

Reunion

Bhalacho looked hard at Beren, a shade of doubt showing again on his honest face.

“We’ve heard some wild tales about you, Master,” he said. “I don’t doubt many be rumours, as you said; and straight up, some are impossible. But I don’t know what’s true and what’s not, and that’s a fact.”

“Which are the impossible ones?” asked Beren, keeping an impassive face.

“Well,” said Bhalacho awkwardly, looking around at the now quiet and attentive Hairfeet, “we did hear as how you lost your hand. Which a wolf bit it off. So strike that one, cos we can see with our eyes that it ain’t so.”

Beren held up his hand to show, and nodded solemnly. “What else?” he said.

Nobody seemed to want to speak. Mungo leaned forward at last. “Master Beren,” he said soberly, “they said you was dead.”

“Come off it, Mungo,” retorted Beren, “do I look dead to you?” He nudged the avidly listening Etty on his knee. “What do you think, Etty, am I dead?” She shook her curl-laden head decidedly.

“Well, is it all lies then?” cried Bhalacho with a passion. “What we heard? Of you wrestling with the Wicked Man himself in his big house yonder, and the jewel, and the princess, and all of it?”

“There was a jewel,” replied Beren, “although it is not here; and it was a hard struggle to win it, although with no wrestling. That of the princess is quite true. She is with me, in our shelter a little way over the hill. We thought to settle here, you see. After hard labour comes rest.”

Now came the round eyes and mouths again. Etty perked up, sat back and looked up at him. “A real princess?” she said shyly. “Could we see her?”

“Of course!” said Beren. “I just thought to come on my own this first time. I’m sure we’ll all see a lot of each other.”

“But Beren,” said Melena. “You and she – are you...? Is she...?”

“We are,” said Beren firmly. “She is my wife.”

“Oh!” said the small woman in a rapture of joy, clapping her hands. “Oh! Oh, my dear – I’m that happy for you – I truly am. It was what you needed more than anything. All us women could see it – Granny knew, she often said how much she’d like to see you settled. It’s only sad that she never could. Oh, Beren. Do let us meet her, so we can give her our blessing – and tell her what a wonderful giant she has netted.”

* * * * *

The Hairfeet all hid in their holes when Beren and Lúthien came together. There was nobody in sight in the clearing when they arrived. Lúthien looked questioningly at Beren, but he shook his head slightly and mouthed the word “Wait.” They sat on some of the low benches and looked around at the fine day.

One by one the little people shyly appeared. They stood first around at some distance; but driven by curiosity, they crept nearer, until quite a crowd waited there in silence.

Lúthien stood. At the full sight of her radiant form and face, one after another, with a rustle of clothes, the men made a knee and the women curtsied. Cheeks were reddened and heads were bowed. The Elf-woman wore only a simple blue dress with no ornament, but her face with its keen grey eyes was as fair as summer, and her river of sable hair fell like midnight magic far below her waist. She was more beautiful than they had ever imagined.

Beren took her hand and brought her to where the baker and his wife stood. "This is Bhalacho and Melena," he said. "Bhalacho, you ass, stand up." The baker was trying to kneel again.

"I am very pleased to meet you," said Lúthien a little shyly, colour showing in her own cheek.

"Please, miss, we don't know what to call you," murmured Melena.

"You being a princess and all," put in Bhalacho, still round-eyed.

"Call me Lúthien," cried she. "That is my name. Princess? My father is a king, I cannot deny it; but he is not king here. And as for me: I am not ruler of anyone. Not even of my husband."

That brought a laugh. Slowly the people began to relax. On Beren taxing them with their poor, un-Hairfoot-like welcome, they began something like their usual bustle. Pastries were brought, and foaming tankards. Lúthien caught fierce whispering in the background over what they should bring for her. To cut such nonsense short she took up a pastry in one hand and reached with decision to grasp a great tankard with the other. "I drink to all your healths!" she declared, took a hearty swig of the ale, then a bite of the pastry. "Mmm, that is good," she said indistinctly, with crumbs and foam about her mouth.

Beren laughed. He caught the look of pleasure on the baker's face. "That is one of Bhalacho's, I make no doubt," he said.

Lúthien turned to the short man. "You make these?" she said, upon which the Hairfoot turned crimson and muttered something inaudible. "I wish you would show me how," Lúthien went on wistfully. "I cannot do this at all. In fact I cannot do much of anything, except dance and sing, and just live." She turned to Melena, listening shyly close by. "I would count it a great favour, Mistress Melena, if you would show me, betimes, something of how to run a household," she said humbly to the small woman. "I confess, I know little about it." She glanced sidelong under her lashes at Beren. "Neither of us do."

"Hey, now hold up a minute," protested Beren, to general laughter. "I did my share of such tasks when we men were alone together on the Pine Mountain – cooking, cleaning, everything. *And* I looked after myself for three years after that."

"Oh yes," said Lúthien, dimpling. "Sleeping on ferns and eating acorns."

"One cannot live on acorns," said Beren in triumph, "they are too bitter. *I* know that much, at least."

Conversation became general then, taking on something close to its wonted lively tone. Beren introduced Lúthien to all the Hairfeet he knew. It took some time. Still, though, something was missing. "Why are the children not with us?" he asked.

"They are in their burrows," said Bhalacho, "with strict orders not to dare to show their faces. We did not think the Lady would want to be bothered with them."

"Oh, bosh," said Beren rudely. "Anyway they have not stayed in their burrows, as I could have told you. I have seen small faces peeping this long while." He turned and hailed the surrounding undergrowth. "Hoy! All you small ones! You are wanted!"

With a great rustling of the bushes, the children appeared. They gathered in a flock around the table, fingers in mouths, eyes wide.

Beren sought among them for the face he knew. "Hi! Etty!" he called. "Come here and meet your princess!"

Face flushing white and red by turns, Etty tottered near. She began to make a curtsy, but Lúthien knelt quickly and caught her hands.

"Please don't," the Elf-maid said quietly. "I would hope that you and I can find a way to be friends. And friends do not curtsy!"

Etty stared into her face, entranced. "You are so beautiful," she whispered.

"I am," replied Lúthien, "but many times I have wished that I were not. I want nothing out of life but to enjoy simple things; but because of this face of mine, and because of the rank and folk I was born to, and the nature of my substance, I have been dragged through the most awful trials. I hope they are ended now, and that I may at last take pleasure in the life I truly wish to live: to have a little house, and a man both strong and kind, and maybe children in time? And friends. So please, Etty, I beg you, I beg all of you here, try to see past the face I did not ask to wear, and see the bashful maid beneath. I shall be very lonely else."

They gathered around her then in their warmth, and their voices were loud in greeting and in earnest reassurance. Etty sat beside Lúthien, clasping her hand, her eyes never leaving the Elf's face. The party continued in great merriment, and as the day wore on, a love of Lúthien the fair took firm hold in every heart among the folk. It was not such a love as to make man forget wife; it was a love for the wonder, the beauty and the goodness in the world, such as they saw and heard in the fair face and voice of this most graceful and radiant of women. She touched their rough lives with a light of joy that none of them ever forgot.

* * * * *