

Telchar

Beren was cleaning some moulds in the smithy when a wide-eyed Breshke sought him out. “Go quickly and clean yourself up a bit, boy – the Forge Master wants to see you!” When Beren came back from the wash-room, several shades paler, if not exactly clean, he asked the Apprentice Master about the summons; but Breshke had already told him all he knew.

Before parting from Beren at the door to the inner sanctum, he fixed the boy with a stern eye. “You just remember your manners,” he said. “Cheek is well enough in the shop, and I believe we give as good as we get from you in that respect. We have smiled in our beards too when you have twitted Khabbock. But that won’t do with the Master, not at all. Do you hear me now?” Without waiting for a reply he shoved the apprehensive boy inside.

Beren made his way slowly through the empty workshop towards the rear, where light glowed through a door. He came to the doorway and looked in.

Sitting at a wide bench, under the warm light of several candles, he saw an aged Dwarf of great breadth whose mighty dome of a head appeared as if it had been carven massively from stone. The silvery grey hair which sprang like a feshet from its rim poured down the sides of the head to where it eventually blended with an equally copious flood of beard. This turbulent, shining river of mixed hair had been pushed to one side and shoved behind the table edge to keep it out of the way. Great brows stood out beneath a monument of a forehead, casting the eyes into shadow.

The Dwarf was bent over the table and was attempting, with outsize hands, to manipulate some small metal items which gleamed in the light. Beren was fascinated by the hands; he had never seen any which were bigger. These huge paws were blackened and covered in scars. Two joints of the smallest finger on the left seemed to be missing entirely.

Beren knocked on the doorway. “Beren son of Barahir,” he gulped, “reporting as requested. Er, that is to say, at your service, sir.”

The massive head looked up, deep-set eyes peered at him. These were of a strange light colour, like brushed steel. The voice, when the Dwarf spoke, seemed to come from somewhere near the centre of his broad chest, and was pitched deep enough to rattle the glasses on a side table. “Telchar son of Malchar, at yours and your family’s,” the Dwarf answered him slowly. The two of them inspected each other in silence for a few moments: on the one side, the square-built smith, full of years; on the other, the fresh young human boy.

“Here,” rumbled the smith at length, “you have small fingers. Come and put this in place for me.” He beckoned the boy over.

Beren came and took the bits of metal, which turned out to be a light steel chain. As he turned it over in his hands, trying to understand how it was supposed to link, the smith observed him closely. Beren worked it out at last, opened the clasp and slipped the link at the other end through. He offered the completed loop back to Telchar. “Here, sir.”

The old Dwarf looked over the chain, grunted, and placed it aside. He turned his attention back to Beren. “I must beg your pardon, Beren Barahir’s son, that I have not greeted you before. I have only lately been told that you are with us. Have they been treating you well?”

“Yes sir,” said Beren, “very well. I am happy here.”

“That is good,” said Telchar. “They tell me you are willing, and work well in the smithy, according to your abilities.”

Beren said nothing, only attempted to look bright and attentive.

The Dwarf gazed at him for some moments from under his massive brows while grunting and rumbling in his chest. He seemed to be turning Beren over in his mind, as a case of some interest. When Telchar spoke

again, Beren had the impression that the smith had questions which he chose not yet to express; preferring to leave them, for the present at least, sitting mute in the darkness at the back of his head.

“You are the first of your race whom I have met,” he said. “I should like to learn from you a little about your people, about Men, if it were agreeable to you.”

Beren wasn't sure what to say. He scratched his ear in puzzlement. “What sort of things shall I tell, sir?” he said.

“Hrrm,” grunted the old smith. “Well. I suppose I am mostly interested to learn how Men fight, and how they smithy steel. You are too young yet to have seen much of war; and although handy and willing, you are no trained smith, that I know. But perhaps you can tell me something, all the same. I could hardly know less than I do now.”

So Beren told the Dwarf about the military training he had taken part in, as well as the weapontakes and drills in which he had not so far himself played any role but which he had observed many times. He told Telchar about the Druug, and about his father and mother, and about Gramlach, and the shield wall. The smith proved an interested listener, one whose questions steered Beren to describe his father's relations with Newfort, and at last even brought something of Bregolas's doubtful ideas to light. Telchar's strange pale eyes regarded the boy steadily the whole time, but any deeper questions remained unspoken.

The old smith sat back at the end of the recital, his face showing his interest. “Well now!” he said. “That is quite a parcel of information. I thank you for it, most sincerely.” He ruminated for a few moments, rocking a little while making his almost subvocal grunts. “But smithcraft, now. You have not yet said much about it. You say that your people make much use of spears and arrows, chiefly made of bronze. Good enough. But have your people the working of iron at all?”

“Yes sir,” said Beren. “My friend, the smith near our home, he knows how to work iron.” He remembered Gorlim's knife; took it from his belt and held it out to the smith, handle first. “He made this for me.”

The Dwarf took the knife in his great hand and removed the blade from the leather sheath. He looked along the blade, turned it over, felt its edge with a horny thumb, tested the flex, and at last tasted the metal with his tongue.

“This is capable work,” he said at last. “Very capable. The steel is not of the best grade, but the work is quite fine. Indeed, if I did not know better, I would say it had an elvish feel to it.”

Beren, slightly shame-faced, had then to relate the story of Maegam and his assistance.

“Ah,” said Telchar at the end, “that is the explanation. Hmm. You say your friend learned much; but, ah, hmm, I do not quite know how to put this, but do you think the Elf learned anything as well?”

Beren shook his head sadly. “No, Master, alas, I think the Fair Folk are far ahead of us – not just in smith craft, but in all ways.”

“Ah, well,” said Telchar philosophically. He mused again for a while. “I know this gift the Elves have for understanding,” he said at last. “We smiths of the *Khazâd*, we also understand some things about steel, but we cannot talk to it in the same way they do. But still, I doubt even the Elves know everything. I had wondered how you Men went about it, whether you had any secrets we could learn for our profit. But it seems there are none.” He eyed Beren steadily. “At least, concerning smith-work.”

Beren could think of nothing he particularly wanted to say to this. The one secret that occurred to his mind was one he was going to keep.

The square old smith sat on for some little time after, making his deep rumbling noises in his beard, halfway between a grunt and a hum. He stirred himself at last and looked up at the boy, then made motions to lever himself from his seat. Beren took the hint and stood up himself.

“My boy,” said Telchar, “this has been an interesting conversation. Shall we have more?”

“Of course, Master, whenever you say,” said Beren, bowing. “I am at your instant service, at any time. That is, when I am not engaged by the Prince.”

Telchar frowned at this last. “Aye,” he said, “the Prince.” He succeeded at last in disengaging himself from stool and bench, straightened with a grunt and moved slowly to escort Beren to the door. He glanced doubtfully at the boy, opened his mouth once or twice, as if uncertain how to shape his words.

“You are in a curious position,” he said at last. “A young lad of foreign race, far from your home. You have not said what induced you to come here, and I have not asked, because that is not my business. About the circumstances attending your journey to Tumunzahar, so far as I have heard about them, I will not comment, save to say that I do not approve of them. We are accustomed to behave with more courtesy in Gabilgathol, the city of my birth and kin. Alas, I have no say over these matters. Over steel, I may have a certain mastery; in the affairs of the *Khazâd*, none at all.

“I nevertheless feel obliged at least to warn you. You are swimming in deep waters. I advise you to take care.” He looked at the boy from under a cocked eyebrow. “They tell me you have a ready tongue. That passes among folk with honest hearts and sturdy skins, but it may not elsewhere. If I were you, I should be slow to exercise my wits in uncertain quarters.”

Beren wished naturally to learn more exactly what Telchar was hinting at, but the aged smith only shook his head and would say no more.

Before bidding Beren farewell, the old Dwarf did something strange. He leaned close to Beren and looked long and deep into his eyes, as if searching for something. Whether he found it or not, he gave no sign; only drew back after a time, nodded to the boy, and closed the door after him.

Beren returned to his moulds with much to think about.

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