

The Gift

The next morning Beren had an opportunity to speak with his mother alone. It was a fine spring day and she was hanging washing on a line outside the kitchen.

“Mother,” he began hesitantly, “I fear our last parting still lies between us, when you begged me to stay, and I would not.”

“Oh, no,” she said without emotion, “take it not so. I do not mind it. That time has long passed. It is forgotten.”

“I would make amends now, if I could,” said Beren. “I am back now, all that is finished. I would gladly stay at your side now, if you wish it.”

She looked at him, but made no direct reply. “Hand me the clothes as I need them, if you would,” she said. “It saves me bending.”

He did as she asked for some time, three shirts and an apron’s worth. “Have you nothing to say about my offer?” he said at last.

“Son,” she answered quietly, “my need was then, not now.”

He spread his hands. “At that time, I could not.”

Her eyes kindled. “Say rather, would not. You chose. You went. It was your idea, your plan. *I* did not figure in it. You thought your lessons would not wait, so off you went. Do not say ‘could not’ to me.”

He swallowed. “Mother,” he said, “you do not know what a price in terror I paid for those lessons. The opportunity came to me, and I grasped it. It never would have come again.”

Her voice returned to indifference. “Well, it is all one now anyway.” She pegged on for a while. “Tell me though,” Emeldir asked him coldly, “was it worth it? Did you get what you paid for? Are you now the second-best swordsman in all Middle-earth?”

“I beat him in the end,” said Beren, “so I don’t know what that makes me.”

He handed her the wet pieces until the basket was empty. She took the bag of pegs and bent to pick up the basket.

“Mother,” said Beren, “put the basket down again for a moment. I have something I am charged to give you.” As she straightened up again, wondering, he fumbled in his pouch for the gift from Nendilmë. “I told you about the Queen, who was so kind to me?” he went on. “She had this made for you. All her family are gifted workers in such things.” With that he handed the small package to Emeldir.

When she unwrapped it and saw what it was, her hand flew to her mouth. “Hiril had such a thing,” she whispered. “A shell of the sea.”

“I did not know if it would be right to give you such a thing,” he went on with hesitation, “but the Queen said that I must. She lost her own daughter, you know.”

There were tears in Emeldir’s eyes.

“You wind it with the little key, and it plays a melody when you open the shell,” said Beren awkwardly. He took the shell back for a moment and showed her.

Emeldir had to sit down on the basket. The tears were running down her face. “It is beautiful,” she whispered as she listened to the tiny tune playing on her hand. When it was finished she held out her other hand to Beren, and when he came to her, she hugged him close, laying her greying head on his chest. She looked up

at him with swimming eyes, face working. “You say she lost... she lost...”

“Yes, Mother. That is why. That is what she said. From one mother to another.”

Emeldir was sobbing openly now. “If I could only have found her,” she cried. “I couldn’t say good-bye. I am held from her.”

“Yes, Mother,” said Beren, “Nendilmë knew about that too.” He stroked her head, and she grasped his hand and kissed it. They stayed there for some time while Emeldir shook and cried against his chest, his arms tight around her. She quietened gradually. At last she sighed, straightened, wiped her eyes and blew her nose.

“How I wish I could thank her,” she said, still a little damply. “Such a beautiful thing – if only I could meet her. I must at least send her something, by the carters. I will have to consider of it.” She looked up at Beren and smiled radiantly at him, the old smile he knew. “Thank you, my son. Thank you.”

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