

Beren and Húrin.

“Get him, lads!” cried the leader, and more stones came Beren’s way, and yet more. He raised his hands to protect his face, then sank to his knees. He was still trying to hobble forwards when a large stone got through his guard and turned the lights out.

When he rose slowly to the groggy surface of sense, there was a shadow standing over him. He reached out blindly and encountered a smallish hand, which gripped his firmly, then withdrew.

“Sons of slime,” a cold voice over him spoke, “one stone more, and you are dog meat.”

“Get out of our way!” shouted several of the gang. “We do not know you. You have no business here.”

“I shall not go,” said the voice. “Truly, you are dogs without honour – or wisdom either. Stone me, and my father will hunt you down, one by one; and your ends will not be handsome. Galdor Fire-sword shall not be kind to any pack of yellow, slinking jackals who pull down his son.

“But come! Is there not one among you with pith to meet my blade, man to man? See how it shines you welcome! No? Not one? Then depart from here, cravens, on this instant. And let me not see your stinking hides again – or I swear by the Kindler, they will not be fit to house you afterwards!”

Beren opened bleary eyes and looked up. Standing over him with a bright blade in his hand was the blond boy he had last seen hawking. His head was spinning again though, and he closed his eyes into the velvety dark.

He woke to pain – pain almost everywhere. He groaned and tried to raise a hand to his head.

“Mother,” came the voice he knew, “he is awake.”

Beren opened one eye – the other seemed to be glued shut – to see a slender, dark-haired woman bending over him. She looked anxiously into his eye. “Can you open the other?” she asked.

“It sticks,” he mumbled.

“Wait you – I will try warm water,” she replied.

She sponged his recalcitrant eye gently until he was able to open that to a stab of light. She looked into it and relaxed a little.

“Your head at least seems to have taken no major hurt,” she said. She asked him then where else he had pain.

“Ask rather, where I do not,” he managed to say through bruised and bleeding lips. The woman smiled at that, but made him try his limbs, one by one. While this painful procedure was going on, Beren looked at the boy sitting beside the bed. “Sir,” Beren said to him, “I have to thank you for my life. Alas, I do not know your name. I am Beren, and my father is Barahir, younger son of the Lord of these parts, although that counts for little in these days. But if there is any service within my power that I can do for you, you have only to name it.”

The golden-haired boy stirred and smiled. “You need not thank me,” he said. “It was a pleasure to drive some right thinking into such curs as they, even though there was not much sport to be had from them. I had hoped one or two at least would have stood against me as men. As for my name: I am Húrin, son of Galdor whom men name the Tall, and Hareth my mother here.”

“The not-so-tall,” smiled his mother. “Young sir, I think you have taken no grave hurt; only bruises. If you will tell us where you house, we will send word to your people.”

Beren sat up suddenly, wincing and clutching his head. “What of my friends?” he asked indistinctly.

“They were not badly hurt,” said Húrin. “Only scratches.”

Beren lay back again, relieved, but then he stiffened and grasped at the boy’s hand. “Do not tell me the eagle was only scratched,” he said. “I remember what I saw.”

Húrin’s face showed surprise and concern. “It... but you name the bird also as your friend?”

“One of my oldest, and firmest,” said Beren. “Tell me how he is! Where is he? I must go to him!” He read the reality in their sad faces. “No,” he said, shaking his head. “No. No. Tell me it isn’t true!”

“They stamped on him,” said Húrin bleakly. “The brutes. They dragged your friends away, and they stamped the bird into the earth. I could not protect you both.”

Beren covered his face with his hands and turned to the wall. They could get no more word out of him, and at last they went quietly away.

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They took Beren to the Hall. His aunt Hirwen, with uncharacteristic firmness, insisted on it. He saw only his aunts: Bregolas did not come, nor did Andreth.

The bruises on his skin healed quickly, but those on his soul did not. He was not sure Hareth had been right to say there was no damage to his brains, because he had blank moments: short intervals in which he lost his place in the world. Then he would find it again, and go on. But something remained out of step, dislocated.

As soon as he could get up, Beren went back to the place of stones. There he took the broken body of the eagle and buried it under the trees. He had no marker for the grave, but he needed none. There was nobody else in the world to care.

He could shed no tears. His eyes remained desert-dry all throughout the grim business, and indeed the heart within him felt bloodless too. There was a gap inside him, a gulf where something was missing.

As he stood under the trees, hearing the small heedless birds among the leaves, the terrible realization grew on him that he could no longer understand what they were saying. At first he did not believe it; it was only when he tried to speak to them, and later with increasing desperation to horses and dogs in the town, only to find that his tongue had forgotten how to make the sounds, as his ears had to hear them, that the full weight of his loss sank in. With this tearing away of his birthright, the blank spot, the empty place, reached its tentacles over yet more of his soul.

The growing friendship with Húrin was the one bright part of his existence. The fair-haired youngster had come often to his bedside, and after Beren was able to get up, Húrin would insist that he venture out and walk a little through the streets of Newfort. Beren came to value the boy highly, so blithe and true was his spirit. They talked much together, each listening with admiring interest to the other’s experiences.

One day they were walking about the gate square, and Beren was actually laughing at one of his companion’s ridiculous stories, when they almost ran right into one of the gang. The lumpish youth turned white and ducked off to the side out of sight.

“Well, we seem to have brought them to a satisfactory state of manners!” said Húrin. “He is not the first I have seen dodge away like that.”

“They know that I am going to kill them all,” said Beren quietly, “as soon as I am hale. Not many days to wait now.”

The younger boy stopped and looked at him in consternation. “Do you mean it?” he said. “Beren, you must not. I beg you, no.”

Beren half-smiled and tilted his head. “You value their worthless hides so high?” he lisped through lips which still bore healing scabs.

“No!” said the other. “It is just... well, it just feels wrong. It would be a great mistake, I think. I would gladly have dispatched one or two at the time myself; I would have felt the better for it, and the world too would have been the lighter for their passing. But in cold blood? It is not the same at all.”

“My blood is not cold,” replied Beren in the same level voice. “They killed my friend.”

Húrin was silent for a time. “It is not them I fear for, it is you,” he said at last. “You will not bring your friend back, whatever you do. And I do not think you will come to any good by steeping your heart in their blood. On the contrary.”

Beren stood still and stared across the square at the busy people. “I must do something,” he said. “Or I think I shall die. Truly, Húrin. Things with me are – not good.”

The boy faced him and grasped his hand in his own. “Then punish them! Make them pay. That is the way. But not with their blood; I beg you not. You would only wound yourself.”

Beren smiled again, winced, and felt his lips. “You are very persuasive,” he said. “Well, I will try your way. If I cannot live with it, there is always the other.” The two of them walked on.

“So, tell me your plan,” said Húrin. “Tell me what I am to do in it.”

“Nothing,” said Beren. “Your pardon, Húrin, I know you would relish the fight. But it is my heart the blackness weighs upon, not yours.”

Húrin stole a glance at him and recognized that there was no use in arguing. He could not resist one last try however. “But, Beren,” he said, “they are thirty, you are one. Can you truly manage so many on your own?”

Beren smiled, but his eyes were cold. “Oh, yes. I shall manage.”

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