound, pacing in his path close to Beren, glanced at the man in passing. His eyes were dark and deep, and held sorrows that he could not tell.

Interested in spite of himself, Beren turned to an armoured Elf beside him. "What dog is that?" he asked.

"That is Huan, the Hound of Valinor," came the answer. "There are many tales concerning him." However, an order being then called out, the soldier had to go before he could recount any of the tales.

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Celegorm barged right into the room, pushing aside the guard. "Finrod!" he shouted. "What treachery are you plotting?"

Finrod stood up, displeasure colouring his face. "I pray you explain to me, without delay, the reason for this extraordinary intrusion into my chambers," he said stiffly.

Celegorm shook a finger under his nose. "Don't you play the innocent with me," he growled. "Do you tell me that the story I hear openly on every hand is false? Do you deny that you are sheltering a robber and a pirate, one who plots to steal our birthright? Well do you?"

"I am King here," said Finrod through gritted teeth. "*You* shall not speak to me in this fashion. If you seek information, you must ask in a proper manner. Now get out, before I have you thrown out."

Celegorm laughed in his face. "You would not dare," he said.

Finrod turned. "Guards!" he called. "Guards!" A quick clatter answered his words as armoured men tumbled into the room.

Celegorm, red in the face, bared his teeth at the encircling sword points. He turned back to Finrod with eyes narrowed to slits, but when he spoke, he mastered his voice to speak levelly.

"I owe you much," he said, "and I have been loyal to your will here, in your own place, as is but proper. But the Jewels of my father throw all that aside; they sweep it into the fire. Gratitude, manners, friendship; all of it. This you know. You have not said that the story is lies, as you might have. I *will* have the truth. If not now, then very soon." He turned then and strode out of the room, brushing aside the men as he went.

Finrod paced back and forth a moment after he left, thinking. He turned then to the uneasy guard commander. "Rouse all the guard," he said. "Tell them to be ready, and to await my further commands. And detail a section to escort the Man Beren to me, if he consent to come. You may tell him from me that the

reason for guards is that I fear for his safety.” The commander saluted and went quickly about his orders.

Celevir and Edrahil had arrived on the scene by this time. Finrod looked to them. “You heard?” he asked; the two nodded. “I dared not arrest him, as duty and custom demand,” the King went on, biting a fingernail. “I dared not. Can you believe it? In my own kingdom, I dared not trust my own people to arrest a defaulter. I have let things slip. But too late now for that; I must decide what to do.”

“It is as I said before,” said Celevir. “It must come into the open. It is the only course.”

Finrod sighed. “And what then?” he said. “The people will not change their minds because of that. It may come to revolt. Do you hear? Revolt!”

They chewed over the situation a while longer. After some ten minutes, Beren joined them. Finrod sketched the situation for him.

“My lord,” said Beren, “I am devastated that I have brought this on your head. Had I known of this... this instability, I would never have come.”

Finrod laid a hand on his arm. “It was not your doing,” he said. “Some part is circumstance; a great part, I must own, is due to my own negligence. Do not chafe yourself with it. Reflect too that, after all, the rule of Nargothrond is only a small matter in the affairs of the world.”

A guard knocked at the door, poked his nervous face through the gap. “Sire,” he said, “the people are gathering in the audience hall. They are calling for you.”

“How is their mood?” asked the King.

“Sire, I think, not good,” replied the sweating soldier.

Finrod sighed again. “Come then, brothers,” he said to the Elves and the man. “Let us see what the people want from us. No, stay – someone first fetch my crown. And the Necklace<sup>9</sup>.” When the circlet was set on his shining locks, and the glorious sweep of Dwarf-wrought gold arrayed around his neck, he turned to his followers and held his arms up. “How do I look?” he asked them, with a humorous glint in his eye.

“Magnificent, Sire,” replied Edrahil, with the ring of admiring truth in his voice.

Beren for his part could find no suitable words. He had last seen the Nauglamír folded in Nendilmë’s lap, but that memory had not prepared him for the nobility and grandeur of Finrod now arrayed in the wealth of shimmering gold, with the blazing jewels of Valinor raising answering sparks in his hair. Standing before them was an Elf-lord revealed in his glory.

Finrod laughed and let his arms fall. “It is all nonsense,” he said, “but at least the people will know who their King is – should they have forgotten it.”

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The great hall was filling fast. People were streaming in from every side: women in clothes both quotidian and fine, men struggling into armour; even children. As Finrod entered, he felt their uneasy temper strike him in the face like a wave of hot and foetid air. There was fear in that crowd, and a smouldering anger.

“Those devils have been speaking poison in their ears, and not just since yesterday,” he muttered. “How have I not seen it?”

A murmur gathered strength among the seething throng as Finrod was caught sight of, with Beren at his side. “Save us from treachery, Lord,” came a man’s voice from the side. Another rose up: “Ware King! There are

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9 The Nauglamír, now returned to him.

spies and traitors among us.” It was impossible to identify the speakers in the surging crowd.

Orodreth was already standing on the daïs next to the throne, flanked by soldiers with drawn swords. As Finrod drew near, he perceived that his brother was shaking.

“Fool!” the King whispered to him vehemently. “Tell your guard to sheath their swords. What would they be about, for all love? These are our own people!”

Reluctantly, Orodreth turned and gave the order.

Finrod seated himself then on the throne and looked over the masses of faces turned towards him. Some were truculent, others anxious. It came to him then to recall that what he had to deal with were no soft peasants, but a soldier race. More than this: his people were already rebels, by virtue of their flight from the West, and the doom of banishment under which they lay. They were not naturally of a temper to obey, least of all blindly. If he wanted their allegiance, he would have to win it; and gazing at their stony countenances, he feared in his stomach that he had already lost.

The King raised his hands, and the tide-rush of talk gradually quieted. When he had hush enough to be heard, he pitched his clear voice so as to carry even to the far corners of the vast room.

“My people!” he cried. “You have listened to fears. I am come now to this moot to lay all before you, so that all shall be clear to your eyes. Then you will know what to do.” He turned and beckoned Beren to come forward.

As the doughty man advanced, his hair catching reddish lights under the lamps, something between a hiss and a sigh went through the crowd. They knew who he was.

Laying a hand on Beren’s shoulder, Finrod said, “You see before you the saviour of my life. Beren here it was, led by his father Barahir, who rode through an army and plucked me from the jaws of death. You have heard of him! For do not the songs sing of his long and lonely battle in the forests of the North?” He went on then at some length to number all of Beren’s deeds of daring and valour. There was hush as the people listened; slowly their mood softened, turned towards a kind of rejoicing awe. Had they not all heard the songs, and honoured the one of whom they sang? Now here he stood before them, the very man. Their eyes drank in his handsome carriage and his noble face. Beren of the North!

Finrod finished his tally and fell silent. Nobody in the whole hall spoke; only whispers of the breathing of thousands drifted inward from the serried pillars along the walls.

“I owe this man my life,” went on Finrod slowly. “In that hour of my rescue, I swore an oath. I swore to aid Barahir, and all his house after him, in whatever need they stood, with all that I possess, even to my own life if it came to that. Such was my vow.

“Now Beren comes to my court, seeking aid. Shall I turn him away? Pah! Not one of you would think of it. But of what aid stands he in need?” He told them then of Beren’s travails in Doriath, confirming and clarifying the rumours which had swirled among them these past few days. He finished thus: “Now to achieve his heart’s desire, in which quest I am bound by my vow to give him all the help and strength at my command, he must do this: by force or stealth beat path through all the guards of Angband, even unto the very person of Morgoth himself, and prize from his crown at last – a Silmaril!”

A great uproar arose at this. Celegorm sprang forward from his place near the front of the crowd. Bounding onto the daïs, facing the crowd, he drew his sword and held it high. The long blade flashed redly under the lantern light. He cried in a great voice, “Be he friend or foe, whether demon of Morgoth, or Elf, or child of Men, or any other living thing in Arda! Neither law, nor love, nor league of Hell, nor might of the Valar, nor any power of wizardry, shall defend him from the pursuing hate of Fëanor’s sons, if he take or find a Silmaril and keep it. For the Silmarils we alone claim, until the world ends!” He spoke on then, words both hot and fierce, and he awoke again in the hearts of the listeners the flame that had burned by the light of many

torches on the hill of Túna.<sup>10</sup> His passages of speech were met first by growls of assent, but the growls grew to shouts, and finally to roars. Swords were drawn in the crowd and bashed on shields, and the tumult of blow and voice grew so as to shake the roof.

When Celegorm had shouted himself hoarse, Curufin arose. His voice was softer than his brother's, so people had to hush to hear what he was saying, but his words held no less power; maybe even more. Spoken low as they were, they wound their way into people's hearts and gripped them in fingers of ice. Where before had been anger there now arose a choking fear – fear of spies, ignominy, defeat. A vision of the fall of Nargothrond arose before their eyes; of fire in the halls, of blood spilled, of the wailing of women led into slavery. So great was the twisted knot of fear Curufin wrought in their hearts that never again until the time of Túrin<sup>11</sup> would any Elf of that realm go into open battle; but with stealth and ambush, with wizardry and venomous dart, they pursued all strangers, forgetting the bonds of kinship. Thus they fell from the valour and freedom of the Elves of old, and their land was darkened.

When Curufin at last had had his say, Finrod left the throne and stepped forward. He had listened long, helpless to stem the tide, turning red or white in the face by turns.

The King bellowed now over the dark masses surging below him in a voice loud with suppressed outrage, "What say ye then, people of Nargothrond! Do you give ear to these vipers, or stand ye yet by your liege?"

He was answered by a roar of denial. Closed, red faces were turned to him, and fists were shaken.

Seeing his answer in their faces, Finrod with hands that shook from chagrin and fury took from his head the silver crown of Nargothrond. He flung it clanging at his feet.

"You oaths of faith to me you may break as you will," he shouted, "but *I* will hold by my bond. If there be any of you upon whom the shadow of this curse has not yet fallen, stand by me now! Then perhaps I shall go forth not entirely as a beggar thrust from the gates." He swung about then and turned his back on the people.

The crowd noise sank away, as the people held their breaths. Then Edrahil stepped forward, with Celevir close behind. Stout Ormaid cursed and strode out from the ranks of guards. Aramil and Pergas, no jest on their faces now, shouldered their passage from between the massed watchers. Some others came forward – Macomar, Bergil, Silbaran; Tuldor and Findamos. When movement ceased, a bare handful stood beside the King, on the dais, under the torches, before the silent crowd. They were but ten in number.

Finrod flushed, eyeing them. Pride and black anger mixed in his breast. So few! But also so many.

Edrahil bent and picked up the crown. "This should be kept safe, by a steward," he said. "For you remain my King, and theirs too, whatever betide."

Finrod took the crown and brought it the few steps to Orodreth. "I give this to you, Brother," he said in low tones, "for safe keeping. Wear it in my stead, and rule as you may. I am sorry we have not agreed, but I cannot help it. I must obey my vow."

Orodreth took the circlet with a reluctance which was all too plain. "There is no part of this business which is good," he complained. "How am I supposed to govern this unruly folk when they have so turned their faces against you? They will have no ear for me, that is certain."

"They accepted the headship of the house of Finarfin," said Finrod. "In time they will remember that. Tread lightly and await events."

He turned away. Gathering Beren and his faithful few to him, the King left the chamber. The die being now cast for good or ill, he did not delay; the party set out that same day. They ran fleet-foot through the soft autumn air into the North, until the darkness of night swallowed them up.

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10 The place and moment at which the Noldor in Valinor decided to rebel.

11 The son of Húrin and Morwen, who does not come into this tale.

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Celegorm and Curufin held conclave in their chambers after the meeting. They were joined there by some trusted followers; last of all, Celebrimbor slipped silently in at the door.

Celegorm, flushed still, peered with caution through the door crack after his nephew had come in. "Are you the last?" he said. "It is well. You there, Thorgun! Stand outside here and make sure that nobody listens." He bundled the man named out of the opening before closing the door.

"What do you fear, Brother?" said Curufin softly. "The situation is well in hand."

"I do not know how you can say that," said Celegorm with a scowl. "I thought I could work them to pull down that human interloper. Alas, my voice could not stay the course. I thought you would finish the job; but you stirred them strangely, put other thoughts in their heads. I do not know what you were about, what you are fixed upon."

"Not on the Jewel," said Curufin.

"Speak no words of peril, Brother," warned the blond Elf. "You are bound as deep in the oath as I."

Curufin spread his hands. "There is no peril. Think you truly that this life-short vagabond stands a gnat's chance in the furnace of achieving his boast? I had thought better of your wits. This is not a matter of the Jewels at all!"

Celegorm lowered his brows. "He should not have dared even to name them. He and this rustic pretender, this Thingol, this leaf-crowned fool: they are bound in the same insult together. Taunter or tormented, it makes no difference to us. Both sullied the Jewels in their insolent mouths. They should pay for this outrage."

Curufin showed signs of impatience. "Morgoth will make short work of the one, the other can wait. It behoves us now to think of nearer matters."

"What matters? What are you talking about?"

Before answering, Curufin searched the faces of the few and trusted followers who were ranged listening along the walls. Last and longest of all he gazed upon his son, trying to gauge the thought behind that impassive face. Unsatisfied, but for the time defeated, he turned back to his brother.

"We have a kingdom here without a king," he said in a low voice.

Celegorm looked at him. "Finrod lives," he said.

"For how long?" returned his brother. "You do not think he will return from this absurd adventure, surely?"

Celegorm considered. "There is still Orodreth," he said.

Curufin's response was to laugh out loud. "Oh, come, Gorm," he scoffed. "I need not make effort even to give that an answer."

Celegorm spent some moments wrestling with his thoughts, glancing at his brother from time to time. "I meant no hurt to the King," he said at last thickly. "All the laws of gratitude and courtesy speak against it. If he had only given up the trespasser, I should have been content. Are you asking me now to break my faith?"

"Not a bit of it," replied the dark Elf smoothly. "The matter is how it is; we did not contrive it so."

"Ah!" said Celegorm. "Did we not?"

“Brother,” said Curufin, “it was even as you say: our sole desire was to have the mortal in our hands.”

“That is not what you...” Celegorm stopped. With flushed face, he gazed fixedly at his brother. “Go on,” he said at last.

“Well,” continued Curufin, “matters being as they are, most regrettably; the King gone off on a wild career, to end in certain death; discontent among the people; a weak hand at the helm; it were no shame to us to profit from the situation. Rather it were shame if we did not.”

Celegorm’s eyes were still locked on those of his brother; he seemed fascinated. “What do you propose?” he said.

“To go on as we have begun,” replied the other. “Speak softly; sow doubt; build our following. Our moment will come. The news of Finrod’s death may bring it. We must watch and be ready.”

“And then...?” said Celegorm.

“Then we shall be a power in the land,” said Curufin, his dark eyes glowing in his face. “Strong enough, maybe, to punish the insolence of some who strut in the woods, pretending to a majesty beyond their deserts.”

“You mean – Doriath?” said the blond Elf.

“Where else?”

“That land is guarded by strong words of power,” objected Celegorm. “No-one can storm it, no matter how great their might.”

Curufin shrugged. “Perhaps. But where force cannot break down the door, sometimes cunning can find the key. Did not this mortal, this vainglorious swaggerer from the North, did not even he find a way in? Are you telling me a Noldo cannot go where a weak-souled Man has crept?”

Again Celegorm took some moments to turn this idea over in his head. A slow smile spread across his face as a new thought formed in his mind. “Do you know,” he said contemplatively, “Angband is not the only fortress to hide a jewel of price. Of the Jewel of Doriath,<sup>12</sup> this Flower-maiden, we have also heard much. Now think you, if we followed whatever rat-hole this Beren burrowed into that land, might we not also think to supplant his gangrel face and figure in the dreams of his enamoured – by ourselves?”

“Go to it,” grinned Curufin. “I am bound; I may not play that game. But you go to it.”

Celebrimbor got up suddenly and went out of the door, slamming it behind him. His father ran close after him, and catching him in the passage, seized his arm. “Soft!” said Curufin. “Stay a moment. Some trouble in the stomach, my son?”

Celebrimbor eyed his father, the distaste now plain to read in his face at this narrow distance. “You could call it so,” he said, striving to keep his voice even.

Curufin shrugged a little, keeping his grip, eyes fixed on those of his son. “All the young suffer so. But stomachs harden with time. A diet of reality is the best physic.”

Celebrimbor shook himself free. “Then it is my most fervent wish, Father,” he said savagely, “to remain as far from health, as you would name it, so long as I live.”

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12 Lúthien.



In the reorganization after the debacle with the Tree-monsters, and the rat-folk, and the bloody Bandit in his bloody suit of lights, or whatever it had been, Choker been banished to the lowest rank of one of the few mean squads of nervous Lice who remained at the island tower. It was pure spite. They expected he'd get the chop, probably, as disgraced and all that, everyone's fair game; but the maggots scuttling about in the ranks took one look at his gaunt and scarred frame and sheered off. He was connected with the Master too, didn't matter how, and such folk weren't healthy. You gave them their road. That was the view of his squad-mates, so much was clear, and of the squad-leader too. That wizened runt ignored Choker as far as he could, only keeping him warily under his eye. Well, thought Choker, if I was him, with an unwanted ranker of my size thrown into my command, I'd keep an eye on me too. He hadn't any need to, though, had he only known. Choker had no ambition any more – lost it, somehow, in all the sweating days and the cold nights.

Choker knew his end wasn't far off. He was old. Soon as he showed weakness, he'd be done – connections to Master or not. Until that time, though, he was just going to take it easy. They'd flung him in here and forgotten him – and why not? What use was an old Louse? So he'd just spin out his time.

He almost enjoyed it, going out on patrol again. By the seven claws of Hell, anything was better than that Tower! Not to mention the black pit of despair that Pine-land had become. Master had gone mad, and there had been an orgy of death. Death – it was a land of Death now, those haunted hills. The place gave Choker the horrors; gave everyone the horrors.

Patrol was familiar. He'd been doing it a long time. He almost savoured the stinking flowers now, the burning feeling of sun in his eyes, the air taking the skin off his throat. Ah! That was something like! Good old forest air! He scoffed at the young stinkers, coughing and wheezing, their watering eyes screwed up to slits. Soft, that's what they were. Things were not like they used to be, not by a long chalk.

Take the Soft-skinners, now – you didn't see much of them any more. The pale-haired big ones still slunk behind their mountains in the West, but they were left alone these days. Choker didn't know what was going on with the High-ups. Master was cracked, and the Mind-eaters let things slide now. It all seemed to have run out into a hole in the ground.

Since they weren't lashed on to do anything, the Lice patrols just sort of snuck around in the scrub not far south of the valley. Suited Choker, though. He didn't care if he never saw a Softy again. My, he had seen some tough ones! Like those blasted Wood-men and their darts, back in the years before the Fire! They were well shot of those stinkers, that was for sure.

Choker had spent so much of his life calculating what could kill him, and when it would try, that when the moment finally came, it took him completely by surprise. The squad had been sort of wandering about in thin sort of woods, down South away. It was early day, but the leader had been going to push on for a bit, while there were clouds covering the damned Fire-eye. The first anyone knew of anything was when Lice were already falling. Choker heard the arrows whizzing then, made to turn to run back into cover, but he was too late.

There was a blank spot just then. At the other side of that, he found himself lying on his back among scratchy, smelly leaves, with four arrows stuck in him. It didn't hurt, he was kind of numb. He could see them sticking out of his front and side, could feel them, but there was no pain, not especially. It was strange.

He knew straight away that he was gone – three of the arrows'd caught him in the lower belly, the last in his lungs. Something was cut, he could feel the hot blood pooling under him. Suddenly he started to feel cold, and to shiver. As soon as he did, that hurt; by the Pit it did.

Well, Pit take it! he thought. Here it was at last. So sudden! After all this time. All that skiving and dodging. What had it all been for? What was any of it for?

A dark figure appeared at the base of his field of view. Enemy. I suppose I should try to scrag him, thought Choker weakly, but what was the point? Why spoil the poor bastard's day? It was all the same in the end anyway. He watched with apathy as the Softy approached, but as soon as he caught a good look at the man's

face Choker's eyes widened and he started to laugh, despite the pain it caused him. Oh, this was rich.

"You!" he croaked.

The man with the face Choker knew bent warily over the stricken Orc. "You know me?" he demanded. "How?"

A tall Elf appeared in the clearing. The brightness of his eyes cut Choker like knives; the Louse shrank away from the harsh gaze, squinted his eyes closed from the pain.

"Cut his throat quickly," commanded the Elf. "And by my advice, you will not come so close. They are dangerous until cold."

"Wait a moment, Celevir," replied the man. "Never fear, I know Orcs. But here is something strange." He turned back to Choker. "Do you have something to say to me?" he said.

"You're the Bandit, ain't you," wheezed Choker, opening his eyes a little. Life was running hot out of him; he could feel it. He coughed up bright blood. "*You* was the one – up there in the Forest, fighting on your own, all those years. Wasn't you?"

"What if I was?" replied Beren cautiously.

A convulsion of silent laughter shook the Orc, which ended in a coughing fit. He spat out more blood. "Never thought I'd know something Master don't," he managed at last.

"Master'?" echoed Beren. "He in the Tower?"

The Orc nodded. "He never could find out just who you was," he said. "But then, I never saw you that time neither. Not when you was killing us. No – I knows you from before."

"When before?" Beren was suspicious.

Choker eyed him squint-eyed, coughed again convulsively and spat out the blood he had fetched up. "There was a raid," he wheezed. "Long ago. We was all caught, most killed. They put me in a cage. In the flaying sun, with people throwing rocks. Then they all ran away, and there was only a boy."

More Elves came up, impatient now. "Beren, must I kill that filth myself?" demanded a fair-haired one.

Beren waved his hand. "Wait! Give me a moment." He was trying to recover from the shock of memory. The Blackshirts, the nightmare time... the Orc in the cage... he had been thirteen or so, and troubled in his mind.

He searched the scarred face of the dying Orc. Yes – it *was* so. This was the one he had freed, in that spasm of rejection, all those years ago. He squatted down, closer to the blood-spattered face.

"What do you want from me?" he asked the Orc.

A haze was gathering before Choker's eyes, there was a taste of brass on his tongue. "Should have... guessed it were you," he gasped. "In the Forest. Killing all our folk. Good job..." he wheezed again, choked, cleared his voice. "Why'd you free me, that time? Why?"

Beren sat back on his heels. "I don't know what to tell you," he said. "It was a difficult time."

The Orc scabbled with his claws until he found Beren's foot, held it then in a vice-like grip. "Something more to tell," he gasped. "Your fishy friend. They gave her the Question. You know, knives and all kinds. I was there." Beren stiffened, made to shake his foot free in revulsion. Choker held tight. "Wait!" he said. "I put her... I stopped her... I made an end. Didn't like to see it. Curse me, I don't know why!" He choked on blood again, shuddering, and the man thought he was gone. The creature rallied again though, turned

unseeing eyes in Beren's direction. "Got in trouble for that," it said with a baring of fangs, from pain as much as humour. The grin faded as consciousness sank, then was gathered again with an effort. "N' I wiped a girl's face once," the Orc mumbled. It gave Beren's ankle a final weak squeeze. "Speak for me, Brother," it husked. "Speak f' me." The hand pressure weakened and fell away. The breathing rattled loud for a short moment, then choked to a gargling, straining stop. The body gave three or four great shudders, making the blood-soaked leaves rustle; then all motion ceased, as it settled slowly into the hollowness of death.

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The Elves avoided asking Beren about the odd incident, but he caught some curious glances. Of all of the party, only Finrod could make some guesses as to its meaning.

They were in any case too busy for chat. They had spent two days searching for Orcs before they had crossed tracks of this party in the old part of the night. Hunting Orcs had been Finrod's idea; but he would not tell them why. Now he bade them strip the corpses, then skin them. This messy and unpleasant job took them some time. In the dull heat of the afternoon they lay down – at least Beren did – for a few hours of uneasy sleep. There had not been much of that since they had left Nargothrond behind them and come hot-foot into the North.

Later they made a fire in the dark. Finrod had gathered some plants. Beren had the curious feeling of not being entirely awake. There was something dreamlike about the scene: the red flicker of the fire lighting the tips of the branches, gleaming in the bright eyes of the Elves. The herbs on the fire smoked and gave strange wafts of scent to the air.

There was music now. When had that started? Finrod had out his shining lyre; Beren had not known he had brought it. Perhaps it folded up, he thought muzzily. The bright-haired King sang a low song, softly, and Beren saw that he was singing over the skins of the slain goblins.

The song wove itself into the skins, and the fire, and the man. The dream deepened. Beren watched with drugged eyes as a pale-skinned Elf stood up, went slowly to the pile, and pulled a skin over his bare shoulders. The song and the night smoothed the pelt over his flanks, down, down, and somehow he was there, but not there; an Orc stood there, a bandy-legged Orc with bright eyes. Another Elf stood, and another. After a long time, there were no Elves more; only Rrrk.

Who was he himself? His name was Choker-with-Shit, and his number – but no, he was Beren, why had he thought of such dirt? The song went on, soft, tender, anchoring him in who he was. It spoke to him softly in the fire-light, with the herbs fuming, and his brain not knowing sleep from waking.

The song had stopped. Where the fire had flickered was now only a pile of coals which random twists of the moist air woke into fitful life. The moon was shining, the pale light overmastering the feeble red glow of the coals.

Beren shook himself. He felt strange. In that instant he became as wide awake as it is possible to be. He looked up and across the glade, and in spite of himself a gasp flew from his lips; for around him, cold in the moonlight, stood not his eleven companions, but a circle of squat and ugly goblins. The pale light gleamed from claws here, picked up the tip of a hooked nose there. Only in the black eyes glimmered a remnant of the light of his friends.

One of the Lice approached him. ('Lice' – why had he thought that?) Despite the creature's savage ugliness, he knew it to be Finrod.

The harsh voice sounded. "Is it well with you?"

"It is well," replied Beren, shocked to hear the gravel rasp of his own voice. "Am I dreaming?"

"All life is a dream," replied the being. "This one will, I hope, gain us entry to Angband. Come! We must

make haste.”

One by one, the Lice, who were not Lice, gathered their gear from the piles and picked up their bucklers. Each had a curved, black sword bound across his back, and each carried a short spear. When all were ready, their leader led them, iron sandals pounding, running north into the Vale.

\* \* \* \* \*

Snaggler hated day-duty. He always seemed to cop it, too. Fuck this miserable life, he thought, and fuck that fat prick Pincher, and fuck them wolves what crunch you up just for laughs, and fuck this fucking tower and its fucking... in fact fuck it all, fuck everything. Pincher always dobbed him for day-duty. It did no good to complain, the fucker just laughed the harder. Fuck him. May his eyeballs turn to turds and drip into his mouth and choke him.

The bored Louse leaned against the edge of the spy-hole in the guard post, squinting against the harsh light. He sighed but continued to peer dutifully down the empty track. Half the watch still to go. You wait though, Pincher would have him on again before nightfall, see if he didn't. Fucking fucker.

He stiffened, looked harder. Movement. Lice. Looked like Nutboiler's patrol. He was early. Looked like he'd lost a few – might be only twelve or so left, hard to say with them milling about. He was coming on at a great clip, like there was something behind him. Snaggler peered down the track; no, there didn't seem to be anything. Well, he'd hear what was up in a minute or so.

The line of approaching Rrrk reached the gate. Snaggler could see them sweating in the light as they ran. He moved into the doorway, expecting the troop to stop, but they crashed on right past him and onto the bridge.

“Oi!” Snaggler stepped into the dust they raised, shielding his eyes, shouting after them. “Oi! Where's the fire?”

The two guards on the central gate, aroused by this commotion, now stepped into the path with their spears.

Snaggler turned to his offsider, on the other side of the entrance. “Here, you! Just glue your eyes to that there hole of yours. Don't let Pincher catch you goofing. I'll be back in a tick.” He sped then over the bridge after the intruders.

Nutboiler's mad patrol had had to halt at the spears. “Move aside,” their chief said harshly to the guards.

“You what?” said the taller guard. “Where you off to, Nuts? Barracks are that way.”

“Orders,” grated the Louse. “Errand to Central. You're standing in my way. Shall I tell the Boss when I see him?”

The spearman gaped. “What?” he said. “What are you talking about? Boss? What errand? Who gave it you?”

Nutboiler drew his sword. Seeing his action, the rest of his troop did the same, almost as one. Snaggler was impressed in spite of himself – old Nuts had cleaned their drill up a treat. Even that big old bad-luck Louse, what was his name, Choker something.

“If you want trouble, you'll get it,” said Nutboiler to the tall guard. “Now be clever and stand aside.”

“Listen, Nuts,” said Snaggler from behind, “what's all this about? What's flown up yer arse all of a sudden? You got to report. 'S orders. You should know that.”

Nuts paid him no attention. He menaced the guards with his sword and the two of them fell back, holding their spare hands high in surrender.

“All right, all right, keep your tits on!” said the tall one. “But there'll be shit for dinner, matey, and it won't

be me who's eating it."

The file of Lice ignored that. Nuts gave the order, and they set off again, clomping over the bridge. They ran passed the astonished guard on the far arch and turned on up the farther path.

"What in sweet fuck was that all about?" Snaggler asked the tall guard, who went by the name of Shitmounter.

The other scratched his head. "Buggered if I know. I'll going to report it."

"Better to leave it, maybe," said Snaggler uncertainly. "Maybe there is an errand. You don't want to go meddling with that stuff."

Shitmounter shook his head. "Uh-uh. They gave me my orders, I'm going to follow 'em. That's safest, all round. Hoy, Marbles! Hop up and let Pincher know about this." The smaller guard propped his spear against the wall and trotted off between the stone Watchers into the Tower.

Snaggler looked at the cloud of dust on the path left by Nutboiler's troop, a grimace twisting his mouth. "You know what'll happen to 'em. You know what they'll send after 'em."

"Is that my fault?" said Shitmounter. "He orta have reported, I don't care what the fuck errand or whatever fucking shit he picked up fuck knows where. In the fucking woods. I mean, excuse me? In the fucking woods? Anyway, everyone reports. 'S orders, like you said. No, he's for it, matey, and don't expect me to weep over him."

\* \* \* \* \*

The wolves found them before they had put even a league between themselves and the Tower. About two dozen of them came running up from behind; huge grey monsters, each with a great mouthful of terrible teeth. They had eyes that stabbed like daggers.

Beren had felt the darkness sweeping up from behind them like a racing tide. These were not ordinary wolves, merely bred to great size – these were the same monsters who had hunted him two years before. The tenants of these bodies were spirits of malice summoned by Gorthaur from the dark behind the stars.

The companions skidded to a halt and backed together into a clump, spears facing out. The great wolves flowed around them on both sides until the besieged stood within a wide circle of slavering red tongues and bare white fangs. The dread presences surrounded their minds at the same time: sneering, probing, pushing.

Finrod took in the grinning circle of terrible wolves, each taller than a man. "Don't fight," he said quietly. "There's no use."

One of the wolves paced forwards and addressed him in tones mangled by its animal throat, scarcely to be understood. "Very wise," it said with a sneer. "Now drop those spears, and get marching. Back to the Tower."

Finrod made one last try. Drawing himself up, he glared at the Wolf-captain. "You don't tell me what to do," he said fiercely. "We got our orders. Now get out of our –" He was cut off by the wolf, which came a pace nearer and snapped its great maw in his face. The teeth rang most horribly as they clashed together.

"*That's* what I say to your orders. Next time I won't bite air. Master wants you, but he don't necessarily want all of you, understand? Now march."

Finrod, wiping spittle off his face, turned silently to obey.

The wolves herded them back at a good pace. Nobody said anything. After a minute or so Beren edged closer to the panting figure he knew was Finrod and began to mutter low near his ear, "Shall we –" but he got no further, because a great shaggy wolf shouldered in and snarled at him. "No talking!" it said. Beren shot it a

wrathful look, but shut his mouth and ran on. Shortly after, though, a voice began to form in his mind. *Whatever happens, it said to him, keep silence. Stay strong. Leave the talking to me.* He knew it was Finrod, he could not say how. The voice came again. *Will you give me the ring?* it said. *I can better hide it than you, maybe.*

Beren slowly zig-zagged his way, as if jostled into it, towards the centre of the panting and running companions, furthest from the running wolves. His friends closed about him, aware of or perhaps guessing his intention. Now how to do it? If he spent any time fumbling at his neck, the wolves would notice; they had eyes like gimlets. It was bad luck that 'his' Orc body was taller than the others. Still trying to think of a way, he stumbled on a rock in the track which the hustling bodies in front of him had obscured from view. He nearly fell, recovered, but for an instant his chest was hidden from the wolves. Like lightning his hand came up and snatched at the small pouch. Luckily the leather band was worn and made little noise as it snapped. Then he was running on, the pouch closed in his hand. He worked a finger in, slowly, concentrating, until at last he had extracted the ring and could juggle it aside from the rest.

The ring clutched safe in two fingers, he felt again inside the pouch, touching the other small keepsakes in there, memories from the past. There was a tiny jade frog Nose had carved; a fibre dolly made by Long Hair; a clear red stone he had found one day in a stream. He had a perfect golden rose from Nendilmë, and a tight-woven circlet of Carver's hair. Small bodies, they communed silently with the tip of his finger. What should he do with them? Should he simply let the pouch drop? There seemed small likelihood that he would see many more hours of life, and there remained to him surely less than one hour to enjoy of light or air or any other goodness. So what point hanging on to the past? Let it go.

Somehow he could not make himself do it. I'll leave them when I'm made to, he thought stubbornly, not before.

He had been working his way back to Finrod. Now they were close; their long Orc-arms jostled. A brush of the hands together and the thing was done. He kept the pouch clutched in his claws, but Finrod had the ring.

They turned the last corner, where the valley opened out into a wide dale, with the two arms of the river about the island in its centre. Beren remembered the first time he had seen it from this side, as a youngster, wandering south with the Druug. It was the same island, the same fortress; but whereas long ago it had gleamed fair under heaven, now the great pile looked drear and ominous. The lights in its sullen stones were long dead, and fear streamed from it in a dark mist.

The Orcs on guard stayed silent as the captives were herded past. They kept their eyes stolidly on their duty. Fear of the wolves suppressed any impulse to jeer. Up the bridge; into the darkness under the great arch, under the vicious gaze of the Watchers. As Finrod's party clattered in under the walls of the Tower, the full weight of dolour of the place came to bear on their minds and spirits. It was as if they were running ever deeper into a swamp, a great foetid miasma of all wrongs. Here was the source; from here streamed every evil. Each of the lost band struggled against the black tide, fought against suffocation under the weight of loss, horror and pain in that awful place.

Half fainting under the assault of terror from all sides, Beren was fuzzily aware of being goaded across the great court, and up a stair he seemed to remember. They were hustled into a great room, lit with red lights, although he never made out their source. As soon as the party were all in, they were made by the wolves to line up against one wall. Just as soon as that was accomplished, they found themselves frozen into place. It was not that one tried in vain to move against bonds; rather that the impulse to move, sent by the mind, never arrived at the limbs. The captives had power to move their eyes and tongues, but nothing else.

When all was ready, a gilded door to one side opened and a figure stepped slowly into the room. It was clad in a long robe gathered at the waist, of colour either white or red; it was hard to tell which in that ruddy light. The form was graceful, that of a tall Man or an Elf; the pale face was long, the brow noble, the eyes soulful and deep.

Just as Beren's eyes were taking in the sight of this being, the thought forming in his secret mind that at last

he stood before his former adversary, he started, because wolf jaws had closed about his fist. Unable to help himself, his hand opened and released the pouch. The wolf carried it to a table set waist-high, reached up, and dropped its trove thereon.

“Concealed,” it grated. “He passed something also to the leader – the fourth from the left, Master, may it please you.”

The figure in the robe tipped out the pouch and disturbed the contents with an idle finger. Finding nothing there to engage his deeper attention, he swept the small pile to the floor. Beren flinched, saw the objects bounce and scatter. The tiny circlet of Carver’s hair stared at him from the floor like an accusing eye.

A stunted creature that he had not previously noticed scurried out from the shadows and made haste to sweep the dross into a pan before scurrying quickly back.

The disappearance of his small keepsakes smote Beren to the heart. This is the end of it, he thought bleakly. Nothing to do now but die.

The robed one strolled over to the Finrod-orc. “What did he pass to you?” he asked. The voice was resonant, multi-layered. Its tones held no threat, only idle curiosity.

Finrod made no sign in reply.

“Well,” said the robed figure pleasantly after some moments of silence, “no matter. We shall have it soon enough.” He turned away then and stepped back to where he could observe the full line of captives. He laughed then, for no reason that was apparent. “Questions!” he said gaily. “We must have questions. For what is an interrogation without them?” He proceeded then to bombard the captives with questions, some pointed, others seeming nonsense. He left no space for replies. He asked them where they came from, whom they served, who was master; he asked them how many feathers had a turtle-dove, and what was the colour of the back side of the Moon. The stream of words scoured their ears and left them dazed. When it finally ended, none of them had heart to look up. Only Finrod had kept his head high the whole time.

The tall figure paced closer to the King. “Who are ye?” it asked him then directly.

“Why, we are Lice – that is, your servants, Master,” replied the Finrod-orc.

“Ye are not,” replied the other, but his voice was mild. “Mobiles are born in servitude. But ye? Ye have minds like steel balls. I know well of what sort ye are. I have tasted such minds before.” He paced slowly away, and for some moments there was silence. The tall one swung around suddenly and lashed with his mind at Finrod. “Tell me who you are!” he commanded. Finrod swayed, and they all felt the blow; but the disguised Elf held firm and made no answer.

He whom the Orcs named Master surveyed the row of prisoners. He raised his hands, and a dark cloud overwhelmed them. In the sightless fog of pressing fear, they heard the Sorcerer’s voice begin to chant, and the words struck at their quailing hearts.

But then Finrod’s clear voice came in answer, and it was as if some mighty star rose slow in waxing grandeur, throwing off the dark mists.

As the Master’s black words came clutching at their hearts like snakes, so Felagund’s voice rose in defence like a shining shield; and the power of the King was very great. Although he was matched against one of a higher order than his own, against a Maia from before the dawn of time, the eternal power of light and life surged through all his being, lending his words a potency out of rule, out of time.

The Master gathered his powers about him like a robe of darkness, and sang anew. The ensuing contest of song between the dark Enchanter and the Elven King is told of in the Lay of Leithian, that the defeated Eldar made in later years, as they huddled in their last desperate havens in the South.

He chanted a song of wizardry,  
Of piercing, opening, of treachery,  
Revealing, uncovering, betraying.  
Then sudden Felagund there swaying  
Sang in answer a song of staying,  
Resisting, battling against power,  
Of secrets kept, strength like a tower,  
And trust unbroken, freedom, escape;  
Of changing and of shifting shape  
Of snares eluded, broken traps,  
The prison opening, the chain that snaps.

Backwards and forwards swayed their song.  
Reeling and foundering, as ever more strong  
The chanting swelled. Felagund fought,  
And all the magic and might he brought  
Of Elvenesse into his words.  
Softly in the gloom they heard the birds  
Singing afar in Nargothrond,  
The sighing of the Sea beyond,  
Beyond the western world, on sand,  
On sand of pearls in Elvenland.

Alas! The diamond was flawed, the forged blade hid a secret crack; the dread Master of Werewolves had the mastery in the end, as is sadly told in the Lay.

Then the gloom gathered; darkness growing  
In Valinor, the red blood flowing  
Beside the Sea, where the Noldor slew  
The Foamriders, and stealing drew  
Their white ships with their white sails  
From lamplit havens. The wind wails,  
The wolf howls. The ravens flee.  
The ice mutters in the mouths of the Sea.  
The captive sad in Angband mourn.  
Thunder rumbles, the fires blaze.

The black tide of despair rose and submerged all their hearts. The contest was lost.

The darkness slowly cleared, revealing that Finrod, beaten, had fallen fainting to the ground. Beren, struggling for air like a drowning man, felt at the same time a sensation as of many bindings beginning slowly to relax and fall away. He felt as a man stripped of a pinching armour which, while uncomfortable to wear, had nevertheless been a protection and a trusty shield. Without willing to do so, indeed being helpless to prevent it, he found he was standing up taller, back to his old height. He saw the Orc-shape falling from the others as well, also from Finrod, lying still dazed upon the floor. As each unbent to his old shape and size, the Orc-clothes split and hung from them in tatters.

The Master walked over to Finrod and stirred him with his foot. "Stand up when I address you," he said curtly. Finrod climbed shakily to his feet. The robed figure paced slowly down the line, but he stopped at Beren. The man staggered under the sudden assault of stabbing eyes, felt himself pressed down by darkness. He had felt the same terrible weight on the field of Ladros, ten years before, but now it was much more directed and immediate. The power of this being squeezed at his mind until he feared it would break; but he held, and eventually the pressure eased again.

"Eleven Noldor and one Man!" mused the Master. "A most curious occurrence. What is your position in this gathering, Man? Do you fetch water, maybe, or polish the armour?" He laughed, then suddenly he stopped,



and looked keenly at Beren. He rubbed his right hand, as if at the remembered smart of an old wound. "It could not be," he muttered, "could it? But no, put the fantasy away. Fate would not be so absurd, nor so generous. That Bandit certainly perished with all the other lives."

Shaking his head to clear the thought, the Master turned to face them all. "Now that we have dispensed with this pitiful pretence," he continued in tones as bare and bleak as a knife blade, "I shall tell you who I am. I have many names, but it is most fitting that you call me Mairon, the Admirable."

Nobody replied.

"It would be idle to put such as you to the Question," Mairon went on. "Experience tells me this. The Extractors are of use only when working with the weak. But truly, I am not so eager to know whatever small secrets you huddle to your breasts. Most of you are servants, followers, of no importance. But *you*," here he pointed to Finrod, "you are different. You are a lord of the Noldor, that must be plain to any. But which one? And what was your purpose? These things I do desire to know. I have a way to find out. I know your weakness now, you rebels; your flaw, your madness. This shall be my key." He turned to address the wolves who had remained ranged to the sides. "Strip them, search them, then confine them in darkness. Pit seven, I think. Let time work on them a while." He smiled, and it was the smile of a skull. "After that, we will turn to other means."

\* \* \* \* \*

Lúthien had called Beren's name a hundred times into the empty air, and received no answer. As the days of misery dragged on, still no answer came, but a presentiment began to occupy her mind. She opened her eyes to the light one day and found the nameless apprehension grown overnight to a crushing weight of horror and fear. Somewhere Beren was in mortal danger; she was sure of it, though she knew not where or how.

Lúthien blamed her mother for many things. The maid had not returned answer or even looked in the King's face for many weeks, as is only to be expected, but she meted out the same treatment to her mother, which was perhaps not so just. Now, though, since she knew no better doorway to knowledge of her beloved, she sought her mother out at last.

Melian listened in silence to her daughter's desperate stream of words. Nobody but she knew the pang she felt, nor how hard it was for her to keep a calm face.

When Lúthien had run finally to a sobbing halt, Melian looked at her sorrowfully out of her dark eyes. "Daughter," she said softly, "I cannot help you." She stood and turned to go, but Lúthien sprang to her and, sinking to her knees, clasped her mother around her legs. She turned to Melian a look of such agony that the latter's resolve was shaken.

"Mother," pleaded the girl, "I know that you know. Please just tell me, to still my foreboding at least. I know he is lost, and Elbereth knows I could not be any more miserable than I am. But I cannot bear not to know. I beg you!"

Melian hesitated, then she said, "Oh, Lúthien. Beren went to Felagund for help. Now they are in Gorthaur's dungeons, on the Wolf Isle. Now let me go. It is forbidden to me to say more."

"But is there none to help?" asked Lúthien tremblingly.

"You can judge that as well as I," replied Melian sadly.

"That means, no-one," said Lúthien, and the tremble in her voice was more pronounced than ever.

"Therefore I must go myself. I am only a light-hearted maid – oh! Once light-hearted. I have no strength nor device for opening dungeons. Joy and song are all the maiden knows, and lately even these have failed her. But if all that I can do is beat upon the bars with my tender hands, then beat I must, and beat I shall."

Melian made no reply, either by word or expression.

“Mother,” went on Lúthien through tears, “have you nothing to say? Do you love your daughter so little that you will neither give her aid to save her reason, nor seek with words to hold her back, in well-meant if ill-thought concern?”

Melian bent, and with hands gentle but strong she freed herself from Lúthien’s clasp. “I cannot do more,” she said, then turned away; and nobody saw her pain.

Lúthien was distraught, and fled to the woods. Whether by accident or instinct, she came across Daeron sitting gloomy in a glade. He was crowned with fern and had his pipes, but he did not play. His eyes widened in pain as he saw her approach, but he said nothing.

She knelt in the rustling leaves before him. “Daeron!” she cried. “Companion of my former joy! I beg thee, make me a song, else I think my heart will break.”

“Heart-break?” replied Daeron thickly. He clasped his own throat in sudden passion. “My music is dead,” he croaked in agony. “There are no more tunes.” But looking again into the eyes of utter despair before him, he changed his mind of a sudden and took up his pipes in hands that shook. He gave forth a wailing tune of such power of grief and woe that the birds fell silent, and all who heard it – and they were many – forgot the very name of mirth, and stood there lifeless with their heads bowed and their hands at their sides. The pain of that song was such that it carried Lúthien beyond tears into the bleak country in which one desires nothing but death, and curses the unfeeling body that stubbornly goes on living.

When the terrible music was over, Lúthien knew what she must do; even though she well knew the weight of the deed, and whose heart was breaking indeed. She touched Daeron on the knee and looked into his eyes, wide and dark with tragedy.

“My friend,” she said, “I know your heart. You long to be more than friend. But just as you did not choose your... your garment of scratching fire, neither did I. We none of us have choice in these matters. Friend is all I can be to you, and you to me. It lies not within me to choose otherwise, no matter how sorely I rue your pain.

“Now, the subject of *my* unwilling fixation lies presently in the Wolf-Warlock’s dungeons. There is no-one to help, so I mean to go myself – yes, even I. I do not know how I will find the courage even to enter that road, let alone walk it for many steps, looking never to the dark end of it, lest it break my fragile resolve, and bring thus everything down in ruin – reason, life, everything.

“I need help. I have never needed anything before. As you were my friend, without I think too much pain, in those lost days of brightness, I beg you, be my friend now, when I have need of it, as never maid had need before. Help me!”

Daeron stood up abruptly and turned away from her. “Are you made of brass,” he asked thickly over his shoulder, “that you can ask this of me? Your desire is that I come with you, is it not? I am to place myself in direst peril, yea venture even into the stronghold of this Captain of the Enemy himself. But for whose sake? My rival’s! Is your heart made of stone?”

“No,” she cried, “I only wish it were. Please, Daeron, for my sake, do not take it so. I only do what I must, as do all.”

He turned to face her again. “Do what you must?” he echoed in low tones. “Then shall I too do what I must. I make you at least this promise: I will keep you from the peril you would dare. I will do so in my own way; but I will fend it from you.”

Lúthien, head bowed, thanked him in a voice scarcely to be heard. She said then, “I must think further what to do. I do not know where to begin.” She looked at him tremulously. “I can truly rely on you?”

“You can rely on me,” said Daeron coldly, standing like stone.

Lúthien left him for the time on noiseless feet. The thought in her mind then led her to choose a great tree, north of Esgalduin, which she climbed with nimble feet. Perched at last in the highest crown of leaves, she felt the clean air stream through her dark hair, trailing it out behind in a great waft. With Elven-sharp eyes she gazed, not north to the shadow of terror, but a little further west, where the line of cloven ragged peaks came to an end. Ranged beyond, glimmering on the very edge of sight, the Mountains of Shadow could just be made out. Between those lines, she knew, lay the mouth of Sirion’s vale, which would lead her at last to him whose face and form she longed to see.

The thought of what she had resolved to dare made her tremble. She had lived among doughty ones who went to the wars – Celeborn, Mablung, Beleg; there were many in Doriath with stout arms who faced the horrors and dangers of war with an eager eye and a high heart. Lúthien had admired these warriors, had celebrated their deeds with others, but never, never, had she thought that she might ever tread in their footsteps. Some had strength to fight, and did that; others had not, so had better dance and sing. But into what erratic course careered the world that singers now must also face the bitterness of steel? And with what? Should a song stop an army?

She tried to think of a plan; but there was no plan. All that she could do was run into the dark, and hope that some means unlooked for would arise when she came to the very razor edge of need. It seemed a fool’s course – a fitting sequel, maybe, to folly already undergone; but what else was there for her?

\* \* \* \* \*

Thingol heard Daeron’s account first with amazement, but a blaze of blind anger soon kindled in his breast: anger at the wayward folly of this daughter of his. Was there to be no end to the trouble her infatuation would cause? Bitterly he regretted that he had not kept a watchful, guarding eye on all her movements; fool that he was, he had thought there was no need. Bitter is the cup of that wisdom that comes first after the fall.

Daeron finished his account and stood silent before the King with sunken head. Thingol shook free of wrathful thoughts and turned a warm glance on his minister.

“Lore-master Daeron,” he said, “a more true friend hast thou been to me than any of these bold knights of mine, who are eager enough to dabble in small squabbings of little account outside the strong fences of this land, but who have no rede for grave troubles within it. Love there shall ever be between us; truly, a prince of this realm of beech and elm hast thou proven, and so shalt be also now in name.”

Daeron, his face impossible to read, made his bow and departed. As soon as he was gone, Thingol called loudly for his guards. He bade them most urgently seek Lúthien, and to bring her to him. If she would not come, they had permission to lay hand on her. The guards received these orders with no joy at all, but they were careful to hide their dismay, and set about them all the same, with heavy hearts.

Thingol said to Melian, “I suppose there is no point asking you where the maid is, or what she intends.”

Melian shook her head.

Fuming at the injustice of everything, all Thingol could do then was pace back and forth until his daughter appeared.

“Father,” she quavered, “you sent for me. I think you are angry?”

Thingol opened his mouth, but he could not straight away find words to express his thoughts. He had to close it again and think awhile.

“Daughter,” he said at last, striving to speak calmly, “it is true, I am angry. When you have a child of your own, you will understand why. I am not angry because you cross my will; I am angry because I love you

above all things, and of all things I would keep you from harm. But now I hear that you would throw yourself into almost the gravest peril you could find in this world! My fear for you rises in a cloud to choke me; and fear shows itself by anger.”

Lúthien was silent. The stark revelation of Daeron’s betrayal stood tall and black in her mind.

“Most treasured daughter,” continued Thingol, “dearer far than life itself. Tell me only this: why do you seek this folly? I can understand your wish to help this the object of your errant fantasy, much as I deplore it; but this plan of yours to seek him yourself in Gorthaur’s prisons is madness pure. Do you not realize this? Dear daughter, they would slaughter you there, as hunters cut down the wide-eyed and gentle deer. Can it be true that this is your actual wish? Will truly nothing content you but to throw your life away? Reveal your heart to me, I pray you!

“My father,” said Lúthien quietly, “what you name folly, I call the painful wisdom of one who struggles free at last from doting infancy.” Further than that she would not explain.

Thingol tried to reason with her, but she answered all his arguments with silent refusal. He demanded that she promise to give up her wild scheme; but she would not. He raged at her, shook his fist in her face; all to no avail.

When Thingol at last had run out of things to say, he realized that his anger had also burned away, leaving nothing in his breast but cold and bitter ashes. He gazed in silence at his daughter a while, as she stood there slender and fair in the centre of the floor. She had left him only one course he could take.

He strode to the door and called anew for his guards. When the captain came in, he pointed to Lúthien. “My daughter there is not in her senses,” he said. “She must be confined for her own safety. Do you escort her to her chambers, with whatever most gentle force the case should require, and sequester her within. Station men outside the door so that she not, *not* do you hear, pass out of it, except I give express permission thereto. I will meanwhile contrive some confinement more comfortable and fitting.”

After Lúthien meekly allowed herself to be led away, Thingol sat on his seat, gnawing on a knuckle with such ferocity, it seemed he would chew it off entire.

The King knew well that Lúthien was a creature for whom light and air were as necessary as food and drink. He dared not shut her up underground. He had already feared for her health when she had kept to her rooms in the first onset of her grief, and he would not set it at risk now by any action of his. The plan he eventually lighted upon pleased him, since it appeared to meet all needs. Standing not far from the gates of Menegroth, as has been mentioned, towered that queen of the forest, Hirilorn, whose grey-skinned bole reared high above the crowns of all the lesser trees that held crowded court around her. Thingol bethought him to build a house high in the noble tree. There should Lúthien live in the finest light and air in the kingdom, yet remain under strait supervision, placed as she was right before his door. In time, he hoped, the fantastic webs of glamour would fade and she could return at last to the old, carefree life.

Therefore he set the work in hand; and it was done, and to strict order, but with no good will, for the Sindar of Doriath were unhappy at this King of theirs, who seemed ever more determined to swim headstrong against the tide of fate.

They built a small three-cornered house high above the ground in the first branches of Hirilorn, which height was already above the tops of many tall trees. The tree forked into three at that place, and the grey trunks, each still very great in size, bounded the house on those sides. It was a fair dwelling, full of air and sweet scents. A couch was placed in the uppermost room, whose windows looked wide about. Below that was a kitchen, and a day-room; and lowest of all, a privy place to wash.

They carried up with labour, or hauled with long ropes, many things for the woman’s recreation. A spinning wheel there was, and a loom, and a goodly store of thread and web. Toys and wonders of amusement there were, contrived by clever fingers long ago, by arts now lost. Lastly Lúthien was conducted carefully up the

ladders and ushered with apologetic mien within. Arrangements were made to deliver food and drink, or anything else she had need of.

Thingol spent much thought on the guard. He did not suppose there was any in the kingdom who would cross his will, least of all to help his daughter to her avowed plan of deadly folly, but he took care that the guard was threefold, on different shifts, and that the men were drawn from different companies. He declared stark penalties for any who left a ladder or rope, or who by any other negligence, should aid the girl in attempting to escape.

His only point of doubt was his wife. He asked her to her face if she had any thought to help Lúthien to follow her frustrated courses.

Melian laughed bitterly. "I?" she said. "No!"

Lúthien wandered through all the house and explored its contents with listless fingers. She could take no pleasure in it, none at all. She had wrestled as if with giants to bring herself to the bleak point of decision, to dare the teeth of wolves and the malice of Gorthaur for Beren's sake; and now all that was for nothing. Her anguish was very great, and she had no rest by day or night.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beren and the Elves were chained to the wall of a dank and lightless pit far underground. Finrod knew the chamber: it had been one of the great store-rooms and armouries honeycombed into the rock of the Isle. He remarked wryly that the room had been better ventilated in his time.

Their wrists were gripped in heavy shackles, clasped up snug against the skin. These had cruel barbs which dug into the flesh at any determined attempt to pull the hand through. A chain connected the two shackles, passing through an iron ring in the wall. The prisoners could reach the ground with one hand, or sit, but not lie flat. None of them could quite reach his neighbour.

They had little food, which in the beginning was not much trial, although as the days turned to weeks, hunger began to gnaw at them in earnest. On infrequent occasions, a little light pierced the gloom as the door was thrown back. This signalled the entry of one of their gaolers to fling a few hunks of maggoty meat at their feet. Their stomachs revolted from these objects at first, so they kicked the stinking parcels as far from them as they could. Later they became less picky.

The Orcs of the Tower had rifled all their gear. They had left Beren his metal belt, since it was dull and unlovely in appearance, but they had broken his knife with the other small weapons. The destruction of this old gift to him from Gorlim, which he had worn at his side all through the long tally of years and battles, smote Beren as sorely as the loss of his keepsakes. By such small things are our hearts bound up.

Among other items of no interest to the Orcs, such food as their bags had contained was returned to them, flung at their feet together with the bags themselves. The Waybread of Doriath had been smashed, but quite an amount of it remained in the form of fragments. The prisoners shared everything, sliding the things among them with their feet as best they might, and Beren was glad to contribute the Lembas to the general pool. All ate of the biscuit and enjoyed the tingle of energy and hope it brought to them.

They were given no water and had to slake their thirsts as best they could by licking the slimy runnels bestripping the walls on all sides.

The prisoners were far from comfortable, but their situation could have been much worse. None of them was by nature heavily dependent on bodily comforts. Beren of course had been long inured to hardship. The Elves had not his long experience of short commons and hard beds, but although they all dearly loved a drink and a fire and a full stomach, their natures were not founded on material things, and could therefore indefinitely do without such without grievous suffering.

Finrod had early on produced the ring, from what hiding place Beren could not see. The Elf-lord had hoped with its aid to cut their bonds; but here in the centre of Gorthaur's power, it would not answer his call. The band remained dark and cold.

The prisoners were free to talk with each other, and at the start they filled the days and nights with talk, or sometimes with song. The Elves told Beren much. He learned more of the history of the Noldor, of their errors and their griefs, than any other outsider had learned before. At other times he marvelled as they spoke of wonders in the fabled Country of the Gods, now lost to them, far away across the Sea. During those long, empty days in the pit he came to understand many things of which he had previously been ignorant.

Beren for his part, when asked, spoke at length of his own history, and of the wars in the North. The Elves cried out in wonder at many points. Finrod lamented that none of this would likely ever come to light. Very little of Beren's deeds was known, he said, which was a tragedy; for there was material there for many a golden song. Some of these details were now known only to few, the Bëorings being dead or scattered; and some things were known only among themselves, they twelve there in the dungeon.

As well as events from the past, they spoke also sometimes of the present. Finrod remarked on the weakness of the garrison. Aside from the wolves, he doubted there were as many as a hundred Orcs in the place together. He thought that a determined assault could probably re-take the place. Gorthaur also appeared weak in himself. The King enlarged on this, and his guesses matched those of Rattlecone, which Beren had not up until then mentioned, although he did so now. It seemed clear that the Warlock had spent most of his power in creating the horror that now blanketed Dorthonion. He had killed a whole country, and that to drive out a single intruder. Finrod expressed surprised at that: it did not fit what he knew of this Maia's nature, as they had measured it from passing contacts in the long ages, back before the count of years began, during which time they had all lived as neighbours. The King said it was an act of unreasoned spite more like to those petulant waves of bile and fire with which Morgoth had marred all of Arda during its creation.

Finrod remarked that it was lucky for them that they fell foul of Mairon-Gorthaur now, in this obviously weakened state, rather than earlier. At the height of his powers, they could never had withstood him as they had; he would have crushed their minds like grapes between his fingers.

Beren wanted to know how it was that, despite that the Elves had lived in Valinor cheek by jowl with Mairon so long, in what might be termed happier circumstances, the Sorcerer had nonetheless failed to recognize a single one of them. Finrod had laughed and said that the same might apply between Mairon and Beren. Then he said that Mairon had a mind of metal and wheels. He did not fully recognize people as things; only as pieces to manipulate. He ignored any who were not of immediate use to him. Finrod said further that he was more sorry for Mairon than for anybody else he could think of. The Maia was as one who had spent his entire life in a desolation, being born there, and who had no hope of ever escaping it. He was too blind to notice how much there was that he could not see.

The companions had no hope, but at least at the start of things their hearts were far from in their boots. This was not courage on their part, rather a kind of realism. If they had to die, they reasoned, there was no point in spending their remaining days grovelling in terror and despair. What would happen would happen; but until it did, they would tell a joke and sing a catch as if they had no care.

So far Gorthaur had left them in peace. They did not know his intentions, although they expected nothing good. The full horror of the Warlock's plan was not made plain to them until they had languished in darkness for some time.

The first they noticed on the day was a lightening of the dark. The source of this became revealed as two long red tapers, with flames which burned high in the still air, carried by figures who to begin with were not clear to see. The prisoners were so unused to light that they had to shield their eyes. When they could again see for glare, they beheld Mairon in his white robe, advancing between two Orcs who carried the tapers. The glassy eyes of the Orcs and their teeth bared in grimace spoke of utter terror, or some other state of fugue. The Warlock's eyes in contrast were dark and deep – sensitive, gleaming wide, like those of a trapped deer.

Mairon stopped by Finrod, the light from the candles picking off glints of gold from the Elf-lord's hair. The Maia spoke, and his voice was low and pleasant as before; one might even fool oneself that it held sympathy.

"Greetings, O unnamed Prince of the Noldor," he said. "Is all well with you?"

Finrod smiled. "Well or ill, what are these?" he replied. "The world goes on the same."

Mairon affected to consider this. "An admirable philosophy," he replied. "Which makes it all the stranger that so few pursue it. I do not so myself. I desire many things, and it is not equal to me whether I obtain them or not." He looked at Finrod. "But you: at your claim, it can make small difference to you, surely, to tell me your name. For whether you do or not, will not the world go on the same?"

"If it is indeed as I say," said Finrod tightly, "then it matters little what I choose. Therefore I choose not."

"At the roll of the dice, so?" Mairon seemed amused.

"If you like," said Finrod.

"Well," said the white-robed figure, "if it is a matter of such nice balance, surely I can find a way to tip the die. What think you? Does a means to change your mind exist?"

"No," replied Finrod.

"I find you inconsistent," replied the tall Maia.

"That disturbs me not at all," replied Finrod. "Do your worst, Warlock. You will prise no word from my mouth."

Mairon turned to the figures of the other captives, the nearer of whom could be dimly glimpsed in the ruddy light. "Is that the word of you all?"

Obedient to the wishes of the King, none of them spoke, but their resolve was plain to perceive.

Mairon shrugged slightly. He turned to look behind him, made a gesture with his hand. Two pale lights appeared in the darkness behind him at shoulder height. The lights moved a little, together, and then they blinked.

As the realisation of what that meant flashed its way into their minds, the monster sprang. A great, grey form leaped in past the edge of the circle of light and buried its jaws in the bowels of one of the captives – merry Pergas, ever with a jest on his lips. No jest now. The Elf screamed and beat at the rough head that devoured him, but without weight of steel his blows had no avail.

A shout of horror had escaped the mouths of all the others; but soon they had to turn their heads away. Some jammed hands over ears to try to shut out the cries of the stricken Elf, and the horrid noises that went on long after his voice fell silent.

Mairon had watched the whole frightful deed with a visage which showed only mild interest. When all was done, the monster slunk back, licking its blood-dark chops in disgusting satisfaction.

The Maia turned again to Finrod. "Well? Is the die tipped?" he asked.

Finrod ground his teeth together, but said nothing.

Mairon's dark eyes were fathomless. "Do you know," he remarked, almost conversationally, "It is not actually of great moment whether you tell me your name, or anything else. Suppose I found ways to induce you to tell me everything: every detail of all the feeble webs you plotted to weave at our feet. It would make no difference. Free, you would be a nuisance; I own it. You strutting Firstborn cause us considerable trouble,

divert many resources that might be better directed. But, my prince, you are not free. I have you here, and nobody comes away from this place with their life. Here is the end to all your webs and plans, all your fragile devices and childish stratagems. I should like to know who you are; but I do not need to know. Time will reveal which of the princes you are, as we eliminate them one by one.

“You are stubborn; you make great show of courage. Know that it is wasted, poured out with the cess. You cheat Mairon of nothing. I have no use for you, save as food for my pets. Therefore at times one of them will come, and dine from among you, as today, until none of you are left. You, or one of you, will tell me your name and purpose; or perhaps you will not. It does not matter. Your philosophy was right.” He turned to go, beckoning to the stupefied light-bearers.

Finrod found his voice. “You devil,” he grated. “You may send us to dreadful death one by one, if that is our fate. By Heaven though, you shall not retain your name. Mairon! The Admirable! You evil butcher, you witcher of souls. You shall no longer be called admirable. Despicable are you! Therefore I name you Sauron!”

They all now began to call “Sauron! Despicable!” at the tops of their voices. The prisons being fairly full, other ears caught this and other voices took it up, until the shouts of “Sauron!” echoed through all the dungeons.

Sauron, as he ever after was known, turned back to glare at the Elf-king. “Shout away, little people,” he sneered. “It matters little. Your squeaks will not rob your flesh of its flavour. And none of you will ever see the light again, to carry this slander through the world above.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Imprisonment was only the start of Lúthien’s woes – she found soon enough that the cup held yet bitter lees in plenty. Not three nights after the beginning of her isolation, a wave of sick horror rose out of nowhere in a black onslaught whose passing left her white and trembling. What under the bright lights of Heaven had that portended? Her beloved lived still, that she knew... but some awful deed had passed before his eyes; and his horror was her horror. She knew not what had happened, but the savage mask of a wolf appeared in her inner vision.

The long, empty days came and went, and as the year slipped deeper into autumn, Lúthien’s desperation grew. Four more times the dreadful wave came, and she knew in her heart that it washed ever closer to Beren. The leaves bloomed to red and gold and began to fall, and still she beat her fists upon the rail in despair, and could think of nothing to do. Almost it had been better if Beren had died outright, or she herself. She gazed down to the ground far beneath and wished that it held an escape for her from this dreadful pain of life. But that was not for creatures such as she. Servant of life as she was, she was unable to will her own death.

At last she pulled herself together. Firing her will to a brighter blaze than ever she had known before, she *refused* to wait in this nest of passive weakness any longer. There *was* a way to escape, of that she was certain; all that she had to do was find it.

The Elf-woman was alone, and nobody knows for certain what passed through her mind. She did escape from her prison in the end, and while some facts surrounding this event are sure, more has been supposed than is known. Some have sung of silver bowls and gold, and of magicked wine, and water from Esgalduin beneath the moon; and perhaps it was so. But just as bowls and wine sit dumbly by for those with no power, so power needs not such things to prop and guide its working. Helpmeets they may be, but need can do without.

Long she sat beneath the moon, faring in her thoughts into wide lands and far times. It came to her at last that she was child to Melian, who had danced in spaces deep and vast before the opening of time. That spirit who was her mother, being gathered with her peers to heed the Call, had joined with them to shape with song and love the flower that was – Arda. Those Powers then had descended and entered into the garden of their own



design. There they had played, and wrought, and ruled. And Melian the Maia? She was of the dark – the old, fecund darkness from which all things spring, and to which all return. The child in the dark of the hidden womb she cherished, and the seed unborn beneath the moist and lightless earth, and the sleeper weary from toil.

This was her mother; Lúthien's heritage. The full weight of this knowing flowed into her during the long hours, the dark hours, beneath the velvet sky. At the end of that time she knew what she could do. Her Night was come, and she knew herself at last.

Thread she had indeed, but it fitted not her purpose. Therefore she put forth her power into her own hair and made it grow. The dark waves of hair flowed forth from her bended head, folding silently onto the floor; and it was the old darkness, her mother's darkness, that piled there in softness. She who had been named nightingale would not take up weapon, as had been her thought at first; such would be wrong for her. Let softness be her weapon then, as of the child that is hidden, and the tender seed; softness, and secrecy, and sleep.

When she judged that she had enough coils of the thick, soft hair, she set to work. Long hours at wheel and loom she sat, and at the end of that time she had a cloak, a dark robe to wrap her beauty like a shadow; and its nature was slumber. Of the strands that remained she twined a cord: slender, but strong as Night.

Three days the sun wheeled over her busy, bended head, but at last the work was complete. When night came again, she lowered the rope slowly to the ground. As its end dangled near the watchful guards, sleep stole over them before they were aware.

When all was quiet, the limber maid shinned noiseless down the lengthy cord. She paused by the slumbering guards with pity on her face. She feared the wrath of her father they would have to face. Hoping to save them the worst of their punishment, she passed a wisp of her sable thread of dreams through the buttonholes of all three, to make plain the author of their predicament. Then she wrapped her shadowy cloak about her and vanished out of Doriath.

\* \* \* \* \*

The wolves were running.

Sauron – as we shall now name him, sharing the fierce contempt of the free peoples – had lied to Finrod. In fact, he was not at all indifferent. The whole affair puzzled him mightily; he could not in the least understand what possessed a Lord of the Eldar to run such an appalling risk by passing the Tower in disguise, and with such a small party. Sauron was certain that something of moment lay behind it, and he desired very greatly to know what it was. He feared a plot, or the onrush of some stroke unforeseen. In search of clues, he sent out many spies to the South: birds and small furtive beasts under his sway, as well as all the wolves he could spare. Of Orcs he had too few now to spend.

Celegorm and Curufin had grown restive in Nargothrond. The news they expected of Finrod's death never arrived; he had simply disappeared. The influence of the brothers had in the meantime gone steadily backwards as many of the people became ashamed that they had listened to hot words, and began to be pricked by their consciences to remember their fealty. Their respect and love for Orodreth was slight, but so long as he stood as steward for their King, they were more minded now to follow his word and not hark to the brothers.

The brothers had debated whether to seek north for news of Felagund, and they welcomed the reports of wolfish incursions, since it allowed them to kill not two birds with one stone, but three; and perhaps even more. They would go out and kill the wolves, which it was necessary to do, and that was one bird. They could cast about for tidings of the King for two. A third bird was the simple enjoyment of hunting in the sharp autumn air.

A fourth bird was Celegorm's alone. He did not speak of it, although his brother could make some shrewd

guesses as to the form and colour of the fowl. Since Lúthien had first entered Celegorm's head, she had rarely been far from his thoughts. He had never seen her, but report made her the fairest of maidens, beautiful beyond compare. The difficulty of obtaining her only made her the more desirable. He was impatient for power to wield in Thingol's direction. This hunt, he thought, would at least give good cause to prowl the western borders of that cockscomb chieftain's lands. He might learn there something to his advantage.

Therefore the brothers called their men together, formed a mounted band, and rode forth in a thunder of hoofs to the music of horn and trumpet, paying scant heed to the huddling fears of the Nargothronders. Running as ever in the van, swifter and more tireless than any horse, his nose plucking every strand of meaning from the air, his eyes piercing every shadow, went the great leaping shape of Huan.

Eastward they coursed, under the wind-bitten Hunters' Hills, all across the Guarded Plain. The great Fen checked them, and there they turned and rode north. With Sirion growing ever younger on their flank, they thundered on hooves of fire up the marches of Doriath, seeking what spoor there was to find. Two wolves they turned up, lurking in the thickets; then a third. The two ran, but in each case Huan was after them quicker than thought, running two paces to their one, so that the great grim forms seemed to run backward into his jaws. The bodies met. A flash of teeth, whiter than the snows of Oiolossë, the Holy Mountain; a jerk of Huan's head; and the filth lay stretched in the dust.

The third wolf turned to fight; but there the end was even swifter.

Celegorm's eyes strayed often to the East, trying to pierce the mists that coiled over the river. A radiance lay on the air there, but the land beyond was veiled from his sight. No hint he found of any path over the river; yet there must be one, else how came the messengers and riders from Doriath?

No trace of passage could be concealed from the eyes and nose of Huan, and it was the hound who found the trail. He checked, circled back, then halted, sniffing deeply. He would have turned straight away and hunted the scent he had found to the West, had not Celegorm called him sharply to heel.

The brothers dismounted, but they bade the others keep the horses back for fear of overtreading the tracks. They looked hard along the line where the great glossy-pelted form of Huan sniffed. There were many rocks here, but some scuffing was evident, hardly to be seen by the eye; plus a crushed blade or two. Celegorm's searching gaze detected a winding gap in the undergrowth which led in either direction. Nobody crossing it would notice it or take it as anything more than one of innumerable chance openings under the trees.

"To the river!" he said to his brother, and the Hound.

Bidding their men to remain where they were, the two, dark and light, followed Huan along the winding, green-lit path.

A rushing noise and an ever-moving light between the branches revealed the river. Once there, they found the answer to the riddle: a rope, strong but slender, curved out over the foaming width of the river. The line was woven of some mottled yarn that made it hard to see against the water.

"Soft," whispered Celegorm in caution. "Do not disturb the outer growth." The two crouched and peered awhile through the gaps between the leaves; then Celegorm gave a tiny grunt. "The bush with the yellow berries," he whispered to his brother. "A little to the left. Do you see him?"

Curufin looked, and at length nodded. His brother motioned for him to come quietly away.

"There are sure to be other guards whom we did not see," said Celegorm on the way back. "All ready to cut the rope, I'll warrant, should any stranger dare it. We must think more on this."

"It is their way in, though," replied his brother. "We have found the door; now we must think of a key. I rue now that we did not quiz this mortal before we sent him to his death."

Since they could do no more there at that time, they mounted and turned again to the West, following the same trail. The faint path trended away north after a while, keeping to the forest beside Teiglin; but since hunting wolves in closely-grown country was a bad business, the party diverged from it at this point and made for more open ground. Huan left the path with some reluctance; clearly he had found some scent on it which interested him.

The hunt was on again. They rode to the Red Hill, and there they surprised three more wolves, all together, as if in conclave. Huan dispatched the first quickly, but this gave the second time to find a good stance: the hound found flashing white teeth however he approached. In the time it takes to tell all this, the horsemen had spurred with whoops of joy onto the third wolf. Almost in the same breath their cries turned to fear and pain. This wolf was a monster. Its snarling, red-mouthed form stood higher than the riders' knees. The horses shied and bucked from its sudden onslaught in a wild panic. Two men were snatched from their saddles and ripped to stark and bloody death. Spears clashed, a horse was stabbed in the wild thrusting, but the horrid grey form was too quick. Another man was torn down. The horrified riders were fighting to escape now, spears flung down and forgotten. Hot blood was spraying everywhere. The monster pulled another down, then another. As its great maw gaped wide, in the act of closing on another leg, a form too quick to clearly see flashed in from the side. There was a thump, followed by a great ripping sound, and then nothing remained of the wolf but a twitching mound of soiled pelt, with Huan standing bloody-mouthed over it.

The shaken men collected themselves and counted the casualties. Five Elves with their chests – their chests! – torn open, nigh torn right off, lying in five lakes of red blood. Blood was still oozing from the corpses. Together with a speared horse and a few scratches, that was the tally.

After ministering to the horse, they washed the blood from Huan in a nearby spring. They examined him closely, all over, but could find no wound on his muscled form.

“By the lights of Heaven,” exclaimed Celegorm, “I would fain leave it all to the dog next time!” He found nobody inclined to argue with him.

They rested there that night, after burying their dead comrades and skinning the wolves. The next day, with now six grey pelts rolled and tied behind their saddles, they turned northward again, meaning to follow Teiglin to the crossing. The brothers discussed among themselves what to do when they reached it. Curufin thought they should be getting back, but Celegorm was for pressing on to the inn. “We need news of Finarfin's son,” he said, “and Zalta's hostel is the best place to hear it.” In fact Finrod had not gone that way, but through the wild and secret lands under the feet of the Shadowy Mountains; but they were not to know that.

Curufin could see the sense in that course, although he privately thought that ale, and the other charms of Zalta's establishment, might also have weight in his brother's designs.

They had not gone far however before Huan picked up a scent. It was the same one as before, stronger and closer now than ever. It puzzled him. He had smelled many like it before... but none quite like this. Almost it reminded him of his home, far across the sundering seas.

“The hound is onto something,” said Celegorm.

“Wolf?” asked his brother.

“I don't think so,” replied Celegorm with some doubt. “I cannot read him. Shall we give him his head?”

Huan, encouraged, loped forward at a pace the men and horses had difficulty in matching. The quarry was not far ahead; every step brought the scent stronger and fresher, and with this, the old fierce joy began to rise in the breast of the hound. He was running like the wind now, leaving the shouting Elves behind. His eyes quested ahead to find the prey. He could feel her, not far ahead, and she was aware of him now, and fled. Life pounding in every limb, the great hunting hound barrelled down the ever-narrowing trail, seeking the hot blood, his life-goal. Not far now. And there it was: a shadow flitting, caught in the day. He ran her down in

fiery zeal, running quicker than the eagle flies, teeth bared for the hot neck, boring down in a quick line, the target in sight. He could feel the heat now, it was nearly met, it was nearly met, oh the joy! His jaws strained wide, the neck, she stumbled, turned anguished face toward him –

Dread memory clutched him in its sudden net. He twisted his face violently to one side, turned his flank, bucked in a mighty swerve to miss the girl, and fell over in a tumble of dust and limbs at Lúthien's side. He picked himself up, shook himself, and stared at her in horror. Almost, almost he had forgotten, and slipped back. Had he learned nothing? Mandos was just, Mandos was just!

Lúthien backed away from the great animal. With shaking hands she spread her shadowy cloak before his eyes. But Huan was gripped by an iron fate: his doom was written, the time and agent of his death defined. Nothing else, not fire, nor blade, nor whispered spell, could affect him at all. He felt the charge of potent slumber woven into the subtle cloak, but alone perhaps of all the denizens of Middle-earth, it held no power to move him.

Lúthien, smitten by sudden doubts, let the cloak fall in hands that trembled. Hound and Fay regarded one another.

"I wish Beren were here," Lúthien said, trying to keep a quaver out of her voice. "He would speak to you, and ask you if you meant us harm." Her face and voice were gentle; her expression spoke of her distress. It came to Huan suddenly that she was beautiful, beyond any he had ever known; and a great desire came into his heart to serve this dark-haired slender girl, with her eyes full of starlight, dimmed now by tears. He yearned to speak to her, to beg her pardon, to assure her that he meant no harm. He strained to form the words with his dog's tongue and throat, failed miserably as always, and had to be content to bow his noble head and lick her hand. He crouched down before her. She knelt as well, venturing with timid hand to pet his great head; marvelling at the softness of the fur behind his ears.

The sound of the following riders came now to Lúthien's ear, although Huan had never lost it from his. The maid sprang up in panic and would have run for the woods, but Huan sprang up quicker and blocked her way. It bruised his heart to do it, but he served whom he served, and he would not break his faith. He knew his master would want to see this gentle creature, of his kind as she was; yet not quite so, either. He wished again that he could speak, to assure her there was no cause for concern.

Frustrated by the great hound in her desire to escape, Lúthien wrapped herself in her shadowy cloak and waited helplessly for the horsemen to show themselves. Her relief at finding the riders to be Eldar was intense.

He who seemed to be their chief, a strongly-built Elf of fair hair and countenance, pulled his horse up close by her and dismounted slowly, looking her over in astonishment the while.

"By the diamond sands of Tirion!" he said. "What wandering spirit art thou? Clad so in shades of evening. Beest thou dark Elf perhaps, or bodiless ghost? Speak, if thou canst!"

"May it please you, O Lord both bright and strong," she said. "No spirit am I, nor Dark Elf. I am Lúthien of Doriath." She drew the cloak away, exposing first her face within its river of dark hair, then her slender form. She was clad in a white dress sewn with stripes of cunning small gems that threw back the autumn sunlight now in strips of fire. A sky-blue mantle lay over her shoulders, embroidered with golden lilies.

Curufin now dismounted at his brother's side, and the pair of them stared at her in amazement. There could be no possibility of doubting her claim; there could be no other of such transcendent beauty. Curufin, who had up until now viewed the lust of his brother with the amusement of one untouched, found himself heavily affected. His tongue clove to his mouth from the power of her beauty.

"But, but what are you doing *here*?" asked Celegorm. But even before she spoke in reply, he guessed the strength of it. She must be seeking that gangrel lover of hers! He would bet his sword on it.

“I, I suppose I am among friends?” the maiden stammered.

Celegorm glanced at his brother to gauge that one’s thought, but found him still heavily smitten. Choosing his words with care, he said in reply to Lúthien, “We are lords in Nargothrond. We hunt these foul creatures of Gorthaur. See!” He gestured to the rolled-up wolf-skins. “Six we have taken, although at nearly the same cost. Had you ventured further, my lady, the chances of your ending down a wolf’s gullet were not small.”

Lúthien eyed the stained and shaggy bundles with fear and distaste, but she was reassured by the blond Elf’s words. “I seek one beloved of me, Beren by name,” she said. “Perhaps you have heard of him? Long and valiant was his lonely battle in the forests of the North. This summer gone we vowed our troth; but the King, my father, he... he was not of a mind to agree. He set the highest price upon my hand; oh, bitter high. Now Beren has run into danger for my sake. His life is in deadly peril; and since there are none to help him, I must needs go myself.”

These words burned like fire in Celegorm’s brain. “Unfortunate!” was all that he said though, assuming a bland tone. “Know you which way he went?” He observed her face closely, because where Beren was, there surely also was Felagund.

“People say he left our land southward,” she murmured. “I do not know what he intended. But lately... that is to say, at the end of summer – I, I was held long from action against my will – I learned that he was a captive of the... of him on the Isle of cursed Wolves. Whence doubtless these creatures here have come. Beren lives yet, of that I am certain; but his peril is very dire. I would hasten to his side – every moment may count.”

“A prisoner on the Isle, is it? Was there no-one to help him?” asked Celegorm carefully. He wanted to clarify how much she knew.

“I think he has companions, or had,” replied Lúthien, “some few; for I have felt their deaths, one by one. But I cannot think who they might be.”

This was the answer he had hoped to hear! It seemed she knew nothing of Beren’s visit to Nargothrond. Disguising his glee, he said with feigned earnest, “These are heavy tidings. We have heard much of this Man Beren. Aye, and all to his credit! I grieve that he languishes in Gorthaur’s dungeons. But... I pray thee, maiden, I would a moment consult with my brother. We must decide what best we should do.”

He grasped the shoulder of the dazed Curufin and jerked him around, and a few steps from Lúthien. “Pull thyself together, thou dotting loon,” he whispered savagely into his brother’s ear. “Gaping like a mooncalf. Put thy mind to the matter! Here we have the news we sought! Or close enough. What should we do, what should we say?”

Curufin shook his head, trying to focus. “We must take her back,” he said hoarsely. “Such beauty – I must have her!”

Celegorm let him go. There would be no wisdom from *that* spring this moon, so much was clear. But his brother was right for all that – the maiden must come with them to Nargothrond. She was the key to Doriath.

He turned again to address Lúthien. “Lady,” he said, with open mien and spread hands, “you see our troop here. We are a body of some strength; twenty sharp spears, and twenty strong arms to thrust them. Now your quest has smitten me to my heart, and I would most fain ride with you this instant to the aid of your beloved, this famous Beren. I am ready to do it, but for one thing: it would be impossible. We would only throw our lives away. So few spears as we have could never avail against the Warlock’s wizardry. Wolves we can hunt and kill, but against the might of Gorthaur’s magic – why, one might as well smite a titan with a feather. I beg thee, judge us not by the refusal. Courage must have measure, else it were not courage, but only the rashest lunacy. A hero wins in the face of peril; but where none can win, no hero will go.

“Now, where twenty armoured Noldor cannot win through, how much less could a single tender maid? Hear

therefore my counsel! We have taken your quest to our hearts, and we will not be idle in pursuing it. But our only course is for all of us to repair with thunderous speed back to Nargothrond. There we can quickly gather such force as will make even the Witch-lord flinch and sweat. What say you? Will you part from us here, running nigh certain into the fanged maw of some dreadful death, never to see the face of your consort again? Or do you cast your lot with us, will you allow us brief time to assemble a sizeable force, and so ride forth to his relief?"

Lúthien was uncertain. "I fear delay," she said.

"Three days!" said Celegorm. "Only three days, and we will be in the Vale with an army. On the fourth day, we begin the assault on the Tower. You could scarce come there quicker by foot."

Every reason spoke for yes. Lúthien did not understand her own reluctance. Was this not the exact answer to her hopeless desire? Half angry with herself, she looked in the face of the tall Noldo. "I accept," she said firmly, "and you will never know the depth of my gratitude."

Celegorm flushed slightly. "Speak first of thanks when the deed is done," he said. "But now mount! We have horses enough."

Lúthien had ridden, but not often, and she had never been atop such a high, powerful, mettled charger as this one before. With some help, she scrambled up. She felt a long way from the ground, and was afraid. However, she leaned forward on the great curving neck, and soon she and the horse understood one another. It was gentle with her henceforth, and did not buck beneath hand and heel as it had for its previous master. The party started off, riding at a good rate to the West.

Huan loped in the fore as was his wont. He had heard everything that passed between the maid and his master, and he was not easy in his mind. He could not square Celegorm's words with his own knowledge of the country and the circumstances. Almost as disturbing were the things Celegorm had not said. Why had there been no mention of Felagund? Huan had never interested himself too closely in the concerns of the Elves, living as he did now the life of a dog. Until now, he had let most of their talk and their contentions pass over his head. All this had changed when he had looked into Lúthien's eyes. She had touched him deeply, and altered him in his courses.

Lúthien found that the two leaders, the big fair one and the still-silent dark one, rode close on either side of her. "Might I know the names of my champions?" she asked them timidly.

"I am Celegorm, he is Curufin," spoke the fair-haired Elf. "We are sons of mighty Fëanor. These others are house-carls of our following."

A slight shiver passed through Lúthien at his words. 'Fëanor' had been a name of no good fame in Doriath.

As they rode, Celegorm questioned her further. He was curious to know how she had been 'held against her will', and how that had ended. Lúthien saw no reason to hide any part of her history, except that she was ashamed for her father, and wished to spare him ignominy. She told Celegorm of the tree-house therefore, but passed lightly over her painful entry into it. She spoke in a subdued voice, full of remembered anguish, of the long days of impotent waiting, and of the deaths she felt, one after the other. As to her escape...

"I do not know how to tell you of this," she said to the intently listening Elf. "We ride here in bright sunlight, and the smell of the country is in our nostrils, and we feel the movement and the labour of our mounts. All is real and solid. But there is more to the world than that. I do not have words for this thing. At uttermost need, I reached into myself – no! I cried into myself for aid; into my being, into my beginnings. I found there, in that inner life, more than I knew. Much more. Power I found; found, and used. I made a rope out of my hair; and this." Here she held up her misty-dark cloak, rolled into a slender bundle.

Her words made Celegorm uneasy. "What kind of power would that be, Lady?"

She looked at him out of the depths of her eyes, and the look made him shiver. "Darkness," she replied.

He did not question her further that day, but he directed many doubtful glances at the cloak.

They halted for that night in thickets on the near bank of the Narog, although Lúthien knew not its name, nor indeed anything else about the place. "Why do we stop?" she asked Celegorm.

"The horses need rest," he said shortly. "Never fear, we shall be there shortly on the morrow." In setting out the gear for camping, he took advantage of an opportunity to snatch up her cloak. "I will keep this," he said. "I can better keep it from dirt and harm among the other gear."

Quietly, and away from her presence, he gave Huan orders to keep the girl from wandering off.

A black presentiment kept Lúthien from sleep. It surely had not been wrong to join these ones. Had it? These strong lords would help her, as they promised. Wouldn't they?

The wolf-horror came again to her that night, as the dreadful death took another life close to her beloved. She could feel Beren's fury and anguish as if they had been her own. Why had she consented to wander off with these dubious knights? She might have been almost at her lover's side by now. All she could do was beat her fists on the ground in helpless despair.

Huan never slept, but he too was troubled by oppressive thoughts where he lay beside the fire they had kindled for their fair guest. He grew more and more certain that Celegorm had not been truthful in his words to Lúthien, and that some great wrong lay somewhere not far off in the future. He felt it like a shadow of darkness, and it tormented him. Toward Curufin, who was no master of his, his thought was more direct and fierce. He could smell the Elf's hot desire. Just let that lustful cur put a hand out of place...

Rain came in the night and put out the fire. The following day was grey, with frequent shawls of rain drifting down the wind. The party delayed starting until well after sun-up. They crossed the river, then shortly after, another; after which they turned south, following the water's course. There was a guard-post on the far bank of the second crossing, but Lúthien was puzzled to see that the guards remained inside their booth and carefully ignored the party. She was not to know that Celegorm had sent men ahead with threats to make sure of this.

The two brothers were riding ahead, out of earshot. They kept close to each other and appeared to hold deep congress. Now and then Lúthien could see Celegorm make some animated gesture. Huan, on the other hand, was today trotting along close beside her.

Lúthien could not understand why the pace was so slow. Yesterday they had trotted; today the horses were walking. She turned to a rider near her. "Can we not ride faster?" she said. "I rue every moment of delay; and we are heading now south I think? But my errand is north."

"Lady," replied the rider, "that is for the Captain to say."

Lúthien stared at him, then spurred her horse forward, intending to speak to Celegorm. The rider moved quickly to cut her off, and others came closer in support. She found her way blocked. "Let me through!" she stormed at them.

"Sorry lady," said another grinning rider. "Orders." He let his gaze linger on her figure as it bounced up and down on the horse, but turned it hastily away as he caught Huan's eye and growl from the far side.

The shape of her predicament was growing ever clearer to Lúthien. One thing she could not believe, that they were riding to Nargothrond. Felagund was King there, and Felagund was noble and true. He would never allow such things to happen in his domain.

Her eye lighted on the great hound beside her, to find that he in his turn was eyeing her mournfully. "O great

dog,” she said to him, “I do not believe you have a false heart. If only you could help me!” Huan hung his head and looked away.

\* \* \* \* \*

Celegorm had been in conclave with his brother since before dawn. He set a slow pace because he did not want to arrive at the city until they had thrashed out a plan.

“By the lights of heaven!” he swore. “These lies stick in my throat. It would like me better if we bound the maid, then we might unbind our tongues.”

“Do you lay but one finger on her,” menaced Curufin, “and it is my blade that will stick in your throat. I remind you that a good half of these men here are of my following, not yours.”

Celegorm was exasperated. “Forget the maid,” he said. “Can you not put her face out of your mind for one moment? I will give your lunacy time to cool before disputing with you over her. Although I do not know how you propose to address this question with your spouse. But fair or not, she is our key to Doriath. Once we have Doriath, we can bring the others to our side – with bloodshed, or without. But all that comes later. First we must make sure of our base.”

Eventually he made Curufin see sense, and they began to discuss plans. After some back and forth, Curufin said, “There is only one thing for it: we must declare the King dead the moment we set foot through the gate.”

“We do not know that for sure,” said Celegorm.

Curufin shrugged. “Assuming the maid spoke sooth, if he is not, then he soon will be, along with this insolent adventurer whose cause he so rashly espoused. Gorthaur will do our work for us. At worst we do but anticipate the fact.”

They continued to talk in low tones at the front of the party throughout the wet day. The riders had left the woods behind now; the path wound between rocky hills, and the river began to speak loudly over stones. A thousand rills of water trickled down bouldered cliffs and bubbled across the path.

At long intervals they passed Elves, singly or in groups, coming from the other direction. These eyed the brothers with seeming respect. Their eyes widened as they took in Lúthien’s soaked figure, but none of these emissaries seemed disposed to ask questions. They hurried rather past with few words exchanged.

The party arrived at the mighty gates in the gloom of evening. The main body was bidden to wait with Lúthien while the brothers went inside, taking only a few trusty men of their house to accompany them.

The riders sat on, cold and wet. The dispirited horses were holding their heads low. Rain ran down their necks and dripped off their noses.

The watchmen outside the gate behaved almost as though they were holding stiffly to their postures of guard because that saved them from having to think what to do. White flicked in their eyes now and then as they glanced sideways at the wolf-hunters.

At last the stable gate was opened and they were waved inside. As Lúthien rode through, she addressed one of the men holding the gate wide: “Pray, Sir, can you tell me what place this is?”

“Nargothrond,” replied that one, surprised.

Then it *was* Nargothrond! But was it truly? Caught in a swirl of evasions and half-truths, Lúthien was sure of nothing any more. She turned back from within and called back to the man. “Can you tell the King what passes? I pray thee, tell the King!”



“Silence!” growled one of her captors, and they hurried her into the stables, so that she could not see what effect her words had had. One of Celegorm’s men was waiting for them there. “The maid is to be taken straight to her rooms,” the house-carl told the others. “Five of you make escort. I will show you the way.” He made to grasp Lúthien’s arm, but Huan, standing close by, gave forth such a terrific growl that he fell back. “Curse the hound!” the man said. He turned with stern face back to Lúthien. “Lady, this must be. I have orders from my master. Come now. I will not lay hand on you; but you must come.”

Lúthien stood straight and her eye flashed. “I will not,” she said. “I do not know what coil you work here, but it is nothing good. Your master lied to me, so much is clear, and now he would hold me against my will. I demand to be taken before the King! I will not move an inch unless for that.”

The man swore at her, but he dared not trespass against Huan’s eye or bared teeth. “Wait, then!” he spat, and hurried out.

Lúthien railed against the others standing there, and her tongue was not backward in telling them what she thought of their supposed honour and manhood; but although they flushed, none moved or answered.

Some ten minutes later Celegorm burst in, red in the face. “This is most inopportune,” he fumed. “Think you I have nothing better to do than to see to your discipline?”

Lúthien’s fury had waxed during the interval. “You are a liar,” she said to him. “Now you would prove yourself an abductor and despoiler of maidenhood. Is this what you learned at the knees of your vaunted sire?”

Celegorm’s eye flashed with half-stifled resentment. “Hold your tongue!” he said. “Or I shall have you gagged.” The big man turned to Huan and gave his anger full rein. “Is this thy faith, cur?” he shouted. “Dost thou thwart me? Never yet has thy hide felt whip, but that can alter. Get down! And let us hear no more of thy curséd impudence.” Chastened, the great hound bowed his head and slunk to one side.

Unhampered now, Celegorm seized Lúthien by her arm and pulled her along by force. Having little option to do otherwise, she suffered herself to be led in this way. They passed quickly through minor passages. As they went, Lúthien became aware of a roar in the background, as of many raised voices. The city was in tumult.

The rooms into which she was ushered were pleasant enough, designed for a woman, but they had a look about them as though their former tenant had been made to vacate them in a hurry. There was no door to close off the entrance, only a curtain, but two guards stationed outside the doorway were as effective a confinement as any oak or steel.

She turned to Celegorm after he released her and was moving to depart. “Lord, I beg thee!” she said to him. “Have pity on my plight. May I not see the King? Or any friendly face?”

“That may not be,” he replied to her, lips compressed. “I cannot stay. You will be looked after.” With that he ducked out the curtain and away.

No-one came to her, except servitors with food and drink, for a night and a day, and then another night. Lúthien explored the apartments thoroughly. She found loom and wheel among the furnishings, and the thought came to her to repeat her previous feat; but no-one can work the same magic twice. She sought inside herself, but the well was dry.

On the second day there came a call from the doorway: a voice gentle and musical. Lúthien hurried to the entrance and found standing there a fair-haired woman with most beautiful grey eyes. A look of sadness lay over her face.

“I am Finduilas,” the woman said, “daughter of Orodreth, the brother of King Felagund. I am come to discover what I can do to serve you.”

“Oh, welcome!” cried Lúthien. “Come within! Pray, sit with me! Tell me first, if you will, whether the King will see me, and how soon. It cannot be too soon. I have a most urgent errand in the North, but these brigands of whom you doubtless know have waylaid me, and I know not what is happening, nor what I can do. But I know the King would not countenance the misdeeds of these bravos, I *know* it. I beg thee, of thy mercy, carry the news of my distress to him as quickly as you may!”

The sadness deepened on Finduilas’s face. “Alas!” she cried. “Have those faithless ones not told you? The King left us weeks ago. He rode north with Beren your beloved. My father held the throne in stewardship for him, but now these brothers have come back with a tale that Felagund is dead. They claim the kingship as the elder house of the Noldor. The people have turned from my father, they will not listen to his protests.”

The hope drained out of Lúthien almost visibly and she sagged where she sat. “Then I am lost,” she murmured, “and so is my beloved. And who knows? Perhaps the King as well. Beren lives yet, that I know; and he had companions, some seven of whom have met their deaths. I felt them go.”

The fair woman stared at her. “With Felagund and Beren went ten companions,” she breathed. “Therefore four lives might remain, and Beren’s. It might be so. It might be so!”

“Yet here we sit, powerless,” said Lúthien sadly.

Finduilas wrung her hands. “I would help you if I could,” she said. “Oh, I would. What can I do? I will do anything within my power.”

The maid of Doriath looked up. “Can you get me my cloak?” she said. “The usurper stole it. Had I that, I think I might escape.” She explained further to the fair-haired beauty the powers of the cloak.

“I will try,” said Finduilas at last, “but I doubt I can succeed. If Celegorm took it, he doubtless suspects its powers, and has it locked away. I will also think, to see if I can discover another way to free you. I will ask Father, he is very learned. But now, is there anything you need? Anything I can bring to you?”

“Clothes,” replied Lúthien. “They have given me none. I have only what I stand in, and that has seen much weather since last I put it on.”

“Oh, the low curs!” exclaimed the other. “I had suspected as much, but to hear it confirmed...! Stand beside me, Sister, that I might better judge thy height and girth.”

When this was settled, Finduilas left her, with a promise to return. That she did; and as the days stretched into weeks, and the weeks dragged past one by one, until gales in the outer world had blown off all the leaves, her visits were the one thing that kept Lúthien from despair.

All attempts to retrieve the cloak failed; nobody could come up with another plan. Again and again the wave of horror returned to Lúthien, as she felt the teeth of death come ever closer to the one she loved, until she thought she would go mad from the strain of waiting for the worst-feared event.

The spouse of Orodreth, Gilrodel, now more sad-eyed than ever, came also from time to time; and once Orodreth himself, sunken now and shamed. But their daughter it was who was Lúthien’s most constant and treasured companion.

Once she had a visit from Celegorm. She stood tall to meet him, eyes flashing. “You dare to show your face in here?” she flamed. “Liar. Abductor. Usurper. Hunter of wolves, are you? You are little better than a wolf yourself. Take your thief’s face out of my chambers! I do not need to bandy words with you.”

Celegorm flushed. “You shall not bait me,” he said. “I make no apology. Policy excuses deeds which private life would condemn.”

“What need this interview then?” she said. “Your presence pains me. Pray do not prolong it.”

“It is but shortly done,” he said tightly. “You and I must marry. It is policy, as I said. Messengers have been sent to your father.”

Lúthien’s mouth fell open on hearing this. She laughed at the finish: a long, high laugh.

“Truly is it said that there is ever more filth in a mire-pond, dredge how one will,” she said, and the lash in her voice made him wince. “I had judged thee too highly, son of Fëanor. Truly! Yes, I had! But strive on. There is infamy yet that thou hast not tasted; yea, a whole swamp full.”

Celegorm ground his teeth. “Maid,” he said, “you have judged me false, or not at all. I have only one goal before my eyes: the Jewels of my father, of which he was robbed. All else must stand aside from that.”

“Get out,” she spat. “Thou emissary of darkness. Thou hast ransomed thine honour for a gaud. Do as thou listeth, it matters naught to me. Get out!”

Besides Finduilas, Lúthien’s most constant source of comfort was the great Hound of Valinor. She would lay her head on his warm shoulders and weep; the hound would whine his helpless distress, and lick the salt tears from her face. He stayed before her door as a constant guard. Twice he had, with bared fang and savage eye, warded off Curufin, creeping in the night; but the maid was spared the shame and horror of this knowledge.

There came a night when the eleventh wave of death rolled over Lúthien, almost oversetting her reason. All the companions, which must also include the King, were lost; no lives now stood between Beren and the wolf’s dread maw.

She rose and sat cold in the darkness. It was almost over; the knowledge lay in her heart like ice.

She heard the click of claws and felt the warm breath of her friend. She embraced him in the dark and cried, “Oh Huan, why did I let go of my cloak!”

Huan stood there a moment, but he pulled away from her, and was suddenly gone. She wept then, feeling that her last friend had deserted her. She went and cast herself on her lonely couch.

She started up; was that a noise? She could not tell if it had been moments since Huan had left, or hours. She thought that morning was not far off. With elven sight she searched the dark. A shadow she made out, advancing along the wall, and her pulse began to beat; but she relaxed as she heard again the familiar click.

“Oh, Huan!” she whispered. “You gave me a fright. I am glad you have come back to me. Come, my friend, there is room for you too. See! I move over.”

But Huan did not spring up. She heard something soft fall beside the couch. The great hound crouched down; just the vaguest outline of his head could be seen against the dark. Then, deep as a bell, came his voice. Huan spake, who never could before in this form, and only twice again before his death.

“Lady most beloved,” spoke the hound, “the world has moved this night, and loosened my tongue. Hear my words, while I yet have power to make them!

“Lúthien, O flower of Doriath, I have loved thee from the moment I saw thee; as should all true creatures, Men, and Elves. Thy pain is my pain, thy quest is mine.

“I have brought thee thy cloak. Great indeed is its power: the two guards without lie already fast in sleep. With this key thou canst unlock the gates of Nargothrond and run free. But I will do more: I will come with thee, and face all the evil of Gorthaur at thy side. Thou shalt ride upon my back for greater speed. But I pray thee, make haste! For I feel speech slipping from me again.”

Lúthien cast her arms tight about his neck, and wept anew; tears now of love and gladness, such that she feared her heart might fail from very hope and joy. “O my friend,” she wept, “O my friend! Thy love is returned, in brimming measure. Companions until death are we.”

Not long would Huan allow for this sweetness; he stood up, and nudged her to take up the cloak and come with him. Together the two made their way out of the city. Nobody minded the hound, who went in the public ways where he would; but Lúthien, coming like a shadow behind, wrapped in her cloak, sent all whom they encountered drowsing into slumber – a fair sleep full of dreams of spring, and warm days, and meadow flowers, and the laughter of love and children.

Out of the last gate they came, to find the world greying towards dawn. Huan crouched that Lúthien might sit astride his back; then he was away, flying north like the wind.

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He whom the captives had dubbed Sauron brooded in gloom. None of them had broken, and now he had only the Man and the leader left. His scouts to the South had turned up nothing; all the lands seemed quiet.

He tallied the possible powers ranged against him. Fingon's strength was known. Turgon was hidden, and no clue of him had come to light. Finrod was unreachable in his southern citadel. Thingol lurked behind his fences. Maedhros, Maglor, Celegorm, Caranthir, Curufin, Amrod and Amras: all were known of, more or less. Men? Some still pranced in Fingon's train, and they could swing a sword, if little else. Their measure was nevertheless known. The pine-country farmers were slaughtered or scattered, those further south were rustics from whom there was little to fear. New men still streamed in from the East, but they were not so afflicted by fantasies as the first-comers, and could usually be brought to see sense.

Of further power he knew none. Why stirred yet within his thought these cloudy fears unnamed?

The Man in the company was special. Sauron had never met so strong a mind in one not of the Eldar. Why did the company include a man? What was his role? Sauron had speculated long, but he had not enough straw to make any bricks.

Sauron had kept the mortal almost until last, although he was not sure in his own mind why. Instinct told him perhaps that this unmatched piece was the key to this whole affair.

Well, now he was out of other options. Sauron sighed. The man's time had come. He gave the order.

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Finrod and Beren were unbroken, although their bodies were in a sad state – starved and covered in ulcers. They had come out the other side of grief; no tears they wept as each wolf-death came, but cheered rather at the fight the victims made, and jeered defiance at the monster. They shouted for Sauron himself to come and do his own dirty work.

After the last of their companions had trodden that gruesome path – stout Ormaid, who kicked the slaving creature back, then clawed its eyes as it chewed at his bowels – Finrod said to Beren, “Well my brother, the next time will break our bond. I care not greatly which of us will go – it will be as lonely without you here as in the halls of Mandos. I grieve only that we shall not soon see one another again. For the Dead among Men, as you know, pass into realms of which we Eldar know nothing.”

“Lord,” replied Beren, “I would say the same... but lately I have asked myself, why not tell all? Where is the good? Perhaps if I tell Mairon – Sauron, I should call him – of my quest, he might at least allow you to go free. As for your oath: I release you from what little can remain of it, for you have done more in my service than ever was earned in yours.”

Finrod laughed, and in his fair laughter was still to be heard a memory of Light undying. “My friend, my brother in all but blood,” he said, “I might suppose you had learned little in your years of fighting this devil-lord! Little of his true nature at least. No: be under no illusion. Any promises made by these treacherous and evil folk are as frail as breath. Neither of us can escape this yoke of pain by any route short of death, no matter what we tell or do not tell. Indeed, I think it likely that we should suffer deeper torment, should he

learn our names and quest. Nay, put the thought from your mind! It is a chimera. Come, we have not sung for some days. Let us make a song of summer in Dorthonion, when the far mountains stand blue and snowy white above the sombre trees, and the sweet pine-scent flavours the air.”

The slow time passed. But at last the moment came that each had dreaded, when he should either die or be left alone in the dark. The pale eyes of the werewolf appeared in the gloom. Beren strained with all the strength that remained in his body to break the chain. Would that he not die helpless in bonds, or helpless witness Finrod’s death! The sweat stood out on his brow, his sinews cracked, the chain creaked; but he could not break it.

Whom would it be? The eyes moved, came closer. Directly toward Beren. The man took mighty breaths, nerved himself to fight with feet, and one fist, and teeth and fury. But as the foul monster approached him, Finrod to the side gave forth a great, straining cry that echoed through all the hollows of that dungeon. Beren heard the shrieking of tortured metal; then there came a flash of blue light as the King’s bonds parted. Before the wolf had time to more than turn its amazed head, Finrod was upon it. Beren could only follow the fight thereafter from the terrible noise – the huge, horrible worry-worry of blow and growl and yelling snarl; the tearing of teeth and the smashing of mighty blows. Beren added his own yells to the *melée*, yanking at his chains, frantic that he could not strike a single blow.

The snarls cut off, were replaced by a gurgling sound, and the thrashing of great claws upon the ground. Finrod was choking the monster with his chain. Slowly the scrabbling weakened; at long last it ceased. Silence fell.

“My lord?” called Beren into the stillness.

He jumped as he felt a hand upon his foot. He bent quickly, felt along Finrod’s arms until he came to his head. Sticky blood was everywhere.

“Lord!” he said in a broken voice. “I rejoice that you live. Come, my brother, creep closer to me, that I might care for you. You are cold, let me warm you. Let me tear some rags to bind your wounds.”

“Alas!” whispered Finrod. “No use. My strength is spent. I have burst my heart. Already my limbs cool. I must go to my long rest in the halls across the Sea. I bid thee farewell, son of Man.” He fumbled until he found Beren’s hand with his. “Take back now thy ring.” The stricken Elf’s hand opened, and there was the cold band. Beren took it and held it tight in his own hand.

“Lord!” he cried. “Do not leave me alone in this dark place. I beg thee!” But Finrod did not speak again. He died then, that great prince of Noldorin race, in the tower he had built himself. Thus did King Finrod Felagund, fairest and noblest of the house of Finwë, redeem his oath.

Beren sat there long in the dark and the silence, the dead King’s head cradled in his lap, his mind faring to far reaches of space and time. Many visions he had in those empty hours, stretching to days; and at last one most fair, of Light upon the sea, and of a wide green land, and a shining city upon a hill. This faded and vanished away, he knew not where. But he seemed to see then the stars above him through tender branches, and to sniff the thousand scents of evening. There were nightingales in the trees, and the soft music of flutes and viols sublime. Joy was upon him then, for he heard the voice again of her he loved, and saw before his eyes her lissom form, gleaming under the moon, as she had danced for him long ago. “Tinúviel!” he cried. “Tinúviel!”

He shook his head. What dream was this? He was still in the pit, but he thought... no, surely. Was that her voice, or had his reason bent at last beneath the strain?

He raised up then his own strong voice in song. As the Lay of Leithian has it,

...it seemed he sang,  
and loud and fierce his chanting rang;

old songs of battle in the North,  
of breathless deeds, of marching forth  
to dare uncounted odds and break  
great foes, and towers, and strong walls shake;  
and over all the silver fire  
that Men once named the Burning Briar.  
The Seven Stars that Varda set  
about the North, are burning yet,  
a light in darkness, hope in woe,  
the emblem vast of Morgoth's foe.

All strength left him then and he slipped into darkness.

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Huan had run north before the wind. He was tireless, and his pace was very great. Over Ginglith he splashed, then Narog. No-one saw them go; hound and maid passed like a shadow behind the eyes. All that day the plain poured down before them, and the mountains grew visibly closer. Nightfall found them shortly before Teiglin, where Huan ran through the ford in the blue dusk. On the skirts of Brethil they encountered travellers upon the road, and began to pass the lights of settlements; but the pair slipped through the gaps in awareness, in the times of blink, of turned head. Not even one forewarned of their approach, staring hard down a lamplit road, could easily have seen them.

A short hour of rest they took in the kindly depths of that forest, then on they went. The Lithir they crossed in the moonless dark, and shortly thereafter they heard the quick rush of the youthful Sirion. They were come to the Vale. In the first grey light of dawn, Huan slowed to a walk. The dark walls towered up before them; they had arrived.

Lúthien did not know what to do, and Huan stood also in doubt. With her still on his back, he paced warily forward. He wrinkled his nose at the foul stink of the stones.

They reached the bridge and found the archway barred by a tall iron grill. In the growing light two Orcs could be seen through it, collapsed and snoring on the ground, conquered by a wave of Lúthien's cloak.

Now what do I do? thought Lúthien. She slipped silently from the hound's back to the ground. Huan was sniffing the air and listening intently. All that Lúthien could hear was the churning of the restless waters. No lights showed anywhere on the dark mass of tower, slowly now taking form in the dawn light.

Well, Lúthien thought to herself, I said that singers had now to face steel. There is nothing else I can do; so I shall sing.

She raised her pure voice then and sang a song of a beauty so great that even the water seemed to hush. She rejected the harsh iron and the evil pile of stones. She would sing of love, and innocence, and joy, and of the morning of the world. Her song rose, and never was fairer sound heard in that dark place. The wolves heard it, and rustled uneasily in their cages. The few Orcs in the garrison heard it, and many of them became lost in it, and dreamed strange and wonderful dreams, so that when the song ended, they looked about themselves in greater dismay, as if noticing for the first time how dismal were the circumstances of their bare and pitiless existence. The prisoners heard it, raising their heads at the sudden vision of hope. Last of all, deepest of all the miserable captives, Beren heard the song in his exhausted dream.

Lúthien finished her song with regret. What were they to do? Had the suffering and the miles been for nothing? Did Beren yet live? She was no longer sure.

Huan had been lost in the song, and now as it was done, his eyes unclouded, and he saw again their surroundings. They were both back again in the cruel world, and he bowed his head before the stark reality of bars and walls against which even he was powerless. But suddenly he raised his head with a jerk; his ears

shot forward. He nudged the woman.

She strained to hear what it was that he heard. What was that? Oh stars above... no, could it be? As Beren's song of defiance waxed stronger, it came clearer to her ears, and the joy rushed into her throat so strongly that she felt she might choke of it. She breathed deeper and dashed the tears from her eyes. She knew herself again.

The brave song faltered and died; but Lúthien knew now what to do. She sang again, and now there was power in her song. In it was a challenge, and a summoning. The song gathered force; the Isle trembled, the wolves howled in their dens. Her song rose through the air and came through windows to Sauron's ears. He sat up, electrified. This song he had heard in his dreams. He knew the singer, knew that the daughter of Melian stood before his gate. The fame of the beauty of Lúthien and the wonder of her song had long gone forth from Doriath.

Her song brought no fear to his breast; rather he smiled. The thought came into his mind to capture this fay, and hand her to Morgoth, for surely great reward.

He called his wolves to him. "Fetch her in," he commanded.

On the bridge, a postern gate slid back with a clang. Lúthien faltered in her song, then fell into a horrified silence, for what came upon them now was a monster, such as she had never believed could exist. Like to a wolf it was, but tall and fell, and in its eyes flickered an evil intelligence. Grinning at her, with lolling blood-red tongue, the thing approached, step by dreadful step. Lúthien looked wildly around. Where was Huan? She could not believe he had deserted her – *could* not.

She thought of the cloak; but before she could deploy it, a flashing shape came from the side. What happened then was too quick to see – a wrench, a toss, and the blood-trailing body of the wolf was sailing over the stone wall into the stream. Huan stood before her with blood smeared over his great jaws. He eyed her meaningfully, then crept back to the shadow in which he had been lurking.

The wolves waiting in the court were in doubt. What had just occurred? There had been little noise but a splash; but they smelled blood.

The leader growled. "Three of you go," he commanded.

The three commanded glanced at him in doubt, but squeezed obediently one after the other through the gate. Sounds from without hinted at their rapid distress; then there was nothing more.

"There is some devilry at work here," growled the captain. "You there! Fetch reinforcements. Twenty should make sure. We gather at the gate. When all is ready, we all run out at once."

"But those scum of two-legs are asleep," protested one of the wolves. "We have none here with hands. How shall we raise the gate?"

The leader cursed and raved, but he could not think of a quick solution. "I will go through myself," he said.

He ran to the narrow postern and through. He looked quickly around, but the only thing on the bridge was the pale figure of the two-legs he had seen from the start. "You!" he began. "Come –" but he was not to finish that sentence. Something slammed into him from the side. He felt mighty jaws crush his whole throat, before ripping away again, taking throat and life with them. His last thought as he sailed over the wall was "What...?" He never finished that sentence either.

Sauron was growing restive. *Where is that captive?* he demanded in thought of the wolves.

*We die, they whimper. Something that we don't understand is killing us.*

*Get out there, you cowards!* His thought fell on their minds like a hot whip. They yelped in unison, and one

by one slunk miserably out the gate to their deaths.

Sauron felt their numbers diminish. He paced to and fro in agitation. What was out there?

He called Draugluin to his presence. We have met Draugluin before; and he had not decreased in might from that time. Old in evil he was, and strong, lord and sire of all the werewolves of the Isle.

“Some powerful foe lurks on the bridge,” Sauron said, “but I have never known foe who could best you. Have you fear?”

“I fear nothing,” growled the monstrous blue-pelted wolf. “Only...”

“Speak!” commanded his master.

“The Dog,” replied Draugluin in a low voice.

“He is far in the South,” snapped Sauron. “He is not here. He cannot be here. Now go and take me these prisoners!”

Draugluin made his way to the gate. Shoving aside the cringing lesser wolves, he put his head out of the entrance and looked around warily; sniffed. Blood drenched the place, and the stench of it was strong in his nostrils. He could smell the Elf girl cringing there; but otherwise nothing. He squeezed his bulk through the narrow portal.

Blind instinct flashed through him like an electric shock. He whipped his head around and met the charging Huan jaw to jaw. The teeth of hound and wolf rang together like savage bells.

The fight of Huan and Draugluin was a terror and a wonder to behold. Lúthien, appalled at the twisting bodies and the flashing teeth, fell back in shock. She retreated as far as she could. She would not watch; she turned her head away. But nothing would shut out the frightful sounds.

Huan had the mastery. No wound could Draugluin make on him; the hound was too quick. But Huan’s teeth slashed the mighty wolf again and again. Draugluin’s rage cooled inexorably towards a cold despair. There was blood streaming into his eyes and nose, he could not see, could hardly draw breath. He struck out now blindly, but with no better fortune; he was steadily losing blood, and with it, strength.

The terrible jaws closed about his shoulder, crunched together. Draugluin retreated on three legs, the pain shocking. He flicked the blood from his vision as best he could, but more welled down straight away. Clear enough to him, however, was the cold light of death that gleamed in his adversary’s eyes.

Once more the foes came together, and the clash of it was like thunder in the mountains. When they fell apart again, Draugluin was torn to the death. Red, red blood sprayed from his throat in jets. He turned and ran, Huan tearing the flesh off one ham as the maimed monster wrestled his bulk back through the wicket. Draugluin limped with difficulty up through one floor, then another, but the darkness was before his eyes and he could stand no longer. He crawled from thence, leaving a trail of bright blood. Reaching the smell of his master’s foot at last, he gasped, “Huan is there!” and so died.

Huan. The thorn in all their sides. He who kept the sullen Firelords from faring forth, he who daunted the fire-drake. Invincible... yet Sauron knew the tale as well as any. Somewhere in Huan’s future marched his bane: the world’s greatest wolf.

The Maia had sought long by his art, just for this purpose, searching through all the worlds and visions for this creature, the fierce acme of his kind; but no glimpse of it had he ever seen.

A new thought came to him. His visions had never found their target... but could that be... because it was himself he sought?



And why not? He was far greater in might than Draugluin. By the power that was in him, Mairon could take upon himself the form of a wolf. He could become a wolf such as the world had never seen. The conviction gathered in him that this was indeed his destiny. Why, it all fitted! It was well known that no witch could see their own self through their art. This must be the explanation for the absence, the failure of sight. To be the greatest wolf, Huan's nemesis, must be reserved to Mairon himself.

The thought never entered his head that the greatest wolf might be hidden from his vision by the greater power of Melkor, his master.

On the bridge, the flow of wolves had ceased, but Huan had not relaxed a single sinew. He stood tense and ready, snuffing the air for clues. Lúthien stood silent where she had retreated against the far breastwork. She was watching the hound. She did not know what would come next, but a heavy conviction lay on her heart that they had not yet seen the end of the monsters of Gaurhoth.

All of the creatures so far had come out through the postern, since the main gate was shut and its warders comatose; thus neither woman nor dog had given the main gate much notice. The shock was therefore the greater when the iron grating burst asunder with a flash of light and a great ringing clang. Viciously sharp fragments cartwheeled onto the bridge in all directions, missing both defenders by inches.

A great darkness rose up and swallowed the sky. The remaining wolves in the Tower howled as though the end of the world had come.

In the blackness beneath the arch two flaming eyes appeared. What stepped then through the arch tore a cry from Lúthien's throat; even Huan was daunted and shrunk backward a step with averted head. It was a wolf as great again than Draugluin as that prince of wolves had been greater than the first and boldest of his tribe; and as they in their turn were greater than the common wolves of holt and field. The huge creature's pelt was black as pain, and the malice in its eyes whipped at the soul.

This wolf of horror took one stride through the shattered gate, then another. Huan stared up at it, snarling full, crouched down, ears back flat, but his eyes were showing white at the sides. The jaws of the thing alone were bigger than his head. The eyes tore at his courage, while they also held him fixed. He could not move.

Another step the monster took; and another. The splat of its slaver came now close before Huan's snout. Voices were yelling in Huan's mind, but a mist of despair was before his eyes.

Lúthien had stood frozen after that first horrified sight, but horror seized her now, as it seemed that the huge creature would in a moment pounce on her friend and rend his brave flesh to death. She could not watch it. She raised her hand, holding the dark cloak by its edge, and swept it through the air to cover her face.

The cloak's dark wave of sleep washed past Huan, who shed it like a seagull sheds salt water; but the wave took Sauron, in wolf form as he was, full into its soft embrace. All his stratagems and schemes slipped away from the Sorcerer into the comforting dark. He staggered, and his eyes drooped half-closed. The fires were damped, the malice forgotten. The dark cleared from the air.

In that narrow second, as the great black wolf staggered, stunned, Huan saw his chance. Before the monster could recover, the hound leaped in and seized it square on the throat with all the fearsome power in his mighty jaws.

Sauron's air was cut off; his throat was crushed as if in some monstrous vice of massy iron. Frantically he bucked and thrashed, but the thing that had hold of him, though smaller than he was, had a strength in it of pythons. Huan was thrown from side to side, his flanks bruised against the stones, but he hung on, and griped and griped. Ever tighter closed his jaws, as the great muscles either side of his head bunched and stood out like ropes of steel. His great teeth sought deeper into the throat of the frenzied monster. Already he felt the pulsing of the great veins. He was close to the quick, and came with each great corded gripe a little closer.

Sauron had never felt such pain and fear. It went far beyond the shock he had felt when that renegade Man

had cut his hand. He was in agony; the house of his flesh was dying. His legs wobbled, his thrashings grew weaker.

Huan braced all four feet on the ground and twisted with all his strength. Slowly he brought the scrabbling black wolf further from its balance, turning it further, until the balance inexorably tipped, and it crashed onto its side. Losing no whit of his grip, Huan flung his body to one side, clear of the fall. He now bestrode the demon-fetch, still struggling as it was; his jaws still clenching on its throat.

In the gathering fog of his desperation, Sauron called on his art. He took shapes in a kaleidoscope of colours and forms: from serpent to lion to unnamed creatures of the deep sea; but he could not shake Huan from his throat. Last of all he lapsed into his truest, innermost form, terrible to behold – but nothing could deflect the power of Huan’s grip. The Warlock’s life began to wane; his struggles grew weaker, darkness grew in his sight, hellish lights floated before his inner eyes.

Lúthien had been watching in fascinated horror. Of a sudden she collected herself, shook free of the fugue. Was this what they wanted? No! This was not her purpose. All she desired was the life of her beloved; wreaking death upon others was not her task. Singers were not warriors, say what one might.

She collected herself, strode forward. “Huan, do not kill him!” she commanded. The hound looked at her from the side of his eye and eased his awful clenching grip the barest trifle. She bent beside the raw ear of the thing that lay shuddering, stricken almost to the death. As she knelt there, few would have recognized in her grim visage the gentle maiden of flowers and sunlight.

“Do you hear me, Demon?” she spoke into the ear of ugliness, and steel was in her eyes and voice. “I know that you do. See! We hold your miserable life in our hands. You shall die here, black-heart, if you heed me not. Your spirit will flee back quaking to your master, condemned to endure his scorn and fury, and why? Because you, Lieutenant of Angband, were brought to nothing by a maid and a dog. This shall you suffer, unless for one thing: that you yield to me the mastery of the Tower. Tell me the word that looses the binding of stone to stone! If you will not, then your body will perish here in the filth, and pain and mockery shall be your eternal lot.” Huan squeezed again at the end of her words, the remorseless jaws now very close to the vein. Sauron, thrashing in his death-spasm, felt the world drift away from him. “The word!” Lúthien insisted. Darkness before his eyes, he willed to give her the word, but had no breath with which to do it. Instead he sent it, in his last despair, onto the surface of her mind, as he fumbling felt it there before him.

Lúthien saw the word burn in tall letters of fire before her inner vision. She stood up and extended her hand. All the old power surged back into her – power of the gentle things and the quiet, power of youth and growth; the great power of the singer to move hearts and to shape worlds.

Holding the pile of stone as if in the cup of her hand, she spoke the Word with all the force of her singer’s voice. The world shook to the sound. The Word of Loosing echoed in all the courts and balustrades, then fainter back from the dark slopes behind.

The spoken sound died away to silence. But then into the silence came a whisper; a whisper as of falling sand. The whisper grew to a hiss, and the hiss to a rattle and a pouring, and the pouring at last to a great roar; a roar that mounted into a thunderous crescendo. The binding spell, the cancer that had killed the bright stones of Felagund, was falling apart, leaving nothing but a dirty mass of crumbling stone. The high tower melted and collapsed with the greatest roar of all, drowning the shrieks of crushed and dying wolves and Orcs.

Lúthien stood back. “Let him go,” she said to Huan. “There is nothing more to fear from him; and *I* keep my faith, whether he would or no.”

Huan relaxed his grip, extracted his teeth from the deep wounds he had made in the creature’s scaly neck, and shook his head to settle his jaw into place. The bloody thing on the ground took a shuddering gasp of air, burning like fire in the damaged throat. Then it was transforming again. A blurred moment of change left a great vampire spread on the earth, which gathered its leathern wings before leaping into the air with a cry

that echoed from the cliffs. The monster flapped away from the pair on the bridge, a filthy blackness besmirching the clean sky. Dripping blood all the while, the thing shrieked in an eldritch voice as it fled. Smaller tatters of darkness rose to join it, as the evil denizens of the tower fled with their lord. The last Huan and Lúthien saw of the bats, they were flying in the direction of the dark forest known as Nightshade: the years-dead former Dorthonion.

Lúthien stared aghast at the pile of ruined stone that was all that remained of the great fortress and tower. Had they gone too far? Was Beren buried beneath crushing stones, or choking under a yard-deep layer of dust?

The bridge and arch had fallen with the rest, and Sirion now washed past great shards and boulders in the bed where the bridge had been. It was no easy task to cross over them, even with Huan's strong neck to cling to for balance. Hard it was too to take care with footing when anxiety for Beren urged her on. Her heart was in her mouth all the while with fear for him.

She need not have worried. The prisons were carved from the rock of the Isle, which had not been bound by Sauron. In these pits and hollows, only the chains and bars had fallen to bitter dust; the walls and roofs held. As Lúthien clambered up the piles of rubble which lipped into the rushing waters, former captives were already making their dazed way out of holes half-choked with gravel. Some could walk, others only crawl, but they all gazed on the light of heaven and breathed the free air with faces that showed their radiant joy. Many wept; others fell to their knees and gave thanks.

Lúthien wandered anxious from face to face, but she did not find the one she sought. In the end she had to venture under the earth. Huan came with her, to lend her the aid of his nose.

Lúthien at first despaired of finding anything in the sightless dark, but she recalled to her mind all the summers she had lived, and the joy she had had in their light; calling that memory to her command, she raised her hand to her brow and made a light thereon.

Long they sought in vain, Lúthien calling Beren's name again and again. Death in many ugly forms they stumbled upon, and other scarecrow figures whose bodies lived on but who were gone in their wits. At last, in the darkness of the nethermost row of pits, she came upon the face she longed most to see in all the world. It was Beren, sitting heedless, with Felagund's cold and mangled head lying in a blackened mess of blood on his lap. The man's eyes stared blankly before him and he did not look up at the sound of her step.

Lúthien knelt trembling at his side, her heart wrung with pity and fear. Oh, let her not be too late!

"Beren," she said softly. "It is I, Lúthien. Thy Tinúviel. I have come."

He stirred slowly. He turned his hollow face to eye her dully, his senses slowly gathering. "It is surely another dream," he croaked.

Lúthien could hardly see for tears. "It is no dream," she said, her voice breaking. "My love, I am really here. I have come to bear thee away." She touched him softly on his arm.

Beren stared at her hand, then again at her face, and at the golden light over her brow. "Is this death?" he whispered. "Perhaps... perhaps it *is* you, and no dream. But have we died?"

"No," she replied gently. "We live. Oh, I thank the good Powers, we both live. Now, my beloved, canst thou stand? I have here a true friend who will bear thee on his back. But it would make all easier, couldst thou but stand."

Beren looked at her, confused, then down at the dead face of the King. "I cannot leave Finrod," he said.

"My love," she said, her voice softened by grief and pity, "he is dead. Soon we will bear his body forth in honour. But my first care is for the living."

Beren looked again at the poor torn figure of the King as it lay revealed to him in the light. His senses seemed to rally, and his voice grew firmer. "Yes," he said sadly, "he is dead. I had forgotten." He looked up into her beautiful face, wet now with tears. "Oh Tinúviel, is it truly you?" He wept then too in the warmth and fragrance of her embrace, so desperately familiar to him; he who had shed never a tear through his years-long tragedy of many griefs.

With Huan's aid she brought him stumbling up through the levels, and at last into light and life, where he had never thought to come again. The season was late, the old year nearly dead; the winter's day was dull and drear. But to the weary soul who stood newly under the grey sky, the dazzle in his eyes was the very light of heaven; and the rain which ran down his face, nectar inconceivable.

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There was much to do. Upwards of a hundred former slaves and prisoners were wandering dazedly about the barren island, with even what mean lodgings and provisions they had possessed now laid waste under the avalanche of powdered stone. More remained below, too sick or crazed to make their way up to the light.

Lúthien's first concern was Beren. He could, with effort, move about on his feet, although his scabby limbs were weak and writhen from starvation, and stiff from lack of exercise. Holding tight to Huan's sturdy back, he managed to cross the frothing arm of Sirion to the western shore, where the slopes were milder and the woods kinder. Others followed his lead. Someone got a fire going; others gathered what reeds and other growth they could find in that late season and commenced thatching together some rude shelter.

With Beren lying supported on Huan's warm flank next to the fire, and sheltered by hastily arranged branches from the worst of the rain, Lúthien left him to help the other unfortunates. Under her guidance, those in somewhat better condition soon pulled themselves together and began to organize evacuation of the poorly ones from below. She sent others to find whatever provisions and clothing might remain fit to use.

Beren addressed Huan in dog-speech, thanking him, but Huan reared back in shock at the unexpected words. After some few grunted dog-words in reply, he refused to speak any more. When Beren asked him why, all he would mumble was, "Mandos is just."

By day's end, all the survivors were gathered to the western shore. Beren advised them from his deep store of woodland knowledge. He told them how to make snares, and rough and ready bows; he told them where to find roots and other hidden foods in the woods. The first night was a hungry one, but things promised to be better on the morrow. Spirits were high; songs were sung, and there was laughter. The people were frankly tipsy on the free, sweet air.

There remained one thing to do. The weight of Finrod's death had not left Beren's heart; he would not rest until the body of the King had been brought from the pit and properly interred.

Four of the Elves who had strength for it dug a hole high on the mound of debris which was all that remained of the once-mighty tower. The ground smelled flinty and clean; evil was departing from that place as the rain steadily washed its filthy remnants from the stones.

When all was ready, a party went below to retrieve the body – bent and grim Elves of Finrod's following, captured long ago in the first assault. They carried their dead King in silence high up the mound, and all the valley opened up to the South before their gaze. Weak sunbeams swept slowly across the river and the wooded hills, bringing a shimmer to the one and patches of subdued colour to the other.

The King was laid in his grave. Beren was there; he flinched as the first earth fell onto the white, blind face of his friend. After the last earth had been heaped on the mound, the workers laid their rude shovels aside and stretched their weary backs.

Nobody knew what to say. Here was no grand state burial of a hero beneath translucent carved marble; no half-paced silent carriage, no rows of sturdy guards in glittering armour. The survivors had made of it what

they could. A scrabbling interment in wet earth must take the place of the marble tomb. The hero was a mangled and pitiful remnant; the guards, scarred and worn from years of slavery, were clothed in rags. It seemed no occasion for fine speeches.

Beren limped forward. The memory of all those months of darkness and horror were yet strong in him, but through them all wove Finrod's calm strength like a stream of golden sunlight. The vision of this so clutched the man that he thought his heart would break in two.

"Farewell, Comrade," he said in a voice that shook. "Saviour, hero, bright companion. Wiser than father wert thou; dearer than brother. Fare thee well."

Lúthien had never left his side. She put her arm around him now. "Come, Beloved," she said gently. "There is nothing more you can do." So after a further moment of silence, one by one the onlookers, led by Beren, turned and left the grave.

And so were laid to rest the bodily remains of Finrod Felagund, noblest Elda of them all. The green grass of the following spring covered the mound in a soft carpet. Some of his people returned at that time, daring the close presence of the enemy, to lay an inscribed stone at the head of the grave. Never more came Orc or Wolf to that isle; the stone remained inviolate, until all that land was changed and broken, and foundered under destroying seas. But Finrod walks with Finarfin his father beneath the trees of Eldamar.

At the close of that day the survivors had a meeting to decide what to do. They were all Eldar; all of the mortal captives, of so much lesser strength and stamina than the Firstborn, had long since perished. Most of those rescued were of Finrod's following, as has been said, but a part were of Fingon's people.

The course of the Fingonians was clear: to climb westward into the hills. They would surely not have to go far before they would find strongholds under guard from their own folk.

The people of Finrod's following were aware of some of what had passed in Nargothrond, and Lúthien now told them more. Some of them became very hot to journey thither and test whether it lay within their power to set right the evil wrought by the Brothers. Beren, however, doubted the wisdom of this plan. "Nargothrond lies many marches to the South," he said, "and you have no proper food or clothing. Also you have sick ones to carry. Winter is here; snow will come tomorrow, I can smell it on the wind. You would do much better to follow your kindred to the West, and winter in Mithrim. Store up your wrath! If it be truly founded, it will not diminish. Nargothrond will not collapse to disaster in a few short months." There was some argument, but eventually they saw the sense in this proposal, and made their plans accordingly.

"But you must come with us," they urged him. "There is a place for you with Fingon – a place of high honour. You will come?"

Beren and Lúthien looked at one another. They had made no plans for themselves, but both felt the same: neither desired company. On the other hand, the problems of bare survival seemed no easier for Beren than for the others.

Lúthien decided it. "We shall go south," she said. "Pray do not ask why, or how. I have few answers; but I know that our path lies with just we two together, apart from you others."

No-one dared to question her. One by one, they turned away and went about their own pursuits.

The great company departed the following day. Most were walking, although one or two of the spirit-sick ones were led, and some of the weakest were carried on rude stretchers. Beren and Lúthien watched them go. When the echoes of the last farewell had faded in the trees, Huan came to them. He bowed his head sadly and laid it against Lúthien's side. His intentions were plain.

"He needs also to depart," said Lúthien softly. "I knew that he would. Faithful heart, he will not break his trust. He only lent himself to me for a while."

They watched the great hound lope away down the path. After all sight of him had vanished, Beren sighed. Snow had begun to fall in a fine, still powder, true to his prediction. He held out a hand, catching the quick-melting particles. "How are we going to survive in this?" he said. He shivered in his thin rags.

Lúthien turned on him a smile of utmost sweetness and happiness. "Are you forgetting with whom you have tangled yourself?" she asked. "The daughter of a Maia need not be bothered by a little snow!" She spread her arms to each side, and to Beren's astonishment, the snow disappeared from a globe of air surrounding them. Soft grass sprang from the barren earth under his feet, and the air became warm and scented with flowers.

He scratched his head. "It's a good trick," he admitted, "but some furs, a little hut, and a nice big bowl of piping-hot stew would be worthy additions."

She laughed. "We'll manage them together," she said. "But shouldn't we go now? There is nothing more for us here. Can you walk a little way? We should find somewhere less exposed."

"Wait a bit," he said. He hesitated. "There is something I want to try. It probably won't work..."

He hobbled across the meadow where they had camped until he reached the bank of the river, facing the island. He stood a moment thinking, seemingly listening to the rush of the waters and looking at the dark hills. Then from a fold of cloth he drew forth the great ring of Finrod. The silver gleamed coldly in the daylight.

He struggled to recall the half-learned lessons from long ago, to find the words he wanted. But whether from the touch of the ring itself, or the strong memories of his friend whose mouldering remains lay up there in the cold earth, or some power in the water; something unlocked his tongue. He held the ring high and addressed it in the old, sweet speech of the People of the Star.

"O noble ring!" he cried in that tongue. "Far more than metal art thou. Thou knowest surely my humble wish. It is not for my life or for any great need that I ask now, yet it is not a light matter either, for of such slight mortar are our souls held whole." Beren held up his other hand, cupped. He concentrated fiercely, attempting to see clearly in his mind the objects of his desire. "O ring! These small things of my heart, swept aside as dross by another's contempt. If it lie within thy power, I beseech thee, summon them to me! Summon them now!"

The ring glowed in his fingers like a circle of white fire. For a moment there was silence, then a zipping noise sounded as some small object flew through the air to meet Beren's out-held hand. Another whispered in, then a few more.

He lowered his hand and opened his fingers carefully. The sight of the contents sent a wash of purest joy through him. There was Nose's frog, chipped but otherwise unharmed. Long Hair's dolly was in two pieces; the rose was flattened; the ring of Carver's hair was tattered and dirty. None of it mattered. They were his past, and he had them back.

### Year 466

As the weeks of winter passed, Beren grew slowly strong again. The lovers walked alone under snow-clad hills, for few people were abroad in that cold season. The weather flung its worst at them, but the power of Lúthien's joy kept the gales and the snow at bay. Birds sang where she walked, the streams unlocked their voices, sweet grass and flowers raised their blooms to greet her. Joy was Beren's too; such joy as he had never thought to meet again. Through many a glade and meadow wandered the two, hand in hand; and each had eyes and voice only for the other.

The season turned, the snow melted. Spring waited in the wings, a giant of mighty force, ready to pump the sap high in a million million tree-stems. Buds swelled throughout the wild, wide woods in a blush of purple and bronze.

The first thaw found the pair at Ivrin, high in the hills of the North. The kindling sun shimmered off those newly freed waters, hallowed in ancient days by Ulmo. Fowl of all kinds cried gladly in crossing flight, or quarked in the sprouting reed-beds, as all the life in the land awoke. Streams threw off the cold clutch of ice and joined in the chorus of praise. The beauty of the lake was beyond compare: blue as a kingfisher's wing by day, a glimmering secret glory under the moon and stars.

Beren and Lúthien stood on the shore and drank in the sights, sounds and scents. They were both almost too happy to speak.

Mortal men, however, if nobody else, know all too well that all happiness of this earth must have its ending. That evening, as they roasted fish over the fire, despite Beren's quiet enjoyment of watching Lúthien's intent, firelit face, the future lay on his heart like a stone. He sighed a little.

"You are troubled," Lúthien said to him without taking her eyes off the fish. "I have sensed it in you."

"I was thinking of my vow," he said. "I have not forgotten it; nor has the world that witnessed me speak it."

"You have me," she replied quietly. "Without any vow. Do you wish for more?"

He was silent a moment, not immediately knowing how to answer. "I am an exile," he said at last, slowly. "I cannot return to my land; and I think the pain of that will never leave me. You are everything to me, Tinúviel, you know that well; but not all your love can give me back my home. How heartless should I be, then, to wish the same pain on you?"

"Things must be weighed," she replied. "There must be proportion. My father played a cruel trick on you – it shames me yet to think on it. He wished to send you to your death, without the bother of having it on his conscience. But you do not need to play mouse to his cat – least of all to salve my displacement."

"Lúthien," he began, but she placed a stick with a roasted fish in his hand.

"Eat," she said; so he did.

Later they nestled down together under their thick robe. The night arched its velvet dome far over their heads, the stars flashing like a powder of diamonds: fiery red, then blue, then purest white again. Beren cherished the sight of the stars in their majesty and grace, and he knew the warm woman in his arms was looking at them too.

"Beloved," he spoke softly, "I think you are wrong. You look only at the narrow view. What your father wished or did not wish has nothing to do with anything, not in its essentials. There are great powers at work; he is only their agent. Did you not feel yourself the stroke of doom? The path lies before my feet still, as it ever did."

Lúthien was silent, but he read the course of her thought almost as if it were his own. He knew that she could not dispute the rightness of his words.

"I speak no word on that," she said at last. "I will not say that you are right or wrong. In truth, I do not know. I am not privy to the councils of the gods. But one thing I will say to you, Beren of the North: I am not willing to be parted from you again. The choice is freely yours to make: to dare Morgoth, or to give it up. But in either case I will be with you."

Long time he lay, thinking over all the choices of the past. When he spoke, he made her no direct answer. "Tomorrow we should turn south," he said. "This beauty here will not help us. It is not ours to enjoy. Let us return to woods we know and seek there for wisdom."

\* \* \* \* \*

With the advent of spring, the former prisoners of Sauron, rested and strengthened after spending a kindly

winter among their friends in Mithrim, made the journey to Nargothrond. Their coming was like a shock of cold water. The story of Finrod's long endurance, of his final heroic death, and of the rescue of the captives themselves, ran through the city like wild-fire. A clamour arose that no words of Celegorm could still. The lies and the treachery of the brothers, being now exposed, were cried in all the streets. The people lamented bitterly the fall of Felagund their King, and repented also of their own faint hearts, exclaiming that a slender maid had faced peril where no other had dared to go.

A large deputation, Gwindor among them, came to Orodreth where he dwelt quietly in his chambers. They met him, flanked there by his wife and daughter, and asked him to forgive them their former blindness. They asked him whether he could be persuaded to take the crown now in his dead brother's succession. If he would not, then they must attempt to choose from their own number someone who would be suitable. The two Fëanorians they now utterly repudiated.

Finduilas observed the emissaries with a fiery eye. "You have a nerve!" she said. "Otherwise spake ye, even so late as yesterday."

Orodreth laid a hand on her arm. "Peace, daughter," he said. He turned back to the delegation. "Why do you come to me?"

"Lord," said the leaders, "you and your sister, who is not here, are the last of the children of Finarfin. We place our faith in that House, as we have since time out of mind; most bitterly do we rue that we ever took it elsewhere."

"I put little faith in your steadfastness," said Orodreth. "Those who have wavered before may waver again. This city will not stand long on such weak foundations. Yet, someone must rule. If ye wish me to, then I will." He added with some bitterness, "At least, until the next fluke of wind bends the wheat the other way."

Led by Gwindor, the mass of shamed people one by one sank to their knees and bowed their heads.

"Lord King, command us," said Gwindor.

"Let the people be assembled," said Orodreth, "and let these malefactors be brought before us."

When Orodreth was sitting on the throne of his brother, the silver circlet of Nargothrond held yet in his hand, the two brothers were brought before him in bonds. They refused to kneel, and guards jumped to the daïs to wrestle their impudence to the floor, but Orodreth stopped them. "It does not matter," he said. He rose then and faced the multitude assembled there in the great and shadowy hall. He raised the crown in one hand. "People of Nargothrond!" he cried. "Is it your wish that I wear this crown, and rule in succession to Felagund, my dead and lamented brother?"

The subdued voices came back like a surge of great waves on the shore: "It is."

Orodreth sank slowly back on the high seat and placed the band of metal on his head. "So be it," he said. "There are many things to order. But first of all, we must decide the fate of these two here."

A murmur began in the crowd and soon rose to the sound of many voices. "They are liars and traitors," called some. "Kill them!" shouted others. "Death!" More and more voices took up the cry. "Death, death!" they yelled.

Orodreth stood again. He raised his hand, and slowly the voices quieted. When he could again be heard, he spoke to them with a passion people had not often seen him employ.

"Death!" he cried. "Is that your wish? Ye Eldar whose hands are already red with the blood of your own people, slain at Alqualondë in their innocence? Have ye so soon forgotten the curse we live under? For I have not. Have ye so soon forgotten the lands we have lost, the paradise we are barred from, condemned to linger forsaken on this far grey shore? I have not. Ye say ye will have me as King. Hear then my command! There



shall be no more blood shed of kin by kin in my domain. No word or deed of ours can lift the curse, but it were fools' work to bind the yoke yet more tightly about our throats."

In the silence that now reigned throughout the hall, he turned to Celegorm and Curufin. "Ye shall keep your lives," he said to them, "but ye shall depart from here, and by my command neither bread nor rest shall ye find more within the whole realm of Nargothrond." He came forward and cut their bonds himself with a small knife from his belt. "Now get ye gone, ye two. Do not sit, do not pause, until ye have removed yourselves and whatever of yours ye can carry from this city. We shall prick you with spears else. Little love shall there be henceforth between my house and yours."

"Let it be so!" said Celegorm, with a light of menace in his eyes, as he cast the cut ends of cord to the floor; but Curufin only smiled.

Try as they might, the brothers could find none of their own people willing to go with them. Cajoling, orders, nothing had effect; there was not one of their men who had not felt the sting of shame, or was blind any longer to the dark weight of the curse that lay on the Brothers.

Curufin sought out Celebrimbor his son where he worked in the gallery among the Dwarves. "Leave these fripperies and prepare to travel," he said to him. "Did you not hear that fool on the dais? We have lost this throw of the game; we must depart forthwith."

"Father," replied Celebrimbor slowly, "I am not coming."

Curufin reared back and stared at him in astonishment and rising anger. "You may not so choose!" he said. "You are my son, and you will obey me in this. I have allowed you much license to dally with these stunted folk, the following of this crazed and aged Telchar, who eats and drinks at cost of the Children, yet makes for them in return nothing worthy of his rumoured fame; but the time for games and light pursuits is past. Come!"

Celebrimbor shook his head. "I will not," he said. "By your own deeds you have thrown away any rights in this matter. Goodbye, Father. We will not meet again this side of the Sea." He turned and left the forge, leaving Curufin alone among the glowering Dwarves.

"Ingrate!" shouted his father after him, fuming. But there was nothing he could do.

On Huan's return to his master at the onset of winter, Celegorm knew very well what the beast had done. The Noldo had raged and stormed at his dog, but he had not dared to lay hand to his skin; in his heart he knew that Huan's was a greater spirit than his own. Nevertheless the bond between them had not recovered from that day. Huan remained faithful to the call, but his eyes were now empty of their former regard.

Celegorm came now to the hound. "Do you come with me," he said in bitterness to the beast, "or will you, too, throw up your faith?"

The great hound made no sound in reply, only stood up. He followed Celegorm out of the chamber.

Packing only those few things they could carry on their own horses, the brothers mounted, and spurred their mounts clattering out of the gate, with Huan loping behind. Without a backward look, they rode north; and the hooves of their horses struck sparks from the stones. They purposed to pass through Dimbar and then under the Mountains of Terror, if they could, as the quickest road to Maedhros at Himring.

\* \* \* \* \*

Evil days had fallen upon Doriath since Lúthien had vanished from her prison in the tree. Thingol had been more bewildered than angry. He felt that he had missed something, left something out of his accounting, but he did not know what it could be. From the stories of the guards caught sleeping at the base of the tree it was clear that they were not to blame, but had been overcome by some power of enchantment; and the wisps of

hair tucked carefully into each buttonhole, hair that even now contained a power of drowsiness for the unwary, confirmed that conclusion. Therefore the King had let them go without punishment.

Indeed he needed every able person for the hunt for Lúthien. This was the greatest endeavour the people of Doriath had ever undertaken. All other works and concerns were laid aside while the whole land was scoured. Traces of the maid's passage had been early found that led to the West, but Thingol wished to leave no possibility unexamined, and his people were most fervently of the same desire.

Lúthien had been a wellspring of joy for every person in that land. There was not one whose life she had not touched, not one who had not paused in a golden-misted trance of listening, carried to unknown regions of pure joy by the unearthly sweetness of her voice. They would not believe now that their flower was lost; could not accept it.

Daeron, wise lore-master, greatest of minstrels east of the Sea, had no music to soothe his own heart, no lore for his own plight. He wished most passionately for an oblivion, for a surcease from pain, which his birthright denied to him. Were he to slay himself in despair, that would avail nothing, for death to the Firstborn was merely a displacement. What did it matter whether he gnawed on his grief in the grey halls of Mandos or under the green canopy of Doriath? He was bound in Arda for the life of the world; he would never be able to forget.

He could not leave the world, but he would not stay in Doriath, where every scene stabbed his tender heart with another memory of his lost and betrayed love. Rising silently one night therefore he crept away. By morning he was gone. The distracted search was widened to include him, because he too, in his measure, was valued and loved; but they did not find him either.

Daeron's journeyings took him far. Over the eastern mountains he passed, and so escaped the downfall of Beleriand; and it is said that for many ages he wandered in the East of the world, making lament beside dark waters for his lost Lúthien, most beautiful of all living things.

Thingol, distraught, not knowing what to do in the general despair, turned at last to Melian his queen.

"Things have not gone as I had expected," he said to her humbly. "I no longer see the path so clearly as I did; I do not know what to do. It may be that I should have listened to you. I beg you, advise me now. This time I will give heed to your words, I promise. Lighten the darkness that has come upon me!"

Melian looked at him sadly. "My beloved," she said to him, "it pleases me not at all to be the one proven to have better judged – if indeed that be the case. Alas! I am as powerless now as I was before. Doom has been set in motion; it can no longer be stayed by your words or mine. We must all of us simply wait."

"But where is Lúthien?" cried the King. "Into what grievous peril does she tread? I would have her back, dearest to me of all the world. I will own that I was wrong. She may consort with whomever she pleases – if that be the price of her return, I hold it light. I will take back my ban and give this Beren my countenance. Let me but find my daughter, the understay of my heart!"

Melian only shook her head; she would say no more.

News of Lúthien came before long, but it was not such as to soothe Thingol's heart. This was a messenger from Celegorm, reporting Lúthien's captivity, and relaying Celegorm's demand for her hand in marriage. So enraged was Thingol that he was with difficulty dissuaded from slaying the messenger on the spot.

All the strength of Doriath swung then from the search into preparations for war. While the people were arming and training, Thingol sent spies into the bitter weather. There were clashes in the Guarded Plain, and blood was spilled. Little rede did he receive until the thaw, when word came to him that the Brothers were deposed, and had sought shelter with their kin. Orodreth sent an embassy to him, offering redress for the blood shed, and bearing news that Lúthien had fled Nargothrond before the turning of the year; her present whereabouts were unknown.

Then was Thingol's counsel in doubt, for he had not the strength to assail the seven sons of Fëanor; but he sent messages to Himring, demanding their aid in the search for Lúthien, since Celegorm of their ilk had not returned her to the house of her father as manners and custom mandated, nor had he kept her in safety. To these messages came no reply. Thingol stood down his soldiers, but kept scouts scouring all the lands to the North. He had learned of the defeat of Gorthaur from Orodreth; but whither his daughter had gone after the rescue of Beren, no man could tell him. The King sat gnawing his fist in his chambers, not knowing now any more than before what he should best do.

Thus Doriath came through a grim winter to a spring of little hope. The demands of life do not pause on such account; people address their daily tasks, as they must. But all light and joy seemed to have departed from the land.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beren and Lúthien reached the borders of Brethil, but were no closer to determining what to do. Beren said that he wanted to visit Zalta at the inn, and hear what news she might have to tell; but secretly he was resolved to leave Lúthien as close to her home as he could, then to go again on his quest. He dreaded to leave her, but he found simply intolerable the thought of taking her into the danger that loomed still dark in his future.

They were on the road, not far from the inn. They had just been passed by a wagon-load of Dwarves and Men, who had goggled, as if disbelieving their own eyes, at the fabulous dark-haired beauty who walked there with her companion.

Lúthien stopped. "Is this wise?" she said to Beren. "People look at me. You saw those want-wits who just passed. It will be just the same in your inn, surely? I had rather not excite so much attention. We come to hear talk, not to start it."

"You are right," said Beren, vexed at himself. "Of course you will be noticed. I of all people should have thought of that." He thought for a moment. "Could you wear perhaps your cloak?" He looked back down the road, seeing there another wagon approaching from the North.

"And send everybody to sleep? That's no good," replied Lúthien. "Perhaps if I stay somewhere in the woods, and you go in alone?"

The wagon was nearly up with them now and its passengers could be seen sitting up and screwing their fists in their eyes to clear their vision. Beren became suddenly aware of the sound of galloping hooves from the opposite direction. "Ware horses!" he said. He backed away to clear the track, while Lúthien retreated to the far side.

What happened next happened very quickly. The horsemen were Celegorm and Curufin. They had seen and recognized the couple while they were distracted by the wagon. This was time enough for blind fury to rise in the breasts of both brothers, and for them to spur their mounts to a furious charge. Celegorm directed his passage toward Beren, purposing to ride him into the earth; but Curufin, riding to pass close to Lúthien, bent to snatch her from the path. Despite that he stood behind his brother in feats of arms, he was a cunning horseman all the same, and much stronger than he appeared.

Beren had a bare second to take in the fierce faces bearing down upon them. There was no time to think, only react. As he saw Curufin bow low with hooked arm, on course toward Lúthien, his own legs were already flexed down, bunched with power. The robber's arm curved down; the woman, open-mouthed, was snatched; bending in the middle like a reed, she was hauled high. But Beren's mighty limbs had released their strength, had thrust him from the earth, and he was springing up, up, in a wide salmon's leap. Out of Celegorm's path he lifted, and in far less time that it takes to tell of it, he had swept in his curving flight into the path of Curufin's horse, his hands reaching to meet the rider's advancing neck. The three figures rammed together before spinning apart again in clumps. The woman, thrown loose in the shock of impact, tumbled helpless into the bushes. Beren and Curufin crashed to the ground together, Beren's hands still locked about the

ravisher's throat. That was the Leap of Beren, which is still spoken of with awe wherever folk gather to rest and talk.

Celegorm had hauled up his horse to a halt some yards down the path and was prancing it around to come back. At the same time he had pulled a lance out of its carriage by his foot. Spear couched, he spurred his mount to ride down the man who was throttling his brother.

Death would have taken Beren then but for Huan. In that hour the great hound forsook the service of Celegorm, and sprang upon him, such that his horse swerved aside, and would not approach Beren because of its terror of the snarling beast. Celegorm cursed both hound and horse, but Huan was unmoved.

Lúthien pulled herself out of the growth and ran to Beren. Curufin was by now purple in the face and kicking only feebly. "Don't kill him!" she pleaded. "Beren, please, you know in your own heart you must not."

Beren did know. His vow to never again take life, his disgust with killing, returned to him like a bad taste in the mouth. He released his grip. The Elda under him sucked in the returning breath in great whooping gasps.

Beren looked over his foe, saw the knife hanging sheathless at his belt. He knew it: Angrist it was, Telchar's 'drink-piece', the work the Dwarf had once made, the path through to the glory of creation he had followed; the path which he had so long after sought again in vain. The knife would cleave iron, Telchar had said, as if it were green wood. Beren unbuckled it from Curufin's waist and bound it about his own.

"I leave you your life, wretch," he said to the gasping Elf, "but I will take this knife as my victor's spoils, to replace that which my lost friend made for me; and in honour of Telchar the Dwarf, who made this, which is too good for such dross as you." He stooped then, and lifting the unhappy and still wheezing Curufin bodily above his head, he flung him from him in ignominy into the mud of the ditch. "Walk now back to your noble kinfolk," he said, "who may perchance teach you to turn your valour to worthier use. Your horse I shall keep; he shall carry Lúthien in your stead. And I doubt not that he will rejoice at the change."

Curufin clawed his way out of the ditch and turned a white and furious face to Beren. He cursed him with many words, and bade him run to the bitter death that surely awaited him. "Fall into thy blackness, mortal worm," he hissed. "And before the light faileth utterly in thine eyes, think on us for whom death is but a brief inconvenience, a momentary excursion, which leaves us thereafter sucking the juice from the fruits of eternity. Go to thy cold grave of loss and nothingness with that knowledge. The path to it will not be long, I assure thee of that." When he could think of nothing more to say, he limped to Celegorm, who took his brother up behind him on his horse. They made then as if to ride away, and Beren turned to go, taking no more heed of their words. But Curufin, filled with shame and malice, took the bow of Celegorm and shot back as they went; and in the bitterness of his envy and hatred, he aimed the arrow at Lúthien.

Only Huan saw the draw. He leaped then his own mighty leap and caught the arrow in his jaws. Beren looked back and glimpsed this, just as Curufin had set another arrow on the string and was drawing again. The second arrow was flying while the hound was yet tumbling in the dust, clutching the first. Beren sprang in front of Lúthien; the dart struck him in the breast, and smote him to the earth.

No more could Curufin shoot, because Huan had found his feet by then and his furious charge spurred the terrified horse into a swift retreat. The brothers disappeared and were not seen again. Huan trotted back then in haste to the crowd which was gathering about the stricken man.

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The leech was an old woman of the Haladin with the deeply lined face of one who has seen much pain and death. "The arrow hit no major vein," she said, "else he had died in the first half hour. But I doubt that he can live."

Lúthien was there, with Zalta and Irma. With the help of the wagoners, they had carried Beren to the inn, where he now lay, flushed in the face and with half-closed eyes, wandering in fever.

Zalta puffed the hanging hair out of her face, on which the marks of shock, amazement and anguish were still to be seen. “Can you at least cut the thing out of his chest?” she asked. “Surely he cannot do well while it remains.”

The leech shrugged. “I have seen such cases before,” she said. “It is fever that kills. It is not the arrow, but the dirt from outside that it draws with it in its passage, that is the source of the fever. He would be better without the dart, that is true; the wound cannot drain while it remains. But those whose pleasure it is to design such instruments of death do not use half measures in their dreadful work. That is to say, arrow heads are made with barbs. One must do far more damage to cut them out than ever they wreak themselves. The shock of it usually kills the patient anyway.”

Zalta looked up at the Elf-maid beside her, whose beauty still took her breath away. “Mistress,” she said gently, “I don’t know what to advise you.”

Lúthien’s face revealed nothing of her thoughts. “I pray you, leave us,” she said. “If there is nothing you can do, then leave us alone for a while.”

“I will do what I can,” said the leech. “I will brew some tisanes. But that can wait a little.” She stood up and went with the other women to the door. Zalta closed it quietly after them, with a final anxious glance at Lúthien.

The Elf-woman sat by the bed, her eyes fixed on Beren’s face, while all the time pondering furiously. Her first thought was for the Noldor, who counted many masters over substance in their ranks. Had she one of the smiths of Nargothrond at her side, or one of the less caitiff Fëanorians, surely there would be art at their command to work on arrow-heads inside the body. But there was no-one to hand. All such help was too far off.

What shall you sing of now, lover of flowers and fair things? she asked herself darkly. Can you dance or sing an arrow away?

Even as she thought this, she felt the power move within her, like the stirring of some mighty beast. She was a tigress at bay; she *would not* allow this, would not sit useless by in girlish tears while untimely death stole her only treasure. She would not. Was not love a great power? Had she not that power at her command? Sing, then. Sing, singer, against the deadly steel.

She placed a hand on Beren’s chest next to the protruding shaft, and the other on the shaft itself. With her eyes closed, she sang what was in her heart. She could feel the life of her man, and the cold sharp object intruding. She had no power over the dead steel – but she could call on power over the living. Living things could give way, they could flow around the hard inflictions of the world. So she sang of the path of the otter in the stream, and of the long weeds that curved to the flow; of the tree that bent before the gale, and of the soft shoot that moved a stone aside. Singing still, she held Beren’s flesh in her mind. She moved it gently aside; a little more. Then with her right hand she applied force to the wooden shaft. Bend, flesh! Bend like the tree and the otter; give way.

The shaft in her hand slid a slow inch from the body of her beloved. Beren cried out then, and Lúthien faltered and lost the thread. She felt the arrow gripped fast again in the flesh. Fearful of the harm she might inflict if she trod this awful tightrope one step too far one side or the other, she concentrated again, ignoring Beren’s groans. Feel. There. Sing. Now *give way*...

Slowly she gained more and more of the shaft. The head was very near the surface now, but she dared not look; only sang on, and kept up the steady pull. It grew easier, the shaft came quicker, until suddenly it was free, clear of Beren’s chest. A gush of fluid and dark blood welled out of the wound.

Lúthien laid the arrow aside and hurried to the door. Irma started up white-faced from her chair in the passage. “Is it...?” she said.

“Please fetch the leech, Irma,” said Lúthien with a tremor in her voice. “As quickly as you can!” Irma turned and ran, ran down the passage, calling as she went.

The old woman hurried into the room a minute or two later and went straight to the patient. Seeing the arrow missing, she turned to Lúthien. “What have you done?” she demanded. Lúthien gestured silently to the arrow lying bloody on the table. The leech quickly checked that the barbs were unbroken, then examined the wound. After some moments she turned back to Lúthien, blank astonishment written on her face. “How did you do that?” she breathed. “How did you get it out? The flesh is not torn at all!”

Lúthien lifted her hands helplessly. “I sang it out,” she said.

The old woman stood straight and looked at her with wide wonder in her eyes. “If you can do that,” she said, “you should learn my art. You could save many lives!”

“Have I saved his?” Lúthien asked tremulously, with a slight gesture to Beren.

The leech looked back to Beren, felt his pulse, his temperature, observed the colour of his face. “I do not know,” she admitted. “He is very strong. I will say that he now has a chance. He certainly had none before.”

There was nothing left for Lúthien to do but sit with her love, during the long hours that became a day, then stretched toward another. Beren’s fever did not diminish, and his strength was gradually failing. Lúthien felt as empty of power as a dry gourd. She could do nothing but wait.

Towards afternoon on the second day she heard a disturbance in the passage: vehement voices, hushed because of the patient. But hearing a clattering sound that she knew, Lúthien started up.

Huan was outside the door, and had been about to nose it open when Lúthien forestalled him. Standing to one side in the passage were red-faced servants of the inn. “I’m mortal sorry, Lady,” said one in hushed tones. “He would come in, and so big as he is, we weren’t able to stop him. Valan’s gone to fetch a spear, he won’t be a moment.”

“Don’t on any account do that!” said Lúthien. “Don’t you know who this is? This is Huan, he is no ordinary dog. I have no greater or wiser friend in all the world. If he will go somewhere, then he has good reason for it. He is to be treated with honour, do you hear me? If I hear of any who fails in this, I will have words to say which they will not like. Now go about your business!”

She turned then to greet Huan. The great dog looked at her, taking in the shadows under her eyes, then rubbed his muzzle briefly against her head in greeting before turning to Beren. Lúthien told him all that she knew of the case while Huan snuffed deeply first at the wound and then at the breath of the dying man. He touched his head again quickly to Lúthien’s hand before pushing the door open and twisting his great body carefully through it. Then he was gone.

Deep in the night something woke Lúthien from her daze. The lamp was burning low on the table, illuminating Beren’s face in harsh planes. His breathing was noisy and unsteady. She felt his pulse in the way the leech had showed her: fast but very weak.

The well-remembered clicking. The door pushed open at the end of Huan’s nose, and he came back taking even more care than when he had left. Lúthien noted the gleam of the lamp in his deep eyes before she perceived that he was carrying a bunch of greenery in his mouth. He laid this plant on the bed. Lúthien looked closely at it: it was some herb she had never seen before. Its leaves were five-pointed and they reflected the light in a satin sheen. The plant had small red flowers which gave forth a curious scent – not sweet, not sour, just particular. It was a refreshing, a lively scent.

Lúthien saw that the hound’s sides were scratched by brambles. He must have run deep into the woods. But where? No-one would ever know.

“Is that for Beren?” she asked him softly. “What must I do?”

Huan trotted over to the end of the room where there was a broader table. He picked up a beaker in his jaws and showed it to Lúthien.

“I am to brew tea? Is that it?” The great head nodded; but Huan was not finished. He stepped back to Beren’s side and just touched the bandage over the wound with his nose, looking at Lúthien all the while. “On the wound too? A poultice?” That seemed to be the meaning.

Zalta was in the next room. Lúthien took up the lamp, knocked lightly and went in. The older woman sat up, hair dishevelled. Her eyes were wide and fearful. “Is he..?”

“I need help,” said Lúthien. Together they prepared the desired things. Zalta did not stop to question, just did as she was asked; only eyeing the great figure of the dog from time to time, who stood shadowy and motionless at the foot of the bed.

They made a steaming poultice of some of the plant stuff – it had a clean, sharp, fresh smell when bruised – and brewed more in a tisane. The poultice applied, they with some difficulty managed to get some of the liquid past Beren’s lips. Then there was nothing to do but wait.

Lúthien felt the man’s pulse after half an hour. “It is stronger,” she whispered. “I believe it is stronger...” Another half hour placed it beyond any doubt: Beren was breathing more easily, and his pulse was calmer.

Huan nudged Lúthien to brew more tea and change the poultice. Twice more in that long night they did that; and by the time the first grey light of morning began to filter past the shutters, Beren’s fever had broken. He was sleeping easily now for the first time in days. Lúthien wept then, and Zalta hugged her before stumbling yawning back to her bed.

The strange plant brought by Huan worked a great healing on Beren. Within a week he was well enough to receive visitors; and visitors there were in abundance, for the story of his captivity and rescue had spread through the whole land like a summer fire before the wind. Some were strangers merely curious to see the hero and the mighty dog with their own eyes, or wishing to marvel at the famed beauty of Lúthien; others were friends. Haldir and Glóredhel came from Amon Obel near at hand, warmly persuasive that he come to them for rest and healing. Gwindor journeyed from Nargothrond bearing a message from Orodreth, offering Beren a place of honour and rank in that kingdom. Erlan came from Fingon on similar errand, and Húrin also sent by messenger the wish of his heart that Beren come to him. Last of all came quietly and under cover of dusk a party of four young men led by Adril, his father’s former servant, now grown to strong manhood. The Bëorings, Adril told Beren, were tired of Girazôn’s arbitrary and often brutal rule, and would greatly welcome his replacement by the son of Barahir – no matter what actions that might require.

Beren greeted them all with warmth or courtesy as the situation required, but they made him uneasy. Two years before he had shrunk from the admiration of Haldir’s people, and he still felt the same; but added to this now was a sense of discordance. These were voices from his past; he felt he had left them behind him, in a place to which he had no wish to return. All that he really wanted to do was to walk in the fair woods of Doriath with Lúthien. He felt obscurely but deeply that his part in the wars of Beleriand was over. It was not so for these others; and were he to make cause with this one or that one, it would mean being drawn back into the struggle. There was something of a lull in the fighting at present, but somewhere not far in the future Beren sensed the loom of a great and shattering conflict, a holocaust of all these lives. But this was not for him: his path lay elsewhere.

A constant weight on his thoughts was the awareness of his vow to Thingol. It loomed in his mind ever before him like some dark mountain that he must climb. Lúthien and he had not spoken again of the matter since the pool of Ivrin, but in his heart he knew well enough what course he had chosen – the course he had followed from the beginning, and had never diverted from. The vow, being spoken, could not be unspoken. He thought that Lúthien knew this too. Beren’s difficulty, and the reason for his delay, lay in his knowledge that if he left her behind in safety, as was his fixed purpose, he would need to find means to circumvent her

own. But at last, during all the long days and nights abed, and through all the words and smiles for faces familiar and strange, he had hammered out a plan.

As soon as Beren could get about, the two left the inn and sought again the privacy of the nearby woods. They spent a peaceful summer in the forest, far enough from the inn to avoid visitors, near enough to slip in under cover of night for supplies. The year had turned before the man felt himself fully fit, but the couple dallied longer still; neither was eager to take up again the toils of the outer world. The season of nuts and berries was come, and they wandered in joy, cherishing even the fading leaves.

The time came when with heavy hearts they accepted again their burdens. Returning for a final time to the inn, Beren took leave of Zalta. Embracing her stumpy figure, he found his eyes pricking. His affection for the innkeeper was deep; and as with Parth, she was one of his very few remaining living connections to the lost, sunny days of his far-off boyhood.

Zalta was weeping openly. "My son," she began, but she could not go on, and waved her hands in the air, turning her wet face aside. "Go quickly," she said in a choked voice, "else I cannot stand it."

Lúthien and he brought their few belongings to the stable. Beren addressed there the horse he had taken from Curufin, asking it if it would consent to bear Lúthien some way further.

The horse was impressed. "No two-legs ever asked before," it said. "They just climb and sit, then urge me on with hand and spur. I did not know I had any choice in the matter."

"They do not know how to ask," replied Beren. "But I do, so it must be different for me. Also I am loth to command anyone, however many legs they may have. If it is your wish to be free, horse, then I am very willing to help you achieve that. I do not command; but I have need of your aid, and I humbly request it, as one free creature to another."

The horse looked the pair over while it turned the situation over in its mind. "I will do this for you," it said, although it could not easily have explained what moved it to accede to the man's request. There was something about this couple, and the great Dog-creature who was their companion, that stirred most un-horselike feelings in its mind. The startling thought came to it that there might be more to the world than grass, and work, and the incomprehensible motions of the two-legs.

The horse turned a newly thoughtful gaze on Lúthien. "This female looks likely to be lighter and gentler than my last master," it remarked.

Beren knew that Lúthien could not understand the horse-speech. He dared not glance at her, but he replied quietly to the horse, "She is that. I am also gentle, if maybe not so light as she. But would you consent to carry me thereafter? I would need all your speed at that time."

"Two journeys?" asked the horse. "One slow, one fast?"

"That's right," said Beren. "The first with her, then with me."

The horse whickered its puzzlement. "Very well, Man," it said. "If that is your wish, then I suppose I had better comply. But after that second journey, may I run free?"

"I promise you, yes," said Beren.

Lúthien had made no comment when Beren proposed that she ride the horse. For her part, she felt no need of a mount; she was perfectly able and willing to wander the forest on her own strong legs. But she was aware of movements beneath the surface of events, and felt obscurely but strongly that she needed to let them work their way to the surface in their own time.

The sun had not yet risen when they left, walking the horse quietly through the skeins of cold mist that



wound across the road. Huan was roving ahead at Beren's request, since not all of the interest the man's presence had aroused locally was friendly. They left the road as soon as they could find passage for the horse. By the time the sun had climbed toward noon, they were hidden deep in the woods and could afford to relax their guard. Beren and Lúthien found a shady spot where they lay down together in the soft grass and dozed through the heat of the day. Huan remained watchful, all senses alert; but they were truly alone. There was nothing on the air but the myriad scents of the forest, and nothing to hear but the sleepy zither of insects and the tearing sounds of the horse cropping the grass.

They went a few miles further in the afternoon, stopping toward sundown in a peaceful glade. As soon as they had a fire lit and a pan of soup simmering over it, Beren said to Lúthien, "Let me tell you what is in my mind."

"Some of it," she replied quietly.

He glanced uncertainly at her. How much did she guess? Probably all of it, he thought. Well, nothing to do but press on, and see what she made of it.

"This fork in our road," he went on. "We have not spoken of it since Ivrin. I wanted to come to familiar places before deciding. Well, we have reached those, more or less; but I should like to go just a little further. I should like to glimpse Doriath one final time. There, on the banks of Sirion, I shall choose. What say you to that?"

She shrugged a little. "The choice of your way is yours to make," she said, "not mine. It is for you to say when and where you will make it. As for me, my own choice has long been made. There is nothing more for me to say."

They embraced each other under the sleeping robe as the night held the land in its dark and velvet hand, but neither slept. Each felt the thoughts coursing through the brain of the other.

Two days later they had come to the gore of land between Teiglin and Sirion, where Beren had stood with Húrin and Huor long years before. The pair had not hurried, since Beren had not yet regained all of his former wind. Lúthien thought it a great nonsense that she should sit perched on Curufin's charger and not him, but she held her peace.

They both stood long on the sandy bank, gazing across the foaming stream at the wonder of the Light, right there in front of them. In both of them the longing to reach for the unattainable was strong. Lúthien knew that Beren felt the same way as she.

He turned to her. "We have little to eat," he said. "I will take Huan, and forage."

"All right," she replied.

Some few hours later, Huan had pulled down a deer, and Beren had gathered as much as he could carry from the roots and plants he knew where to find in the woods. When hound and man met together again before returning to their camp, Beren told Huan he had something to say to him.

"I do not know how you will receive this," he said to the great beast, "since in the last pinch you are the sworn friend of Lúthien, not mine. Huan, I purpose to leave her. I must go into great danger; so great, that I cannot see how I can ever return. But I will not drag her life down with mine. I know she feels otherwise, but I cannot have her death on my conscience." He stopped then, because the great dog was shaking his head from side to side in negation. "Well, you may say nay all you please, my friend, but the choice is not yours to make. This is *my* fate, and she is *my* beloved.

"Now, I have brought her as near to her home as I can. I need not charge you to take care of her, because I know you will do that anyway. But can you help her across the river? Sirion is strong, but I make no doubt that she could cross in safety with you swimming by her side." The dog made no sign in reply, only gazed at

Beren mournfully. "We each have our path to follow in this life," the man persisted. "This is mine. I beg thee not to hinder me in it."

Coming back to the camp, Beren's route took him past the horse. He murmured into its ear as he passed close, "Be ready tonight."

The horse raised its head from the grass and looked at him.

In the deep night, when Lúthien was fast in sleep, Beren got up quietly. He had nothing to carry. He could see where Huan sat watching him, but the hound made no sound. Perhaps he had decided, as Beren had hoped he would, to let the humans settle their own affairs.

Beren found the shape of the horse, pale in the starlight, where it stood head down on the far side of the clearing. With a word whispered in its ear, he jumped silently onto its back. Man and horse walked with little noise into the heavy blackness of the forest, finding a path by the air of it rather than by sight. Once at a safe distance from the camp, Beren urged his mount forward with all the speed it could make in the dark.

By morning they were not far short of Obel. All that day they rode on. They left the forest, following ever the course of Sirion as he wound flashing in the sun. The mountains grew tall and white on the far shore. They halted for the evening in the wild shaws north of the Lithir, among the out-thrust arms of the Mountains of Shadow. Beren was wary for Orcs, so far from guarded and settled areas as they now found themselves, but he could detect no shadow in his mind. The lands were quiet.

In the morning he and the horse went on. They passed the shattered Isle, on which new growth bloomed now bright and green under the early sun.

Beren kept to the west bank of the stream, despite that the path there was narrow and overgrown. All too near on the other side, the dark mass of Nightshade loomed. It had the very look of Death itself. As before, a pang went through his heart – that had once been his home; now lost, gone, dead.

The horse was equally happy to keep as much distance from that black and jagged line of trees as the valley allowed. It eyed the far slope with lowered ears, snorting betimes through flared nostrils.

They crossed Sirion not far short of the beginning of the fens, where the horse was able to splash through the shallows with no great effort. Beren hurried it through as quickly as it could go. He was anxious to leave these places; the memories were almost more than he could bear.

The sun was sinking toward the West when man and horse arrived at that terrible terminus where the living lands stopped. Beren's nose caught the whiff of it first: the stink of the ruined and poisoned plain. It was not long before he could make out signs of it ahead.

They trotted over a low rise and arrived suddenly at the dread line, where the living grass came to an end. Beyond was Desolation, stretching as it seemed to infinity.

The horse balked violently at the sight and would tread no step further. It twisted its neck and bared its teeth at Beren. "I will not go into that," it snorted. "No, do not ask me! I cannot."

The grey expanse stretched before them as far as the eye could see. The funeral plain, the kingdom of ash and death. And there – Beren raising his eyes against the weight of horror on their lids – there it was at last, as he had glimpsed it in childhood, but now far nearer and more awful: the Iron Hells of Morgoth, their sear and jagged rampart crowned by the three giant fangs of Thangorodrim.

Beren dismounted, and gentling the frightened horse with hands stroking its neck and flank, he led it slowly back over the rise whence they had just come.

"I would not take anybody into that dark place where I must go," he said to the animal. "You have done for

me all that I could desire. Go now, and may good fortune attend you! Leave all dread and servitude, and run free on the green grass wherever you will.”

The horse whickered, and rubbed Beren’s shoulder with its nose. “You are not as others of your kind,” it said to him, and in its eyes was more than respect. “I would serve you yet if I could. But since we must part, my luck wish go with you! Run far, Two-legs, run far and well, and may you too find in the end your own wide land of green grass and sweet waters, untroubled by any masters, with their cruel whips to rule and score you.” The charger turned then, and after neighing a last farewell, it galloped away to the East. It was soon lost to sight.

Beren stood utterly alone, on the edge of the vast poisoned plain, the cruel walls of his destination still far off in the hazy distance, but looming huge and dark in his mind. How far would he run before he was caught?

But at least, at least he had not dragged Lúthien into whatever miserable and gruesome death Fate had laid out for him. So fair a thing as she was not made for such an end; for her to suffer such would be a crime to break the world.

In his despair he was moved to song. He sang then in full voice, uncaring what spies there might be to hear him in that bleak landscape. He sang loud and strong, in defiance of fate, and to suppress the seeping black terror that rose in his heart. He sang that he might forget the agony of his parting and loss. It was a song of leave-taking from the world, and of praise for it. He thanked whatever powers there might be for his life, which he was now preparing to give back. He thanked them for the beauty of the world, and for the faces and the laughter in his past; and lastly he gave fervent thanks that they had allowed Lúthien, fairest of all works or beings, to live in the world, and that his path had been permitted to run with hers for a time.

As he sang, he thought of the time not so long before when he had sat despairing in darkness with his dead friend’s head cradled in his lap. He had sung then too; but miracle of miracles, as if in a dream made real, Lúthien’s voice had come to answer his. He could almost fancy to hear the same now – but no. One miracle in a lifetime was the most that anybody had a right to expect.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lúthien woke with birdsong in her ears. She knew straight away that Beren was gone; she felt the emptiness. She sat up, shaking the last tendrils of sleep from her mind.

Beren and the horse were indeed missing. There was only Huan sitting there, watching her with his sad eyes.

“I knew he would work some trick like that,” she muttered. “I *knew* it! But oh Huan, why did you not wake me?” The dog’s head sunk down. He was a picture of sadness. Lúthien went to him and wrapped her arm around his mighty neck. “Oh my friend, do not look so, I beg thee. I doubt not that thou hast thy reasons. Didst thou think thereby to keep me safe?”

Huan looked into her face, his eyes full of things he could not tell. He licked her hand.

Lúthien looked around, seeing the sleeping robe, and the water skins, and the remainder of the deer. She sighed. Beren had taken little or nothing with him. “Now what am I to do?” she said to herself.

Huan stood up, tall above her. He nudged her gently with his nose. Again.

“I am to go that way? But why?” said Lúthien.

Nudge.

“I do not know what you want.”

Nudge.

“Oh very well. I shall find out what is in thy mind perhaps.” Following the direction of the hound’s prompting, she left the clearing. That way led toward the river. “Water? I should fill the skins? Then you must let me go back for them.”

They stood on the bank. Huan nudged her again, and in the same direction: towards the water.

Lúthien looked across the river into the beauty of her home. “Oh, no,” she said softly. “Oh, no. I see now what is in your mind. But I am not going there. You shall not take me, and you cannot make me.”

Huan could not reply; he only gazed at her out of his soulful eyes.

“My friend,” said Lúthien, and she spoke now with more determination than was her wont, “I can see that we do not all understand one another. Let you and I therefore have some words together!

“Beren, now: him I believe I understand. I knew all along he would keep to his purpose. I was sure of that, and I thought also that he would try to give me the slip. Until he declared himself by word or deed, however, there was little I could do. Well, now he has declared. That is all well and good. But *he* does not understand *me*, or the path *I* must tread; and it is in my thought now that you, friend Huan, do not understand me either. Nay, sir, do not toss your head at me; attend my words. Listen to me. There was a king, not too wise, who thought he could bend me to his will, but I suffered it not. Later, there were some fallen and caitiff knights who tried the same; and you know as well as I what fortune attended *their* presumption. Last of all there came a foolish wolf, who met a foolish end. These things you know. Therefore know this too: I am nobody’s toy, nobody’s to command or control; not yours, not even Beren’s.

“Beren is sure that Fate has spun out his path before him, and that the fate of the whole world, maybe, hangs thereof. All my sense tells me he is right; that is why I have let matters run as they have. But he will not see that *my* thread is wound with his. In this I do not blame him, for he is only a man. But you, Huan, you who are more than hound, and more than man, and more perhaps, even, than the wisest of the Firstborn: your sight must be clearer. I know it is clearer. So why do you make play as if to keep me from my destiny?”

The sight that she now beheld was fearful to see. Huan was struggling mightily to speak. The great head tossed from side to side in agony; the muscles around his throat clenched in convulsion; but no word could he bring forth.

Lúthien ran to him and embraced him with both arms. “Please don’t!” she cried. “I beg thee, do not torment thyself so. I am afraid you will break yourself. Peace now, friend and brother. Leave off for a moment and hear me. You spoke to me once, Huan, but then my need was desperate. Perhaps now it is not so desperate? Or perhaps I can guess thy thought, if I do but exert myself? Let me try. Well now, is it that your first thought was to keep me from harm?”

The huge beast took himself gently out of her grasp. Free thus to move, he made a clumsy nod with his dog head, using muscles not designed for it.

“Good. So. And is it sooth that you know very well how things stand with me, and with Beren, but from your love for me, which feeling often works in despite of sense and certain knowledge, you still wished to take me to safety?”

Very deep nods.

“Perhaps also that was Beren’s request to you, before he left?”

Nod.

“Well now,” said Lúthien, breathing out in relief, “we manage, so, do we not, without you needing to break your tongue, and maybe your heart with it. One more thing. Do you believe me when I tell you, Huan, that not all your care would be any use? For I assure you that, supposing I did with your help swim to that far

shore there, so familiar and beloved of me, leaving Beren alone to meet his death, I would not thereafter live a month. Do you believe me in that? Search your heart, and tell me.”

Huan hesitated before answering with a long, sad nod to this.

“Well!” said Lúthien. “I think we have had enough words for now. It is time for action, for movement.” She sighed. “All that time he made me sit on that horse when there was no need, and now he takes it for himself, and leaves me to walk behind!”

She turned to go back to the clearing, but Huan paced in front of her, blocking her way. He sat himself down then on all fours and turned his head back to gaze at her.

“What is this?” she cried. “Do you not yet understand? No, wait. You offer to carry me again?”

Huan made one of his clumsy nods.

“To Beren?”

Nod.

Lúthien put her hands on her hips and regarded him. “I do not know your history, friend Huan,” she said, “or at least, no more of it than can be gleaned from the idle tales that pass from mouth to mouth. But it is clear to me that you work out some sentence of punishment. I cannot imagine what your crime can have been, but I promise you this: if ever it lies within my power to speak for you, I will. With all of my heart.”

She climbed on his back then without more ado and clasped her arms about his warm neck. Huan clambered to his feet.

“On, fleetfoot, once more into the North!” she cried.

Huan set off with a bound. All day he ran. The forest streamed past them, then the plain, with Sirion ever flashing on their right. The lands narrowed before them; the shadow-hills rose dark and close to their left, and the vast wall of rock and ice towered up, facing them, across the river to the right. The setting sun painted the Crissaegrim in shades of blood as hound and maid rode into the gathering dark. Night fell, and more than night. Lúthien felt the fires of his strength burn ever hotter in the great beast beneath her, and she trembled as she clung. Huan no longer seemed of the earth; he galloped on like some creature of unbridled and unguessable power, hunting down the paths of nightmare.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beren had expected to be caught, but not nearly so soon; nor was he expecting an attack from the rear. He eyed the dreadful creatures galloping up from behind therefore with his grim dismay tinged by a sense of grievance. For the love of heaven, he had not yet even set foot on the ash-lands!

He recognized them. One was the creature, like to a grey-blue wolf of enormous size and power, that had come to treat with him before the rescue of the Little People; and clinging to its back with iron claws was the great bat thing, Thuringwethil, which had earlier performed a similar office.

He had no sword, no bow, no spear; only Telchar’s knife, and his fists. He took the knife in one hand and raised the balled fist of the other. There was nothing then left to do but await the onset of the fearful Blue Wolf – Draugluin as he was in the Grey-elven – which bounded closer with each passing second, its eyes fixed on his.

What happened next made him doubt his senses. The wolf pulled to a skidding halt in front of him. The great bat spread out its loathsome leather wings, and spoke his name – but the voice! It spoke with Lúthien’s voice!

While his head was reeling, there came a movement, a blurring of the air; the skins of wolf and bat crumpled and fell away, to reveal – no wolf, but Huan, the Hound of Valinor, with Lúthien the Flower of Doriath riding on his back.

Lúthien sprang off and ran to the half-fainting man. He embraced her tightly, trying to assure himself that she was real. He held her at arms length, looked at her closely, then at Huan, then around at the landscape; and lastly at the loathly skins where they lay crumpled on the ground.

“Where in the name of the Thousand Stars did you get those?” he asked in his amazement.

Lúthien’s face clouded. “There are black passages in your past that you are loth to recall,” she said. “Now I have one of my own. Huan hunted them at the Isle, but he found them not on this plane of the world. More than that I will not willingly tell.”

As he looked again on her face, so fair and so dear to him, a glow of frustration and anger began to kindle in his breast. “But what fool prank is this, that brings you to this deathly place?” he demanded. “Beneath the very shadow of Thangorodrim? Have you no sense? Do you not realize the danger?”

She flushed a little, but she replied calmly. “Beloved,” she said, “there are things about this which you are not seeing.”

“I am not seeing?” he replied hotly. He turned to Huan. “Comrade,” he said to him accusingly, “is this your trust? Had you followed my expressed wish, as I believe you had agreed to, Lúthien would be safe home by now. What...” He broke off in sudden surprise, because he saw that a change was occurring in Huan. The great dog was tossing his head in agitation, and his throat muscles were working and bunching.

Lúthien observed these motions with an anxious eye. Before she could open her mouth, however, Huan opened his; and out of it came not growls, but the resonant voice she had heard once before, deep in the night, in Nargothrond.

“Children,” he said. Beren’s mouth fell open in amazement. “Children,” said Huan, looking slightly surprised himself, “hear my words. I have very few. Value them. Beren, you are wrong, and your beloved is right. I who saw the world made, I who have seen into the very sinews of the world-beast itself, I assure you of this. From the shadow of death you can no longer save Lúthien, for by her love for you she is now subject to it. Your choice is thus: you can, if you will it, turn from your fate and lead her into exile, seeking peace in vain while your lives last. But if you will not deny your doom, then either Lúthien, being forsaken, must assuredly die alone; or you two must never more be parted, and hand in hand go to challenge the fate that lies jointly before you.”

After Beren had collected his wits, he said slowly to the dog, “I must accept what you say... I have no choice but to believe you.” His face became graven with harsh lines. “All that is left me is to rue thricefold my foolish words to Thingol, for bitterest of all outcomes is that Lúthien should die. Far better had he killed me outright. But now, if your words be true, whether we go or go not makes little difference. Miserable life or certain death are our only choices.”

“No,” replied Huan, shaking his great head. “*Not* certain. More amply said: if you leave Lúthien and go alone, yes, you will both certainly die. But if you go together, your deaths are *not* certain.”

“How do you know?” demanded Beren.

“I know,” replied the dog with certainty. “I smell it on you. I smell a faint trail, a meeting of we three in the paths of the future, under the light of Doriath. The odds against it are fearful; but *not* certain. Now enough! I feel my allowed span of voice near to its end. Are ye resolved at last to go, together, where none have dared to go, and to attempt the unachievable?”

Lúthien and Beren looked at one another, slow decision firming at last in their joined gaze. “We are,” they

said to him.

“Clothe yourselves in these skins,” said the hound. “Thus you may walk far. Much further, maybe, than a party of miserable Orcs.”

“But what will you wear?” asked Beren.

“I may not come,” said Huan. “My children, this you must dare on your own. And for one more reason: I sense my death waiting at the gates of Hell. But it is not yet my allotted time to meet him. Soon, but not yet.

“My voice fails. Fare ye well!”

The sun had set. Dusk threw its long shadows over the drear lands behind them. The two figures, tall man and slender maid, watched as the figure of the great dog loped away into the failing light. Soon he was lost to sight.

Beren turned to consider doubtfully the dreadful hides lying heaped beside the path. “What shall we do with these?” he asked, his voice sounding loud and strange in the silence that blanketed that empty land. “We did this formerly with Orc-skins, but Felagund worked some magic at that time...”

“Pull the wolf-skin over you,” said Lúthien. She bent and lifted the loathsome leathery cloak of the bat-horror, the savage claws clinking ominously where they dangled together.

Beren hesitated before doing the same with his own pelt, unable to dismiss from his mind Draugluin’s remembered malice and power. The skin was heavy, the pale grey fur harsh under his hands. He draped it with reluctance over his head and shoulders and turned again to look at Lúthien.

Lúthien had greater power than Felagund. What had taken the Elf-prince an evening’s long-wrought song to weave, the child of Melian accomplished with a raised hand and a single high note that shook the air.

The sere grasses thrashed about their feet; the brooding pines standing bleak on the ridge to the South stirred in unease. Beren felt the change begin. His mind could only bear helpless witness as his body, obedient to the piercing command in Lúthien’s voice, twisted itself through an agony of change. In a way impossible to describe, it was a base, disgusting pathway; of all the many horrors Beren had endured in the darkness of his days, this was in some ways the most loathsome of all.

When he had at last shaken off the miasma, as a man shakes himself free of a cloud of filthy and buzzing flies, he found himself standing on all fours, sick at spirit, but physically quite at his ease. His legs seemed to have grown shorter, his arms longer, and he felt a leaping power in this body that was strange and new. His long tongue moved in its narrow bed and he was startled by the array of great and tearing fangs it touched. There was no tower of human body beneath him any more, only two great paws; behind him he could glimpse bluish-grey shaggy pelt curving over mighty ribs. He had become the wolf.

Beside him crouched a shadow of terror from which his gaze shrank. He forced himself to look. There, cloaked in vast dark wings of creased and dirty leather covering a splayed web of long finger-bones, squatted the horror that haunted his memory, and many a nightmare since. Thuringwethil. There were the glittering eyes he remembered, set in twisted flesh which could not be named a face; rather it was some work of a creation distorted and perverted out of all reason and goodness.

“Lúthien?” he rumbled, in a voice gone deep and harsh, sounding strangely in his thick-furred throat. “Is that still you?”

“It is I,” replied the batlike monster, and though the voice was a screech like claw on steel, there was something in it that he recognized; and yes, gleaming deep within the eyes, there she was.

“Of all the dark things I have witnessed,” he said, “I think this may be the most terrible. Can we escape again

from these garments, think you, with our souls intact?”

“That we shall see,” she replied grimly. “Now on: our road awaits.”

\* \* \* \* \*

In former times these wide northern plains had been clean and kindly. They lay under deep snow in winter, but the spring called forth again the soft grasses and the green growing things. In that season tender flowers dotted the sward, and small waters tinkled everywhere, winding in secret runnels between the herbs. Rabbits had lived there in their thousands, and it had been home to sheep and horses, and to deer both great and small. Foxes had hunted there, and the clean wolves of the North. White clouds had sailed there across the wide blue sky, and the winds were ever fresh. The plains had echoed to the sound of King Fingolfin’s trumpets, and had witnessed the hoof-thunder of his squadrons, proud ranks of serried spears and shields, glittering silver beneath the newborn sun.

Then had come the night of fire, bringing death to the broad lands, to the quiet plain as it lay sleeping in winter’s grip. The terrible blanket of poisoned death had spread, out from the towers of Hell. All the souls it covered, whether trifling or great, had perished in that single moment; and the cry of their throats had risen to accuse the very heavens.

Now over all of that vast landscape, no living thing housed or grew. No bird sang; no fly buzzed. That terrible plain was become the kingdom of Death, bounded on the one side by the gloom-choked ravines of Thangorodrim, and on the other by the monstrous vacancy under the black shadows of Nightshade.

The poison gases had now long since dispersed, and it was possible to walk on the plain again and live; but all softness and joy had departed from that place forever, until the world be made anew. Acrid clinker carpeted the ground, crunching harshly under foot. The mournful wind raised clouds of alkali dust which stung the eyes and parched throat and nose. What rain dared to fall hissed as it met the ground. Where pools collected, they were stained orange and green. These dried again quickly, leaving multi-levelled curlicues of poisonous scum, like the meaningless scribblings of a mad god.

Eager to consolidate and defend his grip on his conquests, Morgoth had caused a web of strongholds and towers to be built across the dead plain. Harsh voices and watch-fires brought a kind of life back to the lands, but death had the place in its grip, and the garrisons could only be maintained by ceaseless effort.

Into this place of dread now trod wolf and bat. Beren had quailed within as they had passed the first and outermost ring of defence, but the two passed unchallenged. Some there paused to wonder, perhaps, who had seen Draugluin before, since all had heard rumours of the fall of the Tower on the Isle, but none of the Orcs digging, marshalling or shouting felt bold enough to hinder the great wolf, so fierce of flashing eye; and all turned shuddering from the black and dreadful being which clung to its broad back, like as it was to some creature from nightmare, escaped most terribly into the light of day.

Ever further the pair went, and ever blacker and nearer loomed the jagged peaks of their destination. The towers on the plain were sown ever more thickly, the passing troops of Orcs more frequent.

The pair drank water from a cistern. The water was made bitter by the ever-present dust, but such was their thirst by that time that the murky and acrid liquid slid most gratefully down their parched throats. Cloaked again by the darkness of night, they rested some hours in the lee of a corner of a wall. Shouts from Orcs and bellows of great beasts of burden kept both of them from sleep.

Day came again. The sun, a sullen and brassy coin as seen now through murky layers of air, brought a pitiless light to the road, but scant warmth to their limbs. Shivering, sore-footed, the unrested travellers raised themselves on limbs made stiff by cold and took once more to the road. Of pounded ashes, it stretched before them, broad and straight, to the first mighty slopes of the mountains of Hell.

As they crept nearer to the end of their road, so ever higher were piled the mounds of rock-vomit on either



side. The pair began to pass chasms rent in the earth from which rose gases that caught in their throats. In some of the depths, dark forms could be glimpsed, writhing like demented serpents. The traffic on the road grew more monstrous, the minds they passed darker and more threatening. Before them towered the wall of the fortress of their enemy, wreathed in gloom.

Night came to them again, but there was no place to rest between earth and sullen sky, so they could only creep on, in the grip of a waking nightmare. Beren's paws were cut to ribbons by the cinders, and he left now blood on the ground with each pace, but he pushed himself grimly on. They spoke no words to each other, but the warm weight of Lúthien on his back, the grip of her talons in his hide, were not burdens to be endured, but rather a glad freight of love, an umbilical of life to his tested soul. He gathered himself anew, sunk his head, and went on.

Thus they arrived at last at the gate. The sun had by that time risen again in its circle, but it rose far behind the bulk of rock and iron which now towered blackly before them, and little light filtered down to pierce the gloom. A vast wall they could dimly make out, towering high above them, fluted in razor-serrated ridges, reaching to tiers of arches fanged in teeth of bitter steel, all ending at last high above in battlements. Behind those again loomed yet higher walls, and behind those higher still, until the ranks vanished into blackness. Carrion fowl of who knew what corrupt and midnight race sat serried on the beetling walls, from whence they cried into the dank air with fell voices that withered the soul.

The gateway arch yawned in front of them like a vast mouth. Green and red lights from sources unseen tinted the stinking air in the broad court behind it. The high rim of the arch was worked in iron, with needle-pointed teeth descending, each as long as Beren's leg. Massive brazen gates stood open on either side, reaching up higher than trees.

The road through the arch was not free. Squarely in the way, blocking it, was piled a great heap of something unknown, showing black against the poisonous light behind.

Beren and Lúthien approached until they were almost beneath the arch, its teeth threatening high overhead, but still they could not make out what the heap could be. Suddenly the mass stirred, making them jump back in fright. The outline changed; a terrible head reared high. A muzzle yawned wide, exposing knife-like fangs, each as long as a man's forearm.

Iron clanked, and they saw that the thing was chained, but what a chain! Each black link was as large as an Orc's head.

The fearful red-mawed yawn stretched, stretched; then the jaws came together with a clash. The monster blinked, levered itself to its feet, then directed upon the two venturers a pair of eyes in which flickered a terrible spirit. Neither of the pair dared meet this deadly gaze; they looked aside, took in the rest of the creature. Most like a wolf the apparition appeared, but a wolf distorted out of proportion in the fierceness of its generation. The jaws were too large, the brain-case too small. A body vast and bloated perched lumbering on knotted legs.

A stench came to their noses from that place: a stench of terror and death. Heaps of bones could be made out in the gloom to the sides of the road. Orcs scurried ceaselessly through the gaps between wolf and wall; they had no option, else they had not dared it. The bones signified that not all of them passed through with their lives.

Beren had stared in shock as the monster revealed itself. No tale had told of this, but he remembered Huan's words. Here was Death indeed.

He made to pass through the gap with the jostling Orcs, but a massive paw came down with a crash right in front of him, blocking his way. Two Orcs were crushed, the rest scattered in gibbering panic. Beren looked up into eyes of madness, but turned his gaze then hastily to the side, lest those terrible eyes suck him in and draw out his senses like a hook-dragged gizzard.

The thing bent its hideous muzzle down and sniffed at him, while the man sent a fierce command to his legs to remain calm and sturdy.

A voice now came rattling out of the depths of the monster's throat, and this voice shook Beren to his core. It seemed to reach far back into his past and stab him in the very place where he was most tender. With the first sound, the mad thought had seized him, against all reason, that he stood before the slayer of his sister.

"Who are you?" came the terrible voice in a rumble like rocks falling. "Are you my death?"

"I am Draugluin," Beren made himself reply, in as steady a voice as he could manage, looking up but not quite into the eyes of the tormented spirit within the great carcase. "I serve... I serve the Lord Mairon, sometime Lieutenant of Angband. I have dispatches of importance. Let me pass."

"Draugluin," rumbled the voice. "Mairon. Dispatches. Fire. Madness. What are these things? I spoke to a whirlwind, and the wind spoke not to me; and its name was Nemesis. Farther than you can know, Wolf-hame, I have come. But where do we go? Pain cannot tell me. Death turns her face from me. What say you to that?"

"I do not know of these things," replied Beren. "I serve my Master. I come and go at his bidding. Let me pass!"

"Do you so? Do you serve? *I do not. I serve no-one,*" said the monster. "I serve not, I am not, I have not. Names, no, no name names me, O Wolf of a name which is surely not his own. Some have named me Carcharoth, the Red Maw, or Knife-fang, but these things are not mine, they are not to me, to me; fine mantles to be shucked when the swords come, when all shall be shucked, or shorn away. Are you for the shearing, or the shucking? Where is your shuck-shearing sword? For no wolf are you! Or I am a cockroach." And with this it stretched back its terrible head and laughed. The shattering sound rattled in echoes across the courtyard and made ring the cruel iron teeth on the edges of the gate. The crowds of waiting Orcs whimpered and tried to crush themselves further back into dark corners.

"I tell you, I am Draugluin," said Beren through clenched teeth.

The monster, Carcharoth as he had named himself, brought his head back down. He bared his terrible teeth at Beren in a grimace.

"You do not smell right," he growled. "I shall eat thee, and thus shall I know thee." He opened his mouth, wider and wider, like a cavern of death, edged by a forest of razor-edged steel.

Lúthien had been crouching on Beren's back all this time in silence. She sprang now to the ground and in an instant she had cast aside the bat disguise and took back her true form. She stood mantled in her cloak before the wolf and it was as though a shaft of brilliant white light came into that dark place.

Lúthien raised her hand; her grey eyes glittered; power was in her. "Sleep!" she commanded, and all there swayed before the might in her voice. "Thou woe-begotten spirit, fall now into dark oblivion, and forget for a while the pains of life. Sleep!"

The malevolence in Carcharoth's eyes went out like a blown-out candle. The whole of that mountain of heaped and twisted flesh sagged as the will within it fled to worlds unknown. The mighty legs slowly collapsed; the monster wolf fell at last in an ungainly heap, where it lay, bathed in twitching slumber.

After the tumult of the collapsing body had faded to nothing, all was silent in the great court. The Orcs carpeted the ground thickly in snoring heaps, and the foul birds above had their heads hanging limply, or else tucked beneath their wings.

Beren eyed his love-bond, relishing the sight of her familiar form. "Beloved," he said to her in admiration, "the direst perils lie yet before us; but you may be very proud. No other in the whole of Elfinesse has come

so far, nor penetrated so deep into the Enemy's guard."

She smiled at him a little tiredly. "Then let us try to reach a little deeper."

He was a wolf; he could not squeeze her hand. Glance meeting glance had to say everything between them.

She changed before his eyes, discarding all fairness and light, again she crouched before him in her hideous disguise. With a bound she was once more clinging to his back. They went on.

Ever further and deeper they went, through iron gates innumerable, past great halls and low warrens. Orcs swarmed everywhere, and nameless creatures. The ground shook in places from the hammering of forges.

Scenes of brutality and harshness passed one after another before the eyes of the hurrying pair. Soldiers in their ranked hundreds marshalled shouting in a court. A great Orc or troll cut with a whip at a quivering rack of bloody bones that had once been a living creature. Bellowing screams shivered through the murk, following them after as they hurried away from their source: a great toad-like creature, bound or joined to the earth in some way they could not make out, from which living slices of flesh were being carved.

Guarded gate after guarded gate, and some of the guards were now tall spirits of terror; but still none stayed their passage. A mighty iron bridge they passed over, and in the gulf beneath there was a churning, and they glimpsed a roil of water in which swords seemed to whirl. Their way led through the middle of a great hall which was packed on either side by formations of large figures, covered from head to toe in blue-beetle armour; and whether the rows were dancing or drilling was impossible to tell. They swung and clashed and stamped, all in unison. Green highlights gleamed off their armour from the sick-hued lights which crawled in stealthy worms across the walls.

Down, ever down, into rising heat. Beren did not know where they were going, but there was only one possible way. He walked in a daze, sick at the horrors he had glimpsed. And somewhere ahead of him, looming like a dark cloud, like a heart of evil fire, pulsed the centre of everything. Every plague of misery, every disappointment or betrayal, every cruel torture, all spite and hate; gleeful destruction, the riever of innocence, the twisted mind, lies, filth, ordure, ruin: here was its source.

The staggering pair passed through an archway of tortured iron into a final vast, dark space. The floor of this gloomy chamber teemed with murmuring shadows, constantly passing. Some of the figures held whispered conclave over rustled papers, lit by glow-worm gleams, the light touching harsh features grimacing in hush-voiced vehemence, or giving outline to the shaking of a fisted claw. All furtive glances among the attendants, all tendency of motion, were directed towards a single point: a mighty doorway at the far end, through which streamed a pulsing, filthy light the colour of old blood. The blood-light shone greasily on the arcade between a central rows of giant pillars, whose lines narrowed and brightened until they met the opening. A constant traffic of shadows could be seen ducking into the red-lit door, or scuttling out of it again into the sheltering dark.

That door was the terminus of their journey; the road led no further.

There was nothing for it but to go on, heads down, against the tide of bloody light, accompanied by a flowing darkness within that threatened to upset their reason.

As they neared the great doorway, Beren became aware of two centres of concentrated malice at either side of it. Peering through the gloom, he could just make out, standing very tall beside the fiery portal, two giant figures, winged and horned, cloaked in shadow. Each seethed with smoke like a brand that is about to burst into flame.

The guards were aware of him: he could feel their cold minds playing over his, picking at it, trying to find a way in. Eyes like furnace coals laid hot whips across his senses.

Eyes tight closed, clutching desperately to his sanity, wolf-Beren forced his shaking limbs to take him, step

by step, toward the red-glowing doorway.

Just before he entered, the smoking giants guarding the doorway burst with a roar into twin towers of flame. Swords of white-hot steel flashed out and barred the gap in front of him. The heat of the brands smote him in the face in a scorching blast.

A harsh voice came hissing out of the fire on one side. "Who are ye that would disturb the Eternal One, He who arises in might like a mountain of fire, the world's glory and its terror, most puissant Lord of all Arda?"

"We bear messages from Mairon," cried Beren. "We are his servants."

The fires flickered away to nothing, the swords were withdrawn. He thought he could detect a cold humour. "It is well," the voice hissed. "Pass, servants."

So Beren and Lúthien crept into the centre of terror. With his senses reeling, wolf-Beren could not see the towering fires on every side of this final chamber, the terrible courtiers whose nerve-tearing laughter sounded on this side and that, the writhing, living sculptures of tortured and debased beauty, or the long pillar-bordered passage with the tall throne at its end, on which the brooding figure sat; all he could do was creep blindly, one feeble step after another, towards the source of the dark, approaching that vast whirling centre of destruction. He tried desperately to clutch to his life, but in the storm of power that snagged at his soul, he was no longer sure where he ended and where the inner darkness began.

His blind head bumped into something. It was a leg of the throne. He staggered forward, beneath the great seat, and collapsed, shaking from terror like a man dying of fever.

Despite the tide of horror that threatened to wash him away, Beren became aware slowly of two things: firstly that the attention of the dark god was not directed at him; secondly, that Lúthien was no longer on his back. Lúthien! He opened his eyes and looked wildly around.

She had flown up into the shadowed spaces high overhead, where vast pillars like cruel and jagged trees sent out branching razor curves to slice the choking air; alighting at last, high above, in a maze of fanged iron vaulting.

The savage laughter in the hall sank away. The Balrogs and other behemoths who seethed in congress at the feet of their master were suddenly at pause, uneasy. Something was not right – a new air had entered the room; and with it, unpleasant memory. Memory of radiance, and of the bright sword's edge, and of a fierce light in the eyes of forgotten gods; and of vengeance awoken.

A Voice broke the sudden hush, thundering into the high spaces. "You there, above! Come down! And show yourself, wretch! It takes more than a borrowed bat-skin to fool Me."

It was a voice to shake the world; it shook Beren's bones in his body. One word of that voice, he knew, could reduce him to atoms and fling them to the four corners of Middle-earth.

Under the inexorable force of this command, Lúthien could do nothing but obey. Appearing small and insignificant against the sharp-fluted pillars, the scrap of bat-shape fluttered into view, then quickly descended to earth. The wings shivered and shrivelled away; the small figure straightened from her crouch. She stood there, alone, held in the crossed gaze of all eyes in that chamber, the centre of their hot, suspicious focus.

So tiny she appeared, so fragile! But standing bold and unafraid.

The Voice sounded again, now rumbling low. "Long I have watched your advance," it said sneeringly. "Your pitiful attempts at disguise have availed you nothing. I could have had you killed at the first fences. But I was curious. So tell me, who are you who dare to approach Me, and what is your purpose?"

“I am Lúthien of Doriath,” replied she, her clear voice sounding small in the cavernous hall. “As doubtless you know, O high one from whom nothing can be hidden. My purpose? I have many purposes.”

The gaggle of watching monsters stirred in uneasy surmise.

So it *was* Lúthien! Conflict arose in Morgoth’s mind. He had heard much of this daughter of Thingol, but had never seen her face. Now that she stood before him, he found her fair beyond any of the Children he had ever seen; fair even by the measure of the Gods. As with all the fair things of the world, a great desire arose in him to possess her; at the same time this mood battled with jealousy, a desire to rend and corrupt, because she was no creation of his.

Could he do both? Possess yet besmirch?

As he pondered, a most evil design formed in his mind. Yes: that was the way. And it held further potential, for what fruit might not that breach of the house of her body, that outrage of its tenant, that forced possession of light by dark, come at last to bear? Smiling secretly, he decided to leave her free for a little while, the better to savour his design.

“You stand under my power, O fair daughter of Arda,” his voice boomed, “so you had best answer my questions without pertness. Has it not come to my ears that you are pert? So I ask again: what purpose have you here? If you will not reveal that, then you cannot expect to retain either your life or your freedom. I will send your flesh to other uses.”

“O mighty Lord,” replied Lúthien, “my people are at war with yours. Should not therefore my purpose – my deadly purpose – be as familiar to you as my name?”

Beren, forgotten beneath the throne, clenched his jaw together. This was it, this was the end. But he would not sit idly by! He bunched his haunches, ready to spring forth in last defence of his beloved.

Then he jerked in surprise, because the sound of Morgoth’s sudden and terrible laughter thundered out from over his head. The flames on the walls shook at the huge sound of his scorn, the iron arches rang.

“Can you be so brazen as to speak of war?” the Vala laughed. “Such a soft, small thing as you? Before my very seat of power?” His voice changed, became sneering. “Such words bespeak madness, or direst folly. I am Melkor!” The thunder of this boast echoed from the hollowed walls. “I am He who arises in might! None can best me, none dare face me – not even those fools over the Sea, sitting huddled in the ruins of their petty dreams. How much less dare even the doughtiest of your kin. Those mad few who have tried, have but dashed out their lives on the rock of my irresistible strength. Their puny blades lie broken, their armour crushed. And you? *You* are powerless, for all your petty witchery. You bear no blade; you wear no armour. Weak and defenceless you stand in my presence. What can *you* do? Nothing!”

Beren cowered, gasping, beneath the power of the Voice. He could not find air enough to breathe. But after the storm of sounds had subsided, to his renewed amazement, he heard the small voice of Lúthien reply, sounding clear and bright in that dark chamber of horrors.

“I can sing,” the slender maid said. “No-one can sing better than I. Shall I sing for you, Lord?”

Sing? What nonsense was this? For a moment, Morgoth was caught off balance, with no ready reply at hand. But only for a moment, before he gathered again his powers. “You doting wanton,” came his voice then, laden now with such a power of scorn as might scarify the walls. “You poor joke. You infant. You disgusting worm only fit to be ground underfoot with a curse. What new prattle is this? *Sing?* Think you not that the purest voices of Middle-earth lie ready at my command? You would match your weasen squeaks to their power? Your effrontery is boundless. Sing, then. Lay bare to all here the height and breadth of your dismal insufficiency, in this as with all others of your boasts this day. Sing, that we may laugh our fill – before we snuff out the guttering candle of your miserable life.”

Paying no heed to the threats, the daughter of Melian spread wide her dark cloak with her arms, and straight away commenced to sing. Meagre at the beginning, hardly to be heard over the harsh tide of sound in that hall of fires and leering devils, the sweetness of her voice gathered slow power with the moments. And how sweet it was! None of the graspers and plotters there in fawning assembly had ever heard anything like it. One by one they ceased their mutterings, reached to quell the furnaces and engines; straining to hear more. Silence spread out from the slender maid, a silence which became filled with the pure magic of her voice, weaving a song such as not even the blackest heart there could resist.

Morgoth was entranced with the rest, completely contrary to either his intentions or expectations. The sound of her gentle voice came as fair to his ears as the sight of her face. The Lord of Hell forgot everything, carried away by the loveliness of the song.

Suddenly she was no longer before his eyes. How had she eluded him? And where was she now? The golden voice still trickled down from the shadows. He cast about him, seeking her, but a great weariness had come upon him. He closed his eyes for a moment. He would catch her soon enough – after a little rest. He needed a rest. There had been so much work, so much pain and frustration. The weight of all his dreams and fears was as heavy on his head as the cursed crown with its sullen jewels.

All he could think of was the golden tide of song. There had never been a sound more lovely. Presently, he would... but just for now, let him but hear. The song had become all his world. The drowsiness took him to its heart, and carried him away. In the dream that seized gentle hold of his spirit, the Vala stood straight, his burdens removed, his wounds healed; and he was crowned in white light. The music led him to a place of such peace and beauty as he had never known before, and never would again. He carried the memory of it forever after, and grief for its loss would pain him until the end of time.

The tide of drowsiness covered first all those in the room, then spread through the whole mighty fortress. Guards drooped at their posts, sergeants stopped their shouting. Orcs in their thousands cast down their burdens and blades and slumped down yawning. Deep underground, slaves and breeders found their way into the blessed peace of sleep, their tormentors snoring at their sides. The fires sank. Outside the door, the Balrog guards slumped down and slumbered, their own fires smouldering low. Heads nodded, spears fell from nerveless hands.

Last of all, gripped fast in sleep, the mighty god slid from his throne like a hill in avalanche, that starts slow at its beginning but picks up monstrous pace and power. His great form tumbled off the seat at last and stretched with a noise like thunder full length upon the floor. The heavy iron crown, thrown from his head, hit the ground with a clang and trundled away into the gloom.

The fires were out, all things were still. Angband slept.

Lúthien came to Beren where he lay in sleep and touched him with her hand. He woke with a start, but her dim figure warned him to silence with a finger laid on his wolf-lips. At her gesture he cast aside the foul wolf-hide and stood again on his own two legs as a free man. He looked unbelievably at the dark figure lying prone over half the floor.

“He sleeps,” whispered Lúthien in his ear. “Seek the crown.”

Beren, stepping carefully around the shadowed forms of prone and extinguished attendants, found the brutish circlet rolled against the wall. He set the heavy thing with silent care onto its base and felt along it. Where were the famous jewels? He could see nothing which matched Finrod’s entrancing description. Where was the Light of Valinor, welling out of the stones?

His searching fingers found what must be them – three smooth rounds under his hands, each as broad as a pigeon’s egg. They were held by iron claws. Bethinking him of the knife, Angrist, he took it from his belt and tried it on the iron of the middle jewel. The task was not easy; this was no ordinary iron. He managed one claw, then another. Then a third. As the final claw was severed, the smooth jewel slipped loose into his hand. He had it! A Silmaril!

A faint glimmer showed – it came from the jewel! The glimmer grew to a glow, then the glow waxed to a blazing white flame. The flame grew to a centre of unbearable brilliance; and still it gathered power. This was more than light of sun, more even than the stars of Arda; it was a light that pierced the soul like a white-hot fire. It pierced to the man's heart and began to scorch him.

Laid bare beneath that light of the world's Creation, all the petty meannesses of childhood flitted past Beren in a flashing vision. He glimpsed Hiril's stubborn face, then his mother's at their parting; Andreth's anguish, his father's grief. Thunderbolt died again before his eyes, and a parade of beaten Blackshirts sprawled before him, sobbing. Orcs with the knowledge of their deaths in their eyes, far too many to count.

It seemed a brief time; then he was back in the throne-room. The light from the stone held in his hand flooded the room with brilliance, but it no longer seared. Beren felt a little as though he were sunburned on his inside. But he had passed the trial; the stone accepted his touch.

The man and woman stood for a moment, hand in hand, with fuller hearts perhaps than ever felt by any other creature. Their quest was fulfilled.

Looking around at the walls and furnishings of the chamber, as they were revealed now in the merciless light of the Silmaril held high in his red-glowing hand, Beren was struck by how tawdry they all were, how ill-made. He turned his gaze then with awe and trepidation on the face of the sleeping god. It was a noble face, with dark arched brows, a strong line of jaw, and well-shaped lips. He marked the scars on the pale face where the Eagle had scored it. High on the forehead too there was a mark: a blackened band across its width. Beren's hand came to his mouth as the realization shook him. That was a burn, from the crown!

Wondering, he whispered to Lúthien, "Why, he suffers!"

She nodded.

They should not delay. There was the door, all unguarded. But even as Beren shifted his weight to move towards it, a new thought came to him. Two Silmarils remained imprisoned. Why should he not go beyond his vow?

He bent again with the knife in his hand. Lúthien, seeing what he was about, shook her head and tugged his arm; but he was seized by the boldness of the idea. Silently he worked the knife. One claw severed. As he levered the knife on the second, however, forcing the knife to cut the ensorcelled metal, the noble blade of his Dwarven friend and mentor could no longer support the strain. The blade snapped, ringing loud in the stillness. A shard of it flew and wounded the sleeping god in the face. Morgoth groaned mightily and stirred in his sleep.

Lúthien tugged at Beren in rising panic. "Oh come, come!" she said. "If he wakes we are lost!"

Seized now by the same fear, cursing his rash folly, Beren ran with her out of the door. As they ran, their footsteps clapping loud in the stillness, they saw the door-ward Balrogs stir and begin to smoke. Terror seized them then and they sprinted for their lives. The memory of the long path down rose high and black in Beren's despairing mind. So far! They could never make it!

As they flew, however, their pace became less and less like running and more like actual flying. With Lúthien's hand in his, their speed became very great. The passages and furnaces began to pass in a blur. Back past the marching beetle-men, now fallen and still in their ranks. Back over the bridge of the swords, churning still below. Back past the barracks and prisons, past the blood and the bones. No-one stopped them, no-one followed them; sleep still held the inhabitants of Angband.

All but one. He was awake and waiting for them: Carcharoth, the mad wolf. Before they were aware of him, he saw them, and sprang into their path.

Lúthien was spent; she fell gasping to her knees. No more power could she call up. But Beren strode forth

before her, and in his right hand he held aloft the Silmaril, which burned in that court like a star of the northern sky fallen to earth. The monster skidded to a halt, grimacing face turned in pain from the jewel which flayed away its skin. Eyes closed tight against the searing intensity, it thrashed and tried blindly to scabble away.

“Get you gone, foul misbegot of Morgoth,” said Beren in a voice that rang through the court. “Here is a bane for you. Here is a fire to your flesh. Get you gone, lest it consume you untimely!”

But the mad spirit that drove the carcass knew neither fear nor reason. The wolf stopped thrashing its head and paws, opened its eyes and stared full at the fire that scorched them. “Death!” it howled in mad ecstasy. Reaching forward with the speed of a striking adder, it bit off the hand that held the jewel.

The pandemonium that then filled the court was indescribable. The wolf-creature, with the Silmaril burning its insides, bucked and thrashed like some maddened force of nature. It burst its chain with a ringing crash; freed, the monster tore howling out of the gate. The terror and violence of its passage could be heard for minutes thereafter.

Inside the gateway, Beren lay fainted on the ground, the blood pumping from his stump. The panting girl ripped his shirt with hands that shook, attempting to staunch the blood with the rag. She trembled with haste and terror as she worked, for behind her in the depths of Angband the rumour grew of great wrath aroused. The hosts of Morgoth were awakened.

Thus the quest of the Silmaril was likely to have ended in ruin and despair; but at that hour, above the walls of the valley, three mighty birds appeared, flying northward with wings swifter than the wind. Among all birds and beasts the wandering and need of Beren had been noised, and Huan himself had bidden all things watch, that they might bring the man aid. High above the realm of Morgoth, Thorondor and his vassals soared; and seeing now the madness of the Wolf and Beren’s fall they came swiftly down, even as the powers of Angband were released from the toils of sleep.

Then they lifted up Lúthien and Beren from the earth and bore them aloft into the clouds. Below them sudden thunder rolled, lightnings leapt upwards, and the mountains quaked. Fire and smoke belched from Thangorodrim, and flaming bolts were hurled far abroad, falling ruinous upon the lands; and the Noldor in Hithlum trembled. But Thorondor took his way far above the earth, seeking the high roads of heaven, where the sun shines through the day unveiled and the moon walks amid the cloudless stars. Thus they passed swiftly over the plain of dusty death, and over the dark lands of Nightshade, and thence over the high mountains. Lúthien, watching the land below, saw with wonder how a deep valley opened in the heart of the wild peaks. Green lands spread in that hollow far below, and in their midst she saw a white light shining, as though from a jewel; and this was the radiance of Gondolin the fair where Turgon dwelt. But she wept, for she thought that Beren would surely die; he spoke no word, nor opened his eyes, and knew thereafter nothing of the flight. And at last the eagles set them down on the borders of Doriath; and they were come to that same meadow whence Beren had stolen in despair and left Lúthien asleep.

There the eagles laid her at Beren’s side and returned to their high eyries in the peaks of the Crissaegrim. But Huan came to her, and together they tended Beren, even as before when she had healed him of the wound which Curufin gave to him. But this wound of the Wolf was evil and poisonous. Long Beren lay, fighting for his life. Although shielded from the bitter winter by Lúthien’s power, his spirit wandered on the dark borders of death, pursued with anguish from dream to dream. Then suddenly, when her hope was almost spent, he woke again, and looked up, seeing leaves against the sky; and he heard beneath the leaves, singing soft and slow beside him, Lúthien Tinúviel. And it was spring again.

#### Year 467

The love of Lúthien and the care of Huan the faithful Hound of Valinor drew Beren back slowly to full life, although from that time on his suffering was graven onto his face for all to see. Together the pair wandered through the woods of that place, which of all the woods of Outland had come to seem to them most fair. Their joy was very great, since the weight of dreadful doom was lifted at last from their hearts. They laughed



often, sometimes over the silliest things. They needed little to wake each time anew these springs of joy. They spoke much over the past, which no longer had power to cause them pain; turning over many incidents, attempting better to understand the currents of thought and fate that underlay each.

In all that they did, however transcendent their happiness, ever present in both their minds, perhaps most clearly to Lúthien as she noted the lines in Beren's face and the glints of silver in his hair, was the knowledge that doom was not removed forever, only postponed. Beren had not died in Angband, but he would die someday; their parting was not avoided, only delayed. For Lúthien was bound by her birth to the circles of the world, in which Beren, after the fate of his own kind, was not permitted long to remain. They thrust this sadness from them, but they could not wholly forget it.

The loss of his right hand was a blow to Beren, as it would be to any active man. In time, however, he learned many tricks to work around the loss; also in these first days Huan was with them, and was an aid in many resorts, since he could understand speech, and hold or fetch as requested.

Strange perhaps to say, Beren was not at all grieved that he had not, after all their loss and terror, succeeded in bringing a Silmaril out of Angband. The whole awful tangle of vow and fate was lifted from his shoulders and dissolved away to nothing. Indeed, he thought now that it had been foolish and vain to set both his own life and that of his love at such hazard for the sake of a mere bauble. Lúthien did not follow him in all of this; she could not see the great jewels as baubles, and she thought that the matter was not finished yet. No-one could say what had become of the monster wolf, nor where in Middle-earth he had carried the burning jewel within him. Beren only laughed at that and said that it was no longer his concern.

However, the matter of Doriath remained unresolved. Lúthien with all her heart was willing to wander in the wild with her love, without ever setting foot in her home again. She had made her choice, accepting the losses as fair price for her happiness; and the loss of her home was, after all, a small thing when set beside the far greater loss that remorseless time would bring upon her. Beren, for his part, for a while had been content to put from his mind the matter of Thingol, but he could not do so forever. When it began to trouble him again, rather than chewing over it with frowns and sighs, thus muddying the pure water of their joyful life, he made prompt mention of it to Lúthien.

She listened to him with downcast eyes. After he had finished, she raised again her clear gaze to his. "But what need?" she said. "It cannot end as you vowed. And where would be the gain? Have we not everything here which we could desire?"

Beren struggled to express his thought. "Dear heart, you live with me here as a simple laughing maid, and I could want no more from life," he said, "no more at all. But it is not right. You are not simple: you are a great lady of a noble race. It is not fitting that you throw away all honour and live as an outcast, as a rude hunter in the woods."

"But I am simple," she replied with a dazzling smile. "This 'great lady' business of yours is a great nonsense. I did not ask to be born as I was; as I did not *ask* to be beautiful. You would love me as well if I had a dumpty figure, and freckles on my homely nose, would you not? I know that you would. Body and face may draw a man in, as the flower draws in the bee, but it is the light of the soul in the eyes which binds. No, seek not for my sake this honour or that, or what other foolish trappings of ladyhood come to your mind. I don't desire them. This life as a rude hunter is enough for me – given only that your face is the one I see across the fire."

"Doriath is your home," he said. "Shall you be barred from it forever?"

"One cannot have everything," she replied. "I am barred from my home not by my own design, but because of the errors of my father. This is not anything I can repair; all I can do is accept."

"I wonder about that," said Beren. "I would like to have further words with him. I have found more wisdom, maybe, since last time we spoke. It can at least do no harm to try. It would ease my mind if I could only reconcile him with you. You *are* a high lady, whether you wish it or not; and it is simply wrong that such a one, of such deeds as yours, should be subject to shame and exile from her own people. This is wrong,

Tinúviel, and I have made up my mind no longer to suffer it. We must go to Doriath together.”

“Have you forgotten that you are under sentence of death, should you tread there again?” said Lúthien softly.

“No,” replied Beren, “but Huan will come with us, if I ask him. He will be a powerful protection against insults. And I think, after daring Morgoth in his own den, we need fear no earthly danger.”

\* \* \* \* \*

They crossed into Neldoreth together one morning, the three of them, in the quiet of the day. On the far bank they met no-one to hinder them, but the peace of their journey was not to last; for a storm was gathering in the North. The first harbinger of it came even as they made their first evening’s halt under the wondrous trees of Doriath.

A cry rent the darkening air, and broad wings swept overhead, then curved around and down. It was an eagle – not of Thorondor’s great race, but one of normal size. The great red-bronze bird alighted swaying on a branch and hailed Beren in Grey-elven by his name.

To his astonishment, Beren recognized the bird as Farsight. “Brother!” he cried. “O my brother! This is well met indeed!”

“You may not think so, after you have heard my news,” said the eagle. “I greet you indeed, Comrade without wings, but just now there is not time for pleasantries. A terror approaches from the North, some dire work of the Enemy. I fear it will lay all in waste before it if it cannot be stopped. We eagles have kept knowledge of your movements; therefore I have come hot-feather to you.”

Beren and Lúthien looked at one another in dismay. “Had you not better tell Thingol’s people?” said Beren. “I doubt there is anything I can do.”

“Say you so? I cannot believe it,” replied the bird. “Long have I known you. Long have I fought at your side. Never has one fought with more might than you. Have you not for long years held the second power in the whole Enemy’s ranks at bay? Have you not robbed the first of all, the Black Enemy, Morgoth himself, of his dearest treasure? Have I not witnessed your prowess with bow and sword? To no other would I first come in this whole land; no, not Fingon, nor Maedhros, nor Húrin. In addition to that, you have the countenance of the wild. With you on the hunt, we may raise *all* the creatures against this terror. No other can say or do as much.”

Beren’s face was troubled. “Old friend,” he said, “those times are past with me. You see that I cannot now wield any weapon, even had I the wish to. Others must take up this burden. We go now to Thingol; I will deliver to him these tidings.”

“Thingol will soon know,” replied Farsight. “I out-flew Mablung his messenger, but even now he is hastening south, having left all others of his party dead in their own gore.” He tilted his fierce head and looked at the stump of Beren’s right hand. “I hear your words, O my comrade. But if you will not go to the hunt, I cannot say but that the hunt may come to you.”

“Of what nature is this terror?” asked Lúthien.

“It is shaped like a wolf,” replied the eagle, “but of great size. A power unguessable drives it to madness and destruction.”

“Carcharoth!” exclaimed Beren and Lúthien together. Huan shivered at the name, but no-one noticed this.

“Time is short,” added the bird, “and I do not think the Lady’s fences were meant for such as he.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Mablung heavy-hand had scarce gasped his report into the ear of the King when an air unlooked-for began to move. A wind sprang up from the West, and it was as if it carried light and life on its questing tendrils into a dark house where mourners sat in silent sorrow. The sun seemed suddenly more brilliant, the birds were singing a glad chorus! What was happening? Voices could be heard, the sound of a great crowd approaching; and the voices were joyful. Many were singing, and such song had not been heard in Doriath for many a sad month. Thingol started up from his throne, hope rising to choke his throat. The joyful wave washed closer, and now people were crying, "Lúthien! Lúthien!" Some began to run out of the room in wild hope; the King descended from the daïs on shaking legs. Just then the wave reached the door of the throne-hall and burst into it like the coming of spring. And there at last was the figure of she whom he most wished to see: Lúthien, his daughter, dearest to him of all the world. She entered the doorway hand in hand with Beren, and behind them paced a mighty hound, and behind him surged a glad host of the people of Doriath, and their joy was such that they could not contain it.

Beren led Lúthien to the foot of the throne, and there he bent his knee to the ground. "Lord King," he said. "I have brought you back your daughter."

Thingol was torn by strong but conflicting emotions. On the one hand, joy bubbled up in him like a spring at seeing Lúthien's clear grey eyes, which he had long now feared he would never see in Middle-earth again. On the other hand, here again was this mortal man – the author, as Thingol held it, of all these troubles.

The King viewed Beren with darkened brow. "Have you forgotten my words from the last time we met?" he asked harshly.

"No," replied Beren, "I have them graven on my heart. You said to me, that if I dared once more to show here my face, and my hand held not a Silmaril from the crown of Morgoth, you would put me to death. Did you not?"

"I did," grated Thingol.

"To this I assented," said Beren. "Yet I am not come here to give up my life. The condition is fulfilled. I hold even now a Silmaril in my hand!"

Murmurs and widened eyes showed the people's astonishment.

"Show it to me!" demanded Thingol.

Beren lifted his left hand out of his cloak and opened it, showing the empty palm. Then from the folds of his cloak he lifted his right arm and held it equally high; and all could see that the arm ended in a stump. The hand was missing.

Thingol looked into the man's eyes and saw stark truth written there. He looked into his daughter's, and saw there the same. Then his heart changed within him; the realization swept over him at last, at long last, that what he was dealing with here was far more than just the wayward folly of a doting maid. This mortal man, whose race he had despised, had risen higher than any of the Firstborn. No other than he had dared and bested Morgoth in his den. And here he was on his knee to Thingol!

With a heart full to bursting with a turmoil of emotions, the King went slowly to the waiting man and reached out his hand. Beren taking it, Thingol urged him gently to his feet. Then, to the wonder of all, Thingol the King dropped to his own knee before the couple and bent his head.

A rustling began in the great chamber as all the courtiers and the great and growing crowd of marvelling Sindar followed their King's example. Soon all had knelt and bent the head; leaving Lúthien standing, and Beren staring with wonder all around, and behind them the tall figure of Huan the dog.

"Son of Bëor," Thingol said to him, "forgive me. I have been blind to many things." He rose again, and taking Beren's hand in one of his and Lúthien's in the other, he led them to the daïs. "Come," he said. "We

have newly received grave tidings, and must presently attend to them. But first I will hear something of your quest." He had chairs brought, and a great cushion for Huan, and water and wine. Beren sat before his throne on the left, and Lúthien on his right, and for an hour or more they told all the tale of the Quest, while all there listened and were filled with amazement. And it seemed to Thingol that this Man was unlike all other mortal Men, and among the great in Arda, and the love of Lúthien a thing new and strange; and he perceived at last that their doom might not be withstood by any power of the world.

When the tale came to an end, he stood, and bade them rise also. Melian came quietly from where she sat and stood beside the King.

Thingol addressed Lúthien. "Daughter," he said, "is it still thy will to wed this man?"

"Father," she replied with tremulous voice, "it is."

Thingol turned to the man. "And you, Beren, is this thy will, that you should make one cause with Lúthien the daughter of Thingol and Melian, and accept her as your wife?"

"It is," replied Beren, his voice and eyes full of wonder. This was more than he ever had hoped.

"I had not consented," said Thingol, "and my reasons seemed good to me at the time. In this, however, I have been deaf and blind. I had arguments before my eyes, and counsel from this my wise spouse for my ears, but I chose to ignore both. Well, what is past is past; we cannot undo it. But now perhaps I see the matter a little more clearly. There is grief before you in this match; you know that as well as I. That has not changed. But I understand now that some prices must be paid. Therefore I withdraw my objections, and I give my consent to your union."

Melian came forward. "Your promises to one another you have long since exchanged," she said quietly. "But I bid you each take the other by the hand, and kiss, as a mark of this moment. For you have been joined to one another these many months; but now you shall join to us."

Beren turned to face Lúthien, and she him. The light shining in their eyes for each other could be felt by all. The tall man leaned forward, the Elf-maid tilted her face up; their lips met.

Time held her breath.

With a sigh from the throats of all the watchers, the couple reluctantly drew their faces apart.

"My son," said Thingol with grave warmth, "you are welcome to me."

"And to me," said Melian. She dimpled into a smile that had some slyness to it. "As if it were since many years."

Beren returned her glance and smile. He knew; but even as Willow had taught him, there were some things best left unshaped in words.

Thingol sighed. "It is most unfortunate," he said. "This should be a joyful time, a time of celebration. Alas, news most alarming came to me shortly before your arrival. Morgoth has sent forth some demon of malice, and even as we sit here it nears our borders. I have spent all the time we can spare to matters of joy. I beg your pardon most humbly that we must now break short this most happy occasion and hurry away to the fences."

"Lord King," said Beren, "we ourselves had word of this threat yestereve. I do not know what news your scout has brought to you; but by my reckoning this demon is without doubt this same Carcharoth who took my hand, and the Silmaril with it."

Melian started up with a cry. "This is grave news!" she cried. "I had thought us safe behind the Girdle; but such a power is in the Silmarils that no wall I could raise can hold one back."

“Think you the stone lies yet within the creature’s belly?” said the King.

“Sire, I am sure of it,” replied Beren.

“Then we must act at once,” said the King. “I had thought to brace the fence with spear and bow, and thus ward this terror from our land. But it seems now we must hunt it to its death, lest it bring death to our door.”

Huan had stood and was standing stiff, sniffing the air uneasily. Beren sighed, went to the great dog and laid his one hand on his broad neck. “I had thought we had won through to our peace,” he said regretfully to Huan, “but I was wrong. The Quest is not yet over. Is it, Comrade?”

To the wonder of all, the dog seemed to understand his words; for it looked at him gravely out of its dark eyes, then slowly shook its head.

Beren turned back to the King. “Well, my lord,” he said, “it is no longer my part to brandish spear, I think, even were I to use my left hand for it; but if it be your will, I and my friend Huan would stand at your side in this hunt.”

The King eyed him with renewed regard. “My son, that would please me greatly,” he said. He turned to Mablung, who was sitting to one side, still clad in his battle-stained raiment. “Go and refresh thyself, warrior,” the King said to him. “We shall need thy strong arm.” He raised his voice and lifted his hand. “Let the hunt be prepared! Call in all within reach who can run and hold a spear! We ride at dawn.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Lúthien wept. “Beren, why must you go?” she cried.

It tore at Beren’s heart to see her distress. He felt like someone torn from the grasp of a beloved by a torrent in flood. Not all the perils and terror of the long road had prepared him for this: that at the end of it he would have to part from Lúthien, the love of his heart.

He had no answer that could help her; words were useless. Nevertheless, he must give what answer there was to give. “Beloved,” he said gently, “our paths have never been ours to choose. If I could, I would be walking and singing under the greenwood with you yet, with the little birds singing joyous all around us, and a garland of flowers in your hair. But I cannot. I may not. The choice is not mine to make; my path has been set out before me, yea, since even the earliest times, although I knew it not in the beginning. Fates weave the cloth of life for all; but for ours, the cloth is woven from steel. Why this should be so, I do not know. I do know that the last step of the path is yet to take. It lies now before me; I must take it.”

“One day of happiness with thee in the return to my homeland,” she sobbed, “and a bare hour of bridal bliss. Is that all I am ever to have? Really all?”

He stroked her head, helpless to ease either her pain or his own. “Come now!” he said. “It is not so dire. Such a valour of strong folk are gathering to this hunt as I have never seen before. I shall be fenced with many spears; and Huan stands beside me.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head under his hand, “if you go on this hunt, you go to your death. Huan too. He knows it, and I know it. This monster seeks your flesh. Why else, when it had all the wide lands of the North to choose from, has it flown straight to where you are?”

He found nothing more to say, could only hold her close in his despair.

“If you die, I shall die,” she said. “That also is written in the cloth. But my death will not join me to you; our paths will remain sundered. I do not understand how this can be. I am joined to you in my very soul; this I know. But by force of who I am, even in death I must remain in my chains, bound to the life of this tawdry world, while you run free into the dark. The cloth has a skipped thread somewhere. It was not made right at

the start; and now it never can be.”

They sat on for a while longer in the silence of their grief, he rocking her gently in his arms. “Will you not come on the hunt?” he asked at last quietly.

“No,” she replied. “I shall remain here. This time I cannot help you; and I do not want to watch, helpless.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Thus was made ready the Hunting of the Wolf; and of all pursuits of beasts whereof tales tell, perhaps only the battle of Túrin with the Worm Glaurung was more bound up with peril. To the chase went Huan the Hound of Valinor, and Beren One-Hand of the North; with them came Mablung of the Heavy Hand, and Beleg Strongbow, chief of Thingol’s march-wardens; and lastly King Thingol himself of Doriath, mounted on his great charger Ancalaros, whose coat rippled golden under sun and silver beneath the moon. A host of spears and fierce faces followed in their train. The great company rode forth in the morning and passed over the river Esgalduin, where she foamed and sang before the gates of Menegroth. But Lúthien would not even watch them go, but turned her face away in the darkness of her despair.

To the wonder there of many, the eagle Farsight came again that fair morning to Beren. Sitting high on the Northman’s leather gauntlet, in the midst of the circle of horsemen, he gave the company news of the prey.

“The beast is through the Girdle,” Farsight reported, “and how that was wrought you may know better than I. However, he comes on but slowly. I think it is not well with him, but why that may be, I cannot say. He bears no visible wound.”

“We believe a Silmaril of Fëanor burns within his bowels,” replied Beren. “That may be the answer to both your conjectures.”

“Ah, so?” said the eagle. “Well, whatever drives him, you will presently find him on the river, not three leagues from here.”

“Three leagues?” said Mablung. “Then he must be close on the falls.”

“Even so,” said Farsight.

“Below the falls the slopes are steep,” said Mablung, “but the growth is not so thick. We may have him at our advantage if we seize this moment.”

“Then let us make haste to meet him!” said Thingol. He urged Ancalaros around and led the hunt in a thundering gallop to the North.

\* \* \* \* \*

Carcharoth had made his way down to the deep pool at the base of the falls. He could see nothing moving on the dark slopes above him, but the falls masked any sound of approach. He snarled at the unforgiving landscape and bent to drink of the water. The fire in his belly tormented him with a crueller intensity of agony than any creature has had to bear before or since. The violence wrought by cold water on his charred flesh was monstrous; but he must drink, he could not stop himself.

As the draught of water hissed down his tortured gullet, he raised his shaggy head with writhen jowls agape and howled his all-consuming agony to the skies.

The howl echoed down the valley walls past where Thingol’s horsemen filed silently over the rise. With a low-spoken word or two they carried out the plan prepared on the ride. Dividing into two parties, leading the horses now, they crept with what discretion they could along the opposing slopes of the valley. The Wolf was below; if fortune stayed with them, they would catch him between two jaws, with the waterfall at his back.

Closer they rode, closer, but there was not yet sight nor sound of the monster. Farsight flew down from above. "He is in the thicket," he croaked.

They saw indeed how at a twist in the stream a great thicket of thorn grew. Carcharoth had detected their coming, despite their caution, and hidden himself within.

The hunters held whispered counsel. "By no means can we assail him in there," said Thingol, and the others agreed. "We must hedge this place with spears, and wait."

The placing of the guard, the slow crawling into position, took Beren back many years to his days, short now as they seemed in memory, with the brown men of the Druug. Patience: that was the art of the hunter. This had been ground into him through many, many hours with his second father, the wise and ugly man who bore without rancour the cheerful epithet of Big Nose.

He was prepared thus for a long wait, but such was not how the day was ordained. Beren suddenly became aware that Huan was no longer at his side. He turned to Thingol, crouching beside him. "Huan! He must have gone in!"

Just at that moment the great hound gave voice below them. The sound of his baying echoed from the cliffs around them; like the horns of Oromë it boomed out, like the war-wrath of the Valar. All the hunters stood up stark and staring, spears grasped, bows at the stretch. The baying stopped, but in its place there came now a great thrashing and a roaring from the thorn thicket. The thorns hid the meeting of hound and wolf, but the ground shook beneath its force.

Suddenly the great masses of thorns were thrown to each side, and the Wolf emerged. Three times more frightful it looked now to Beren than he remembered. With eyes aflame and the great knives of teeth bared it bounded straight towards the King. Beren sprang in its path, but the monster swept its fanged head and tore ribs from his chest with the dire blow, sending the man cartwheeling in his blood. The head swung back, the terrible eyes spitted the King as he crouched there small and pale behind his puny spear. But before the creature could stoop to slay, a silver-grey shape sprang onto its back from behind. Huan. Quick as thought, the hound clamped his jaws across the top of the monster's skull.

If the voice of Huan had been like to the trumpets of the army of the Valar, then the howls now given forth by Carcharoth as he thrashed under the remorseless grip of the hound echoed the hate of Morgoth. In his voice was a malice crueller than his own teeth of steel. Trees shivered at the sound, rocks were shaken from the cliffs and fell to choke the falls. Most of the hunters ran in horror, holding hands over their ears.

Thingol was untouched. He had no more thought for the clamour of battle that shook the valley, but quickly scrambled to Beren where he lay. The King tore strips from his own tunic to pack the gaping wound. More Elves now ran up to help: Mablung and Beleg, and young Hobas, and others whose boldness had withstood the terror.

"We must get him out of here," shouted Beleg over the tumult of the wolf, who was flinging the fast-clinging form of Huan against trees with blows of fearful force, not thirty paces distant. "If that creature turns here we are all lost!"

They bent with haste to lift Beren, but they paused in the motion, frozen by the tableau that now played out before them.

Huan had been battered with terrible force against trees and rocks, again and again. His body was smashed to pulp, but his jaws had not ceased their death-grip of the wolf's skull, and Carcharoth could by no means reach them or loose them. As the great jaws griped ever tighter, the skull-bone had slowly crunched. The tortured brain within was even now gasping out its last moments. The wolf's movements became spastic, dwindled to quivers. Its howls choked, its neck stretched high, its mouth gaped soundlessly. Then it could no longer stand, but collapsed awkwardly onto its belly. From there it rolled helplessly to one side, flopping Huan's blood-smeared rag of a body over with the motion. The hound hung now close to death, half-draped

and boneless on the ground, but his head remained intact; the jaws inexorably closing and crushing the brain between them.

Carcharoth jerked, great spasms that shook his whole body. Once, twice, thrice. The devil-light in his eyes flickered at last and went out. All was still.

Beren's eyes were open and clear, but he could not speak. His wound was fearful: a gaping rent was torn in his chest, and poison was in the wound.

Thingol met the eyes of the others there. They all knew the dreadful truth.

They looked up at a rustling sound in the leaves. It was Huan. How he moved was a wonder to them, because he had no bone in his limbs left unbroken; but he clenched his muscles, inched forward, shuddered, then clenched them again. He dragged himself thus until his head lay near to Beren's shattered shoulder. Then Huan, dying, spoke for his third allotted time.

"Beren, noble heart, farewell," he gasped. "My time of penance is done. I would that I had more than memory of thee."

Beren's lips moved, but he could not form the words. Instead he brought his other hand over, fumbling, and laid it on the dog's great head. So Huan died. He runs now free in Valinor, but he is not forgotten.

All those gathered around were weeping. But Thingol swiped the tears from his eyes and pointed to the wolf. "Cut that thing open," he ordered. Men ran to carry out his command. They heaved the wolf over and opened his belly with knives. They found that nigh all the flesh within was as if roasted; and the deeper they cut, the more charred it became. Mablung finally reached the stomach, but when he opened that, he gasped and stood back. The others craned to see; then caught their own breath at the sight.

Beren's still-clenched hand lay within, unsullied by corruption. But when Mablung reached out to touch it, lo! The hand vanished into mist. The Silmaril lay there unveiled, and the light of it filled the shadows of the forest all about them. Then quickly and in fear Mablung took the great jewel, came back, and set it in Beren's living hand; and Beren was aroused by the touch of the Silmaril. He found the King with his eyes, and held the jewel as high as his unsteady hand could reach towards him. As the King took the stone from him, the man whispered, "Now is the Quest achieved; and my doom full-wrought." Thereafter he spoke no more.

They laid Beren on a stretcher made from birch-branches, and bore him with all the speed that care permitted from that place. The ruined body of the dead hound they carried with what honour they could upon a travois.

Night had fallen before the bearers arrived back at Menegroth, walking softly, between others who bore torches. Lúthien met them under Hirilorn. She laid her arms about Beren and kissed his cold face. His eyelids opened with an effort, and he looked into her eyes one last time; but it seemed to all there watching that the man was drawing his last breaths.

"Wait for me!" she cried to him. "On the final shore, wait for me! Not yet am I willing to bid thee farewell. I will come to thee! Only wait!"

The ghost of a smile twitched his lips. Then his eyelids fluttered, the rattle caught in his throat, and he saw and breathed no more.

A great darkness fell upon the kneeling woman and spread over the entire company. The torches sputtered low and sullen; overhead a gloom of night extinguished the stars. The gathered people started and stared about them, fearing that the end had come of all they knew.

Lúthien fell then over onto the grass beside the bier of her lover and lay sprawled like an untidy bundle of rags upon the ground.



“No!” Thingol cried. He plunged forward and lifted her limp form from the dew-cold grass. “No! Lúthien! O my flower! No!” The woman’s arms dangled lifeless, her head lolled. Her light had gone out. Thingol wept as one mad and tore at his hair and breast, while far overhead the great gloom slowly lifted and blew away to nothing.

\* \* \* \* \*

The unhoused spirit has no eyes with which to see, nor ears nor skin; but since it knows nothing other than the body, whatever experiences it may have are interpreted through the old habits of seeing, hearing and feeling. Only through such knowledge may Lúthien’s account, told long afterwards, be understood.

It seemed to her that she stood with bowed head in a world of grey mist. There was no room, no space; only mist. Her body beneath her was become transparent and filled with crystalline intricacies, brittle soap-bubble films, in whorls and sheets and nested curves. She was vaguely aware of others standing near her in the gloom, all rapt in contemplation. Old pains and wrongs bloomed from time to time in their diamond bodies like spilled paints – red, white, grey – before being slowly smoothed away again.

Hardly had she woken to this scene when her own remembered pain bloomed inside her, the colour of bright blood. The unbearable loss and sense of utter wrongness, of a breach in the world, flushed through all the coils and half-visible pathways of her crystal being, unto its last boundaries. Voiceless she cried her anguish to the greyness. Justice! Where was justice? This was not as she had been taught the world could be. She cried in passionate appeal to the universe. The crystal beings near to her blushed also with shared pain, and added their whispered voices to her lament. Further the anguish spread, and yet further still.

How long this lasted she could not afterwards say. The mist cleared suddenly away; the others huddling beside her had vanished. She found herself in a place her mind could not properly understand. There seemed to be a floor under her feet, but she could make nothing of its nature; nor could she make any sense of the distances into which the plane stretched on every hand. Light came from coruscating squares of gold, set an unguessable distance overhead.

Before her, on a high throne, sat a Being, clad in glowing white. Beams of a Light greater and purer than mere light of sun or stars streamed from over its head, dazzling Lúthien where she stood alone on the vast floor.

A voice hard as iron came out of the Light. “All who come here accept their fate,” spoke the deep tones rolling from above. “Only you do not. Why?”

“Are you Mandos?” the woman quavered, shrinking in awe from the face behind the light.

“I am the Warden of Judgement,” tolled the voice. “If it eases you to call me Mandos, he who judges, then do so. But I do not judge. Rather, each soul judges its own wrongs, sets its own time of penance. So should you also. It is your only pathway, Firstborn, through these halls of reflection, should you wish again to see the Blessed Lands.”

“I do not wish to go to the Blessed Lands,” she cried, “for they cannot be blessed to me, robbed as I am of half my heart. You say each must judge their own wrongs. But what of those who are wronged? What is a judge for if not to right wrongs? Are you not of the Powers of this world, and able to command it to your will?”

“This one whom you love has a fate which is sundered from yours,” came the cold voice of Mandos. “You name this wrong; but no wrong can come of the designs of the One. This fate cannot be amended. You must accept.”

“I appeal to your pity!” cried Lúthien in desperation. “Do not condemn me to suffer down the ages! If he may not be rescued from death, then let me die with him!”

“Your appeal is vain,” said Mandos. “I did not weave your fate, and I may not loose it.”

Lúthien could do nothing but weep into her hands.

The terrible, dry, distant voice continued. “Understand: we whom you name as Powers are also servants. The fates of the First- and Second-born are sundered, and not by us. We *cannot* change that, whether we will or no.”

Knowing not what else she could do, Lúthien took her hands from her tear-wet face, fell to her knees before Mandos, and sang. As her voice rose in all its sweetness and power, she wove a song from her anguish such as has never been heard before or since, either in the circles of the world or in the halls of the Gods. The beauty in that song, and its sorrow, reached out and touched even the heart of Mandos, which had never been moved to pity before, and maybe never will be again. Unchanged, imperishable, Lúthien’s song of her unbearable loss is sung yet in Valinor beyond the hearing of the world, and the Valar are grieved. For Lúthien wove two themes, of the sorrow of the Eldar and the grief of Men, of the two kindreds that were made by the One to dwell in Arda, the kingdom of the Earth amid the innumerable stars.

When Lúthien was exhausted, she cried in her utter despair a great cry, as if her soul would break in two, and cast herself to the ground. As she lay there on her floor of pain, scoured as empty of tears as a burnt-out husk, a part of her wondered dully, for the song seemed to go on; whispered of many voices that had come softly in, unremarked, to stand in the shadowed blur in the distances on all sides.

Something else: the white light was growing brighter, until Lúthien’s pain-misted eyes could no longer stand it. But when she blinked and squinted, she saw stretched over her head no longer the strange ceiling, but a bluest dome of heaven. Even through her anguish, she was pierced by its eternal beauty. The Light before her eyes was still too great to penetrate, but she knew without knowing how that she no longer stood before Mandos, but in the presence of another. Before her shone the High One, Manwë, suzerain over all Arda by gift of Ilúvatar.

The voice that now addressed her sent a thrill through her wounded soul. The sound of it was like to air in the face of one ascended to a high country, bringing to the senses the clean scent of snow and silence. Yet there was a warmth of sunlight in it also.

“Lúthien of Doriath,” spoke the voice of Manwë from the brilliance. “Beloved younger sister. Through your grief and your song, you have brought us, the custodians of Arda, to feel the ache of your two kindreds as has no other. We are resolved to do what lies within our narrow power to help you. I pray you, speak clearly to me your desire.”

She gulped. “To be with my bonded mate,” she said, “Beren of the North, lately One-handed; that bond being surely forged by all the powers of heaven. Great King, O most venerable one, I beg thee, heal this breach in the world. Thou knowest it is wrong as surely as I.”

“I am the servant of the All-father, All-mother,” replied Manwë, “who can do no wrong. Yet I am as a feeble mouse next to the One, both in strength and understanding. You say you do not understand the reason for the pain you feel; but no more do I. Therefore I have sought within me for the will of the One, sought even as you spoke to me your pain. Hear now the words I have found written in my heart.

“Beren may not live for the life of the world as one of the Firstborn. His nature is not made to endure this. Therefore two choices are given to you. The first choice is, that you remain sundered from Beren, and enter into Valinor, whither all your kindred will come in the end. But so that your grief be cleansed away, we will take the memories of Beren from you. Thus you may live out your destined life without pain.”

Lúthien was shaking her head already. “Great Lord,” she said, “I had heard that we Children were not made by the Valar; and now I believe it, else ye had understood us better than that. I do not think even the most humble farm-maid could accept that choice. I pray thee, tell me the other?”

“That we recall Beren to life,” said Manwë gravely, “and return him to live in Middle-earth, for a brief time. You may join him there. But with this proviso: that you will become as he, with a life that is short; and when you die, you will die indeed. Thus you may stay with him, and share his fate; but you must give up your birthright – Valinor, time, and all your kin.”

As Lúthien, squinting into the light, heard these words, it was as if a great rush of golden joy flooded through all her system, cleaning away the dark agony. She could hardly rule her voice enough to reply.

“Mighty One,” she quavered, “I accept this of thy mercy. Thy second choice. I give up my birthright, and I will accept death, so be it only that I might remain for a quiet space of time with my beloved, and share his fate. Oh, I accept. With all my heart.”

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At the end of the world the outer sea laps in tired ripples at a misty shore. No fish swims in that sea. No bird calls in the sky. The dull sand holds no worms. There are no shells to mar the even strand, nor prints. There is no wood or other trove to wash up in that lifeless place.

But there was a rock. Clinging fast to that rock was all that was left of a man. He clung there, because he knew that was what he must do, although he had forgotten why. He had forgotten all reasons and names. He had forgotten his own name; he had even forgotten hers, although he could see her laughing face in his memory in many varied scenes, all now far off and dim. When he saw her face in his mind, and that was almost all of the time, he felt longing in what had been his breast, and pain, although he had forgotten the why of that too.

That was all he had left: her face, and his rock, and the pain. That and the compulsion that made him cling to it, and cling to it.

A weary wind blew cold and ceaseless from the shore, carrying the shades of Men on its wings. The vague shapes of the Dead drifted into view out of the mist, then past him and out to sea. The movement never paused. Wisps of children the clinging man saw, and the aged, but also the misty forms of many a stout man and bonny woman. Their eyes gleamed at him as they passed, every one, and they seemed to whisper to him at the edge of hearing. The shades drifted past and were gone; but always more appeared out of the mists. Where they drifted to behind his gaze he could not see. He would not turn and look. Grip fast to the rock; grip fast to the pain.

How much time passed in this way he did not know. There was no time here, and no change. When a change at last began, the remains of the man felt no surprise, for he had forgotten how. He watched as a section of the mist ahead of him began to brighten, more and more, until it was become a burning radiance. And out of the radiance stepped she: the woman of his memory.

Her light reflected back from his eyes as he crouched there clutching his rock. As she stepped nearer, he remembered her name. “Tinúviel,” he croaked.

She knelt in front of him, in the wet sand, solid and real; and he thought he would die of the blessed pain of it. The tears were streaming down her beloved face too. “My dearest,” she said to him, “I have come to you, even as I promised. Will you give me your hand?”

He loosed a cramped hand from the rock and grasped hers with it. Her warmth and her reality surged through his whole being. “Tinúviel,” he said in a voice raspy from disuse, “what are you doing here? Have you come to make the journey with me?” And he remembered too, now, that it was in the hope of her coming that he had held to his rock.

“Not yet,” she said, smiling through her tears. “My love, I am come to take you back to life.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The lawn lay quiet under starlight. Somewhere close at hand, a tiny stream burred its way toward the river, whose deeper whisper sounded at the edge of hearing. Night birds were chirruping softly in the dark woods, and the cool air was scented by secret blossoms.

The couple stood there, hand in hand, content for a time just to feel the night air on their skins and the tickle of the mown grass beneath their feet. Their hearts were too full for anything else.

At the edge of the lawn, two great slabs of polished stone were set into the sward. By common consent the two stepped noiselessly nearer, to see what they might be. On the nearer stone their night-sharp eyes made out, carven in the runes of Daeron<sup>13</sup>,

HUAN, HOUND OF VALINOR  
SLAYER OF CARCHAROTH

They knew now what the second would say. Stepping to it, they read the simple inscription,

LÚTHIEN TINÚVIEL, FLOWER OF DORIATH  
BEREN ONE-HAND, SOLDIER OF THE NORTH

“If we are in there,” said the man in a low voice, “then what are these?” And he lightly struck his own flank.

“They wove us new bodies,” murmured Lúthien. “For the Valar this is a light matter. As for you, I think you are now clothed in the hardy flesh of the Firstborn. I see the look of it on you. It is a blessed gift. Die we surely must; age we need not.”

“I am not yet convinced it is not all a dream,” whispered Beren.

“Perhaps it is,” his beloved replied. “All of it. Did not Finrod think so?”

Beren pondered that for a time. He eyed then his right arm, which still ended in a stump. “They might have given me a new hand,” he said with a touch of peevishness.

Lúthien laughed softly. “Maybe they did,” she said. “Maybe you have simply fallen into the habit of not having one. Try!”

Beren stared at her, then back at his hand. He concentrated, not believing, then was shocked when a glimmer appeared past the end of his stump. The glimmer grew stronger, and was suddenly real and solid: a hand, good as new. Beren turned it over in front of his astonished eyes, palpated its warm flesh with the other. “This is *surely* a dream.” He turned then back to his partner. “Oh, Tinúviel! Is it really you? Do we really have our lives again? And the Wolf is dead? Poor Huan. But I cannot feel sad for him, either, because I know he runs happy and free. Indeed, I cannot make myself feel sad about anything! I feel... I feel... I feel like laughing, and turning cartwheels, and wrestling Ents. I feel I could tackle anything, and sing while I did it. So tell me, what shall we do next, assail Morgoth in his ugly hall? But no – enough of hardship and heroism. I want to enjoy myself!”

The Elf-woman laughed again, a sound of transparent joy, then gestured at her nakedness. “I think we should first find some clothes,” she said. “And make ourselves known to people. That will be... difficult.”

“Then I shall let this go for the time,” said Beren of his restored hand, which vanished again at his thought.

Something moved in the starlight at the edge of the clearing – a person. The figure stepped nearer, and they saw that it was Melian, clothed in umber and shadow. As she came close to them they saw that she was trembling, and in her eye was a look of awe.

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<sup>13</sup> Daeron invented a system of runic writing which, although eventually eclipsed among the Eldar by the cursive characters of Fëanor, found in later ages particular favour among the Dwarves.

“Mother!” said Lúthien. “It is me! I am real, I am no shade. Do not tremble!”

“I should not tremble at a shade,” whispered Melian, “but you two have been touched by the hand of the One. Should I not feel awe? Never before has anyone been permitted to come back from the Dead.” She held her arms out to them from her body, and they saw that she had brought robes for them. “I felt your coming,” she said.

Lúthien clothed herself quickly. She took her mother’s hand in her two own and kissed her. “I must go to Father,” she said. She loosed the hand and stepped silently across the dew-chill lawn to disappear into the shadows.

Maia and mortal Man were left looking at one another in the sweet night.

Beren put his head a little on one side in wryness and said to her, “Lady Queen – I do not dare or presume to call you Mother – I do not know that we need to talk of the past. And that which is, is. But I should like to know if you have further quests in mind for me. For I am not ashamed to say that I am very tired of them.”

Melian shook her head. “I know what you think of me,” she said. “You see in me the puppet-mistress who has ruled all your days. And I will not deny that I have had you in my eye from your earliest babyhood, and that I have arranged this and that in your life. But you have never stopped to think that I, too, may have my pathway laid out for me, with my own burdens which I did not ask for, but may not shirk.”

“Well,” said Beren quietly, “despite what you say, that thought has occurred to me. And my recent experiences have shown me a glimpse of the glory and wonder of the true power behind the world; enough to realize that Melian the Maia is perhaps not so very great a personage after all.”

“I honour your avoidance of presumption,” replied the Queen dryly.

Beren smiled, his teeth showing pale in the starlight. “You surely know your vassal by now,” he said, “enough to know that you may force him to be a hero, but no power in Arda could ever make him a courtier. But may I point out, with utmost politeness, that you have not yet answered my question?”

Melian laughed softly. “My dear son – for so I shall call you without hesitation – you will be a tonic for me. What was the phrase? ‘Rough candour, learned in camp and field?’”

Beren looked puzzled, then blushed as the memory of long ago surged back: of his address to the air on the occasion of finding Nixenárë. “I must apologize for that rude speech,” he said. “I understand things a little better now.”

She laid a gentle hand on his arm. “No need. I do know your nature, and I know its value. I fear our time together may be short, but I shall treasure every moment. To answer your question: there are no more quests. You have earned your reward. At last, at long last, your time is your own to spend.”

Beren smiled, and stretched his shoulders back in a long, slow stretch. “Oh, you have no idea how good that sounds!” he said. “But I have one final question. Can you satisfy an old campaigner’s curiosity and tell me: will the Sword ever come again to another hand?”

“That is not your story, but another’s,” replied the Queen, “and nobody ever hears any story but their own.”

“I will take that as a ‘yes’,” said Beren, at which the Queen laughed with delight. She took his arm and smiled up into his face, the stars of Varda gleaming in her dark eyes.

“Come, impudent son,” she said, “let us leave this now. We have Elves to astonish.”

\* \* \* \* \*

So came Beren and Lúthien back to Doriath. They walked in its bright woods for a time, and put behind

them all the dark time of trial, and their joy of it was as the first morning of spring in the youth of the world. But there is no perfect happiness attainable in Arda. A sadness of parting grew in them, because although they had returned from the very shadow of death itself, they could not undo the fact that they had died, nor all that went before. There was no going back. Everywhere they went in that magic land, people stood as they approached, and looked at them with white showing at the corners of their eyes. There was great love in the people's faces, but there was fear also. And so at last Beren and Lúthien came to the sad realization that, although they had been granted a further measure of life, they could not go home. Doriath was no longer for them.

Therefore in the last days of that long, bright summer they made ready to depart. When the couple set out at last for the South, a great company attended them, and never has passed pageant more colourful. Banners and long pennons there were of ruby cloth and gold, and the clothes of the laughing throng were almost too bright to look at. The King, healed of the winter in his heart, rode at the van on snorting Ancalaros, shimmering gold beneath the sun. The knights of Thingol's house rode glittering beside him, and silver trumpets blew at his going forth each day. In the evenings great tents of silk were raised, and their colours were as a field of jewels in the gardens of the moon. Then was the feast prepared; sweating cooks bidding their helpers run here and there, as each vied to create dishes more striking in form and colour, more subtle in flavour, more mouth-melting than those of his rivals. Wines there were that recalled the strong air of Valinor, or the flowers on the meadows in the far, lost days of youth, of the times when one was still free of any care. Song and joy followed the great train as it made its way through the heaven-lit woods.

The company came at last to the bank of Aros, where Beren had come two years before. He took his leave then of those he knew, embracing his comrades, Mablung and Beleg, and many others. Last of all from these he came to Hobas.

Hobas said to him, "My joy is mixed with grief: for no sooner is it permitted to me to follow my heart and call thee friend at last, than I am to be parted from thee forever."

Beren embraced him and said, "I have no words of comfort for thee. But that which binds thee and me must surely have life beyond the world, else all were pointless. Thou wert my first friend in my distress, and I shall not forget it. No, not until the seas freeze over."

Last of all he took farewell of the King. Thingol said to him, "Dear Son, I would have armed you with my best sword, and clad you in elven-armour most cunning and fair, for I would have you go forth openly as that which you are, namely the first knight of my realm; but you say you are done with war, and I see the truth of it in your countenance. You say also that you will take no parting gift, no sort of jewel or other made thing of worth. I beg you though at least to take this." He held up a small phial, carven from some crystal. A living fluid filled the interior, through which drifted glittering motes. The King shook the phial, and light sprang forth, as though the sun could shine behind a rainbow. "Here is diamond sand from the beaches of Kor," he said, "and water from the snows of Oiolossë. I am no Fëanor, and this is no Silmaril; but it captures, perhaps, a little of the Light of the Blessed Realm, which these eyes of mine have seen, but which now is lost."

Beren accepted the phial; and with his ring, and his keepsakes, and the hilt-shard of Angrist, and a little waybread, that was all that he took out of Doriath.

Lúthien went apart with Melian her mother, and no-one heard the words they spoke to one another, nor felt the grief in their hearts. For Melian had read the truth in her daughter's eyes at that first meeting on the starlit lawn, and she knew that a parting beyond the end of the world had come between them. Never again inside the circles of the world would she see the bright face of her child; never to speak with her in the quiet gardens of Lórien across the seas.

At last all was said, and the two stepped to the bank. Waiting to ferry them across the stream was a very abashed and head-sunk Master of Boats, Gwael by name. Beren, however, bade him raise his head.

"You made a mistake," he said to the boatman, "but so do we all. Only learn from it! Strive to look deeper into things, and to become better able to tell truth from lies."

The journeyed on then, into the South, following the path Beren had trodden two years before. As they went, he looked about him with eyes full of wonder, because although he knew he had been here before, there was nevertheless so much that appeared new to him.

“I don’t know whether it is because I am with you,” he said, “or because my mood is very different, but when last I was here I could only see the ugly scars over the beauty; but now I perceive the great beauty that remains beneath the surface blemishes.”

“There is beauty everywhere,” replied Lúthien, “but sometimes we must learn how to see it.”

Beren wanted to visit the Falls, to show them to Lúthien. They found their way to them, and stood at the lip of the gulf and marvelled. The mind-shaking thunder of the masses of water hurtling into the chasm was as before, and the rainbows playing in the curling mists, but whereas for Beren his heart on his first visit to the Falls had been closed to any joy or beauty, and writhen with pain, it soared now at the sights and sounds of that mighty feat of nature.

With regret they turned away at last. They took their way southward then, into lands unknown to them; but both remained silent and thoughtful long after the roar of the falls had sunk behind them, awed still by the majesty of Creation.

Over many days they travelled into the South. They found their new bodies to be tireless and hardy. They were seldom hungry, and what little need for food they had was easily stilled by a nibble of waybread.

They did not know it, but they were following the way Celeborn and Galadriel had trodden the year before, in company with numbers of their followers and kin.

There were abundant animals and birds in that land, and all beasts whom they passed greeted Beren, and the birds came and carolled on his shoulders. All the creatures of wing and fur had heard of him. Of people, though, the land was empty. There were no Elves here, and to these lands no Man of the three Houses had ever come. Beren knew indeed that the Druug came here betimes, but the Druug were few and the lands were wide. They never met any, although several times Beren found traces of their passing – cold fire-ashes, or faint tracks; and once a Watch-stone, warm and quiet beneath the friendly sun.

They passed into the Willow-country, and the sun grew hotter and higher. Grapes grew here, and figs, and the woods were redolent of strange herbs. At last, in the closing of the year, there came a day when they knew that they approached the sea. They tasted a tang in the air, and there was a light along the southern horizon. Sea-birds soared through the air above them, crying their eternal lament. Here the couple halted and made camp.

Galadriel had camped nearby, but they did not know that; nor did they meet the person whom she met. But I say no more of that matter, for one cannot tell all the stories in one.

“I do not wish to look upon the Sea,” said Beren. “I do not believe I have anything to do with it. The forests and mountains are my home.”

In all matters now, the minds of the couple ran very close together in their tracks. “I also shun the sight,” said Lúthien. “Beyond the Sea lies Valinor, and I have no desire to be reminded of that which I have given up. My eyes are fixed forward, on the brightness of the future with you. The Sea is not for us.”

“But that will not be so for our descendants,” mused Beren, who could see now further into things than he could before.

“Whither shall we go?” said his beloved. “Are we to wander all our days? Middle-earth is very great; and even could we see the end of it, what would that avail us?”

“For me, I would be content to find a place of peace, where we might build a house, and have a garden,” said

Beren. "It is pleasant to wander the lands with you, and we have seen much beauty along the way, which those who stay at home never do. But I think I can see an end of it, and that not far off."

"A place for children," agreed Lúthien, smiling with pleasure at the thought. "Near to water."

"But not too far from the mountains," added he.

"If it is mountains your heart yearns for," said the Elven beauty, "then we must turn east."

Therefore they left the sea behind them and entered the wild lands of the Forest between the Waters. They passed the winter under that shelter, in those far southern lands where snow rarely comes. They met there for the first time on their travels other people: Green-elves these were, strange and wild. The Elves bowed before the couple, because they sensed in them a majesty and power; also stories of the deeds of Beren and Lúthien had filtered even down to this lonely country. Many a feast the pair enjoyed with the Elves beneath the trees, garlanded with the berries and red leaves of autumn; many a song they heard and dance they made, heads dizzy from the strong wine of that land.

'One-hand' the Elves named Beren, for although he had allowed his new hand to return after departing Doriath, their keen eyes could tell the difference. And indeed, as Beren learned in time, the differences were profound. Tool this hand would hold, but not weapon; and it seemed that it could not take hurt.

### Year 468

When the sun began again to climb higher in the noon sky, and the buds in that strange southern country began to break, the two took up again their travels. Guided by the words of the Green-elves, they came at last to the river Gelion.

Lúthien gazed in dismay at the broad reach of water flowing swiftly across their front. She turned to Beren. "What shall we do?" she said.

He laughed merrily. "Swim!" he said. "I would not have dared it before; but no river can hold us back now."

That is what they did. They were swept by the current far downstream, but Beren never faltered, surging forward steadily with frog-kicks of his strong legs, pulling through the water with one arm while supporting Lúthien with the other. They climbed out laughing onto the far bank, naked and dripping. They ran themselves dry, but found that their bundled clothes were wet, so they laughed again, clambered into the wet things, and walked on blithe and regardless.

In that green, fair country they turned north, and in a few day's travel they came to a fast-running stream. Indeed they had sought it, and knew it for the river Adurant, southernmost of the Seven Rivers after which that broad land before the mountains was named<sup>14</sup>. Day after day thereafter they made their way up beside the stream, as the sun gained in power with the advancing year. Birds everywhere were praising the new season with song; the many-coloured blooms of spring garlanded the tender meads.

The couple came at last to a place where the stream forked, the flow coming down on two sides to join before their feet. This was the gore of Tol Galen, the Green Isle, of which they had heard from the Green-elves, and which had been their destination these many weeks. They waded the stream in a silence of wonder and clambered onto the island through the willow-brakes. High onto the central hill they climbed, until the slopes became very gentle near the summit. They found at last a dell, not far short of the bare and windblown peak, but sheltered from the north wind. A soft green lawn spread beneath their feet; off to the left, the rugged line of the Blue Mountains peeped over the tree-tops. The lands fell in wide green curves before them far into the misty South, and a breeze sighed in the nearby trees.

Becoming aware of a purling of water, they turned to find its source. They found a thin stream of water, cold and pure, that sprang from the rock and descended to a little pool in a spray of falls, with drops that flashed

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14 Ossiriand, which means 'Land of Seven Rivers'.



and glittered in the warm light of the sun.

“Here we can be at peace,” said Beren quietly. “Here is the place where our hearts can rest.”

Lúthien said nothing, only took him by the hand. He spoke for both, and both knew it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Peace indeed Beren and Lúthien found, in measure deep and full; but they had no chance to grow lonely in their retreat, for the lands thereabout were far from deserted. New company they found, but also familiar, in a strange wise shortly to be related.

Their first care was to build a shelter, since not even Elves care to pass all their time beneath the sky, exposed to each extremity of weather. After that first rude dwelling was accomplished, they set off to explore the island. Lúthien followed in her husband’s footsteps, so that he could examine what tracks he found without impediment, but since both were sure that no enemy was to be feared in these woods, she sang in the lightness of her heart, and chirruped to the little birds which flew down to greet her. The day was sunny and quiet, with clean white clouds floating in the blue.

It took them all day to complete a circuit of the island. Beren halted at many places to examine minutely traces invisible to Lúthien’s eyes, and twice he grunted in evident surprise. They returned to their dell as the sun went down, woke fire from the previous night’s ashes, and commenced to heat a little soup. As they rested their weary legs beside the blaze, with the waterfall whispering its eternal song behind them in the gathering gloom, Beren told his spouse all that he had found.

“I found no sign of Orcs,” he said, “but I think we knew that they have never come here. Green-elves have been here within the week, and I would say they are not long absent from the island. I hope we may meet with them before long, because whatever their rights over this land, they are used to it being as it is; we should ask their permission to stay, as a courtesy at least.

“They may also have news for us which might clear up some puzzles. Before I get to these, to pass through the remainder of the list: absent is any sign of Men, even Drúedain. Present are several marks of Walkers, or as I should in this speech say, Onodrim. In itself that last is not strange, indeed I have seen trace of them several times in our journeys; but there are echoes about it that make me wonder. But I dismiss the idle thought that came to my mind, for it can be nothing but foolishness. That would be a strange chance indeed.

“Of the puzzles I mentioned, the first is the marks of what must be Elves, but I think not of the Green companies, who mostly go barefoot, or with light skin buskins. These marks are old, indeed not much remains of them from the battering of the elements, but their makers seemed to be more firmly shod than the Green-elves are wont to be.

“The second and last puzzle is the most astonishing. I have told you how, in Dorthonion, I stumbled across a settlement of a small, merry people, most like perhaps unto mortal Men, yet scarce half so high, and with other differences. Nobody I have spoken to in the wide world has seen any others of this folk, nor known of them either. I parted from those I knew in the North; yet here again, today, I have seen in the mud by the waters, quite fresh, the mark of a small foot, after the exact pattern of those I have seen often and often in my northern home. There must be a colony of them somewhere on this island, and that seems most strange to me: of these rarest people in Middle-earth, of whom nobody else has ever heard, that I should encounter them not once in my life, but twice.”

They met with the Green-elves before long. They found them to be wild Elves and wary, similar to their close kin in the great Forest to the West of the river. These Laiquendi had lately heard word of the couple, as well as the tales about them from the year before, and they were curious to see what manner of beings this famed pair might be.

The chief of the bands hereabouts was called Tuilind. Once he overcame his initial awe, he showed not

unfriendly. He readily acceded to Beren and Lúthien settling on the Isle. "For it is plain to me that you are not like these Night-fearers, these Men, who came stomping over the mountains, some years past," he said. "Since they had neither wit nor senses, and were scaring all the game, we sent them on their way. But indeed, most radiant Lady," and here he bowed again to Lúthien, from whose beauty he had scarcely been able to take his eyes, "of whose fame we have heard much: you and we are akin from afar, are we not? For we are both of the House of Elwë and Olwë; a great people. No, be not anxious, we are glad to welcome you both here, for as long as you choose to stay. You will bring good luck, I know it."

Tuilind confirmed that neither Orcs nor Men came to the Isle, nor so far south as Adurant at all. "Of the former I cannot speak," he said. "It will be time to be concerned when they try. As for Men, they wander everywhere it seems, but they will certainly not venture here now that you have come. For are you not the Dead who live? That is awful matter enough for we Firstborn who never have to face the darkness beyond the final shore. But no mortal Man would willingly court your presence, for sheer fear of your faces and what they portend. All Men must pass through Death, to a destination that is unknown to them. They fear what they do not know; but they would fear all the more such folk as ye, who do know."

"Neither have we passed through Death," replied Beren quietly. "We came back from the final threshold. But I understand that Men may view that as disturbing enough. I do so myself."

He asked the wild Elf about the tracks he had found: the larger ones first. "Yes," said Tuilind, "you are right. Grey-elves they were, a bright and warlike party. They are but newly come to this Land of Rivers. They made their camp in the high hills a little way from here, whence they can ride north and east to seek their foes. We meet them sometimes. Celeborn is the name of their leader. You know of him, maybe? His spouse is no Sinda, but a sun-haired beauty of the Sword-elves. Those are a high-mettled and valiant people to be sure, but strange to us simple folk of wood and stream."

"Celeborn and Galadriel!" cried Lúthien gladly. "Oh, this is bonny news! I yearn to see them!"

After some more talk, Beren asked about the small footprint he had found in the mud. The Elf smiled. "Now that is a strange matter," he said. "I have lived long, and I have known many lands and lives to the East of the mountains, in days before the sun. But this is for me a new thing, also to all others of my folk. Four years ago, or it may be a little more, on a bitter day near the close of the year, a cavalcade came from the North. Onodrim they were, such as we meet in the woods from time to time, but what they were bearing between them we have never seen before, nor imagined either. Conceive if you will a broad pannier, woven of branches. Five of these there were, each held between two stout Ents. Now I invite you to guess, should it please you, what the panniers held."

"I do not have to guess," replied Beren, smiling, "for I know."

Tuilind sat back and opened his eyes wide at that. "Tell, then!" he demanded.

"They were full of a little folk," said Beren, "about so high when full grown." Here he held his hand flat at the right height above the ground. "A mortal folk they are, akin perhaps to Men; few have hair on their faces, but many grow it on their feet. They are fond of meat and drink and all good cheer."

"This is a wonder to me!" replied the Elf. "How is it that you know this?"

"I met this people in my homeland, in the high country far to the North."

Tuilind turned this news over in his head, glancing at Beren's face from time to time. "Well!" he said at last. "There are workings of fate in this affair, so seemeth it to me, out of the reckoning of such simple folk as we. Mayhap you understand better of the matter than I. Whatever of that; the Onodrim laid this folk onto the Isle, and asked of us our help. We saw indeed that it was needed – many wounded and some dead the little people had, and a terror was upon them. They will not speak of it, but it is clear that they have tangled with the Enemy. The Ents brought them here, I would say, that they might find peace. They live not far from here. I will show you the place."

So it was that, out of all reckoning, after having passed through terror and torment, Beren met again the small folk he had grown to love so deeply, but that he never thought he would see again under the light of heaven. He went alone for the first visit, creeping with all his art to the place Tuilind had told him of, and which the birds confirmed. Shortly he could hear voices; there seemed to be dispute. Closer he crept, and closer yet. Now he could see movement between the branches. One of the raised voices was Bhalacho's – it *had* to be. A thrill of memory passed through Beren.

"No, no, no!" the small baker was saying, in a passion. "Good gods of sky and meadow, I never heard the like. Salt and milk before the flour? You would curdle the leaves out of the trees."

"My gammer always did it that way," came the stubborn reply, from a thick-headed type Beren knew as Trogo. "And what's good enough for my gammer is good enough for me."

"My stomach votes for Bhalacho," came a deep voice from the trees. All turned in surprise to see who this might be. The foliage shook; then out from the middle stepped Beren.

The eyes of the Hairfeet opened so wide in their sockets that the man half-seriously considered the danger of them falling out. Bhalacho took a half step forward. "Beren!" he cried in a voice hoarse with disbelief. Then he stopped, and a look of doubt and apprehension began to gather on his face. "Is it...?"

Beren stepped forward into the sun, a smile of the pure pleasure at greeting old friends spread across his features. "It really is me, Bhalacho," he said.

The baker took another step forward, but doubt remained. "We heard..." he said.

"Stories, rumours," said Beren. "Come and shake my hand, fool."

Bhalacho came the rest of the way and grasped Beren's hand, looking intently into his face. "Oh, glory be," he said. A smile broke over his own face and he began to pump the hand for all he was worth. "Oh, glory be!"

The others had also gathered now round the tall figure in a clamour of greeting. Several hands clutched and shook his free one; people were thumping his legs and his back as high as they could reach. More were streaming in now, crying maids, shrieking children; and there, with her mother, came at last Etty. As she ran to him, mouth as open as her arms, he knelt to her, taking the shock of her small body as it cannoned into his. The Hairfoot girl was sobbing as she wound her arms as far around him as they would go.

"Come, come, Etty," he said gently, rocking her from side to side. "What's this? Tears for me? That's a fine welcome, I don't think."

The girl was too overcome to say anything. Melena was holding Beren's hand now, smiling all over her face, but she too had to wipe constant tears away.

"Welcome, Beren, oh welcome!" she said.

He sat down then at one of the rude tables the Little People had contrived anew, with Etty on his knee, still holding tight to his neck, her face buried in his side. She was much bigger now than when he first saw her, but still not full-grown. The People hurried to bring out the best things they had to eat and drink, and soon the table was heavily laden, and the one next to it, the one next to that. Sixteen people seemed to be trying to talk at once, but gradually Beren took in their story of the great climb through the mountains, the descent to the mysterious Southlands, and the long, long journey through forest and field unending, until they arrived at this place. The Treefolk had left them here, and most had gone off, though one or two remained in the district. Elves were here though, they told him with round eyes; and the Elves had been very kind.

"But why did the Treefolk bring you here?" asked Beren when he could get a word in.

“Well,” said Bhalacho, “we did have some talk about it. That friend of yours, that Rattlecone, he reckoned it were best if we were well out of it. Southmost were best for us, he said, or even over the far mountains. Well, we’re out the range of trouble here, or so it seems to us; we none of us weren’t too keen to go much further. Besides, we liked this place well. There d’seem more light here, somehow. Yon Rattlecone weren’t quite happy in his mind about us stopping, but he couldn’t say exactly why. The upshot was, well, we’ve had our warning now, we know things don’t go right in these lands no more. We’ll be ready to run, a sight readier than we was before anyway. At least I hope so. But in the meantime we’ll stick where we are, in this pleasant place, what’s warmer and friendlier than what we’re used to, and a good thing too say I...” Dispute broke out then, some supporting Bhalacho in his contention, others praising the benefits of the cooler country.

After order had been somewhat restored, Bhalacho looked hard at Beren, a shade of doubt showing again on his honest face.

“We’ve heard some wild tales about you, Master,” he said. “I don’t doubt many be rumours, as you said; and straight up, some are impossible. But I don’t know what’s true and what’s not, and that’s a fact.”

“Which are the impossible ones?” asked Beren, keeping an impassive face.

“Well,” said Bhalacho awkwardly, looking around at the now quiet and attentive Hairfeet, “we did hear as how you lost your hand. Which a wolf bit it off. So strike that one, cos we can see with our eyes that it ain’t so.”

Beren held up his hand to show, and nodded solemnly. “What else?” he said.

Nobody seemed to want to speak. Mungo leaned forward at last. “Master Beren,” he said soberly, “they said you was dead.”

“Come off it, Mungo,” retorted Beren, “do I look dead to you?” He nudged the avidly listening Etty on his knee. “What do you think, Etty, am I dead?” She shook her curl-laden head decidedly.

“Well, is it all lies then?” cried Bhalacho with a passion. “What we heard? Of you wrestling with the Wicked Man himself in his big house yonder, and the jewel, and the princess, and all of it?”

“There was a jewel,” replied Beren, “although it is not here; and it was a hard struggle to win it, although with no wrestling. That of the princess is quite true. She is with me, in our shelter a little way over the hill. We thought to settle here, you see. After hard labour comes rest.”

Now came the round eyes and mouths again. Etty perked up, sat back and looked up at him. “A real princess?” she said shyly. “Could we see her?”

“Of course!” said Beren. “I just thought to come on my own this first time. I’m sure we’ll all see a lot of each other.”

“But Beren,” said Melena. “You and she – are you...? Is she...?”

“We are,” said Beren firmly. “She is my wife.”

“Oh!” said the small woman in a rapture of joy, clapping her hands. “Oh! Oh, my dear – I’m that happy for you – I truly am. It was what you needed more than anything. All us women could see it – Granny knew, she often said how much she’d like to see you settled. It’s only sad that she never could. Oh, Beren. Do let us meet her, so we can give her our blessing – and tell her what a wonderful giant she has netted.”

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The Hairfeet all hid in their holes when Beren and Lúthien came together. There was nobody in sight in the clearing when they arrived. Lúthien looked questioningly at Beren, but he shook his head slightly and mouthed the word “Wait.” They sat on some of the low benches and looked around at the fine day.

One by one the little people shyly appeared. They stood first around at some distance; but driven by curiosity, they crept nearer, until quite a crowd waited there in silence.

Lúthien stood. At the full sight of her radiant form and face, one after another, with a rustle of clothes, the men made a knee and the women curtsied. Cheeks were reddened and heads were bowed. The Elf-woman wore only a simple blue dress with no ornament, but her face with its keen grey eyes was as fair as summer, and her river of sable hair fell like midnight magic far below her waist. She was more beautiful than they had ever imagined.

Beren took her hand and brought her to where the baker and his wife stood. "This is Bhalacho and Melena," he said. "Bhalacho, you ass, stand up." The baker was trying to kneel again.

"I am very pleased to meet you," said Lúthien a little shyly, colour showing in her own cheek.

"Please, miss, we don't know what to call you," murmured Melena.

"You being a princess and all," put in Bhalacho, still round-eyed.

"Call me Lúthien," cried she. "That is my name. Princess? My father is a king, I cannot deny it; but he is not king here. And as for me: I am not ruler of anyone. Not even of my husband."

That brought a laugh. Slowly the people began to relax. On Beren taxing them with their poor, un-Hairfoot-like welcome, they began something like their usual bustle. Pastries were brought, and foaming tankards. Lúthien caught fierce whispering in the background over what they should bring for her. To cut such nonsense short she took up a pastry in one hand and reached with decision to grasp a great tankard with the other. "I drink to all your healths!" she declared, took a hearty swig of the ale, then a bite of the pastry. "Mmm, that is good," she said indistinctly, with crumbs and foam about her mouth.

Beren laughed. He caught the look of pleasure on the baker's face. "That is one of Bhalacho's, I make no doubt," he said.

Lúthien turned to the short man. "You make these?" she said, upon which the Hairfoot turned crimson and muttered something inaudible. "I wish you would show me how," Lúthien went on wistfully. "I cannot do this at all. In fact I cannot do much of anything, except dance and sing, and just live." She turned to Melena, listening shyly close by. "I would count it a great favour, Mistress Melena, if you would show me, betimes, something of how to run a household," she said humbly to the small woman. "I confess, I know little about it." She glanced sidelong under her lashes at Beren. "Neither of us do."

"Hey, now hold up a minute," protested Beren, to general laughter. "I did my share of such tasks when we men were alone together on the Pine Mountain – cooking, cleaning, everything. *And* I looked after myself for three years after that."

"Oh yes," said Lúthien, dimpling. "Sleeping on ferns and eating acorns."

"One cannot live on acorns," said Beren in triumph, "they are too bitter. *I* know that much, at least."

Conversation became general then, taking on something close to its wonted lively tone. Beren introduced Lúthien to all the Hairfeet he knew. It took some time. Still, though, something was missing. "Why are the children not with us?" he asked.

"They are in their burrows," said Bhalacho, "with strict orders not to dare to show their faces. We did not think the Lady would want to be bothered with them."

"Oh, bosh," said Beren rudely. "Anyway they have not stayed in their burrows, as I could have told you. I have seen small faces peeping this long while." He turned and hailed the surrounding undergrowth. "Hoy! All you small ones! You are wanted!"

With a great rustling of the bushes, the children appeared. They gathered in a flock around the table, fingers in mouths, eyes wide.

Beren sought among them for the face he knew. "Hi! Etty!" he called. "Come here and meet your princess!"

Face flushing white and red by turns, Etty tottered near. She began to make a curtsy, but Lúthien knelt quickly and caught her hands.

"Please don't," the Elf-maid said quietly. "I would hope that you and I can find a way to be friends. And friends do not curtsy!"

Etty stared into her face, entranced. "You are so beautiful," she whispered.

"I am," replied Lúthien, "but many times I have wished that I were not. I want nothing out of life but to enjoy simple things; but because of this face of mine, and because of the rank and folk I was born to, and the nature of my substance, I have been dragged through the most awful trials. I hope they are ended now, and that I may at last take pleasure in the life I truly wish to live: to have a little house, and a man both strong and kind, and maybe children in time? And friends. So please, Etty, I beg you, I beg all of you here, try to see past the face I did not ask to wear, and see the bashful maid beneath. I shall be very lonely else."

They gathered around her then in their warmth, and their voices were loud in greeting and in earnest reassurance. Etty sat beside Lúthien, clasping her hand, her eyes never leaving the Elf's face. The party continued in great merriment, and as the day wore on, a love of Lúthien the fair took firm hold in every heart among the folk. It was not such a love as to make man forget wife; it was a love for the wonder, the beauty and the goodness in the world, such as they saw and heard in the fair face and voice of this most graceful and radiant of women. She touched their rough lives with a light of joy that none of them ever forgot.

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Not many days after that, Beren was wandering over the sunny isle, hand in hand with Lúthien, when he pulled up suddenly and looked closely at the ground. "Hah!" he exclaimed.

"What is it?" said Lúthien.

Beren had let go her hand and was casting back and forth over the ground like a hound. "Another surprise," he said, "or I am a stump, and my eyes mere stones. Come! Follow me, and we shall see what we shall see."

Greatly mystified, Lúthien followed in his track as he nosed along a trail which she could not make out at all, although it seemed plain to him. Beren led her a long path through the woods until he stopped in an open glade among tall trees, not too far from the chatter and flash of the stream. A stumpy old alder grew there, on the far side.

With a look of mischief on his face, Beren said to Lúthien, "This looks like a good place to make a fire. I will just gather some twigs." He went and reached a hand to some whiskery growth on the alder; but to Lúthien's astonishment, the tree opened a pair of deep eyes and moved a little.

"So there is memory even among mortals," the tree said, in a voice that vibrated in Lúthien's stomach.

Beren laughed a laugh of pure delight. He grasped a branch of the tree – but Lúthien saw that it was an arm; how had she thought otherwise? – in both of his hands and pumped it up and down as hard as he could. "Rattlecone!" he cried. "Rattlecone! I saw your tracks before, but I did not believe. Forgive me my unbelief!"

"Nay," replied the Onod, which Lúthien now recognized him to be, "there is nothing to forgive. Well met, Comrade. Very well met indeed." He turned to Lúthien and bowed to her as deeply as he could. "I greet you, reverend Lady. It vexes me that such a one as you should find herself root-tangled with this joker, this

reprobate.” There were tones of deep affection in his voice as he spoke of Beren. “Was there no other husband you could find?”

Lúthien came to the Onod and took his other hand. She gazed up into the deep wells of his eyes, full of time.

“Alas, sir, no,” she said with a dimple in her cheek. “I found no other who would bear with my waywardness. I greet you, sir, with a pleasure made sweet as the young leaves of spring by the knowledge that you are that Rattlecone who stood by my Beren in all his travails, from his earliest childhood. He has told me much of your faith, your comradeship, and your aid in every adversity.”

Rattlecone sat them on his broad upper arms, which he held out in front of him, that they might be close to his face and better able all to converse together. In the mysterious way of Ents, he seemed already to know most of their adventures, without their needing to tell him anything. They were glad of that, since their desire was to look forward rather than back. On his part, however, he told them more details of the long march from the North.

“How did you avoid the terror at the feet of the mountains?” Beren asked him. “That is what I most want to know.”

“We took a more southerly path,” replied the Ent.

“But... the Girdle is there,” replied the puzzled man.

Rattlecone laughed. “Did not even you pass through that?” he said. “Nay, all woods are in our charge. Nobody can keep us from them except the lady Kementári, and I cannot think that she would ever wish to. Yes, we come betimes even to Doriath. The Queen knows and understands.”

Beren thought in silence for a moment. “There seem to be no end of wonders,” he said. “I grow almost weary of them. We have come here in the hope of living a quiet life; to simply enjoy breathing for a while. Rather like an Ent in fact.” Rattlecone laughed at that, deep in his chest. “But what do I find?” continued Beren. “So many old friends: the Little People, and now you. Do not tell me that this is chance!”

“Indeed it is not,” replied the Ent. “Do you not understand? This is your reward; and the Hairfeet’s too; and maybe even mine. Here may we all find peace – for a little while. For no-one’s days may run smoothly forever; the world is not so constructed as to allow it.”

The day passed quickly in talk and laughter. As the sun was lowering, and the need grew on the humans to see about their evening business, Rattlecone set them down. He turned to Beren, and there was a twinkle in his eye. “You spoke of wonders, Comrade,” he said, “and here is another: for you have sought me out, and spent the whole day here with me, yet you have not once asked me for any favour.”

Beren hung his head. “You shame me, friend and wise teacher,” he said. “I have asked too much of you, too often. I know it. But such was my need at those times. Now I have no need more, and I would seek your company in simple friendship.”

Rattlecone reached out with his many-fingered hand and gently raised Beren’s chin. “Nay,” he said, “be not ashamed. I spoke in jest. The needs of the past we shall leave in the past. But have you truly no needs now?”

“No,” replied Beren firmly. “Nothing that we are not fit ourselves to fulfil, with thought and labour. I would not ask one thing more of you.”

“Where favours are no longer requested,” said the Ent, “gifts may yet be given. I know that you need a house. Can this not be my wedding gift to you?”

Lúthien put her hand to her mouth and looked at Beren, as the poet has it, with a wild surmise. Beren’s own features showed a mixture of astonishment and dawning gratitude. “I will admit that this problem has cost us

much thought,” he said, “for we have no tools here but a broken knife, and that is but meagre equipment for the working of wood. Do you think to prepare planks for us such as you did for poor Gorlim? That would be an enormous help.”

“No,” said Rattlecone. “I have something else in mind. I will come to you when the gift is ready.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Summer was hot in that southern land. It was some weeks since Rattlecone had made his promise, and they had not seen him, but the hot weather made them lazy and disinclined to spend thought or effort on making shelter against the coming winter. They spent all their days in the woods. Sometimes they would find a shaded glade to doze through the midday, pits and shells of apricots and walnuts strewn beside them; or Beren would lie his head on Lúthien’s warm lap and gaze into her face, luxuriating in utter contentment. She would stroke his forehead idly, both of them wrapped in sleepy half-dreams, bathed in the languid air scented by tarragon and lavender, while cicadas zithered all around in the molten sun of noon. Other times they would bathe in the snow-fed waters of Adurant, laughing and splashing like children, before running themselves dry again in the heat. They were most transcendently happy.

Rattlecone came to them one day just as they emerged from bathing. Lúthien, wet hair streaked darkly across her pale form, snatched giggling at her robe to clutch against her body, while Beren equally cheerfully, but a little pink in the face all the same, clambered out to fetch his clout.

“Welcome, Rattlecone!” he called. “You have caught us at bath-time.”

“I beg your pardon,” said the Ent. “Shall I come later?”

The couple whispered a little together. “Perhaps in an hour, up at the waterfall?” said Beren. The Ent nodded to them and walked away with his long stride. The two humans burst into helpless laughter as soon as his tall form had disappeared between the trees. By the time the hour was up, however, they had collected themselves, had combed their hair and changed, and were able to behave with reasonable decorum.

Rattlecone met them at the little dell the pair called home, where the fresh whisper of the sparkling fall sounded from the rocks. “What sort of house would you like?” he asked straight off. “Or do you need more time to think about it?”

Beren looked at Lúthien uncertainly. They had talked about it, but without knowing exactly what Rattlecone had in mind, it was hard to come up with definite designs. In any case, the Northman was himself not so used to houses, and the ones he knew were not such as he would really care to live in.

“You say,” Beren said to his love.

“Well,” said Lúthien, “it is really only a dream of mine; you will tell me it is silly. But the sort of house I should wish for is a little like the house they shut me in, high in Hirilorn, in Doriath, where the door of my father’s dwelling faces the river. I own it is strange in me to wish for a place like to my prison; but it was not the house’s fault that I might not leave it. It was a sweet little house, and it did its best to soothe the pain of my confinement, which was otherwise almost beyond my wits to endure.”

“Tell me of it,” suggested Rattlecone.

Lúthien described the house. “I should like a house after that pattern, only not set so high perhaps. Also there must needs be room for two, and... and perhaps more than two, should the Goddess of such matters be kind to us; and... well, that is all that I can think of,” she ended lamely.

“And where should this house be? Exactly?” asked Rattlecone.

Looking at Beren for confirmation, Lúthien walked a little to and fro, finally pointing her finger to the earth



in the place where she came to a stand. “Here,” she said a little uncertainly.

Rattlecone walked up to her, and in his hand he was holding what looked like a large seed or pod, although where he had fetched it from neither of them could make out. He bent and squatted as far as he was able and with his strong arm he shoved the seed deep into the earth at Lúthien’s feet. “Water it as soon as it sprouts,” he said, “and keep that up for a week. After that time it will have roots deep enough to feed itself. Your house should be ready before the first storms of autumn.” Without waiting for thanks or any other word, he turned and strode straight away.

The two gathered and looked with bemusement at the loose earth where the seed lay buried. “Surely he doesn’t mean to *grow* us a house,” said Beren.

“I can think of no other way to understand his words,” confessed Lúthien. “I should have spent a bit more time on details. We need more rooms than I had in Hirilorn. I didn’t know he would set to it straight away, and then leave us!”

“It is going to be awkward if it does grow one, but we find we don’t quite like it,” said her man. “And how are we going to heat it? Where shall we lay a fire?”

“Well,” said the Elf-maid, touching the loose earth with her foot, “we shall just have to see. But I think I trust your friend. I think he knows what he is about. He might even know what we want better than we do ourselves.”

The seed sprouted quickly into a tall, dark-green shoot that gained height almost as they watched it. They watered it carefully for a week, at which point it was already two fathoms high, and thicker at its base than Beren’s wrist. It grew quickly to a stout tree with a wide-spreading canopy of large, waxy green leaves; and then it began to bulge. The bulge began in the middle of the trunk and grew with hypnotic speed. If one sat and watched carefully, one could perceive it enlarging. At the end of a month it had ballooned to a great, circular structure. This must surely be the house! Air-roots had descended to the ground at points around its underside, providing stability and support. Then a hole opened up near the trunk. Lúthien and Beren, fascinated beyond description by the whole process, made their way into the cavity, not much more than fifteen feet off the ground. They found that the whole of the inside was hollow. It was divided into floors, as had been the house in Hirilorn. The walls were thin enough that a dim green light made its way through, but there were patches where it was thinning much further and bubbling slightly outwards. These looked on a fair course to become windows. Small holes worming through the walls ensured enough turnover of air while preventing drafts. The very top floor was an open balcony, with a last lip over all to provide shade. All of the floors were soft, even, and warm. It was a living house. They named it Lanthir Lamath<sup>15</sup>, after the sound of the waterfall.

Beren had been very curious to see if the tree would be able to manage places for cooking, washing and bathing, all of which would need heat. It did. Washing and bathing were essentially the same problem, solved by the tree in variants of the same arrangement. The floor in the rooms most suitable (in Beren and Lúthien’s opinion, but how did the tree know?) thickened into a green, waxy layer which began to raise lips upward. Soon this growth had grown to the form of a bath in one room and a tub (raised to a comfortable height) in the other. After these excrescences had reached their final shapes, they began to harden.

Water was managed in a curious manner. The central trunk had become very thick, and sections of it had begun to bulge like the veins on a strong man’s arm. Two of these veins came to rest over each tub, bent over at the ends and ending in horizontal seams like lips. One vein was thin and cool, the other quite thick, as if padded. After some experimentation the fascinated humans found that these were water sources, cold and hot respectively, which could be turned on and off by pressing at a hollow point under the curve. A third mouth in the tubs allowed for exhaust of the used water. As soon as the growth seemed ready, the pair ran themselves a hot bath; the first either of them had had for a very long time.

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15 Echoing cataract – or more poetically, ‘singing waters’.

The cooking place had them puzzled for some time. There was a place where boiling hot water welled up, and that was useful. A large growth began at the trunk side of the room and slowly took on the squared-off shape of a range. There were six hollows in the places for hearths, and a great sheet of material grew off the trunk and formed itself over these like a hood; after this was in shape, tapering up to a hole that disappeared into the roof at the join with the trunk, it slowly over days began to grow darker and harder. The whole thing was clearly meant to be a stove, but how were things to be heated?

The six hollows were peculiar. Three bosses grew out of these, and the bowls and the bosses eventually grew very hard and stony. There were intricate holes at their bases which led down to tubes which snaked to the trunk and then disappeared within it. Beren was toying with these tubes one day, trying to find out what they were for, when he pressed somewhere and heard a hiss. Rearing up on his knees and peering into the bowl, he found that gas seemed to be hissing out of the holes. Hurriedly he squeezed again, hoping it would turn off the flow; it did. He sat back on his haunches and thought about it. Gas. Somewhere he had heard stories of a place where gas came out of the ground and could burn. And one could seat a metal bowl on those bosses... or a grid.

Indeed he had hit on the explanation. It took them some time to make enough equipment to use the hearth, they having at the beginning neither metal nor means to work it; but they managed in the end. It was a full two years before they felt the house was really finished and furnished, but for long afterwards it remained a blessed home to them, and to their son Dior, and to his wife and children after.

Of course they sought out Rattlecone and thanked him as best they knew how. Lúthien made ropes of flowers to drape the Ent with, and she danced around him in her gratitude and joy. He had fulfilled all her hopes: she felt that the house was perfect.

Although there was company for them when they sought it, they were rarely troubled by visitors. Nobody came near the isle from the outside world except the Green-elves who hunted the woods, and their reverence for the couple made them reticent. As for the Hairfeet, although they welcomed visits with warmth, there was hardly a one of them who did not view Beren and Lúthien with an almost superstitious awe which only deepened as time went on. Leave well enough alone, was their motto.

The single exception was Ety. She came often and eagerly to the House of the Singing Waters. When the baby came, she helped Lúthien with it, until the Hairfoot girl married and had a household and babies of her own, after which she was only seldom able to tear herself free and make the trip over the hill. But the light that lay over that land left its ineradicable stamp on her, and in the later part of her long life the memory became to her as an ever-receding patch of golden sunlight in a landscape of shadows. Years later, after she had become the rather stern matriarch of her eastward-wandered people, her grandchildren and great-grandchildren knew that an infallible way to evade Granny's strictness was to ask her about her days on the Green Isle.

The old lady's eyes would soften at the memory. "Ah! That was the Good Place," she would say simply. "There weren't no meanness there, nor nothing ugly, and nobody lived under fear. A body never got sick, and it was hard for anyone to stay miserable, though there was some what tried of course. There always is, isn't that so, Galbo?" This brought a general laugh, for everybody knew Galbo and his gloomy outlook on life. "There was always plenty to eat," went on Ety, "and oh! How them fruits tasted! You younger folk have no notion of fruit. Strawberries, well there ain't no use in me trying to describe 'em, and that's a fact. I've never tasted the like since."

She paused, eyes dimmed by past times. "And there was Them, the two, the people that I loved. Well, a body couldn't help but love 'em, that's the fact of it. Big folk I suppose we must call 'em, but big or small, it didn't come into the picture, somehow. There never was a pair like them. Looking at 'em was like looking at a graceful tree in spring-time with the sun behind it. There was Beren, him who saved me from the Harrek when I weren't no bigger'n you, Varna. What a man! His eyes – well, if you look straight up on a cloudless summer morning, that's what colour his eyes were. And his smile would melt a body's heart – oh, there weren't nothin' a maid could do against that. Oh, I loved him so. Wherever he's gone to now, brave soul, he's took half my heart with him.

“His lady, Lúthien the Beautiful, she’s took the other half. Never was maid fairer, nor merrier either. She were a fast friend to me, such as I never quite had the like of since. There was that to her, times she’d seen and things she’d done, such as you’d open your mouth at the wonder of it; but she was a warm heart, and a laughing one, with a voice like sunshine and roses, and all other good things like that.

“You’ve heard stories, maybe, about what they two did together; how they dared go into the house of the Wicked Man himself,” here she spat on her hand against bad luck and touched her forehead and heart with it, “and took back the Jewel of Heaven what he stole. Well, stories often ain’t no more than just that, stories. But all them stories about Beren and his lady are true! I know, ’cause I was there for some of it, and knowed ’em for the rest. And there’s a lot more besides what was never told. Truth is, better nor braver folk never lived; no, nor kinder, neither. And if anyone was to object that they weren’t Hairfeet but Big Folk, well I’m here to spit in their eye, that’s all.”

She paused for a while, possessed by the golden memory, but she sighed after a moment and focussed again on the familiar faces around her. “We Folk have seen hard times since then,” she went on slowly, wincing as she eased her joints, “had to scratch our living in hard lands. We’ve gone hungry, times, and we been often afeared. I never seen any place again like to the Green Isle of them days, and I know I never will. It’s all gone now o’ course – He and She long gone, and then the salt wave came and drowned all that country. It’s gone now and done. But I don’t mind owning that the one thing that’s kept me going often and often, when the road were special hard and lonely, is the idea that somehow, some day, I might find my way back to that island, and live happy again under the Light, with Beren and Lúthien, and their bonny baby, there beside the laughing waters.” She reached for a handkerchief with hands on which the tremor of age had lately begun to settle, and blew her nose. “How I miss them times!”

And here we will leave Etty, and for the greater part too we will leave Beren and Lúthien in their bliss; for happy years make dull tales. The outer world touched their island just twice more; and of these times is told below.

News came but faintly from outside of great forces mustering, and of victories, and of lands taken back from the foe. Beren and Lúthien paid them but little mind, for there seemed a great distance between them and the outer world, and they had their own lives to live; with a beautiful laughing baby now taking up all their time and concern. In the summer of that year came the news that, through black treachery and failure, all the bright plans had fallen down to fire and ruin.<sup>16</sup> They felt a pang for the hopes dashed and the lives lost – Beren especially at the news of Huor and Húrin; but such affairs were nothing to do with them any more. It was a tragedy in the shadowlands.

In autumn of that year a parcel of excited birds flew into the dell and fluttered around Beren’s head as he sat mending a chair. “Someone is coming!” they twittered. “Someone is coming!”

“Come now, Blackbird, Pigeon,” Beren said, putting down his work and extending an arm for the creatures to land on. “Calm yourselves, if you will, and tell me a little more. What sort of someone?”

After some back and forth he succeeded in getting out of them that it was only one person, probably an Elf, and no-one that any of them knew. “His head-feathers are black,” said the blackbird importantly, “not pale like these other Speakers.” ‘Speakers’ was what all the birds called the Elves, and indeed it was what the Elves called themselves: Quendi, in their old tongue.

They waited, but the ‘black-feathered speaker’ didn’t appear; so in the end Beren went to find out who it might be. The birds guided him to a small clearing not far from the crest of the hill. There, sitting on a stone, he saw a figure he recognized indeed, but had never expected to see again: Celebrimbor.

As Beren approached, the Elven smith turned to face him. A light as it appeared of wonder and joy was on Celebrimbor’s face, and Beren marked with surprise the tracks which tears had left on his cheeks.

He squatted beside the Elf, and bade him quietly welcome.

<sup>16</sup> The Battle of Unnumbered Tears, Year of the Sun 472.

“You remember me?” said Celebrimbor, looking into his face.

“I do,” replied Beren. “Are you in distress? Can I aid you in some way?”

“Distress?” said the Elf. “No. Or rather, yes. Truth to say, I am wounded to my very heart’s-meat; so deeply that I do not know if I will survive it.”

Beren was somewhat at a loss. “Perhaps,” he said, “if you can tell me what has wounded you, we might better seek for a remedy? No-one has yet died on this isle that I know of. I would not have you of all people be the first.”

Celebrimbor sighed. “‘Of all people’,” he repeated. “You do me an honour that I have not earned. But if you will know, it is your isle itself which has penetrated to my heart, like a bitter needle of the finest steel. I had not expected it; I had prepared no defence. Thus has it overcome me.”

“It is a place of peace and beauty, to be sure,” said the man. “But is it truly of such power to wound the heart?”

“In all this dark land,” said the other, “on this side of the Sea, it is the first time I have been reminded of my home.”

Beren understood. He said gently, “I have not seen Valinor, and likely never will. But I do know that we have made here – how, I do not rightly know – a haven very like to Doriath, which many compare to the land of the Powers beyond the sea.”

“Doriath!” replied the deep-eyed Elf. “Oh, I have longed to see that land, whose fame I knew. But I am barred from it by fault of my blood – and by the shed blood of others. Barred by those crimes indeed from any easy joy. So, as much as I love light, and hunger for it, I had made up my mind that I would never again find it, but would have to mope evermore through the dark. Such is the fate which my House has brought upon its own head. We swearers of the Oath have forfeited our right to Light.

“Being so resolved, or I might say resigned, I slunk past Doriath with averted head; but the sorrow of the denial bit deep. I travelled with companions who likewise had poor expectation of welcome in the Guarded Realm. So, we passed it by. Duty bound, I left my fellows beyond your water below, and as I crossed that stream, and entered the woods, I found all unawaited just that which I had lost, and thought never to see or find ever again: Light. I have been smitten since then with the wonder and the glory of it, and I have wandered this day through the land as a besotted lover, unsure if I will die from joy, or from the pain of the parting which must surely come.”

“You may willingly stay here, for my part,” said Beren quietly. “You speak of crimes, and crimes there have certainly been; but not of your hand. To my mind, you are not answerable for those of your elders. Why not stay? Joy has never killed anyone here, at least not yet.”

Celebrimbor sighed and shook his head. “Alas, I cannot,” he said. “The weave of my life will not permit it. Duty must come before any hope of reward. It was even so with you, was it not? Nay, friend, your blessed light is not for me. Perhaps, in the end, those who order this world may allow me to go home;<sup>17</sup> and although the Light I crave lives there no longer, at least I will find what beauty the darkness affords, and peace. But I have a long road to tread before that time. So I pray you, do not make that which is necessary even harder to bear than it is already.”

The two of them sat silent for a time, before Beren stirred. “You spoke of duty,” he said. “May I ask what duty brings you here?”

“I have an errand to you,” replied the Elvish smith. “But I also have words for the Lady Lúthien.”

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17 Valinor.

Beren smiled at him and stood up. "Then will you not come to visit at our abode? I know Lúthien would willingly have you as guest." He held out his hand.

Celebrimbor glanced at him with wonder, standing up himself as he did so. "You have no cause to love me," he said, "and have heavy grievance against my House. Yet still you would bid me welcome?"

"Nonsense," replied Beren firmly. "You are a friend of Telchar; that is enough for me."

The Elf took his hand. A smile with a hint of sadness to it lit his rather sombre features. "Then I shall come," he said. He picked up his bundles, among which was some long, weighty item wrapped in fine cloth, and followed Beren's lead.

Arriving back, Beren called into the house, telling Lúthien who had come. She came out to greet the visitor, carrying baby Dior. When Celebrimbor caught sight of her, he bowed low.

"Reverend Lady," he said, "I owe you humble apology, if the word be even adequate for recognition of a transgression, or omission, of such a shameful nature. I most humbly beg your pardon that, while my father and my uncle most despicably held you captive, I did nothing to abate it."

"It is hard to go against the word of the father," replied Lúthien softly. "Who should know that better than I? No, sir, for my part you need not excuse yourself. We are none of us perfect judges of affairs, and in the end a person must be weighed by their nature, not whatever temporary errors they may make. And your nature is a high one."

"I am glad my Lady thinks so," replied Celebrimbor earnestly. "Leastways, I parted ways with my father not long after. I would have helped you then, but you were already gone."

"Come," said Beren, "the day is warm for the season. Sit you down in the cool shade and rest. Can I fetch you some refreshment?"

For some moments there was a bustle of fetching and seating. When Celebrimbor was sitting at last with a glass of cool, light wine in his hands, he raised his eyes to the fair couple. They read his news in them even before the Elf spoke.

"You mentioned Telchar," he said to Beren. "It grieves me to tell you that he is dead."

Beren sat for a while with his head bowed. "Telchar gone," he sighed at last. "Well, we all must come to it at last: the silence and the loss. But indeed, I thought he must be near his time. He was very full of years." He looked up keenly into Celebrimbor's face. "Was his end peaceful?"

"He went full-hearted content," replied Celebrimbor, and some overtone in his words, and some look in his dark eyes, made Beren glance over at the long bundle which had been leaned against the tree.

"Come, master Smith," the man said slowly, "you surely did not come all this way simply to tell me of the passing of a friend. What is the real reason you are here?"

"No indeed," said Celebrimbor. "I bear a commission from Telchar: something I am bidden to give to you. Here it is." With this he stood up and fetched the long bundle from where it stood, proffering it to Beren. The man took the bundle and unwrapped the cloth at one end. The layers fell aside to reveal the jewelled hilt of a great sword.

Beren sighed again. "I feared it would be so," he said.

"Feared?" repeated Celebrimbor in surprise.

"This is the sword I saw in pieces some years ago, is it not?" said Beren. "Telchar told me he was making it for me. Now what should I do with such a mighty gift? I cannot use it myself."

“Telchar knew that,” said Celebrimbor. “You are forgetting his words. But I do not forget. This is the Sword of Man. It is yours to pass down as an heirloom, for some future hand to wield.” He nodded at the child on Lúthien’s lap, who was playing with his toes and singing softly to himself in some private language. “Perhaps his.”

Slowly Beren released the remainder of the wrappings. The blade of the sword was very finely made, with a damask pattern such as Beren had never seen before: instead of the more usual ripples of grey, the waving gloss in the steel wove an intricate dapple which blended sun-colour and subtle silver. He carried the blade into the sunlight, under which it shone fiery bright. “Narsil,” he said, reading the runes graven on the steel. “Sun-moon. He has wrought well.”

“Pah, the appearance is nothing,” said Celebrimbor. “The power in the blade, that is what matters. Narsil! I have never seen a finer work of hand. That sword can cleave a hair on water; yet there is no force of Man, Elf or Dwarf which could break it. Try the blade, man, be not content simply to gawk at it! Has it not been said that you are the greatest swordsman of the age?”

“I was, maybe,” replied Beren. “No longer.” Nevertheless he grasped the blade in his left hand and whipped it in quick curves through the air. “Aye,” he admitted, “it balances well. I will take your word for the keenness and the strength. I am sorry the old Dwarf is dead, but this is a worthy child of his long labours.”

“You still feel – pain in your right hand?” asked Celebrimbor carefully.

Beren smiled and turned the hand in front of his eyes. “The Wolf bit it off,” he said, “as I am sure you know. They granted me a new one; ask me not how. It is not quite my own flesh, however.” He did not elaborate, and Celebrimbor did not venture to pursue the subject. Beren wrapped the sword again, extinguishing its fire. To the surprise of the Elf, Beren reached the bundle back to him. “I cannot accept the gift,” he said, and his voice showed that there was no use to argue.

Celebrimbor took the sword back, but his reluctance was clear to see. “Not even for your son?” he said.

“He will inherit from Thingol,” Beren replied. “So will his line lie rather with the Firstborn.”

“Do you, then, deny Telchar’s vision?”

“No,” said Beren, “but he saw the use of this blade far in the future – it may be, after many generations of Men. Thick as the falling leaves of autumn they may pass, life after life, before this blade meets the hand matched to it. You keep it, smith. It will be safer among those who directly keep the memory. You will know when it is the right moment to give it, to what unimaginable one follows distantly from my line.”

He spoke with authority, and Celebrimbor saw no option but to comply. He set his cup down. “Then I have fulfilled all my errand,” he said. “Is there anything else I can tell you? I am loth to speak news to you, seeing as how it must nearly all be bad, but I will do so if you desire it.”

Beren looked at Lúthien, then slowly shook his head. “We are done with all that,” he said to the Elf. “And indeed I know most of it. I am sorry to my marrow – about so many things. But it is not part of our story any more.”

Celebrimbor smiled a little wryly. “Would that I could say the same!” he said. “In that case, since I have no light conversation, being a maker, and thus suited only to conceiving and hammering, I will take my leave of ye.”

“You travel alone?” asked Lúthien.

“No,” replied the smith. “All the Dwarves in Nargothrond took the road with me, also others of my kin. With Telchar’s passing, there was nothing to keep them in the city any more. Nor me. These companions wait for me in the woods south of Adurant.”

“What?” cried Beren. “Breshke, Khabbock and the rest? My old friends, so near? Will they pass by, and not come to greet me?”

The dark-eyed Elf shook his head. “It would be too heavy a burden for their natures,” he replied soberly. “Forgive them if you can. Even for me, who have no fear of the spirits of Men, it was with shaking knee that I directed my path here.”

“Oh what nonsense,” replied Beren. “I am no spirit! I am just as I ever was.”

Celebrimbor shook his head slowly. “No,” he said, “you are not. The finger of the One has touched you; and that is a great matter. It is strong drink even for we who have seen the faces of the Gods.”

“I understand,” said Lúthien quietly. “It is more than I care to rest my mind on myself.”

They all sat silent for a time, listening to the gentle wind, and the varied chatter of the water.

“I must go,” said the smith after a time, the weight of his heavy heart in his voice. He stood even as he spoke.

“Whither do you go, Celebrimbor?” asked Lúthien, standing in her turn.

“East,” he replied. “Beleriand is not yet lost, but soon will be. I cannot help, and here there is nothing more to learn. My destiny lies elsewhere.”

“And what will you do in the East?” the Elf-woman asked him. “You spoke of deeds to accomplish. What deeds shall they be?”

Celebrimbor stood for a moment in thought. “You also have not seen Valinor,” he replied slowly. “Let me tell you then, that for we who have seen the Light of the Trees in their glory, every moment in the darkness of this outer world is an ache of regret. We may not go back. We are banned from paradise, and must wander down the ages through these dark and cheerless woods. Yet all here is not dark. In the kingdom of your father, Lady, any one of us might rest content; and here, too, now, I have found another such land, quite unexpected. Why should there not be more such enclaves? Could we not compass by mind and heart further such sanctuaries? To find and gather the Light of perfection, of beauty, of pure love, of creation, of wonder, of all fine and high things; to cleanse, to hallow, to preserve; that is my goal. Ask me not how I might accomplish it, for I cannot say. But I will not rest until I do.”

The two had listened with great solemnity to the words of the Maker. When he had finished, Beren took the Elf’s hand in both of his own. “Fare thee well, great spirit,” he said to him. “And may the Powers bless all the works of thy hands.”

“Ye who died and rose again, I bid ye farewell in my turn,” returned the dark-browed smith. “May your time of bliss long continue!”

\* \* \* \* \*

The golden years passed on the Isle, in that blessed haven, while the world darkened outside; but the storms without had no power to disturb Beren and Lúthien, and were but faintly heeded. Their son Dior grew to strong manhood, and all who lived in that place loved him. Fairer of face was he than any Elf or mortal Man, a reminder of the eternal beauty which lies in the gift of the gods. To see him was to feel renewed joy in that gift; but those who loved him did so for the gold of his nature, not because of how he looked. In the course of time Dior looked to wed, and meeting him hand to hand at that time was Nimloth, fair-limbed maiden of the Sindar, whom he had grown to know and love. Near relation she was to Celeborn, prince of Doriath. Celeborn and Galadriel came to the wedding, and a more joyous occasion has perhaps never been seen on the face of Middle-earth. The trees themselves put forth ropes of flowers in honour of the pair, and as the couple walked down between their rows, the white petals scenting the sweet air, it seemed that light and joy would never again leave the earth, and the hearts of all there present were full nigh to bursting from the wonder and

the glory of it. The couple lived afterwards in harmony and blessed laughter. Twin sons Nimloth bore, Eluréd and Elurín; then a daughter, Elwing, born on a night of stars, and named Star-spray after the glitter of their light on the gentle falls of Lanthir Lamath.

The world remains full of sorrow nonetheless. It is not our purpose here to rehearse its every grief, and our own tale is nearly done. The dark history of Húrin is told elsewhere, and we shrink from it, but since it touches at last on our own, we must mention some brief outline thereof.

The songs of sadness tell of the waxing but at last the downfall of all of Húrin's house, which tale of grief he was made by Morgoth to witness, helpless. Glaurung the Worm raged, and Nargothrond fell at last beneath his fire. It is told how Húrin, released at last, limped to the ruins of that city, and wrested with murder from the dragon-trove that work of wondrous craft of which has here been told: glittering garland of Felagund's breast, wrought of Medb, smith-maid of Belegost; the Nauglamir, Necklace of the Dwarves. Húrin took this treasure and carried it to Thingol, and no tale tells aught further of the trials of that noble and tragic man. But the world cannot be made right if he receive never his justice in any of the manifold halls of Time.

Thingol had the Necklace, and the Silmaril, and it came into his thought to join the two. Only Dwarves could undertake the work; thus he engaged their best smiths for the purpose. In time the desire of Thingol was achieved, and the greatest of the works of Elves and Dwarves were brought together and made one; and its beauty was sublime, for now the countless jewels of the Nauglamir did shining honour to the light of the Silmaril amidmost. Yet curséd was that work of hand, for gold has ever had claws and poison for the hearts of men. Also the blood of murder had sullied the sheen of the Necklace, and a Dragon had brooded on it. Lust drew proud words from Thingol's lips, and stirred blind rage in answer from Dwarven hearts; and so it was that Thingol was slain in his own citadel, and with his last sight gazed upon a Silmaril, in which now only lived that Light he once beheld in Valinor.

The Dwarves fled with the booty, but they did not run far, and the Nauglamir was brought back in bitter grief to Melian the Queen. But Melian cared but little for jewels or metals of the earth; her own heart's jewel was lost, and she knew that her long sojourn of joy in Middle-earth was at an end. So Melian departed, passing to the land of the Valar beyond the western seas, to muse upon her sorrows in the garden of Lórien from whence she came. With her going, the Girdle was withdrawn from Doriath, and Esgalduin the enchanted river spoke with a different voice. Doriath lay open to its enemies.

The Dwarves of the Blue Mountains, on hearing the tidings, prepared for war. Ere long a great host came forth from Nogrod, and crossing over Gelion, marched westward through Beleriand.

Word of the marching of the host from Nogrod had come to the pair on Tol Galen through the Green-elves. In that time also a messenger came to them out of Doriath, telling of what had earlier befallen there. We will not tell of the grief his words sowed in their hearts.

We take up our tale again at the council of war. Beren came to this with Dior, and there they met with Tuilind, chief of the Green-elves, together with the leaders of his hunters. Rattlecone was also present.

Lúthien would not come. Stricken at the passing of her parents, and the rape of her home, she lay abed, and had turned her face from the world. Nimloth stayed at her side.

Beren listened to Tuilind's more detailed report in consternation. "An army," he muttered at the end of it, "and of so many thousands. I doubt that Doriath has strength to hold them off. Their trust was always in the Girdle."

"The Hidden Kingdom lies now exposed," agreed Tuilind, grim-faced. "And they are far from us. No help could we send in time. We must fear the worst – Doriath conquered, the Jewel retaken."

Beren gnawed at a fingernail. "How old is this news?" he asked.

"Of the army, perhaps two weeks," replied the Elf. "News of the murder must be older."



“Two weeks...” said Beren. “Nogrod to Menelgroth is, I don’t know, eighty leagues? But they would not tarry... I think by now the Dwarves must have been and done, all evil already wrought. Oh, this is an ill season!”

“Those of our people who live nearer will have heard the news earlier,” said Tuilind, “but I know not what they could hope to do. Our own strength lies also not in armies. We could do little more than pepper the flanks of these stunted peace-breakers as they stumble their ways back through the greenwood.”

“Surely that shall not be all,” fretted Beren. “The raiders cannot yet have come far on their return... but tell me, chieftain. You say ‘could’. What of ‘shall’? I think I have made up my own mind what I shall do. But what do your people intend?”

“Alone the killing of Grey-cloak in his own hall is a great crime,” Tuilind said slowly in answer. “To that we must add the other deaths. Even though the Grey Ones are not close kin to us, we think that we cannot leave them unavenged. Word will be sent. Bows will be mustered. We would meet the evil deed with vengeance, as all right-thinking peoples must.”

“We do not know all the rights and wrongs of it,” cautioned Beren.

“A death is a death,” countered the Elf. “Grey-cloak did not earn his. It must be paid for.”

Beren sighed, then pondered a moment in silence. “His death grieves me beyond measure,” he said at last, “but that alone would not move me to action. With such griefs of the world I have no more to do. But the Silmaril, now, that is a different matter. My heart tells me that I cannot stand aloof and see it carried off as robber’s loot. Shall I permit that holy jewel to suffer such insult, I who cut it myself from the crown of the Enemy in his innermost, most terrible stronghold, and who suffered the pains of death in payment? I am resolved to attempt its recovery; it remains for me only to decide how. I ween it will take more than a little peppering of arrows from forest ambushade.”

“They must cross Gelion,” said Tuilind. “How if we meet them on its banks?”

“Can we come there in time, that is the question,” said Beren.

“By horse, on a flat grade, through cleared lands, without a doubt,” replied the Elf. “But the lands are wooded and wild; and we have no horses anyhow. It is not our custom to ride. This side of the mountains, I know of none nearer than Estolad.”

“Then we must perforce go on foot,” the man said. “The question remains. Is it possible?”

The keen-faced Elf hesitated, eyeing the man the while as if measuring him up. “Yes,” he said at last, new decision showing in his voice. “We have a fair chance. But it will not be soft running.”

They discussed this idea for a little, which seemed the best course to all of them, although they were far from certain what they could usefully attempt against such a well-armed and -armoured army as they had heard word of.

Rattlecone had remained silent through all of this. Beren turned to him at last. “What is your advice, old friend?” he said. “I would hear your wisdom. Do you hold silence for fear I will not listen? Nay, those impatient days are long gone. If you tell me the quest is vain, and that I should give it up, I will heed your words.”

Rattlecone stirred and looked the company over in his slow fashion. “I do not tell you so,” he rumbled at last. “It is grievous indeed that the free peoples should take up arms against each other. Yet I am with Tuilind: crime merits punishment. Thingol, maybe, spoke proud words, as was ever his wont, but he did not deserve to be murdered for them, nor did his folk.

“But not for this alone would the Onodrim lift their hands against the Dwarves. The plundering of the Jewel is a further matter, and there I am with you. This is no simple glittering stone or gaud over which Men and Dwarves may squabble; it is a holy thing of Arda, and it is of all things least fitting that it should be so coarsely and casually handled, blown like a helpless leaf in a storm of rapine and murder.

“But there is a further cause for wrath of which neither of you has shown sensible: that is, the slow coming death of Light in Doriath. While Melian lived on earth, she held the Dark from that land; but she is here no more, and already I sense its gathering stain. *That* is the greatest crime of all. These dwarvish miscreants were born free folk, and they have made no open compact with Morgoth, but in this they do his work, as directly as if they had been paid in coin from his very hand. So no, I do not seek to dissuade you from your quest; indeed, we of the trees will aid you in it. When you march north, I will come with you, and word shall go out. Our people will meet you at Sarn Athrad, the Ford of Stones.”

At the mention of the name, a cold hand seemed to grasp at Beren’s heart. He gazed with troubled brow at Rattlecone, for it seemed to him that, for the first time in all his long knowledge of the Ent, his friend’s sight into a matter fell short. Beren looked always to hear wisdom from him, and before now he had always found it; but now he was not sure.

“I must talk this over with Lúthien,” Beren said at last.

His spouse had recovered somewhat by evening, or at least had gathered herself, aware that she had long since forgone the luxury of giving in to private grief: she was now wife and mother, and grandmother too, and thus responsible for others.

“Being what I am, of my birthright and people, I see far,” she said to Beren as they wandered beneath the starlit trees, “but it is not permitted to me to see the ends of those I love. It is a merciful gift, I think. My heart’s-mate, there is a dark wall before my sight, that lies but bare days ahead, into which your path vanishes. I beg you, do not go. Leave it to the Elves and the Ents, to do as drives them. But for all that, no good can come of killing. Blood cannot be washed away with more blood.”

“My joined soul-twin,” he replied quietly, “sight may fail, but sense says that we cannot stay here in bliss forever. It must have an end, and it is even good so, since we are not made for eternity; not in this form, not in this world. We have drunk from the cup, but it is not bottomless, and we must come to the lees in time. That time cannot be long hence, whether I go on this venture or not. You know this in your heart as well as I.

“I have seen now nearly seventy years on this Middle-earth, yet my hair is still glossy and dark, the spring remains in my step. But when my lease on life was renewed by the grace of the One, I was not given the life of the Eldar; or better said, the gift of Death was not taken from me. I was born to age and die, yet I have been bound in this land of ours to youth and life. A time will come to cut the bonds and run free – I know not whither. Whether that time comes a little sooner, on this venture, or a little later, should I survive it, is surely a matter of no great weight.”

“It is shame to speak so,” she whispered. “Each moment to me is precious.”

“Lúthien,” he said to her, “I must go to this war. This fate which was wrought for me has given me a long leave, but now it has recalled me to duty.”

“But this time I cannot come with you,” she said. “Could I do that, I would face what fate sent to us at your side, and be content. But Nimloth is ailing still since Elwing’s birth. I must help her, and since I cannot be in two places, I must leave you to go alone. This is what I find hardest to bear. In the beginning, all that we had was each other, and all other bonds of love paled beside that, and could be set aside. But time has wrought new bonds, bonds of adamant. My love, my need for you burns hotter than the sun, but I would put Dior’s life before yours, and the grand-children’s too. Is that not terrible? The thought is almost more than I can bear.”

“It is but natural,” he replied. “Although Dior goes too on this venture; yet it is me you would keep from it,

not him.”

“I see Dior crowned in Doriath,” she replied, “therefore I do not fear his going.”

He sighed. “I cannot withhold my hand from this,” he said at last, “although I see along my path no further than you, and a shadow lies over my heart.”

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Tuilind had said to Beren that the Elves would need a day to gather and prepare. They therefore had arranged to set out together on the second sunrise following the council. Beren’s preparations were soon made; he was used to travelling light. He took no mail nor any sort of weapon.

Dior also was packing light. He took a war-shirt, but neither sword nor bow.

“Son,” Beren said to him, “will you not go armed?”

“No,” replied his son. “My place is at your side; but I do not wish to kill.”

“I can understand that,” said Beren, “but none of us knows what might happen on this expedition. It troubles me to think that you will have no weapon to ward yourself from harm.”

“I might say the same about you, Father.”

“That would be a vain remark, as you know well,” said his elder. “You know I can bear none. But you are not in my case. I spent much labour teaching you swordcraft, but that skill is of no use if you leave your blade at home.”

Dior shook his head, and he would not be swayed. In the end Beren had to allow that his son was a full-grown man who knew his own business best.

He left Dior then and made his disconsolate way into the sunlit woods, feeling out of joint. His tongue felt thick in his mouth, and his head ached. There was a strange smell in the air, something he could not put his finger on; and the light looked odd, too bright perhaps. Anyhow, somehow wrong. He wandered through the woods and glades, oppressed by the strangeness, while wishing with all his heart that this change in his affairs had not come upon him.

As he walked, half fevered, his mind ranged far into the past, over all the faces he had known and all the times he had seen. And it seemed as if he wandered in a dream; the hot air became unreal to him, the heavy stillness of noon was as a thin curtain, any moment to be brushed aside revealing – what?

Some instinct made him turn swiftly. He saw three figures; and it took several beats of his pounding heart before he recognized them.

There stood a tall, comely woman, seemingly in her early twenties, with crisp blue eyes and a long plait of hair of the true, fiery red. Her handsome face was sprinkled with freckles and her teeth gleamed pearly white. The woman was smiling at him, love and welcome shining out of her beautiful eyes. Next to her stood a strong man with dark eyes and a rich beard, who grinned cheerfully at Beren. Between them both, arms linked in theirs, stood a slender woman clothed in white; she was smiling at him shyly. Her warm-shaded, glossy hair was bound around her head in a crown, and her face! Her face was so familiar to Beren!

Tongue cleaving to his mouth, unable to utter a word, Beren took a stumbling step forward and reached out his hand to his family.

But there was nothing there; and it seemed to him that he had been tricked by the play of hot light among the leaves and branches.

He found a forest stream and washed his face in the cold water, trying to sort out what was real and what was not.

In the cool of the evening he told Lúthien what he had seen. She heard him out in silence, then nodded as he came to an end. "I have heard of such things," she said quietly. "I think that was your fetch that you saw."

"Fetch, what is that?" asked Beren.

"When the walls of life wear thin," said Lúthien, "one can begin to see through them, into the unknown country. It calls. Hence the name, perhaps. I do not know."

To that Beren had no answer.

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The party set out in the dawn of next day, after all partings had been said. Only twenty Elves were with Tuilind, but he had sent runners ahead, and expected to gather more support along the way.

They ran north, and with intervals of walking, they kept running all that day. The Elves ran lightly, and the man and his son were also tireless and fleet. Rattlecone kept easy pace with them, walking with his long strides. They ran on through the green land of the Seven Rivers, the mountains ever blue on their right. The river Duilwen lay before them, then Brilthor, then Legolin; Thalos they must cross, and finally Ascar, that Beren had seen once long ago.

With each mile northward they ran, the shadow grew within him; the place they were coming to, the crossing, looming higher and blacker in his mind. Death waited there. He had felt it, all those years ago. He had known. "What is this place?" he had asked his genial captor in his unease, and the Dwarf had named it to him: the Ford of Stones.

They crossed Duilwen late in the afternoon, but resolved to run on. They were running into the unknown. They were not even certain the Dwarves would succeed in their assault, nor if they would return, or anything. Beren wished he had the friendship of the eagles in this land; the party was sorely in need of tidings. The worst outcome of all would be to arrive too late. He was sure that none but the Valar themselves could ever recover the jewel if once it passed the gates of Tumunzahar the Great.

The party threw themselves down at moonset for a few hours of sleep, then went on through the cold dew of the first grey light of day. The sun climbed, the dew burned off. As the sun stood high in the blue sky they tumbled down a bank into the roaring waters of Brilthor. They stumbled over slippery stones through the tug of the chill waters, and then they were clambering up the far slope and away.

Beren had spoken few words with Dior so far, being preoccupied with his own forebodings. He loped now beside his son and looked him over with silent approval. The boy seemed to be holding up well. Boy! he thought, what am I saying? He's – why, he must be over thirty. Where do the years go?

"How goes it, Son?" he asked.

Dior grinned at him. "It is a pleasant outing," he replied. "It feels good to stretch the body. But I wonder much at your sure feet in the dark, Father. Lies it in the feet do you suppose, or do you have cat's eyes, and never told us?"

Beren laughed. "No," he said, "but I was trained early to it. You have missed out on that. Indeed, I have often thought it was the one thing the Isle lacked: no Druug."

"I doubt it lacks for aught else," said his son, glancing around him. "This outer world is drear in comparison. My place is beside you, therefore I came with you, but I will admit that I also had some eager expectation to see new things; but nothing that I have seen so far would tempt me to journey here again."

"I was born in the world, so I do not see the matter quite so," said Beren, running lightly beside his son, "but I very well understand what you mean. But that leads me to mention something else. We have not spoken much of it, but the throne of Doriath is now yours by right. So I am afraid that duty will likely lead you further yet from home. Alas, it is often so. Luckily for you, Doriath, even in its decline, is such a land as may ease your homesickness."

The younger man made no reply to that. After a little time Beren said to him, "Your mother was born before the Sun was made, and has ever found her strength in the dark. Search for her inside yourself; then you may find your way without light, maybe, in the end perhaps even better than I."

"Perhaps," Dior said. "But Father, that touches on a matter I have wondered about. I am son to both you and Mother. But which does that make me: Man or Elf?"

"Time will reveal that," replied his father, but even as he spoke these words, the heavy knowledge opened to him that they were hollow<sup>18</sup>. His mood darkened again at that, despite the fair summer's day.

They ran on for a time in silence. "Father," said Dior at last, "what is it that you fear at the ford?"

"It is not fear," replied Beren. "It is a presentiment, a sense that some cold knot of evil lies ahead. It may be indeed that I shall die in it; but I do not fear my own death."

Dior glanced at his father, thinking about his words. "Have you had such feelings before?"

"Yes," replied his father. "I have often been able to sense evil in the road. It has saved my life many times." He was silent a while, considering. "Some things that happened to others I have also had foreknowledge of," he went on. "My sister's death I felt years before it happened. Yet not that of my mother, nor my father, nor of others I have loved. It is a fickle thing."

Onward they went, and onward still. The last red rays of the setting sun saw them in a fair rolling country still some way from Legolin.

Elves do not quickly tire; both body and will are made of tougher stuff than those of mortal Men. Only in Beren did they meet their match, and more than match. Few now of the free folk of Middle-earth could equal his strength of will, and he had never yet tested fully the limits of his new-made body. Therefore he had set a relentless pace.

Tuilind came to him in the dusk. "Let us halt, and eat!" he said. "We are only poor Elves, not creatures of iron. We need food and rest."

Beren frowned. "Surely we should go on while we can," he said. "The food would not console us, came we too late to the ford."

"Yet it will do us no good if we are too weak to lift bow when we get there," replied the Elf. "And there is also this: I sent runners ahead, and have engaged to meet one Gwyldor on Legolin at midday tomorrow. We could cross the stream by moonset, maybe, at this present pace; but then we would miss our rendezvous. And Gwyldor should bring fresh recruits to our numbers. Nay, let us rest! Thirty leagues we have come in one and a half suns. I had no notion you Mortals were made of such stuff!"

With the matter put so, Beren agreed to a halt. They made fire, and a hasty meal. The two men threw themselves down straight afterwards and fell into an immediate and deep slumber; the Elves sat dreaming in the dark, or conversed in low voices. Rattlecone stood to one side, silent and thoughtful, watching over all.

Tuilind woke Beren after sunrise. The party went on then at a slower pace. Gwyldor joined them at noon with a hundred archers, tripling their numbers. More were promised later. "I sent twice this number north last fore-night," said Gwyldor, his eyes still wide at finding himself in Beren's famed presence. "They will be

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18 Dior was not fated to meet a natural end.

nearing Thalos, or over it. I doubt we can catch them before Ascar.”

“Knew you our leader here better,” said Tuilind drily, “you would not doubt.”

They ran on through a sea of gathering pain. Everything was hurting – feet, legs, and bands of pain wrapped their labouring chests. The new Elves were fresh, and laughed and joked among themselves to begin with, but the relentless pace slowly wore down their light mood.

In a growing fog of weariness, Beren felt more and more as if he was running into a dream. The bright light on the trees, the voices of the Elves, none of it seemed quite real any more. These lights and sounds began to him to seem like a painted cloth in a play; and behind the cloth, shadows were gathering.

Night fell, but Beren did not stop, and none dared ask it of him. They flitted on through the moonlight, almost silent, slipping between the silver-striped trees. Dior was stumbling now; even his fresh young body was beginning to tire. As the night wore on, the flagging Elves felt that moonset would never come. They seemed to have wandered into a nightmare, an evil dream of exhaustion and pain, and endless spur to effort, for a reason nobody could remember.

The shadow-figures were more real to Beren now than the moon. He could see them on every side – a host of dim figures, keeping easy pace with him, although they seemed to glide rather than run. Some he thought he recognized; as the weary night drew on, he began to be sure of it. Was that not Nose he glimpsed beside him, striding through the dark? And the young Willow a little beyond? The hulking figure of Radhruin; Gorlim; and that lithe shade was surely Glith. He knew them; they were all there, and there were more beyond. None of them spoke to him, but their eyes glittered in the gloom.

A great hand on his arm pulled him up with a shock. He looked around with a start, but could see little. The moon had set and only a little dim, star-sprinkled sky peered between the black clusters of leaves overhead.

The hand belonged to Rattlecone, who stood over him, the glimmer of his eyes faintly to be seen in the dark.

“You were drifting,” rumbled the Ent in his deep voice. “Come back to us. It is not yet time.”

Beren held his head in both hands, gripped by a weariness greater than he had ever known. “Where are we?” he muttered. The shadows had not retreated far from him; he could sense them all around.

“We are in the world,” replied Rattlecone. “Come, the Elves are this way.” He led Beren through the darkness, and soon the sound of low voices showed him the nearness of the People of the Stars.

Tuilind faced Beren, the expression on his face impossible to read in the gloom. “We lost you,” he said. “One-hand, we cannot do more this night.”

“Then let us rest,” said Beren thickly. “Where is Dior?”

“He sleeps,” said the Elf, pointing down. “Just there.”

Beren laid himself without further words at the side of his son, and sank straight away into sleep. Nor did the Elves wait long before following his example.

He roused them as the sun was gilding the tree-tops. “Up!” he cried. “This is the last effort. Thalos lies below; we will rest at Ascar this night.” Indeed they could hear the whisper of the waters filtering up through the trees from the base of the steep slope where they lay, and wondered that they had not marked it the previous night.

With many a groan, the Elves hauled themselves up and began to move, attempting to loosen up their stiff joints. The passage through Thalos’s snow-fed waters did not improve matters, but once they were climbing the far slopes, and had begun to warm and dry their clothes and limbs, their joints moved more easily and their pace picked up. More Elves joined them in the morning, and at midday they indeed came up with

Gwyldor's advance party: two hundred Elves, clad in green and marching easily. These were gathered in and induced to pick up their pace.

In the last blue of the evening, the army plodded wearily over a final high ridge. From a clearing on the height, they could look down on the darkening valley below. There, faint but still to see, wound the white waters of Ascar. They had come eighty leagues in less than four days.

They made a sketchy camp in the valley by the light of the moon. Lulled by the ever-changing voice of the Ascar, they fell at once into an exhausted sleep.

Beren felt he had not lain down for five minutes when he was shaken awake again, but a glance at the moon showed in fact that he had slept for two hours. It was Tuilind, with another Elf at his side.

"Word has come," the Elf-lord told him. "This messenger here. He says the Short Folk will be here, not tomorrow, but the day following. We are in time."

Beren shook his head, trying to clear the fog of fatigue. "That is good," he said. "Do they march in victory or defeat?"

"Victory for them, alas," replied the messenger. "Many were killed, on both sides; but Doriath had the worst of it. Mablung is fallen, and many others of lesser fame."

Beren groaned. He could not find more words until he had swallowed somewhat his grief and sorrow. "Have they the Jewel?" he asked when he had mastered himself.

"Yes," answered the Elf. "The Lord of Nogrod wears it around his neck."

The Lord of Nogrod, thought Beren; and then again with dawning shock. *That* was what this was all about. "Do you mean King Yg?" he asked.

Tuilind scowled. "Yg is his name," he said, "but he is no king who murders his own father for the throne. We have ever scorned his pretensions."

"That was never proven," said Beren, but neither Elf thought that worth dignifying with a reply. The man sighed. Yg! The ways of fate were mysterious. "Let us decide what to do in the morning," he said to the Elves, and plunged once again into a dark sleep.

Beren woke with the day. Clouds hid the sun, and the air felt heavy and sullen.

His first awareness was of the host of the shades who had gathered to this place. He could see nothing, but he knew they were there. They pressed on his mind.

His body was more stiff than he had ever known it. From the look of the Elves he could see creeping about, many of them were in no better case. Dior slept still a few paces away. Somebody had covered him with a fleece.

Beren's feet were bloody. He was examining them regretfully when Tuilind approached accompanied by another Elf, a fierce-looking woman with eyes that looked sharp enough to cut.

"This is Dyriel," began Tuilind without ceremony. "As you know, we have no lord, but she is the first among all our folk west of the mountains." Beren and the sharp-eyed Elf-woman nodded to one another.

"What do you mean to do?" Beren asked the newcomer.

"I would know the same from you," replied the woman. Her voice was as firm and crisp as her gaze. "No-one rules us; but we will listen to your counsel, One-hand, before we do anything."

Beren shook his head, trying to dispel the heavy, foggy feeling. "Ambush at the ford seems the only plan," he said, "but it must be carefully done if we are to recover the stone. That is my only interest. I doubt we can defeat this army, and I see no sense in risking our own lives to eke out the blood-price."

"You wish to cut the Silmaril from their midst," said Dyriel slowly. "That is a worthy aim. We would gladly punish these evildoers, but if we have to leave them untouched in order to acquire the Stone, then so shall we do. Opportunity for frank vengeance may come later; but I think as you do, or at least as Tuilind has reported your thought: that with the Stone it is now or never."

"Thank you," said Beren.

"It will not be easy," continued the Elf-woman. "Report says that the Stone is worn by their leader, and he will be the best protected."

"We must know more of their order of march," said the man.

Tuilind spoke. "We have many hidden watchers observing their passage," he said. "More reports came in during the night. All agree: the dwarvish army is divided into two bodies of foot, with the treasure hauled in carts between them. This Yg travels with the rear and stronger body."

"Treasure?" said Beren. "What treasure?"

"It seems that the robbers were not content to take merely the great Jewel," replied Tuilind: "they have also emptied Grey-cloak's treasury. Lately it had become much richer, with gold he took out of ruined Nargothrond."

"Dragon-hoard," muttered Beren.

"Even so," said Dyriel. "And may it bring to these half-height robbers the luck they deserve."

Beren sat straight. "Well, that is nothing to us. Or better said, the gold belongs by right to Thingol's Heir, who sleeps there in the grass. But I doubt we will come to rule over the disposing of it. Dior must take up the matter with the Dwarves in his own good time."

They discussed the business some time longer, and agreed to make their cautious way to the ford during the day. There were no reports of Dwarvish spies or scouts in the area, but there was no sense in taking their absence for granted.

The day wore on with much discussion and preparation. For Beren the sense of unreality persisted, while the clouds in the sky seemed to gather and thicken in concert with the clouds in his mind. There were times when he feared he might be on the way to losing his wits. Was this what Lúthien foresaw? That he might survive in body but be left wandering far afield in his mind? Grimly he hauled his mind back to the task at hand. He could not turn back now. The only way was to press on and hope to see it through.

As the party was about to set off for the ford, Beren stopped what he was doing, struck by a realization. He turned to Tuilind and asked him, "Where is Rattlecone?"

"He left during the night," replied the Elf.

Beren heard this with no pleasure. "He was supposed to gather his people to help us," he said. "Did he say aught of his intentions?"

"No," said Tuilind. "The Onodrim ask no-one for leave before they come or go."

The man raised his arms in frustration. "It is difficult to plan an attack if one's allies do not keep one informed! Well, grumbling won't help. We will just have to manage without the Ents."



They found the Dwarf-road a little way above the Ascar, where Beren had remembered it. They peeped along it from behind cover, but saw no-one. To the East the road shot straight up into the foothills, and somewhere up there was the toll-place. Beren wondered if it was still manned, and if so, by whom. A darkness loomed on that side that spoke of the mountains, but Dolmed and the other peaks were hidden by the lowering clouds.

The war-party, some five hundred Elves strong, made their silent way beside the road, following it downhill to the West. They began to hear the sound of water ahead; and at last they stopped, for they had arrived.

Beren was having difficulty breathing, or even thinking, for the place pressed on him so. It was the same broad expanse as he remembered, with the chattering water divided into many channels. He sat on a stone and held his head in his hands. The Elvish leaders looked at him with apprehension and concern, then went quietly about their arrangements.

Some time later, Dior came to him and laid hand on his arm. "Come, Father," he said gently.

Beren looked up. "What's to do?" he said thickly.

"Nothing," replied his son. "All is made ready. Now we must wait. Come, Father, I will show you the hide we have prepared."

There followed featureless hours while the unseen sun sank down in the West before them. Messengers slipped in from time to time and reported to Dyriel. Beren listened dully, only half hearing their reports of the approach of the Dwarves. The lowering sun reached a strip of clear sky on the horizon and glared suddenly into the eyes of the watchers. As the light turned the racing froth before them to gold, the awaited word came: the vanguard had reached the ford.

Dior joined the Elvish leaders as they peered from cover. The setting sun made it difficult to see, but there it was: slow movement on the far bank.

"We are all in position," said Dyriel to him, "but I doubt they will press on. The ford will be perilous after dark. They will surely camp on that bank and come on with the new day."

"You may be right," said Dior, "but I do not like the weather. Something is gathering in the mountains." Indeed in the direction behind them the sky was now almost black.

The Elf-woman appeared unmoved by that. "A little water changes nothing," she said. She glanced towards where Beren was sitting. "How is it with your father?"

Dior's face expressed his concern. "I do not know. There is some knot of trouble about this place that has caught him in its coils. I do not rightly understand it."

Dyriel shifted a little uneasily. "We also feel something of this. It may be bound with the Stone. Your father is right; we must regain it. The whole fate of Arda trembles on that bauble." She thought for a little, then her frown deepened. "Something is about to happen here. And I do not mean the storm."

The night that swept in was black and starless, pressing on them from above. Not even the full moon could penetrate the layers of murk; the only points of light were the red twinkles of fires on the far bank. The Elves of course made no fires, but crouched silently at their places, along the bank, and concealed on some of the more densely-wooded islets.

Dior tried to sleep, but the mounting pressure of the air would not let him rest. Inchoate fears rose slowly in the back of mind and grasped at his throat. He pressed them down, only to have them seep back. But somehow the long hours dragged past, one by one. He checked on his father from time to time, but Beren seemed to be insensible: he neither moved nor made answer to Dior's whispered inquiries.

He crept back at last to the edge, guided by the subdued sound of the waters, until he found Dyriel.

“This night is as long as years!” he whispered to the Elf-woman in a voice that shook with strain.

“Truly,” that one murmured. “And I take back my earlier nonchalance – this is no ordinary weather. It is not canny. There should be lightning; but I have seen none.”

Dior sat on at her side, loath to relinquish the company. The time passed somehow. There came a time when he knew he must have dozed, and that the dawn was not far off. But still the vaporous roof above them pressed down in a smothering mass. Dior could hardly catch his breath. He felt as though he was being buried alive.

Beside him, Dior felt rather than heard it as Dyriel sat up suddenly.

“What is it?” he whispered to the Elf.

Dyriel said nothing at first, only grasped Dior’s arm convulsively. After long moments she whispered, “Something is loosed among the Stunted Ones! Listen!”

Dior strained his ears; and now he too could hear it. Above the sound of the wide expanse of hurrying waters there seemed to be shouting, in high-voiced tones of terror. Some of the fires flared up, and he thought he could see movement.

“Something is attacking them!” he said.

The Elf-chieftain replied doubtfully, “Certainly they are in fear. But I hear no clash of weapons.” They sat listening and trying to see for some minutes. Others of the Elvish leaders crept in to join them. Suddenly Dyriel, listening, gave a start.

“No – it cannot be!” she gasped. “They are attempting the ford!”

They waited, unbelieving, but as the minutes passed it became clear that Dyriel had guessed the truth. A new sound was gradually added to the rush of the waters: the splatter of the current about many legs, punctuated by the trample of hurrying feet upon shingle. Cries pierced the heavy night as one unfortunate soldier after another lost his footing and was swept away in the darkness.

The noises told of the fore-guard hurrying to clamber up the near bank of the long ford, as they ran into it in the dark. Behind them a bellowing of oxen came now to the ear, and the grind of stones under wheels. In the incessant roar of water about wheels and legs, Dior realized with something like admiration that, despite their obvious haste and terror, the Dwarves were nonetheless keeping to their formations. It was clear, though, that the beasts were being whipped to all the speed they could muster. More than once the listeners heard a roar and a tumble, with screams, that told them that a wagon had blundered in the blind dark and overtipped.

The foremost wagons were nearing the bank now in their turn. Dyriel came to herself with a jerk. “Pass the word,” she whispered. “We keep to the plan: let the wagons also pass and do as they may. It is the rearguard that we want.”

They listened to the rumbles and cries until there were few still to be heard from the water in front of them. Ears and eyes strained then to pick up the first signs of the after-guard. But the tense wait was broken by an enormous, blinding flash of lightning which seemed to extend across the whole breadth of the ford. For a split second, the whole scene in front of them was lit as bright as noon. In that blazing instant of light, the watchers beheld a sight that none of them would ever forget. That glimpse revealed a disorder of marching Dwarves strewn across the waste of wide water; but thronging around and behind their mass was a host of other figures – misty figures, who appeared to be driving the terrified Dwarves in pell-mell confusion.

Shocked realization, then the blackness closed down again like a lid. At the same instant, the boom of the stroke shook leaves from the trees above them, leaving hearts a-pitter in its wake. The echoes of the frightful sound fell away at last to grumblings to and fro between the hills behind.

“It is the Dead!” gasped Gwyldor, on Dior’s other side. “The Dead have come! By the Lady of Leaf, they are running the Naugrim like hares!”

“Now is our moment!” cried Dyriel. “Shoot, archers!”

Now from all along the bank Dior could hear the bowstrings begin to sing. It was a marvel to him how the Elves could find targets in that gloom, but finding them they obviously were, if the yells coming from the crossing were anything to go by.

More lightning came, and yet more, and more still; jagged blue death playing about the sky, revealing in flashes the faces of the stricken Dwarves below, and the harrying Dead, and the hornet flashes of the arrows. The voice of the thunder was like booming laughter shouted from the hills. Blazing blue strokes across the sky made shapes of tortured bones, and grinning skulls, and other sigils of dreadful death. A wind rose from nowhere and howled about the dying Dwarves, and in it sounded the fell voices of wolves, as at the ending of the world. Ice hurled now upon the victims from the heavy sky, in the arena of cries and slaughter, as the deadly hail of arrows rained ever down from every side.

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Beren awoke when it was quite light. A curdle of clouds still hid the just-risen sun, but their former thickness was much diminished. The layer was even touched with golden light at thinner places.

Although Beren’s head was aching savagely, the fog was gone from his mind. All the ghosts of the night had fled away, a million miles away. From the far borders of the universe they stood now in silence, watching, but without involvement.

Nothing much seemed to be happening. Apart from the ever-present rush of the waters, there was nothing to be heard apart from a murmur of voices nearby. Painfully he levered himself upright and crept to locate their source. He found Dior with Dyriel, Gwyldor and others of the Elvish leaders crouched in a hide from where they could view the ford from behind a covering screen of bushes. They looked at him a little strangely as he approached.

“What is happening?” he croaked. “And has somebody got some water? My throat feels like a desert.”

Dior passed him a leather flask in silence while Dyriel spoke. “Strange things have occurred,” the Elf-woman said. “Stranger than any I have seen, and I came into this world before the sun. The Dead fought for us. They came before the dawn and put terror on the Naugrim. The short folk ran in their panic, and the only way for them was across the waters. We let the fore-guard and the wagons go past, as was the plan, and shot at the others. Some are captive, but most are dead.” She took Beren’s arm and urged him gently toward a gap in the screen of leaves. “There remain some living Naugrim who have laged behind the bodies of those horses you see there. We think this Yg must be among them. They have archers, and there is now light enough for even these Sons of Earth to hit a mark. We were just debating what to do.”

Beren peered out. He could see the low wall of horse carcasses, circled on a patch of shingle which rose but barely out of the water.

“The Dead,” he mused. Then, “Even in their terror, the Dwarves took their wagons?”

“They took their gold,” remarked Tuilind dryly.

“And where are these wagons now?”

Dyriel answered him. "The greater part of their army fled with all their goods up the road. We do not know what has become of them. Scouts have been sent to seek news of them."

Across the wide expanse of the crossing, Beren could see mounds of slaughtered Dwarves, heaped on shingle banks, stuck with arrows like bristles. Streams of red still fouled the water. Looking at them, Beren felt nothing in his heart but a vast sorrow. What terrible turn had events taken that it must needs come to this!

He wondered grimly if any of his old comrades in the Fourth Legion were among the dead.

He turned back to Dyriel. "And you think their lord is hidden behind the flesh-wall," he said.

The Elf-woman shrugged. "We do not know – but somebody is. They shoot at any who come near. We must overcome them before we can search among the dead for what we seek. I think we must raise our aim and drop arrows on them from the sky. It is not a very courteous manner of warfare, and it may take some little time, but it is safe. I have no wish to buy back Grey-cloak's treasure with my own blood."

Beren's head was now clearer than it had been for days. The world was fully real to him, and hard as crystal. He knew exactly what he had to do. "No," he said, standing up, "don't do that."

Dyriel stared up at him. "What else can we do?" she asked.

"I will go and talk to them."

"If you go out there they will shoot you," the Elf-woman said sharply.

Beren shook his head. "No," he said. "They won't do that."

"Do not be a fool," replied Dyriel. "Death is waiting here for someone. Can you not taste it in the air?"

"It will be all right," said Beren. He slithered down the bank before any of them could stop him and began to wade out into the rushing water.

"Is he fey?" muttered Dyriel. "Does he seek his own death?" Aloud she called after Beren, "Then we will bend bow-string here. Let Naug but show nose and we will shoot it off!"

Beren made no further reply, made only a vague motion of negation behind him with his hand. He was already hip-deep in the surging waters.

Dior leaned forward. "He knows this Yg," he said to the Elves. "Father learned sword-craft from him, long ago, when he was a boy. He told me all about it."

"So?" replied Dyriel. "Then I hope he is not trusting his life to a comradeship which, maybe, was rotten to begin with. I have heard much of this black-eyed beardless, but nothing to his good." She turned to Gwyldor. "I pray you pass quick word to all to set arrow to string, and to shoot promptly at any Naug who shows himself. But they are to have a care with their aim! We wish to save the One-hand's life, not take it."

Never had the shapes of things seemed more crisp to Beren, never the colours so clear; the greens of the trees, the blue patches of sky. The foam of the rushing river that swirled around his thighs was of a sharp, clean white. Some flying insect buzzed up to him and hung a moment before his face, gleaming blue-black on humming wings, before zooming off on its path. Birds were carolling heedless in the woods.

The slack forms of the piled horses grew ever larger in the centre of his vision. Suddenly he glimpsed movement – the tops of bows; then, a few paces closer, the tops of metal helmets that winked gleaming in the weak sunlight.

A head raised up and saw him. Straight away the Dwarf let out a shriek of fear. Others popped up, staring open-mouthed in horror. Before Beren could do anything to stop them, one leaped to his feet and scrambled

to get away. Even as the Dwarf scabbled in his terror up the far wall of horse-flesh, others sprang up to follow him. They cast their bows away in their fear.

“Wait!” cried Beren. “Wait!” But he was too late. Even as he spoke, the savage song of the bows along the banks came to his ears. Arrows sang past, smacked into the Dwarves. Stricken, voiceless, dying, they collapsed one by one and sank slowly into the water.

Beren was beside himself with shock and mortification. “Oh, you stupid, stupid fools!” he cried. “You didn’t need to die!”

He stood there motionless, waiting. He could see no more movement in the small stockade. The dead Dwarves lay still, their red blood flowing to mingle pinkly with the stream.

Beren stepped on, into the shallows of the shingle bank. Closer, closer. The stones crunched under his heel. He could make out each disordered hair now on the mounds of horse-corpses.

Close. He leaned forward, peered within; and there squatted Yg.

The Dwarf was staring at him with wide-open eyes, his teeth bared in a rictus grin of terror. A drawn sword gleamed coldly in his hand.

“I do not fear you, revenant,” came the voice Beren remembered, shaking in spite of its claim. “Do your worst; but I will resist it.”

Beren looked the Dwarf over. Yg had thickened, had become much coarser and grosser in the face. His black hair and beard were now clearly dyed; but the fierce black eyes were the same.

“I am not a ghost, Yg,” said Beren. “I can do you no harm. Your people threw their lives away for nothing.”

“Liar,” hissed the Dwarf. “You died. All say so. And I have stood by your grave. Your grave!”

“I died – and came back to life,” said Beren. “I am not dead now. There is a difference.”

Yg glared at him, the fear still in his eyes. “And those others, that came in the dark hour,” he spat. “Will you tell me they were living beings? Those shades whom no sword could mark? You called them up, I know it. Do not deny it. Look now on your work. My people are all dead; betrayed. Your army of ghosts drove them into the trap. Whether you yourself are dead or living, is all one. You bring the grave-breath of that fearful world with you. I smell the stink of it yet.”

“Yg,” said Beren, “this is not to the point. You have something which is not yours by right.” He pointed to the gleam of gold that showed at the open collar of the Dwarf’s jerkin. “I must demand it of you. Hand it over, and you will escape with your life.”

The Dwarf’s teeth gleamed. “Robbery, so that is your plan,” he sneered, while raising his free hand to caress the necklace. “This *is* mine, by right of conquest; also as weregild for my dead. We had women among those who were cruelly slaughtered by the *Fanáð*, for no more reason than that they claimed their fee. Did you know that? My cousin was among them. Yet you say I have no right? Pah. I will not give up the work our smiths, my own blood, died to make. No. If you want it, you will have to wrest it from me. But if you be dead, then seize it you clearly cannot; and be you living, I know not how you, with no sword, purpose to take it from me, who has one, and knows how to use it, as you will not have forgotten. Lest you have some feeble trick behind your back.”

“No trick,” said Beren. “But if turn and I leave you, you will die here. You are one, we are hundreds. They will rain arrows upon you. And if that have no effect, we will find other means. You had best swallow your pride and give me the Stone. You may keep the Necklace, to which you at least have some claim; but the Stone must come to me. I did not prise it from the Iron Crown for you to carry away as loot, whatever the

rights and wrongs of your grievance.”

“Arrows!” scoffed Yg. “Always this cowardly resort. Are you too craven now to bear blade? You fling all my years of teaching away, make them as nothing. Is this how you honour your teacher?”

“Even if I wanted to wield a sword, I cannot,” said Beren. “Watch!” He splashed to the nearest of the bodies which lay strewn around in the shallow water and drew a Dwarf-length sword from its sheath with his left hand. Going back to the barricade of horse bodies, he showed the blade to Yg. He shifted the grip of his left hand to the forte of the blade, then tried to grasp the hilt with his right; but the hand seemed to pass right through. “Did you see that?” said Beren, and repeated the attempt. “I died without a hand on this side, as perhaps you knew. They made me a new one, but it is not quite normal flesh. It will not grasp a weapon, which is no grief to me, since my killing days are done. Also it has other strange properties.”

After Yg had taken this properly in, he sat back and laughed loud and long. “Oh, this is irony!” he said at last, wiping his eyes. “Thus am I repaid. You poor unmanned wretch! All that height of knowledge and skill lost in a wolf’s maw. Unkind, to give you back your life, but to hold back that by which a man maintains his pride and standing.” He sobered. “Well, No-man, you had best splash back to your cowardly and treacherous companions. Tell them they may shoot as they please. I scorn their darts. Certain it is that you will not get this necklace from me until I am lying dead in my blood.”

“I will, though,” said Beren. “I am coming for it now.”

Yg curled his lip. “Come you but one step closer and I will smite you.”

“I do not think you will,” replied Beren. “I advise you not to try.” Nevertheless he made no move to climb over the horses.

Yg looked long upon his former pupil, narrow-eyed, and as he did so, all enmity seemed to fade from his features. His face relaxed, became bland, impossible to read. “Wait you now,” he said at last, and the impatience and pride had vanished also from his husky voice. “It does not behove old comrades to treat so. Let us not be hasty; let us not fling hot words at each other’s head, like goodwives who bicker in the street. It were pity, surely, for we two to be enemies. Only think what binds us.”

“Your mood was otherwise when last we parted company,” observed Beren dryly.

Yg kept silence again for a long moment. “I spoke hastily at that time,” he admitted at last. “As do all who feel themselves insulted. My blood was aroused. But I have thought often on our parting since, and on my words to you; and I regret them. I am sorry. There, now you have something which few have heard from me.” He reached out to Beren with his left hand.

“Yg,” said Beren, “what is this?”

“It is a hand, damn you,” said the Dwarf, temper flaring in his eyes. “You know me as well as any – nay, better. And you know I have had many bitter matters to chew upon. They have left their scars. You resent me, perhaps. I was a hard master to you – I own it; but had I the time again, I would abate the hardness not one whit, because to teach great skill requires the very hardest school. I had to be hard to you, and that hardness won great result. But do you believe I am evil in myself? Surely not! Not you. Look beyond my burdens and my harsh teaching, and see the inner Dwarf.”

“I did not think you were evil when I knew you,” said Beren slowly. “Not in your innermost self.”

“Then take my hand, in memory of that time,” said Yg.

“What will that avail?” asked Beren cautiously. “You will not give me the Stone of your free will. You have said so.”

“Oh! You are as hard as I, or more so,” replied the Dwarf impatiently. “I cannot give you the jewel, no. That is accepted, that must be understood. You and I must part, and your shooters must try to take my life. I would simply not part from you as a foe.”

Beren looked long upon the Dwarf, but he could detect no treachery in his eye. He sat himself on the rim of cold horse-flesh, and cautiously swung his legs over, almost within the Dwarf’s reach. Slowly he bent forward and reached down with his own left hand.

Yg grasped the hand in his own. “Fool,” spat the Dwarf, stood up to gain reach and room, then whipped his sword around in a blur of silver. Beren brought his right arm across just as quickly. A loud, ringing sound froze the tableau, leaving the Dwarf staring amazed at his own blade caught in the man’s bare hand.

“I told you it had other uses,” said Beren, but there was sadness in his voice, because he had heard the bow strings twang even as he opened his mouth to speak. Barely had he closed it again before arrows thudded into the Dwarf’s neck, one after another, shockingly before Beren’s eyes. Some passed right through; others stuck in the spine. Red blood began to squirt.

The Dwarf turned unbelieving eyes to Beren’s, then began slowly to buckle at the knees.

“I am sorry, Yg,” said the man. “I did try to warn you.” He gently allowed the collapsing body to sag onto the shingle. The sword he let fall with a clatter. Shortly he heard splashes coming up behind him. Dior came breathless to his side, followed by Tuilind and others of the Elves.

“Father, are you all right?” asked Dior, anxiety written on his face.

Beren turned to him and smiled tiredly. Suddenly there was nothing he wanted more in the world than to sleep. “I’m not hurt,” he said. “I am sorry about Yg, though. I had hoped to save him.”

“He was lost years ago,” said Tuilind, gazing with contempt at the corpse, from which blood was still oozing. “Such a snake as that – we saw the wicked blow. He deserved death.”

Beren felt too tired to argue. “Let us get what we came for,” he said. Taking the stump of Angrist from his pouch, he knelt by the remains of his former teacher. The wonderful edge made short work of the mail vest. He soon laid bare the necklace, which he had last seen on Finrod’s breast. The great jewel sat now in the place of glory at its centre, but the gold and stone both were painted thickly with Yg’s congealing blood. As soon as the heavy carcanet was freed from the dead Dwarf, Beren took it to the water and washed the blood away. The cleaned gold sparkled in the sun, but the Silmaril remained sullen.

“What ails the stone?” asked Tuilind. “Or do the tales of its beauty reach so much further than the truth?”

“They fall far short,” said Beren. “But such was its demeanour while in Morgoth’s crown. It does not suffer evil; and this necklace has seen much. Yg’s killing does but pile blood on blood. It will take more than water to wash that stain away.”

“Perhaps the stone were better free,” said Dior.

“Maybe,” replied his father. “But we may think this over in good time. Our present concern must be the remainder of the Dwarvish army.”

“The first scouts should be back at any time,” said Dyriel. And indeed, when the party returned to the bank, they found two waiting. “What is your tale?” asked Dyriel of them. “What are the Naugrim about? If they turn back, it were best that we take ourselves to the woods without delay. I for one have no taste for further bloodshed.”

The two scouts looked uneasily at one another. “Lady, I know not rightly what to tell you,” said one. “You speak, Temorn, you are the senior.”

Temorn did not look pleased to bear this honour. "Lord and Lady," he said, addressing Beren and Dyriel both, "we do not know what has become of the Stunted Folk. We found the wagons left anyhow upon the road, but neither living nor dead Naug did we find."

Beren scratched his head. "But where was the treasure?"

Temorn shrugged. "All still in the wagons, so far as we could tally it."

"Well, here is a wonder!" exclaimed Tuilind, "That a Naug will leave treasure behind. Yet we have seen that not even the fear of the Dead could induce them to release it from their grasp. But now they simply leave it. They simply leave it!"

The germ of a notion was forming in Beren's mind; a suspicion concerning the fate of the Dwarves. "Let us go to look," he said. He led a small party up the long, paved road he had travelled so many years before. They walked for the best part of an hour before they caught sight of the scattered wagons far on the road ahead. Another quarter of an hour brought them up with them.

Beren looked around. "Somebody has cut loose the oxen," he remarked, and it was even so, because many of the beasts were to be seen not far away, grazing peacefully in the long grass of clearings near the road verge.

They had no chance to speculate further about the strange affair, because a sudden rustle and movement among the trees drew their eyes in that direction. They saw an Ent making its way toward them: Rattlecone. He came up to them without greeting and stood beside a cart, gazing around at the disorder.

"Have you aught to tell us about the Dwarves, friend Rattlecone?" said Beren quietly.

The Ent turned to him and regarded him gravely. "They will not come again," he said slowly. "We were waiting for them. We met them in their flight. They will not come again."

There did not seem to be anything to say about that. "Then this affair is now over," said Beren, "and we may all go home."

"Aye," said Rattlecone sadly, "but where may that lie?"

Beren looked at him, trouble furrowing his brow. "I thought you had made your home with us on the blessed Isle," he said.

"For a time," replied the Ent. "For very little longer. I have other calls I must heed." Without further words, he turned and strode off into the woods.

After the last signs of his friend had vanished, Beren looked down and sighed. For the first time in his life he was feeling old. "Come, let us go home," he said.

"But what about all this gold?" said Tuilind.

"Oh," said Beren. He thought for a moment. "Rightly speaking, it belongs to Dior, as Grey-cloak's heir," he said, turning to his son.

Dior was startled. "To me? *I* do not want it," he said. He looked at the wagons, strewn at all angles along the roadway. His expression firmed. "If it belongs to me, then I may dispose of it as I please, not so?"

The rest of the party variously shrugged and nodded.

"Then let it be destroyed," said Dior. "This treasure has suffered rapine and dragon-evil; and now rapine again. There is no luck in it. I do not want it; and no other should be tempted to kill for it."

"How shall we do that?" Dyriel wanted to know. "We are forest folk, we have no furnaces for melting metal.



And besides, that would not destroy the gold.”

“Then let it be thrown into the Ascar close under the slope here,” said Dior. “I hear his roar; he is not far. So shall it at least be dispersed. Wanderers may find a gold piece or two, but no-one can ever hoard it again.”

The others held this for wisdom; so, gathering and harnessing the oxen with some difficulty, they hauled the wagons down the slope. At the last they cut the beasts free and let the carts trundle over the precipice to crash into the hungry waters below. When all was done, they stood on the height, looking down at the waters.

“I name you no longer Ascar, but Rathlóriel<sup>19</sup>,” declared Dyriel. And that was the name that was used for that water henceforth.

They turned then and went back down the road. Of course they could not go home straight away; there were many weary tasks to do before they could depart, of the sort that tales and songs tend not to dwell upon. Chiefly these consisted of gathering the Dwarvish dead and placing them under stones to keep them from at least the larger flesh-eaters until their folk could come and dispose of the remains as seemed best to them. The Green-elves set the few dishevelled and sunken-headed captives on the road to Nogrod, bearing a stiffly-worded despatch concerning the battle.

Scouts hurried in while these tasks were yet under way. By their report, an Elvish army approached from the North, captained by Celegorm and Curufin.

Beren was sensible of the weight of the Necklace in the pack he had slung on his back. “It is not hard to know what they seek,” he muttered.

“How far off?” Dyriel asked the messengers.

“A bare day’s march, Lady,” they replied.

Beren said, “These are not good tidings – at least not for me; you may view them otherwise. We are nearly finished here. For my part, I would flee to the South, with Dior, so soon as all is done. I do not think these Noldor will so easily catch us, once we are away.”

Dyriel looked at the other Elves, shrugged. “I feel no need to parley with any Sword-elf – perhaps least of all with these brothers. Since we have nothing that they want, they will not come to seek us in our woodland homes. But can you say the same?”

Beren considered. “I cannot know for sure. But somehow I do not think so. In future years, in other lands, these Sons may take up again their deadly hunt; but the Isle of the Dead who Live is a place set apart.”

When all was finished, they turned for home. Beren and Dior arrived back on the fourteenth day after they had set out. Lúthien and Nimloth met them beaming at Lanthir Lamath, the dark and the fair beauty standing side by side. The twin boys ran out yelling to greet their father, and baby Elwing goggled at them from her mother’s arms. Fire was kindled, and wine drunk, and they were very happy.

\* \* \* \* \*

The autumn leaves were falling before Beren saw Rattlecone again. He and Dior were sawing up a fallen tree for wood, deep in the thick growth at the base of the hill, when he heard a rustling behind, the same time as he saw the presence reflected in Dior’s eyes.

Beren turned and greeted his old friend with a smile. “Well met, Ent,” he said. “Do you come to offer aid? We do not need it. It takes us puny ones a little longer, but we enjoy the exercise.”

Rattlecone smiled down at him. “Can it be that you have learned wisdom at last?” he said. “Indeed: sufficient

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19 Goldenbed.

is often better than best.”

Beren let go his end of the saw and sat himself on the grey trunk. “Let us then be even more barely sufficient and enjoy a pause. What news among you creatures of bough and leaf?”

“You will not like my news,” was the Ent’s sober reply. “I do not like it myself. I have come to say goodbye.”

Beren’s face fell into sadness, although he showed no surprise. “I knew you would go,” he said. “That day on the Ascar. You said so. I had just hoped not so soon.”

Amazement had built a wave within Dior’s breast which now tumbled over into upset. The great Ent had been friend and mentor to him from the time of his birth; Rattlecone’s warm presence was woven through all his fairest memories of the green Isle, his beloved home.

“But, but...” he stuttered, “but why? Why must you leave us, Rattlecone? It cannot be so! Has someone put you under order, or in fear? Tell us, I pray you, that we may take your part, and resist it!”

“There is no order, no fear,” said the Ent, “it is simply that my period of service is now complete. The woods call to me. I desire in my heart-wood to wander elsewhere through the wilderness of Middle-earth, to places I have long time not seen. I must take farewell of you here, you Men. But I will admit, it makes a great ache in my innermost part.”

“Service?” repeated Dior, his voice showing his distress. “What service? I do not understand!”

“Service to your father,” replied Rattlecone. “He knows. He can explain.”

Dior looked to his father, the question written clear on his face.

Beren sighed. “I had thought that was long over, and that you stayed for love,” he said. He turned to his son. “You know the story of the times I have seen, in the North. Rattlecone was set to guide my steps, right from the first. He has never said by whom, but I can make some guesses. We can speak on this later, if you desire to know more.” He sat silent a while, musing. Suddenly he turned to Rattlecone and burst out, “Does it not sometimes grieve you, friend, that it was all for naught?”

Rattlecone leaned back, a faint look of surprise on his features. “But it was not,” he said. “Why should you say so?”

“My people died, the land was lost,” replied Beren in grim tones. “Do you name that victory?”

“The price was grievous indeed,” the Ent said, “but the ransom was won.”

“What ransom? What are you talking about?”

“Sauron, as all now call him,” said Rattlecone. “That is what. You drew most of his teeth. Did you not know? He has played no further part in this war. True, he need not, it must come to the final throw without him, and it will. It is the future which should thank you. I misdoubt we will be rid of this sorcerer in this age of Middle-earth, or even the next. But if it were not for you, Sauron would remain many times more perilous than he now is.”

Beren sat for a long time, thinking about this. After some minutes, he looked to Dior. “That I must leave to those who come after. But you console me, Rattlecone. More than you know.” He stood and faced his friend. “Must you go now? This minute?”

“Late or early,” replied the tall Tree-shepherd, “the pain is the same.”

Beren swallowed. “Then let us not prolong it,” he said. “I have taken leave of you once already. Twice feels

like excess.” He reached up, the Ent reached down, and they touched hands. The two men watched with sadness as the tall figure walked away. In a very short time the woods had swallowed him up.

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Time moves on in its stream, and no-one in Arda can hold it back. All too soon came the time when Dior had to depart to take up the kingship in Doriath.

On the day before his departure, he sought his father. He found Beren in the woods they loved, sitting on a mossy stone; simply existing, in enjoyment of the soft air, the trembling green light filtering through the leaves, and the sweet sound of birds everywhere.

Beren looked up at Dior’s approach and smiled welcome to his son. Dior joined him on the rock without a word.

After a time Beren leaned towards his son and spoke in a soft voice and sad. “I wish you could have known my parents,” he said, “and seen Dorthonion. All these scenes that I have seen, and people I have known, these are now lost in time. The men and women who were kind to me in my youth. Big Nose, my other father; Sunshine my mother; Long Hair my poor sister, who had to turn from me at last. Hiril my blood sister, whose life was cut short by cruel and senseless chance. Owl, Big Belly, Willow, Lion Scar. Dear Carver, who loved me, bright and brave spirit. Celevir, bold Elf and merry, who died beside me in Gorthaur’s prison. Where have they gone? You will never know them, they live only in my memory. Goracc the wise raven who fought beside Boromir. Thunderbolt the Eagle, whose life I could not protect. Huan, Hound of Valinor, who came through sacrifice to his reward, and who runs now free in that country again. Húrin, noble spirit, steadfast friend; tormented by the Enemy, he suffered more perhaps than any man who has ever lived. I do not understand the weft of the world, that such a man could receive such a fate. And last of all, Finrod Finarfin’s son. He was the best of us. He saved my life; then died in my arms.”

Beren turned now to face the other. “Son, I have no way to give you these lives and days. Indeed I have nothing to give you at all, apart from my love, which you carry with you always. Perhaps only this.” With these words he reached into the small pouch that dangled as ever about his neck and drew out of it Finrod’s ring. He passed the band to Dior, and while the other turned it gleaming in the dappled light, Beren told his son of the history and lineage of the ring. “It has many powers,” he concluded, “and it has saved my life more than once. Take it now, as your inheritance, and as a mark of the bond between our house and the noblest race of the Eldar.”

“But Father,” said Dior, wondering, “should you not keep it, while you yet live?”

Beren smiled. “I am done with such things,” he said. “It is your time now. Take it.”

Dior looked at his father uncertainly. “Forgive the question,” he said, “but what of the Silmaril? What is your wish concerning that?”

“We will keep it here for now,” replied Beren. “It will come to you soon; but not quite yet.”

The next day, after all was prepared, Dior and Nimloth mounted their horses. The boys were placed before Dior, whereas Nimloth held laughing Elwing. The airy tuft of silver-white hair on the baby girl’s head glistened like starlight.

Smiles were strained. Both couples knew they would not see the other again, but the hurt could not be eased by mentioning this.

“Farewell then, Mother, Father,” said Dior. He turned his horse; shy Nimloth following, flashing them a last tremulous smile under her pale hair, which gleamed beneath the dappled light like a river of silver.

Beren and Lúthien stood long at the edge of their home clearing, watching the riders grow smaller and

smaller as they wound down the hill. Before they disappeared around the curve of the land, Dior held his hand high, and the ring of Finrod blazed in a tower of green fire. Then they were gone.

Lúthien sighed, turned to her silent partner. "Now it is just you and I again," she said, putting her arms around his waist and looking into his face. "Can you stand it?"

He bent his head and kissed her, and the old thrill ran through her down to her soles.

"I will work at it," he said gently, the blue eyes glinting with love and humour. "Come, beloved, shall we walk in the woods a while? The spring flowers may console us."

Each with arm about the other's waist, they wandered in the timeless woods like new-met lovers; and they were happy, despite the pain of loss. As the quiet days passed, they felt themselves becoming more and more fixed at the centre of things. This was where they were meant to be. All things seemed to be flowing in fast now towards a common goal, not far off. Yet something was still missing from the symphony.

They had done nothing with the Nauglamir, only folded it with reverence and put it away. Towards midsummer's day Lúthien brought it out. She spread the broad necklace in the sunlight, the gold and jewels of the wonderful work shimmering in potent beauty; but the Silmaril in the centre remained sullen.

Beren was troubled. "This is not right," he said. "I have wondered if it would not be better to free the jewel. It would be shame to mar the work, to be sure; but the price may not be too high, if we regain the holiness we glimpsed on a time, that grim day in Morgoth's dungeons."

"I have another notion," said Lúthien. She said nothing more of it at that time, but later that day she took some osiers and commenced to make a sort of crude armature, which she mounted on a pole, not far from where the lively spray of the waterfall freshened the air, but placed where it could be touched by the sun and moon. As soon as the work was finished, she took the Nauglamir and hung it on the frame.

"What is that for?" asked Beren.

"Wait," she said secretly.

Midsummer's night. The air was warm still from the heat of the day. The pair had been swimming, and were coming home late. There was no moon, but they easily saw their way by the myriad stars scattered across the velvet dome of the sky. Moths were flitting among the herbs. Lúthien stopped, turned to embrace Beren with both arms, and looked up at him with love and wildness in her eyes.

"Do you remember?" she whispered. "Do you remember the dancing moths, and the drugged scent of the hemlocks?"

He smiled and kissed her tenderly. Hand in hand, they walked on through beauty.

They passed through varied scents of night-flowers, rich and strong. They came at last to their clearing, saw the familiar bulk of their strange tree-house looming dark above, and caught now with their ears the quiet voice of the spring. The sprays of its water flashed faintly in the starlight, which also reflected in oily gleams from the gold of the Nauglamir.

"Elwing was born on just such a night," whispered Lúthien dreamily. "Star-spray..."

"Whist!" said Beren urgently. "Look to the Jewel!"

The Silmaril had waked. A pale light flickered in its depths, and even as they watched, this grew in strength. The stone began to burn with the white light they remembered; and still the radiance increased.

The Silmaril was remembering its power. Its fire waxed and waxed, filling the whole clearing with a light like a captive star brought to earth; and still it grew in radiance.

Lúthien and Beren could by now see nothing of the clearing, of the dim world. There was no seeing; there was only the light of the holy Jewel. A door had opened to the heart of all things pure and good, and it was like the heart of the sun; only hotter, whiter, and purer. These two beings of flesh and blood stood at its border, hand held tightly in hand, feeling the rays of the Silmaril stream through their souls in a white-hot torrent of pure beauty; and they knew at last which piece of the puzzle had been missing.

After a time beyond measure they came to themselves again. They were both shaking through their whole bodies, and a weakness was in their sinews, as if they had passed through the ecstasy of love. The Jewel had sunk back from the pinnacle of its power, but it was burning still with a lambent flame, answered and praised now by all the lesser jewels, indeed by the whole work of hand and mind. The necklace had achieved its designed beauty at last.

The gold looked different. Trembling with awe, first one then the other of the pair came tentatively forward.

The metal was as if purified. It still had the buttery glow of gold, but now many times richer and more beautiful. Greater still was the change they found in it when they handled it, for the metal was become light and wonderful. It warmed the heart to admire its shining innocence. They could see that it was gold that aroused reverence, but not lust. It was to ordinary gold as a butterfly is to a toad.

“The Silmaril has burned the stain out of it,” breathed Lúthien in wonder. “This is true-gold! Gold, as it was meant to be!”

“Put the necklace on,” he whispered.

She looked at him with wide eyes. “I don’t...” she hesitated. “Do you think it is allowed?”

He nodded, further words sticking in his throat. He took up the necklace himself in trembling hands and arranged it around her neck.

This was the missing piece; it seemed to him that he could feel great masses somewhere behind the world as they swung and clicked perfectly into place. He stepped back, and felt compelled then to fall to his knees before the beauty of the daughter of Melian with the Necklace of the Dwarves about her neck. It was unearthly. He bent his head and shielded his eyes.

“This is the end,” he muttered.

Light grew redly on his eyelids. Lúthien. She knelt.

“No,” she whispered. “Not the end. Not of our time on this Middle-earth. Not quite yet. It is only the beginning of the end.” She embraced her love, made him stand, to accept his full share in the wonder.

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It is said that Lúthien wearing that necklace and that immortal jewel was the vision of greatest beauty and glory that has ever been outside the realm of Valinor; and for a little while the Land of the Dead that Live became like a vision of the land of the Valar, and no place has since been so fair, so fruitful, or so filled with light. Too fair it was for this world, and both of them knew it.

Beren knew the night when it arrived. He could feel the thinness of the walls about this grey existence. Somewhere, just a little out of reach, the many voices and eyes of those he had loved and known whispered and glinted. He felt he could almost see faces out of the corners of his eyes. They were somewhere, somewhere very close.

He tidied the house and damped the fire. Tuilind had promised to visit in the morning. Shame that they would not see him; Beren would have liked to have said goodbye.

The sun went down in slow-fading fire. His mundane tasks complete, the man stood for a while looking over

the beloved house, and around the clearing, darkening now into the blue shadows of evening. The waterfall spoke to him quietly.

He stood there, musing on the times he had known; the laughter of children came to his ears out of time, and bright eyes he had seen, and voices out of the past.

He sighed at last, and turned away. He left the clearing and took the path leading up the hill. In the warm blue dusk, tiny sparks began to dance in the air, accompanying him. He felt time as it flowed past him in its steady stream.

A light ahead, on the summit. The voices and faces that walked with him were close now; only a heartbeat away. The air was charged with possibility, and the sparks danced and gathered, ever thicker. He could fancy they were picking out forms now, hinting at shapes of fire.

Lúthien stood on the peak of the hill. Time and the night gathered together, in the power and beauty of the radiance that streamed from her. The Nauglamir glowed about her neck like a river of fire; the holy jewel burned hot and white; and blazing through all was the immortal beauty of Lúthien Tinúviel, fairest of all the People of the Star.

She held out her hands to him, and her love and her need shone from her eyes. "Beloved," she said softly to Beren, "it is time."

He took her hands, his own eyes shining. The light grew about them.

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Tuilind found the house empty. He stood for a while, looking at the long red fingers of the young sun threading flat through the trees, and listening to the quiet. There was nothing to hear but the eternal chatter of the cheerful waters. He listened also within himself; but there also he found nothing.

The Green-elf could not have said what led him up the hill, rather than in some other direction, but the senses of Elves are very keen. Some faint air perhaps... As he slipped through the trees, climbing, he listened; but there was nothing to hear. The whole land lay very quiet. Tuilind felt a new emptiness in it.

A gleam caught his eye at the hilltop. He hurried toward it, and found the shimmering golden glory lying in the dewy grass where it had fallen. There was nobody else there at all.

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There came a night of autumn, and when it grew late, one came and smote upon the doors of Menelgroth. He said that his name was Tuilind, a Green-elf of Ossiriand; and that he bore messages to the King. The doorwards brought him to where Dior sat alone in his chamber, and there in silence the Elf gave to the King a coffer, and took his leave. But in that coffer lay the Necklace of the Dwarves, wherein was set the Silmaril; and Dior looking upon it knew it for a sign that Beren One-hand and Lúthien Tinúviel had died indeed, and gone where go the race of Men to a fate beyond the world.

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