

The Rescue of Finrod

Beren passed the word back now for silence. "There are enemies all around us," he whispered.

The ground was growing swampier in nature, and more and more often now the hooves rang suddenly on ice. Barahir gave silent thanks that they were not having to do this in summer. And all the time the snow fell.

Then came a halt which was different, for this time Beren came back into the middle of the group and nudged his horse up next to his father's.

"We are very near," he whispered hoarsely. "Less than a mile. Finrod stands at bay on an island of clear ground, just across the river. He knows we are near, I think. There are some Orcs on the near bank, many more on the far, but the snow has blinded them pretty thoroughly: there are great forces nearby which have not found their goal. If we dash in and destroy the forces on the near bank, the King may be able to come to us. But I do not truly know how it is with him. Probably not good. We may have to cross right over and engage."

Barahir thought about it. "How wide is the river here?" he asked. "Can we ford it?"

"I don't know," said Beren. "I have never been here."

His father chewed his lip. Well, they had no choice – they would just have to find it out the hard way. "I have to give orders," he muttered. "Can I raise my voice a little?"

Beren shrugged. "Have to risk it. Try to keep it as quiet as you can."

Barahir stared at him, then turned to motion the watching riders into him. They huddled their horses in close. "Listen up, everybody," he said in low but carrying tones. "Can you all hear me? Good. We are close; within a mile. Finrod's across the river; whether he can come to us, or we have to cross first to him, we don't know. Anybody know this country? No? Well then, it's also an open question whether the river here is fordable or not. We'll just have to find out."

The warm clouds of the horses' breath; the falling snow; the faces of the riders, dirty and grim.

"We'll set lances at the ready, but we'll start off at a walk," Barahir continued. "Beren will lead us, as before. Any smallish bodies we meet, say ten or less, we'll leave be unless they attack us. Let's save a charge until we have to. But everybody must be ready for it. All clear?"

Nods and grunts told him this was so.

"I want a moment to talk to the horses," said Beren. He got off his mount, stood in front of them all, then commenced whinnying and nickering in a way which was strange to hear coming out of a human mouth. But what he said must have been effective, because the horses all at once jerked their heads up and whinnied in response. Their ears all turned in unison first flat back, then pricked forward. Barahir would have found it comical if the situation had not been so deadly. His own horse had come alive under him and he was having difficulty in keeping it still.

"The All-Father be with you all," he said to his riders, and led them forward at a walk. Beren had strung his great bow. He rode on the left van; Emeldir on the right.

They had covered the ground in silence for a while when all of a sudden a troop of Orcs materialized through the snow-beaded curtain of air ahead of them. The goblins were marching sullenly in three files, in the same direction as the riders. In the muffling snow, the enemy were not aware of the strangers creeping up behind them.

Barahir met the eyes of the riders on either side of him and found instant, silent agreement. Every man and woman couched their spear and kicked their horse into a gallop. In less time than it takes to tell it, they were among the astonished Orcs. They rode through the shattered troop then wheeled back to finish the work.

There were cries of rage and pain from their foes, but the swords were out now and made short work of the remnant.

“Come now,” said Barahir, “that won’t have gone unheard. At the trot.”

The next alarm was one of the great twisted wolves. It ran silently out of the wall of snow, straight at them. Almost before anybody else could think what to do or even react, Emeldir’s arrow took it in the eye, and it crashed to earth, ploughing a long furrow in the snow before coming to a twitching halt.

“Keep your eyes peeled!” called Barahir. “There’ll be more!”

They dealt in the same way with three more wolves before they began to be aware of a faint animal noise ahead of them. They had all heard it only the day before: it was the many-throated roar of battle.

“Spears ready, and pick up the pace!” called Barahir. The horses were cantering now, and the roar was coming closer. Lines of Orcs came dimly into view in front, facing away, towards a darkness of water; and buried still deeper back in the layers of snowy air, the riders became aware of occasional flashes.

Barahir urged them to full gallop. The Bëorings were yelling now themselves as they spurred their horses to the charge. Some few of the enemy turned at the last, gaping, but in the main the impact of a hundred spears on their ranks caused total surprise and utter destruction.

The front of the cavalry passed through the lines on the bank, leaving a great hole in their train. The hooves splashed now into the shallows of the icy river.

“Don’t stop!” cried Barahir. “Full on and across!”

They plunged on into the current. Now the horses were thrusting through up to their breasts. However, the stream here was not many paces wide, and soon the animals were heaving out into the shallows toward the far bank.

They saw now on the far side what remained of the Elves. All their horses were dead, the bodies having been laid in a ring around a slight rise in the ground. Behind that wall of flesh, the survivors were crouched. The horses protected them from the worst of the arrows, and they were still just able to repel the attacks of the Orcs who swarmed on the far shore. The piled bodies of goblins all around wrote a vivid history of the battle.

All this was taken in in a flash as Barahir led his men clattering and heaving up the bank. The Orc archers became aware of them, and arrows began to zip through their ranks; but the mighty bow of Beren began to utter its *thung!* on the one side in answer, joined immediately by the lighter note of Emeldir’s.

Amid the yelling confusion Barahir searched for the King, saw the golden head swing around to him. “Finrod!” Barahir bawled to him. “Get your men up behind us!”

But now the Orcs had swept round to the Bëorings and were all among them. Barahir drew his sword and cut down goblin after goblin; all the riders were hard at it. A shout rang out! The Elves had risen up, were clambering over the mounds of dead flesh and flinging themselves onto the rear of the Orcs. Their bright swords rose and fell, rose and fell, and then they were through and among the horses. “Up!” cried Barahir, and the Elf-lord himself swung himself up behind him, his body slamming into Barahir’s back. The outraged horse pirouetted under the suddenly doubled weight and screamed in its rage and fear. With a corner of his mind, Barahir saw Beren with sword in hand, doing mighty work with it on the side. The arrows were coming in thickly now, and people were falling. Suddenly there came a wolf: it skittered in from the side and threw itself, snarling, at the wildly surging riders. It pulled down one man, leapt at another; but Beren appeared as if out of nowhere and smote its head from its steaming flanks with a single mighty sweep of his blade.

All the living Elves were horsed now. “Back!” cried Barahir, and slowly they tore themselves free of the hordes of clawing, clinging Orcs. The horses were gasping back through the water, and still the arrows were taking their toll. The enemy had reformed on the far side and were now many ranks of jeering, howling Orcs thick. No chance for spears; they could not charge out of the water, up the sticky bank. It would have to be a

hack job.

Hack is what they did. But half of the horses carried two swords now, and it made a difference. Slowly the rescuers made ground, although rider after rider was pulled down and clawed to pieces on the spot.

At last they managed to fight their way into clearer ground. As they picked up the pace, the running Orcs began to be left behind. The deadly rain of arrows thinned away to a trickle, then to nothing. The last of the enemy was left behind them in the mist.

The tired horses wanted to halt, but Beren, smeared all over with blood, whether his own or someone else's was not clear, stood up in his stirrups and cried, "Whip them on! The enemy is upon us!" He cried then aloud in the horse-tongue, and the animals started up as if electrified and began to gallop in the direction he led.

He led them a wild chase, jinking across the meadows, following some inner, shifting map of his own. In this wise they made their way through and around the main bodies of the five Orc legions which were now in the field around them, but several times they had to battle their way through bodies of enemy, and they were twice attacked by the wolf-things, at grievous cost on both occasions.

After what seemed an eternity, Beren said cautiously that he thought that most of the enemy were now behind them, out of immediate reach. They could perhaps take a short pause to breathe and tally their condition.

"Are you hurt, my Lord?" Barahir asked the Elf behind him. It was the first time he had been able to draw breath to ask.

Finrod eased himself painfully. "Every one of us," he said. "But if we breathe, we will heal." He looked around and counted the survivors, a grim look on his face. "How many did you bring?" he asked. When Barahir told him, he winced. "Seventy of my people, and over twenty of yours, has my folly cost," he said.

"Say not so, Lord," replied Barahir. "We do not blame you, and if I may be so bold, you should not blame yourself either. I fear they will not be the last to die in this war, which was of Morgoth's making, not yours."

Finrod was silent behind him, then he sighed. "A madness of grief was upon me," he said. "My brothers are burned to nothing."

"We know," said Barahir. "We rue their loss also. I know it is not the same – a brother is a brother, and not to be replaced."

"And your own brother?" asked Finrod. "Have you news of him?"

"Alas! I fear he fell at Angrod's side," said Barahir, but it was not so.

"We should get on," broke in Beren apologetically. He had made use of the break to borrow some arrows from some of the others, having used up all of his own. They spurred the reluctant horses again to a walk, and then to a sort of half-hearted trot. Beren talked to the beasts constantly, urging them on. It was a long, weary road back, and the snow now was falling heavily enough to make breathing difficult. It lay soft and thick on the ground now too and the horses at last had to fall back on a sort of wading walk. The snow at least however seemed to have hidden their scent as well as their tracks; they had no more trouble with wolves.

After an endless time in the hypnotically falling snow Beren appeared again at his father's side. "I think," he began hesitantly, "I think... our army is not far off."

Finrod stirred and brushed the cold powder from his shoulders. "Yes," he agreed. "It is a pity we dare not sound a horn. We will just have to walk into them."

Shortly after, that is exactly what occurred. Long lines of trudging soldiers appeared towards them out of the wilderness of snow-laden air. Leading the party was Celevir, who was expecting them. There was great joy at the meeting. The Elves' reverence for their recovered leader was a noble thing to see, and nobody could

praise Barahir enough.

After the jubilation had died down a little, the three leaders went into a huddle together.

“So, what now?” said Finrod.

“Lord King,” said Barahir, “it is of course for you to command. But I cannot but admit that my people have had enough for the time being. Also they are anxious for their homes; with the towers of your brothers thrown into ruin, such a stroke of disaster and dismay as no-one expected, the whole land lies exposed to attack from the North. On top of all, we are running very low on provisions. With your consent, I propose to take them home for now. I would wish to discover the situation in the rest of my land and to consult with others as to our best course of defence.”

Finrod smiled. “I think such talk of consent has been rather overtaken by events,” he said, “but for what it is worth: I concur with and support your plan. Indeed we must do likewise among our own folk. We must think first how to defend that which remains to us; later, Valar willing, we can concert an attack.” He turned then to Celevir. “What think you, Warden? I am ready now to hear your sober counsels, and I most humbly beg your pardon for my earlier over-mood.”

Celevir stirred. “My Lord,” he said, “it is bootless to rue past deeds, or to debate whether they were good or ill. As for the present, I too think we must withdraw. We of the Third Company have for our part fulfilled our mission.”

“Well then,” said Finrod, “shall we march back first to the hills? Your son has guided us to perfection, Barahir, but although we have evaded our enemy, we have not yet escaped him. I would put some country between him and us before attempting anything else. This cover of snowfall will not last much longer either. What say ye?”

The other two agreeing, they all returned to their troops and began the march back. The sorely wounded stayed on the horses; the others now walked, and glad they were of it too. Trotting for miles with only a rough blanket between oneself and the horse’s back is no recipe for comfort.

The snow lasted all the way back to the hills. The lines of troops had already climbed high on the final slope, following back the broad beaten path of their passage hither, when the light began to strengthen behind them. It grew steadily to a blinding intensity, until the last flurries of snow were swept from the weary marchers and they emerged from a wall of storm into bright sunlight under a clean blue sky. They stood there on the height below the trees of their last night’s camp and almost swooned for joy of the sun, and of their escape, and of each other. Their enemy was far off on the plain below; they had their lives and their honour, and they were going home.

Finrod stood on the height, the mild wind from the West drawing his hair out behind him in a fluttering golden flag. He spread his arms wide and laughed aloud, despite his losses and his wounds, for he had been given back his life quite unlooked-for; also the fire of the young world ran yet hot in his veins, and his lungs remembered the living air of Valinor. He turned then to address the ranks of Barahir’s army, who were drawn up nearby.

“People of Ladros!” he cried. “My valiant comrades! In these late days you have shown a valour which none could command; and in future, by Elbereth Kindler, none *shall* command it. Be ye and all your folk from this day vassals no more, but neighbours, and friends too if ye will it. Ladros is given to you to hold freely, for your own.” He turned back to Barahir and laughed anew. “But thou – thou hast given me my life, so there can be no talk of mere friendship between us. We have both of us lost brothers, but now we have each found another. For my brother shalt thou be from this day; and like any brother, thou must just accept it, wilt thou or nillst thou.”

Barahir laughed now in his turn. The two embraced, the sun-haired Elf and the grizzled dark man. “So let it be!” answered Barahir.

Finrod released him and took then the silver ring he wore and showed it to Barahir. “I pray thee, Brother, see

this device,” he said. Barahir looked at the ring and saw that it was wrought into the likeness of two serpents which had green gems for eyes. Their heads met beneath a crown of golden flowers, which the one supported and the other devoured.

“This ring I had of my father, Finarfin, at our parting,” Finrod said. “That is the symbol he devised for our house. Take it now in token of our bond.” But instead of handing Barahir the ring, he held it up high, so that the westering sun caught it. The silver shone under the rays, but the jewels wrought in Valinor flamed into a green fire which blinded the sight. Each person standing there received a sudden vision of a fair land beneath a holy light; each heart was wrung by the conviction that there were higher, nobler things than this life of dust and sweat – that somewhere, not far away, there lived a bright hope, and a joy purer than any had ever known; somewhere around some nearby corner of the world. The vision faded then, and the people sighed. But many there remembered it as the high point of their whole lives.

Their sight cleared at last, and some wept. But there stood Finrod still beneath the sun, with the ring in his hand. He cried then to them all together: “Ye Elves and Men, bear witness! In the sight of the Sun of blessed memory, under clear heaven, and by the Powers of earth, water and air, I, Finrod, eldest on this shore of the house of Finarfin and Eärwen, swear to give whatever aid lies within my power, at whatever need, to my brother here Barahir, scion of Boromir the Renowned, and to all his house who follow, until the ending of the world. And thereof let this ring be the token!” He gave the ring to Barahir.

As he spoke, he shivered slightly, as if the dark wing of fate had passed over his head. Was he aware that he had wrought his own death with his words? Or had he a presentiment that most of the people he spoke to would be dead by the end of the year? Nobody can know.

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