

## The Deadly Quest

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>1</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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1 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.

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