

# RENEWAL

A tale of the Second Age.

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## **Acknowledgments**

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## Prologue

“You have all this,” said Galadriel, the sweep of her hand taking in the City, the smithies, the Dwarves, the potent ally, and the Rings; “why do you need me?”

Celebrimbor’s expression was defensive. “I will explain it to you,” he said, “but I must sue for your pardon before I begin. I am a worker in metal; I have little skill with words. It takes me many to express my thought, where others, maybe, could achieve the same with few.”

She made a slight gesture, as if to wave this gently aside. “Use as many as you need, honoured smith. We do not lack for time.”

Celebrimbor did not commence straight away, but walked to the window that faced west. He rested both hands on the sill, looking out over the many-planed jumble of roofs; then further still, over the grey wall, to the wide, fair lands beyond. He gazed as though his sight could cross the long miles, as if it could pierce the thick air to touch the unseen mountains; then over and past, to rest at last upon the cold, grey sea.

Galadriel reclined at her ease on a couch. The room held little else in the way of furniture. Eight sided, light and airy, it was of a size well suited to quiet conclave. Clearly, the chamber had existed for a long time – long enough for all its textures and colours to settle and harmonize. The floor was of pine, deep-toned from years of use and care. The old-sawn wood lent yet a faint tang to the air. Each mellow-plastered wall framed a large, many-leaded window, the glass patterned in amber and brandy, picked out with small patches of sapphire along the edges. Panes propped open allowed the entry of tree-top breezes and birdsong. The height was enough to mute the varied noises of the streets, yet not so high as to sever all felt connection with the concourse below.

The smith, having gathered his thoughts, turned at last to face his golden-haired visitor. “Here are my words,” he said. “I begin by reminding you of who we are: you and I, and all our folk. You know we are children of the singular and eternal One. We came into being with the world; we will last so long as the world lasts. We form part of the world, and the world is in us.” He spread his hands. “Were Arda<sup>1</sup> laid before us as a breadth of cloth, the lives of our people would wind through it as a silver thread. This you know.

“I need not rehearse for you how, in the Creation of the world, the glorious conception of the One was marred in the weave by Melkor, strongest of the demigods. Thwarted in his desire to order the making, this unruly Vala directed his fury towards destruction. What his siblings in their united might raised up, he could not alone throw down; but he blighted and besmirched where he could. Alas! His reach was long. Thus is it that every part of Arda, down to its finest grain, bears the scars of Melkor’s petulance.

“Few indeed are the places in which power has succeeded in cleansing the stain of Melkor from the fabric of the world. In the West that once we knew, where those of our ilk may no longer tread; in the secret land of Melian, now lost beneath the Sea; and, as I knew in my own body for all too brief a time, the green and enchanted Isle of Beren and Lúthien.

“Into this world awoke our people, in the dark beneath the stars before the count of years began. Some of us, those of deeper temper, maybe, sought the light of the Trees in the West<sup>2</sup>, in the time that is now past. Long we sojourned there in the lands of undying – at least, long then it seemed to us, although brief enough now in all truth; a fair moment, that ever recedes, ever fades, like a brilliant leaf sinking slowly deeper into a dark lake of time.

“The Trees were killed, their Light is gone; but it lives on, Galadriel, it lives on, and in more than memory. It shines from your face, and from my own. That Light has marked us to the bone – and not only with memory, but also with longing.

“Cast out, we recrossed the Sea, returning to Middle-earth. The moment we set foot once more upon her shores, we ran our heads back into Melkor’s dirt and ruin. We, who love clean winds, clear water, and quiet! I will not recall for you the long years of despair, the vain and losing struggle against this evil Vala, then inexorably tightening his grip over all that land; the ugliness, the losses, and the tears; the eventual grace of the Powers, the final victory; if such we may name a tide of avenging fury so potent that it rent the earth, letting in the waters to cover friend and foe alike.

“Neither you nor I struck blow in that fight; such was not our destiny. But you were with me at the end, after the salt

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1 The elvish name for the whole of Creation.

2 That is, in Valinor, the abode of the Powers: Valar and Maiar.

flood roared in, covering all that we had known. We few, we huddled survivors, crouched piping on the new shore like a throng of mournful birds. We knew not what we should do, where we should go. You and I, in like mood of despair, crossed the mountains together; and as we stood on the far descending slopes, gazing over the wide wastes of further Middle-earth spread before us, we held counsel. Do you remember? We both at that time conceived the same thought. The spirit of malice was departed from the land; but of the evil fruit of that malice, oh how much remained! It seemed to us that a task was laid before us, a task not too great to attempt. Defeat of the Enemy had from the beginning been beyond our powers. But to repair his aftermath: this, at least in some measure, we believed we could compass. Our task, as we conceived it, which no-one else would do, or could do, was to clean and renew as we might, and also to preserve against the world's decay whatever could be salvaged of the pristine design of the One.

“So far, so ambitious. What of the details? Which approach to take? For my part, I work with matter, as you know – a lowly occupation, one might say, ill fitted to cleanse or preserve anything of worth. A hum-drum pursuit; of the world, worldly. Should mason, carpenter, or smith, such as I, strive at such high purpose as we named? Yet I thought on the Silmarils, the great feat of my grandsire. He found a way – we know not how – to capture that Light that we cannot forget into spell-stones of unbreakable strength. His craft did not, could not, create that Light; but what he could do was build a strong house for it. The strongest possible! Somehow he harnessed the whole weight of Arda to keep the lock on those stones, a lock that even Melkor was unable to break.

“I took thought therefore on how one might house and fortify the will to renewal in talismans of stone or metal. In the long years since the downfall of Melkor, I have studied this art. Yes, I have had help. I am not too proud to admit that. Together, we Brotherhood of smiths, working closely too with the Naugrim<sup>3</sup> of the mountains near at hand, and with high advice from other sources: we have achieved much. The path has been long; but we have climbed on it very high.”

He stopped at this point, and seemed at a loss to continue. Galadriel left him a space of time, before at last prompting gently, “But?”

“Well,” he stammered, “I do not know quite what words to choose. I lately feel a certain unease, yes. I confess it. We have done much, as I said. But, well, somehow I am no longer sure of my direction. The path that once lay so clear before my feet seems to have led elsewhere while my attention was engaged. My heart will have it that I am no longer upon it.

“For long, I thought I could accomplish alone that which I sought; indeed, the feeling, the hope, burned ever hotter as the years passed, as my knowledge grew deep and wide. But through a lengthy time of doubt increasing, I am come at last to cold conclusion: I cannot reach the heights I hunger for by myself. Thus I turn now to you, who were once of one mind with me. Now, we rarely see you in this City. You take no part in our work –”

“Why should I?” Galadriel answered, with some tartness. “I do not care to live under stone. I do not trust your associate, and I do not admire the things that you and he have made together.”

“I beg your pardon,” Celebrimbor said mildly. “I think you mistake my intent, which was in no way to censure. Your ways are other than ours; of course, I know that. I wanted only to tell you that I have never forgotten you, nor your words to me at the start of the present age. Lady Galadriel, you are the greatest of our tribe, your powers of mind the deepest and most sublime. I petition you for help.”

Neither spoke for several moments. When Galadriel at length broke the silence, it was not in direct answer to his request.

“Many words you spoke indeed, Smith,” she said, “but you left others unsaid. ‘High advice from other sources.’ May I suppose that to mean Annatar?”

“Annatar?” Celebrimbor frowned. “Well, yes. His aid has been fundamental, I do not deny it; yet what more shall I say? Rather, *you* should say. Why do you distrust him, as you so clearly do?”

“Because I cannot tell who he is,” she replied. “He told us he was sent by the Powers. Clearly he is of the order of the Maiar<sup>4</sup>. He claims not to have abided in Valinor, and one cannot go anywhere from that, because we know there are many Maiar, most of whom have not worn flesh at times or places where we could know them. I have no firm cause to doubt him; but also no cause not to doubt him. I cannot see into his heart at all. He hides it, as he can, since he is of greater strength than I. But why does he, Celebrimbor? Why bar the doors if he intends nothing ill? I do not like it. My

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3 Dwarves.

4 The secondary order of Powers who descended into Arda.

heart will not let me trust him. Círdan, Gil-galad: they are of the same mind as I.”

Celebrimbor had doubt written over his honest face. “I have learned much from Annatar,” he said. “Much. He has brought me to heights I should never have climbed on my own. I cannot think badly of him. His speech to me has ever been fair, and his hand open. He speaks also of a climb to greatness, to glory.”

“He has aided you in your projects, you say. Of these, I know only what hearsay reports. Can you tell me more of them, of these rings which your brotherhood has devised? It may be that my opinions are unjust.”

Having gathered his words once more, Celebrimbor said, “I will tell you. Before Annatar came to advise us, we wrought many of these rings, among other works and talismans; we brotherhood of smiths. These lesser rings were essays in power. They have this power or that, variations on a theme; but they are not much more worth than toys. We have given them mostly away. In any case I have not kept tally of them, to know which has gone where.

“Climbing higher up the summit of craft, now with Annatar’s help, we made eventually seven rings; rings of great power. These were, at that time, the best things I ever had a hand in making. I doubt I can describe the joy of it to you.”

Galadriel smiled. “I perceive the echo of it still in your heart.”

“Do you so?” he said. “Then the happier I, that I can in some measure share the depth of my satisfaction. And perhaps I, in my turn, receive an echo, passed down through the blood, of the ecstasy of he who made the Silmarils.” He paused, the disquiet in his face now openly to be seen. “After that, the Brotherhood was eager to push on, to attempt yet greater works than these.” But he did not volunteer further information.

Galadriel broke the silence. “What became of the Seven?” she asked.

Celebrimbor roused himself from uneasy reverie. “We gave them to our friends, the Dwarves,” he said. “We had them in mind from the start.”

Galadriel nodded. “The seven tribes. But who made that suggestion? Was it Annatar?”

Celebrimbor looked more troubled than ever. “Well, I do not know,” he replied. “It may have been, yes. But we all thought the idea was fitting.”

Galadriel contemplated him. “You do not seem entirely happy, Smith,” she said.

“Well, I am not...,” he began. “I do not... Well, to speak my heart, I am just not entirely sure that we did right. The Seven were powerful talismans; very powerful. I hope they will work for good. I hope they will. It would grieve me beyond measure to be the cause of harm to our dwarvish comrades.”

“And what came after that?” she asked. “Rumour goes beyond what you have told me so far.”

He swallowed, nodded stiffly. “Yes, we made more. Nine. The Seven were strong, but these latest rings are stronger. Stronger, but... well, it is their direction that troubles me, Galadriel. I am not confident these will work for good. I have to admit that to you.”

Galadriel shook her head, disapproval written plainly on her face. “And to whom did you bestow *those* as largess?”

“Nobody,” he replied. “I keep them safe. I would not even dare wear one myself.”

“Ah. May I see one?”

“Surely,” he said. He crossed the room to open a cupboard, revealing a blank steel door set low in the wall. The smith bent and whispered some words, too low to hear; the thick steel opened with a click and swung wide. Celebrimbor retrieved from within a carven wooden box, which he carried to Galadriel, lifting the lid as he went.

The golden-haired woman looked long within. No thought could be read in her face and eyes; and after some space of time, she motioned to him to close the box.

“Can you destroy these?” she asked.

He blanched, hesitated. "Is it... I don't... do you really feel them to be so perilous?"

"Your own heart has told you so. But I asked not 'shall,' but 'can.' Lies it within your power?"

He shook his head. "Alas, I do not think so. There are parts of their being that I do not understand, you see. We have --"

She stopped him with a slight gesture. "Then I should keep them safe and secluded, even as you do."

As he returned the box to the safe, she lay back on the divan, looking very thoughtful.

Celebrimbor glanced at her in abashed enquiry, but she spoke no word. At last however, just as he was about to open his own mouth, she asked, "And what does your Brotherhood think?"

"Oh, they are hot to continue," he said. "More than ever so. It is only I who have doubts."

The late sun sent golden light streaming low through the tinted glass. In that kindly room, surrounded by the sweet airs and clear voices of Elvendom, it was hard to think that evil days might ever come again.

"You sent many messengers to seek me for counsel?"

"Many," he affirmed. "I did not know where in Middle-earth you might be found."

Galadriel stood and went to gaze herself out of the western window, her gown rustling against the floor. She sighed. "What are we doing here, Celebrimbor, in this shadow-land, in this neglected garden of Middle-earth? In the beginning times, everything was clear. The terrible struggle occupied all our minds. But at the end of it, we refused the amnesty of the Valar; so much less did we value the pardon they offered than the acquittal they did not. Thus heads were shaken, the denying palm upraised. In response, the door was slammed shut. We would not; and now we may not. We who chose Middle-earth now have no road back.

"I do remember speaking those words to you, on that hill, as though it were yesterday. I have not changed. But the years lengthen in Middle-earth, and what works have we achieved? Some few small successes perhaps, here and there. But anything worthy of the time spent?"

Celebrimbor shook his head, but did not speak.

"Two things brought me at this time to your city," she went on, "and they were not your messengers. Firstly: evil multiplies, and it becomes marshalled. There is a Power at work in Middle-earth, and it is no hale one. It is in my thought that this Power could be Annatar."

Again the smith made no reply, only stood gazing at the floor. He could not deny the possibility.

"Of the second matter that drew me here I say this. As you report of yourself, I too, through long study and trial, have made some progress towards our shared dream of renewal. A glade, a season, these I can clean of Melkor's stain. But at long last I – as you – have come to realize that I cannot reach the place of desire on my own."

She turned to face him.

"Of your messengers I met not one. I came here solely at the prompting of my own heart. Celebrimbor Silver-fist, you say you seek my help? But I say to you in answer: I, Galadriel, I seek *your* help. And I have come here expressly to ask you for it."

He did not speak or smile in reply, but as it were a glow suffused his whole face and shone from his eyes as he considered the implications of these words. Moments went past while the westering sun crept a little lower.

"We shall have to find you a house," he said at last.

Galadriel sighed. "A house," she said. "Well, if it must be, it must be."

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It was due to the rain that Tarin found his perfection.

The downpours of the previous week had run off the edge of the island in short-lived streams. As soon as the storm waves subsided, these rivulets cut curved traces everywhere in the grey sands of the looping shore. Tarin, who had got up very early for his purpose, earlier even than Ma, in the grey half-light of the coming day, walked over many such graven channels as he combed the beach.

He liked to come here. Not only because there were things to find: bleached and withren branches, which he stowed in a big creel on his back; sometimes saw-cut timber, rare and valuable, which usually required the help of others to salvage. Rarely he found wrecks and their scattered cargoes, which could be all kinds of strange things. Nor were the clean air, the lonesome cries of the gulls, and the long and open lines of sight the sole reason. He liked to come because here he was usually alone. On his own, Tarin could just be himself, and forget the things that made him different from his people, things that brought that look into their eyes. He hated that look – polite of course, but a little distant and measuring; sometimes almost wary. That look told Tarin that the people he grew up among, indeed the only people he knew, viewed him as not quite one of themselves.

There was not much to glean from the strand today. Tarin could see sufficient length of sand ahead of him before it curved out of sight to be ready in good time for any item that warranted closer inspection. In between times he could look around him, and muse. He knew the vista well of course, but it was always of interest to see who might be abroad on the waters.

The island lay not far from the shore of the sea, or lake, or whatever it was – Tarin had heard tales of a true salt sea, but nobody he knew had ever been to it, or even close – and on that side a wide swathe of reed beds met the eye. Tarin had been over there betimes with Ma, in their boat, trapping wildfowl and such. In the further distance behind the reeds the eye was met by a dark wall of forest. The forest was dangerous: there were animals in it, there were Biggers. The People didn't often venture so far.

As one walked around the curving shoreline, the lonely stretch of reeded shore receded ever further into the distance. From the far side of the island, the opposite shore of the lake could not be made out at all.

One of Tarin's differences was obvious: his height. He was a good head taller than any other of his folk. People said his father had been a Bigger, and it seemed an obvious conclusion. Tarin didn't know the facts of it, since his father, who would have been proof one way or another, was absent, and had always been absent. None of the people knew anything about him, and this was a topic that Ma refused to discuss. She had encountered the man on some shoreward venture, that was all Tarin knew.

Tarin could join dots as well as any, and didn't like the ugly conclusion he came to. What did that say about him, if his father really had been the type to force a woman that way? He didn't like to think about it. This man, this Bigger, who he had never met, who he had never set out to have anything to do with, had made him willy-nilly who he was. He had given Tarin life, but he had set his brand upon him, made him tall, made him stand out. And maybe had left him with Powers only knew what internal marring.

Although everything was marred, everything. Tarin could see that, could sense it acutely. In every single part of the world he had ever encountered, Tarin could sense the dirt and the damage, feel out its precise character in every case. He was quite grown before he realized that other people could not do this.

Mulling over such unhappy thoughts that day, Tarin almost missed the object in the sand. It was only a glint of light that caught the corner of his eye. He turned with waking interest, bent casually to look. What he saw made him take the heavy creel quickly from his back so he could squat down and look more closely.

He saw a gleam, as of metal, from something still half buried in the sand, brought barely to light now by the scouring action of one of the rain-streams. But from the moment Tarin had the object clearly in his eye, his heart began to beat like a drum. His eyes saw the gleam, but his other sense, the strange sense, could also feel the thing, and what it told him brought him to a state of excitement and awe such as he had never known. Because here, on the lonely beach he knew so well, for the first time ever in his life, Tarin had found something unmarred. Something clean. It was an undreamed-of perfection.

What was it? With careful fingers he scraped sand away from the top and sides of the object. He uncovered a small thing, smaller than his hand; gleaming, its curved surface throwing back the greyness of the clouded day with more than reflected glory. He hardly dared to pick the object up, because who was he to handle such a centre of holiness? But he could not leave it there either. He closed tentative fingers around it, feeling the thrill of contact, and lifted it from the

sand.

It was a hair-comb. Ma had them; Lissie too, and other girls. But none like this. This comb was delicately made of some white metal, covered with fine carvings that told some story in pictures that he could puzzle out later. Metal – it was scarce enough among the People, and what they had of it was mostly bronze or steel. Either would take something of a shine, if one worked at it, and that was fair enough, Tarin supposed; but nothing like this. He thought more, and remembered the silver buttons on the formal coat which was the badge of office held presently by old white-haired Tundo, the chosen Chief of the settlement. This metal was like that silver – only better. It was silver as it ought to have been. Silver unmarred. Tough, light, untarnishable; and full of a holy light.

Oh, such joy, such perfection! Tarin was so overcome he could hardly think. But whence had the comb come? There was no way of telling.

Wrapping his precious find in a piece of cloth, he picked up the creel of wood and made his rapid way back to the settlement. Ma was up, and a cup of tea was waiting for Tarin. But the young man had no interest in tea just now.

“Ma!” he said to her in a trembling voice. “Look at this!” And he carefully unwrapped his treasure under her gaze.

Ma was short and stocky, with dark brows and hair, the latter now plentifully salted with grey. She bent over his find, grunted.

“Looks elvish,” she said. “Where did you find it?”

“On the beach,” he said. “What makes you think it’s elvish?” Like all of the People, he had heard many stories about Elves, although he had never seen one.

“Met some once,” his mother replied. “Before you were born.” She took the gleaming comb and turned it under her gaze, her taciturn features revealing an almost reluctant admiration. “Can’t think who else could have made such a thing. Nobody I know.” She examined the piece further in silence. “Pretty piece,” she admitted at last. She handed it back to Tarin.

He cherished the wonder again in his hand. “What’s it made of, Ma?” he asked.

Ma was a mender; she knew a lot about materials. But Ma had to admit that she did not know. She agreed with him that it was most like Tundo’s silver buttons. Like, and yet not like.

“What are you going to do with it?” she asked.

He had already thought this out. “I’m going to give it to Lissie,” he said firmly.

Ma said nothing, just grunted and nodded. “Your tea’s getting cold,” was all she said. She turned then back to the chair she was mending.

Tarin wasn’t sure what Ma thought about him and Lissie. She never said anything to approve; then again, she never said anything against it, either. But there was never a lot of spare talk in Ma.

He slurped his tea, then with a word of thanks to Ma, he went out into the settlement. The settlement wasn’t large – a few low huts was all there was to see, not too densely packed. Tarin’s people preferred to dig holes in which to live, but this was difficult on the island, which was low and damp. Most of the huts were backed onto a small sand dune, which at least offered the possibility of sleeping holes, if for scarcely more extensive excavation. Bark and wattle, sealed with mud, mostly served for such daytime shelter as was required.

Tarin had wondered what his people were doing here in this lonely place. The older folk who knew all the tales had told him the People had come here for refuge. Nobody liked to be explicit, but there were dark hints of being hunted. The island was not very comfortable, it must be owned; but there was nothing here to attract unwelcome visitors, and the stretch of water shielded the settlement against chance wanderings by outsiders. It was safe.

People were up and about their business in byre and garden. Those he passed nodded to Tarin cheerfully enough. Lissie had a herd of goats, housed down past the end of the dune. She was on her own now, her father having passed early on, and her mother having died of the ague two seasons ago.

Lissie was often out and about, minding her goats at pasture, but today she was easy to find. The bleating as much as the smell of the beasts led him to his goal. Tarin knocked for manners at the door frame, but passed without pause into the warm, goat-smelling interior.

Lissie was bending her stout frame over a goat that she was holding with ease to the floor. A deft hand dosed the animal which she allowed then to scramble indignantly to its feet and away. The girl straightened, smiled at her visitor. "Hello Tarin! What brings you passing?"

Lissie had clear skin, cheerful eyes, freckles, and a ready smile. Tarin thought she was the prettiest girl he had ever seen. He was always tongue-tied in her presence.

"Found this," he stumbled, bringing out the cloth-wrapped comb with a jerky movement. "It's for you, Lissie."

She took it from him, her questioning eyes turning from his face to the parcel. She unwrapped it, and a glow of wonder spread over her face. Tarin, watching her, felt a lump rise in his throat at the lovely sight.

"It's beautiful," she whispered, holding the comb up and turning it to catch the light.

"It's for you, Lissie," he said again.

Her face changed quickly again. She shook her head with decision. "Oh, no, Tarin, I couldn't." She held the comb back out to him. "But it is so sweet of you to think of me."

He looked at the proffered comb; he looked at her. He had been fixed on the idea of the gift, had imagined her pleased gratitude. But clearly Lissie had other ideas. He knew he had no way to persuade her. Disconsolate, he accepted back the shining comb.

"I just thought..." he muttered with sunken head.

The girl regarded his bowed head with a fleeting expression of piercing sympathy that she had never, would never, let him see.

"Tarin," she said to him gently, "it's simply far too good for me. Such a thing! No, no. It's not to be thought of."

His gaze returned to her face, on which only her kindness was now to be seen.

"But thank you, so much, for the thought," she added softly.

"Oh, well..." he said lamely.

"Won't you stay, and visit with me a while? I haven't seen you since last week. I'll make some tea."

"No, uh, I'd better get back and help Ma," he said. "Maybe tomorrow?"

They took their farewells then, and Tarin went back to Ma.

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The brilliant comb was the subject of Tarin's broodings for many days thereafter. It was the only truly clean thing he knew – and he longed for cleanliness. He had never thought there could be such things in the world. Could there be more? There must be. Where could one find them?

"Tell me about the Elves, Ma," he said one day when they were both at work on a kettle. Ma had the small forge heated and was doing a careful work of brazing the blackened item.

She looked at him in surprise. "What are you wanting to know about them for?"

"Well," he said, "because of the comb. You know. I just wanted to know a bit more."

Ma finished the current bead of braze, then set the piece down. "Reckon you've heard most of what I know," she said.



“You said you’d met some. You never told me that before.”

“Ah!” said Ma, “That I did. Long ago, but I remember it as if it were yesterday.”

“Well what were they like?”

She looked at him from under her dark brows, considering. “Like your comb, lad,” she said at last. “Something a bit out of the ordinary. Higher, like.”

Tarin looked at his mother, read what her eyes revealed. Whatever she had experienced among the Elves had left its impression on her, so much was obvious.

“Where did you meet them?” he asked, tentative.

Ma turned the kettle over, estimating how much was left to do. “Down south,” she said after a moment. “One or two of us went trading. We needed bronze and that, we had a cart with wool and leather. Do it every once in a while.” The woman thought for a little, bring the time back to mind. “There’s a road down there, or a track. Other side of the forest. A long road. Dwarves made it, maybe. Leastways, they use it. Well, probably all folks do – Biggers for all I know, and I seen the Elves on it meself. But it’s the Dwarves who trade, Dwarves who we went to seek.

“We hid ourselves pretty well off the track whenever folk came along. We didn’t want to meet just anyone. You know how it is. But them Elves spotted us straight away. Four of them there was, on tall horses. They came down and sat with us a spell, sang with us.” She paused, clearly struggling under strong emotion. “Tarin, lad, I don’t know what to tell you. I’ve got no words for it. I never met people like them before or since. Never knew there *was* such.” Tarin, to his amazement, watched as Ma wiped tears of feeling from her eyes. “I never told anyone so much before,” she went on. “Folk don’t know. They wouldn’t understand.” She looked wetly at her son. “Only you, now, maybe.”

Tarin thought about it all. “Where do the Elves live?” he said at last.

“West, I heard,” said his mother, dabbing the remaining moisture from her eyes. “Far away. At the end of the road, maybe. There’s mountains down there somewhere, who knows how far. Folk say so, anyway.”

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Life went on. The year advanced; the weather warmed towards summer. Ma wasn’t the only mender on the island, but she always had plenty to do. They made a living.

Marring was easy to see, of course, in the broken things that were brought to them. But everything was marred in its basic nature – people too. That Tarin could sense this was, to begin with, neither here nor there for him, so far as his relations with his people went. It wasn’t anything remarkable for him, so he never thought to mention this ability. By the time he realized he alone among them possessed this strange talent, he was old enough to appreciate the virtue of discretion.

Nevertheless, the matter came to light in the end, and became a large cause of Tarin’s estrangement from his community. It happened in this wise.

It was a broken vase. A pretty piece, delicately turned, with a handsome pattern of blue glaze. Chief Tundo’s sister Tarissa brought it to Ma and Tarin, to see if there was anything they could do.

Ma handled the pieces, tried to fit them together. There were quite a few, some rather small.

“I don’t know what came over me,” sobbed Tarissa. “I knocked it off, unthinking. I’m not normally clumsy.”

“Shame,” muttered Ma.

“Is there anything you can do? It’s such a pretty vase. It’s been in the family for generations.”

Ma looked doubtful. “I could glue it, I suppose,” she said. “But there’s no way I can think of to hide the cracks.” She put the pieces down, which Tarin then picked up to examine.

“Oh, oh,” cried Tarissa.

Tarin felt for the woman. He could sense as well as see the break in the vase, on top of the general sad debased nature which everything in the world seemed to share. But the crack stood clear in his mind. It would be so easy simply to turn matters – so – and return the vase to its uncracked former state. The way was obvious to him, open to his sight.

Without stopping to think, almost without willing it, he manipulated the shapes in his mind. It was so easy! Under his hands, the vase became whole. All the small pieces lying on the bench vanished like mist as they reincorporated into the unity. Tarin, profoundly shocked at what he had just done, replaced the vase on the bench.

The two women stood there, staring at the vase, nonplussed.

“I don’t understand,” said Tarissa plaintively.

Realization began to grow in Ma. She shifted her wide-eyed gaze from the vase to her great lump of a son. “What have you done?” she demanded.

“I, I, I,” he stuttered, “I don’t know. It was broken, so I just fixed it.”

Tarissa’s mouth was open at this stage as her gaze switched between Ma, the vase, and Tarin.

Eventually most of the community crowded in, all heads craning to get a glimpse of the vase, and Tarin. Many more words were spoken, most of them unbelieving: people said it was a trick. But whatever had happened, it wasn’t canny. The Look came into people’s eyes then, as they looked at Tarin. It had stayed there ever since.

That was some time ago. Tarin, for his part, had never dared repeat the feat. This was not particularly because he feared to excite further notoriety in his community – indeed, he felt he had probably gone as far down that dismal path as there was path to go – but because of a profound sense that he had somehow broken some important rule. The High Ones of the universe, according to the lore he had been taught, had between them made all of Creation. To them belonged the power of knitting new things out of old; of renewal, of seamless repair. That such a lowly being as Tarin should also possess this power struck him as nothing less than impious.

So the broken items that continued to be brought to the shop were fixed by Ma, with Tarin helping, as best they could with glue, binding, or solder. Tarin kept himself strictly in check. Nobody said anything; but everybody knew.

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The leaves yellowed and began to fall, the days grew shorter, and Ma had a pain. The first Tarin knew of it was when she bent to pick up a dropped tool, cried out, and caught at her side.

Tarin came and held her steady. “What is it, Ma?”

She winced. “Stitch, maybe.”

But the pain didn’t go away. Mostly Ma ignored it, but times came now and then when she couldn’t ignore it.

Some of the people studied herb-lore, and body-lore. They knew of cures for beasts and men which were passed down to new students. The doyenne of these leeches, an old, old woman named Kora, came now to examine Ma. Tarin had to wait outside. When Kora hobbled out at last on her stick, she was noncommittal. “It’s possible she has a blockage,” she said to Tarin. “I will prepare something for her to take. I’ll send it tomorrow, with instructions for times and amounts.”

Tarin thanked her, then went in to Ma.

“Blockage be blowed,” muttered Ma. “She had an idea. But she wasn’t about to tell me what it was.”

Tarin was silent. Although he had to fight against a strong unwillingness to invade Ma’s privacy, he was presently conducting his own examination, in the way that he knew. The things he could sense in Ma’s body were not good. A black growth was there, in many branches, and it was slowly consuming ever more of her.

Tarin left Ma to rest with the excuse to make a cup of tea. He closed the door of her chamber, then leaned back against it, feeling awful. But what would be the good of telling her?

All at once, as he stood there, Tarin’s mood changed from dismal to almost a kind of horror as another thought sprang,

unbidden and unwanted, into his mind. Such a sickness was surely no more than another thing to mend. . . He tried to thrust the impious thought from him. But should he leave Ma to die in pain? Do nothing? He writhed in agony. But how could he dare to repair a person? That of all things should be strictly off limits. To even attempt it would surely count as an unpardonable outrage against the prerogatives of the gods. Once one began with such, where would one stop?

Ma got up on the morrow. The promised draught arrived, and it proved to ease the pain at least. But as the autumn progressed into winter, Ma's condition grew gradually worse. She spent more and more time in bed.

Tarin was glad of the extra work this threw on him, because it distracted his thoughts. He had trouble sleeping; he would toss and turn, wrestling with the horrible conundrum.

In between times, he sat with Ma, or bathed her wasted face, or held her so she could drink. She had no appetite any more, but for a while at least she would accept soup. Sometimes they would talk; but it became an effort for Ma, so the silences grew longer.

A day came when Tarin could stand his internal conflict no longer. "Ma," he began hesitantly, in a voice that shook. "Your sickness. . . I could maybe. . ."

She gripped his hand. "Don't," she whispered. She knew him; none better.

"But I could," he said helplessly; "you know I could."

She shook her head, her skin sallow, stretched in folds across the bones beneath. "It's my time," she whispered. "You mustn't. You must not. You won't. Don't rob me of it."

Tarin put his head in his hands and sobbed.

Ma reached to him with an effort and grasped his hand again. "Lad," she said in her weak voice, "everything has its time. It's the way of things. And it's right. The way might be ugly, but the passing itself is not. It's not one of your marrings."

As she said it, he knew that it was true.

Ma lasted about a week more. She roused a little on the last day, turned her sunken eyes towards her son, sitting in his grief and great size beside her. Even this movement now seemed to cost her pain. Her lips moved, but he could not hear what she was saying. Tarin bent his head right down, smelled the approaching death.

"Sorry," she whispered. "So sorry. Sorry for everything."

Tarin took Ma gently in his embrace, trying to assure her through his arms that she of all people had nothing to be sorry for.

Ma never spoke again. She died some hours before dawn.

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The weeping grey skies of winter matched the condition of Tarin's heart. He had nothing to distract him: it was as yet too early for garden work, and nobody brought anything to mend. Most of the community had visited at the time of the burying, but since that moment of formal condolence, few people came at all. Only Lissie, every couple of weeks, bearing a pot of soup, would pop in for a cheerful word.

Tarin stayed perforce in the damp shack they had called home. It had seemed homelike enough with Ma there, but now it just seemed to Tarin like a shabby, dark pile of patches and junk that flapped in the wind and smelled of mildew. The little house that he and she had called home had sunk to the status of a mere shelter, a hovel that served barely to keep off the worst of the weather. He would lie awake at night, in the dark to save candles, huddled under a smelly pile of blankets against the cold fingers of air that made their way through cracks in the rattling walls. He couldn't face the sleeping hole he had shared with Ma, not only because of the memories, but because, although out of the draughts, it was cold as a stone in that hole at this time of year. As cold and bleak as his heart. During the short days, when he could no longer stand to mope between the narrow walls of the hut, Tarin would go out to wander along the lonely shores, spindrift flinging cold into his face, with a sack over his bowed shoulders to keep out the worst of the drizzle.

Of course, winter was hard for everyone. But all the others seemed to have someone. Even Lissie had uncles and cousins to sojourn and laugh with. At the feast of Sunwending, the warm glow from windows all over the settlement stabbed Tarin to the heart. He stood shivering in the grey dusk, longing to be part of one of the companies gathered in celebration around a friendly fire.

Matters improved with the spring. There was work in the garden; although still nobody brought anything to mend. Tarin thought they had stayed away, maybe, out of sensitivity at Ma's death. They had wanted to leave him alone. But that time should be past now.

He pulled himself together and cleaned the house. He had the rest of his life ahead of him, he couldn't spend it moping.

A thought had been germinating in Tarin for some time. It had begun a year or two ago as a daydream, but in those times there had seemed little progression in life. The future had been a hazy thing, something comfortable to dream about maybe; it had not any clear relation to the present. It had been easy to believe, in those times now gone past, that each day would turn out as the one preceding. Breakfast; work; evening meal, followed by a little talk by the fire. But Ma was gone, there was nobody to talk with any more, and no work. The present was empty, and the realization had come to Tarin that, if he was ever again to enjoy something similar, he would have to construct it for himself. Into those musings, his former daydream had risen up and taken on a solidity that he found daunting. Dreaming was all very fine; but to bring that dream to life was a wholly different proposition.

Digging, hauling, even fiddly sort of work like mending, these he could do. They weren't difficult, there was no mental hill to climb. You just set to, whistling, and did the necessary. But the task that now stood starkly before him was of a different nature. He simply had no idea where he could gather the courage to attempt it. But attempt it he must; for he knew now that his hopes of happiness stood squarely on its other side.

That is why, after days of sweating and cavilling, he at last, in a burst of desperation, mentally whipped himself into going out. Clutching a bunch of flowers in a hand that shook like one in the grip of marsh fever, he made his way to Lissie's barn and knocked on the door frame.

"Why, Tarin!" she smiled broad welcome at him, and stood up from her work. "I haven't seen you for days!" Then her eyes caught sight of the flowers.

The large young man shrugged jerkily. "Busy... you know..." He could hardly get any words out.

Lissie, perceiving his difficulty, quietly suggested a cup of tea. They made their way into her tiny but cheery kitchen, and while Tarin sat hunched in the small space, sweating dark patches into his best tunic, Lissie prepared the brew.

Once they were both sitting over a steaming cup, she asked him with kindness, "Was there a special reason you came today, Tarin?"

Heart thumping, with many stumblings and hesitations, somehow he found the words to explain his quest. She had known it, however, from the first instant sight of the clutched blossoms. "So I just thought, Lissie," he concluded lamely, "seeing as how we, you know, get on so well together, and we haven't either of us got another, and a man has to think of his future, well. I just thought. I just thought as perhaps you might see your way to, you know. Marrying me, like." He gulped.

Lissie, in the meantime, having known perfectly well which way the wind lay, had had time to think of words to say in reply.

She thought of reaching over and taking his hand; but it would not do. "Tarin," she said to him, as gently as she could, "you and me's been friends since time out of mind. And I hope we'll keep on that way. And I'm touched and honoured that you should want me. But Tarin, although it's true there's nobody else for me right now, I've just... I've just never thought of you in that way."

There had been no way to soften it. Tarin, looking up from his despair, said in a low voice, "You don't think, maybe, in time, you could, you know, learn to see me different?"

Now she did take his hand, and her eyes showed her sympathy. "Tarin, my old and dear friend: no. It just isn't that way between us. Not for me."

Somehow he got himself out of the tiny room without knocking anything over, and went home. The flowers that he

dropped in a scatter on the path drooped slowly into wilt. During the passage of the day unheeding feet flattened some, and kicked others away.

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The sun rose high, the days grew warm, but no work came in. Tarin went to enquire of the other mender in the settlement, a man called Hollom. He found him harassed, with customers waiting, and two new apprentices busy on different jobs.

Tarin glanced around in surprise at the piled-up work. The customers avoided his eye.

“Look,” he said to Hollom. “I don’t want to make trouble. But do you think it’s quite fair that you’re taking all the work?”

The little man threw up his hands in exasperation. “T’aint none of my askin’!” he said. “I’ve got more’n I can handle. But what can I do? They brings it to me, I got to do it.”

Tarin turned to the waiting customers. It was an embarrassing situation for everyone. He cleared his throat. “Your free choice, of course, friends,” he said to them. “But I just want to say to you as how I’m ready and willing. I appreciate you might have been staying away ’cause o’ Ma, but that’s over now. I got to earn me living, and you know I can do the work. Just saying.”

The two men smiled and nodded, smiled and nodded. Of course, they told him. They’d wanted to leave him a bit of peace for a while. This job, well *this* job were promised to Hollom; but soon as they had another, they’d come to Tarin, for sure.

In the days that followed, Tarin button-holed one or two people he had known well, people who had often brought work for him and Ma. People he had thought were friends.

Nobody seemed to want to look him in the eye. Everyone had an excuse.

Eventually he took his trouble to Tundo, the Chief. Tundo heard him out with apparent sympathy, then shook his head.

“I can’t make people come to you if they don’t want to,” he said.

Tarin spread his hands helplessly. “But look,” he said. “What am I to do? I got to make my living, same as anyone else. You’re the Chief. Can’t you advise me what to do?”

The old Chief cleared his throat while considering the young giant. “What I’ll do,” he said, “what I’ll do is, see, I’ll consult with the other elders. You come back tomorrow, lad, and we’ll see if we can’t work out some advice for you. I understand you’re in a jam, understand that sure enough. Don’t worry yourself, sleep on it, we’ll work out something for you.” Raising a hand to pat the tall fellow on his shoulder, he ushered him out the door.

When he called on the morrow, they were waiting for him, four of them. Tundo plus three other old men. Tarin knew them all, of course. They bade him sit down, but his large frame sat hunched on the small chair, and even sitting like that, they had to look up into his face.

Tundo began. “Bad business, bad business,” he huffed. “We all miss your mother. Troubles come in packs, boy. It’s the common experience. Well, lad, we’ve talked over your case. There’s no easy solutions, of course. But now, here’s one thing: there’s always work to do, and I suppose you could just choose some other occupation.”

Tarin set his mouth. This wasn’t sounding like it was going to be helpful.

“But one or two of us were wondering,” went on Tundo, seeming now to pick his words with care, “whether you might not be happier, like, in another situation entirely. What we mean is, if you found some of your own people to live with. Not but what you’re perfectly welcome here, of course,” he went on hastily. “But we’re just thinking for your own good, like. We thought as how you might prefer it.” The other three men nodded in unison, like parrots.

“My *own* people?” replied Tarin hotly. “These *are* my people! I was born, grew up here! How would I not think of you as my people?”

Tundo made calming motions. “We understand how you might feel that way, of course,” he said.

In the end, Tarin had stormed out, slamming the door behind him. He had tried further to reason with them, but their attitudes were immovable. He burst into the shack he and Ma had called home and flung himself on the narrow bed, fuming.

As the anger seeped out of him, a great coldness grew to take its place. Everything was sinking into the same nasty pit – the looks, the avoidance, Lissie’s refusal. The stark fact stood before his eye, impossible to ignore: his own people didn’t want him. They thought of him as a Bigger. They had tolerated his presence so long as Ma was alive, but now they wanted no more of him. Numerous instances in the past that he had thought no more of at the time now flocked in one by one like evil birds to perch on the hard knot in his heart.

Over the next few days, from the place of coldness inside him, he tried to work out what he could do. Should he stay here, among folk who as good as shunned him, and support himself by farming? Considering the cold mechanics of the thing, he supposed he could in that wise keep body and soul well enough together. But it would not answer. He knew that clearly: it would not answer. Nobody could live that way.

‘Live with your own people.’ Tundo had said. He meant Biggers. But Tarin had never even seen a Bigger. He had no idea how they lived. Why would he want to go and live among Biggers?

He fetched the silvery comb out from his things: his best possession. The purity of the piece was balm to his heart. It came to him then, out of nowhere, what he should do. The Elves: he would seek out the Elves. They were not his people either; and from the little he had heard, their ways might be stranger to him than any. But living with them, at least he could breathe untainted air, enjoy the company of clean souls. So might he soothe his losses.

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South, Ma had said. Tarin packed all he could think of useful to carry into a big pack, and set off. He first took their little boat and rowed across the narrow strait into the reed-beds. The reeds grew ever thicker as he went on, and it wasn’t easy to push the boat between them. In the end he had to leave it and splash the last few yards to the muddy shore. Someone would find the boat.

The going became easier after he had struggled up the bank. He paused under the first trees, uncertain of the way. Even this was further than he had ever been either with Ma, or on his own. So he considered for a space of time while he scraped, as best he could, the mud from his trows with a stick.

Somewhere to the south lay the road. Once on the road, he would head west. From that point on, Tarin had no fixed plan. He was resolved simply to trust to what fortune might bring him. But first he had to reach the road.

Ma had never said much, nor had he heard from anyone else, concerning the woods. He didn’t even know if there were any paths. He thought, from what he remembered of the talk, that the dwarvish road lay no great distance away; but he had no certainty of anything.

Well, all he could do was set off in the right direction and trust to luck.

All that day Tarin laboured through the dark woods. The going was relatively open, since little in the way of undergrowth could flourish in the deep gloom beneath the forest giants, but the ground itself was a thick mush of slowly rotting leaves and other vegetable matter that made footing insecure and passage laborious. Keeping the right direction was also difficult. In theory, all Tarin needed to do was keep the sun in his face, adjusting for its position either side of noon, but he so rarely caught even a spark of its bright disc through the leaves that steering by it turned out next to impossible. Once or twice, when he emerged into open, rocky ground, he discovered that he was pointed quite wrongly. By the time dark caught up with Tarin, he was exhausted from plodding through the mould, and was beginning to have worries about being lost. The path was supposed to be somewhere down this way. But where was it? Wouldn’t people have mentioned it if one had to spend a night on the way? Might he perhaps have crossed the path unawares? Part of his mind scoffed at this, but the niggling doubt would not be dismissed.

At least there was no wind down here in the gloom, and plenty of fuel. He made a fire readily enough and crouched, brooding, to face its welcome warmth. His back ached like fury, his legs were stiff, he had blisters, and his shoulders were raw where the straps of the pack had cut into them. But worst of all, worse than his worries about being lost geographically, was a feeling that dogged him of being lost in a more fundamental sense – of being cut off irretrievably from everything he had known.

After eating a scrap or two of his dried provisions, he curled up wearily in the sleeping fur and fell instantly asleep.

Next morning, the first exercise of yesterday's wounds was agony. Tarin, however, pushed doggedly ahead, since there was nothing else he could do. He was soon rewarded by a turn of things to the better.

Early in the day, the way began to lead upward. The ground became firmer, the trees grew less thickly, and it became easier to keep direction. The uphill climb topped out near midday at a shallow ridge, stony and clear of trees over a wide area. For the first time since he entered the forest, Tarin could gain a sense of the land around him. Ahead, the slope dropped away into what seemed like a valley, before rising again into a series of forested ridges that extended into the blue distance. The valley ahead was only lightly wooded, and very welcome to Tarin were glimpses here and there between the thickets of what surely must be a track made by men – or rather, he supposed, by Dwarves – running along its base.

Looking behind, Tarin could make out no trace of the great sea. The trees in that direction appeared to go on forever. Now he felt truly cut off from his home.

Leaving such regrets behind him, with some eagerness he trotted down the slope towards the valley floor. In quite a short time he reached the track. It was broad and rutted, suggesting the passage of great wagons. Just at present, however, there was nobody to see. The road wound back and forth, and not too much of it was visible in either direction before its windings took it behind obscuring trees. Tarin, feeling shy of meeting any strangers just now, stood listening intently for some minutes; but there was nothing to hear except bird song and the wind in the trees.

He looked westward, but no mountains were to be seen. Well, the direction at least was clear. He set off walking.

Tarin saw nobody all that day. He found that the trend of the road, albeit broadly westward, seemed also to have quite a bit of north in it, that is, trending back towards his lake. Tarin began to wonder whether he might unwittingly have chosen the long way across the woods. As the sun sank to the horizon, he began to look for a place to camp. Just as he was about to make up his mind to halt, he was surprised to encounter a grass-grown track that joined the road from the right. This also showed wagon ruts, but the way was overgrown, and had clearly not been in use for some time.

As the realization came over Tarin, he sat down in annoyance. Obviously people would need a cart track to trade in skins and bronze! But nobody had been explicit. If he had known, he could have saved himself a great deal of time and effort.

Well, it was as good a place to camp as any.

It was a further two days before he encountered any fellow travellers. He heard them before he glimpsed them, and hurried into cover behind some bushes. Before long a great wagon appeared, drawn by animals larger than he had ever seen before. Much larger than goats. These were greyish, had long faces, big ears that flicked at flies, and what seemed like a brush of dark hair along the backs of their necks. Were these the horses he had heard about? Maybe, although nobody was riding them.

But the people in the carts! They were as big as he was, but they were clearly Dwarves. Even Tarin knew that much, who had never seen one. Their figures were broad and square, and they were bearded.

The beards fascinated Tarin. Nobody he knew had a beard. These growths were superb: long and lustrous, coloured and plaited.

The Dwarves were travelling east, opposite to him, so as soon as they were out of sight, he went on.

The next wagon he heard came up behind him, and so slowly that he had at least an hour's warning of its approach. The long wait made him nervous; so at last he resolved to hide and let it go past.

There appeared to be several wagons in this coming train. As the first came slowly into view past the most recent bend in the road, Tarin noted firstly that its haul-beasts were different again – huge as the first lot, but different. These were not so high, but they looked immensely broad and strong. The beasts were pale in colour, and each carried a barbarous width of horns across its head. The animals exerted their force on the carriage through means of a great wooden yoke that lay across their broad backs, and Tarin could only wonder at the courage (as well as the strength) of the fellow who had to set that in place each morning.

As the wagon itself came into sight, Tarin gasped. He had never seen a Bigger, although he had heard about them all his

life. Obviously, from the name, they must be bigger than people. From his own greater size than his fellows, Tarin had thought himself one. But *these* – these were giants. Any one of them would tower over Tarin.

In the space of these few moments he spent cowering behind the bushes, the young man had once again to readjust his picture of the world. Always, since earliest times, he had thought of himself as sizeable. Unexceptional perhaps in other ways, he was undeniably big and strong. That was his mark. That was what made him stand out. He found it absurd to think of himself as the *smallest* in any company. But in the wider world, it seemed, he might have to get used to that.

On subsequent days he encountered further wagons, always manned by either Biggers or Dwarves. He saw no person of the modest sort and size he was used to. The rumoured mountains persisted in not appearing, and he never met any people he recognized as Elves. But since he had nothing else at all to do, no sniff of a possible alternative to this unsought-for life he had slipped into, he kept on plodding along the road to the West. Day after day after day.

At the time Tarin had first found the path, it led beside a brook, which of course he was glad of, for water carried heavy. But since the brooks hereabouts trended to the north-east, whereas the road-makers appeared to wish to head directly west and east, now and then the road took a kind of jink to the right, off away from one water until it found another. The road-makers had been cunning: the route they chose avoided heights as well as dense stretches of forest. The resulting grades were never too steep for wagons, nor was the earth too soft.

After two weeks or so of almost imperceptible climbing, the road seemed to wind its way over a shallow watershed. The streams, when they appeared again, now flowed in the direction of travel. The downward grade seemed steeper at first, but after some days of this, the valleys broadened out and the stream commenced to wind and divide. Pools and bogs became common, and insects began to trouble Tarin at night.

His people knew how to prepare brews to ward off biting insects, but Tarin had not thought to bring any such. He had not suffered greatly since leaving the lake shore, but matters now became serious. Worse than the nuisance was the threat of fever. Sure enough, he soon began to labour under one. His head ached savagely; indeed his whole body ached. His legs felt as weak as rubber. His impetuous journey, which had already been hard enough, began to approach the insupportable. Visions of his past life arose before his burning eyes – repairing things with Ma, walking on the strand, digging vegetables. He saw again Tundo's prating face, and the raised hands of his harassed rival Hollom. But most often, it was Lissie who attended the feverish youth. Lissie smiling, Lissie laughing. Lissie holding his hand. Lissie's kindness and industry, the changes of feeling in Lissie's eyes; with the passing of one grim and effort-full day after another, these became more real to Tarin than the soggy plain through which he stumbled.

On one of Tarin's brief returns to awareness, he found himself on hands and knees in mud. A fear rose in him that he had lost the road. He had to keep to the road – he had forgotten why, he just knew it was important. Searching with eyes which ached in their sockets, he succeeded, with a gush of nameless relief, in locating through his internal mists the vague paler strip of gravel that he had indeed left some yards behind him. The fear, once arisen, now never left him. If he lost the road, he was lost himself.

A rumbling noise rose into his vague consciousness. Voices. Tarin became dimly aware that a caravan must be passing. He was lying on his face; too weak to move. It was too much trouble to do anything, so he just lay there. The thankful thought formed in his mind that at least he hadn't lost the road. Consciousness faded.

The next time he opened his crusted and aching eyes, Tarin couldn't understand what he was seeing. An arch of some pale cloth swayed over him – swayed, indeed, with the same jerky motions he felt in whatever it was that supported him. He lay there for some time, looking up at the cloth, wondering where he was. He could smell something tart, close to his nose; it came to him after a while that his face was covered in salve.

Eventually he mustered up the effort to move his head. His neck was weak, and the effort raised a painful throbbing in his skull, but he was able to make out enough to work out that he must be lying in some sort of wagon, with an arched covering of cloth. He could see the sky, and sunlight, through a gap at his feet.

Craning his eyes upward, in the other direction, he could make out that something blocked the opening at that end. A person. After several vain attempts, Tarin succeeded in emitting a croak. The body twisted to him and bent its head over him. Tarin took in a normal-sized body and head; dark hair, bright eyes, no beard. Glory be, it was surely a Person! One of his own folk!

Before Tarin had time to properly react to this, the person turned back towards the outside and called something in a high voice. Deeper voices answered and the wagon halted. The cloth at the front was pushed aside and a second form joined the first in the gap. But this form was very large: a Bigger. It was a giant of a man – at least from Tarin's



perspective – with a shock of hair and a bristly chestnut beard.

Tarin, looking at the two of them together, realized with dismay that his earlier conclusion had been wrong. The smaller of the two was not one of his own people, as he had thought: he must be the large Bigger's son.

There turned out to be four of them that belonged to the wagon. They were a family: father and mother, the son, plus an infant daughter, newly able to toddle. Tarin found he could understand them well enough after a while. They spoke as he did, only with a barbarous accent. When he mentioned this however, the huge man laughed, and replied that everyone he knew spoke much the same way; it was Tarin who sounded odd.

The father was Sirtus, the wife Valena, and the children were named Sund and Pippi. Sirtus told him they were traders in cheese and wine, which cargo followed in a second wagon, hitched behind. They passed that way once or twice a year to trade with the Dwarves who lived under the mountains. Tarin pricked up his ears at that, but set his questions aside for later. The Biggers in their avid turn had plenty of questions for him. Although they had heard in a vague way of small people – halflings, they named them – they had never before encountered any. They had not heard of any settlement on Tarin's island.

Tarin never knew what had induced the family to pick him up from the roadside. Such kindness was rare in this hard world. He thought the notion was the man's, and that Valena didn't entirely approve. But they were good people, he could sense it. The reassurance greatly soothed his instinctive fear of these big folk. In any case, for whatever reason, they had picked him up, saved him against the midges, and dosed him to break the fever. They had, in fact, saved his life. Tarin was deeply sensible of it, and deeply grateful.

From quite early on, Tarin had understood, without particularly thinking about it, that the family wagons were travelling as part one of the long caravans he had seen from time to time. The actual sight of the long line of wagons, as soon as he was well enough to sit up and take it in, was impressive. Sirtus told him the grouping was to protect against raiders, who were sporadically a problem everywhere it seemed, but particularly a nuisance in the area they were about to traverse.

Of all of these new friends, Tarin most enjoyed the company of the boy Sund. Possibly this was because they were both of a size. The boy's notions were unformed, as befitted his age, but he knew nonetheless many things unknown to Tarin. For his part, Sund found their pint-sized guest fascinating, and willingly listened to such stories as he could tell.

During the day the adults walked beside the wagon. Young Sund would walk until he was tired, after which he rode for a spell. Tarin, so soon as he felt himself strong enough, left the support of the wagon to join the large couple on the road beside. He found the pace manageable, just a little on the brisk side for his shorter legs.

The whole caravan camped in the evenings. These Biggers were given at that time to visiting from one fire to another. They all more or less seemed to know one another. Tarin shrank from these evenings stops, because he was such an object of interest to these large folk. He had no desire to be around them, and felt discomfort as the centre of attention. He was always glad when the meal had been prepared, eaten and finally digested and he could roll himself in his sleeping fur and sleep.

Tarin's hazy notions about geography underwent a large-scale expansion through his talks with Sirtus and others of his trail companions. He learned of great battles in far places, and of wide plains; of heat and of snows. He heard settlements described, and even cities.

The Biggers assured him that the mountains he had taken for his sketchy goal did, in fact, exist, and that there were indeed Elves to be found in their vicinity. Some of the people he spoke to had met Elves, and their descriptions tallied well with those of Ma's that time. Tarin became even more firmly fixed in the idea that these were people he must at least seek to know. But it seemed he would have to wait: he could not expect the mountains to loom into sight for some weeks. And first they would have to cross a river.

Mountains of another sort had already come under discussion. By the time Tarin had recovered enough to leave the wagon and walk with his rescuers, the train, to the gratitude of all, had left the marshes behind. The country they now passed through was lightly wooded, and pleasant enough. But the first time Tarin descended from the wagon, stretched himself, and looked around, he noticed to his surprise what seemed like a ragged range of shadow spread in the great distance off to the left of the way, just at the hazy edge of sight. The sight of it made Tarin uneasy, somehow; nor were his fears soothed by the answer he received to his query.

"A bad place," Sirtus told him, frowning and shaking his head. "Mountain Butchers live there."

“What are Mountain Butchers?” Tarin wanted to know.

“Name already says most of it,” replied the other. “We only got rumour to go on. Nobody who goes down that way ever comes back.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The second of the family’s wagons gave constant trouble, despite that it was newly built. Sirtus was day and night cursing over it, or more particularly, over the man who had sold it to him. It appeared that he had been cheated, that the materials were inferior. This was an occurrence as unusual in the trade as it was serious. Several times the big man had needed to stay up late, repairing some part by the poor light of a fire. Tarin’s cautious disclosure after a while that he could help with such repairs suffused the worried Bigger with relief. His smile, his whole attitude showed it. Tarin for his part felt pleased that he could in this manner, in some degree, repay the kindness of his hosts.

One day the thing worst feared happened: the wagon broke down too badly to be quickly patched.

Many Biggers joined Sirtus and his wife in their sad inspection of the wagon. The rear axle had broken completely; a wheel was off, the body canted to the ground.

Sirtus scratched his shaggy head. “We’re out of spares,” he said. “Have to make ’un from new.”

The other Biggers glanced at each other meaningly. Everyone knew this would take days.

“You’ll have to catch us up,” said the train leader. “Sorry, lad.”

Sirtus made no reply. Everyone knew the ground rules. The others dispersed to their wagons. Teams were whipped up, words shouted, wagons lurched into movement. One by one, slowly, the train of wagons edged sideways over softer ground past the broken one, the expressions of their drivers a varied mixture of sympathy and vexation. The caravan took a long time to disappear; but for Sirtus and his people, mentally it was already gone as soon as the last wagon had lurched past. They dismissed it from their minds straight away.

It was quiet and lonely, standing there in the wide, empty landscape. The boy Sund looked lost; the little girl began to cry. Valena picked her up and soothed her. Sirtus set the mules loose, one by one. The freed animals walked to one side of the track and commenced with evident satisfaction to tear up lush mouthfuls of grass.

The two men went to contemplate the broken wagon.

“What do we do now?” Tarin asked Sirtus.

“Make a new axle,” the big man replied. “Not normally more than a cursed nuisance. Got a good piece o’ wood for it, an’ steel for fixings. It’s just particular bad luck right now.”

“Because of the brigands?”

“Aye,” Sirtus said heavily. “It’s bad round here. We had a breakdown like this before, weeks back. Before we picked you up, it was. Damn wagon – but we fixed her that time, and caught up, no trouble. It’s never good to leave the caravan, but back there it wasn’t so bad as hereabouts. Not nearly so bad.” He couldn’t conceal the worry he felt.

This didn’t sound good. “How long do you think it will be, before we can rejoin?”

Sirtus considered. “Take me all of two days to make and mount a new axle,” he said. “After that: ’nother two days to catch up? Hard to say, exactly. My beasts can go a lot faster than they oxen they mostly got. But on the other hand, the others will be whipping up their cattle, wanting to get along. We all know the score in these parts.”

The whole time since the breakdown, Tarin had been trying to push away the thought that had risen naturally into his mind. He shrank, as always when such matters arose, from the thought of such a flagrant violation of the normal rules of life and matter as he knew lay within his power. He had dared it just that once in his life, with the pretty blue pot; he had resolved never to do so again.

But lives were at stake here – not only his own, but those of his rescuers and hosts. He glanced at the disconsolate boy, and at the teary little girl sucking her thumb on the hip of her equally scared-looking mother. That decided him.

“Look,” he said in a low voice to Sirtus, drawing the big man to one side. “There’s a thing I can do... ’twould maybe let us get on faster. We could rejoin today – in an hour.” He glanced up the road at the retreating caravan. “I mean, there they are still.”

The Bigger’s eyebrows raised about as high as he could make them go. “Is that so?” he said. “And just how do you propose to work that kind of miracle?”

Tarin hated the situation. “It’s sort of a power I have,” he said reluctantly. “I don’t like to talk of it. It’s not canny. But trust me: I can do what I say. I could fix your wagon in the blink of an eye.”

Sirtus looked hard at the smaller man. “It would be a powerful relief to we,” he said, his doubts sounding in his voice. “I’ve no need to tell you that, I’m sure. But it’s beyond me to guess what you be hinting of. Sounds like wizard’s work to me.”

Tarin had heard of wizards. He shook his head. “It’s not like that,” he said. “It’s just a talent. I can *see* things that are wrong, or broken. I do it all the time. And with seeing them, I mean you naturally see, not just the fact of it, like, but *how* they’re broken. And with seeing how like that, well, you can just un-break them again. If you know what I mean.”

It was a new situation for Sirtus. His uncertainty was plain to read. He hesitated; but the needs of his family were stark. “Well, all right,” he said. “I’m game. What do you need?”

“Nothing,” said Tarin. “Just let me concentrate.”

He squatted at the side of the wagon and closed his eyes. The defects of the pieces stood out clearly to his mind – from the damage and the twist in the very nature of the materials, through the poor growth of the wood, all the way up to the surface break. The steel fittings, he sensed, were in similar parlous state. Those that had not yet broken would do so soon.

How radically should he intervene? He knew he could rectify every part of the damage in these pieces of the world. Everything, down to the wrong that had been done to their substance in its very beginnings, by what malign agents he could not imagine. But that would not do. It was not for such as he to meddle with the designs of the gods. Who was he to judge if they were ill or good?

Sufficient to repair the superficial break. That would be hubris enough. So Tarin reached out with his inner sense and guided the pieces back along the wrong paths that lay so plain before his inner vision. It never occurred to him, knowing he had done this only once before, to doubt that he could do it again; so light a matter it was for him.

He opened his eyes, and stood up. The wagon stood whole before him.

There followed the wearisome round of exclamations and amazement he had expected. A wonder had dawned in the eyes of the boy Sund; Tarin could not tell whether his companionship with the boy had gained or lost by the change.

Tarin begged them not to tell the others. Thus, when they caught up with the rest of the caravan at the close of day, Sirtus gave out to the astonished company that he had miscounted his spares, and had found sufficient after all. Some of the others looked unbelievably over his wagon, reckoning on their fingers the time needed to replace an axle; but the thing was there, innocent and whole. They had no option but to believe their companion’s story, allowing Tarin to relax secretly in a welcome continuation of his relative anonymity.

He lay awake that night, however, thinking the whole thing over. Here it was: he had presumed to do the thing again. Had he done right? He concluded, albeit tentatively, that he had. It wasn’t the same case as with Ma. Torture and death at the hands of evil men could surely not be counted a natural passing.

But should he indeed have gone further, and cleaned the original marring from the materials? There had been no call for it, it was true. The wagon would fulfil its function well enough now, without the need for more radical repair. But were his instinctive objections really so valid? If Elves could clean the evil from the comb he had found, why should not he do likewise?

Tarin fetched the shining piece from his pack and contemplated the loveliness of its inner nature, at the same time as he admired the brilliant way the true-silver threw back the light of the fire. The comb felt right to him; his heart insisted on it. He fell asleep with it clutched in his hand, and dreamed of Lissie.

The country grew steadily more barren, with no open water and poor grazing. Wagoners broke out stored feed for the animals and tapped water barrels for all. The road led across the grain of the lands, rising and sinking over a series of low crests. The traders now chose their places of evening halt with more care. A hollow was preferred, as offering more shelter from prying eyes. The campers spoke in low voices, made their fires all together, and forbore to linger after the meal was consumed.

Sirtus told Tarin of a road that would shortly cross their own. It was a bad road, he said. No trader would venture on it; only Mountain Butchers used it. But once they were past it, the threat would diminish, and the lands would begin to grow kinder. It wouldn't be too many days after that, he said, that they would begin the descent towards the great river.

Tarin thought Sirtus had something on his mind. True, he himself had given the trader enough to be thoughtful about, back when he fixed the wagon; but Tarin wasn't sure that explained the pensive looks he caught now and then on the big man's bristly face.

The next day, Sirtus finally brought the matter to light. He sidled up to Tarin on the march, nudged him, and indicated with head and eyebrows to climb up on the wagon with him. Once the two were concealed beneath the wagon cover, Sirtus cleared his throat once or twice before opening his mind to his companion.

"Amazing thing, that," he began, indicating with a jerk of his head back down the trail. "That thing you did."

Tarin shrugged, wary for what might come next.

"Something I wanted to show you," continued the big man. He fished inside his jerkin and brought out a small leather bag. Out of this he carefully extracted some small object. He reached it over to Tarin, who, after he saw what it was, had to catch his breath.

What Sirtus was holding out to him was a most glorious diamond. It wasn't very large; about like a dried lentil in both size and shape. But even under the shade of the wagon cover, the stone threw back the subdued available light in fiery coruscation.

"A family heirloom," the big man muttered, but his furtive looks undermined the words.

Tarin didn't need Sirtus to tell him in addition what was already obvious to him. "It's flawed," he said.

The stone felt to him like a beautiful woman whose nobility and dignity were held, helpless, bowed and warped beneath an ugly chain.

"Yes," said Sirtus.

The unspoken request hung between them.

The stone was so nearly perfect, that was the thing. Even its marring sat lightly upon it. Right there in Tarin's internal eye he could see what it might have been – might yet become, if he only made it so.

He owed a lot to Sirtus. He was minded for that reason alone to repair the flaw at the trader's request. But the stone itself mutely begged him to go further: to restore it to its birthright.

The scales trembled, Tarin's fear and doubt weighting one side, the nascent glory of the stone on the other. But the promise of beauty tipped the balance. Tarin reached out with his hand, and briefly covered the stone from sight. When he opened it again, purity shone into the intent faces of the two men.

Sirtus received back the shining glory in hands that trembled.

"It's holy," he breathed. "Oh, my friend and comrade..."

Tarin also was feeling shaky in the aftermath. Such bold flights into the preserves of the gods were far, far too easy for him. But that was not the end of such matters for that day...

He watched as Sirtus went to stow the beauty in his pouch – before hesitating. Then, instead of hiding the diamond

away, the trader shook the pouch again into his cupped palm. Three more stones slid out: one red as a drop of blood; the second green as new growth in spring; the last, of a blue to outmatch the summer sky. These stones were larger.

Tarin took them with great reluctance. Under his touch, their complete natures lay displayed before his inner gaze. Noble stones, all. He needed no jeweller to tell him that! The stones knew their own worth.

“More heirlooms?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Sirtus looked a little embarrassed. “All right, look, I’ll be honest with you,” he said, keeping his voice low. “I can’t keep up the pretence any more – not with you. Truth is, I trade chiefly in such as these. My Da bred me to the trade, taught me the craft. It’s in the family, you might say. The wine and that, well it’s mostly just a cover, like.” He hesitated, indicated the stones. “As for these here: I don’t like to confess it, but there’s a bit of sharp dealing goes on at times. I got these cheap, see, ’cause they all got flaws. Now there’s ways to treat such, pass ’em off as new... had that in mind for these, in the usual way... but they’re such fine stones, this set I got here, that somehow I haven’t had the heart to meddle. I just thought it were dead shame, that they were so near perfect, but could never be so. But now, that what you done with the diamond... well, it’s like me dreams come true,” he finished simply.

Tarin’s eyes were hard. “Is that what you had in mind? Sell them at a high price? If I fix them?”

Sirtus blushed. “Look, I’m not always exactly what you’d call an honest man,” he said. “Do me best, like, with people in general, but I’ve got my living to make. Dealing in these things is simply dealing in greed. I’ve learned that. It’s not exactly the life I would have chosen if I was starting over.

“That said and all, I love the stones. It’s not their fault people seek them out with bad intentions. Yes, I buy as cheap as I can, and sell as dear. That’s trade. But I haven’t fixed these up to sell in two trips now. If you can raise ’em up, my friend, same as what you did for that brilliant, why, I don’t believe I’d ever part with ’em. But I’ll pay you what you like in lesser gems if you will do this thing for me. If you’ll do it for the stones.”

Tarin looked straight into the man’s face with a clear eye. “Sirtus, I owe you and Valena my life,” he said. “And I will admit that this, what you are asking, is an easy thing for me. Too easy, maybe. But will you believe me if I tell you that your diamond there is only the third thing I have repaired in this way? In my whole life?”

“Really?” Sirtus protested, astonished. “Really so? But why? If I had your power, there’s no end o’ things I’d fix!”

Tarin had travelled this road long since in his own thoughts. “You’d fix things, would you?”

“Aye! No end o’ things.”

“And where would you stop?” Tarin pressed. “Would you fix all the sick you could reach? Mend all the greedy, and all the other bad natures? Where would you stop, Sirtus? What would you leave for the gods to do? And could you fix everything in the world that needed fixing? Even if you could, supposing you could fix everything and everyone, do you think you would have done right? After you had made yourself your gleaming world, in which nobody died, and no ill was done? Is this the world you desire? It would never bore nor cloy you?”

The other man sat silent.

“I do not know why I have this gift,” said Tarin. “It offers a path to seeming godly glory; a path I shrink to tread. I have neither the right nor the wisdom to dare to venture more than the smallest distance on this way. The very smallest. And I quail even over that. I fixed your wagon because you saved my life, and because not to do so would have been to risk yours, and the lives of your family. I cleaned and set to rights this diamond, because the stone itself cried out to me for mercy. But Sirtus, I let my own mother die from an ugly illness rather than tread this path on her behalf. She knew, and would have it so. But think what that meant to me, what scar it carved upon my heart.

“So I say this to you: I agree to clean these three gems. You are right: they do deserve it of themselves. But understand me clearly: not one grain of my power will I expend to eke out your gain.”

The big man swallowed, nodded. “Well, that’s clear enough. Fair enough, too.”

After it was done, Tarin said to him, “I pray you never speak of this again. As I in my turn will keep your secret.”

\* \* \* \* \*

They were less than a day from the ominous crossing when one of the mules went lame. Sirtus pulled to the side so he could look at it.

“Lost a shoe,” he said with a curse, lifting the hoof to show Valena and Tarin. The three of them contemplated it in grim silence.

Sirtus looked at Tarin. “I don’t suppose you could, sort of...,” he began hesitantly.

Tarin spread his hands. “A lost shoe is nothing broken. I can’t even sense anything wrong. I suppose mules are not born with shoes.” Nobody said anything. “Couldn’t you just go on without? At least until after the crossing?”

“It’s a while yet ’til we get clear of this bad country,” said Sirtus. “I don’t think he’d hold that long. And a lame mule’d slow us up, choose how you look at it. No, best to do the shoeing. Won’t take long.” The Bigger looked at his wife. “Best you take the kids in the other wagon, ’Lena, and get along,” he said. “I’ll catch you up at nightfall.”

Valena would have none of this. “We stick together,” she said. “No sense in as dropping off in dribs and drabs. A family is a family.”

She was obstinate. Eventually, since it was wasting time, Sirtus gave way. The remainder of the caravan had already passed ahead by this time. The forge and other items were quickly fetched out, and work got under way. It was no more than a couple of hours before the mule was hitched up again and ready to go.

They had pulled off the road in a low place at the foot of a long slope. Their luck had in fact run out the moment the mule went lame; but they only realized it as they topped the rise.

Sirtus, leading the mules, turned suddenly and pulled the traces back hard enough to make the animals dance and snort. He quieted them with a harsh word. Tarin, standing a head lower, could not yet see what the big man had glimpsed over the crest.

“What is it?” Valena called from the wagon behind.

“Horsemen,” said Sirtus tersely. “Four of ’em.” He was attempting with difficulty to jockey the mules backward down the slope.

“Should I fetch the bows?” Tarin asked him in a low voice.

“No. We couldn’t kill all four. Let’s hope they didn’t see us.”

In a short time the sound of hoofbeats showed his hope vain. The riders emerged in dust over the rise ahead and spread out, two on each side of the wagons. They slowed their horses to a walk while they took in the situation. One of them approached the two men then, who were standing tense still at the head of the mules.

The horseman was stocky, shock-haired, unshaven. He wore a leather jerkin and kilt, with dirty mail to protect chest and stomach. A thick black bow was hooked to his saddle, and he wore a short sword at his waist.

Tarin was horrified at the state of the man’s soul. He had never encountered anything like it. It was clear to him that the man’s beginnings had already left him both weak and cruel; but something terrible had been done to him since that time. To Tarin it seemed as if some entity possessing immense power had sealed the soul into a red-hot cage. Those flabby parts of the man’s humanity which had not been seared away were constrained within bonds of steel. There was no way to fix him – no road back. There wouldn’t be enough left to make a man.

The leather-clad rider jockeyed his horse close. A whiff of sourness wafting over them suggested he had not bathed in some time. Savage dark eyes looked them over.

“Whip them mules up and get on,” the man said.

They did as he said, since there was nothing else to do. Mingled with their hollow fear was still the faint hope that they could get out of this with only material loss, that the brigands would let them continue when they reached the crossing.

Tarin and Sirtus went back and sat on the wagon with Valena and the frightened children.

“We’ll get out of this,” Sirtus muttered to Valena, who clung to him. “I’ll buy ’em off. Not to worry, love. Keep your chin up.”

They reached the crossing as the sun began to lower into their eyes. No caravan was to be seen. The same rider as before approached the lead wagon. “Just you turn off to the south there, mister,” he said.

“Well, you see, mate,” replied Sirtus carefully, “actually we’re headed west.”

The man drew his sword. The shining blade threw back the lowering sun as the man laid it casually across his knees.

“I won’t tell you again,” he said.

Sirtus swallowed, but still made no move to comply. “Listen. Maybe we could come to some sort of... arrangement?” He said. He held out his hand towards the man, opened it to reveal a glittering jewel.

The brigand came close, reached out across Valena, who shrank away. He took the stone, held it high, turned it.

“Very pretty,” he said. “How many of those you got?”

“One or two,” replied Sirtus carefully. “Hidden here and there. Hard to find, like.”

But Tarin already knew the man was only toying with them. Whoever had been the awful encager who set his internal brand so starkly on the raider, he had not left him enough volition to make that kind of bargain. The expected back and forth played on for a few more moments, Sirtus being forced further and further towards a position of abject helplessness, until the raider laughed, and forbore.

“Good to know you’ve got a few baubles by you,” he said. “They’ll keep. Hidden won’t bother us none. Now you just buck up them mules, mister, and turn south. I ain’t got any more time for play.”

With reluctance, all hearts feeling an aching hollowness, they left the safe trail and turned towards the unknown and feared south.

“I’m sorry, Sirtus,” muttered Tarin. “I’ve been bad luck for you.”

“Not you,” murmured Sirtus low, out of the side of his mouth. “Don’t think it. Mule would have cast its shoe, whatever.”

After some while on the despondent journey, a thought occurred to Tarin. He rummaged in his pack until he found the comb, his piece of perfection. He furtively shoved the wrapped piece deep in his jerkin. These pirates would probably find it anyway; but he hated to think of it in their corrupt and grubby paws. This was the best he could do.

Nothing happened to them for some hours. They trundled despondently to the south, the four riders trotting in easy formation behind. But time spent in fear of certain future loss and pain is sometimes almost harder to bear than the experience itself when it finally arrives.

The setting sun tinted red the smoke of fires on the trail ahead. The party reached the source in the blue of dusk: an encampment. Several wagons were parked in line, and oxen were foraging. But this was no caravan of peaceful traders.

Something strange occurred as they were chivvied into line at the end of the row. As they approached the other wagons, all in Sirtus’s party felt a kind of opening inside. The closer they came, the more aware they grew of other minds. Many of these minds languished in various intensities of despair; some few – the guards, Tarin supposed, several of whose dim forms could be glimpsed moving among the fires – expressed a variety of bestial lusts. The pressure, the awareness, the mass of dull pain on the one side, the red bloom of cruelty on the other, was something none of them had ever experienced. Both the children began to wail.

A form approached, black against the firelight. Tarin jerked in shock, because this man was different to all the other raiders. No-one had burnt him inside; Tarin could detect no cage. Indeed, Tarin felt, this was almost a good man. The light, as soon as it caught the man’s face, confirmed this picture. His features were coarsely cut, but there was decency in them somewhere.

“What goods?” said the man curtly to them.

“Wine and cheese,” stammered Sirtus. “And a gem or two,” he added, since the knowledge was out. “Mate, can’t we do a deal?”

The man shook his head. “No deal. I got my orders.” But to Tarin it seemed that he took no pleasure in the work.

The man spoke further: “I got to chain you up. Men and women separate. The less you squawk about it, the easier it will go. My men will show you where.” He turned to go.

Tarin, on a rash impulse of the moment, spoke up. “How can you do this work?” he said in a low voice. “You know what it is. How can you do it?”

“Shut your mouth,” answered the man over his shoulder, without breaking stride.

Evil men came then, two of them. “You,” said one, pointing at Sirtus, “over there. Take your boys with you.” Clearly, he took Tarin for Sirtus’s son. The rough man turned to Valena, pointed to another wagon. “You go there. And snap it up, both of you!”

“No,” sobbed Valena, clinging to her husband. “Don’t make me, please.”

The raiders spent no more time in argument. One drew sword, and while he held that to Sirtus’s throat, the other grabbed Valena without ceremony and simply hauled her off the wagon to the ground. The woman wailed, the child Pippi left beside Sirtus on the wagon seat screamed and held out her arms to her lost mother.

The first man had a hand in Valena’s hair and was dragging. Sirtus, red-faced, half rising, the sword point at his throat, shouted over the squalling. “Let her up! Let her up! She’ll go, curse you, just let her up!”

The ruffian shrugged, let go of Valena’s hair. She sat up, clearing it from her tear-streaked face. Still sobbing, she clambered to her feet, looking longingly to her husband and children, but making no move towards them. The coarse man grabbed her by an arm and went to urge her to the wagon.

“Wait, wait! What about the bub, mister?” Sirtus protested.

The swordsman turned to glance at the howling and distressed Pippi. Tarin could feel the faint shreds of humanity that remained to him struggling to give voice. The man hesitated, then shook Valena by the arm he clutched.

“Fetch your brat, bitch,” he growled, shoving her. “And make it snappy!”

Once Valena and Pippi were led off, Sirtus was hustled to the other wagon. Tarin stayed close at one side, while the sobbing Sund clung tight to his father’s other hand. They clambered aboard the wagon into stink and despair. A row of ragged men of varying ages and clothing sat on each side of the wooden tray. Sirtus was chained up where a shackle hung vacant. He clung to Sund.

“Can’t you leave my boy with me?” he pleaded. “He’s not going to run away without his father.”

The guard shrugged. It was the usual practice anyway. “The other too?”

Sirtus shook his head.

The guard looked between him and Tarin, shrugged again. He led Tarin to another vacant shackle. Tarin shivered as the cold iron snapped closed about his wrists and ankles.

“No talking!” the guard warned them, before leaping down from the wagon and disappearing into the gloom.

Tarin turned to the man beside him. A Bigger of course; they all were. Old, the man was, with sunken cheeks. Tarin was about to open his mouth to speak to him, but the man shook his head warningly. His lips, faint to see in the firelight, formed the word ‘wait.’ So they waited. After five minutes, the man bent his head to Tarin and whispered, “Bastards wait to catch you, sometimes. They’re mean brutes to cross. You take care, son. Keep yer head down.”

“What do they mean to do with us?” Tarin whispered back.

“Nobody gave me a program,” replied the man drily, “but it looks like we’re slaves, I’d say. Work in the mines and that,



maybe. Or farm labour, I dunno.”

Tarin chewed on this bitter prediction. But after all, it was no worse than he had concluded for himself. And he supposed it was better than being dead. Whatever the event, it looked as though his foolish dreams of seeing the Elves had just about blown away. He thought mournfully back to his old life on the island. It seemed to him that he had been happy in those times without ever realising. He’d give anything to be back fixing some bit of furniture at Ma’s taciturn side, or savouring a cup of tea among the warm smell of goats, with Lissie’s friendly smile across the table.

Something else. “Here,” he whispered to his neighbour, “what’s this other business all about? Like, how I can feel the mood of everyone here. Do you feel that too?”

The old man nodded. “Yeah, everyone does. It’s her up there,” he muttered, pointing up the row of wagons. “Two carriages up. It’s her doing, don’t ask me how. Some witchery she works. They give her a wagon of her own, an’ leave her be, mostly. Not like with the other women. The talk is she’s some sort of princess, from the forest up north ways. Certainly looks the part.”

Tarin thought about this. “What do they do to the other women?” he asked uneasily. Although he thought he could guess.

The man glanced at him before shaking his head sadly. “Son, it’s sorry I am to tell you,” he said, “but you’ve got some nasty experiences ahead of you.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The shivering night and the burning day that followed were the precursors of many such weary days thereafter. The prisoners possessed few blankets against the nightly cold. They huddled together for warmth, as best they could. The room in the wagon tray was insufficient, and the shackles added to the discomfort.

They had no protection from the sun. The women’s wagons that followed had covers, but the two wagons of men enjoyed no such luxury. Some of the men tied rags about their heads, some few had caps or hats. Exposed patches of skin burned to a deep bronze-red over the following days.

None of them was ever loosed, so they had to suffer the additional indignity of eliminating where they sat. Once a day, the resulting filth was swilled out with a bucket or two of water.

The captives were given enough to drink, but food was scanty and poor. Clearly, their captors were intent on keeping them alive until the end of the journey; but equally clearly, none of them saw any point in going beyond that bare minimum.

Sirtus and Tarin were separated in the wagon by a couple of paces. On the first day, the big man had tried to talk to Tarin. A guard rode close, shouted at them “No talking!” Sirtus tried again, but the guard hauled out a whip, and lashed the trader with it repeatedly. “I’ll teach you to talk, you scum,” he yelled. “You’ll talk, will you, you turd? I’ll teach you!” The lash fell again and again, in a fury. Sirtus suffered it on his hands, on his body; he groaned and gasped. His neighbours cowered as far away as they could, and people shielded Sund.

Sated at last, the guard turned away, panting. Sirtus was bleeding. The big man looked at Tarin in mute appeal.

Tarin could only raise his hands helplessly. He knew very well what his friend was trying to ask of him, but he had no way to convey back that the task was impossible. It was beyond him to amend these fierce robbers, to reverse what had been done to them. There was nothing he could do.

Once they crossed a decent-sized stream. The gruff leader – whose name, Tarin had learned in the meantime, was Kell – stopped the train, and announced that everyone would bathe.

It was like a holiday. The prisoners in Tarin’s wagon all looked to one another in cheerful anticipation. Kell told them how it was to be. One wagon at a time, in turns, they were to be set loose to bathe in the stream as they pleased. Guards with strung bows lined the banks, but really, where could anyone run to, in these lonely lands? To the Mountain Butchers, in the ominous range that loomed ever nearer?

The women had first turn. Nearly all the prisoners, so far as Tarin could see, did the decent thing and averted their eyes. Not so the greedy-eyed guards.

Eventually it was the turn of Tarin's wagon. A guard moved along the rows, crouching by each prisoner to undo the chafing shackles. When it was Tarin's turn, his pleasure at rubbing his newly-released wrists and ankles was intense. The men pulled off their rags where they sat, joking the while. The contrast between sun-exposed and pale protected skin was stark.

One by one, the piebald, naked men clambered stiffly to the ground, off the wagon for the first time in days. The gritty soil felt strange under their feet. Then into the water. It was cold, but oh! How good it felt! Tarin could almost feel the dirt and ordure washing from his skin. Some people lay soaking; others splashed and laughed. At the bolder sallies, a momentary smile even twitched the faces of one or two of the guards.

All too soon it was over. Back in the wagon. Pull on the rags again. The heavy clamber after them of the guard with keys; the slow, clanking re-imprisonment. Wet skin drying under breeze and sun.

The next load of men were about their own pleasurable bath by this time. Tarin's wagon watched them from their contentment, shouting ribald remarks. For once, for the length of this short, golden holiday from despair, not even their brutal guards had the heart to enforce the talking ban.

The last men clambered back on their wagon, dressed, and were bound back in their chains. A hush fell.

A slender figure descended from the next wagon in front – that of the reputed princess. The woman was tall, her long legs concealed by a flowing, night-blue robe. Dark hair was bound short behind the curve of her neck. All eyes were on her figure as she made her way towards the stream. She stepped with the grace of a deer.

The woman had to pass close to Tarin's wagon. As she approached, the strange sharing of group mood intensified. The woman's face was long, oval, pale. The skin high on her cheeks bore tattoos of birds. She glanced up, her eyes meeting Tarin's. Her eyes were green as a forest glade. In that instant of joined gaze, Tarin's heart was lost for life.

Not so her. Her gaze passed directly on, unmoved. The graceful beauty reached the stream, stopped. She raised herself to her proud height and looked haughtily towards the guards.

"You shall not watch *me*," she declared to them with imperious mien.

None of them dared contest it. Tarin could feel their awe of her. Slowly, almost without willing it, one by one, they turned their backs. The woman turned her commanding gaze to the wagons, and each man crouching there shuffled around so as to present as near a back to her as their constraints would allow.

The splashing continued for some little time. Eventually silence fell. The girl did not bother to tell the company when they could look; she simply strolled back to her wagon as soon as she was dressed and ready. As her indifferent figure passed their gaze, people relaxed and sighed.

Kell called the guards. Preparations commenced to get under way.

Tarin's neighbour leaned to him, one wary eye on the guards. "Her name's Limm," he confided. "She's a looker, ain't she?"

But Tarin had no words for any reply. He was lost inside, stricken, struggling, with no way in sight to any shore.

\* \* \* \* \*

The little girl, Pippi, had been poorly the whole way. She grizzled constantly, and would not be soothed by her increasingly anxious mother. The guards quickly reached an alarming level of exasperation; and since none of the watching prisoners had much confidence in their captors possessing even enough basic decency to hold back from harming a child, their hearts were often in their mouths. But somehow, something, maybe some uneasy sense of the watching community, had so far kept the tempers of the guards in fragile check.

Sirtus could see and hear everything that was happening in the adjacent woman's wagon. His inability to do anything, to comfort his child, or even to call to her drove him frantic. He fell to jerking at his chains in misery and frustration. Brown stains and fresh red drops soon began to show how the heavy irons were punishing his flesh.

On a day on which the crying of the child had been even more persistent than usual, Kell called an unusual midday halt. He came down the line to the wagon that held Valena. The desperate mother, her whimpering child in arms, looked up at

him pleadingly.

“What’s wrong with her?” Kell asked her bluntly.

“I don’t know, the food maybe,” she said. “Please, mister, please. Just let us go free. Please!”

The Captain made no reply, but Tarin could feel his pity. Bathed as they were in Limm’s strange influence, everyone could.

“Give me the child,” he said. And she, perhaps because of what she could sense in his heart, hesitated, then reached the child over.

Kell turned, gave the baby to the guard standing next to him. Nodded to him.

“No!” cried Valena, rising in her chains. “No!”

They paid her no attention. Kell strode back towards the head of the column while the guard carried the wailing child in the other direction. The crying mother tried to stand up, tried to follow the guard’s movement behind the arch of the wagon cover. “My baby!” she shrieked. “Give me back my baby!” Unable to see what was happening, she fell back in a paroxysm of incoherently wailing fear. The women sitting near her tried to comfort her, but she thrashed them away with her arms, crying, and would not hear their soft words.

Sirtus had risen to the cramped extent of his own chains and stood tensed as a bow string while the cries of the child receded into silence. He stood so, while the slow minutes passed. After quarter of an hour, the guard came back; but his hands were empty. The moment the trader glimpsed him, he sank down with a deep moan and covered his face with his hands.

Valena sighted the empty-handed guard now. She froze; then drew in a great, long breath, and let it out in a scream. Another scream followed, and another. Not ceasing from screaming, legs spastically extending her chains to the limit, she drew a hidden knife from her clothes and struck herself in the breast. Again and again she struck, screaming the while, until the screams began to weaken and alternate with chokes.

In the meantime Sirtus had been thrashing and bellowing in an insensate roar, trying to reach his wife, shaking his bearded head from one side to the other in a frenzy. The blood from his own wounds splattered the onlookers, who shrank away, helpless to avoid the blows he dealt out in his madness.

It went on and on until a disgusted guard came up with a staff. He swung from behind and laid the trader to the floor with a cracking blow to the head. In the renewed silence, the appalled prisoners could hear the bubbling sounds made by the dying woman.

A brigand climbed into the women’s wagon, inspected her. He leaned out of the opening and called for another to come, before turning back to unlock the shackles. Together with the second guard, they dragged the body off the end of the wagon and through the dust of the road to one side. Returning, one of them smacked his hands together, called out “Let’s get moving now!” Whip-cracks and shouts stirred up the oxen. The guards mounted their horses, the wagons jerked into motion.

Tarin had been rocking the boy Sund in his arms through the whole terrible episode. Rocking him, holding his head nestled to his chest. Numbly, he watched as the bloody bundle of rags that had been Valena receded, until it vanished behind the latter wagons. All that was left to them of the woman he had known was a great red smear on the tray of the next wagon down.

When Sirtus woke again to groaning consciousness, something appeared to have broken inside him. All he would do was sit hunched in his chains and weep. Tarin never heard him say a single word again, save once.

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From the twisted natures of the guards that he could so easily perceive, Tarin had expected worse from them. They were clearly men who would stop at nothing, men who revelled in cruelty, for whom a bunch of helpless victims should have offered tempting targets for abuse. Events however had played out otherwise. So long as prisoners caused no trouble, they were left largely in whatever scraps of peace they could clutch to their troubled souls. It seemed that whichever monstrous hand had deformed the natures of the guards had also bound their wills in tight cages. Tarin supposed these

depraved men had been given orders not to damage the goods; orders they had little choice but to obey.

That the guards also held back for fear of their captain, and that ‘not to damage’ allowed some unpleasant latitude, Tarin only discovered towards the end of that sad journey.

They had by now approached quite close to the line of southern mountains. These were treeless; indeed the whole land appeared rocky and barren. Scattered thorn bushes amid clumps of harsh grass were the only things that grew. The grazing had dried up some days ago with the water, and the fodder wagon was growing dangerously light.

If one followed the line of unappealing hills to the right, it could be seen that they came to a sudden end – or rather, as it seemed, that they made a sharp bend to the south. A kind of gap or valley had gradually become apparent at the point of the bend, and it was towards this gap that the slow line of wagons was directed. At some point – having waited, Tarin supposed, until the shrinking distance rendered the journey practicable – Kell left the caravan and rode off alone in the direction of their seeming goal.

The mood of the guards immediately lightened. They halted the train and loafed around a fire, laughing and boasting. In their furtive relief, one or two of the brigands turned to consider what profit they might derive from their captives. Tarin had to turn his head away in disgust as one of them – he recognized the man who had been the first to waylay them – ransacked the listless Sirtus, turning the gaunt figure over and going through all of his clothes. The guard’s vicious parting kick revealed however that his search had been fruitless.

Others clawed through the heaps of confiscated goods. The guards broached a jar of Sirtus’s wine, and smacked their lips over that for a while; but one of them detected with glee some smaller stone bottles among the load, bottles that offered promise of something stronger. And so it proved to be. As the guards passed the fiery liquor from hand to hand with loud remarks, Tarin felt with apprehension how their thought darkened and their lust awoke. He was seized by a sudden presentiment of the coming atrocity.

The old man, Tarin’s neighbour, groaned in like recognition. “Oh, Powers no,” he said, bowing his head. “Not again.”

Tarin had all along expected some occurrence of casual rape; he was surprised that none had so far occurred, so far as he knew. But what now transpired was of a different order entirely, reaching a hitherto unimagined plane of monstrosity.

The guards’ first move was perplexing. They unhooked Limm’s wagon, and led its beasts around to bring it back to the vicinity of the women’s wagons towards the rear. Confounding Tarin’s initial fears, however, they left the forest woman in peace; instead, one by one they clambered into the women’s.

The cloth covers shaded most of what subsequently happened from outside eyes, and there was little to hear save the occasional gasp or despairing moan. But the presence of Limm, with her strange power to open the feelings of those nearby to a common channel, meant that the helpless and horrified onlookers had no choice but to feel every bit of the emotions of those who took part. They felt the united lust of the perpetrators, during the whole cycle of their rise through savage excitement to a vast common release, and at the same time they experienced the pain and degradation of the victims. It was an utter profanity; one that marked Tarin for the rest of his life. He thought the howls of the boy Sund in particular, forced to witness – nay, to take part in – a crime he was not yet capable of comprehending, would never leave him.

Kell cantered back in a cloud of dust as the sun was getting low. Dismounting, he turned his head slowly to take in the scene: the halted and disordered train, the silent, head-drooping prisoners; the guards lolling somnolent and snoring around the remains of their fire. The scattered stone bottles; the strong scent of liquor.

Something more. In his nearness to the sorceress Limm, he could pick up the general misery, which found its dismal centre in the women’s wagons.

The big captain turned to his horse and lifted a whip from the saddle-bag. Tarin, watching the subsequent scene, feeling internally the vicious smacks of the whip, hearing the moans succeeded by yells of the soddenly waking guards, did not know whether to feel sorry for the men or to revel in their well-deserved and in fact far too inadequate punishment. Mostly, he realized, he just felt empty. Too many awful things had happened.

Kell laid on with fury until the guards had all somehow picked themselves up and retreated to a huddle in a corner of the wagons. He then proceeded to curse them out for a solid minute, in a style to which Tarin in other circumstances would have listened with admiration. However, despite the apparent fury of the captain, Tarin thought with bitterness that there was something formulaic about the whole affair. When the cat was away, of course the mice would play.

Nobody got really hurt – except the women, of course.

The day had a more curious turn still to take. Turning away in final disgust, the captain picked up one of the empty bottles, sniffed it, then cast it away. The stone bottle hit a rock and shattered. Kell would have passed on, but a glitter among the fragments caught his eye. He squatted to reach, then held up a small object that flashed fire under the sun.

A diamond! thought Tarin. Must have been a double bottom.

Kell apparently came to the same conclusion, because he made his men gather up and smash the other empties. Several held gems.

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The morrow dawned overcast. The hungover guards snarled and bickered as they inspanned the wagons, before whipping up the beasts to drag the whole sorry lot a little further along its way.

As the train drew slowly closer to the gap in the lowering hills, Tarin, his dull mood matching the weather, watched listlessly as the dark slopes rearing now on either side inched towards the rear. He was neither glad nor sorry now the journey seemed to be approaching its end: he had worn out both hopes and fears. Matters could hardly grow worse than they were at present; and they would never grow better. About all any of them could hope for was a change. He was so tired of the hard wagon, of the chafing irons, of the filth. He was tired of the bad food and of the bestial guards. He was tired of the stink of the man next to him. Most of all he was tired of having to look the whole day at the gaunt, empty face of Sirtus: the man who had saved him and whom he could not save in return. And he was tired of hugging to him the lost trader's equally lost and shivering son.

But things can always get worse; always.

Another trail had joined theirs from the west; a trail that seemed to bear more traffic. Tarin could make out another caravan now some way ahead, as the joint way led deeper into the gap between the mighty hills. The day wore on, the bleak and barren slopes grew slowly closer and more distinct. Tarin glanced again to the fore and made out that they seemed to be approaching some sort of post – a low stone building, apparently, built against one of the pair of dark hills that served almost as gateposts to a narrow neck at the entrance of the valley. A sort of ditch-and-palisade cut across the open space between them.

The distance shrank. He could make out wagons parked at the post-house, and movement beside them showed activity. There were Biggers up on one of the wagons. As Tarin continued to watch with little interest, watching solely because it made a change, he saw something that made him sit up and pay more attention. Not all of the figures moving about were Biggers. Many were smaller.

In the first wild, heart-leaping moment, Tarin thought he was seeing his own folk. But as their own wagon train jolted inexorably nearer, his first burst of expectation faded gradually into puzzlement. Something about the figures seemed wrong – the way they moved, the proportions. As Tarin kept his gaze fixed on the scene, his puzzlement dissolved slowly away, to be replaced by a coalescing clench of disbelief and horror.

These were not People. These were creatures of nightmare. These were Orcs.

Everyone had heard stories of Orcs; heard them, and shivered over them. Orcs, those swarming agents of evil! They had been the soldiers of the Black Master, in the wars of the former age, long ago. But, Tarin cried to himself, they had all been destroyed! There *weren't* any such things these days!

Apparently there were.

Others of the prisoners had noticed now. Their groans and cries of dismay alerted those less attentive. Soon the whole wagon was lamenting the awful recrudescence into their unhappy lives of an evil they had believed was extinct. No! It could not be happening!

Tarin could feel the Orcs now. These were beings of whom every last particle was marred: damage and corruption was what they were made of. The wagons halted, and suddenly these monsters out of an evil dream were clambering all over, their claws scratching on wood, their pitiless black eyes and fang-edged maws grinning at their fresh victims. Harsh laughter flayed the ears of the cowering prisoners.

In the array of natures under Tarin's touch, that of Kell stood out. He was so nearly a good man... In his last despair, in this moment of panic at the hideous turn their fates had taken, Tarin did the unthinkable. He reached out to the twist in Kell's soul, and untwisted it.

He could sense the immediate change, the man's wave of renunciation, revulsion. Physically, the man stood not far off. Tarin leaned out of the wagon to him. "Help us," he pleaded. A monster came, cursing, and hit Tarin on the head with something, but he ignored it. "Help us!"

Kell looked at him, then at the palisade, then at the surrounding Orcs. He spread one hand in a helpless gesture, before turning away. Nothing was left for Tarin but to slump back in despair, horror at this sudden and dire worsening of their circumstances contending now in his mind with the appalled realization of what he had just done.

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The palisade with the Orcs had clearly been a border post of some kind. Following from this occurred a seemingly endless journey along what felt like the bottom floor of Hell. The single slight relief was that no Orcs accompanied them, although they saw the monsters often, about their varied business in that dark land.

Kell had left them at the barrier, had passed them to other supervision. They didn't see the bluff captain again. Tarin supposed it was for the best. For Kell had been right. What could he have done?

If only Tarin had acted earlier, when it might have done some good. If only.

After a day or two they passed through another neck between hills, and after that the lands opened out. They found themselves entering what seemed like a vast plain enclosed in a grim ring of mountains. But ahead now, an extraordinary sight reared up. This was a tall hill, standing alone on the plain, from whose conical peak a great flag of smoke and ash constantly streamed. It was as if a great fire were constantly burning inside. Their course lay not to this fire-mountain, but slightly to the left of it.

Day followed day, with small change except the shifting perspective of the hill of fire. Journey's end, when it came into sight at last, took the form of a great fortress made of dark stone. The ascending ranks of towers sent a chill into Tarin's heart as they grew ever higher in his sight. At last the wagons passed, clanking, one by one, through a yawning gate-arch. The train came to a halt; Orcs and men came, took away the oxen and the mules, unshackled one wagon from another. The stores were wheeled away somewhere. One of their erstwhile guards clambered aboard and set about unlocking the shackles. The shivering prisoners were marshalled then in rows on the greasy cobbles of the yard.

They stood unchained, and there in front of them yawned the portal through which they had just entered. The guards were busy and heedless, no bows were held at readiness. But Tarin could only laugh bitterly to himself at the very notion of escape. They had been carried to the middle of a vast engine of despair. Where would any runaway go? The whole land was a prison.

It is man's nature to grow accustomed to any circumstances that allow at least the barest existence, no matter how dire. The wagons, dismal as they had been, had come to seem to the captives, if not like home, then at least familiar. The associated evils were known; and at least the wretched passengers had had each other. Now they had to undergo the heartbreak of separation. The women were hustled off in one direction, the men in another. Couples who at least had seen each other every day now held out helpless hands in a vain attempt to bridge the sudden distance, before contact was cut off forever by the cruel clang of a door.

Tarin, holding tight to Sund's hand, shuffled with the other men as they were directed, with curses and blows, through a door. They found themselves in a chamber furnished on one side with some battered desks and cabinets, and on the other, with a row of cells. Hard-faced Biggers sorted them into groups – fit men, aged, children. Tarin and Sund were hustled towards the children, but a big man grabbed Tarin and pulled him out of the throng.

"Here," he said, squinting down suspiciously. "You're not a young 'un, or I'll be switched. You're grown. But no Dwarf, neither. Just what do you call yourself?"

"I'm a Hairfoot," said Tarin, since that was what his people sometimes called themselves. "A Halfling," he added, because he had heard Biggers use this expression.

"Never heard of it," said the man. He looked Tarin up and down. "Can you work? Little fellow like you? Wouldn't think so."

“I can fix things that are broken,” replied Tarin.

The man scratched his head, turned to a companion. “Here, Barrastan. What shall I do with this? Says he can fix things.”

The brute-faced Bigger named Barrastan considered. “Don’t put him in with the rest,” he said. “Keep him here for now, then bung him in with those scribes and that when we’ve sorted the rest. See if he’s any use. If not...” He terminated the remark with a shrug.

Tarin held tight to Sund. “Please don’t separate me from the boy,” he pleaded. “I’d rather go with him.”

The guard, whose soul was as seared and caged as all the other ruined vassals of the dark Master of this land, whoever he was, put his hands on his hips. He grinned down with ominous levity at Tarin.

“Oh,” he drawled in mockery. “You’d raw-ther, would you?” He bowed mockingly to Tarin, before straightening and dealing him a blow in the face that made the smaller man stagger and see stars. “Get over there, you maggot,” the guard hissed into Tarin’s bruised face, “and keep your fucking mouth shut in future. If you know what’s good for you.”

It took, however, many more and harder blows, and a surprising amount of furious struggle, considering the size of the little shrimp, before they could wrench the screaming boy out of his grasp.

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Had the clerks been as cruel to Tarin as most other denizens of that land, it is likely that he would have simply rolled over and given up on breathing. However, he found they were merely prisoners like himself – ordinary folk, snatched from many milieus to slave for the Master in and around his dungeons.

As soon as Tarin found heart again to take notice of his surroundings and companions, they told him of the Master. The Master, all-powerful, was to be feared and obeyed. This cloudy but ominous being was absent at present from the land, on who knew what errand of his own. Equally, nobody knew when he would be back; and nobody cared to know. It was strictly unhealthy to enquire about such matters.

Although their natures had not been abraded in the same dreadful manner, almost to the point of destruction, as the guards and jailers Tarin had encountered, he sensed soul-bonds in most of the odd assortment of clerks, scribes and dogsbodies he had been thrown among. They were not free. He did, however, encounter a few with no such internal bonds; a circumstance that Tarin found curious. Chance remarks thrown out in conversation soon suggested an explanation: the free people were those who had not yet come before the Master.

Most of the clerks, although not actively spiteful in their relations with Tarin, had no great interest in being friendly. They all fervently and hopelessly wished to be elsewhere, and each nursed his own particular problems and fears. The only one who showed conspicuous kindness to Tarin, even went out of his way to help him, was a wizened, limping, brown-skinned man named Podossian. Pod, as everyone called him, covered for Tarin while he was still prostrated by grief and shame; then later, he spent generously of his own scanty time in order to show the diminutive newcomer the ropes.

Although prisoners in general were kept behind bars, nobody bothered about the clerks. The doors of their dormitory were not even locked. But Pod advised Tarin to resign himself to staying here – here in the Dark Lands, as he called them. Nobody escaped; no-one ever had. There was no way. Orcs were everywhere, and Orcs would scrag you. Set foot outside the prison and you wouldn’t get half a mile. Better to stay here. Although life in the Fortress was tough for some, for others, it could be supportable.

Pod’s own story was simple. He had been brought up far in the South, he said, in a sun-filled city on the coast of the Sea. The trade of letters had come easily to him, and early. But preferring new horizons, Pod had set out to see the world. He had not got far. In a neighbouring coastal town, he had gone out for a drink with companions, and had woken to find himself gagged and bundled with other unfortunates in a box. Some weeks of discomfort later, he had found himself here. That was years ago, now; he’d been here ever since.

Tarin wanted to know why hadn’t Pod been hauled before the Master, like many of the others? Pod had shrugged, and said that nobody cared much about the clerks. He supposed the Master couldn’t be bothered.

Another time, Tarin asked the wizened clerk about his leg.

“Oh,” said Pod, “that was because of some documents. Some prisoner records I hadn’t copied fast enough to suit them. Quint was head of clerks then, and he was a bastard. Our present bloke, Churruk, is a pussycat compared to Quint. Anyway they’ve got these cells they call well-cells. They threw me down one, broke me leg. Three days I was there, with no food nor water. I nearly downed me pen that time, I can tell you. After I got out, I had a couple of mates who looked after me – splinted me leg as well as they could. And here I am,” he concluded, patting his twisted leg ruefully.

It was a chilling reminder that, even if one had the luck to escape the mines or the breeding cells, life was precarious anywhere in the dark realm of the Master.

Tarin learned quickly to make himself useful. His work took him all over the building, which was one of many prisons in the Tower. This particular section was devoted to the induction of new drafts. As such, it had a greater requirement than the prison average for administration – hence the clerks. And, since Orcs were of small use for such work, it was mostly staffed by humans.

Although by his great good luck Tarin had found himself in a refuge of relative calm, there were horrors enough about the place. Quite early on, he ran into one. He had been sent to deliver some repaired folders to jailer such-and-such. Uncertain as yet of the layout, he succeeded in finding the man’s office, only to find him absent. Timid enquiries obtained further directions, with a cuff added for good measure. Tottering under the pile of tape-patched, shabby folders, Tarin made his diffident way down corridors he had not so far explored. A cacophony of yells began to grow in his hearing. They seemed to be coming from the place he had been directed to.

He found jailer such-and-such in vehement conversation with a second, hulking man in what seemed to Tarin like a chamber from Hell. The floor on one side was occupied by a strip of bars, ten or fifteen paces long, and it was from these bars that the deafening babble of demented cries and pleas arose. A stench of ordure and rotting flesh smote Tarin’s nose as he stopped, frozen with shock and horror, in the doorway. Trying to tear his eyes from the forest of hands that clutched and gesticulated wildly at the bars, he waited in apprehensive servility until the jailers should finish their argument and deign to notice him.

“I don’t give a fuck what Monko says,” the jailer was shouting. “I’m up to my ears in these pigs, I had another lot last week. That’s three drafts, jammed in there. Three drafts! How’m I s’posed to feed ’em? I don’t get no allocation for that. If your boss doesn’t take his hand off his cock and do some work, I’ll be shovelling out deaders in barrow-loads.” The man turned to Tarin. “The fuck do *you* want?” he shouted.

“Folders,” Tarin quavered. “Repair section. These are fixed up.”

“Fucking folders,” grumbled the man. “They only give us shit, up at Supply. Listen, don’t you know to leave those things at the office? The fuck ’dja bring ’em up here for?” He walked over to the bars, shouted down, “Shut up, you pigs, you rats! Just shut up! D’yer want a taste of the whip? Do you?”

The other, hulking man said stolidly, “Listen, Monko says –”

The first cut him off. “No, *you* listen! You go back to Monko and tell him what I said. Go on, piss off with it. I’ll pave his wank-nest a yard deep in deaders if he don’t get a move on. Go and tell him that!”

With a shrug, the second man lurched out of the room.

The jailer turned the force of his ire on Tarin. “What are you standing gawking about here for? Take those fucking things to my office, and I mean run. Then, you can fetch some water, and come back and wet these pigs down. Can’t have the fuckers dying even before we get any work out of ’em.” He was still standing next to the bars. As Tarin scampered off, still balancing the files, he glimpsed the jailer as he turned and stamped viciously at some of the hands that reached despairingly towards him. “Scum,” the man remarked to nobody. “We’d get a lot more peace if we head-hacked the lot of ’em.”

By dint of more questions, and by dodging the cuffs that seemed, almost by reflex, to accompany the surly answers he received, Tarin succeeded in finding out where the well was. He drew a bucket – large-sized by his standards – and staggered back with it to the room with the bars. Standing back from the edge, trying his best to ignore the gleam of maddened eyes, the anguish of the desperate struggle for water the first glimpse of the bucket had set loose, he addressed those below in the firmest tones he could manage.

“Now stop that! If you fight like that, none of you will get any! Settle down, and I’ll do my best to make sure everyone gets a drink.”



Whether from the tone of his voice or something else, the riot did settle a little. Men still wrestled for a place at the bars, but the edge of desperation had left the struggle. Carefully, patiently, Tarin tipped the unwieldy bucket into cupped hands, again and again. Many of the men did receive a drink. A groan echoed in the pit as the last drops ran out.

“I’m going for another,” Tarin assured them hastily, and ran to do it. The next bucket, and the next; and still the crowd surged and struggled, for they were packed in that cell like sardines. The cell clearly extended back well behind the bars into the darkness. The first mouths had been replaced, then those were replaced, and then those. But there were always more mouths.

A hand reached to him. Appearing out of the pack was a wild face he knew. “Tarin!” shouted the wreck of the man he had known as Sirtus. The hand reached his, thrust something into his own, then disappeared again into the *melée*.

“Sirtus!” he cried, but the man was gone. Sirtus had not received a drink, and now the bucket was empty again.

Tarin hurried back for a refill, but the jailer stopped him. “That’ll do,” the man growled. “Don’t want to spoil ’em.”

Numbly, in the privacy of his sleeping-cell, Tarin pulled out the leather sachet the trader had given him, which Tarin, in the urgency of the moment, had thrust into his breeches. He knew what was in it, though. Among a scatter of lesser stones, there they were: the four great gems that Tarin had restored to their inherent grandeur and nobility.

\* \* \* \* \*

One day Tarin caught wind of Limm. He was in the kitchens, repairing the ash raker of one of the two main ovens. He had to take the thing right out so he could scrape the hardened gunk out of the guides. The sweaty head cook had made do that morning with just one oven, while hovering anxiously at times behind Tarin’s shoulder.

As Tarin reassembled the raker, he was aware that the midday food for the guards was being taken up. Now, with that taken care of, there seemed to be an argument going on.

Job finished, he stood up and wiped his hands on a rag, and gave the cook and his truculent helpers his interested attention.

“I ain’t doing it twice in one week, and that’s flat,” one of the kitchen helpers was saying. “That witch gives me the shivers. She just looks at a man, and you can hear what everyone’s thinking.” Tarin pricked up his ears with a jerk at that. “It’s not decent.”

“Well I did one o’ your runs last month, Lem,” said another.

“The witch wasn’t there, then!” replied Lem hotly.

A third kitchen boy spoke up. “An’ I did two for you, Lem, the month before. You need to spend less time in your sack, mate. Then you wouldn’t get in jams like this.”

The cook was impatient. “Look, I don’t give a shit who goes,” he said. “All I know is, if those specials don’t get their rations, it’s my skin they’ll take it out of. Do you think I won’t pass that on double-serve to youse? So sort it out, and sharpish. There’s work to do.”

“What’s the witch look like?” Tarin interrupted.

The head cook turned his head at the interruption, looked Tarin up and down. This shrimp wasn’t one of them; but he had fixed the range, and the cook was grateful. Some minimal civility was due. “Tall,” said the cook. “Black hair.”

“She got birds on her cheeks,” put in Lem, indicating with his fingers. “An’ creepy eyes, that look right through you.”

The other lads muttered agreement, nodding apprehensively.

“I’ll take her food up,” said Tarin.

They all stared at him. “You?” said the cook.

“All right by me,” put in Lem quickly.

But the cook was wary. “Now why would you do that?” he said.

“I know her,” said Tarin. That brought the whole gang to gaping silence.

“What?” the cook said, open-mouthed.

“We were weeks in the wagons together, coming here.”

The kitchen-folk looked at one another, taking this in. “It don’t bother you,” said the cook hesitantly, “you know, that thing what she does to your head?”

Tarin shrugged. “I’m used to it.”

The cook shook his head at that concept, tsked. He thought the thing over, looked at the pile of food baskets, scratched his head. “Well,” he said, “it’s not regular, like. But if you’re set on doing it, I don’t see as how anyone would object. I’ll need you to take up all seven, mind. It’s for the Specials. Know where they are?”

Tarin did, although he had never yet been in that section. Balancing the tottering pile of baskets, with Lem holding the door open, he started out.

He found that the guard of the Specials had dragged his desk right outside the door of the section, as far as he could get from it and still keep an eye on the entrance. He didn’t look happy in his work. “Who the hell are you?” he said, as Tarin appeared with his unsteady load.

“Food for the Specials,” said Tarin. He thought he could sense Limm’s influence from here. Certainly he could feel enough of the guard’s mood to tell straight away that this was the wrong answer. “I’m just casual,” he added hastily. “I was fixing the oven. But Cookie made me do this.”

The guard’s incipient fury subsided. “Telling me it’s food for Spesh,” he growled. “Think I’m stupid? What the fuck else would it be? Get in there and deal them out. And don’t leave the witch’s in the gangway, like one feller tried it on.”

The first whiff of terror flicked against Tarin’s mind as he entered the room. It was a long room, with eight cells on each side. The first prisoner on the left sat crouched with his back to the corner, jammed as hard away from Tarin as he could get. The Bigger’s distended, fear-filled eyes were fixed on Tarin. The ruined man gave the snarl of a beast in desperation; of an animal that knows it is about to die, defenceless, with only the snarl left to brandish vainly between it and the attacker.

A metal bowl, licked clean, had been shoved out from under the bottom rail of the bars, into the gangway. Tarin put his stack of flat baskets on the ground and opened the top one. It contained a similar bowl filled with some sort of meagre stew (slightly slopped – he made a mental note to take more care, if he ever did this again), plus a hunk of hard, grey bread. Tarin shoved the full bowl carefully under the low rail, the bread next to it. There was nothing to hold the bread off the grimy floor. The empty bowl he placed back in the basket.

To Tarin’s surprise, the cell on the right held a Dwarf. But this was no stolid, gruff, inscrutable trader, with impeccably groomed beard and clothing; this was a Dwarf pushed to the edge of reason, or beyond. The Dwarf stood at the bars, clutching at them with his great hands, and stared at Tarin with an expression in which fury and madness were the chief components.

“Let me out of here!” the Dwarf said hoarsely.

Tarin only shook his head sympathetically. He approached the cell with a basket, but as he came close, the Dwarf lunged at him. Tarin jerked back, felt the wind of the fist across his face.

“Hi, you!” he protested. “I can’t feed you if you do that.”

“To the Pit with your food,” snarled the Dwarf. “And with you, and your people, and all you know, and all you love, and all your descendants unto the seventh generation. Let me out!” He kicked at his bars. He appeared to have kicked his previous bowl into the corridor. Nevertheless, Tarin noted that its contents had been eaten.

Tarin looked around for something to help him. He dared not come within range of the mad Dwarf’s fists. He saw a mop leaning in the corner, took it, and with its help he managed to shove the bowl and bread under the Dwarf’s rail.

The next prisoner was curled in a tight ball, his back to the light, on the heap of dirty straw that served each of them for a bed. His previous bread lay dry next to his curdled bowl of stew. Tarin looked at them bleakly before replacing them with fresh. It was all he could do.

As he progressed down the rows, so the communal agony grew in strength. These people had been tortured, he was sure of it. He could feel their remembered fear, and smell the stink of it. He began to struggle to keep his own knees from trembling. He wanted to run away.

Six captives. Three on each side. Next, empty cells. Where was Limm?

He found her right at the end, in the cell furthest from the door. The woman was sitting listlessly on the stone floor, her clothes rumpled, her hair unkempt. Her skin was grimy, and her former dignity seemed sunk beneath her present conditions.

As Tarin reached her cell, she raised her eyes to meet his, with no sign of recognition. Her face was as beautiful as he remembered; her green eyes, as imperious.

“Food,” he stammered. “I’ve brought your food.”

“Thanks,” she said in lifeless tones.

Tarin swapped the bowls, hesitated.

She looked at him, without interest. “Was there something you wanted?”

Tarin swallowed. “We were together on the wagons,” he said.

Limm blinked once or twice, like a cat. “Oh,” she said.

“I didn’t know you were here,” said Tarin. “I thought you’d be with the women. With the other women.”

“I get no peace here either,” the girl said, sounding disgusted. “Always the same. And it’s not fair. I didn’t *ask* to be this way.”

From what Tarin had heard in the meantime about the general fate of women captives, he thought she did not have quite the right sense for how well off she was. No point mentioning that, however.

“D’you mean this... gift of yours, I suppose you’d call it?” Tarin asked tentatively.

“It’s not a gift!” she flared. “It’s a curséd burden. I didn’t ask for it. All I want is to be left in peace.”

Tormented as he was still by the shared mental anguish of the other Specials, Tarin could only feel sympathy. “It must be awful,” he said, “especially here, feeling everything these poor wretches have been through.”

“Oh,” she replied, “no, I don’t feel their feelings myself. I’m only a sort of conduit. It’s got nothing to do with *me*.”

Tarin was nonplussed, since he had naturally assumed the girl would share in her own influence; but it seemed she only facilitated the sharing by others. He felt his sympathies sensibly diminish. But he supposed it was good fortune for the girl. For his part, he wanted urgently to get out of this terrible place. It would drive him mad to have to stay here, being forced through Limm’s nearness to share in the general mental agony.

On the other hand, the opportunity to converse with this stunning woman was one he would not pass up, or willingly shorten. He sought for something still to say. “Have they, uh,” he hesitated, “have they bothered you at all?”

“They asked me questions, two times,” said Limm, returning to listlessness. “But nothing serious. I think they are waiting ’til this Master gets back.” She sat up. “Look, chum, I’ve got to eat, and they don’t give me a spoon. I don’t care to be a spectacle. Would you mind...?”

“Oh,” he said, flustered. “Sorry, yes of course. I’d better get on, anyway. I’ll maybe see you later, perhaps?”

“Sure,” she said with indifference as she reached for the bowl.

Tarin gathered the baskets in haste and trotted with them out the door. His relief at leaving the miasma of fear, however, was premature. The guard stopped him.

“While you’re here, pal,” said the grinning Bigger, looming over him, “I’ve got another little job for you. Just you go and muck out their buckets, like a good little chap. If you do it right, I might even not give you a thrashing.”

So he had to plunge back into the pit of despair, again and again. The shit buckets were installed so that one need not open the cage door to get at them; but he could only carry one at a time. Tarin had to take the smelly buckets one by one down and out to a back door of the scullery. There he swilled out the turds into a nearby drain.

Limm had finished her meal by the time he reached hers, and was lying on straw with her back to him. In embarrassment, he levered her bucket out of its recess and dealt with it as the others. But he was thoughtful as he stood in the stony yard, working the pump, oppressed by the serried ranks of grim adjacent towers, all beneath the dark loom of the mountains beyond. He was having to digest the unexpected revelation of Limm’s close presence.

The day held one final surprise for Tarin. As he went to report completion of his task to the Specials guard, he found the man engaged with four other Biggers, also clearly guards, obvious as much from their apparel as from their warped souls. A closet that Tarin had noticed casually during his many passages past the desk now stood open; and he beheld, with something of a shock, a curious and repellent creature hunched within. The beast was fat, and dark, and warty, and it had big bald ears. It returned Tarin’s gaze with malevolence. Without taking its eyes off him, the thing raised something it held in its hand and gave it a brisk bite. Nodding, it then handed the item – it looked like a slate tablet – back to its keeper, who stood up, jangling keys, before ushering his visitors into the room with the cells. The four of these then took one of the Specials out of his cage and dragged him away.

\* \* \* \* \*

The finding of Limm swung Tarin’s mental compass completely around. Until now, he had assumed that she had vanished, along with the other poor, lost victims, into the maw of the dungeons.

Tarin had fallen in love with the green-eyed girl from the moment he first saw her, that day back on the wagons. He had sat awake many a troubled night afterwards, huddled shivering in his chains, bundled up for warmth close to his neighbour, whose name he had never learned, because the memory of his old feelings for Lissie gave him an uneasy conscience. He could not help how he now felt; all the same, he could not escape the feeling that he was betraying the memory of his former paragon. Only the mournful assurance that both women were unattainable gave him a degree of ease. After arriving at the Dark Fortress, despite the terrible triage the captives had undergone, from which Tarin had only survived as a chance piece of flotsam in the flood, he could at least anticipate the prospect of reaching a degree of mental equilibrium, of fixity in resignation if nothing else. He was inescapably here; both his former and his new ideal were ineluctably gone. All one could do was get on with the business of scraping a precarious living from grim but apparently stable circumstances.

Now everything was changed. Limm was safe – at least for the present – and separated from him only by the width of a steel bar. That she could scarcely remain untouched, that she would serve rather as a choice target for exploitation by the Master as soon as he returned, was the thought that rose stark in Tarin’s imagination like an evil black reef. He could not bear it. Such a gloriously free, wild thing as Limm! To become caged – and cored like a melon, like as not – by this foul and nameless enchanter! No, it was not to be borne.

He took his anguish to Pod. “I’ve got to get her out,” he said, after explaining the matter to his friend. “I’ve got to, Pod. I didn’t mind so much for myself, but I can pretty well guess what’s going to happen to her as soon as this Master gets back. He’ll want to use her power, suck it out of her somehow. I’m as sure of it as I’m sitting here. I couldn’t stand it, Pod. I’ve got to do something.”

Pod heard the desperation in his young friend’s voice, but he could only shake his head. “I’m mortal sorry for you, son, I am,” he said. “But it’s like I said before: there’s just no way.”

Tarin sat in silence, gnawing his thumbnail. “Have you ever thought about it?” he asked at last. “I don’t mean dreamed. I mean thought, of ways and means.”

“Keep your voice down,” muttered Pod. He leaned closer to his friend. “There’s one or two tried it. One in my time.”

“What did he do?” Tarin said.

“Stole a horse,” said Pod. “Not sure what happened, they don’t let on much. They caught him, I know that, ’cause I seen him, after.” He swallowed. “What they’d left of him. But putting the pieces together, I’d say he had to get fodder, or water, for the horse. It’s a long way to the Gate, and there’s no streams, and there’s only these stations they got for fodder. Well, naturally he didn’t have the paperwork, so they scragged ’im. That’s what I reckon, anyway.”

Tarin thought about it. “Well,” he said, “you clerks deal in papers all the time.”

Pod looked at him in some consternation. “Good gods, mate,” he said, “I wouldn’t like to think what they’d do to you if they caught you with forged papers. Some of those Orcs are pretty inventive fellers. No, no, put that idea right out of your head.”

“What’s the difference?” Tarin whispered fiercely. “No papers, forged papers? What does it matter what they get you for? This is a dog’s life, anyway. I’m not going to stick it. If they kill me, then so be it. I’d take Limm with me. Death’d be a release for us both.”

A further difficulty had occurred to Pod.

“Hate to wet down your fire, lad, I really do, but you’ll need more than fake papers to bust your lass out of Spesh,” he said. “The normal passes and that, yes, all right, those we can forge. There’s always a little bit of such goes on—” he lowered his voice even further, “—although you didn’t hear about that from me. Not passes, but ration vouchers and so forth. It’s all much of a muchness so far as difficulty goes. But they keep a bit of a tight rein on the Specials. They’re valuable. They got special passes for ’em.” He turned to the cupboard next to his work benches. “I might have a used one here somewhere, wait on.”

After a minute or two of rummaging, Pod came up with a small slate tablet, broken in half, which he held out to Tarin, who took it and examined it with curiosity. One side of it was covered with intricate graven characters – some coarse, some fine.

“Suppose someone wants to interview one of the Specials,” Pod continued. “They get one of these made up, and they have to present it to the section guard. He gives them a receipt, and he breaks the pass, so it can’t be used again. Like this one.”

Tarin couldn’t see the problem. “Well can’t you just make a new one?”

Pod shook his head. “It’s not that simple. We don’t make ’em here, they got a special section, up in Supply. It’s a strange system and I don’t know just how it works. They got these animals, see, though what kind they might be beats me. They can make a special mark on the pass. The one in Supply makes the mark, and the Specials guard has another beastie, who checks it. He bites it, actually.”

A vision of the repellent creature in the cabinet rose in Tarin’s mind, and he breathed out in sudden comprehension.

“And since we don’t know what these beasties do with a pass,” continued Pod, “nor how they do it, nobody I know would have the least notion how to forge one. Admittedly the question’s never really come up ’til now.”

Tarin thought about it, then looked at his friend sideways. “Don’t suppose you’ve got any friend in Supply?”

Pod shook his head with decision. “No chance,” he said. “They keep that place nailed down. Trust me, we’ve tried. Not to bust out Specials, of course, but for other stuff.”

And that seemed to be that.

Tarin took his frustration to bed. He lay awake for a long time, schemes turning themselves over in his mind. When he finally slept, he was plagued by dreams, in which it was Lissie in the cell, and a horse handed him a pass to get her out, in the shape of a hoof. Exhausted, rest descended on him at last.

In the small hours towards dawn, Tarin sat bolt upright, instantly awake. He had had an idea.

He woke Pod as early as he decently could. “What does the jailer at Specials do with the broken passes?”

Pod scratched his head. “He keeps the bits until the prisoner is returned. That’s his proof, case anyone asks. But after that, he throws them away, I suppose.”

Tarin asked, in a voice that he could not keep steady, “He’s got a bin beside his desk, hasn’t he?” Because a search of his memory had suggested so. He was almost certain. He had seen it, but paid it no attention.

“Why, yes,” said Pod. “Last time I passed there, anyway. Don’t suppose it gets emptied too often. But, youngster, are you thinking of finding a broken pass for your lady friend? You can’t just glue the bits together, you know. Yon beastie would know, straight away.”

“Just you wait, friend Podossian,” said Tarin. “Just you wait!”

He ran off. He ran back. “How do I know which one’s for Limm?”

“Her name should be on it,” said the old man. “Other stuff, too, but the name is writ big.”

Tarin could not read. He told Pod so. “Can you show me how it looks?” So Pod wrote the name large on some paper. Tarin stared at it until he had memorized the shapes.

Later that day he sidled to Pod’s desk. He waggled his eyebrows, stood close, and in the shelter provided by his body, lifted a piece of slate briefly out of his pocket. Pod stared hard at it, but could detect no crack.

“Well knock me down. How did you manage that?” the brown man breathed, scarcely moving his lips.

“Tell you one day,” muttered Tarin. “Let’s talk paperwork.”

“Later,” said Pod out of the corner of his mouth. “What you do right now, my lad, is find some place good and safe to stash that. Because if they find it on you, you’re dead. And I don’t mean prettily.”

\* \* \* \* \*

They came for Tarin two nights later. Two burly guards hauled him out of his narrow bunk in the dead of night. They took him before the Bigger named Barrastan whom Tarin remembered from his first day in the prison. One of the guards threw to the floor the meagre collection of things Tarin kept on the shelf beside his bed – spare socks, a few tools, some bits of wire, a pen knife – then went back to stand with the other guard, just behind Tarin’s shoulders.

“Strip,” ordered Barrastan.

Tarin pulled off his ragged clothes while trying to control the trembling of his knees. He was fervently thankful he had at least hidden his three possessions of worth: the comb, the jewels, the pass for Limm. He had cut a slit in the canvas cover of his palliasse, stuffed the items deep into the straw, then unmade the slit in the fashion given to him. He thought it would be proof at least against a casual search.

Barrastan stood, strolled around his desk, and stirred the items with his foot. He picked up the pen knife, examined the small blade.

“ ‘Fixes things,’ ” he said. “That’s what you told us. And yes, you do fix things. Rumour has it, though, that you sometimes fix them a little too well. A little too far beyond what might be thought canny. What have you to say to that, friend Tarin?”

Tarin stammered, “I don’t know what you mean!” But internally, he was appalled. How had that got out? Had Sirtus talked? Or did the people here have a line back to someone on the Island? It didn’t seem possible. It *wasn’t* possible.

The Bigger walked over to the shivering and naked Tarin, and before the latter could duck away, he whipped forward the pen knife so the blade lay under the smaller man’s privates.

“Uh-uh, don’t flinch,” the Bigger scolded. “You might have an accident.” He joggled Tarin’s balls with the blade. “Doesn’t seem likely you’ll ever get a chance to use these, but what do I know? You might be fond of your tiny pills. Don’t think I would be, in your place, but who knows. Stranger things have happened.”

Tarin said nothing, just stayed as motionless as his treacherous muscles would allow.

“You know,” continued the Bigger conversationally, now stirring Tarin’s shrinking member gently with the blade of the knife, “a little squirt like you, it wouldn’t take anything at all to make you talk. I can smell the fear on you. So save

yourself a lot of nasty pain and tell me now.”

Tarin shook his head. “I don’t know anything!” he blurted. Just let them point to something concrete. He wasn’t about to betray himself without such, that was for sure.

Barrastan didn’t take it further. He dropped the knife and went back to lean on his desk.

“You get about, you little fucker,” he said. “Up to all kinds of things. It’s come to our ears. Talking with this and that, taking trays and buckets you’ve got no call to, poking your nose around. Asking questions. Makes us wonder. What are you up to, eh? Plotting something?”

Tarin shook his head violently. “No! I swear it!”

“It’s a cushy little hole you’ve found for yourself,” remarked the big man. “Comfy. Snug. Just a little bit of pleasant work now and then, and a lot of free time in between. Free time! By the Pit! What do you think this is? A rest camp? You’re here to sweat blood! We need to smarten all you odd-jobs up a bit. Leg-irons, maybe. Touch of whip in the morning. That fat bastard Churruk is far too lax. We need to put some spine into him.”

The man carried on in this style for some time, jabbing Tarin with questions and accusations. It became clear though that they had nothing firm to cast before him.

After an hour or so, Barrastan waved him away. “All right, piss off.”

Tarin knew better than to dress in place. Hastily gathering his things, he scampered off.

The interview thoroughly put the wind up Tarin, as perhaps it was meant to do. The effect on Pod, when Tarin told him next day, was similar.

“We mustn’t be seen talking together,” the old man quavered. “There’s spies everywhere.”

“What about my plan?” Tarin muttered in his ear.

“Put it aside for a while. We need to lie low.”

Tarin shook his head. “Every day we waste is a day nearer the Master returning. Once he gets his claws into Limm, that’s it, as far as I’m concerned. I may as well cut my throat on that day. Come on, Pod, you said you could get papers. You promised me.”

“It’s not so easy,” complained Pod. “Tickets for water and fodder, no problem. But I’ve got no idea what kind of pass you’d need to get through the gate, for one thing, and there may be other things. I know what I know, sure enough; but, you have to see, I don’t know what I don’t know. Not many people travel around in the Land.”

Tarin gnawed his thumb, frowning. “I don’t care. If you can get me tickets, I’ll chance the rest. Something will turn up.”

Pod was resentful. “It’s my life you’re asking me to risk, you know, as well as yours. If they catch you, I’ll be the obvious next link in the chain. Did you think of that?”

To that, Tarin had no good answer.

To cap everything, Limm proved uncooperative. Tarin, his heart in his mouth, had dared to wangle another chance to take in her food. Braving once more the awful pool of terror that turned the cell row of the Specials into a small slice of Hell, he squatted beside her bars.

“Listen,” he said, speaking fast and low, “I can get you out.”

Captivated, she knelt close. “How?” she breathed.

“Never you mind,” he replied, flustered by the proximity of her beauty. “Just be ready.”

“Oh come on!” she said. “You can’t just leave it at that. I need to know more than that, else how can I know what to be ready for?”

“Look, I’ve got a pass, all right? One of those the other jailers use.”

Limm looked doubtful. “What’s the plan after that?”

“Steal some horses,” said Tarin, “and ride hell for leather to the Gate. I’ve got passes,” he added, mentally crossing his fingers.

Limm persisted with questions, her initial enthusiasm visibly waning. Mostly these were questions to which Tarin had no good answers. Finally she asked him who else was involved.

“Just me,” he admitted.

Limm sat up. She looked scornful. “Let me get this straight,” she said. “You, a half-size, ragged prisoner, propose to waltz in here, brandishing your pass. The jailer will, of course, simply bow and let me out. We proceed then to the stables and fetch out some horses. The stable people won’t object, naturally. After we’ve got you up on a horse – where you’ve never been before, so you tell me – the guards all line up and wave us goodbye with their handkerchiefs as we ride off into the sunset. Have I about got it straight? I thought you had a *decent* plan.”

“It’s the only chance you’re going to get,” he said doggedly.

“It’s a ticket to a speedy death,” she retorted. “That’s all it is. No thanks. I’ll take my chances with the Master.”

\* \* \* \* \*

A hand shaking his shoulder jerked Tarin awake. Nerves jumping, he rolled quickly to look. Pod.

“Watch yourself!” the older man hissed, “Soldiers!” He vanished back into the gloom.

Tarin could only see one soldier: a burly type at the door, holding a lantern. The man was asking something of one of the sleepy clerks, who pointed across the room in answer. Tarin, eyes wide, his heart thumping fit to burst, watched with waxing dread as the big man approached. Nearer and nearer; until the man stopped by Tarin’s bunk. The soldier lifted his lantern, and now Tarin could see his face.

It was Kell!

“If you’ve anything you want to take,” the man said to him in a low rumble, “fetch it now. Then come and meet me in the courtyard.”

“What’s afoot?” murmured Tarin.

“Escape, old lad,” said Kell in a grating whisper. “Freedom!”

“What, *now*?”

“No time like the present.”

“But... have you got passes, and everything?”

“It’s all laid on, trust me.” Kell grew impatient. “Come on,” he hissed, “don’t piss about. In the courtyard. Two minutes.” Casting a final cautious glance over the sleepers, he turned and walked softly out.

Tarin hastily recovered his treasures from the palliasse. He tied everything into a rag, then crept to where Pod slept. A gleam from his eyes revealed the man.

“Podossian, my true friend and comrade,” whispered Tarin. “I’ve no time to explain. But I’m off!”

“Is it so?” said Pod. “I’d feared... but no matter. Oh my lad, I’m that glad for you. Think of me sometimes, when you... after you...” He couldn’t keep the sadness from his voice. Tarin squeezed his hand, then tore himself away.

It was dark in the courtyard, gloom hiding the stars. Tarin found Kell by the loom of him in the dark.



“You came back for us,” he said. His heart was almost too full for words.

“What’s left of you all,” the man said grimly.

“Are the others...?” began Tarin. But he knew they were gone. The room of bars had new hands.

“Gone from here,” confirmed Kell. “And believe me, mate, dragon’s teeth couldn’t budge them out of where they are now. Those still alive. There’s just nothing to be done.”

“I know,” said Tarin, feeling again the wave of sadness.

“There’s only you left, and that witch Limm,” said the Bigger. “Stay here. I’ll be back. Be ready to move in an instant. I’ve got to bust her out of where she is.” He started to walk away.

“Wait!” hissed the smaller man. “Stop! You don’t need to do that. I’ve got a pass for her.” He extracted it from the rags.

Kell could not see the slate, could only feel it with his hands. “Is this true talk?” he said. “This’ll pass muster?”

“Yes,” said Tarin, trying to put a certainty into his voice that he couldn’t quite feel.

“It’d be a help,” the big man said. “Save us being hunted straight away.” He considered. “Do you know where she’s kept?” he asked.

Tarin tried to describe the way, but Kell cut him short. “Show me,” he said. “Wait.” He strode to the side of the yard, and returned carrying a heavy pack, with his sword strapped on top. “Take this,” he added. “For the look of the thing.”

They made their way back into the dimly lit halls of the prison, Kell stepping out confidently, nodding to the one or two sleepy guards they passed. Tarin staggered in his wake, his arms already aching under the weight of the pack. The night guard outside the Specials goggled at them.

“Got a prisoner requisition,” said Kell to him, holding out the slate.

“What, *now*?” said the guard.

“Master’s orders don’t take no mind of the hour,” replied Kell in tones of indifference.

The man shrugged, turned, open the door to the beast. The creature opened its beady eyes, looked with squinted eyes around at the company. It took the pass, sniffed at it suspiciously, turned it over. But then it bit it, nodded, handed it back.

The guard looked at the slate. “Oh, *her*,” he said. “You can take *her*, and welcome!” He broke the slate in two, then laid the pieces on his desk, before getting up and fetching a ring of keys.

Tarin saw how his hard-faced companion blanched under the assault of misery that grew to its usual tumult as soon as they were well into the chamber. Kell, however, allowed no sign of his disturbance to show in his regular, soldierly stride as he followed the guard along the row.

The end cell. Limm, huddled in a blanket.

“Wake up, witch!” shouted the guard as he unlocked the cell.

The sound of the lock turning as much as his voice brought her sitting up, blinking at the lantern. She saw Tarin, looked up at Kell, and her face changed.

Tarin managed to put a finger to his lips, with a meaning look.

Docilely, the girl came with them. Once in the darkness of the courtyard, she turned to Kell.

“What’s this about?” she murmured.

He explained, in short words. “Are you ready?” he whispered.

She nodded, the motion barely visible. She took Kell's hand, moved closer to him. "Thank you," she said fervently. "Thank you."

Later, the memory of this would cause Tarin some bitterness, but just at present he had something else on his mind. A daring idea had come to him. He tugged at Kell's tunic.

"Couldn't we take someone else too?" he muttered.

"What?" Even Kell's iron nerve was showing the strain by now. He wanted to be away. "No! Forget it! We can't take everyone. Much as I'd like to. But I got papers for you two, and that's it."

Tarin pleaded. "Kell. Please."

"Who, then? Who, blast it?"

"He's a clerk. He's been a loyal friend to me, none truer. I can't just leave him to die alone in this awful place. Please, Kell. I can fetch him in an instant."

The soldier swore. "All right. I suppose I can bluster another horse. But run!"

Tarin crept to Pod's bed, woke him. "What is it?" whispered the old man. "Was that a dream? I thought you'd gone."

"No dream," Tarin assured him. "I came back for you. We've a horse for you. We've got papers, everything."

Pod hesitated. "Lad," he said, the longing plain to hear in his voice. "How I wish I could... It's my leg, you see. I couldn't manage. You get off. I'll be all right."

"Pod," whispered Tarin fiercely. "You remember the slate? I made it whole. It is a gift I have; magic, if you like. I can make your leg whole, too. As good as new. Now, you will have to trust me. There's no time to debate. Come! Come now! Come outside this room, so there's nobody to see, and I will give you back your leg. Come!"

Pod found himself, although he could never afterwards remember how, standing with his small companion in the dark corridor outside the dormitory. Nobody else was in sight, nothing could be heard.

Tarin reached, felt the wrong path taken by the leg those years ago, and gently moved the pieces back. A gasp escaped his friend, standing now straight for the first time in years. Tarin grasped the hand of the astounded and overjoyed Pod.

"Now come," he said, "and waste no words. The quicker we get on our way, the safer we will be."

They found now three figures in the dark of the courtyard. "This is my wife," whispered Kell to Tarin, explaining the addition. "No more talk now. We need to move."

\* \* \* \* \*

Daylight revealed both the landscape around them and the faces of the strangely assorted companions. The fire-mountain, whose high red glow had steadily approached during the night, towered now grey and forbidding close on their right hand. A chain of as yet distant, dark-shadowed mountains barred their forward way, marching to invisibility on either side. On the left hand, a desolate plain spread wide before their gaze, extending beyond sight into the unguessable South. Vegetable life in this dry landscape was sparse, harsh, thorny.

The presence of Limm, and her strange gift, had already in some measure brought the strangers to know each other during the night. Communally, they sensed the resolution of Kell; the cheerfulness of his wife, named to them as Lalast; the hope in the heart of Tarin; and the unbounded gratitude and joy radiating from the wizened old clerk, Podossian. Only Limm, riding silently in their company, remained unreadable. An attentive observer might have noticed that she never once addressed a word to Lalast.

They had four horses. Tarin rode perched before Pod; all the others rode alone. Limm had the best seat of them all. She rode as gracefully as she went on foot.

As soon as the light was well established, the company made a brief pause to rest their aching joints, rub down and water the snorting horses, and to snatch a drink and a bite themselves. Pod walked around, laughing with pleasure at the

miraculous restoration of his long-lost mobility. The brown man's happiness was palpable. He kept shaking both of Tarin's hands. "Oh, oh, youngster," he burred, "I haven't words to express my thanks. It means so much..."

As soon as he could decently shake free, Tarin sought out Kell.

The big man grinned down at him. "I can sense you have questions before you ask them," he said. "It's a strange feeling."

Tarin smiled diffidently. "Well, for one thing, I was wondering where you were taking us." Since their path clearly did not lead to the Gate, where they had entered this land.

Kell pointed to the wall of mountains ahead of them. "See there, where those hills make a kind of notch?" he said. "There's a pass there. I thought we'd do better to try there. There's several reasons. I'll tell you all about it in a minute."

Tarin watched the man for some moments as he gazed around at the landscape in between taking sups from his cup. It was a hard face, but there was that in it nonetheless that invited trust.

"Kell," said Tarin suddenly, "what made you come back?"

The soldier looked back at him, frowning. He took a moment to think how to answer. "I don't know how I can explain it to you," he said at last. "I never liked this job, not from the beginning. But when all's said and done, a man has to do something to feed himself. And it's a hard world.

"See, I hadn't enjoyed no fortune at home. Long story, tell you some day. So anyway, I found my way here to the Master's country, me and some others I know. There was work for us. But it was a grim sort of job, to be sure."

A look of perplexity crossed his face. "But that day, as I left you folk at the Gate, all of a sudden, I couldn't stand it any more. Just couldn't bide with it. It came to me that I'd do better to starve than inflict that sort of misery on folk that had never done me any harm. It shouldn't be in a man to do that sort of thing, whatever it cost him to keep his hand from it." A faint flush crossed his hard features. "Dunno what came over me, really. Never been one to cry over spilt milk before.

"Anyhow, I had that change of heart, as it were, but it were too late for you folk. I had to leave you, see, because I had another job to go to. And I needed to think about things, try to work out what to do. I made out pretty soon that I'd think myself a poor sort of fish if I couldn't do me best to rescue what I could. Likely it wouldn't be much, but that little would be a sight better than nothing. So, I organized this. It wasn't too difficult. Despite that I've not been here too long, I've got to know my way around a bit. So here I am."

"You mean you went off and fetched another load of slaves?" Tarin's voice was hard.

Kell flushed again with embarrassment, a look that sat strangely on his weather-tanned features. "Aw, well, I let 'em go." The unwonted colour seeped away; the man grinned. "Soon as my report makes its way up a level or two, I'll be a badly wanted man."

"You'll be that a bit sooner, now," observed Tarin. "Jail-breaking."

"Sheep as a lamb, sort of thing," the man said cheerfully. He set his cup down and clapped his hands. "Gather round, people!"

The other three came up, wondering.

"Just to let you all know what I have in mind," said Kell. "There wasn't time last night, and with no light and all. Ladies, gentles, you'll have marked that we are not bound for the Gate. I have something else in mind. There's precious few ways in and out of this land, so far as I know; but one of them, more favourable for us than the Gate, maybe, lies in yonder notch, in the hills 'fore us. Reasons for choosing it: one, that way ahead lies nearest to known lands for most of us. Two: the pass is but lightly guarded, since it's not a proper way for troops to get in. It's lesser known, less expected maybe. Three: I know the chap in charge. So all things considered, it looks to me like the better chance.

"We've ridden through the night, and we're tired. The horses are tired. But, if you haven't worked it out by now: sooner or later, they'll be after us. They'll send Orcs. And Orcs won't sleep. If we want to stay ahead of them, we'll need to forego sleep ourselves, as much as we humanly can.

“One more thing. I wouldn’t even attempt this caper if this Master they talk of was about the place. It don’t need a long head to recognize that chap runs things pretty tight. I think, if he was here, he’d be after us already, and he wouldn’t stop. But without him, everything’s just a bit lax. What I’m trying to say is this. Once we cross the border, up there at the top of the range, that lies before your very eyes as I speak: according to my reckoning we’ll be safe. They won’t chase past that line. Orcs can’t leave this land, according to my information, without the Master gives ’em leave. And the rest won’t exert themselves – the will’s lacking in ’em, you can feel that everywhere. So give it your all! Keep yourselves going. Your freedom is within your grasp. All you need is a bit of push, the same as what these fellows here haven’t got. Hold to your pride, show yourselves the free Men you are.

“There’s a guard place a little way ahead, where the ways cross. I expect to reach it by nightfall. If the gods are kind to us, we’ll be able to change our mounts there. I urge you to push on a little further, into the dark hours; we should rest a bit then, off the road. I plan to climb to the pass tomorrow. With luck, we’ll be out of this place tomorrow night, and before the hunt is even up. What do you say? Are you with me?”

Cheers and claps echoed what he could very well sense from their minds.

In spite of Kell’s hopes, the hunt was up much quicker than that. It was Pod’s absence that began it. Already in the morning, an irritated Churruk reported that Pod had not turned in his needed work, and the lazy gimp gutter-rat could not even be found to take his thrashing. Investigations turned up that Tarin, also, was gone; from there, the whole sorry saga was quickly uncovered.

Barrastan, furious, turned away from the screams of the head ostler under the sizzling hot irons. “Send up to guard central straight away!” he shouted. “Rouse out some Orcs! We want trackers, we want hunters. Don’t forget, if those maggots get away, it’s all your balls on the rack as well as mine. Get to it!”

By this time the fugitives were passing the very shoulder of the fire mountain. Orcs were rarely far from their own uneasy thoughts. Several times during the night they had encountered squads of the creatures, passing along the road in both directions. Each time, the ear-flattening horses had to be led to one side until the creatures had passed. No animals would abide Orcs.

Weary and dusty, the party reached the crossing of roads while the sun, glaring directly in their faces, stood yet a span above the ragged line of the looming mountains. From under cover at the guard house, fang-toothed grins revealed the presence of further Orcs. The place itself, however, was run by humans.

The man in charge knew Kell by sight, and knew his reputation somewhat better; but it was a strange cavalcade the soldier paraded before him. Why had Kell brought his wife? And why all this haste? Their horses were knackered, and the riders didn’t look much better themselves.

“Not escaping are you, comrade?” he joked, as he perused their paperwork.

Kell’s lips gave a minimal twitch in answer. “Hardly,” he said.

The guard-captain shuffled the grubby sheets. “I see dockets here for three horses,” he said. “But you’ve got four.”

“Listen, blame those wankers back at Central,” replied Kell in weary tones. “They fucked me up, left one off. I didn’t find out until it was too late to turn back. I’ll roast ’em over a slow fire, soon as I get back. But I got to get on – my orders don’t allow me no leeway.”

The guard-captain blinked at the word ‘orders’. “Don’t know as it’s strictly regular,” he said.

“Look,” said Kell, “Waddy want from me? Blood? If you send back to Central while we scratch our nuts here, you’ll set us back two, three days.”

The guard shrugged. “All right. But just sign me a waiver.” He leered. “Then it’s your arse on the line, ’stead ’o mine, see?”

Forcing their stiff and aching bodies to mount again was agony. Once under way, however, it wasn’t too bad. The horses were brisk and fresh, and the sun had by now sunk behind the ragged-edged screen of the range that loomed up ever higher before them.

They had cursed the sun, the whole of that long, hot day. They never knew that it saved their lives; for the Orcs back at

the fortress had refused to start until nightfall. Only now, as the dusty fugitives approached the first foothills, were the sullen, squinting hunters forming up to run, the whole width of the plain away.

As the light began to fade from the sky, Kell led them off the road in search of a place to rest. He halted them in a fold of ground. The weary riders dismounted stiffly.

“We’ll rest here a space,” he croaked to them. “Few hours. Go on at moonrise.” He turned to Pod and Tarin. “Only got three blankets. Can you two double up?”

The pair nodded, their own throats too dry for easy speech. “Fire?” husked Tarin.

“Better not,” said their leader.

Forcing their aching limbs through the necessary motions, the riders unsaddled their horses and rubbed them down. Water was dispensed. Hobbles tied. Feed bags were strapped on the horses, but the humans were too tired to eat. They threw themselves on the ground and fell asleep in moments.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Up! Get up!”

Tarin woke, bleary-eyed, blinking in the dawn light. Realization came slowly: they had overslept.

Kell was furious, mostly at his own failure of discipline. He went to where Limm lay curled in her blanket and stirred her behind roughly with his foot. “Get the hell up!”

The indignant girl uncovered her head and glared at him through dishevelled hair.

Tarin felt chilled all through, and was so stiff he could barely move. In addition, he was tender all down one side from the hard ground. He and Pod extricated themselves painfully from each other and from the blanket.

“How goes it, comrade?” Tarin enquired of Pod, when they were standing and trying to ease their joints. The older man was clearly in much worse case.

“Oh,” groaned Pod. “I don’t know. Ask me in a while.”

Lalast was already seeing to the horses. Kell would not let the people eat. Under the relentless whip of his tongue, they got under way in as short a time as could be managed.

Unbeknownst to them, the pursuing Orcs were at that moment approaching the crossing. At some point in the night, the weather had changed across the plain. Heavy clouds had gathered from nowhere and now had spread across the whole basin. The hunters glowered at the oppressive dome of light above, but the sun itself was hidden. Conditions weren’t ideal, but they could run in it.

Kell’s party spent the whole of that second weary day climbing into the hills. The track was rough, and the misty drizzle that ghosted down from time to time made it slippery. At times they had to lead the horses on foot. The preceding day had tried their mettle through heat and dust, but they found the present damp and cold almost as burdensome. They rode wrapped in clammy blankets and welcomed the times at which they dismounted and trudged on foot for the opportunity to work some blood through their chilled limbs.

Kell had ridden in silence for most of the morning. The mood-sharing they bathed in suggested he had something on his mind. During a brief halt, as Tarin stood, holding his cup, in contemplation of the harsh lands spread now far below, the captain stumped up and joined him in gazing outwards.

“That little girl,” the man said roughly. “Back on the wagons.”

Tarin looked into the coarse-cut planes of the face above him, nodded bleakly. He remembered.

“You know what would have happened to her, don’t you?”

The smaller man shivered. “I know,” he said.

Kell stood silently for a time. "It was a mercy," he said at last, defiantly. He looked then at his companion as if awaiting justification. But within the strange field of mood transmission which the presence of Limm folded about them, he needed no word from Tarin to convey the Halfling's sad acceptance. After a moment, the soldier turned and walked away.

The party made better time than they expected. The light of day was still full, the hidden sun still high, as the slope eased out near the top of the pass. They found themselves entering a deep notch in the rugged hills. It was not much longer after that when a turn in the road revealed a cluster of fortified stone buildings at the head of the pass.

Kell called a halt. "Just a few words about this place," he said to them. "The chap in charge is called Ondo. He and I go way back. Lal and I, we've known him for years. We come from the same place, you see." His wife beside him nodded. "In fact he was the fellow who got me into this lark," Kell continued. "Now, speaking official, he's got no call to let us go. I don't anticipate any difficulty though; a wink of the eye between old mates, sort of thing. I'm just telling you, just in case. It's possible we'll have to make it up as we go along. So stay alert."

Orcs leered at them from the parapets as they approached. The horses, scenting the creatures, showed white at the eye and jinked uneasily. Neither could the humans still their own disquiets. Crows called harshly in the towering rocks surrounding, and the dank, coarse stones of the fortress lent its walls a forbidding look.

Human guards took care of the horses. The party was ushered then into the chambers of the Castellan. Ondo proved to be a tall man of pleasing face and figure, well turned out, with shrewd eyes of evening blue, and dark hair clubbed and bound behind his neck.

"Kell!" he called out. "You old rascal!" The two men embraced, banged backs. "And Lal! It's been too long." Ondo took her hand, bowed over it. "Lass, you look prettier than ever." The man glanced then with evident curiosity over his three remaining visitors. Old fellow, small fellow, girl? This as much as their grimy and ragged condition marked them clearly as prisoners. "Sit you all down," he continued. "Let me call for some wine."

"Mate," replied Kell, "much as I'd like a sup, we're in a bit of a hurry. Let me just tell you how it is..."

The hunting Rrrk were footsore, and even their iron constitutions had begun to bow beneath the strain. They were near the head of the pass now, and with no fugitives in sight, hope of a result was diminishing fast. The body of them were disgusted; they'd had enough. Had it been down to them, they would have thrown up the chase long since. But they had picked up a brace of fresh leaders at the crossing fort, and these big fellows now loped at the rear, encouraging the jaded and sullen squad with licks and lashes from the whips they carried, while hooting and jeering. They'd made the rankers run in three neat columns, the better to hinder any from sneaking off.

"...I've told you," Ondo said, in a voice now growing impatient, "it just isn't on. No. Mate, try to understand. It would be more than my skin is worth. Old comrades is all very well; and you know I'd go through a lot for you. But I don't know these-here folk with you, see. You can't expect me to put meself under torture just because you want to spring a few prisoners. It isn't reasonable. You wouldn't do the same for me, you know you wouldn't."

Kell, his face set in equally stubborn lines, shook his head. "I owe these folk," he said, "and I mean to pay that debt, come what may. Don't stand in my way, Ondo. For the sake of old friendship, I'm asking you."

Tarin, having searched the Castellan's nature, felt pessimistic. This man, decent enough at his core, had been under the hand of the Master. The familiar iron bonds kept his will in bounds. Ondo was not able to leave the Master's domain; and there were many other choices he was barred from taking.

"Come with us!" Kell was saying. "Away from this hell-pit! It's no life for any man with an ounce of self-respect. Open your eyes to it! Lal and I are never coming back. Stiffen your spine, man, and come with us!"

But his countryman behaved as if he had not even heard this suggestion. Tarin, looking within, saw that the warpings of the Master's cage had indeed left the man unable even to entertain the idea. For Ondo, escape was not only impossible, it was literally unthinkable.

Sighing to himself, Tarin began tracing the ugly tangle of compulsion that had been threaded through the man's mind. To his dismay, he found he was faced by a repair which was not laid out, transparent and obvious, beneath his inner hand. Human minds were complicated; but this case seemed to go further than that.

He was troubled also by the moral dimension. It was not so very long ago that he had felt that even the slightest repair

of an inanimate object constituted a trespass against the prerogatives of the gods – a thing outrageous, almost blasphemous. And if that were so, how much graver was the transgression to heal a human nature? Yet he had reached his hand to this once already, without hesitation, in the hope to save his own life, as well as those of others. And now he had the same awful deed once more in contemplation.

But indeed, he saw no alternative that he could stomach. Again, his hand was forced.

Teeth had been bared and hands laid on swords by the time he was ready. Tentatively, he reached out with his mind and, as carefully as he could, undid what he could detect in Ondo's mind of the Master's constraints. He had suspicions that some of the Master's bitter iron remained yet hidden in the man's soul; and the thought troubled him. But what he could do, he did.

Ondo stopped in mid-threat. He passed a hand over his face, looking bewildered.

“What have I been saying?” he said. “Some confounded nonsense.” He looked around him in confusion.

Kell, eyeing him warily, remained keyed up for action. “If you won't come with us, stand aside,” he growled. “Or we'll walk straight through you.”

“What?” Ondo held a hand to his head. “I'll come with you. Of course I will!”

It took several more minutes of confused back and forth before the radical nature of his change of heart became fully clear to the others. Kell came to his friend and clasped his shoulders.

“Comrade,” he said, “you're a hard nut! But it's glad I am that you see it our way at last. What say you – shall we be about it with no more delay?”

The still somewhat dazed Ondo agreeing, they set about their preparations. Underlings were sent scurrying to stuff provisions into packs. A horse from the garrison was saddled, and another set in pack harness. But when Ondo, girded now in mail, with his sword at his side, attempted to explain his wishes to his lieutenants, and to give them orders respecting the fortress, he met blank resistance.

“I don't understand,” said their leader, shaking his head.

“It is very simple,” said Ondo, speaking slowly, since this was his second repetition. “I am going out. West. Out. With my companion here, and his friends. There's nothing *to* understand. I am going out, that's all.”

“To Central?” persisted the puzzled lieutenant.

“No!! West!!”

The man just shook his head again. It was incomprehensible. Nobody went 'out.' 'Out?' His mind slid off the idea.

Finally, under Ondo's forceful urging to forget about understanding, and for all love simply to attend to his orders and go and open the outer gate, the man moved reluctantly to comply. Standing by the wide-flung portal, as the company tightened girths in the adjoining court, the man still looked confused.

“But who's coming in?” he asked plaintively.

Ondo paid him no mind. The gate was open, the day outside was waning. “Let's be going!” he called sharply to those not yet mounted.

Even as he did so, a noise of shouting commenced in the far depths of the court behind them. It grew rapidly to a clamour. Orc heads popped over the inner parapet, stared at the riders, yelled back down to their yet-hidden comrades.

Realization flashed upon Kell. He tugged his reins, clattered his mount around in the narrow court. “The chase is up!” he cried. “Get moving!”

Tarin was in place; Pod scrambled up behind him, then spurred his horse to follow the others. Orcs were streaming into the court now, yelling. Some of them carried bows.

Sheer fright got the fugitives started. In a clatter of hooves, the horses jostled out the gate. The Orcs were snatching at their very heels, but the creatures skidded to an unwilling halt at the threshold, which they were forbidden to cross. The road out led through a narrow defile for some hundred paces, before turning behind cover. As the riders went thundering down this gully, arrows began to nick and skitter off the rocks. It does not take a frightened horse long to run a hundred paces; alas, it was too long for some. Tarin felt the shock behind him as Pod was hit. Pod gasped. Three arrows thunked almost together into the quarters of Limm's horse in front of him. The animal skidded, then fell, throwing Limm clear. Tarin and Pod's horse leapt the sprawling beast on the instant, but they then had to swerve furiously as Kell, just ahead of them, brought his own mount to a skidding, braking turn. Having jinked around, the captain spurred furiously back up the slope. The storm of arrows was focussed on him now, but he had his round shield up, and those piles that found their way past only bounced off his mail. Tarin craned backwards to see Kell, using the blazing strength of sudden battle, scoop up the tall girl reaching her arms to him. He threw her across the saddle in front of him before spurring his terrified mount to return. Rearing and pawing, with Kell sawing at the reins, the horse wheeled, then pelted back down to join the others.

They all pulled up gasping around the bend, in terror lest the Orcs followed. But slowly they realized that their hope, Kell's promise, had held: the Orcs remained inside the open gate.

Humans and horses alike were panting fit to burst. Kell set Limm down. The athletic girl appeared to have taken no hurt, but other horses had arrows sticking from their rumps, including Tarin and Pod's.

Pod. He was sagging into Tarin, forcing him forward, his rattly breathing loud in Tarin's ear. Ondo was already there, reaching to the brown man. He eased him out of the saddle and down. He had to lie Pod on his side, because the old man had three arrows protruding from his back.

Kell strode up, looking anxious. "Can he ride?" But he knew the answer already.

Ondo shook his head. He made a thumbs down sign, out of Pod's view.

Tarin knelt beside his friend. Back up the road, frighteningly near, frantic horns were blowing in the fort. Tarin found Pod's wrinkled brown hand, held it.

His friend's eyes opened slowly, and found Tarin's. Pod tried to speak, but couldn't. His lips could only shape the words. He squeezed Tarin's hand, then once again. But as the halfling squatted there, stricken with helpless grief for his friend, the grip slowly relaxed. The eyes grew glassy. Tarin realized his friend was no longer breathing.

"We have to get out of here," said Kell urgently. "We're still far too close." He squeezed Tarin's shoulder. "He's gone, Tarin. Come on, old mate. There's nothing we can do. We have to leave him."

Unable to stop his weeping, the small man nevertheless clambered up in front of Kell. The others arranged themselves as best they might, then spurred up their mounts. The road led down, into the burning sunset.

Night found them still high on the mountain. Tarin, bouncing in front of Kell, had been weeping silently the whole time. He wept as they dismounted in the gathering dark, wept as the horses were hustled into the protection of a small bay off the path. Still weeping, he lay on the rough ground and huddled into the blanket he had so recently shared with his friend.

He wept not only for the loss of Pod, but for all the agony he had witnessed, all the lives that had ended in grief. Sirtus and his family, meeting one by one their miserable fates. Tarin's nameless neighbour on the wagon, who had surely not survived long in the mines. The women, outraged by bestial men in the most grotesque manner imaginable. The tortured Specials; the desperate forest of hands at the bars.

Tarin had left the evil valley of the Master behind him; he was not so sure it would ever leave him.

Kell woke as the waning moon peeped over the dark rim of the mountains and spilled pale light upon the exhausted forms huddled in the bay. Wearily, he stirred his companions to wake and clamber onto their head-hanging mounts. Nobody felt rested; all were sore, hungry, and anxious.

Footing was treacherous; the moon, casting long sections of track into impenetrable shadow, hindered almost more than it helped. Later, as it rose higher, the going improved. The gradient also decreased; the path by this time was winding its way down the depths of a long, slanting valley.



The valley ahead of them now opened into a great bowl, canted downward in the still descending hills. Here the weary party encountered the first heart-lifting sight of their journey. A stream spouted chattering from a defile on their right and could be made out winding its way down the gently falling base of the bowl ahead. The meadows to either side of this waterway were thickly sown with acres of white flowers that sent back the gentle light of the moon in swathes of gleaming silver. Their delicate scent entranced the nose as the wondering travellers emerged into the wide spaces of the bowl. It was all unutterable beautiful.

Bathed in the delicious scent, surrounded on all sides by silver beauty beneath the moon, and feeling at peace for the first time in days, the party cast themselves to the earth and fell into a dreamless sleep for the short hour or two that remained of the night.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tarin opened his eyes. He had been lying on his back; thus what he beheld first was a blue arch of dawn sky, streaked with fingers of rose that converged towards his feet. He sat up, directed his gaze down the slope, where a glorious sight rose before his eyes.

He had dreamed of mountains, never having seen one. The fences of the Dark Land behind them, in their hard and harsh reality, had withered that dream unto a wisp of regret. Tarin now however was able to shove all that dispiriting experience to one side, to recognize it as dross, as betrayal; for before him towered at last a veritable mountain. What he beheld, far away across the miles of sunlit air, was a mighty blue pile of earth and stone, its snow-covered peak glimmering rose-shaded in the dawn. The beauty of it caught his breath.

Kell was already up, ministering to his horse nearby. "Blue-head," he remarked to Tarin. "That's what we call her. Quite a sight, eh?"

The great, flower-covered dell lay yet in shadow. Tarin saw that Lalast and Ondo were also up and busy; Limm lay still curled in her blanket. After a few quiet words with the others, Tarin folded his blanket away and busied himself making a small fire. The other three were concerned with the horses, at which task he could be of small help.

Tarin and Pod's horse had been badly hit. It was lame, and failing. Kell's horse, although not so severely wounded, also had an orkish arrow sticking out of it.

All three of the Biggers were clearly at home among the animals, but it was Lalast who appeared to know the most. She stroked the lame and distressed horse, inspected its hindquarters gravely with the others, and shook her head.

They put that aside for now and turned to the other. This, Kell's horse, as well as its arrow, also had some glancing wounds. The best that could be done for these in present circumstances was to clean them. The arrow was more serious. Examining it, they found the projectile was not deeply lodged, and could perhaps be pushed through and clear. Somehow, with Lalast talking in a continuous, reassuring stream to the restless and frightened horse, and stroking its head with a gentle hand, while Kell pushed and Ondo steadied, with some difficulty they managed at last to free the wound. After it was cleansed, Kell walked the horse to and fro while the others looked on with critical gaze. They nodded. The animal passed muster.

The wounded animals were turned loose to graze with the others while their erstwhile riders saw to their own sustenance. Joined by a sleepy, blanket-huddled Limm, the party gathered around the fire and drank gratefully from the brew that Tarin had prepared. Provisions were rifled from packs and munched.

Tarin was still very apt to shed tears. He could feel the compassion of the others, although this tended to make him weep the more. Kell clapped a hand to his shoulder, muttering in rough sympathy, "Hard lines, old fellow." Ondo grunted in diffident accord. But it was Lalast who came to Tarin, put an arm about his shoulders, and hugged him close.

"It was an awful place," she murmured. "We all feel it."

It was only Limm whose attitude remained opaque.

Beautiful though it was, the bowl lay still far too close to the mountains. All of them wished to put some greater distance between themselves and the evil land that lay still so close at hand.

Kell took hold of the bridle of the arrow-shot horse. He addressed the company.

“We can’t take this horse,” he said. “It can’t carry anything, and it will slow us up. Had we a proper stables, we could maybe do something. Maybe; maybe not. But here and now we’ve got to cut our losses. I’m sorry for it.”

Nobody had anything to say in reply. Kell, with some difficulty, coaxed the stricken horse up the slope near at hand, towards a clump of dark-needled pines. Silence fell. Some minutes later he emerged again, wiping his sword with a handful of grass.

“Well,” he said roughly, after he had rejoined them, “that’s done. Now look, we’ve got five folk and four horses. I’m not so light meself, and I need to favour mine a bit anyway. Limm, can you double up with Tarin?”

Limm, wide eyed, looked from Kell to Tarin. “Me?” she said. “*I’m* not taking him.”

In the end, Tarin sat in front of Lalast. He was glad of it. He could not imagine how he would manage if he ever found himself perched on a horse by himself; but apart from that, as he had with Pod, he took comfort from the warmth of a body behind. But Lalast was far more skilled on a horse than the old clerk had been, which resulted in a smoother, more comfortable ride.

As they left the vale of moon-flowers, Tarin glanced back with regret. He thought it unlikely he would ever glimpse its beauty again.

The valley led now in a gentle descent through the most pleasant country Tarin had ever known. Tender grass grew in plenty, and the air was scented by herbs. The firs of the heights gradually gave way to fragrant cedars. They began to pass nut and fruit trees: walnuts and wild apricots, apples small but tartly refreshing, and many more. The late season had brought these to fullness, thus the travellers were able to satisfy their appetites along the way without ever needing to leave the saddle. Many of the trees were strange to Tarin. It was a warm country, milder than his own, further in the South.

Tarin felt shy with Lalast at first, but she was easy to talk to.

“How I wish I could take a bushel of these fruits back home!” she said wistfully.

“Don’t you have them there?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No, it’s too cold for them in the hills where we live,” she said. “And too dry in the plain below us.”

Tarin liked her. There wasn’t any meanness in her nature, which lay plain and pleasant before his inner gaze. He wondered how such a person had found herself in the land they had just escaped from. After some while, after he had told her as much as he cared to recall of his own adventures, he got up the courage to ask.

Lalast spent some thought on the words to choose for her reply. “It’s like this,” she said finally. “Back home, it’s not so easy. It’s a hard country, hard people. And you know how it always is: there are those that run things, and those that don’t. Kell and me, we’re just common folk. It’s hard for such as we to squeeze a living, and if you don’t watch your step, the priests are onto you. They’ll cost you money at every step, or worse. Now Kell’s father had a bit of land, so he and his brother were brought up comfortable. But I probably don’t need to tell you that the Mountain Gods themselves couldn’t make my man into a farmer. His Da tried to bring him in the way of it, but Kell’d be off all the time, fighting and that, or getting into other sorts of trouble. In fact, he got into bad trouble in the end, with the priests. I think it marked him, made him bitter.

“Ondo was maybe in worse case still, ’cause there was no land with his folk. Which was a shame, because he’s a fine man. We knew him from a lad. In fact we all grew up near each other, the three of us. Well Ondo went off some time back, but then not so long ago, last year, he sent word. Tidings of places to be had. Not too pleasant work always, it seemed, but everybody needs to earn their bread some way. Kell and me were together by then, and we were scratching out our living pretty desperate, so we thought to go off to give this a try. Well, you know what sort of a place it turned out, back there in that horrid dry hole we just got out of. Awful place, awful. I’d lie awake nights. There was a few other wives there, but they were funny. Something missing with them, or something. They gave me the creeps, to be honest.”

The woman stayed silent for some moments, as they jogged along.

“I don’t know quite how to say the next bit,” she went on at last. “I love my man, and I wouldn’t say anything disloyal about him for the world. But nobody’s perfect, and sometimes there’s a deal of rough to take along with the smooth. No

sense complaining about it, that's just how it is.

"But something changed in him. Something good. Something that brought us out of that terrible land, so that here we are, riding through this loveliness. Mind, I always knew he was a good man, inside. Even if sometimes that good were buried a bit deep. He's different now, though. Since not too many weeks ago. Seems he's cast off the bad feelings. You can see the inner man more." She put an arm around Tarin and squeezed him out of pure happiness. "It's made *such* a difference."

Tarin, not knowing whether to feel guilty or proud, thought he knew the cause. He could never tell her.

The party halted for the day in wind-murmuring woods, nestled in the depths of that kindly land. Around the camp-fire that evening, Kell spoke up. "Time we talked a bit about what we mean to do now, I suppose," he said.

Ondo finished gnawing a chop bone, cast the rest into the fire. "Go back home, for me," he said. "I've had enough of that kind of lark." He jerked his thumb to indicate the shadowed wall of mountain behind them, now receded thankfully into the distance.

"Well, yeah," said Kell. "Same with us. You know how it is at home, not the best. But we'll make out with something." He nodded to Tarin and Limm. "I was wondering more about you two."

Tarin and Limm each looked at the other with much the same expression. It had not occurred to either that they might end up grouped as the same item.

Limm spoke first. "I'm not going back to my people," she said determinedly. "I had enough of them when I left, and nothing about that's changed. All they wanted to do was use me." Her resentment showed plainly in her voice. "You know what I can do. This thing I have. Nobody wanted me for myself. Only for that."

Through some further back-and-forth it emerged that her homeland lay on the skirts of a mighty forest, far to the north. Her people were hunters, not farmers. Limm stoutly maintained that she could look after herself – provided they would give her a horse, to replace the one stolen by the Master's raiders. Stolen by Kell, she said, shooting him an accusing glance.

Kell shrugged. "You'll decide for yourself, I suppose," he said. "What about you, Tarin?"

Tarin wanted with all his heart to follow Limm, but he thought that dream was hopeless. He wasn't blind, or deaf; it was painfully clear to him what low opinion she held of him.

Therefore the small man said slowly, "It is the same for me. That is, I can't go back. Or won't. I wanted to find the Elves. People told me I could find them if I journeyed west, to the Mountains. That's what they said. But I was following the road. I don't even know where I am, now."

The others looked at each other, surprised. None of them had imagined that any such dream as this lay close to the heart of their small companion.

"I can show you where we are," said Kell. "I'll draw you a map in the morning. That road you were on, that ends up at the mountains, right enough. The Misty Mountains, they call 'em, which I'd guess they are, too, though I've never been there. They run right up into the North. As for Elves: there's Elves everywhere, mate, if a body can only find them. Mostly they don't care to be found. This side of the Misties? Yes, I think there are some. Mostly, though, I heard they have a big city, or land, somewhere on the other side. It's all a long way, though."

Not for the first time on his journey, Tarin felt daunted by the sheer size of his world. "How would I get there?" he asked faintly.

"Look," said Kell. "We're set to cross the great river in a day or two. You want mountains, you have to cross the river anyway. Your best course, I would say, would be to stick with us for a while. Then, at some point, handy to you, like, you can turn north." He turned to the tattooed girl. "Limm, honest, I'd advise you the same. Stick with us for a bit. About all there is east of the river is your forest, so far as I've heard, and that filthy place behind us. For anything else, your best course is to cross over."

Tarin scratched his head. The picture still wasn't clear to him. "But where are you three going?" he asked.

“Sorry,” said Kell, poking the fire. “Should’a said. Well, old Blue-head there, what we been seeing since a day or two, she’s the start of another chain of peaks that runs off to the West. Not the Misties, but another lot.”

“*More mountains?*” said Tarin.

“They got ’em all over, son. Anyways, our country lies on their northern edge, some way off yet. So that’s where we mean to head, dead west from here, along the foot of the range.”

In the end, they agreed to stay together for the time.

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They might have thought they were done with the Master, but the Master was not yet done with them. His final grievous stroke fell as they were debating, the next day, how best to cross the river. They had reached its reedy banks early that morning. The grey expanse of quietly flowing water stretched before them, a long bow-shot across.

Of the five of them, only Limm could swim. That meant a boat.

“There’s settlements along here,” said Kell. “That’d be the place to get a boat. Buy one, if nobody’ll take us across. Steal one, at last resort – or at least, borrow, for we’d look after it, and leave it to be found again.”

Tarin thought of Sirtus’s jewels in his pouch. He suspected that even the least of these would suffice to purchase a sumptuous, many-decked galleon. Copper pence were more the right measure for such a humble coracle as they required.

In the middle of the talk, Ondo suddenly stood, letting his mug spill to the ground. The others, gazing up at him in surprise, observed with alarm that the man’s features had turned chalky white.

The man’s eyes glittered down at them. “The Master has returned!” he said to them in a strained whisper. His face became abstracted then, and frightfully drawn, as if he was listening to some fearful inner voice.

Kell laid his own mug aside and started to get up. “Mate,” he said, “calm down. He can’t get at you here.”

But alas, he could. Ondo turned suddenly and ran like a hare, scattering his comrades. He ran straight for the river. Kell bolted after him, but was not able to reach the man before he floundered into the shallows in apparent desperation. Very quickly, Ondo got out of his depth, and began sinking below the surface before bobbing up again, splashing dementedly all the while.

Kell, waist-deep, unable to reach his comrade, turned his head to the others. He shouted to Limm. “Get him! Quick!”

Limm broke out of her frozen posture and sprang quickly in. With some difficulty she and Kell succeeded at last in dragging the man to shore.

Ondo was moaning. “I have to cross running water!” he cried. “Running water!” He fought to break free, back towards the water. But all of a sudden, he spasmed, then ceased to struggle. The three bodies collapsed in a heap.

Kell and Limm extricated themselves, knelt at the side of their sodden companion. Kell checked the man’s breathing, pulse.

He looked up, white-faced. “He’s dead,” he said wonderingly.

Tarin, through his shock, could not help but remember those tangles of coercion that he had been unable even fully to trace, let alone fix, in the former Castellan’s mind. The dismal suspicion grew in him that nobody could escape the Master, having once been his slave.

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The Master was naturally not pleased to find such a disgraceful breach as had occurred in his absence. However, he felt it had now been amended as well as it might. He could not, just at present, touch the remaining four fugitives, but he had seen them in the mind of his servant, and knew them. The two from the land which worshipped imaginary Mountain Gods were reachable, given time. Of the others, the girl intrigued him. Hers was a great gift, for which he

could imagine many uses. He would set a watch on her people, which would no doubt turn her up in time.

The small half-man was of little account, and could be ignored.

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The shock of Ondo's death, and what it implied of the reach and malice of the Master, unnerved them completely. Their former light mood of relief vanished like moon-mist under the harsh rising of the sun. Because of this, when they found a settlement, Kell's last resort became their first – they stole a boat rather than dare venture among strangers.

It was a row-boat, not over-large, offering just sufficient room for the four of them. It was, however, designed of course for Biggers. Tarin, who was the only one of them with any experience in boats, had expected to row. He had not forgotten his former status among his people as an ox of a fellow, of mountainous strength; and he certainly thought he was up to a few hundred yards row, even hauling three lumps of Biggers as freight. In the event, he quickly became exasperated. The oars were simply set too far apart to allow him to exert his strength. Since a short trial by Kell almost resulted in disaster, in the end, Tarin skulled with one of the heavy oars from the rear, trying not to snag the line leading the swimming horses.

The crossing took some time, the current in the meantime carrying them some way downstream. It was a long swim for the horses. The journeymen found nothing on the far side they could tie the boat to, but they beached it on a spit of shingle and hoped its owner would be able to find it without too much difficulty. After rubbing down the horses, they made camp for the remainder of the night. In their new fearful mood, they dared not light a fire. However, whether because of Ondo's notion about the shielding effect of running water, or for some other reason, nothing happened to them. Their initial terror was already beginning to fade. They set off in the morning with renewed hope.

It was a long journey lasting many days, on which they encountered many difficulties in keeping the horses shod and themselves fed. The route lay along the foot of the mountains, as Kell had said. On their left hand, the line of high country stretched beyond vision both before and behind; to their right extended a seemingly limitless, open grassland, whose flatness was only relieved by low, rounded ridges that lay across their direction of travel.

The mountains to their left were cloaked in dense forests of dark fir. Kell led them well out from the forest skirts. Limm wanted to hunt in the forest, but Kell shook his head. The wild men would get her, he said.

What wild men? Limm wanted to know.

“Wild men are short, and brown of hide, and they have eyes like black stones,” their leader told them. The others were surprised to hear a note of almost superstitious awe enter his voice as he described these creatures. “They have magic powers: they can vanish and appear again where they like, and they can turn themselves into stone, and back again. They hunt with poison darts. Ordinary folk do well to stay out of their way.”

It was a fair country, that wide land. The waters were sweet and the grazing was lush. Tarin wondered a little to find it so unpeopled; for they never crossed a path, and they neither saw any settlements nor met fellow travellers. Game there was in plenty: herds of great deer, or wild cattle; even buffalo. Kell warned them to be wary for lions and other great cats.

Although the summer had turned, the weather continued kind. One fine day, Kell and Lalast went for a stroll together away from the camp site. They felt the strength of Limm's strange influence diminish as the distance extended.

“It's an unaccustomed feeling,” remarked Kell to his wife, “not to sense what you and Tarin are each thinking.”

They had all grown used to the effect of the forest woman's presence. Bathed in her strange influence, they had come to know each other through and through. Thus the three of them were all perfectly aware that Kell and Lal loved each other; that Tarin had lost his heart to Limm; that Lal, somewhat plain as she was herself of face and figure, felt flashes of jealousy towards the forest girl; and that Kell, although admiring the girl's curves, held no very high opinion of her character.

Limm had no notion of these currents. Nor could they in their turn read her feelings; although from the fact of her making constant eyes at Kell, and ignoring so far as possible both Tarin and Lalast, some part of them at least was plain.

Lal put her arm around the sturdy waist of her man. “I'll always know what you're thinking,” she said, looking up to him with sparkling eyes.

He smiled his fondness at her, but he had something else on his mind. "What are we going to do about those two?" he said.

Lal knew he felt a bond to Tarin and would keep the small man by him, if he could.

"I don't think it would do," she said. "Honestly, love. You know what folk are like at home. Strangers that don't know the rites: they'd get eaten alive." She meant by the priests. "They wouldn't last a month. You know they wouldn't."

It depressed him to admit that she was right. Not for the first time, he wondered why human beings got themselves into such messes: how it was that people seemed to be capable, all on their own, with no Master to twist and warp things, of making for themselves such oppressive societies. It seemed to him that most folk just wanted the chance to go about their affairs in peace; but in his land, at least, peace was in short supply. Tarin and Limm wouldn't find much of it there, that was for sure.

"I doubt they'll stay together," he said. "That Limm, she'll want to go off on her own."

"I'm not so certain," Lal replied. "She might not quite like the notion, when she comes to it, of wandering off into strange country on her own. And Tarin will stick by her, if he can. You know what he's like about her."

"She's not worth him." He shook his head.

"No," she agreed. "But when did that ever have anything to do with love?"

He thought about this, sighed. "Let's go back," he said. "This good weather won't last."

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Their path had been curving north for some time. There came a day on which a mighty wall of rock and snow took form slowly in front, appearing through the mists as they rode. The party held their course north to pass around the end of this great spur. Towards the close of that day, as its drizzle cleared away, the riders rounded the last, massive, saw-toothed outliers. A great glen in the mountains opened gradually to their left. By that time the sun was setting behind a line of further peaks whose snowy heads extended in a ragged line as far as the eye could see. Shadows gathered on the slopes. In the deeper valleys that wound their ways into the hills, it was already evening.

For the first time in weeks, signs of human occupation were evident: here and there the distant blue of smoke, and a scatter of glimmering lights among the shadowed glens.

They camped for the night at a vigorous, snow-fed stream that foamed down from the hills. Next morning, as they supped hot brew, Kell broke the news that lay heavily on his heart.

"Comrades," he said, "here we must part. We are come to those parts we know, me and Lal. Our home lies up in those hills. I won't waste words on it. These things just have to be."

Tarin had known, of course, but the news took Limm by surprise. Her gaze at Kell was filled with consternation.

"But..." she stuttered. "Do we have to part? I thought we'd go home with you, see what it's like for a while. If we may," she added.

Kell shook his head. "We talked this over already, me and Lal. Lass, it wouldn't be any good. You see, ours is a hard kind of country. For people as have grown up with it, well, we can manage. But strangers come quickly to grief. Our Gods of the Mountains, see, they run things in our land. They run everything, through the priests, like. And they're stern gods, very stern. And unforgiving. Trust me, lass, it just isn't on."

Limm looked around, at a loss. "Then I don't know where I should go." She turned the unwelcome problem over some more, feeling despondent, huddled in her blanket against the damp of the autumn day. She looked up suddenly towards Tarin, and for the first time ever, perhaps, bent the full light of her gaze upon him. The little man actually wasn't too bad looking. Homely, maybe, but nothing to run screaming from. The squirt had sewn himself neater clothes during the journey to replace the rags he had worn when she first saw him. She knew he could hunt and trap, and cook, and do a number of other useful things. Perhaps his company wouldn't be quite so insupportable as she had until now supposed. And such a little fellow would be easy to fend off, should he venture into insolence.

“What are *you* going to do?” she asked him brusquely, almost rudely.

Stay with you, if you’ll let me, he answered silently in his head. But aloud he said diffidently, “I always thought I’d head north, maybe, and try to find the Elves.”

Elves. The notion had its attraction. Elves were an object of wonder and reverence to Limm, who had caught no more than scattered glimpses of them in her short life. To live among such wonderful folk, to be as one of them, in all their grace and glamour: wouldn’t that be fine?

“Not a bad idea,” she said. She looked again at Tarin, almost furtively. Well, why not. She could always change her mind if he grew tiresome. “I suppose we could ride together for a time,” she added in surly tones. “For convenience. Provided you keep your place.”

There seemed to be not much to say to that. Tarin’s joy, however, was apparent to Lal and Kell, as were their sympathies and doubts to him.

He knew what they thought of Limm. Probably, he admitted to himself, they were right. But he could not help himself.

Kell broke the silence. “You’ll take two of the horses, of course.”

The offer caught Tarin by surprise. He had not had any thought but to go on foot. “But I can’t ride,” he protested. He had ridden the whole journey until then perched in front of Lalast.

Limm snorted. “Nonsense. Anyone can ride. Children do it.”

This just seemed starkly impossible to Tarin. The average horse’s back stood considerably higher than his head. He looked shyly at Limm. “Couldn’t I ride with you?”

“No!” He dared propose such a liberty? Completely out of the question. She wondered whether her decision had been a good one after all – the little man was being annoying already.

Lalast took Tarin’s hand. “Try,” she urged him. “We’ll stay here today, and put you in the way of it. Limm’s right, Tarin. It’s not so hard, with a little practice.”

Despite his considerable misgivings, that is what they did. With shortened stirrups, and some judicious padding of the saddle, Tarin found by the end of the day that he could manage, with moderate security, to remain aloft during a gentle walk. But he felt he was merely perched on the horse; in no sense could he be said to be riding it.

Towards evening, as Tarin rubbed ruefully at his bruises, Kell squatted down with them by a bit of bare ground. He wanted to sketch for them the lie of the land.

“These hills here,” he began, “they run up towards sunset for I don’t know, thirty leagues or so. See?” He scratched lines in the soil. “Then there’s a gap. After that, they turn and run north. That’s your Misty Mountains. How far they go, I don’t know – out of any tale I ever heard, anyway.

“Now, Elves: a man can meet Elves anywhere there’s trees and sweet water. But they have their main place, ’cording to what I heard, on the far side of the Misties. If you want to get there, your best plan would be to keep along as we’ve been going until you pass through the gap, here. Then north. But to be honest, I wouldn’t advise it. There’s a power of rough folk living just the other side, and its a long road through them to the Elves. You run the danger of crossing the Sea People in those parts, too. They come from afar to cut down the trees; though what for, I dunno. But they’re folk I’d be a bit leery of having much to do with, if I were you. Kind of unaccountable.

“All right. Word is that you can find Elves on this side too, ’round about here.” He scratched more lines. “I reckon you can get there safe enough if you know what to dodge. Now for starters, see this area here, at the start of the Misties, you’ll avoid that, if you’ll be guided be me. It’s a big, dark wood. There’s tales of that place, and they ain’t canny ones. Walking trees, they tell of, and even stranger. Folk who venture in don’t often come out again. I’d give it a wide berth, if I was you. Now if you skirt it, but keep to this side of the River, you should meet your road again, Tarin, about here.” More scratches. “See? That’s the track you was on when... well, you know, when you was caught.” He cleared his throat in embarrassment before continuing. “It’s a Dwarf road. It leads from far in the East, places I’ve never been, past your folk on their island by your account, before it runs at last up into the Misties. That’s where the Dwarves live, deep inside the rock. Odd folk. But you want to cross over the road, because just after, nestled at the foot of the Misties, like,

is this wood. They call it the Golden Wood. I've never been there either, but I've heard tales, and if you are looking to find Elves this side of the mountains, then I reckon there is your best bet."

They said their goodbyes on the following morning. Tarin picked out half of the lesser gems that Sirtus had given him, and wrapped them in a cloth. He handed these now awkwardly to Lal.

Lalast raised her gaze from the pretty stones to look with wondering eyes on Tarin. The two Mountain folk could hardly stumble out their thanks. A gift of such value would make a big difference to their futures in their homeland, which until that point had been looking a little bleak.

Tarin and Limm splashed their way across the ford, and set off into the North. The Mountain couple stood for a long time, gazing after them.

\* \* \* \* \*

The first day Limm and Tarin spent together set the pattern for many others. Few words were exchanged, and those only concerning necessary subjects. The evening was awkward. After the meal had been prepared, they sat on opposite sides of the fire, with nothing to say, their gazes not even crossing. Limm felt out of countenance, Tarin was shy.

"Well, I'm turning in," said Limm at last, in tones almost of defiance. She arranged herself in blanket and furs on the far side of the fire, her knife stuck ostentatiously in the ground beside her.

Tarin sighed and performed his own preparations for sleep. He lay awake for a long time, self-conscious from the close presence of this lovely woman.

They had a long, dull journey through the chill weather of the gathering autumn. Wordlessly, the pair had opted for the route this side of the mountains. To begin with, they set their course directly north; but since they had a constant need for firewood, which was not to be found on the open plain, they sought rather to camp each night in one of the shallow willow- and alder-fringed gullies that wound their slow way from left to right across their path. A natural progression brought them ever further to the east until at last they were making their way, still northward, but beside the fuller stream towards which all the brooks had been trending. Here they could be sure of both wood and water, as well as good grazing for the horses.

The quiet land was full of all kinds of birds and beasts, ranging from the smallest wren to the great cattle and bison that roamed the plain. Predators were about as well, but even the greatest of these was wary of fire. This meant a fire had to be kept up during the night; a task that seemed, as with many of the more onerous duties of the camp, to fall mostly to Tarin. However, he did not mind; he lay often awake in any case, so he felt he might as well be up and doing as lying and brooding.

Tarin found the constant presence of Limm both gratifying and oppressive. He could never have enough of covertly admiring her: from the grace of her figure, or the easy way she moved with the motion of the horse; to her dark hair, clear skin, and handsome features. The fine shape of her brows and the way her nose tipped up slightly at the end, and the green-inked bird tattoos on her cheeks, were all graven on his aching heart.

At the same time, she was no easy companion. She had few words for him, and no amiable ones. The only times she favoured Tarin with a direct sight of those glade-green eyes, the expression they held was either impatient or scornful.

Nevertheless, he could not stop thinking of her. Tarin had his pride, and had things been equal, he would have left Limm to her own barren company on the first day. Smitten as he was, however, he bore with her sloth and her slights as a cheap price to pay for the privilege of remaining in her magical presence.

After some days of travel, the shallow valley they were following began to wind its way more to the west. The surrounding land had been open until now, but a morning arrived when they glimpsed ahead of them, up the valley, the dark outliers of a forest that spread like a barrier across their path. The two halted and held brief consultation. This wood was presumably the one Kell had warned them against. Clearly, if they wanted to avoid it, they would have to leave the valley and set their course north and east. Well, so be it. They shrugged and waded the horses across the stream.

The country before them rose now gradually to a lofty wold. These lonely heights, caressed by the winds, were nearly empty of moving life, with no sounds to hear but the susurrations of wind in the heather, relieved only by the piping of the occasional curlew. Firewood was hard to come by on the heath, but on the other hand there seemed few animals here



they need guard against.

It was two days before the edge of the wood they were skirting began to trend northward, allowing them again to progress more directly towards their goal. A day or two later, the ground changed again. For one thing, they began rapidly to descend; at the same time, the forest, which had marched for some days now on their left hand, began to recede. The travellers picked their way down off the moors, then splashed through a stream at their base. They made their camp that night on the far side.

The weather had been clearing. A sharp frost during the night drove the ill-assorted pair to huddle each deep in their furs. The morning that greeted them was one of crystal air. During their journey over the wold the mountains to their left had occasionally been visible in the far distance as a ragged blue silhouette, but so clear was the air at present that a detailed web of rock and ice could be made out on the faces of those nearest at hand, directly to the West. Ahead, across a great swathe of open land, far in the distance, the faint outline of a mighty mountain wall could barely be made out against the sky. This seemed to be a spur flung out to the East from the main chain. Their goal, from what Tarin understood of the geography as Kell had sketched it, should lie somewhere at its base.

Tarin and Limm, clapping their hands to their sides for warmth, each breath sending out a ragged flag of fog, busied themselves packing up the camp. Dressed in their warmest, they mounted their horses – Tarin needing, as on every morning, irritated help from Limm – and set off.

The going was easier that day: the land kinder, and more plentifully stocked of beast and fowl. Limm shot a duck early in the day and Tarin, after plucking it, hung it carefully at his saddle. He looked forward to some better eating that evening than they had enjoyed for days.

Late that afternoon, as the sun was sinking in layers of golden mist, they came upon the long-lost road.

Tarin halted his horse in the middle of the way, lost in memory. A longing for his home rose in him. How many days and miles ago had he first set foot on this same road, in the remoteness of the lost East? And over there it lay, be it ever so distant: home. The road might be long, but it was a sure guide. He only had to take one step after another, and he would achieve it in the end.

Limm, who had not stopped, turned to shout at him impatiently. “Come on, Tarin!”

Tarin’s thought darkened. He was deluding himself – he had no home. Nothing remained for him but to go on. In no happy mood, he urged his horse forward.

The morrow found them near the crest of a wide, whale-backed ridge. Clear now to perceive in the dawn light, the Misty Mountains curved in from the left, culminating in three lofty peaks, the snow on their sides tinted red in the sun. The lower lands ahead were shrouded in mist; while a mile or two away to their right, a greater band of fog wound its way along a swathe of lower ground.

Tarin pointed to the fog. “That must be the Great River,” he said. “According to Kell’s map, the woods we seek lie between it and the mountains. Since the space between them does not appear over-broad, I expect we will not easily go wrong.”

“I’d hardly call it a map,” said Limm, “and we left the river a long way behind. I doubt that can be it.”

Tarin thought he remembered the map a little better than that, but he did not want to argue. “What do you suggest, then?”

Limm thought. “I think we want to avoid the mountains,” she said. “I have no wish to meet any ugly old Dwarves. Let us make our way more eastward than we have until now, and see what we find.”

The way downhill was easy enough. As the land flattened, so they began to encounter trees, predominantly alder and willow and other such water-loving types. This, as much as the shape of the land itself, was suggestive to Tarin of the flood plain of some mighty concourse. Soon they were riding across wide meads filled with grasses and wild herbs, no doubt beautiful in flower in the spring, but faded and weighted with seed at this late season. After pushing through a final stretch of rushes, full of the honking of wildfowl, they had to halt before a wide stretch of water. Much narrower though it was here in its upper reaches, this was unmistakably the Great River.

Limm’s brows lowered, Tarin shrugged. Without a word exchanged, the pair went back until they found firmer ground.

They set off then to the north-west, which trend the river seemed to follow.

The day was a fine one, and the woods were pleasant to ride through: not over-dense, and filled with birdsong. Even the mood of the horses seemed to lift. The light appeared to grow ahead of them.

Without any forewarning, the woods came to a sudden end. They found they had come to the banks of a swift-flowing river, that flowed to the right, thus clearly about to join with the Great River that lay not far off. A thrown stone would span this stream, but it looked too deep to wade. On the far bank, a green lawn extended for some distance on either hand. To the right, nearer the river join, the sward appeared to spread to occupy the whole width of the spit of land.

But this was not what occupied the eyes of the travel-worn pair sitting, astonished, astride their horses. Where the trees recommenced, on the far bank, they were of a type that neither Tarin nor Limm had ever seen. Graceful and silver-grey these trees grew, and their massed golden leaves formed a gay and glorious roof to that wood.

Neither of the travellers doubted that they had found their goal. The Golden Wood! If Elves were to be found anywhere, it would be here.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tarin almost failed even to set foot in the new land. They were obliged to swim the horses across the boundary stream. Limm went ahead, floating beside her animal while holding with one hand to the saddle horn. Tarin, who had received no instructions on the matter, chose instead to keep his seat. He could not swim, and clung instinctively to that position which, no matter in what tentative measure, felt the most secure to him. However, the pull of the current on his legs soon unnerved him. He had not expected his animal to swim so deep; in the swirl of water, he somehow lost first one stirrup, then the other. Despite frantically scrabbling to grab at anything available, the small man slid inexorably sideways and into the stream.

Underwater was a strange, silent, gloomy space crossed by dancing sunbeams, centred around the horse floundering soundlessly amid a thrash of bubbles. Suddenly Limm dived into the picture. Tarin found brief fascination in the way her cloud of dark hair alternately bushed out around her pale, intent face then sleeked back again as strokes of her equally pale arms drew her to him. He had an instant to note how dark the bird tattoos showed against her cheeks; the next thing he knew, she had hauled him back, gasping, into the world of light and noise.

In a moment she had dragged Tarin, coughing and choking, half onto the bank. She clambered out herself, cursing.

“You stupid, stupid idiot!” she said. “Look what you’ve made me! I’m wet through.”

Indeed water was running off the woman in streams. Tarin questioned silently how rescuing him could cause her to become much wetter than she had been anyway swimming beside her horse; but perhaps she was vexed to have soaked her hair.

Noting how the clinging wetness revealed every curve of her body, he reddened and averted his eyes.

“Turn your back,” commanded Limm. “I want to change into dry things.”

Tarin complied. “Can’t I see to my horse?” he said over his shoulder.

“No. Shut up.”

After some moments filled with rustling noises, a pale form barely entered his peripheral vision. Tarin was aware of the fact of her movements, but could make out nothing else. He guessed that Limm was hanging her clothes over a bush.

“Turn your back!” repeated Limm in tones of irritation. “Don’t you have any manners?” But Tarin had already turned his head so as to bring her again behind him.

They decided in the end to camp right in that spot. While the hobbled horses munched contentedly at the tender grass of the bank, the humans explored a little on foot. They rounded the spit of land and gazed across the width of the greater river. The golden-leaved trees extended along their own side as far as they could see, but they could not make out any on the far side.

They stayed in that area for many days, running at last into weeks. These two ill-matched travellers spent the time

wandering through the Golden Wood. Tarin found it a place of peace and beauty, and would willingly have sojourned there indefinitely, had there been any Elves to keep him company. But of Elves they found not one.

Sometimes they thought they glimpsed movement among the upper branches, but it was never anything one could put one's finger on. At other times they almost thought they could catch voices or music in the air. Twice they were sure they could see fires in the distance, but on both occasions a closer inspection failed to turn up any trace. They found no tracks, anywhere.

The weather grew remorselessly colder, the days shorter; and at last they gave up. Depressed, huddled under blankets around a fire, they debated what to do.

"I don't believe there *are* any Elves," said Limm. "It's all an illusion."

"What, everywhere?" protested the startled Tarin. "But people have seen them."

"Well, there's none here, anyway."

They ruminated gloomily for some moments, Limm poking the fire with a stick.

"What does someone like you want with Elves anyway?" she asked him suddenly.

Tarin was not used to Limm expressing any interest in him, or in what he thought. He was taken aback, and had to take a moment to respond. He hesitated, then brought out the comb. "Because of this," he said. The delicate piece glittered in the fire light as he handed it to her.

She turned it over in her hands. "Pretty." She looked back to him. "I don't understand."

He shrugged. How could he explain? She couldn't tell clean from dirty, same as all the other people he had met. But the ones who made that comb, they must have been able to.

"It's hard to explain," he said. "I just want to be among people who can make things like that."

She looked at it again. "It's pretty. But it's just a comb." She handed it back to him. "Well, I don't know what to do now. Any ideas?"

"I was wondering," he answered slowly. "Seeing as how we've lucked out here. I was wondering whether we shouldn't try the other side of the mountains."

"Well, I don't mind, as such," said Limm. "Always supposing the Elves on that side aren't just as elusive. But how do you propose to get there?"

"There must be passes."

She looked at him scornfully. "Over the top? Are you crazy? Winter's coming! You want to go wandering up there in the snow, in the middle of winter?"

"Well," he said mildly, "we could go have a look, maybe. Just up a few valleys. That wouldn't hurt."

"We should be thinking rather where to pass the cold time," said she. "If we stay around here, we'll need to build a shelter." In the privacy of her thoughts, she reacted with distaste to the idea of spending a winter cooped up in a tiny hut with this midget. But where else was there to go? And at least Tarin was better than nobody. "And another thing: we're running short of food."

Tarin thought about it. Limm had a point. Nights had become pretty miserable. As for food, few fruits of the fast fleeing autumn were any more to be found. Frosts had killed the last of the mushrooms. What scanty game they found in the Wood was very wary; they had not eaten meat for some days.

His mind had been so focussed on Elves, he had not considered the problems nearer at hand. Turning things over, the emptiness of the lands oppressed him. There was no-one they could turn to for help. Or was there?

"How would it be," he began tentatively, "do you think, if we went to talk to the Dwarves? According to Kell, they're

just up there, in the hills, where the road ends.”

“Dwarves? Ugh. What do we want them for?”

Tarin was still thinking it out. “They could advise us about passes, for one thing,” he said. “And maybe we could buy food. Or even shelter.”

“Buy?” scoffed Limm. “How are we going to buy anything? What with? *I* haven’t got any money.”

“You remember those jewels I gave to Lal?” he said. “I only gave her half of what I had.”

Limm’s eyes opened wide. This changed the face of the matter. She’d forgotten all about those jewels in the hurly-burly of parting, had given them no more thought. How had an insignificant little squirt like Tarin got hold of gems like that? She looked at him with new eyes. Plus there was the shiny comb, too. Huh.

“I don’t know,” she said, hesitant. “Dwarves? Seriously?”

“Do you know anything against them?” he said. “I don’t. I met one or two, on the road. They were all right.”

“Well, no,” she conceded. “Not exactly, no.”

“So shall we do it?”

Limm couldn’t think of any material objection, and had no better plan. “All right,” she said.

The next day, they crossed back over the southern stream, but much higher up, where it could be forded. Tarin had no wish to repeat his exploration of the underwater kingdom. They encountered the great east-west road again soon after, and turned into it, as their best route into the mountains. The broad way led over a sparkling brook, and shortly thereafter they reached the last of the golden-leaved trees. Once out of the sight-limiting closeness of the forest, they both stopped, open-mouthed. They needed to spend some moments to come to terms with the vista that now opened before them.

The road before them climbed at a challenging gradient up the trough of a great gulf of a valley carved deep into the hills. This hollow was as if held in the hand of a ring of mighty peaks that cricked the neck now of whoever tried to look to their full height.

“Gosh,” said Limm. “We won’t find anything to eat up there.”

“We’ve got enough for a day or two,” said Tarin. “We can come back and shoot duck on the streams if we have no luck. Or coney. I saw plenty of sign, back in autumn, when we were first coming down.”

Limm felt inclined to grumble. “I’m running short of arrows,” she said.

Since Tarin had no reply to this, they gee’d up the horses and began the climb. As the slow hours went by, the patient animals plodded steadily higher, carrying the travellers ever deeper into the great glen.

They halted for a scanty bite to eat at midday, in a sheltered dell a stone’s-throw from the road. Here, a second stream burred down the slope from the left, the joined waterways tumbling over a fall. In more clement weather it would have been a pleasing, restful place, but the fine conditions of the morning had given way to overcast with increasing wind. Hurrying grey masses of cloud now obscured the peaks.

On such steep footing as the road now provided they decided they would do better if they left the mounts and continued their search on foot. Thus they left the horses tied to a tree in the dell, in a place where they could reach grass.

The two of them climbed on, puffing. Both began to feel the strain of the unaccustomed exercise, although Limm tried her best to disguise it.

The steep, winding way now topped out onto a small plateau. Here they found a well, clearly the source of the stream, most of whose course they had now traced from its meeting with the Great River. The walkers’ sudden attention was centred not on the well however, but on the two guardhouses that braced the road at the point where it left the shelf and began again to climb. Not, to be accurate, on the structures themselves, but on the two armoured Dwarves who stood

guard in their doorways.

The Dwarves must clearly have glimpsed the two travellers at much the same moment, but they continued standing stiffly to attention. They showed no sign of their awareness beyond perhaps a glint in their eyes.

As the humans approached, the Dwarves each extended a spear held in rest, slantwise so as to block the passage.

The guard on the left spoke. His voice was deep and resonant, as befitted one built to such sturdy proportions, and it was as serious as his demeanour.

“Who are ye who would approach the gates of the Dwarrowdelf?”

“We’ve come to trade,” Limm said to him boldly.

The Dwarf looked the shabbily-dressed human woman up and down before favouring Tarin with the same sceptical appraisal. He clearly held this claim for obvious nonsense.

“Ye may not pass,” he said. The spears remained.

“Didn’t you hear me?” blustered Limm. “We’ve come to trade. Let us through!”

“Ye may not pass,” repeated the Dwarf.

“Oh for Powers’ sake,” said Limm, disgusted. But since there was clearly nothing that would persuade the guards to alter their resolve, the two could only retreat back down the path. They continued until the watch post had disappeared again behind the rise.

“Well, that tears it,” said Tarin, scratching his head. “I didn’t think they’d be like that. What do we do now?”

“This is nonsense,” said Limm. “And I’m not going to stand for it. If we could get around those stuffed jackets, I bet we could find someone more sensible, deeper in.”

“You want to sneak into Dwarf-country? I don’t know that that’s wise.”

“Oh, come on Tarin,” said Limm. “Don’t be such a milk-sop. It’ll be fun. Look, we can creep up there through the bushes. Just follow me and do as I do.”

The furtive scramble along a long loop over the slopes cost them considerable time and scratches, but at last they emerged again on the road, out of sight of the guards now somewhere below.

Limm giggled. “See?” she said. “It was easy.” She looked Tarin over with new appraisal. “You were actually quite good. Very quiet. Keep it up, and we’ll make a hunter of you yet.”

Tarin thought sardonically of Limm’s heavy breathing and of the noise she had made as she thrust Bigger-like through the scrub. Not for the first time in their acquaintance, he found the only useful response to her remarks to be an internal eye-roll and silence.

They continued up the grassy slope, keeping a careful eye out for company. As they approached the final crest, they went on with slowed pace and heightened caution. Once at the top of the rise, they paused to take in what lay before them.

The hidden sun was by now surely sinking in the west, because the clouded day was fading towards gloom. Many lights were to be seen scattered here and there in the deep valley that now opened before them. The road wound its way through these scattered habitations and up the far slope to their left, leading at last into a shallow defile, perhaps a mile distant. The floor of the dale was occupied by a long lake that thrust like a spear deep into the northern hills. Its dark surface was ruffled by wind in its depths, but became mirror-still towards the edges. Close at hand, hard on the bank of the mere, a great pillar stood alone.

Although they were wary of the signs of habitation that lay not far off, curiosity nevertheless drew the pair to the pillar. Their appreciation of its size increased as they drew near. On close approach they found that its span was greater around, perhaps, than two could compass with linked hands. A long spiral of carefully-cut runes occupied its surface as

far upward as the eye could make out. The monument gave out an air of great age. The stone from which it had been won looked as hard as the hills, as tough as the heart of the mountain; nevertheless, the weather of centuries had begun to soften the cut edges of the letters.

Their wonder at the great pillar had distracted them. They both jumped now as a stern voice sounded behind them.

“What do ye two strangers here, in the holy place of Durin?”

They turned to find a Dwarf regarding them from under a frown. His beard was thick and straw-coloured, and his clothing rich and well-appointed. Three others, all bearing swords, stood not far behind him.

Tarin had a sudden vision of the mad Dwarf among the Specials, and had to repress a shiver. He thrust the black memory behind him.

“We didn’t know it was holy,” he said apologetically. “We don’t know our way around. We just wanted to find someone who could help us.”

The Dwarf came closer and inspected them. “You have passage from the guards below?” he demanded.

“Well, no,” said Tarin. “We, er, well we sort of came around them.”

The Dwarf raised his bushy eyebrows at this temerity. “I think I must take you before the guard captain,” he said. “Come.” Since his armed companions had by now moved around behind them, the two humans had little option but to obey.

The Dwarf led them up the road, past dwellings and shrines. They passed graceful buildings fronted with fine carven stonework. Here and there they saw scattered Dwarves about their business. The road curved up and to the left. As the notch it led to opened fully to their gaze, the humans had to stop, despite their captors, and gasp for sheer wonder.

The road terminated in a wide, paved court, a long bow-shot across. On the far side of this, a flight of marble steps ranged up, ending at a face of rock that beetled into the heights overhead. Each white step was as broad across as two span of oxen. At the height of the steps they beheld a great gate cut into the rock, reaching up to many times man-height. Two massive bronze doors, cast in a bewildering wealth of storied detail, guarded it from intrusion.

Their captor had paused with them. From the gleam in his eyes, it seemed he was not displeased by their awe.

“Here before you stands the portal of Khazad-dûm,” he said, “which great city the elvish folk name Dwarrowdelf. The work is fine, is it not? Yet if the tales speak true, this would be thought of small consequence if set beside the doors of Tumunzahar or Gabilgathol, our lost cities in the West.

“But this is idle talk. Come you within.”

The halls they entered were no less impressive than the gate. But since the marvels of Khazad-dûm, or Moria as it later became known, have been many times elsewhere described, and because there can be small interest in repeated mention of gasps, and exclamations, and wide-eyed goggings, I shall pass them over.

The Guard Captain turned out to be an iron-bearded Dwarf whose black eyes under heavy, bristly brows surveyed these gangrel intruders with little favour. He asked them brusquely to explain themselves. Tarin repeated their story.

At the end of it, the Captain snorted. He pointed to a table. “You will be pleased to remove from your persons any objects you carry, and place them there.”

Tarin looked at Limm, shrugged, took the pouch of jewels from around his neck, and placed it where he was bidden. He added the satchel of food. Limm laid her knife, bow and quiver beside it, and the pouch full of snares and such that she carried. There was little else.

The Captain eyed them sharply. “Is that all? It is discourteous to compel strangers to undress; but I shall do so, if I have reason to suspect deceit.”

With reluctance, Tarin fetched the comb from his pocket. There came a collective gasp from the Dwarves in the chamber as he laid the delicate piece on the table.

The Captain inspected the glittering object closely, wonder lighting his dark eyes. He did not touch the comb.

“Where did you get this?” he demanded.

“On the sea-shore, in my home, far to the east of here,” said Tarin. “The rain washed it loose.”

The Dwarf considered for a space, staring at the comb. “I bid you wait in there,” he said after a time, indicating a further chamber. “Food and drink shall be brought to you. And water to wash,” he added, with a hint of disfavour in his expression as he glanced again at the state of their clothes and faces.

“ ‘Compelled to undress,’ ” echoed Limm darkly as they sat down. “I’d like to see him try.”

They had barely eaten and supped – oat-cakes and tasty wine – before they were called again. They were led along graceful dolven ways to a series of well-proportioned chambers whose walls were covered with rich hangings. There they were met by an aged Dwarf who, after nodding polite dismissal to their escort, ushered the strangely-assorted pair to sit at their ease. A small fire warmed the room. The Dwarf poured wine for the visitors, then sat down himself, his movements betraying the stiffness of age.

“Please call me Melennar,” he said. “Consider me at your service. And may I know your own names?” They told him, although in surly enough fashion from Limm.

“What are we doing here?” she demanded. “Why are you keeping us? We haven’t done anything wrong.”

“You have trespassed in our domain,” answered the old Dwarf mildly enough, “and offended custom. That is reason for some departure from the hospitality we would normally extend to guests.”

“Honoured Melennar,” said Tarin, “we admit the offence. We beg your pardon for it. Yet we intended no wrong. We are travellers from afar, and we are in some present difficulty. We sought aid from your people, the only ones we know in this vicinity. Since we were brusquely and, we feel, unfairly, turned from your front door, we thought to try our luck at the side entrance. That is all there is to the matter. Surely it is not one that requires so much dealing?”

“You did not ask for aid at the gate,” reminded their host, “but only mentioned trade. But you are right: trespass is no grave matter; normally to be dealt with, at furthest, by polite ejection. But there is more to your case, and we must decide what is best to do with you. You need not fear that we shall deal with you unjustly.”

“What more?” said Limm hotly. “We’ve told you everything.”

Melennar took a bundle from beside him and unwrapped it to reveal Tarin’s comb, and the four great jewels he had healed, so long ago now, in the lost, kind days before his memories were blighted by the Master.

“These are yours?” he asked.

Tarin nodded.

“You say you found this comb. Do you know what this material is? No? Shall I tell you? It is true-silver – what the Elves call mithril. Here, under this city, in all Middle-earth, is the only mine in which it is found. Or so we thought. Can I enquire of you further: have you any idea how much this piece is worth?”

Tarin could only dumbly shake his head.

“Enough to buy you lands, and armies, and kingly might,” the Dwarf told him gently. “A host of our people might labour a year in mine and forge, and not extract so much as a fourth part of the mithril your comb contains.”

Limm sat up in amazement and looked from one to the other with wide eyes.

“But I have no use for such things,” said Tarin. “Or anything that such wealth could buy. And that is not the reason I treasure that comb.”

“I suspected not,” said the Dwarf. He touched then lightly, one by one, the four jewels that lay glowing their various fires under the light. “And these? Did you also find these?”

“It is a story with complications,” replied Tarin. “And with all respect to you, honoured Melennar, it is not one that I choose to tell. Our trespass you may punish as you please. We do not owe you an account of our lives prior to that act.”

Limm’s gaze at her companion gained slightly in lustre. She had not thought the little man had such firmness in him!

But Melennar addressed her next. “My lady,” he said, “permit me to ask you just one more question. What do you see, when you look at these stones?”

“I?” She was confused. “What is there to see? They are valuable gems. Very beautiful.”

“Yes, they are, are they not?” said the aged Dwarf. He turned back to Tarin. “But you: you see more. Do I not speak truth?”

“I... see in those what I see in the comb,” replied Tarin. This was, again, leading to areas he wished not to discuss.

Melennar thought for a space of time, holding the two visitors in his considering gaze. “I believe I must place this matter before the King,” he said at last. “Which means, since the evening is drawing on, that I must ask you to accept our hospitality for the night. Unless you have pressing business elsewhere...?”

Tarin smiled, shook his head. “Although, if we are to stay here longer, I would just ask you to fetch our horses, and give them all proper care.”

After he had extracted from Tarin where to find the animals, Melennar gave directions for that to be done – at least, his import was clear, although he spoke to the servants in a language the humans could not understand. The aged Dwarf then bade the pair goodnight and had pages show them to their chambers. These were separate, with a common sitting room.

Tarin discovered the possibility of taking a hot bath, and grasped the chance with eagerness. Why, he had not enjoyed hot water since... since when? He could not reckon it. He lay in the bath a long time, receiving heated top-ups from time to time from a genial servant. Afterwards, dried, fed, dressed in a warm robe, holding a glass of mulled wine in his hand, Tarin felt more content with the world than he could remember feeling for a very long time.

Limm, when she joined him at last in the common room, felt similarly cheerful, and disposed to chatter.

“Goodness gracious, what a turn-up,” she was saying. “Those jewels are fine enough in all truth. Worth a lot of money. But what he said about the comb! ‘Kingly might,’ good gods. Did you know it was worth so much before?” She took a gulp at her wine. “Just fancy! You could be King Tarin the First.” She giggled. “King Tarin the Magnificent! And *I* could be...” fluttering her eyelashes.

“Limm,” he said firmly. “Just Limm. Shall we turn in? I can hardly keep my eyes open.”

“All right. I wonder what the King will be like. Their King. Tarin, do you think they’ll try to keep your treasure?”

“No, no. They wouldn’t do anything like that, I’m sure. I may not know much about Dwarves, but you can see from these fellows that they’re not like that.”

As they were about to go to their separate beds, Tarin was brought up short by a thought. “Limm,” he said, “do you know, I’ve only just realized it. I can’t sense what these chaps are feeling!”

It took her a second to recall the circumstance he was talking about. “Oh,” she said. Her expression showed first surprise, then turned pensive. “How odd. Well, goodnight, Tarin.”

“Goodnight.”

\* \* \* \* \*

They were called about mid-morning, and led before the King. After being conducted through chambers more magnificently arrayed than any they had seen so far, they entered a long, high room, hung with vividly emblazoned banners, at the end of which was placed the throne. This high seat was cut from a massive block of some variegated stone in which inner planes of crystal flashed at the eye as one moved around it. Pure, butter-yellow gold was let into the polished stone in the shapes of lines and runes. The seat was padded by a thick, black bearskin; seated on all was the



King. As they walked up, Tarin and Limm took in a Dwarf of massive thews, arrayed in glittering armour, who surveyed pensively in his turn the ill-assorted human pair making their way to his feet.

Tarin was by no means sure what the correct manners were for such occasions, but at the base of the throne he made the deepest knee he could manage, then stood again to wait on events.

Limm, beside him, made an uncertain curtsy. Her head was aching from too much wine, and any tendency to resume the flippancy of yesterday evaporated under the regal power that radiated from this figure.

The King's broad head was crowned by a silvered helmet, its dome girt at the crown by seven mithril stars that almost seemed to glow from their own inner light. His beard that flowed in a river over his lap was a mixture of hairs of many colours. The effect of this was harmonious: the combined hue changed subtly with light or movement. Between helm and beard, the Dwarf's features were as strong and harsh as though they had been cut roughly from stone. The first finger of the King's right hand was banded by a broad gold ring, set with a stone as hot as a dragon's eye.

Tarin noted, however, that the King's deep-set eyes were penetrating rather than fierce, and that the wisdom of long ages sat upon his broad and furrowed brow.

"My name is Durin," came the King's deep voice, "the third life of that name. Your own names I know, and something of your circumstances. I regret that you have been detained, and I promise you that it will not be for much longer. What I would hear from you firstly, if you will, is something of your intentions. Can you tell me what brought you to these parts, what it is that you seek here?"

Limm, too cowed to open her mouth, gave Tarin a nudge. Tarin, gathering his courage, began. "Lord King," he said, "touching our intentions: we, uh, that is to say... well actually, in the longer term as it were, we wanted to find some people of elvish race. If you should ask me why..."

"I do so ask," rumbled the King.

"Well, my lord, I find it a little difficult to explain. And my friend here has her own reasons. Of course we are not Elves ourselves. But for both of us, I think it is true to say that, whatever may be our different reasons for it, we cannot any longer live among our own folk. But everybody needs somebody, I think it is true to say; needs some society, someone to live among. A community, if you will. A life spent alone is a very bleak one, as I know too well. I think even my friend here, who would not, perhaps, have chosen me as companion from among five hundred others, has preferred even my poor company to none."

He glanced up at Limm, who blushed before looking away.

"Well," continued Tarin, "of all the peoples we know, it happens that we both of us admire the elvish folk most of all. Thus have we sought them out," he concluded lamely.

The King grunted. "So, you sought for Elves in the Golden Wood, eh?" he said. "But found them not? I am not surprised. I doubt Celeborn would want to be bothered with such as you. He does not love strangers.

"I will not hide from you that I hold your aim to be ill-advised. Every wight lives most easily among his own kind. You may have your reasons for not going home, but others of like race and custom might be found.

"Yet, I do not know you, I have not lived your lives. I do not even know much of your race, of mortal Men. You are best fitted to decide the courses of your own lives, not I. So we will not pursue that.

"If it is Elves you seek, then it would be better for you, I ween, to leave alone the woodland tribes who have spurned to know you, and seek rather the folk who live west of the mountains. They are of a different, higher race. They, who name themselves Noldor, have known the glorious West beyond the sea; some of them learned there secrets of craft at the feet of He whom we Khazad name in our reverence as Mahal – even our Maker. We have much traffic with this folk. We know them well; some, I would even name as friends.

"So much for that. Before I touch on the matter that interests me – that has caused us to detain you in these halls, and to burden you with many questions – I would just ask what you purposed by coming to us. First you mentioned trade, then you wished for help. Which is it?"

It was Tarin's turn to blush. "My lord, the winter is upon us, and our discomforts and difficulties increase. We

considered that you might be able to shelter us from the season; and we were prepared to pay.”

A flicker of wry amusement crossed the King’s eye. “Pay?” he said. “With those treasures you carry? Know that the least of your gems would buy you many months of bed and board from any host in Middle-earth. Nay, it would buy you the establishment. Such coin is too mighty for your purpose: a silver piece or two would better address your needs. But alas, I must tell you this: here you will find no such hostelry, offer ye what ye will. It grieves me to deny you this, but for no price may you over-winter with us. As you have found, we do have rooms for such as visit for a day, or maybe two; but it is not our custom to consort for longer periods with strangers. We are Khazad, and we keep to our own.”

Tarin’s spirits sank. It seemed that he and Limm would have to fall back on what rude shelter they could patch up from bark and skins. Nevertheless, he bowed to the King.

“Thank you, Sire,” he said, “the matter is clear to me now. But if you may not house us, could we at least request advice? Neither I nor my companion know these lands. If we would cross the mountains to find these Noldor of whom your grace speaks, we must, I am sure, wait until the slow turn of the year brings warmth again to melt the snows of the heights. But, even given fine weather, we do not know the way. We should both of us be very grateful for any advice about which path or pass to attempt.”

The King smiled. “No pass,” he said. “We have delved a way through the mountains. It pleases me to grant you passage in it. For this we ask nothing, neither jewel nor coin. Although indeed, such license is something no outsider could buy. We either grant it, or we do not. Mostly we do not.

“As to the reason you are thus favoured: now we come to the nub. Tarin, you carry with you such items as surprised us greatly, and which have moved us to wonder in like degree.”

The King motioned to a servant, who brought to his hand a silver platter. Lying on this, Tarin’s four great jewels shone under the lights, next to the comb. The King’s first interest was the comb. He questioned Tarin about how and where he had found it, but although Tarin related freely all of the circumstances of his find, he could see that these few facts did very little to satisfy the King.

When the story ran out, which was soon, the King mused silently for a while, turning the gleaming comb under his gaze. At last he sighed and replaced it on the platter.

“We come now to the stones,” he said to Tarin. “You have said you are not willing to reveal how they came into your possession. Of course, discretion is your right; but truth to tell, the matter of the stones is different to that of the comb. With the latter, we have our own reasons for interest in its provenance; the stones, however, are important in themselves. Their path to your hand is no doubt of interest, but it is not of primary importance.

“Indeed these stones are a great matter,” continued King Durin, indicating the four jewels with a bluff finger. “As I think you suspect. Let me tell you briefly of the wider picture I have in surmise. Perhaps you have heard tales of the struggle between powers in the early days of the world. Yes? Well, despite what you may have heard, that struggle is not ended. These four noble gems that you have acquired, by what means you will not say: they are not ordinary substance. As such they touch on that ancient struggle between good and evil. Yes, even these here before us.

“Now this is a greater matter than I know what to do with – yes, even I, Father of my folk, who remember this land when it lay yet unpeopled; when there was nothing here but wilderness, filled only with the sound of wind and stream. Therefore I would counsel you to carry these gems to one who is yet older and greater than I. She will know what to do.”

“She?” echoed Tarin in puzzlement.

“I speak of the Lady Galadriel, who ranks now highest among the Noldor, the Deep-elves, the People of the Star. She sees deeper than any other I know. I bid you carry these stones to her, and to ask of her what her thought is concerning them.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Tarin and Limm came of simple people, rustic folk of wood and field. They were used to no more ambitious structure than a one-story wooden hut. The cruel stone towers of the Master’s dark land had oppressed their senses; but now their sense of wonder was stretched by the mighty mansions of Khazad-dûm. Vast halls, filled with lights; colonnades of pillars, like huge trees of subtly-coloured stone; again and again, just when they thought they had compassed the

measure of these wroughtings and delvings, some greater work would stagger them anew.

So it was with the passage beneath the mountain. After Melennar, who delivered them back their goods, had bidden them a courteous farewell, their guide for the purpose led the pair down many flights of stairs. They came out at last in a space which offered to their astonished eyes the first wonder of that journey. They found themselves as it were at a harbour for ships, built, by what art they could not imagine, here deep beneath the earth. Several high-prowed ships bobbed gently at the buffers of the dock, and the air was full of moisture. Tarin, not believing his senses, looked over the edge, to assure himself that the spacious basin was indeed filled with water.

Here they were met by their horses, conveyed by some means never explained to their side, here in this strange cavern. Their party was urged to board one of the ships. The horses were blindfolded and confined to a narrow box, from which they could from time to time be heard as they stamped and snorted their nervousness. Their erstwhile riders meanwhile were ushered to a padded bench, not far from the stern, where they could sit.

Tarin, at least, could understand something of what went on, since boats were not strange to him; but for Limm, the whole experience was but poorly comprehensible, and she suffered under fear for all the long hours of that journey. She sat straight away close on the bench next to Tarin and spoke not a word.

Lamps were lit along the boat. The dwarvish crew busied themselves about unmooring, then set about other tasks involving ropes and much shouting whose purpose even Tarin could not fathom. A row of Dwarves carrying paddles came to sit along both sides. At a word of command, each row dipped in unison, and the boat began to move. Under the impulse of the rhythmically dipping paddles, they glided away from the piers and approached, after a moment, one of several dark arches in the wall of the harbour hall.

As they entered the dark tunnel, Limm caught at Tarin's hand. Holding hers, he could feel her trembling.

There followed a series of manoeuvres of obscure purpose, involving the opening and closing of great wooden gates. At some point, unnoticed by either, the crew of paddlers disembarked. After some time, the nervous travellers found the barge to be gliding smoothly down an endless tunnel, carried seemingly by the stream itself. Tarin did not understand how this could be; but the fact could not be denied. Only that section of the rough walls that immediately enclosed the ship was lit by its lamps. For hours thereafter there was nothing to see, nothing to do but watch the slow, hypnotic passage of the endless wall of rock as each section emerged into the lamp light at the fore, glided past their faces, then faded into the fathomless dark behind.

Tarin was woken by a jarring bump. He started upright, shook the daze from his head. He had been dozing.

The ship was emerging at last from the tunnel; but not, as both passengers had hoped, into the light of day. The place they had come into had not even the appearance of a terminus. There followed further bumpings, and haulings, through more wooden gates. Finally, movement ceased. They found themselves confined to a narrow space at the base of what seemed like a deep well. Only the wall next to them was lit by the ship lamps; but looking up, Tarin could make out lamps higher in the well.

What happened next caused Limm to whimper and grasp convulsively again at Tarin's hand. They began slowly to rise. The lamp-lit rock was descending beside them. Tarin was nonplussed. How could this be?

He put his arm around Limm, and she laid her frightened head on his shoulder, turning her face away from the motion in the dark – indeed from the whole endless, incomprehensible journey, buried here deep beneath the titanic weight of the mountains.

Tarin found her warmth and nearness overpowering, but at the same time a comfort. The scent of her head was in his nostrils, and he could feel her quick breathing under his hand, and the thump of her heart.

After some minutes they emerged at the top of the well into a chamber similar to those they had traversed before. At this reappearance of slightly more comprehensible surroundings, Limm sat stiffly away from Tarin. He took away his arm, not daring to look at her.

After more bumpings, and gates, which process was beginning to have some familiarity to them, they found themselves once more gliding down a tunnel, exactly as they had before.

How long this eerie journey continued, through how many strange risings in wells, neither of them in after times was able to say. The boat never halted. They were fed several times; they slept perhaps twice. They were never far from one

another, even while resting. The warmth of Limm's back against his own was renewed comfort to Tarin, a renewed joy.

They did not talk. During the dreary hours of wakefulness, they sat close under a single blanket, their shared body warmth welcome to each against the chill of the underground waterway.

All things pass. The ship docked at last; tiers of stairs were wearily climbed. When they again reached levels of business and habitation, their guide turned to them, and offered, as a thing expected, to show them to their quarters for the night.

Tarin and Limm did not even have to look at one another. With one movement, they shook their heads.

"Please let us out," Limm said.

The guide received their refusal with some consternation. "But it is near the end of day," he protested. "There is nowhere outside where you can sleep!" But his guests would not be moved. Shrugging, he gave instructions for their horses to be fetched, then showed them to the gate. Before the high stone doors were pushed open, Tarin thought to ask where to find the Elves, at which the guide blinked, then held out his arm with bladed hand pointing straight out.

Each of the pair thought the golden sunlight streaming in through the opening the most welcome sight they had ever beheld. Giving hasty thanks to their bewildered guide, they stepped out into the light of sunset. They found themselves standing between two giant trees of holly planted at the base of a vertical face of rock. Ahead of them they beheld a paved road lined with further hollies that wound off along a pleasantly wooded, shallow valley. They saw no obvious sign of Elves.

The pair mounted their horses, took a deep breath, looked at each other; taking stock of their strange journey. The memory of their recent physical closeness was very fresh for both.

"I was scared," said Limm to Tarin, with a look of defiance. Her lifted chin seemed to say, do not say one word.

Tarin knew he would never hear any thanks from her; but he thought nonetheless that her gaze held a new warmth. He shrugged, and smiled. "So was I," he said. "But it's over now. Right now, we need to work out where we are going to spend the night."

They found a wooded dell with some deep drifts of leaves. Wrapping themselves in everything they had, they burrowed into the leaves, huddling together under common blankets for warmth.

\* \* \* \* \*

Waking is unpleasant when one is stiff and cold, even more so when one has to brush snow off one's blanket. Tarin, blinking at the overcast sky, reflected ruefully on the mixed blessings of Dwarvish hospitality. Aching in every bone, he stood up. A light fall of overnight snow had whitened the landscape. The horses stood mournfully, not far off. They had not found much forage in the winter landscape.

Tarin made a fire. He returned from carrying water from the stream to find Limm sitting up, wrapped in the blanket and shivering.

"I'd kill now for one of those baths," she said.

Slowly the usual morning tasks were accomplished. When they were seated at last in the saddle, Limm turned to Tarin. "Where to now?"

He shrugged. "Follow the road, I suppose."

The road – broad, and neatly paved – followed the stream they had met at the gate. Its broad direction lay westward, directly away from the range of mountains they had so recently and strangely passed under. As the towering line of snowy heights began gradually to recede behind them, so did the surrounding country open out. It seemed a pleasant land, despite the winter-bare trees. Hollies, with their unmistakable glossy, dark leaves, sprinkled with cheerful red berries, continued to be frequent. As yet the pair had seen no sign of habitation.

The travellers had little food, and no assurance of obtaining shelter; their futures held only hope and no certainty. For all that, their hearts felt buoyed with cheerfulness. Somehow it was difficult to feel despondent in that land.

It was mid-morning before they saw any Elves: these being a mixed party of four, mounted and singing, riding towards them on the road ahead.

Tarin began to feel the Elves as they came within Limm's influence. He had only just begun to register how odd they seemed when all four presences in his consciousness bloomed with astonishment. They in their turn had detected him in the same channel.

The Elves had perhaps intended to pass the shabby human pair with no more than a cheery wave, but now they halted, all four of them looking at Tarin intently. Their faces were noble and fair. Everything about the Elves appeared of exceptional fineness: even down to the fiery, snorting horses.

"Good morning, wayfarer," one of the men said to Tarin. "You have a strange gift."

"It's not me," he replied, pointing to Limm. "It's her!"

The gazes switched to Limm, whose face showed a mixture of awe, embarrassment and weary exasperation.

"But we cannot sense your mind," the man said to her.

She shrugged. "That's how it works," she said. "It's others who feel it. I don't get any benefit."

The man had keen eyes. Tarin, watching him, had the feeling that the man understood, without having been told, many things about them both.

He was having difficulty putting his finger on the nature of their strangeness, just how their minds felt to him. They were somehow so much *more* than any other he had felt when in company with Limm.

All this had occupied just the moment the Elf had taken to contemplate his reply. In the event, he chose to make none, only nodded, and made to move on. Tarin, however, held up a tentative hand.

"Sir," he said, "if you please, could you tell us where this road leads?"

The other pulled up on his rein. "The road will take you to the gates of Ost-in-Edhel," he replied with grave courtesy. "That is our city, three days ride from here. But you will pass other settlements along the way, where you may find food and shelter."

Tarin and Limm both thanked him, upon which Elf nodded, and all four rode on. The two Elf-women smiled at the travellers pleasantly as they passed. Tarin was impressed by the grace of their seats and their general posture as much as their similarly lively expressions and merry eyes.

Limm had given the women much of her attention during the encounter. She raised a hand now to feel with dismay at her own matted hair, and glanced down over her faded and shabby attire.

"I've got to find something better to wear," she muttered.

Not long after, they passed into more cultivated country, pasture and ploughed fields, with wood-smoke revealing the occasional steading. It was a pleasant, rolling land.

Tarin had accepted an offer by Melennar to exchange one of his lesser jewels for a bag of silver, plus a voucher for the balance. He was glad of this when they halted that evening at an inn. A silver coin brought him copper in change, with the balance most gloriously converted into fodder, feast and lastly – and oh, how good it felt! – plentiful hot water. Tarin smiled to hear Limm singing and splashing in the next room. Later, Limm even managed to negotiate a second-hand dress from the wife of the proprietor. The next morning, feeling a greater sense of all-round contentment than either had felt for some time, they continued on their journey in good spirits.

Two days later they reached the city. A turn of the road over a crest revealed it to them, all at once. There it was: nestled in the valley below them, a cluster of terracotta roofs behind a moat and wall, set among meads of willows where a second river flowed in to join the Gate stream. During their long subsequent sojourn in that city they saw nothing built to the same scale as the works in the vast Dwarf-delving they had traversed, but the city radiated a wholeness, an assurance, that the Dwarf mansions could not match. Nothing in it was built to impress; everything seemed exactly the right size, neither too big nor too small. It was elegant; comfortable; satisfying. So the place seemed to them right from

the beginning, when they halted to take in the pleasantly arranged structures below them, all lying still the best part of a mile away: Ost-in-Edhel.

The glittering city walls. The great gate, arching over them as they walked the horses over the sonorous bridge and under its arch. The handsome guards in polished silver helms and mail. And so many people, the laughing, bright-haired people! It was overwhelming. Somehow the pair managed to suppress their amazement enough to find stabling for their horses, and a place to stow their scanty baggage. They emerged then into the weak sunlight of the square, both struggling to come to terms with the sheer noise and numbers of the fair folk going about their various businesses around them.

Both were feeling about equally at a loss. Perhaps they would have strolled about, that first day, and come to terms with the place in their own way. Perhaps Tarin and Limm would have stayed together, learned the place together, grown closer in the shared adventure. One cannot say, because matters took a different turn.

Wondering faces were turning to the new arrivals, more and more. People, feeling the influence of Limm, approached them diffidently. Courteous enquiries were made of the strangers; the explanation received awoke yet deeper interest. Wonder increased; discussion became animated. Soon a crowd of fair faces were gathered about Limm.

Lords of the City arrived. An invitation was issued, in response to which the whole group moved off. Tarin, feeling quite left out and alone, could think of nothing to do but to tag along behind. The affair began to take on the shape of a fête. Clearly the Elves felt that Limm and her gift were a matter of greater moment than they had ever seemed before now. In the last glimpse Tarin caught of Limm that day, the forest woman's eyes flashed animation as she answered queries and responded to the attention. The whole excited crowd went in at a great wooden door; the door closed with a boom.

Tarin stood on the steps of that noble building, feeling empty and lost. *Now* what should he do? What was going to happen? Had this long-sought elvish society done nothing but split him and Limm apart like a whetted axe in kindling?

He was in exactly the place he had dreamed of, back when he had set out on his quest; and the Elves met all of his expectations. But the dream lay dead in his mouth like burned ashes, weighed in his heart like a cold stone. He had lost Limm, and he had nowhere to go.

Tarin felt a gentle tug at his sleeve. He turned, and beheld an elvish child: a little maid, all cheery eyes and sweetness. Slender as a wand she was, standing a little shorter than he did himself.

The little girl was saying something in a language he couldn't understand. However, since he still stood within the faint outer washes of Limm's field, he could pick up the child's intention. She was inviting him to go somewhere.

Well, why not? Smiling while nodding kindly to the child, he allowed himself to be led. She took him, glancing back often with a smile, around this turn and that, for a time neither short nor long. Their destination turned out to be a two-storied wooden building set within quiet gardens, of a style simple but elegant. The maid took Tarin's hand and led him up the steps. The door opened, and a man of striking appearance stepped out. He was tall, well set up, with a sweep of dark hair over a noble brow. Eyes of the clear grey of twilight searched Tarin's face.

The Elf extended a hand down to him, then spoke to him in the tongue that Tarin was used to. "I welcome you, wanderer from afar, to our city." There was something in his voice that thrilled in Tarin's bones. "And I welcome you to my house. My name is Elrond."

\* \* \* \* \*

Tarin stayed many weeks in that house, which he found a haven of rest, most soothing to his wounded and weary spirit. Indeed he only left it in the end because he preferred a little more privacy than the house could provide. Elrond seemed to have friends of many conditions and races, a great variety of whom came and went over the course of much time, the lengths of their stays ranging from a single night to as long as, it seemed in some cases, several years. Nobody bothered any guest who preferred to pursue his own thoughts in peace, but people were all the time coming and going, talking and singing. Unless one stayed in one's room, one couldn't entirely avoid them. Elrond, having shrewdly read the heart of his small guest, prepared more secluded quarters for him. At the time the bulbs were sprouting, readying themselves for their blithe display in the approaching spring, people of Elrond's staff conducted Tarin to a quiet corner of the grounds to show him what they had made for him. Tarin was touched to find they had built for him a little cabin, in which all the furnishings were scaled down to the modest dimensions Tarin had been used to from his earliest youth. It was even backed by a mound of earth which held a dry and snug sleeping-hole. Living here, Tarin was welcome to visit

the larger house whenever he felt a desire for company; or perhaps just to hear a song or a tale; or also now and then, to enjoy the delicious preparations of which Elrond's cooks showed themselves endlessly capable.

Tarin had wanted Elves; but now that he had them, so to speak, he found them to be strong drink. Not all, perhaps; there were many who seemed as carefree and without weight in affairs as children. But others bore spirits profounder than he had imagined possible. They had stronger wills, more penetrating gaze, and far deeper memories, than anyone he was used to, or indeed had ever met. Without in the least desiring to, these Deep-elves, as the great King Durin had named them, made him feel small and insignificant. Not that he had ever felt otherwise in life; but Tarin had been comfortable with himself, content in his confessedly low station. In the presence of Elrond's mighty friends, he sometimes struggled to maintain that equilibrium.

At times when none of these great personages were about, Tarin enjoyed the company at the house, although some aspects of even ordinary elvish society remained opaque to him. He came in some measure to know the Lady of the house, a slender Elf-woman named Eldomë who radiated the calm of moonlight on a windless mere, and whose train of silken silver hair reached almost to her toes. Tarin found her serenity as much as her startling beauty to be restful to both eyes and soul. Moving dreamily from place to place, Eldomë never exhibited the least excitement, but through her constant murmured consultation with this member of staff and that, the house ran under her subtle direction as a smoothly-working machine. At first Tarin assumed that she and Elrond were a couple; but he soon found that this was not so. Eldomë's husband Neldor was a maker of stringed instruments, whereas Elrond was unmarried. Who actually owned the house – or indeed, if Elves could be said to own anything – remained unclear.

Although the number of children in the house at any one time was variable, Mairie, the child who had first fetched him, was always resident, since she was the daughter of Eldomë and Neldor. Tarin liked children and was not unwilling to join in their games. They helped him recall his own youth, which although still very recent in count of years, sometimes seemed to Tarin so far away as to have occurred to someone else, in some other lifetime. Mairie also undertook to school Tarin in the common speech most used by the elvish folk among themselves. Over the course of time, the little maid became very dear to him.

Another long-term guest interested Tarin deeply. In contrast to most of the guests, this person was no Elf, but clearly a man, since he was old and bearded – yet equally clearly, no Dwarf. He was called Éoric, and he had come from afar to study in Elrond's library. Éoric came originally from the North, but he confessed to Tarin that he was something of a sport, since most of his people cared for little but fighting and horses. He sparked Tarin's interest because he claimed to have encountered a colony of Hairfeet in his youth. His description of this folk, although scanty, was fascinating to Tarin, for it was the first tidings he had ever heard concerning the existence of other tribes of the people he still thought of as his own.

Elrond himself Tarin found something of a conundrum. The dark-haired master of the house, while not overtly a mover of affairs himself, had nevertheless something of the air of a pivot about which many affairs revolved. His wisdom was undeniable; his learning, extensive. Everyone, from the highest to the lowest, sought his counsel; but he was not one of these great presences who seemed entirely and forever unreachable by ordinary mortals. Indeed, Tarin found his host to be most approachable. He spoke with him often, on all kinds of subjects, always to his own satisfaction and indeed pleasure. Yet, easy company though he was, nobody in their right mind would dream of trifling with Elrond.

For a long time, Tarin was unable to guess at his host's age, or even with certainty whether he was Elf or Man. Finally, greatly daring, he asked him outright. Elrond smiled and replied that, in terms of heritage, he was both. He and his brother had been offered long ago the choice of which race to cleave to. His brother had chosen Man; he himself had chosen Elf.

Tarin was never sure exactly why Elrond had invited him to stay, although in later years he made some guesses. Equally, he was not sure how much his host had known of Tarin's affairs from the start – clearly not everything, but it didn't seem quite to be nothing, either. Tarin's tale of his dark time in the Master's cruel domain was clearly news to Elrond, and disturbing news at that. On the other hand, Tarin never told the grey-eyed Elf of his power of renewal, nor did he show him his treasures; and Elrond did not ask. Somehow however, Tarin had the not quite comfortable suspicion that Elrond already knew something of these matters. Had King Durin sent out messengers ahead of him and Limm? It seemed possible. Dwarves were frequently to be seen about the streets of the City, and Tarin learned that there was considerable traffic between the realms.

Early on, mindful of Durin's advice, Tarin had asked his host if he knew of a Lady Galadriel. Elrond had replied that he knew her well. The Lady was absent for this time from the City, he said, seeking recreation in the wide woods, but she was expected to return in summer.

It was months before Tarin saw Limm again. In the meantime, he had heard that she was greatly celebrated, and had been taken under the wing of a body called the Brotherhood of Smiths, who had found they could use her gift to combine their powers, apparently to impressive effect. Tarin was glad for her sake, but he missed her company, acerbic though it sometimes was; and he mourned the present separation of their paths, which he had dared for a time to think had been growing closer.

\* \* \* \* \*

Summer came. On a day of early warmth, a messenger arrived for Tarin. The Lady Galadriel, the man informed Tarin, was newly resident in the City, and would welcome Tarin gladly, should it be his pleasure to visit. The messenger gave him instructions on how to find the house; bowed, then left.

No time or other conditions had been specified for the audience, but Tarin knew something of Elves by that time, and had learned that in general they saw small need for ceremony. Therefore, since the day was fine, and since he had nothing else pressing to do, he set out immediately. The place described to him lay outside the City, in a district of gardens and small orchards, but Tarin didn't mind the extra walk.

He was feeling little nervous. Regardless of what he thought or knew about elvish uninterest in ceremonials, manners were still manners; and he was not at all sure how one should behave before a great lady.

At least he enjoyed the walk, the first he had made outside the City since his arrival. It was pleasant to see open country for a change. Birds sang gently in the green-rustling branches around him; cheerful puffs of white cloud sailed serenely through the blue above.

Suddenly he became aware of a new, startling perception: an inner awareness that excited both hope and disbelief in equal measure. Oh, surely it could not be true! But as he walked on, as the feeling firmed and strengthened, so the disbelief faded while the hope grew. It seemed to Tarin's wondering inner gaze like the growth of warm light in the east that promises a fine day to come.

He had detected a patch of world, somewhere not far ahead, which had been cleaned of stain. A whole great patch! The day around him seemed already brighter, the wind fresher.

Walking like a man in a dream, he arrived at the address described to him: an arched entry made of the same holly hedge that enclosed the grounds. There was no gate. Unsure if he did right, Tarin passed within. Beds of roses and other brilliant flowers were laid out between stretches of close-mown lawn. Tarin could see no house, and no person. No sound of voices disturbed the quiet hum of many bees, threaded by birdsong, gentle to the ear. It was a lovely place, a peaceful place.

In any other circumstances, Tarin would have sat with pleasure in the grass and tarried a while. But not now! The patch of clean world called to him. He could sense it, close by. He needed no guide among the paths, but walked unerringly towards it.

The holy place revealed itself as a sunken garden, ringed by a terrace of two to three steps. A great tree planted in the centre spread its growth wide to roof the lawn. The drift of sweet air caused its dense array of leaves, dotted with peeping silver apples, to flash alternately pale and deep green. Uncannily, the lawn beneath the tree lay not dark in dull shadow as with all other trees, but was dappled with a subtle silver light.

Tarin had halted at the entrance, almost unable to breathe for joy and wonder. A figure now caught his eye as it stood, before advancing slowly towards him. He saw that it was a woman, tall and slender, clothed in a flowing robe of blue. The river of hair tumbling down her front outshone the sun. Beyond any doubt, this must be the Lady Galadriel.

Tarin, overcome, went to kneel at her feet, but she stopped him with a warm hand, gently raising him again. Full of awe, he looked into the Lady's face. Elven-fair, she smiled with blue eyes down at him.

"Tarin, sojourner from afar," she said to him, "I bid you most heartfelt welcome." Her voice, although mild, somehow thrilled Tarin to his toes. "Will you sit with me?"

He took her offered hand, acutely sensible of its warmth and firmness, and followed the Elf-woman through the centre of that bright place. He felt clumsy and rough beside her beauty. She sat with grace on the lowest of the terrace steps, beckoning to him a place two steps higher. So sitting, their heads were about on a level. He thought it was courteous of her to arrange matters so.



Galadriel sat regarding him for a while with a gaze that, while not unfriendly, was nevertheless intense. Tarin had the feeling that she was seeing, taking in, not so much his surface appearance, which was of a smallish mortal of homely features, indifferently clothed, somewhat clumsy and ill-assorted of limb; but rather his inner person: what he thought and felt, what he had been through, what he could do. Who he was.

Galadriel broke her silence. "I need not ask if you like my garden," she said in her soft voice, "because I can see that you do. Indeed, I designed it to please. But people enjoy it in different ways. Each has their particular measure. Would you tell me of yours?"

In that holy place, beside this great lady, Tarin had no thought but to answer, and that as truly as he could. He swallowed the lump in his throat, and spoke, his voice sounding harsh in his ears.

"It is clean," he said. "Like almost nowhere, and no thing, I have found in all the world."

"That is truly spoken," she said. "But you must know, not all have eyes to see this."

"I know," he said. His voice turned sad. "I had to leave my home because I could see, but the others could not."

"Was that the only reason?" she asked, very gently.

"No," he said, but halted, because he could find no way into the tale. Instead he fumbled in his clothing, brought forth the small pouch. He poured the four jewels into his hand, where they lay flashing, as if rejoicing in the light.

Tarin extended his hand tentatively towards Galadriel. "My lady, I was bidden to show you these."

She raised her eyes from the stones. "For what reason?"

He hesitated, then said, "So that you could tell me what I should do with them."

She took the stones then into her own palm with reverence. After a moment of wondering contemplation of their fire, she raised her clear eyes again to him.

"Will you tell me how these noble things came to be?" she said.

So he told her the whole story, as he had until now told no other. He told it from his first awareness of his strange power, to the gift of the stones to him by poor, lost Sirtus, in the dreadful room of bars. He told of Pod, and of Ondo, and of what fates befell them. During his long telling, the sun crossed the noon sky.

After Tarin stuttered to an eventual halt, after telling of their arrival in the City, and of his abandonment by Limm, Galadriel kept silence for some time.

"Thus, in all your life," she said at last, "you have healed a jug, a wheel, a slate, a leg, four stones, and two spirits. Have I the tally correct?"

"Yes," he admitted.

"And this is easy for you to accomplish?"

"Well, yes," he stammered. "Mostly, my lady, yes. It seems to be." He felt embarrassed and humble next to this beauty with the glorious golden tresses.

"Then I have a question," she said. She swept an arm to indicate the garden. "If this place fills you with such peace and joy as I perceive in you, why do you not make one of your own? Why should you rather, after your own account, seek us, who must be strange to you, for the sole and express purpose of enjoying that cleanness that you crave? When you can achieve it yourself?"

He struggled to express his thought. "My lady," he said, "I know you to be a great personage. If it be not impertinence to mention it, I have learned something of you betimes, in the house of Elrond. Your name comes into many tales. The line from which you come, and the long years of your life, must lend to you a wisdom beyond my possibility to imagine. But as for me, what am I? The humblest example of a rustic people, who live their simple lives but one step above the beasts. Who am I that I should have this gift? I have rued it, each time I have used it. Yet I rued too that I

forbore to use it to save the mother whom I loved – who was all that I had. I have neither the wisdom to know when to use the gift nor when to hold back. It is not for such as I to reach for this golden fruit. I should leave that to your wisdom.”

She smiled, a little ruefully. “My wisdom is not so infallible as you seem to believe,” she said. “But I would say this to you: much of the wisdom in using power is knowing when not to. This, it seems to me, you possess in good measure.

“I pray you, do not berate yourself over your mother. You know, perhaps, that we elven folk do not die? We can be killed in the body, but for us that is only a displacement; a temporary inconvenience. Truly die we do not, nor shall we until the world ends. Death is a gift granted only to Men. Can you believe me when I tell you that we Firstborn, as our years lengthen in the slow fading of the first bright youth of the world, that we envy you mortals, with your flare of life, terminating in a metamorphosis that we do not and never can comprehend, until the end of everything? You Men live life as it should be lived: with passion. And then you escape. You open the door that is barred to us, and you run through, into what new life we can only imagine. For your mother, it was time. I would say, from the humility of my ever-lengthening years, that you did right to stand aside, to hold your hand from her, to allow her rightful passage.”

Neither spoke for some moments. Tarin was thinking about her words. When he spoke again, it was to express a question that had been in his mind from his first days in this Holly-land that the Elves called, in their own tongue, Eregion.

“My lady,” he said with some hesitation, “may I perhaps turn the question around, and ask you, why do you folk not extend your ambitions, and make more places like this? Is it, perhaps, for the reasons you mentioned, in that it would be against wisdom to do so?”

“That may be,” she said smiling. “But principally it is because we cannot.”

“I do not understand,” he said.

She considered. “Before I explain, or attempt to explain,” she said, “can you describe to me, just what it is that you do. Suppose you were persuaded to make another garden like this. How would you set about it?”

“Well,” he said stammering, “I can *see* it, you know. Inside my head, somehow. For something that is broken – and nearly everything I have come across is, in some way, broken – I can see that damage laid out for me as clearly as I see with my eyes this wondrous tree, this lawn. I can see how the thing *came* to be broken.”

“So is it even with us,” she said softly.

“And then,” continued Tarin, “why, I just move the broken part back to where it was meant to be.”

She received this with silence. “So simply?” she asked at last.

Tarin shrugged, nodded.

“Let me then open to you,” she said to him, “that this garden that you so rightly admire has been, for me, the summit of long years of trial, of training the will. For I tell you that what is effortless for you can be done by us only through an immense effusion of strength. To see, yes; we see damage as clearly as you. But how should one move the pieces? By the stars of holy Elbereth, it is as if one should see a great stone, and say to that stone, fly for me. Tarin, it is not one gift you have, but two. And the second immeasurably greater than the first.”

“And what would you have, Lady,” Tarin asked her softly, “if you could command the stone to fly?”

She sighed. “I would have the world as it was in its first conception,” she said, “in all its shining glory, even as the Valar<sup>5</sup> went to weave it. Tarin, you fear to trespass upon the prerogatives of the Powers that made and rule the world. And it is right to feel such reverence. But I cannot pretend to the same fears, when I made this garden of mine. Indeed, had I the power to make a whole realm healthy and whole, like to that Doriath where I sojourned long years in times gone by, in lands now sunk beneath the sea, I would feel no compunction such as yours. To clean and to set to rights is not to work against the Powers, or even beyond them, but to return a part of the world to their express design. Because the marring that you mark at every hand was not done at the will of the One, but against it.”

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5 Elvish name for the Powers, who constructed the universe according to the dictates of the all-father and all-mother, Ilúvatar, the One.

Tarin was silent for a long time. "I want to help you in such work," he said at last, "but I fear to."

"You must do what your heart bids," she said. "But I would have you consider this: I do not believe you were given your powers for nothing. Nor that your coming to this land, at this time, is by chance."

Tarin felt that he needed time to think about that. He put the matter to one side, and for the time said only, "My heart bids me do one thing at least." He held out the four jewels, which she had given back to him. "I pray you, Lady Galadriel, accept these gifts from one whose heart you have greatly eased, with your garden, and by your wise words."

Tarin thought that, perhaps for the first time in their interview, he had surprised Galadriel. Indeed, tears sprang to her eyes. She accepted the stones.

"That is a princely gift," she said. "Oh, a princely gift. Greater perhaps than thou knowest. It bespeaks a noble heart. Let us hear no more, I pray thee, friend, about thy humble station!"

Tarin stood, and bowed. "Lady, I will leave you now," he said. "But you have given me much to think about. I hope I may see you again?"

She smiled at him brilliantly, the blue eyes intense. "Come whenever you are moved to. I give you leave to enjoy freely all my gardens, whether I am here or not. And, should you decide to make use of your gift, I have a fresh thought for that, too." She would not say more, only smiled again and bade him good day.

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Early that spring, Tarin had visited the horses where they had been stabled near the Gate Square of the City. Despite his initial apprehensions of the great beasts, he had become fond of them during the previous year's long journey of escape and quest. On his first visit, he had been concerned only to discover if the animals were being exercised and cared-for, but finding a friendly reception from the Elves in that place, he came again, and ever the oftener. In the course of time he became good friends with Saracar, the Stable-master, and indeed was viewed with benevolence by all, since he lent a hand with good will in all the more mucky tasks inherent in the care of horses.

Tarin found very noteworthy the comparison between the two nondescript nags that Kell had filched from the stables of the Dark Fortress and the remainder of the steeds in that place. The elven horses were like horses from some sort of story. Like the Elves themselves when viewed next to ordinary people, these horses seemed somehow just – well, like horses, of course, only more so. They seemed not only more real, but were high-mettled and full of fire. Tarin learned their names and would greet them individually. He was ready to swear they knew him and were greeting him in return, could he only interpret their language of snorts and neighs. Their chief, a great, silver-glistening steed named Raméas, Tarin thought, held him in special favour. These horses went in and out as they pleased; the stable was their home rather than a place of compulsory domicile.

One day, not long after his meeting with Galadriel, he saw Limm again. He was sitting with the stable folk, mending tack while laughing at Saracar's stories, when she came in from riding with a party of elvish maidens. Limm was dressed the same as her bright companions, rode her mount with much the same grace, and in all ways seemed an integral part of their group, with whom she was laughing and talking with animation. Tarin, however, seeing them all together, narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. Despite Limm's best efforts to blend with her companions, no-one would ever take her for an Elf. She was simply earth to their fire. He was also troubled by the flavour of some of the thoughts he was picking up from the Elves, which seemed at variance to their laughing words. He recollected that Limm was deaf to this channel.

She spotted him as he came up with the others to look after the snorting mounts. "Why Tarin!" she exclaimed. "Where have you been keeping yourself!"

Limm was pink at the cheek, and the wind had ruffled her hair. She was also hot, and smelled it. Her friends, however, all appeared as if newly minted.

Tarin felt a little aggrieved. "You're the one who went off and left me, without a backward glance," he said accusingly.

Limm flushed. "I couldn't do much else. Those people just jumped on me and herded me away."

And that was true. But she could have looked for me afterwards, thought Tarin. He felt more resigned than bitter, however. He knew Limm.

“How have you been?” he said.

Limm’s companions somehow were leaving. They called their goodbyes, waved, and then they were gone. Limm looked vexed for a moment before turning back to Tarin. “Me? I’m fine,” she said. “Excellent, in fact. This is the life, Tarin! This is what we dreamed of!”

He looked at her with his mouth a little askew. “Riding all day?”

“Not all day,” she said. “We do other games. Although riding is fine sport. These horses they have are just fantastic!” She looked him over thoughtfully. “They’d be a bit much for you, probably. Otherwise I’d show you.”

Same old Limm, he thought sourly. “What about these Brotherhood people?” he asked. “I heard they were taking up a lot of your time.”

She snorted. “Oh, those dry old sticks,” she said. “They try to. I suppose I’m obliged to lend myself to them sometimes. They’re putting me up, after all. But you know, Tarin, sometimes I wonder. It seems to me these people are just using me. Not so bad as some I’ve known, but it’s that kind of thing I ran away from in the first place.”

They spoke some more, desultorily, while Tarin wiped down the horse and inspected his hooves. Limm didn’t help, nor did she ask him about himself. After not too long a time, she excused herself and hurried off. Tarin didn’t know whether to be glad or sorry.

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Some of the things Galadriel had said to him raised questions in Tarin’s mind. He had not said much to Elrond about the meeting; nor did he feel quite comfortable quizzing the Elf over matters that appeared likely to concern him and his kin. That is why, as Tarin was passing Elrond’s library one day, the sight therein of Éoric’s hunched and white-haired form caused him on impulse to turn into the room.

After nodding to his young friend, the Northerner asked him, in his characteristic brusque fashion, what he wanted.

Tarin scratched his head. “Well, Éoric,” he said, “I was wondering if you’d be knowing something about a drowned country.”

“Drowned? Eh?” The old lore-master was puzzled.

“Yes. In olden times, I think. Drowned by the sea.”

Éoric sat back and looked at him with quick exasperation from under bristly brows. “Look, youngster,” he said. “What is this about?”

“Well, you see, I met Galadriel.”

“Oh, aye? Heard a lot about her. Never had the pleasure. Well, well, what’s this got to do with drowned?”

“It’s something she said,” said Tarin helplessly. “Where she used to live, I think.”

Éoric understood now. “Ah. Oh. Drowned. Yes. You’d only be talking about the whole of Beleriand that was,” he snorted. “Only that. Only the most famous occurrence in all of Middle-earth.” He gestured to include all the shelves full of papers and scrolls. “Half of this stuff is about it! Passed you by, seemingly.” He sniffed.

“Those papers are no good to me,” protested the younger man. “I can’t read. How’m I to know?”

Éoric considered him from a rheumy eye. “That’s so,” he said. “I’d forgot.” He sighed. “Ah well, translation was going slow today anyway. Some o’ them scribes didn’t know their business. All right: let me tell you how it was.” He proceeded to relate an outline of the great events of the First Age.

“But was it all so wonderful?” asked Tarin when he had finished. “The land itself, I mean.”

The old man chewed a bit of beard. “Much as here, far as I heard,” he said. “Not so special, mostly. What makes you ask?”

“It’s just the way Galadriel was describing a place,” Tarin replied. “I forget the name she said. Dor-something.”

“Oh,” said Éoric. “You mean Doriath. ’Twas only a little corner of Beleriand. The Hidden Realm, they called it. No mortal could get in – in theory, anyway. Practice turned out a little different. But my, yes, *that* was a magic place. Folk said it was like to Valinor, where the Gods live, and where all the old-time Noldor came from, too. Now Galadriel, she stayed many a year in Doriath, ’cording to the tales.”

Tarin thought about that. But he had another question. “If these Deep-elves liked Valinor so much,” he said, “why did they leave it in the first place? That’s what I wonder. Do you know? Does it say in your scrolls?”

The old scholar didn’t so much like that question. He fumed and puffed for a while, claimed he had work to do; but Tarin was on the scent now, and wouldn’t let the matter go.

Éoric glared at him, white eyebrows bristling. “All right,” he growled. “I’ll tell you a little. Not all, or even most, because I’ll not be held a tale-bearer for any man’s sake. There’s plenty of folks still living, aye, and in this house too, who were concerned in that affair, and would not take kindly to me airing their private business to the ears of all comers.

“If you must know, the parting between they Noldor and the Powers, whom they name the Valar, it was not amicable. And that’s all I’ll say on *that* matter. It’s not my affair, and even less yours. Nor was their journey to these shores what you would call orderly. There was a lot of bad blood arose.

“Well now. After they got back to Middle-earth, what did they do but take on the Enemy, in wise like I sketched out to you a moment ago. After all the fighting, all the travails, and I couldn’t tell you a tithe of them in a month, which if you want to know for real then you’ll just have to set to and learn to read; after all that, the Valar stepped in, and won the fight. Because the Enemy, as you may know, was of the same order of being as they, being their brother as you might say; and not only that, but he was the strongest of all. It needed all of the rest to best him. And so arduous was the affair that their armies tore up the whole of the battleground, which was Beleriand, as I’ve said. The lands sank beneath the sea, and that’s why the coast lies now not so very far off, just across these plains, to the West here, beyond the Blue Mountains.

“All right. You asked why they left. But maybe more to the point is why they didn’t go back. To Valinor, is what I mean. Afterwards. And the answer is: some of them did, and some of them continue to go. From *all* the tribes of Elves: Deep, Grey and Woodland. You’ve seen that chap Círdan? That’s been around lately?”

Beren recalled a tall Elf with salt-weathered features, piercing grey eyes, and a thick braid of silver hair that reached to his knees. He nodded.

“Don’t know what he’s hanging about here for just now,” commented Éoric. “Because normally, see, he’s down at the coast. He’s a master shipwright, among other things. It’s only his ships as can make it across.”

The old man leaned in close to Tarin, fixing him with his bright blue eyes. “Now,” he murmured low, “those Noldor, or Deep-elves, whatever you want to call ’em; that is to say, those ones what *disagreed* with the Powers: for them, it was like this. At the end of the show, after the waters came in, there’s some o’ them as *wasn’t let* to go back. So the rumour goes. That, or they wouldn’t stomach the conditions. Now, if you’ll take my advice, you’ll be very slow to mention this topic among these folk here. You follow? Course you do, bright little feller like you.

“One more thing, and then I’m shutting right up. Those folk as had to stay: your lady Galadriel, she was one of them.”

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When Tarin returned to Galadriel some two weeks later, it was not so much because he had managed to settle all of his ideas, but because he had not.

Voices and laughter met him this time as he approached the holly hedge, preparing him for what he found when he stepped through the gap. Numerous young women were engaged in some sort of riotous game among the trees. So light and fleeting were they that he had difficulty keeping any one of them in his eye – they seemed to slip out of vision before appearing somewhere else. They came to Tarin straight away, laughing, and hung him with garlands, and crowned him with another. The giggling crowd ushered him along a path he had not previously trodden until a turn revealed a low wooden house nestled in a hollow. They left him at the doorway and turned to continue with their frolic.

He found Galadriel seated as before. She smiled at him with her brilliant blue eyes, and he bowed in return, but remained standing.

“I had hoped you had come to lend your help in the work I have in view,” she said after the greetings, “but I perceive that your heart is troubled.”

“Honoured Lady Galadriel,” he replied, “forgive me, for I have no good words to express my thought. Some words I might choose seem to me to border on insolence, whereas others are fawning. My lady, I will just say that I lately heard some lore that has unsettled me. I had believed that your purpose lay always with that of the Valar as two oxen pull in the same harness. But the tale I have heard has left me in some doubt in my mind.”

Her eyes turned to ice. She rose, standing very straight. “The Valar made the earth, and everything in it,” she said, and Tarin quailed beneath her stern expression. “Only they did not make you, or me. We are all of us, the Valar on one side, your folk and mine on the other, equally children of the One – they greater, we lesser. The Valar stand in relation to us as elder siblings rather than parents. There is no question that the Valar have the power to rule our fates; but some of us have disputed that they have the right. So much for your oxen. But if the matter should treat not of the order between our two peoples, but of the substance of the earth, as the one before us does, then for my part I say to you, that I and the Valar stand as close and straight as two rushes that spring from the same root.

“That is my say. So choose. Go, or stay.”

Tarin said humbly, “I will stay, Lady Galadriel, if it please you.” He sat himself tentatively on a padded footstool. “And I am most sorry for putting my foot in where I had no call to.”

She in her turn sat back down. The fierce light faded from her eyes, leaving her at last with the same gentle expression he remembered from last time.

“Forgive me too,” she said. “Only some wounds remain very raw.”

He nodded, said then tentatively, “Will you tell me of the work you had in mind?”

She glanced at him, gathered her thoughts. “I know you long for clean things,” she began. “And you know, I think, that I share that longing. Many of our folk do in some measure, but that longing is deepest and most sore for those few of us remaining who remember the high days in the West that is lost to us.

“Not only must we live among the sad conditions of the world as it is; we cannot simply resign ourselves to endure them, because matters are slowly worsening. Evil, it seems, is seeping back into the world. We had suspected it for long, and now we are sure. In this hardening of our thought, your tale of this Master has lately played a great part.

“Those cleansings that we manage, like my garden here, are expressions of our will, and cannot last. Were I to depart, my garden would slowly fade. To hold whatever gains we make, the will must be locked into some housing, some talisman. We have art with which to do that. The builder of the City yonder, who remains also its ruler, is a great artificer named Celebrimbor, which renders in your tongue as Silver-fist. He is deepest of us in this lore of making, which he has studied long. He and I have come together at this time, together with sundry elders of our race, to devise, if we might, a talisman as a ward against evil. Our plans are not yet mature, nor do we yet know of what nature the house should be. I leave such questions to Celebrimbor.

“This is our dream: to understand, to renew, and to preserve that which we love against decay. But all of our trials to this point have fallen short of the mark. Even working together, the power of renewal we can muster is not sufficient. Therefore has your coming been a source of great hope to me, and therefore I petition you most humbly for aid – for the aid that you, Tarin Halfling, in all the world, as it seems to me, have the power to render.

“Should it be your gracious wish to grant this to us, I had bethought me to make a trial. Look you now,” and with these words, Galadriel raised into Tarin’s sight the great green gem of the four he had given her. “This stone reminded me of another which is now lost; and the memory struck me to the heart, as reminders of loss will do. There was a work of smiths long since drowned that among us bore the name of Elessar, the Elf-stone. It hangs now at the breast of he who is called Eärendil, of whom you may have heard. And if you have not, then you should learn. That stone lives still, yet it is beyond our reach; for you may glimpse Eärendil perchance in the sky of dawning, perchance at evening, and know him by the light of the Silmaril that he bears bound to his brow.

“Therefore, the following I conceived; and if you name it vanity, you do but echo my own inner fears. Tarin, in my

pride, I thought with your aid to essay this: to devise a second Elessar. Because there you sit, with your power; and I can think of no more fitting housing than this noble gem.”

Tarin quaked within himself at the thought of this giant reach beyond anything he had ever dared imagine; but he trusted Galadriel now.

“I am not fit to judge of the wisdom of this, Lady,” he said in a voice that trembled. “I must leave that to you. But I am willing to try, if you will show me the way.”

She smiled at him brilliantly. “I think we must go into the garden,” she said, rising. “I would have free air about me.”

He followed her into the warmth of the day, into the freshness and birdsong. As she led him towards the enchanted garden, its beauty flowed again into his heart and left him breathless for joy. They sat this day on the same terraced lawn, but under a different tree. The foliage of this one was delicate and full of light; its fresh greens instilled a feeling of timeless youth. Carefree voices and laughter came to them faintly from the surrounding gardens.

Tarin drew the air of that place deeply into his lungs. The beauty of the sapphire-blue sky arching overhead was almost more than his heart could bear.

Galadriel placed the emerald on the fine-mown grass between them. “Will you take my hands?” she said softly. “Now gaze into my eyes.”

He did so, and felt immediately the power of her personality. She did not dominate; rather hers surrounded and supported his own. The stone between them grew intensely in his awareness. He could sense its wholeness, as he could sense, gathering around them in array, the powers of youth and hope that dwelt in that holy place. Guided by the deep woman whose mind was so tightly linked with his, he saw how to gently fold these mighty powers into the receptacle of the stone. Emboldened, he set to work.

After a time he could not measure, the strenuous but delicate work of loading the powers was finished. The moment all was complete, he sensed Galadriel’s mind take fire. In a blaze of command, she sealed the stone. It was done.

They fell apart with a gasp. Tarin, blinking again in the sunlight, felt an ache and a weariness within, where the river of hot power had flowed through him.

Galadriel took up the stone and held it cradled in her hand. Rays of the rich colours of springtime seeped between her fingers and reflected from her eyes as she raised them to rest wonderingly on Tarin’s face. “My heart is full,” she whispered. “Oh, Tarin, what have you done for us?”

She laughed suddenly, merrily as the maids in the garden, and sprang to her feet. “Come, great magician, worker of miracles, healer of stones!” she said, pulling him up. “Even such as we must eat. Dine with Galadriel!” Maids like spirits fled in from the outer garden, and the whole enclosure rang with unearthly joy.

The meal that followed, simple though it was, remained in Tarin’s memory as one of the high points in his life. He was never able afterwards to describe it. “Oh!” he would say, helpless for words. “If you could only have heard the music!”

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Celebrimbor, when Tarin met him, turned out to be a dark Elf – dark of eye, dark of hair, and dark of brow. He also lacked that summertime lightness of heart that Galadriel could radiate when the mood took her. He gave the impression of one who viewed life seriously – perhaps, Tarin thought, as a series of tasks to be accomplished, of challenges to be successively overcome. It was not that he lacked the capacity for deep joy; indeed, perhaps rather the contrary. But there seemed no place for frivolity in his character.

Tarin sat uncomfortably while Celebrimbor alternated between examining the green stone he held in his work-hardened hand, and glancing at Tarin in poorly concealed astonishment.

“It is a remarkable work,” the smith said at last. “Indeed, I doubt I have seen the like in this age of the world.”

“You have not,” said Galadriel, who was sitting to one side. “Do you not think, with me, that this changes everything?”

“I think we must discuss it,” replied the smith with caution, “but appearances certainly incline that way.”

“Something else,” said Galadriel. With a glance at Tarin, she opened a cloth she held, to reveal the remaining three stones of Tarin’s gift. As has been related, these were diamond, sapphire, ruby. The latter two stones in particular were of considerable size; but all radiated the same powerful aura of integrity, of purity.

Celebrimbor drew in his breath sharply. Clearly, he was sensible of the special quality of the stones. “Great Aulë,” he breathed. “Where did you get those?”

“I was given them,” replied Galadriel. Although she had not so much as hinted at the giver, Celebrimbor’s eyes came again to rest wonderingly on Tarin.

Celebrimbor received the stones with reverence from Galadriel’s reach. He sat back, gazing at them, sought for words. “By great Aulë’s forge!” he said at last. “This is a day of wonders. Three such!”

“I thought they might serve our need,” said the golden-tressed woman. “Of course it is for you to judge, who knows these matters best. But their green comrade, I think, makes a strong house for power.”

The Elf nodded slowly. “That would suit,” he said. “We had already considered that a single ring would not work well for us, that we could likely not muster the strength to make it as strong as it would need to be. All right then: let us make three. Yes. That is suitable.”

He and Galadriel debated the matter some way further, speaking of things outside of Tarin’s easy comprehension. Indeed after a time they left off speaking in the common language that he knew and continued in another, rounded and sonorous; a tongue that he had heard in the City from time to time, but never learned.

Celebrimbor stopped speaking of a sudden, turned to Tarin. “I beg your pardon, young master,” he said. “We do you a discourtesy. We can debate these dry matters later among ourselves. There are but two questions on which I would know your thought. The first is, simply to ask you, if you are willing to join us in this work, to lend us your aid. Before you say yea, should you be so minded, I should in honest dealing open to you the risks you may run. For this is no light matter of which we speak. Indeed we propose to essay no less than the greatest work of mind and hand that ever Noldo attempted since the making of the Silmarils. I hope we do not thereby set our lives at peril, but I can give no assurance of safety. There will surely be a cost, and it may not be far short of that last and final penalty. I would hope that we might shield you from the worst, and bear the weight of any payment upon our own hardier backs. But I can promise nothing. So, I pray you, do not reply straight away. Go, and think. Weigh what you understand of what we hope to achieve against the risks I have outlined.”

Tarin bowed his head in acknowledgement. He had not heretofore considered the question of risk, but what the Elf told him was somehow no surprise. He felt deeply that everything came with a cost. But what was his second question?

Celebrimbor was already telling him. “Works such as these are in great part creations of the will. We have strong minds among us, even now after so many have been lost. But how to combine our strength? This problem has cost us much fruitless thought. I turn now from you to your travelling companion, of whose strange gift we have heard. It is a curious fate that brought you both to us at this time. I will not believe it is mere chance, and I take hope from that. Camped here as we are in the wilds of Middle-earth, we feel very far from the influence of the Powers. But they have not forgotten us; and I see good sign of that in your presence here.

“You, young master, have the power to renew. Your companion’s gift will allow us to combine. With your joined aid, should you grant it, and if it be the will of the Valar, I believe we can accomplish our design.”

Nobody was moved to speak for some time. Tarin said at last, “Has anyone asked Limm?”

Galadriel and Celebrimbor looked at each other. Galadriel said, “I do not know her. Do you fear she will object? She has done many things for the Brothers, without complaint.”

“Maybe I’d better talk to her first myself,” said Tarin.

However Limm, when he approached her, fulfilled his worst apprehensions. She flared up immediately.

“So it’s selling me you’re at now!” she stormed. “Even you. Even you, Tarin. I’d not have thought it of you. But you’re all of you the same. You all just want a piece of me.”

“But this is important,” he said weakly. How could he get her to see?



Her green eyes glared at him angrily. “Don’t you come at me with your important. It’s always important. Those disgusting men on the wagon train, what they wanted was important – to them. It’s using me, Tarin. I’m fed up with it. The only people who don’t use me are my girls.” She stamped out. She stamped back. “And you needn’t think I’m going to stand for any more nonsense from those Brothers, either! I quit. And if they throw me out, so much the better. I’ll go off and live in the woods. You and your Elves! You can stick them!” She stamped out again. And that was it. The next time he sought her out, at her dwelling, she refused to see him.

Galadriel, when he told her, took the news much more equably than he expected. “No good could come from forcing her against her will,” she said. “That would be quite the wrong direction. We could not come out well in this business if we began in that fashion. We must think of a better approach. Do you think she would consent to talk with me?”

“She won’t even talk to me, now,” said Tarin miserably. “I’m afraid I’ve made an awful mess of it.”

“It is how it is,” replied the elven beauty. “Do not blame yourself. Let us think on it, and talk. Perhaps an idea will come.”

“Something I wanted to ask,” said Tarin. “Celebrimbor talked of dangers. That’s all right, I’m prepared to run some risks. This... this..., well somehow it seems worth it, if you know what I mean. And it is not as if my life meant so much to me anyway. But I never thought of Limm. I’m not... I can’t... look, Galadriel, if she came to harm through me, well it would just kill me, that’s all.”

Her eyes were full of sympathy. “I will need to confirm it with Celebrimbor,” she said, “but so far as I understand the matter, there is small chance of risk to Limm. Only this: that she might lose her gift. But from what you tell me, she might be rather glad of that than otherwise.”

“All right,” he said. “But if she agrees to take part, even that should be made clear to her. She should have the choice.”

She inclined her head to this as something that went without saying. When she spoke again, it was to take up a different thread.

“It saddens me to hear you say you do not value your own life,” she said. “Although I had read that already from your heart. But I understand your plight, maybe better than you know. It is true that my own folk have not turned their faces from me, as you have suffered; but like you, I have left my home. And whether it were wisdom or folly to do so is all the same, because I cannot return.”

“I am sorry for you, my lady,” he mumbled. “Your home must be a much more wonderful place than my damp island.”

She smiled at him kindly. “Home is home, and not to be replaced, whatever its condition. But I would not see you forlorn, you who have so gladdened my heart. Is there anything I can do to abate your discontent? For I would do you honour. I tell you truly, Tarin, your spirit is greater than many another I have met from far higher station. I hope that you received welcome among us, even before we knew you properly for what you are; but now, your name has gone out, and your place among us is secure. It grieves me to think that you value yourself at less than your deserts.”

He smiled up at her. “Oh, I am not unhappy,” he said. “Elrond is very kind. I have company, and things to do. But somehow I have lost my place in the world – perhaps I never had one to begin with, only lived in the foolish delusion. But now even that is gone. Where do I belong? My father I never knew; my mother is dead. And my conception between them was an affair not of love, but of bestial force. That clouds my past, and I can see no future. You named me Halfling, but I am not even that. Half-halfling am I. Three-quarter-ling? I don’t know.”

In all her wisdom, she could think of no consolation for his pain. He bowed his head, and left her for the time.

In the end, Limm came to him. Tarin was weeding his small garden one hot day when he heard Mairie call his name. He turned to find the little maid leading a sheepish Limm by the hand. The child skipped to Tarin and kissed him, before smiling an impish smile and leaving them in a swirl of gaiety.

Limm smiled absently after the child, then sat on one of the rounds of wood placed for the purpose. She was dressed in forest green: breeches, and a jerkin of neat cut that left her brown arms bare.

“I’m sorry I shouted at you,” she said.

Tarin tried his best to conceal his astonishment. It was the first apology he had ever heard from Limm.

“That’s all right,” he said. “Forget it. How have you been?”

“Oh, well enough,” she said. “Usual.” She picked up a twig and dug with it randomly in the soil. “Cute kid.”

“They’re fun,” he agreed. “There’s always a few about the place.”

For some moments there was little sound but the drugged hum of bees.

“Tarin,” Limm began, but she didn’t seem to know how to continue.

“Look,” he said after a while. “I’m sorry I asked you to help with the Elves and their project. I really am. I know you’ve always hated this... this *thing* you have. I shouldn’t have asked.”

She waved a hand as if to brush this aside. “Oh, that,” she said. “You caught me on a bad day, maybe. I’ve been talking to people since then. They’ve been telling me... well, lots of things. Things I didn’t know about you.” She glanced at him from beneath dark brows. “I’ll do it, I’m ready to do it. I know it’s important to them. I don’t mind. It’s not that.” But she didn’t go on to tell him what it was.

“What is it, Limm?” he asked her gently.

Her glance in reply was almost fierce. “Look,” she said. She was getting her words out with difficulty. “We’ve been through a lot together. You and me. I’d like to think that... that... well, that we were friends, sort of. I know I haven’t always... it hasn’t always... well, I’m sorry, that’s all. For the times I’ve been ratty, and that.”

“It’s all right, Limm,” he said. “You don’t need to say any more.”

“No, look,” she said with desperation, “look. I know how things are, I’m not stupid. But I’m not like that. I can’t be like that. Not with you, not with anybody. I’m sorry, all right? It’s just how it is.”

She stood up suddenly and walked quickly out. Tarin wondered to see her raise a hand to her face as she went.

\* \* \* \* \*

Celebrimbor arranged to stage a dry run. As Tarin walked with Limm to Galadriel’s garden, those already there began to come within the outer fringe of her peculiar field of mental illumination. They grew with closer approach to a daunting array of personages in his mind. Sensed on this band, the Elves presented vast, detailed, majestic personalities. Tarin thought they were like great trees, shimmering with life, each leaf a separate thought.

The physical reality was hardly less impressive. Galadriel and Elrond he knew, if not formerly to the depths now revealed, and newly Celebrimbor too. As he and Limm took their places on the sweet grass, sitting rather close for mutual comfort, Tarin glanced at the three figures sitting opposite; then looked quickly away, because their gazes were on him, which he found altogether overwhelming. He felt himself squirming helplessly beneath their potent attention like a hapless earthworm, pinned and slowly fried beneath the noonday sun. Later in the session, at times when their attention was directed elsewhere, he stole glances in furtive awe. Círdan he had seen before; the other two had been introduced to him as Gil-galad and Glorfindel. Their colours were respectively silver, dark, and golden, and their natures, so much deeper and more manifold than mere surface appearance, offered equal contrasts.

Círdan was a creature of the sea, which he understood in all its aspects. He was old, old. Not even Galadriel’s experience stretched back so far. The shipwright’s gaze was keen – keener than Tarin had imagined possible. The silver-haired elder saw to the heart of things, and could not be deceived.

Gil-galad was direct, open, fierce. His arm was strong, his eye commanding. Tarin saw in him a great captain, one whom men would proudly follow, in legions strengthened by his will. Tarin felt deeply that the Elf knew not only how best to win, but also how to save the most from defeat. He had the strongest will of any of them, and the greatest power of endurance.

Glorfindel’s was the brightest spirit of them all, and the one whose healing power came nearest in measure to that of Tarin himself. A white and pure light seemed almost to well from his clothes and skin, as though he were no Elf at all, but a vessel of pearly glass. Venerable he was, as one who has seen many summers; but a boundless spirit of youth glowed in his face. Even just to sight him was to feel cheered and strengthened.

Undoubted chief among these spirits was that of Galadriel. She was the deepest in might, yet her strength sat lightly upon her shoulders. In her were combined the wisdom of Elrond, the clear sight of Círdan, the commanding will of Gil-Galad, and the bright joy of Glorfindel. Seeing her thus, it became clear to Tarin that he had known, as yet, only a few aspects of her deep nature.

Tarin wondered what they all thought of him. If they were like tall trees, why, he must be no more than a stunted shrub. What had he known and done? Nothing. A brief time of youth whose high points were tea with Ma, followed by a single year of mostly horrible adventures. What was that compared to these Elves, to their centuries of life and thought?

It was a strain to sit there while Celebrimbor directed the others according to his plan. The personalities of the Elves beat on Tarin's senses like a burning sun. They were giving him a headache. In addition, he began to grow alarmed at the power he sensed of the forces which Celebrimbor was marshalling in the wings. Tarin had not realized, had had no conception. These deep-pooling powers were charged with strength enough to smash the softness of living flesh and spirit, were they too casually handled. He hoped Celebrimbor knew what he was doing.

To distract himself, Tarin turned his thoughts to memory. Some days ago, he had asked Galadriel if she could explain this power of seeing the defects in things.

The Elf-lady had smiled. "It is not easy to trap the world in any net of words," she had replied. "Too many fish slip through the mesh. Yet let me cast my net so. All things in the world can be sensed in several aspects. Take for example sight: by this, one may perceive shape, lightness, colour. But these three aspects are not as each other: they are independent. For there are people whose eyes will not see colour, although they perceive form and light without difficulty. Again, a person with no sight at all may still sense the shapes of things through touch, although colour and light pass him by.

"Now there are other aspects to which mortal folk, most of them, are blind. In your sensing of stain and damage, you are, I believe, exceptional among your folk. But all of we Firstborn have this sense in some measure. In addition to this, there are further planes, aspects, that we can sense better than you; and others yet further, which the Valar can perceive, but which we cannot. And I do not know whether even the Valar in assembly can perceive all the sides of reality.

"Strangest to me is the gift of your friend. The sense itself is not strange to us; only its intensity, and the fact that it is lent to all who venture within a certain range. This I do not understand."

Limm. He was glad of her present warmth beside him. The forest woman had sat silent through the proceedings, volunteering no word, and answering queries with single syllables. Tarin knew she felt uncomfortable in any situation she did not feel on top of. She could not sense the Elves here so strongly or directly as he, but in sufficient degree that she felt abashed by their presence.

A pang of sympathy smote him. Limm hungered so desperately for the grace and glamour of the Elves. She was strong, she was beautiful; but her feet were stuck in clay. Tarin feared that time spent in the company of Elves would work ever more cruelly upon her. She was a moth flying unerringly to a lamp. The lamp, in its compassion, might lower its glass, to save the moth from instant immolation; but the creature would slowly batter its heart out against the glass nonetheless. And it would not be the fault of the lamp.

Celebrimbor interrupted Tarin's musings at that point, since he desired to coach the small man in what he must do, at the time the true work commenced. It was some time before the two mortals were able to escape and relax.

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They were called on a night of moonlight in the high days of summer. Galadriel had wanted the moon – she said that Ithil was a better reminder of the lost light of Telperion than Anar was of Laurelin<sup>6</sup>. Ithil, she said, was merely scarred and sad; but Anar had gone beyond his remit, had superposed a harsh and boastful overlay.

The enchanted light now streamed down from the starry vault of heaven, touching every blade of grass with silver. The company sat in the open, in a circle. Celebrimbor had fashioned three rings to hold the stones, and these now gleamed between them upon the fine-sown and even lawn. Moonlight glanced from the silver apples in the nearby tree and glistened, thrown back with more than reflected light, from the hair of the Elves. Small moths were dancing through that wide space, their eyes now and then catching the light as tiny sparks of red. The air was heavy with the sweet scent

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6 Telperion and Laurelin were the lost trees of respectively silver and golden light in Valinor; Ithil and Anar are the moon and sun, created from their last fruits.

of many blossoms, and nightingales sang in the woods surrounding. Had Tarin not been so gripped by tension, he would have revelled in the sublime beauty of the night.

“It is time to begin,” said Galadriel softly. They held hands in a ring. The combined might of the elvish personalities held Tarin in an armature of strength, but he was quaking nonetheless. He had not dreamed that his simple power of repairing pots could ever lead to this. Good Powers, what was he even *doing* here. What would Ma have said? He couldn’t imagine. No, but he could. Indeed he could hear her voice now in his memory. “If you’re going to do something, do it properly.”

All right, Ma. He would do his best.

He could feel when it began. Celebrimbor opened mental doors with caution, started to move the powers. The others, strongly present to his mind under Limm’s influence, were playing their allotted roles, guarding, guiding, adding their strength. Tarin had opened himself to the movement, as instructed. He could feel it engaging him, with building force and urgency. The awakening of power was like the growth of some current of wind, turning about the three rings, ever stronger, ever tighter.

His fear rose with the growth of power. Celebrimbor had called up great forces, spirits of the earth, water, and sky, and these moved now of themselves, gathering slowly to the irresistible power of an avalanche in the mountains. These elementals were not to be commanded, never to be completely known. The Noldor were riding the unleashed forces as a man rides a huge and barely controllable beast, and it needed all of their skill and strength. Faster and faster turned the wind, faster and more furiously surged the great beasts. It was getting out of control. Tarin had not thought it would be like this. In his terror, he felt for Limm, but she was not there, not in the terrible wind. He could not sense her. He could no longer feel her hand in his. He cried then in his pain and fear, as the maelstrom grew to a monster of terrible strength. It was tearing at their minds, howling for their souls. The others trying to shield him, but they could not enough, the terrible winds were getting through. The whole world was become pain, oh the pain of it, the horrific sensation of being torn apart in the white-hot focus, the screaming whirlwind funnelling down towards a glaring point, too bright now to look at. Awareness fled from him as he sank into the mercy of unconsciousness.

When at last Tarin struggled, moaning, back to life and light, the toll of this night was immediately clear to him. Emptiness! The whole centre of his nature was missing; as if it had been torn out by the root.

It was not Limm who had lost her power, as Celebrimbor had feared: it was he.

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Tarin had been facing the wall when Limm visited, but he rolled over readily enough. He was glad to see her.

“Thanks for coming to see me,” he said.

“Oh, well, that was Elrond’s idea,” she said, with only a little embarrassment. “I say, Tarin, he’s a bit of a dish, isn’t he? More approachable somehow than these other Elves.” She sat herself next to his bed and looked at him cheerfully.

“I suppose he is,” Tarin answered with a wry smile.

Limm chortled. “I shall have to visit more often. Do you know if he has a girlfriend?”

Tarin had never seen one, but beyond this, he had to confess to knowing nothing about Elrond’s love life.

Limm dropped the subject as likely to be unprofitable. Remembering herself then, she said, “Well how are you anyway, Tarin? You don’t look too bad.”

“I’m fine,” said Tarin. “They said they’d let me up tomorrow.” He estimated a report of that length was about as far as Limm’s dutiful interest would take her.

“Oh, good,” she said vaguely. “I say, Tarin, wasn’t that something! I thought my hair would stand on end! Have you seen the rings yet?”

He had: Galadriel had shown him one. Although she had not worn it, the Elf-woman had been in such a state of incandescent exultation over the ring, Tarin had been almost scared of her.

"They're really something," Limm continued. She leaned closer. "Do you know, Tarin," she confided, "I don't think I understood properly before what this was all about. I mean, just what your friends were trying to achieve. So maybe I owe you almost another apology, eh? Ha ha, you should make notches in a stick. I don't give out many."

Tarin just smiled at that. He said, "How are you yourself? They said you were all right. And you seem cheerful enough." He didn't ask her how the others were, because he had been reassured on that point already by Elrond.

"Oh, yes," she said, "nothing ever happens to me. I'm tough." She rolled her eyes. "And I still have my stupid power. So much for *that* hope."

He had known it; it had been the first thing he had asked Elrond. Although now he wasn't sure whether he should be glad or sorry at the outcome.

He had to ask. "Weren't you scared?"

She shook her head. "No, were you?"

"A bit," he admitted.

"Oh. Well, it's over now, and no harm done." Clearly she didn't know of his loss. Or knew, but had forgotten already. "I tell you what though," she continued, "those Brothers are in an awful stink."

For a moment he couldn't think who she meant. "What brothers?"

"The Brotherhood of Smiths," she said. "That's what they call themselves. Some elvish name I can never remember. Mirdain something. The thing is, they're stinky that Celebrimbor never asked them to help. He just tossed the rings in their laps and said Ho, squires, cop a look at what *I* made. They're not happy."

He scratched his head. "How do you know all this?"

"Don't you remember? They're always at me to help them make swords and things. You *are* slow today. They've been fussing and steaming to me ever since."

He thought about it for a moment, but it didn't seem to be anything to concern him, so he put it aside. "What are you going to do now?" he asked her.

She looked at him curiously. "'Now'? Just the same as I did before. What else?"

What else indeed? Tarin told himself there was nothing to stop him doing the same. It wasn't as if he had ever *used* his power much. Let alone even wanted it in the first place.

Limm was still chatting. "The smiths told me Annatar is coming," she said. "He'll be here in a few days."

She had succeeded in confusing him again. But he was *certain* he had never heard of anyone of that name. "All right, I'll bite," he said with some weariness. "Who's Annatar?"

"Oh, I thought you would have heard of him, you know all these things. Well, the Brotherhood all think the world of him. He's this famous Elf-lord apparently who knows just all the tricks going about smith-work and that. He comes to visit now and then and they make things together. Annatar means 'Lord of Gifts' but they also call him Noble Smith and all sorts of other things."

A shiver went down Tarin's spine, for no reason he could think of.

"Are you all right?" Limm asked him, with what sounded almost like concern in her voice. "You had a funny look on your face."

"Yes, yes," he said. "Someone walked over my grave. It's nothing." He sought for a change of subject. "What are the things that they make?"

"What?"

“You said they make things together,” he said patiently. “Annatar, and the Brothers.”

“Oh. My Brothers didn’t say,” said Limm. “I imagine it is the usual junk they like to make. I don’t know. But they make him out to be such a big dog, I’m just curious to see him.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Tarin did get up the next day. He had slept well, and felt, truth to tell, none the worse for the experience. Even the memory of the terror was fast fading.

Elrond called on him not long after breakfast and invited him into the garden. The two of them sat on a bench together, enjoying the fine morning.

Tarin saw that Elrond was wearing the ring with the blue stone. He was curious to know how it felt, and ventured to ask.

Elrond smiled, lifted his hand, and turned the ring in the sun. The great blue stone flashed in the light. “Not so much different,” he replied. “It will be some time before I can learn how to wield it.”

“Do you have particular plans that way, Master?” asked Tarin diffidently.

“No,” said Elrond. He laughed. “Indeed I did not imagine I would be chosen to bear one at all. It should have gone to our Captain, Gil-galad. But he refused, and so did Celebrimbor, albeit on different grounds. Glorfindel was also firm in declining. In fact, of the three bearers who were chosen, I think only Galadriel was at all eager. I and Círdan were evidently too faint in our protestations, and have had to bear the consequences.”

“You make it sound like a bad thing,” the small man said.

“They are great devices,” replied Elrond soberly. “Good in themselves; but so great a work weighs heavily on the world. It cannot be otherwise. Celebrimbor said there would be a cost; and much of that must be paid by the bearers.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” said Tarin. “I suppose I imagined, rather fondly perhaps, that we would gain wonderful things by these rings, and that nobody would be made unhappy because of them – that nobody *could* be made unhappy. And it does not seem fair to me that a few should suffer for the many. But my mother would tell me that all things, good or bad, have to be paid for.”

“She was right; but so are you. It is not fair. And it seems to me that the greatest unfairness is borne by you,” said Elrond, looking at Tarin with concern in his grey eyes. “For you receive no gain at all; yet you have paid perhaps the highest price.”

Tarin would have said something, but Elrond was not finished.

“Elves do not readily express either regret or gratitude,” the dark-haired Elf continued. “For we hold that all deeds do but follow the weft laid for them in the great skein of cloth that is Arda<sup>7</sup>. And as thanks are but poor reward for a good deed, so can apologies make no amends for a bad. Yet I am of mixed blood, and my view of things is more than merely elvish. It grieves me therefore that you have done this mighty deed for us, yet receive neither thanks nor honour for it. For no-one will sing of you, Tarin, this I know. We Elves, alas, interest ourselves chiefly in our own affairs. All of our songs concern ourselves – save those few that treat of the mighty Men, heroes of the previous age, who wove their affairs with ours. Thus, my young friend, all I can offer you in poor recompense for your kingly gift is the assurance of my gratitude, unto the ending of the earth. For this I promise: I shall not forget.”

Tarin hardly knew where to start. “My dear host and friend, if I may name you such,” he began, “I thank you most deeply for your kind words. But believe you me, I am happy not to be the subject of songs! That would not suit me at all. And if I may, I will just dispute this notion of yours that I have paid some great price. All right, I seem to have lost my gift, but I have been thinking about it, and I am thinking that the experience I have just been through may be the only reason I was granted this great power in the first place. Such gifts do not grow on trees, and they are not given to one for the mending of dropped plates! Lady Galadriel thought that Limm and I turning up at this time was something arranged by the Powers. Well, I know nothing of such matters, and I tremble to think that I might have come to the attention of these most august of all beings in the world; but if it is so, then the honour accruing is already far more reward than I know what to do with.

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7 Elvish name for the created universe.

“No, no, do not concern yourself. I am quite unhurt. I had no use for my power. I was afraid to use it. For this one time, it has been used, I think, as it was intended to be used. If there is no more remaining, then no more is required. I am content.

“As for your thanks, I would just say that you have fed and sheltered me now for many months. More: you have given me a home. That is what I had longed for above all things. So you need not trouble yourself over how I might be repaid. You have already repaid me more than enough.”

Elrond stood momentarily and bowed low to him. “Noble words. But my thanks and my memory you will have regardless.”

He sat again, and the two sat a while in silence, enjoying the freshness of the young day.

Tarin had another topic he wanted to raise. “Elrond,” he said at last, “I am curious to know something of the price others might pay. But it is not my business at all,” he added hastily. “Please feel free to rebuff me as tartly as my temerity deserves.”

The Elf smiled. “All questions may be asked,” he said, “although some may not receive answers. But this is no secret. For my own case, what reckoning might come to me, I do not yet know in full. And what others may pay may be best known to themselves. Cirdan, I know, was hard hit. He has the ring of fire, and fire is a demanding servant. Nor is it clear how that will comport with the watery element he has been used to rule.

“As for Galadriel, she will tell you that she has her heart’s desire, and it is so. For she has since long ages desired some land of her own to order according to her notions. She has now that power, and I hold it no bad thing, for I think she will use it well, and may in the end create the greatest work of us all. I question only whether, in gaining that desire, she has set far back some deeper need of the heart. More I will not say; since it is, to use your own words,” here his eyes twinkled at Tarin, “not my business.

“Of Celebrimbor, who although he bears no ring, is their root and parent, I am not sure. He bears no obvious mark or scar, but in my mind’s eye, his path ends here, or close to it. I cannot see him far in the future, and that troubles me.”

The two unequal companions passed on then to other and lighter matters. They got up after a while and walked in the gardens, among the thousands of living leaves spread glad beneath the sun’s warmth. Bees and birds busied themselves happily all about the strolling pair.

Before leaving his tall friend, Tarin made mention of a subject that had lain somewhat uneasily on his mind: Limm’s news concerning Annatar.

Elrond’s grey eyes became hard at the mention of the name. “Leave Annatar to us,” was all he said.

“But, but, who is he?” stuttered Tarin. “According to Limm, he has done much good work, given unstinting of help to the smiths; but I, well, I’m not sure what to say. I don’t feel quite right about it somehow. And it is clear that you don’t like him.”

“I do not know him,” Elrond corrected him. “But we have a thought for that one. My advice to you is to stay away from him until matters are clearer. And you should advise your young friend likewise.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Tarin knew perfectly well that Limm wouldn’t pay his concerns the slightest attention, and so it proved. She scoffed at his warnings and accused him of having a fit of the vapours. Did he think he knew better, she asked, than a whole parcel of Deep-elves, master smiths at that? Why, even Celebrimbor had worked with Annatar, over many years.

It didn’t help that Tarin could not give any justification for his apprehension. He just had a feeling in one of his more obscure bones that an ominous cloud had settled over the City, only a few days following its most glorious triumph.

Tarin tossed and turned that night, unable to decide what best to do. However, an idea came to him at last, after which he managed to sleep. As soon as it was convenient in the morning, he consulted with Elrond. He went out after that and spoke with one or two people he knew in the City. They all promised to help; said they would pursue their own contacts and organize something.

What he wanted was to gather a chorus of many elven voices to persuade Limm to keep her head down for a few days. He knew she would give weight to their views where she would not to his.

The next day, this scheme was still brewing. To take his mind off things, Tarin spent the time in the stables. Here he found Saracar as genial as ever, but Raméas appeared uneasy, snorting and flashing his eye. The great horse seemed as sensitive as Tarin to the oppression that seemed to hang over the City like a looming thunderstorm.

Shortly before the noon meal on the following day, Tarin threw down the piece of tack he had been fitfully trying to repair and strode out of the building. He had decided to find Limm and find out whether any others had talked to her. He wanted to test her reaction, to see if the compass needle of her stubborn disregard showed any tendency to deviate under their persuasion.

Limm was not in her rooms. He knew she had not gone riding, for her horse, Vilissa, had been in the stables. Where could she be? For the want of any more likely place, Tarin sought her in the complex of workshops and galleries in which, as he knew, the Brotherhood of Smiths worked on their projects.

He was met at the door by a flushed-face apprentice who answered his query by ushering him within. Some few turns and steps brought them to an airy room of which an array of work benches filled about half, the other being occupied by chairs ordered around a lectern. Here Tarin found the smiths all seated, whereas Celebrimbor stood in the centre, facing a tall figure clothed in white. Limm was not there. An impassioned debate that Tarin had heard during his approach broke off as he appeared in the doorway. He had just time to note with astonishment that the master smith appeared to be sweating when the white-robed figure turned its gaze towards him.

Tarin took in a fair and noble face that held a pair of large, dark eyes, as sensitive as those of a deer, but depthless as a moonless night. For a long moment, the man held Tarin in his gaze. The small man shivered, feeling as though a piercing light was searching through his very being.

Having devoted the entire force of his attention to Tarin for a second or two, the white-clad noble now removed it completely. The small man held nothing of interest for him.

Celebrimbor coughed and volunteered, "This is Tarin, of whom we spoke. Tarin, here is the one we know as Annatar, Lord of Gifts."

The white figure, Annatar, inclined his head. After a pause of brief and empty courtesy, he turned away and continued speaking to Celebrimbor in the elvish tongue. His voice was soft, his address courteous; but the sweat stood in beads on Celebrimbor's face. The other smiths, for their part, all appeared at the point of steaming from sheer indignation.

Tarin backed out. Limm was not there, and the debate did not concern him. He was sorry for Celebrimbor, but had no wish to embroil himself in what looked like an awkward confrontation. His concern, however, took him straight to Elrond.

Elrond frowned as he listened to Tarin's account. "We can do nothing until Círdan returns," he said. "Runners have been sent after him. It is an ill chance, maybe, that he was so eager to return home."

"But what about Limm?" Tarin said.

But Elrond advised calm. He said that Limm stood in no danger that he knew of; it was merely wise policy to steer clear of this Lord of Gifts until his status and nature had been better clarified, as Elrond and his peers now hoped to do.

Tarin stood outside Elrond's house, irresolute. A memory came to him of a strange building he had encountered one day while exploring the City. This was a house, maybe, secluded and secret, set back from the street inside manicured grounds. What attracted attention from the street was the structure's outer cladding of cunningly angled crystal. No pane was opaque, but one attempted in vain to see within. Splintered reflections of the onlooker competed with further, deeper panes to obstruct any attempt to see past them, move and crane as one might. A passer-by had remarked idly to Tarin that this was the house of the Enchanter. Tarin knew of no Enchanter, and had not cared enough later to enquire. The City was full of such wonders, mostly unexplained. But now, the strange house rose in Tarin's memory. Could Annatar be the mentioned Enchanter?

Since he had no better plan, he made his way to the locality. While walking quickly, he thought over what his damage-sense had made of the new Lord. At the time, an image had risen in Tarin's mind that he thought was quite unconnected – a memory of the way a ploughed field looked under sunlight. If one stood with the sun behind one, the field in the



direction of one's shadowed head appeared brightly opaque. The shadows cast by the rough clods had not vanished; they were merely hidden at that angle behind the clods themselves.

He realized that he had received exactly this impression of Annatar. No shadow could he detect within this so-named High Smith; it was as if everything was pushed behind a bland and impenetrable front. Indeed, quite like the mirror-fronted house itself.

Tarin turned the last corner; stopped. Limm was walking towards him.

"Where on earth have you been?" he said, anxiety roughening his voice. "I've been looking for you all over!"

Limm, taken at first aback by the tone of his voice, immediately began to bristle. "Who do you think you are?" she said angrily. "You're not my keeper. Where I go is my own concern!"

For once, Tarin was undeterred. "Have you been in there?" he demanded, pointing to the villa with its subtle skin of gaze-deflecting glass.

"Get out of my way," she said, but before she could push past, her gaze rose to something beyond Tarin. The woman's face bloomed radiant, into a look almost of worship. Tarin had the fleeting thought that a light had kindled behind his back.

He turned; then had to look up. Annatar was standing there.

The white figure ignored Tarin, spoke only to Limm, while smiling gently at her.

"My dear young friend," he said in his soft voice. "I pray thee most humbly to forgive my tardy return. Alas, I am not always master of my own time. I have duties, and although the nature of such is to be more or less onerous, as all know on whom responsibility falls, they may not be shirked. In these last hours, some tedious errors of small minds have required guidance and correction. But I am free now of cares for a time. Shall we pass within and take up again our most pleasant diversions?"

Annatar bowed, before taking Limm's hand. The besotted look on her face sickened Tarin. He tried to say something, to protest, but it was as if he had forgotten how to use his tongue. He could only watch helplessly as the tall Enchanter led the woman back into the Hall of Mirrors.

Tarin returned hot-foot to Elrond, but his host, although troubled by the news, said he could do nothing for the present. Círdan was expected on the morrow; after that, they would see. There was nothing for Tarin to do then but toss, sleepless and worried, the whole night. After the sun rose, he got up, washed, listlessly ate some crusts, more to have something to do than because he felt any hunger, then wandered from place to place in the house and the garden. His sense of powerlessness to help Limm oppressed him as much as the dread feeling of some impending doom.

Círdan and Galadriel arrived near noon and immediately closeted themselves with Elrond. The whole house felt the tension now. Éoric grumbled uneasily in his cell. The movements of the silver-haired Eldomë became abrupt and anxious. Neldor hunched nervous and idle by his tools. The children sat in a corner, silent and cowed.

When the three tall Elves at last emerged, each of them was wearing their ring. The three stones had come to life and were flickering with ominous power.

Tarin never knew what drew him to follow the three after they left the house. His fearful memories of the forces now housed in those rings were all too fresh; he shrank from witnessing a confrontation in which these were unleashed. It seemed to him all too likely that bystanders of any such event would quickly come to regret whatever heedless thirst for spectacle had drawn them to witness it. More powerful, though, than his apprehensions for his own safety were his fears for Limm. Instinct told him that his best hope to save her lay in staying as near as he could dare to the heart of any impending fight.

The three took their way to the central building of the City, a noble hall of generous dimensions, but still more suited to human mind and measure than the titanic halls of the Dwarves. Tarin had visited it often to admire the beauty of the carvings, and to enjoy the harmonious arrangement of air and light around its rows of pillars and vaulted roof.

A crowd of people had gathered in the Ring-bearers' train: all of the Brotherhood seemed to be present, as well as many faces whom Tarin knew, and many he did not.

Galadriel, Círdan and Elrond seated themselves now on three high thrones on a dais at the far end of the hall.

“Is Celebrimbor here?” spoke Galadriel, and the aisles of the hall seemed to tremble at her voice. The diamond ring glittered on her finger like a captive star.

The master smith pushed his way to the fore.

“Summon Annatar,” ordered him the Lady of the Elves.

“But...” Celebrimbor replied, shrugging and looking helpless.

“Are you not founder and chief in this City? Summon him!”

The force of the three Ring-bearers radiated out from their seats and held all in their grip. Celebrimbor had no option but to obey. During his brief absence, the waiting crowd murmured and stirred uneasily.

Silence fell. All heads turned to the entrance to the hall. A white figure stood there: Annatar.

“I pray you, approach,” said Galadriel to him, in a voice of such power as to squeeze every heart.

Annatar came haltingly nearer. Step by step, white-faced, clearly against his will; but he came.

Galadriel wasted no time in preliminaries. “Who are you?” she asked.

Annatar made no answer.

All three Ring-bearers spoke together. “Who are you?”

Annatar was caught in their vice. He started towards the one, then turned to another; but he could not escape. The three Rings combined were more than he was equal to resist.

“Annatar I am!” he gasped. “Lord of Gifts, High-smith!”

“Who are you?” came again the inexorable chorus.

“I am Maia! You may not so command me!”

The relentless pressure increased, squeezed him. The Enchanter fell to his knees, writhed helplessly. His features seemed to fluctuate, his outline uncertain. A stream of words came from his mouth. “No I forswore my allegiance Aulë<sup>8</sup> was my master Aulë, I learned of him, of him. No other, no, it is finished, no. No!”

To the appalled Tarin, looking on the scene also with his inner sense, it seemed as if great cracks were opening in the Enchanter’s inner nature as he lay writhing beneath the piercing fire of the Ring-bearers’ enquiry. A vast and awful cloud of filth was pouring out. All of the furtiveness was breaking up, revealing unimagined horrors beneath. His name was... his name was...

“You are Sauron,” said Galadriel. “Do you deny it?”

Head shaking, incoherent babbling.

“Do you deny it!”

Speech burst again out of the writhing mouth. “You may not I am not my desire was good I did not I cannot – no. No! NO!!”

“Yes,” replied the Lady of the Elves. “We see you clearly at last. You are he whom my brother Finrod cursed as he lay rotting in your dungeons. You are the fiend of Utumno, Angband, Tol in Gaurhoth. Servant of Melkor, conjurer of the Dead, master of werewolves and foul phantoms. Sauron. It is you.”

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<sup>8</sup> Aulë was the Vala whose province was the arts of shaping matter. Sauron was of his following before turning to Melkor.

Celebrimbor looked shaken to his roots; the Brothers appeared equally stunned.

The Ring-bearers released the Enchanter, who clambered unsteadily to his feet. He stood there, shuddering.

“Sauron,” Galadriel said to him in bitter contempt. “We cannot harm you, but we vow to thwart you, to the limit of our powers. Now get thee hence.”

\* \* \* \* \*

After this final horrifying scene, the ship of Tarin’s life sailed out of all storms to enter a great lake of calm that was to last for many years. Tarin felt that it might extend to the end of his life; and in strict truth this was so, although not as he might have desired.

Annatar, or Sauron as he had been most dreadfully revealed to be, vanished from the City in that same hour, and was never seen in peaceful guise in that land again. The crystal house was razed to the ground, whereafter weeds grew high in the plot where none now dared to tread. Limm would never reveal what the Enchanter had said to her; instead, whenever his name was mentioned, she would begin to sob, until Tarin gave up trying to know.

So they returned to their old pursuits – Limm to her rides and hunts; Tarin to his stables, kitchens, workshops, or wherever else he found congenial company, and work within the compass of his mind and hands.

Few words had been spoken in the aftermath of the ejection. Elves, as Elrond had remarked, rarely see value in apologies. The Brotherhood of Smiths, abashed and humble, worked once again in harmony with Celebrimbor, their former mutterings of mutiny now blown away to nothing by the scour of their experience. Only, Limm refused ever again to lend her power that the smiths might work in concert.

Of the new Ringbearers, Elrond of course stayed, since the City was his home. Círdan hurried back again to his coasts, unhindered this time, eager to sniff again the salt upon the grey and rolling wave, and to hark to the crying of the gulls. Galadriel had for her part sped to the comfort of her woods. Tarin heard that she had made her way across the Mountains and had rejoined her consort in the Golden Wood. Since she had made Tarin free of her gardens, he walked there often to soothe his sometimes restless heart. Whether because its mistress now bore the Ring or for some other reason, the small dell she had cleared of stain did not, as she had forewarned, shrink and diminish; rather it seemed to Tarin to extend gradually with the years.

Ever since Durin, King of Dwarves, had revealed the enormous rarity and worth of the mithril comb, Tarin had suffered a bad conscience over it. As he said to the King at the time, the worth of the comb to him was quite independent of its monetary value; but the little man had become uneasily aware of its worth to others – its former owner not least. Later that first year he took his troubles to Elrond.

Elrond admired the gleaming beauty held in his hand while he listened to Tarin’s story. He put the mithril comb back on the table at the end and smiled.

“I know something more about this than perhaps Durin disclosed to you,” Elrond said. “We send messengers back and forth, and this matter has been discussed. I will tell you that the Dwarves keep tally of every item crafted from this noble metal. So rare is the substance that the whole supply dug up to date might be carried on the back of a single mule. Your comb, however, appears nowhere in the lists. That means, for one thing, that its owner cannot be traced, which should relieve your conscience. You had better keep it, since we know of no-one else with a better claim. More disturbing to the Dwarves is what your comb implies about the sources of mithril. So far as they were aware, the sole mine in all Middle-earth lies beneath Khazad-dûm. This comb, this item out of all account, implies the existence of another. In itself, that may be no bad thing; but it disturbs them not to know.”

Tarin took up the comb himself and contemplated its loveliness. “I thank you, my friend,” he said. “That is indeed a weight off my mind. Somebody lost it; I should have liked to return it, dear though it is to me. It was only the labour and difficulty of doing so that was weighing on my spirit. Well, perhaps chance and the years will bring more information to light.

“There remains the matter of the jewels which poor Sirtus thrust into my hand, before he disappeared forever into the terrible maw of the Master’s dungeons. The four I raised to health were stones that he had, so far as I understand it, purchased himself.” He smiled wryly. “You therefore need have no concerns that anyone will hammer at your door to dun you for the Ring-stones. But there were others in that sachel, as you know. Lesser stones, but still valuable. Sirtus dealt in gems, but I do not think he owned his stock outright; rather he carried them in bond. In any case, they are not

mine. What do you think I should do?”

“Lay that before Durin,” Elrond advised. “They will have records for this case, too.”

So it proved. After much time, since it was necessary to communicate with dwarven cities far in the East, Tarin received from Durin in exchange for the remaining jewels not only a quittance, but a purse of gold as finder’s reward. So that matter ended happily.

The City grew in grace and beauty with the years. More and more it began to seem to Tarin like a haven removed out of the relentless rush of time. As buildings were altered from time to time, and as others were commenced, the spaces of the City took on an ever greater harmony, wearing this as a lovely woman wears a shining robe. It sometimes seemed to Tarin that its very stones contained an inner glow.

The child Mairie, although losing nothing of either cheek or grace, grew with the years into a slender maiden with gentle hands and a face of bewitching fairness. Although she no longer visited Tarin as often, nor played with him in quite the same way, other children were born to those connected to the house, and these in their turn came betimes to nestle warm on lap or knee, to place small hands trustingly in his, to whisper their small secrets in his ear, or to play with Tarin the simple games he had learned as a child.

Éoric changed but little, muttering over this scroll or that, comparing texts, grunting with scorn over the infacility of rival scribes and scholars, but sometimes also in satisfaction. Tarin enjoyed talking with the old man. Indeed he learned of him many things about the Elves that they themselves forbore to volunteer.

Éoric it was who hinted to Tarin that the Ring-makers might have overreached themselves. He had been most interested in Tarin’s account of the terrifying experience, nodding and grunting into his beard.

“Such forces as they called up are not easy to control,” he commented about the matter. “You have to know what you are doing; know the nature most thoroughly of the things you’re trying to work upon. But the only ones who know those elementals through and through are the ones who constructed the whole affair. By that I mean the Valar. As for these-here Deep-elves, many of them sat at the feet of Aulë himself, the great Maker, from when they was naught but youngsters. I’ll not say as how they didn’t learn great craft at his knee – great craft. But a large part of wisdom is having clear in your eye the extent of what you *don’t* know. That’s what I’m not so sure of. Back in Valinor, maybe, it were different – they had the Valar by them to keep them humble, just as we Men have Elves in this age of Middle-earth. Keeps us pretty humble, don’t it, because we looks at them, and we sees pretty clearly all the things we’d like to be, but ain’t. But *these* fellers, Celebrimbor and company, they are on their own now, and they don’t have nobody by them to keep them humble. And it’s ’cause o’ that, maybe, that they bit off a little more than they could rightly chew.

“All of this is speculation; because what would an old savage like me know. And it do seem to have ended well, I will say that. Sometimes you have to play high to win high. But that’s the reason, if you were to ask me, why your ride on that night were such an almighty bumpy one.”

Tarin was never lonely. He had many friends, from a variety of backgrounds and stations. Standing high among these was a Dwarf named Chulain who delivered his firewood, among other stores. Chulain was a young and cheerful fellow with thick braids and glossy beard of a deep and fiery red. He stood about the same height as Tarin, but much broader in the shoulder. On each of his visits, after the two of them had stacked the wood under the eaves, the wood-trader would usually come in and chat for a while. Over the course of several years, the two grew close.

Chulain never spoke about his past, and Tarin for his part was content to obey the dictates of courtesy in never enquiring. Questions, however, did arise in his mind; or rather, not questions such as one could frame in words; it was more that there was something in his picture of Chulain that refused to gel.

The suspicion came to him one night out of nowhere, as he lay on his bunk. On Chulain’s next visit, Tarin looked at the Dwarf with a new eye. Good Powers, he thought to himself. Could it be true?

Tarin had believed himself discreet, but after some moments of wrestling with his internal astonishment, he saw Chulain put down the billets he had been carrying and turn to face him. The red-bearded Dwarf fixed his friend with a look that had something of defiance in it.

“You have a thought in your mind,” he said. “If it is what I think it is, then I will tell you, you have guessed aright.”

Tarin sat with a thump on a block of wood. “You’re a *woman*?” he said weakly. “*Really*?”

Chulain nodded. "A female Dwarf," she corrected. "Don't spread it around. It's easier if I conform with people's assumptions."

"But how...?"

"How what?" said Chulain. She pulled at her glossy beard. "How this? All Dwarves have beards. Don't ask me why. It's the way we are."

"Well," said Tarin, still coming to terms with this shake-up in his mental picture. "I'm glad to know it, I suppose. Not that it makes the least difference. I just somehow never thought of there being female Dwarves."

Chulain guffawed. "Brother," she said, "if your folk make new people the same way ours do, there are clearly some details they forgot to tell you about." She grinned, clapped him on the shoulder. "Sorry. The truth is, there are not very many of us, and most of us get hidden away, I suppose. Indeed, that is the reason I am here, and not still moping under that pile." She pointed east, in the direction of the mountains.

"I did wonder why you were here," said Tarin, "of course I did. But it is completely none of my business."

"I wanted to live my own life," said Chulain. "They had it all mapped out for me. No thanks. Besides, now that I'm here, I like it here."

After this revelation, their relationship moved to a deeper, easier level. Chulain never told Tarin much about Dwarf life; Dwarves didn't speak of such things, she told him. But a spark of fondness ignited between the oddly-matched pair that grew with the years. There came to be things never spoken of between them that were nevertheless well understood.

Chulain knew all about Limm. "You have to forget her, Tarin," she said one time. "Look for someone else. This is no sort of life for you, living on your own. You're made to be a tender husband, a loving father; anyone can see that. Mahal's hammer, I've seen you with these Elf children that run in and out. Have some sense, man."

Tarin had smiled. "I might say the same about you," he said. "And you have the great advantage of having your own kind at hand. But all right. What am I supposed to do? I'm betwixt and between. No Bigger woman is going to want a squirt like me, and even if I could find some of the people I used to think of as my own, they'd look upon me as a Bigger. Suspicion, estrangement: I've had more than enough of that, thank you. I don't ever want to see that look in anyone's eyes again."

The pair had looked at one another that time, across the fire, and both were sharing the same thought, the same stark and inescapable awareness of the barrier between them. It was never to be mentioned; but they knew. Dwarf and human could not be man and wife. They were not made of the same substance.

Limm. Tarin knew she was unhappy, and her unhappiness only grew. The warps he could perceive in her nature deepened slowly with time, as a tree might weave, with dogged vegetable persistence, a gradual and despairing knot about a nail it was helpless to extract. As the magical, removed quality of the elvish city steadily increased with the years, Limm was left behind: a stolid figure, standing like some shabby stone pillar, dark against the sunrise.

Limm worked herself hard. Her figure became leaner, until the muscles showed beneath the hide as moving cords, and softness retreated from the harsh planes of her face; but all this only took her further from the grace of the Elves. She took to smearing on lotions in an attempt to halt or even reverse the natural nut-brown tan of her skin, but only succeeded in further accentuating the difference between her increasingly weathered appearance and the fairness of her companions. Latest and most worrisome of all, Tarin suspected she had turned to drinking.

He took it up with her once. "Limm," he had said, "this place isn't doing us a lot of good. Why don't we scout around a bit and try somewhere else?"

She had looked at him coldly. "We?" she replied. "There is no 'we.' Wake up to yourself. You're building dreams on a short and stupid journey between two random people that took place years ago. We don't even like each other. Leave me alone. You go your way, and I'll go mine."

It had hurt to hear her say that; but it hurt more to watch her, day after day.

Apart from that one nagging concern, Tarin was not unhappy. All right, he would have liked to marry, and have children of his own. He had always imagined that he would. However, his life had taken another direction, and that was just how

it was. Even his dream of life with Limm was just that: a dream – and an increasingly threadbare one at that. Although his stubborn heart would not listen to reason, his reason knew that they could never have expected a single moment of happiness as a couple. Limm was not made to make him happy; for that matter, neither was he for her.

So Tarin was content to work in stable or garden, to talk and laugh with his friends, to yarn with Éoric, to learn slow wisdom from Elrond or Eldomë, and to muse of evenings by the fireside. Watching the flickering flames, with half an ear for any talk or song that might be going on, he would recall the scenes of his former life, when he lived in a tiny shack on a bleak island hidden deep in the forests, far to the East. What was Lissie doing now, he wondered? He hoped she was happy – that she had found someone, if she wanted, and was not lonely if not. But she and the others seemed far away, in another life.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ten years passed. For Tarin, living in the City of the Elves, these were years largely of contentment. He would have been happy to remain there until the end of his life, but his sojourn with the Elves came to an abrupt end at that time, without forewarning, farewell or explanation. The knell that ushered in this final and sudden interruption in the smooth course of his affairs was a loud thud that sounded against the wall of his cabin on a warm night in spring. Heart in his mouth, Tarin sprang from his bed as if electrified to see what was causing the almighty clamour. Speedy as he was, the thud came booming three times more before he leaned out the window and discovered its cause.

It was the great Elven-horse that he knew, Raméas, silver beneath the moon. The beast was kicking the wall of Tarin's cabin.

The proceedings of the next half hour were greatly impeded by the fact that Raméas could speak no human tongue, whereas Tarin understood no Horse. That some matter of great concern was afoot was only too clear. But what? In the end, following the horse's obvious urging, Tarin, as the quickest way to find out, clambered with difficulty and considerable apprehension onto the tall animal's bare back. Once up there however, he found out what it was to ride an Elven horse. The moment he was up, Raméas turned and raced away. Despite the speed and the lack of rein, the ride was as smooth as silk. Tarin actually felt quite secure. He was amazed. But if a fairy horse once deigns to carry you on his back, he feels it is his business to keep you there as long as you care to stay.

In very little more time than it takes to describe it, the great horse had arrived at the place in the City where Limm had her rooms. The moment they slithered to a stop, Tarin understood. Fear sprang into his heart. Trying to suppress the horrid empty feeling, he clambered off Raméas and sprang for the stairs.

Limm's door was open. Tarin called, "Limm?" No answer. He pushed open the door, stepped in. There was no obvious mess. Kitchen clean. He looked into the rooms one by one. "Limm?" he called again.

The bed was rumpled; items of clothing lay on it.

Had Limm been abducted? But who would do such a thing? And how would Raméas know of that?

A different theory now grew in Tarin's mind. How could he confirm it? He looked in a cupboard, found it full of clothes. Were any missing? Limm had many, and Tarin had no tally of them in his head. He thought her favourite buskins were not there... Ah, Limm's knife and bow were gone. That settled it. She had packed and left of her own accord.

What to do? He didn't own her. If she wanted to leave, that was her option. But then why was Raméas so alarmed?

He ran back down the stairs to where the snorting horse was pawing impatiently at the ground. Seeing him, Raméas manoeuvred himself next to a convenient hedge. The horse's meaning was clear.

Tarin shrugged mentally. He had nothing in principle against a ride in the dark – and he had not fallen off so far. Better to clear this matter up. Somehow, and at the cost of many scratches, he managed once more to scramble up to the height of the great horse's back. The moment he was secure, Raméas was off.

That is how Tarin came to leave the City, with no hint left behind of whither or why. Only weeks later, after Raméas returned alone, exhausted and covered in half-healed wounds, could the first guesses be made about the affair. By that time however, the Deep-elves of Ost-in-Edhil had far greater concerns. The tides of history were beginning to gather, readying to sweep the elvish realm away. In the battles and anguish of that time, Tarin became gradually forgotten. Eventually only a handful of the Elves left in Middle-earth remembered his role in the making of the Rings; and none

ever found out that his last act had been to save the Three Rings from oblivion. Only Elendil, maybe, long years after, in one of the Seeing Stones brought by that king out of the ruin of Númenor, glimpsed Tarin's final hour.

Not knowing beforehand the length of the journey ahead of him, Tarin took nothing with him, not even his mithril comb. That remained with Elrond until Orcs sacked the City and carried it away. Sauron added it to his trove; but of its eventual fate, no tale tells.

South rode Raméas, and his pace was as the wind. The dark lands streamed by Tarin as though he were carried along by some mighty river. He grew cold on the horse's back, despite the mildness of the season. Ruefully he wished he had induced Raméas to pass again by his hut, so that he could have properly equipped himself. But the City lay already far behind them; they were committed to a journey, of what length he could not tell.

Dawn grew to their left, the brightening sky sharpening with every moment the mountains' black and ragged line. The slow light washed grey across the land. The first sun-rays peeping over the heights showed to horse and rider that they were nearing the border of that Land of Holly.

Tarin made Raméas stop at the border inn. Raising the yawning innkeeper from his bed, he bargained some waybread from him, plus a cloak. He had no money, but Elrond was good surety. Thus fortified, they went on, Raméas accelerating to the same dreamlike smoothness and speed.

As the sun was climbing in the morning sky, bringing some welcome warmth to Tarin's bones, the great horse checked, slowed. They had been following the made way, galloping along the strip of turf to the side of the road. There were tracks aplenty on this, but Raméas must have been following one in particular, in which he had clearly found some turn or break. The horse turned back and walked for several paces, keeping its nose intently towards the ground. He found what he was looking for and turned off to one side.

Their way now led into the thickets beside the road. Tarin, leaning cautiously sideways, could make out the hoof marks of several horses on the turf, leading in both directions; but there were too many to trace who went where, and of what sort the riders might be.

Raméas followed the path at a thumping trot for about half a mile. They reached a small clearing; and there, shackled to a tree, they found a dappled grey that Tarin recognized as Limm's mare Vilissa. A tired whinny greeted them.

Limm's broken bow and knife lay cast to one side of the trampled clearing. Tarin perused these grimly before turning to the mare.

While the two horses nickered, nose to nose, Tarin examined the situation. The shackle was iron: that would present a problem. Whoever had tied up the horse had left it no water. Little grass was in reach, and what there was had been nibbled bare. Vilissa, in her hunger, had also stripped a lot of the accessible bark from the tree.

Tarin had no way to work out how long the horse had been there, but this looked like more than a day. Could Limm have fled some few days ago? He was not in the habit of seeing her more than once every so often, so there was nothing he could see to argue otherwise.

He needed urgently to free the horse, which was clearly reaching the limit of its endurance. Cut through the tree? It was far too thick. All he had with him was a small knife.

Ride back for help? That might waste the best part of a day. Limm had succumbed to force – the broken gear said so plainly; and she would never have left a horse in these conditions. Every minute wasted was a minute in which she was carried further away, a minute in which she risked maltreatment by who knew what cruel ruffians.

But what to do here and now? Tarin could *see* in his mind, laid out for him as clear as could be, the wrong that had been done to the horse. In former times he would have undone that as quickly and easily as a man opened a door. Despairingly, he searched inside himself. He had thought his gift completely gone. But *could* it be gone? It had been so much a part of him, knitted into his very fibre.

Refusing to think yea or nay, he just closed his eyes and concentrated on the problem – on the stark ugliness of the shackle, laid out before him. *This* had been done, and *this*. It was perfectly simple: one just had to lift the wrong away, put the parts back into place. So.

He heard a whinny from both horses. Hardly daring, he took a peep; then opened his eyes wide. Oh, glory be. Oh, great

Powers in the West. The thing was done. Vilissa was free.

Raméas led the way back to the road. He halted there, looked back over his shoulder at Tarin, and whickered.

“Honoured Raméas,” said Tarin, leaning forward the better to address his mount. “I am glad beyond measure that we have found and freed your comrade. But I am sure it is as clear to you as to me that my own friend remains in grave danger. If it should be your very great kindness to offer, and if your comrade is fit to make her own way to water and feed: well, it would be a great relief to me if you would carry me on to the south, to track down the malefactors who have made away with my friend. I do not ask this; I have not the right. But that is my answer, should you be offering.”

The horses consulted together. After some back and forth, it was decided. Vilissa turned north and commenced to walk down the road with weary steps, back towards Eregion. Tarin remembered crossing a stream not far back in that direction. He thought the mare would be all right.

Raméas watched her for a while, then snorted, turned, picked up rapid pace towards the South.

All that day they thundered down the reaches of Dunland. They passed no settlement, only here and there small ploughed acres carved from the dark woods, each bordered by a blue-smoking shack. Riders and slow wagons sharing the path were passed in a brief flash of startled faces.

Towards midday Raméas skidded to a halt, tracked back, turned aside.

What now? thought Tarin. The sickening smell of death brought him the first hint.

As horse and rider entered the small clearing, the host of ravens ceased their bickering and lifted gorged and heavy bodies to the surrounding trees in a thunder of black wings. Grey shapes slunk off into the undergrowth.

Tarin, choking, holding a fold of his cloak before his nose and mouth, made out the remains of eight horses and two humans. The bones were still pink, but the scavengers had feasted well on the flesh. The remains looked to have been here for at least a day or two, but no more than a week.

With reluctance, Tarin slid off his backing and snorting mount. He had to know. The human corpses each had a tattered, bloody arrow protruding from the bones of the chest cavity. The remains of crude leather jerkins, and the mop of dirty hair that could still be made out on the skull of each, soothed his particular fear: for they proved that neither was Limm.

His stomach betrayed him then, and he had to turn aside from the hum of the busy blue flies and heave out its contents. As soon as he could, he staggered back to Raméas and scrambled his way as best he could back into his seat.

Only once the wind of their renewed passage began to clear the smell from his nostrils did Tarin begin to think. He had already estimated the number of tracks they were following at seven or eight, and that number had not changed since they left the clearing of death behind them. Eight horses come and go, but leave eight horses dead? How to read this puzzle?

He was no nearer an answer as the day wore towards its close. They began to encounter vast clearings in which nothing remained of the primeval forest but a waste of stumps, stretching in some cases for miles. Someone had been terribly active here. The sun sank slowly lower at Tarin’s right shoulder. In its last, ruddy rays, as it sat red and weakened on the horizon, Tarin perceived that the line of mountains that had slowly glided past on their left all the long day appeared to be coming, not too many miles ahead, to an end.

They halted in the dusk, since Tarin had to eat and sleep, and even Raméas could not go on forever, like some mythic creature of fire and steel. After bolting a few mouthfuls of food, then washing and drinking at a nearby brook, Tarin threw himself to the ground in his cloak and slept like a dead man for several hours. He woke as the moon began to peep over the rim of trees. Warily clambering with the help of a tree onto the horse’s broad back, Tarin settled his stiff and aching limbs as best he might. They rode on.

Again the stench. The corpses were right next to the path this time. Eight horses, no human bodies, so far as they could tally the atrocity in the tricky moonlight. Tarin began to gain an inkling. Could the raiders have stationed new mounts along the way? For maximum speed on their retreat? The organization and determination implied by that were frightening to Tarin. Whoever these people were, they must want Limm very badly. But why the slaughter?

Dawn rose in their eyes through a broad gap in the line of hills. Although the Misty Mountains petered down here to



nothing, blue shapes in the distance told how the line picked up again in the South. The trampled hoof-marks they had been following led now straight for the gap.

He thought the marks were fresher; indeed, he was sure that Raméas was far swifter than any horse a brigand might be able to muster. He began to give thought to just what he would do if he caught them up. What *could* he do? He did not even have a bow with him, or a sword. And someone of his modest stature could hardly expect to *wrestle* the abductors into submission, thought Tarin with a humourless smile. No: all that he would achieve would be to join Limm in her captivity.

Tarin had also made some speculations about the raiders' likely destination. He had not forgotten how, years before, the Enchanter Annatar had drawn Limm into some sort of net of allurement. This same figure had been most dreadfully uncloaked by the combined might of the elvish Ring-bearers as the infamous sorcerer and worker of evil Sauron, of whom even Tarin had heard, even back in the far lost days on his isle. Then there was the Master, to whose evil land these tracks now led like the flight of a crow. Was it not likely that, as Annatar was Sauron, so Sauron was the same as the Master?

It was this last connection that made Tarin think at last of Kell. Kell might help him. Surely it was worth seeking him out to find out.

They had not ridden long before they passed another place of slaughter. Eight horses; and among them, three corpses of Men, shot as before. These bodies were fresher: the scavengers had barely begun their work. The blackened remains of fires and the rubbish scattered about suggested that the party had camped there for some time.

All that long, aching day he kept an eye on the mountains now ranging to the South. Tarin did not know exactly where he and Limm had parted company from Lalast and Kell, and he was anxious lest he miss the place. Towards close of day, however, he saw saw-toothed profiles ahead that seemed to chime with his memories. After another few miles, he was sure. Yes: the great dell was opening to his gaze, there were the same scattered lights and smoke.

Tarin drew Raméas to a halt at that point and carefully explained to the great horse – speaking in Elvish – both his fears and his plans. He was certain the horse understood all of his speech. Finally, mindful of Kell's warning from years before of the dangers of wild men in the forests, they retreated some way into the grassy plains before halting in a shallow fold. Tarin made a fire. They ate, they slept.

\* \* \* \* \*

While washing his face next morning in the chill stream, Tarin considered the problem of finding Kell. He had no idea how far back into the mountains the settlements extended. On the other hand, Tarin's gift of gems had left Kell a relatively wealthy man. Surely his name as such would be known? Tarin decided simply to ask the first person he saw and see what transpired. Powers grant that he had quick success.

Once he was mounted again on Raméas, they rode for the great glen. A tableau slowly opened before them of mountains cleft by gloomy valleys. As the terrain gradually acquired three dimensions, the impression of mighty volumes of rock and space was breathtaking. Not even the vast halls hewn by Dwarves under the mountains could match these natural wonders. Tarin craned back his neck and goggled. Great cliffs of rock and ice towered up beetling on all sides – yet these rocky bastions were obviously still miles away, as revealed by the blue tint of the air before them.

The first outlier of the hills on the left was a great, green mound. This was dotted with cots, each revealed by its wisp of blue smoke, each with its cluster of fenced and huddled fields. White dots of sheep could be made out high on the hill. Tarin steered for the nearest hut. As he and Raméas approached, so could he better appreciate the meagreness of the place. These, at least, were not rich people.

There was no-one to be seen in the yard. A chained dog to one side began to bark furiously.

"Hello?" called Tarin. No answer.

He slipped off the height of Raméas with the usual ankle-jarring thump and made his way to the door of the cottage. Knocked.

"Hello?" he called again, raising his voice to carry over the raging of the dog. Nothing.

Tarin had grown up among people of this sort. He knew what went with such, and what didn't. That's why he pushed

open the door without thinking twice about it – although he would never have so presumed among the Elves in their City.

He had expected to find the place empty; started with shock to find it otherwise. An old couple stood jammed back as far as they could go in the far, dark corner of the room. They were staring at Tarin with mouths open and identical expressions of horror.

Mixed with his surprise and alarm, Tarin found the situation faintly ludicrous. These people were Biggers, they towered over him. He was unarmed. What in Middle-earth was there to fear?

“Hello,” he said with apology. “I beg pardon for the disturbance. I don’t mean any harm to you. I was just hoping for some information.”

The man shook his head vehemently at this, shook his finger at Tarin, shook his head again.

Tarin was completely baffled. What could the problem be? Were these two, in fact, not right in the head? Excusing himself again, he backed out and looked around for the next nearest cottage.

His experience here was, if anything, even stranger. The family here was younger, and there were three children. Tarin came across the man first as he, furtively as it seemed, was tipping some scraps into the pig trough. At the sound of hooves, the man looked up in alarm. He dropped his bucket with a clatter, clapped a hand over his mouth, and ran full tilt for the house.

Tarin scratched his head. What in Middle-earth was wrong with these people? Again he went to the door and poked his head around it. “I’m sure I don’t know what there is to fear in a single Halfling,” he said with the beginnings of exasperation, seeing the looks of terror on all faces.

“Hsshht!” hissed the man, shaking his head and finger, much as his neighbour had done some minutes before.

There was clearly no profit in this. Tarin stood in the yard, baffled and angry. Something was going on here that he didn’t understand.

At a loss, he mounted Raméas again via the handy offices of a fence. He spent a little time then explaining to the great horse what strange behaviour he had encountered. Raméas whickered in response; looked around. The horse started off then at a canter, up the hill. Tarin saw he was aiming for what appeared to be a low wigwam of branches, perhaps half a mile away.

The crude structure, covered by a cloak, was just big enough to shelter a man; and a man is what they found huddled within. He had been playing a bone flute that he shoved hurriedly behind himself as soon as he noticed the great horse approaching. Eyes wide, the man goggled at Tarin as the latter slid off his great gleaming, snorting mount.

Tarin watched the man closely, and saw his expression of amazement change to horrified alarm as Tarin opened his mouth to speak. So that was it!

Tarin squatted down. “I am a stranger here,” he enunciated carefully. “I don’t know your customs. Do I do wrong to speak at this time?”

The man, a shepherd he supposed, nodded vehemently.

“Is it just for today?”

Nod.

“A holy day?”

Shrug.

Tarin thought for a moment. He had no wish to offend custom; but he had no time to spare, either. “I’m sorry to talk, but I have an urgent errand,” he said. “I’m looking for a man named Kell; with wife Lalast. He was a wealthy man when I knew him, some years ago. I have come from afar, from the great City of the Elves on the far side of the mountains. Have you heard of the man I seek?”

The man looked Tarin over carefully; took in his small size, his travel-stained clothing, the magnificent horse. He poked his head out of his shelter, made sure there was no-one near. He leaned then close to Tarin, and in a thick accent the smaller man could barely make out, whispered, "Aye, I heard of him. But I'm telling you, stranger, if you want to keep your guts in your body, you'll close your trap tight 'til cocklight tomorrow. Now I've warned you, and I'll not do so again. Kell has a place up the valley. Now piss off out of 'ere before somebody sees you."

They left the shepherd and rode back down towards the valley floor. "What a confounded nuisance!" fumed Tarin to his mount. "I tell you what, though, I've no appetite for conforming to their silly customs, not today. There's a time and place for manners, and this isn't it. Every moment I waste, Limm is being carried further away." He thought hard. "Money. What would I do, if I had money? I'd build myself a house. We should look for a big house, not more than a few years old, on good land. Along the valley base, I'll be bound. Come on, Raméas, let's go!"

They galloped along the floor of the glen, following the stream. Indeed the land grew kinder, and the density and size of farmsteads increased. It wasn't possible to scan every house though: the valley was too wide.

They came at pace around a bend, and Raméas had to pull up suddenly to avoid running into approaching traffic. This comprised three horsemen, richly attired in red, with embroidered capes. The reins and leather tack of the horses were also dyed bright red, with polished silver fittings.

"Stop!" shouted the foremost rider to Tarin. "You! Come here!"

This was superfluous, since Tarin and Raméas were in the act of closing the last distance.

"Show me your marks, that we may note them," the man went on in sharp tones. "Then return to your vill. The tallagers will visit you on the morrow." The man looked disapprovingly at Raméas. "They may well also question you as to where you came by such an extraordinary animal."

"I don't have marks," began Tarin, but the moment he uttered the first syllable, all three red-caped riders reared back in outrage.

"Sacrilege!!" cried all three.

"By the Kindler!" said Tarin, growing red in the face, "I am a traveller. A traveller, do you hear? I don't know your customs. I don't have marks or vill, and I don't have any more time to listen to this nonsense. Now will you help me, or not?"

"Shut your infamous mouth!" cried the leader. "The Holy Ones of the Mountain rule *all* men! Every word you speak on this Day of Gongs is a stinging slap in the face of those before whom all men must bow and tremble. You shall pay dearly for this. We will carry you to the altar, and the holy knife shall take tallage; and not of your purse, but of your body. Seize him!"

Raméas had kept abreast of events however and curvetted away from the man's clutching hand. The incensed riders could not come at him. The shining horse twisted around them and, as soon as he had gained the road beyond, he surged away. The red-caped riders followed for a while, but soon gave up the chase as hopeless.

They must have been priests, thought Tarin as the wind of passage blew his hair back. He remembered now how Kell and Lal had warned of them.

All the time, he was still looking for likely houses. The shepherd had said 'up the valley'. They had by now come maybe five miles from that point. How far was 'up'? He spoke briefly to Raméas, who turned in compliance into a track leading to a small building beside an orchard from which emerging smoke indicated the presence of people therein. Indeed an apprehensive head poked out the door as they approached it.

"I am a priest in disguise," Tarin called to the man. "I am looking for a man named Kell. Can you tell me where I can find him? Just point. We must not offend the Gongs."

The man, looking him over doubtfully, pointed further up the glen.

"Further than a mile?"

Nod.

“Further than five miles?”

Uncertain look, tilt of the flat palm.

“Blessings of the Holy Mountain Ones be upon your land!” cried Tarin to the man. Raméas spurned sods from the farmyard as he turned and surged away.

The dust flew behind them as the Elven steed carried Tarin in a furious gallop along the road. Twice they passed groups of priests, leaving them shouting in vain after the racing intruder. Tarin was beginning to worry about the hornet’s nest he might be stirring up behind him. He had to find Kell; had somehow persuade the man to leave his comfortable steading, wife and possibly children; had then make his way with him back out of this valley. It was beginning to sound like a steep undertaking.

The house, when he spotted it at last, was unmistakable. It was a gleaming white two-story villa, the rear of the structure merging somewhat clumsily into more extensive and much more weathered outbuildings. A fine gravel drive led through a park to a large arch in the centre of the facing wall. As Tarin rode along the drive, he noted with surprise that weeds were taking hold in it. The park appeared also unkempt.

He rode Raméas right in through the arch. The horse’s hooves clopped loudly on the tile of the inner court, then crisply in drifts of leaves. Central to the court was a fountain in a pool. The fountain wasn’t running, and the pool was green with weed.

Two scared faces peeped through a doorway – a young couple.

Tarin lent forwards over Raméas’s neck and addressed them. “I have a dispensation from the priests to talk,” he said carefully. “I am allowed to talk on Gong day. Of course, you need not. I just want to know, is this the house of Kell? You know Kell? Does he live here?”

The couple hesitated, then the boy nodded.

Tarin breathed out in relief. “Could you fetch him for me? Tell him I’m here?”

The two glanced at each other uncertainly. The boy shook his head to Tarin, shrugged. He gestured towards the inside of the house.

Tarin slipped from Raméas’s back. “Show me,” he said.

Showing an apprehension that seemed if anything to grow deeper, the young Biggers led Tarin into the dark interior. He smelled something – rancid washing perhaps, and was that liquor?

The couple stopped at the door of the room, the girl hiding in the shadows behind her young man, who made a quick gesture towards the inside. Tarin took a step forward, and saw that a figure lay on a bed. It was snoring, face down. He went over to it, entering a miasma of the strong, sour smell of stale clothes and alcohol. Table by the bed, bottles on it. Tarin knelt down and pulled up the man’s shoulder, looked into the slack face. Yes, it was Kell. Pasty and unshaven, as the whole figure was become bloated and seedy; greasy hair now streaked with grey; but it was the man he remembered.

Tarin grasped the man’s beefy shoulder, shook. “Kell. Wake up.” The snore caught in the man’s throat.

The young man came up in haste, grasped Tarin’s wrist to stop him. Shook his free finger, shook his head vehemently. No no no.

But Tarin was by this time in no mood to be thwarted. “Let go,” he said softly, but there was a glint in his eye and a tone in his voice that made the boy let go of his wrist and step back a pace. “I am telling you. He’s got to wake up, and he’s going to wake up. If you don’t like it, you can push off.” He turned back to the drunk man. “Kell!” A momentary break in the snoring, but nothing more.

Tarin got up, left the room, leaving the scared couple cowering uncertain in the doorway. He searched the house, room by room. Found what he sought at last. He half-filled the bucket at the slimy courtyard pond, carried it into Kell’s room, and threw it in the man’s face. Without pausing to note the effects, he fetched another. He saw that the young couple were now fleeing out the archway and down the drive.

By the time Tarin returned to Kell's room with the second bucket, the man was trying to prop himself onto his elbow. "Wha...?" he said blearily, just in time to receive the second dose of water in the face. As Tarin returned lugging the third bucket, Kell was sitting up, trying to wipe the water from his eyes.

"Wait wait, stop stop," the drunken man said. He peered, swaying on the seat. "By gor! 'S li'l Ta'in!" he said, attempting to focus. "'S never! The li'l squir'! 'S come ba'! 'S gimme ever'thing, jew'ls 'n all. Waddaya come for now, tagedda way 'gain, eh?"

"Get up," Tarin's voice was like steel. "Kell! Get *up*!" By main force he dragged the big man to his feet, draped his sodden and weighty arm around his own shoulders, and commenced to tug. "Come on!"

Somehow he steered the mumbling, stumbling man towards the rear of the building, to the rear yard. The horse trough he expected to find was there; indeed Raméas had made his way around to the rear of the house and was already drinking from it. The horse backed up to give Tarin room; then, seeing what he had in mind, came to the side and nudged with his nose. Kell tumbled his full length into the horse trough. His head lay under the surface, bubbling, until Raméas reached in, grasped the front of his jerkin with his teeth and hauled the man right out, dumping his streaming carcass on the ground alongside.

Kell blinked once or twice, focussed on Tarin. "I'll be a cross-eyed badger," he said feebly. "It *is* you. Thought 't was a dream." His gaze moved to the the great horse, who was nosing at him. His eyes widened. "Tha' ish much horse," he mumbled.

"Kell," said Tarin. "What happened to you? Where's Lal?"

The man looked bleakly back at him. "Lal's dead," he said.

\* \* \* \* \*

They were sitting against the outside wall of the house. Tarin had fetched a blanket for Kell.

"You probably should clam up," he said. "And me too. I've annoyed a lot of priests. Something to do with gongs."

Kell looked at him in consternation, went to speak, stopped, looked around with bleary care. "Where're Kestan and Briy?" he whispered.

"The young couple?"

"Keep your voice down," Kell hissed. "Yes, them."

"They ran off. There's no-one here. And listen, I'll sleep with the pigs before I put up with any more nonsense from those silly priests. If they think they can scare me, they've another think coming."

"Then you're a fool," said Kell, slurring his words as the fumes of liquor rose again in his head. "Do you know what they do to you for something like that? First they nail your... no. Trust me, you don't wanna know. But if the priests get to know you've been talking on thish day, then you're for it, friend."

"They already know," said Tarin.

Kell groaned. "Fuck. Then the best thing you can do is get on that great big horse and ride your arse out of here. I mean it. Do it now."

"I'm not doing that," said Tarin. "I need your help."

"Talking on Gong Day," said Kell with despair. "Oh lordy. You've probably done for me too, you know. Nice time we'll have of it, nailed up there together. Help? Friend, I can't even help myself. Look at me."

"But what *happened* to you? I thought I left you well set up."

"The Master happened to me. Happened to us." Kell shivered, wrapped the blanket around himself more tightly. "You didn't mention my name to any priests, did you? During your mad rampage down the valley?"

Tarin thought back. "I don't think so," he said. "I did ask a few people for directions. But what is this about the Master?"

"Then we probably have a few hours," said Kell. "They'll need to follow down the traces. Interr'gate one or two. But not longer.

"Ok." He hiccuped. "The Mas'er. Remember him? He has people here. I know that for sure now. Lal and I, we did well in the beginning. Had couple o' kids. Then Lal got poorly while big with the third. Called in this doctor fellow, he was well known. Hell, thought I knew him. But he didn't do no good, Lal got worse and worse. Then the babies sickened as well. I don't want to make a meal of it: they all up and died. All right, it happens. But that doctor devil, laughs in my face after the burying and said the Master never lets go, and can reach any man, anywhere, any time. That one day he'd come for me. Then, just as I was set to bury my hands in his scrawny neck, he vanished. Puff of smoke deal. I'm not joking."

"Oh Kell," said Tarin, "I am so sorry. And the babies too."

"It were five years ago," said Kell. "I'd of got over it, maybe, but I couldn't seem to stay out of the way of the priests. Those devils nibbled and nibbled – tallage this and tallage that. This was a fine spread of land. But there's not enough left of it even to feed me, now. Not really. All the folk left – well, they had to leave, had no option – except my dead brother's two, that Kestan and Briy that you met. They're good kids, but I suppose they couldn't risk to witness me talking in the face of the Gongs. 'S why they ran off like that. I get drunk so as to sleep through it. Not but what I need much reason to get drunk these days."

"I'm sorry," said Tarin. "Looks like I picked the wrong day."

"They're all wrong days in this benighted land," said Kell. "Ohh fuck," he said, before leaning to the side and vomiting.

Cursing, Tarin helped to clean up his friend. Kell slumped back against the wall. They listened to Raméas tearing off mouthfuls of grass while Kell took some breaths and recovered.

"Wha' was that help you said you wanted?" Kell asked. He rubbed his eyes, tried to blink them clear.

"You remember Limm, the girl I went north with?" Kell nodded. "Well, it looks to me like the Master's got her too." He described the whole affair to Kell.

At the end of it, Kell looked irresolute. "It's not that I'm averse to coming," he said. "I'm back to where I started, here – worse, because in those times I had Lal. But I'm sorry to tell you, matey, but it doesn't sound to me like you've much chance of hauling in that party now. They'll have got too great a lead on you – specially if they've got relays, like you describe it."

"You don't know what Raméas can do," Tarin said firmly. The horse looked up at the sound of his name. "Really, you don't. I think we gained three days on them on the way down. I think we were only a day behind at the end – yesterday, that was."

"That a fact?" Kell squinted speculatively at the horse. "Three days... Course, he was only carrying you then. You'd be thinking of putting both of us on him?"

"If he's agreeable," said Tarin. "That's another thing. He's sharp, and he understands speech. If only I could understand Horse, we'd be a team to beat."

"Eight horses, you said," muttered Kell. "But there won't be eight riders, some o' those mounts'll be spares. Won't be less than four swords, though." He thought some more. "Ah, to hell with it. I'm finished in this country. And it'll be worth it to cock a snoot at that devil, for what he's done to me." He tried to stand, staggered. "Fuck. Gotta get me bow."

"You don't look like you're in a fit state to ride," said Tarin.

"Believe you me," Kell said to him, "there's nothing I'd like better than to sleep this off. But quite seriously, from what you tell me of your games with our boys in red, it is ride now or die. I can sit on a horse, drunk or sober. Now help me fetch a few things."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kell turned his back without a word on the house where he had enjoyed wealth and happiness. What use pining looks or words?

At first, they attempted to ride straight back down the deep hollow of the glen, which the sinking sun behind them now lit in startling clarity, flooding everything with golden light. They were not half an hour under way however, before their way was blocked by an approaching gaggle of armed riders, their steel-glittering numbers leavened with the colourful robes of priests. The posse raised a shout as soon as they sighted the fugitive pair on their great horse. Pursued by a scatter of arrows, Raméas promptly leaped the hedge on one side of the road and made off across the field. It soon became apparent that the whole country was up in arms. Try as the pair might, they found no way through.

“What kind of a hornet’s nest have you stirred up?” slurred Kell.

Tarin, sitting jammed in front of him, could only shrug.

“I don’t think we’ll get out this way, mate,” his friend said. “We’ll have to run before this lot. Don’t worry, we have the legs on them, and then some. You weren’t lying any when you told about your horse.”

“But that’s the wrong direction,” said Tarin despairingly. “We’re losing time.”

“There’s paths through the hills,” said the other. “We’ll have to work our way around. No option.” The sweat on Kell’s pasty complexion showed how badly he was still feeling the drink.

They had been retreating, keeping just ahead of the approaching bands while probing for an opening. Raméas now at Tarin’s prompting picked up his pace to a smooth but very fast gallop. The sun stood now low in their eyes; the walls of the valley began perceptibly to glide past them.

“This is amazing!” shouted Kell in Tarin’s ear. “No saddle! Wouldn’t’a believed it!”

Great shadow-girt masses of stone reared slowly higher on their left, their snow-tipped towers appearing to crowd almost into the valley itself, which curved gradually to the right along its entire length. It was hard to gain a proper appreciation of the size of the heights. Tarin puzzled for some time over what the ranks of pointed, dark-leaved bushes could be that shrouded the lower slopes, until he realized with something of a shock that each dark cone was no shrub, but a mighty fir, many times taller than a man.

Under Kell’s guidance, they crossed the foamy stream, its spray flashing gold under the low rays of the sun now streaming directly down the glen. They had left most of the farms behind them by that point. It was not long before their path reached the far wall of the glen and began to climb. Night found them hidden high in the hills.

Kell stopped Raméas in the deep blue gloaming and slid wearily from his back. He helped Tarin down.

“They won’t find us here,” he mumbled. “Rest now. We need light to see our way.”

They drank, made a fire, and sat by it, eating frugally from the scanty provisions Kell had been able to assemble.

“We won’t get fat on this trip,” the soldier commented.

“Listen,” said Tarin, “you can tell me now. What is this business about gongs?”

“Oh that,” replied his companion. “It’s dead silly, really. Or it would be, if they didn’t make it a life or death matter. They have these big gongs, see, up by the temples. We passed the place, high up under the big dark mountain. They bring ’em out and bong ’em, you know, on this day. All very solemn. They got a hundred different things they do like that. Story I heard was that one day, some feller laughed, see, and made the gong sound, like in echo of his voice. That was *his* lot, o’ course. After that they made a big to-do and didn’t let folk open their mouths on that day. Every time it come around again, like. On pain of death.”

Tarin thought for a while. “That *is* silly,” he said.

“You said it, pal,” said Kell. He took a swig of the water, wiped his face with a palmful. “I’m conking out. See you in the morning.”

\* \* \* \* \*

It took them the whole of the following day to find a way through the hills. Kell barely spoke a word all day; very clearly he was suffering the after-effects of his boozing.

Evening came upon them as they at last made their way out of the broken, forested country and onto the plains. They had emerged some miles short of the entrance to the great glen.

As Kell made to get down, Tarin said, "Shouldn't we get on? We've lost two whole days."

"No can do," said the other shortly. "Sorry, mate. I'm all in." Without eating or doing anything about a fire, he rolled himself in a blanket and in five minutes was snoring. Despite chafing at the delay, Tarin had no option but to do the same.

Raméas woke them with a pealing neigh. The early light, spreading slowly across the sky, was just beginning to touch with faint detail the dark shapes of the peaks that reared to the South and East. The two humans picked themselves up with a wince and a groan. There was little speech in either of them. As quickly as they could, they packed up the loose gear. Both were cold, hungry and sore; both felt dirty and seedy; but there was nothing else for it.

Once the great horse had reached the full, flowing speed of his run, Kell passed Tarin some biscuit. After stilling their hunger in this meagre fashion, and taking a swig of water, both felt better.

"So this Limm, then," shouted Kell above the wind of their passage. "Did you two get together in the end?"

Tarin turned his head to him. "No," he said.

Kell had things he could have replied, but none of them were kind, so he held his peace.

Indeed it was not easy to converse on Raméas's back, and hours at a time passed without either making a remark. However, over the course of the three days it took them to reach the Great River, they did tell each other something of their experiences since the parting of their ways some ten years previous. That is, Kell was reluctant to say much about his own doings, but he was interested to hear Tarin's adventures, perhaps most of all over his sojourn in the City of the Elves.

"Well," said Kell at the end, "I've heard more about them folk in one go from you than in all the other tales I heard together. Amazing times. But listen, mate: d'you suppose them Elves would have a place for someone like me?"

Tarin turned, looked up at him in surprise. "I don't know. I suppose so, there's a lot of different people living there, of all sorts. I'm sure they wouldn't stop you – that's not the sort of thing they do. But do you think you'd be happy, living with Elves?"

"Why not?" said Kell. "I got to find somewhere. Seeing as I've shot me bolt with me own folk – well and truly."

Tarin thought about it. "Limm wasn't happy there," he said at last. "I'm not sure if it would be good for her, going back. Supposing we're able to rescue her, that is."

This, indeed, seemed by no means assured. Kell had looked carefully over the usual gruesome carcasses at the first such place they stopped at. He did not venture aloud a guess about the time since the marauders had passed, but he looked pensive afterwards, and less inclined than ever to waste time.

Kell could shed no light on the murderous behaviour of their chase. "Doesn't make sense," he said. "Why waste good horses?" Nor could he understand how the same riders could keep going so long. He had expected to find traces to show where the marauders had camped; but few such were to be found. This further increased his unease, and his urging to haste.

Evening of the third day found them at the Great River. Without any of them saying anything, Raméas plunged straight into the water and struck out with powerful surgings for the far side. Once over, he pressed on. The miles rolled past in darkness, the warm country passing by unseen: the welcome land they had been so glad to see, years ago, after escaping from the Dark Country. Ever uphill Raméas laboured, as the shadows of the mountains ahead grew high around them.

The moon rising over the jagged outline ahead shone on the same bowl in the hills as last time, and reflected with the same beauty off the same carpet of countless glistening flowers.



Kell halted Raméas with a word. In the sudden silence, he looked over the hollow of the valley. “They’re not here,” he said hoarsely. “And there’s not much more road.”

“How close are we?” asked Tarin.

“Close,” his friend said. He leaned and pointed down to a broad path trampled through the blooms, just to be made out in the silvery light. “That’s where they went. More of them, now. They must have met some more, after the river.”

Tarin didn’t speak for a moment. His friend’s change of tone had not escaped him.

“I want to go on,” he said. “They might just be a little way ahead.”

“Even if that’s true,” said Kell, “what could we do?”

“Whatever we were always going to do. Come on – just a bit further.”

In silence, the big man squeezed gently with his thighs, heels. Raméas, picking up the touch, snorted, curvetted, seemed about to demur; but after a moment of hesitation, he galloped on.

The climb, the hard sound of hooves on the road. At every moment Tarin hoped to hear or see ahead the others – the savage horsemen he had chased so hard and for so long; but the miles brought nothing but disappointment.

Kell pulled up Raméas finally only a little way from the last curve, after which the tower guarding the pass would come into sight. The horse stood there, blowing only a little, while the humans listened to the silence. Evil memories of death still clung to the place.

Kell leaned forward, spoke with sympathy. “No good, old son. I’m that sorry – I know you was set on her. It’s a damn shame, after coming all that way and that. But there’s nothing to be done. They’ve gone through.”

“I’m going on,” said Tarin.

Kell paid that no attention. He knew Tarin was upset. One said wild things at such times. “We’ll go back and camp by the moonflowers,” he said. “Come on.” He had already started Raméas turning when Tarin startled him by a sudden sideways movement. He only just managed to grab the little man, prevent him getting down. “Whoopsie! No you don’t.”

Tarin turned his head in Kell’s grasp, looked him in the eye. “Let go,” he said softly.

“Now look, don’t go playing silly buggers. Come and we’ll camp and talk about it.”

“Are you trying to stop me going on? Because you can’t watch me all the time. All you’re doing is delaying me.”

Kell was growing exasperated. He understood, but he was exhausted. Four days of constant riding and little sleep had worn down a constitution much weakened by his own long grief.

“If you walk in that gate, you’ll die,” he said flatly.

Tarin’s gaze had never left Kell’s face. The moon gleamed in his eyes. “*You* could get in,” he said. “And out again. You and Raméas. *You* could do it.”

The big man shook his head. “No chance,” he said. “Catch me going in there again? No chance. It’s over, Tarin. Leave it. You did your best, but sometimes best just isn’t enough. It’s life, old son. Let it go, and move on.”

“And where will you move to, Kell? Where will you move to? Is this what you owe Lal, and your little boys? Just move on?”

The Bigger stiffened. “Shut up about them,” he said.

“I thought you had some guts, once,” Tarin said. “But all you do is run away. Running to hide your head in drink, or among the Elves. You make me sick. Lal was worth three of you.”

“Shut your mouth!” Kell said roughly. “You hear? Just shut up! You don’t know nothing about it.”

But Tarin had kindled to a white-hot fury. “You coward,” he hissed. “It’s *you* who don’t know anything, not me. *You* don’t know life. All you know is how to give up. How to knuckle under. ‘Best’? You drunken slob, you sot. How dare you talk about ‘best’. All you know is how to feel sorry for yourself. Well you can just wander off and do that with someone else, because *I* am going on. And if you don’t let go of me this instant and let me go on my way, I am going to draw my knife and scratch you up good.”

Raméas whinnied softly and began to edge back down the path. The humans’ raised voices had begun to echo dangerously in the cut.

Kell’s face was dark under the moon. “You crazy little shit,” he whispered fiercely. “All this for a worthless girl. A pretty, empty savage with neither sense nor feeling.”

“Limm is all I have,” replied Tarin equally quietly, but with great vehemence. His hand was on his knife. “Now let me go. I mean it.”

He was watching the glitter of the moon in Kell’s eyes, waiting for his response. The sudden black shadow of the raised fist was the last thing he expected to see – and the last thing he was conscious of, for some time.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tarin woke to a thumping ache in the head, and the scent of perfume in his nostrils. He tried to bring a hand to rub his head, only to find that his two hands were tied together. He opened his eyes. They were back in the Bowl of the Moonflowers, as he thought of the place in his head. The moon was high in the sky now and there were flowers quite close to where Tarin lay. He turned his head, saw the dark bulk of Kell sitting close by.

“Sorry mate,” said Kell. “But there was no way it could come to any good up there. Had to get you away.”

“Cut me loose,” said Tarin. The anger was still in his voice.

“I will in a little while. Wanted some talk with you first.”

Tarin waited, but Kell volunteered nothing more. “What talk?” he asked finally.

The Bigger sighed. “All right. Something I got to ask you first, something I got to know. You remember when we was coming the other way. Those years ago.”

“Yes, of course. Well? What of it?”

“You remember how it was with Limm? How we could feel, near her, just what the other fellow was feeling.”

Tarin was impatient. This was wasting time. “Cut me loose, damn you!”

“In a little while. I just need to clear this up.”

“Then get on with it!”

“All right. You remember how it was around her. She made it pretty hard to hide things. You could tell what the other fellow was feeling. F’r instance, that old bloke you brought along at the last minute – what copped it just about where I thumped you, up above. Very tanned-looking old bloke, forget his name.”

“Pod. Podossian.”

“Yes. Well he was happy as a box of frogs at the start. It just shone out of him. Of course he was – we was all happy to get out of that place. But with him it was more. You’d fixed his leg, hadn’t you? He’d been lame, maybe for a long time, and you fixed his leg. I reckon you must ’a done it right when you went back for him.”

Tarin was silent. He didn’t like the direction this was going.

“And there was something about that funny bit of slate, the pass thing, that the imp had to bite. They break those things,

you know, I watched the guard do it with ours. Been wondering ever since where you laid hands on a whole one.”

Still Tarin said nothing.

“Then we come to Ondo. Master had his claws in him, I could see that. I thought I was going to have to cut my old mate down, because he was so snarled up in that mess. Then suddenly it was all gone. He was free. Leastways, almost free. Not quite free enough to save himself, poor chap.”

Kell waited, but Tarin had nothing to say.

“You can fix things, Tarin, can’t you? I think you fixed me. And I reckon I know just when it was. Right when we came to the Gate, and saw them Orcs. Wasn’t it?”

Tarin tried to make out his friend’s face in the moonlight. “I’m sorry,” he said.

Kell moved his shoulders. “Oh, as to that, there’s no need to be,” the man said. “I’m not sour about it. I just wanted to know the truth.”

Tarin sought for words. “It was a horrible journey,” he said. “Then when we saw those nightmare things... I’m sorry. I suppose I won’t be able to convince you that I don’t use the power lightly. I was desperate.”

Kell was silent for some moments. Finally he said, “We were happy together, me and Lal. After we got back. Happier than before.” He paused for a breath. Tarin could not see his face. “I believe I have you to thank for that. It was damned cheek of you to meddle with my inner nature; but I can’t be sour about it. Not at all. Because of them happy years.”

Tarin waited, but there was no more. “What are you going to do now?”

Kell sighed again. “I’ve changed my mind. I’m going to have a go at getting in, at the guard post, up above. You were right. And for other reasons. But what I have in mind really needs daylight to work. So right now I’m planning to doss down and sleep. Providing you’re agreeable with that plan, and promise not to behave silly, I’ll loose your bonds first, so you can sleep comfortable yourself.”

Tarin thought about it. “All right,” he said. It was the same as when he had turned aside to look for Kell: a choice between a quick, certain fate and one delayed but slightly less certain.

Kell loosed his bonds and they both fell immediately into a dreamless sleep.

Tarin was woken by the sun in his eyes and the smell of frying bacon. He sat up. The flowers were all closed now, hiding their beauty.

“Morning,” the big man said cheerfully.

“Shouldn’t we be moving?”

“We’ll both be bolder for a slice of bacon in our bellies. Here, take your share.”

Wordlessly, the two set to. Tarin began to feel considerably better.

“I said I’d have a go,” Kell said after they had finished, “and I will. It’s still a fool’s errand, with likely death at the end of it. But shut up a while now and listen to what I’ve got in mind.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Not even the sleepy guard they had on watch could miss the approach of the rider: a great big, shiny sort of horse walking along in broad daylight, the clop of his hooves echoing in the cut. The guard goggled a second or two before springing up and ringing furiously at the bell hung for that purpose. Shouts and turmoil echoed from the stony courts below him, and reinforcements shortly clomped pell-mell up the steps to jostle along the rampart. Bows were strung, arrows placed ready.

The intruder was a big bloke, sword at his side, clad in mail that looked fresh-shined; riding easy. He had a child or some sort in front of him in the saddle.

The Guard-captain waited until the intruder was close enough, then called down, "Halt! You there! Step down, lay your weapons at the side of the path, and lay yourself down on the ground, face down, hands spread."

The man stopped, but made no move to dismount. "Is that any way to treat a comrade?" he protested. "I'm back from patrol, with a prisoner. Don't dick me around, just let me in."

The Captain scratched his head. A single soldier was hardly an invasion. And the little bloke perched in front of him did seem to have his hands tied. But the rider was no-one he knew, and he'd heard about no patrol. All the missions came and went through the Gate, to the North.

"Shut your gob, if you know what's good for you!" he said. "We got twenty bows on you, mister! So get moving – off and down!"

"You can shove that where the monkey put the nuts, mate," retorted the rider. "Come on, there must be someone up there who knows me. Old butter-balls Borik, he used to be posted here. You up there, Borik? Or there was a bloke called Karaken. Krak, you miserable streak of horse-piss! Mate? Hello? Come and tell these buggers what's what."

A few of the guards were sniggering. The names were known.

"Shemesh?" continued Kell in rising desperation. "Zimm? Taunus? Da—"

"Yer," came a voice.

"Who's that, then?" said Kell.

"Taunus."

"Taunus, you old bugger! You remember me. Kell! You know me, for sure."

Taunus pushed to the fore, scrutinised the man below. "Kell?" he called down. "That choo? Wot choo doing 'ere? We heard you run orf. Which your name were posted, an' all."

"That was me cover story," came the answer. "I'm secret service, me."

"Which your name were posted," repeated Taunus, ox-like.

"Well of course it were," replied Kell, exasperated. "That was me cover!"

The Guard-captain pulled Taunus aside. "Who is he?" he said.

"Him? I were wiv 'im on the slaving run, years back," said the other slowly, still trying to process the novelty. "He were all right. Firm but fair, sort of thing. But he bust out o' this gate here wiv some others, long time back. I weren't on here then, but there was a big stink about it."

The Captain scratched his head. "Could it be right?" he asked. "I never hearda no Secret Service." But Taunus only shrugged.

Kell called again from below. "Come on fellows, don't piss about. Are you going to let me in, or what? I've had a long ride. Want to get shot of me prisoner so as I can get outside of a mug of something cheerful."

The Captain shrugged now in his turn. After all, nobody in their right mind would come *back* if they really had escaped. Let others sort it out. He leaned out, called down to the inner courtyard. "All right. Let him in."

The heavy gates swung back with a creak. Raméas snorted and clopped forward under the arch. Men were gathering in the courtyard, goggling at the great horse. Kell saluted them, rode on easily, across the yard and into the arched entry on the far side. "Just lift the bar there, fellows, would you?" he said to the two or three guards standing uncertainly around.

The guards looked at the Captain; he hesitated, nodded. The heavy wooden bar was heaved clear, then these gates were swung wide, letting in the light of morning. The rider saluted them again, rode through; the moment he was out, the horse picked up his pace, until he was flying down the road.

“He’s in a hurry,” someone remarked.

“There’s something funny about all this,” said another guard. “I never saw a horse like that before, for one.”

The Guard-captain stood in the gateway, looking after the rapidly receding figures with narrowed eyes. “Yeah,” he said. “Prepare a messenger. We got to report this.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“So we got in,” shouted Kell as Raméas carried them down the curves. “Now tell me how we’re going to get out again.” He got Tarin to hold his bound hands out in front of him, then reached around and cut the cords.

Tarin, now free to move, twisted around, raising his own voice over the wind of their passage. “Raméas could jump the rampart at the Gate. You know, where we came in, years ago. And he’s faster than anything here.”

“We’ll see,” said Kell. Despite everything, the big man was surprised to find he was enjoying himself. “But it’s got to be quick in, quick out. If we give them a chance to raise the cry against us, we’re done for.”

“You didn’t ask at the guard post about the other party,” shouted Tarin. “The ones we’re chasing.”

“What could they tell us that we don’t know?” said Kell. “We know they’re not far ahead of us. They got to go to Central. Might well be they’ve relaxed the pace, now they’ve got in. I dunno. All we can do is pack on their tail, like we done all the way from God Mountain. Like *you* done, from twice as far. They should make a song about you, old son. You and this horse here.”

“What are we going to do if we catch them?” said Tarin.

“Same as we always planned. There’s six riders, at my estimation. Two of they horses have always been running light. That’s five swords plus your Limm. Now, I been thinking about this. That Master wants your friend bad – it’s pretty clear. *I* think he’s juiced those men up somehow. Made ’em so they don’t need sleep, so they’ll cut throats rather than wait a moment. We’d a’ been up with them long since, else. Your Raméas has the legs on them, but we needed to sleep.

“All right. We’ve got five crazy, juiced-up, sleep-starved swords to tackle. That’s my reading of it. But crazy men don’t think right, can’t fight right. If I can down say two of them with bow-shot, thin them out that way first, then we have a chance.”

“I don’t know that I can be much help,” said Tarin. “I’ve never fought anyone.”

Kell didn’t answer that. It was understood. “Just one more thing,” he went on. “If we don’t catch them up before Central, that’s it. End of story. All right? No more argument. We cut our losses and get out of it.”

After Tarin had gloomily assented to this, they rode on in silence.

Kell laughed suddenly. “I never thought we’d do it,” he said. “But we put one over on him, all right. Did him in the eye.”

“Who, your friend at the guard post?” asked Tarin.

“No!” replied Kell. “The Master!”

Tarin shivered. He thought it was bad luck to say such things before they got out and away.

A vast expanse of dry land had been spread before their gaze at the height of the pass. As they lost height, so their field of view shrank and local details of the approaching plain grew proportionally in prominence. The jagged comb of gloomy peaks receded behind, and the mass of the fire-mountain loomed ever larger in front. A huge plume of smoke trailed southward from the peak of the cone, laying a dark swathe of shadow directly across their path.

They reached the crossroads guard-post at noon. Raméas sought a cistern and slaked his thirst while onlookers gaped at the huge, glossy beast. There were Orcs lurking in the shadows, but these recoiled, hissing, shielding their faces, as if the sight of the Elven horse burned their eyes. Tarin, on his part, recoiled as ever from the complete internal wrongness of the creatures. There was no part of them that was right: they were all damage, entirely made out of cruelty and

despair.

Kell sought out the Guard-captain. "Hey," he said to him. "Was there a party come through here? Five men, maybe, and a girl?"

"Yeah," the man said. "They stayed here overnight. Rum crew, gave me the shivers. Left at cock-crow."

Tarin spoke. "There was a girl with them?" he said. "Dark hair? Was she all right?"

The guard stared at him. "Yer, they had a girl," he said. "Not in too good nick, I'd suppose. They was draggin' 'er about. What's it to you, anyway?"

Raméas was finished. "Sorry!" said Kell. "Can't stay!" They gee'd up and clattered on their way.

The great cone of the fire-mountain was looming, the vast cloud of ash hovered dark and ominous before them, but Kell was savagely jubilant. "We've got them!" he said. "I think we've got them! Keep your eyes peeled ahead!"

Raméas, too, had understood how matters lay. He stretched himself, and now it was almost as if they flew. The landscape flowed back past them, while the gale of their passage flattened the hair back from their heads, and made Kell have to hunch forward against its force.

They entered the shadow of the plume. Gloom descended. The taste of the air became acrid on their tongues, and dust began to catch in their throats and grit their teeth.

Raméas pelted around a shadowed buttress of the mountain, then hauled himself to a skidding stop. The way ahead was blocked by an army of Orcs.

"Get around them!" called Kell, but the snorting horse was already turning. He sprang once more into motion, but had to pull up again after only a few paces: Orcs loomed up in that direction as well. Turn to the rear: no good. Orcs were streaming in from all sides. They were surrounded.

Kell swivelled his head at the same time as Raméas was twisting, trying to find an opening. Nothing. The soldier lifted Tarin with one hand, man-handled him around behind him. "Keep low," he shouted. "They don't like the horse. If they're not too deep, we can win through." He kned Raméas into a furious charge upon the Orcs to their front.

The hissing, fuming creatures fell back from the Elven horse, but hordes of them were streaming in from all sides, and most of them carried bows. Arrows began to fly in like wasps. So thick grew the Orcs that Raméas could not make his way through them. The Orc-arrows seemed not to lodge in his hide, but they cut him. And always more Orcs piled in, swarming like flies.

The end came quickly. Events happened in a blur. Tarin was thrown off the horse, or fell, he couldn't tell which or how. There was a pain in his leg. Quick as lightning he was mobbed by a crowd of grinning, leering, grabbing Orcs. Their claws hauled him upright, and then he could see.

Kell was also now on foot, fighting some paces from the furiously rearing horse. Raméas was slashing and biting, laying Orcs into groaning swathes. There were streaks of red blood down Raméas's sides, but the Elven horse shone bright even under that gloom. The Orcs would not abide his onslaught, but they swarmed in behind him, and wherever they came, they and stabbed and shot, stabbed and shot.

Kell's sword was flashing quick arcs of brightness, but he fell now to one knee, and was hidden by the swarming bodies of his foes. The Orcs were all around him, their eyes fierce, fangs in grimace, swarming and yelling. The swords of the Orcs swung and chopped, and their spears jabbed inward.

At this final, terrible ruin of all their hopes, at the betrayal of his friends, at having to witness now their desperate and hopeless fight for life, Tarin, in his despair, sought within himself, scrabbling blindly. It was as if he tore frantically within at a layer of scars, which ripped away now under the force of his need, to reveal an inner white-hot, molten glow. Tarin struck out with all this rediscovered primal power, crying aloud at the agony of it. Trying to repair the unrepairable, trying to make life right. The fire flowed out of him in a great wave, a wing of flame sweeping across the field.

He found that he had fallen again. The ground he was lying on was wet. Ash on his tongue. The pain in his leg. Silence.

He opened his eyes. Not far distant stood Raméas, blowing hard, streaked with blood. Kell lay huddled on the ground. There was no Orc to be seen. Nothing remained of the armies but sheets of foamy fluid spread across the dusty ground, scattered with swords and other paraphernalia.

Far up the slope, the choking ash continued to pour out of the cone of the mountain. The base of the ash column was shot now and then with fitful fire. Tarin could feel the uneasy rumble of it through the ground.

He levered himself painfully to his feet. The pain in his leg, he saw, was an arrow. Nothing to be done about it right now. He hobbled to where Kell lay. The soldier was still alive, but bright red blood was pooling beneath him from his many wounds.

“Where... Orcs?” gasped Kell.

“I unmade them,” said Tarin, crouching by his side. He looked helplessly over his friend’s wounds. “Lie quiet now.” He pulled off his tunic and used his knife to cut it quickly into smaller bands, which he commenced to tie around the worst of the cuts on Kell’s arms.

“Fetch... horse,” said Kell. “Out of... this.”

Tarin had already noticed movements in the distance which signified the approach of further forces. “It’s no good, Kell, I’m sorry,” he said. “I can’t fix the world. I’ve just bought us a tiny bit of time.”

“Horse,” whispered Kell, trying to look towards the brightness that was Raméas standing nearby. “Chance...” he mouthed. He tried to speak more, but although his lips moved, he could not make a sound.

“Kell,” said Tarin. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I brought you to this.”

The man clutched Tarin’s arm, looked into his eyes, tried to speak. Beneath him, the blood continued to pool. Tarin’s makeshift bandages were soaking red and dripping.

The eyes lost focus, the grip loosened. Kell’s laboured breathing gurgled once or twice, choked; his chest fell in a long, slow sigh. He was dead.

Tarin’s eyes were leaking tears, but there wasn’t time for that. He had others still to think of.

He stood, faced Raméas. “My dear and faithful friend,” he said to the horse, “I have no words to convey to you my gratitude and my admiration. You have carried me a long, long way. But the time has come for us to part.”

Raméas whinnied, tossed his head. He trotted over to stand next to a large boulder that would give Tarin the necessary step up to mount, then whinnied again. His intention was clear.

Tarin shook his head. “I am staying,” he said. “It’s my only chance to find Limm. You can think what you like about it. I know it is the sheerest folly – I know it means death, and possibly a lot of unpleasantness even before that. But that’s the way it has to be. Limm is all that’s left for me. But *you* need not stay.”

Raméas foamed, and stamped, and cried. The despair of the fairy horse at parting from his comrade made one of the most heartbreaking scenes in the unsung history of Middle-earth. But if he stayed, die he surely must; yet he would not thereby save Tarin. So fiery a spirit as his would have charged to meet death for any worthy cause; but he could not cast his life away for nothing.

Tarin found that he could not look on to see Raméas go. He turned his head away, tears stinging his eyes.

With his last companion gone, Tarin felt shaky and alone. What am I *doing* here, he thought to himself. I’ve just sent off my only chance of getting out of this mess. He was powerless to help Limm in any way; all that he had done was make some grand gesture. But for what?

He imagined how it would have been if he had stayed at the City. He imagined himself growing old among the deathless Elves; dying, at last, surrounded by sympathy, but with no-one to call his own. Was that what he had wanted?

Tarin eyed the approaching Orcs, still some way off. It seemed more than likely that he was shortly to experience an ugly, debased death – quite the opposite of his imagined passing. In point of fact he didn’t want any death. But was the

endless life of the Elves any better? They were chained to life. He had seen that clearly; it didn't necessarily make them happy.

He sighed. In any case, it was done now. All that was left to him was to face what was coming to him. He must endure it as well as he could; he must do his best to keep hold of who he was. He had now not even the hope that he could die in company with Limm.

His leg was a savage ache, and any movement of the muscles was agony. Wincing at the pain it cost him, Tarin broke off the arrow short, to lessen the chance of accidental movement disturbing it. There was no way to get the arrow out, it was sunk in too deep. Oh well, he didn't suppose it mattered now.

He crawled back to where Kell lay. The fallen fighter's congealing blood was mixed in a frightful mess with the primordial constituents of the Orcs that lay pooled everywhere. Tarin thought to try to bury the man, digging with his knife, but the body was too big, the ground under the muck too hard. Perhaps some stones, piled on top? But he was exhausted, and found any movement to be agony except a careful inching along with his wounded leg uppermost. The stones were too scattered, the Orcs now too close. Even in this, he had failed Kell. My poor friend, he thought, what have I brought you to? A dog's death, in this awful place. A pointless end to a life that had not contained many joys, not much fulfilment. Who was Kell, anyway? This rough but decent man? Only one among anonymous millions, who had lived his short life, but who would be swept to oblivion by the giant current of time. As will I.

Kell, Tarin thought, I'm sorry to tell you, but you didn't put one over the Master after all. He knew we were coming. I don't know how, but he knew.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Rrrk soldiers approached with caution, mistrustful. Something had happened here; they had felt it. Where were the troops who had been sent as the jaws of the ambush? Had they run off? All they could see in the gloom was a human-sized body lying, with a little squirt of a fellow sitting by him. But why didn't the squirt run? It didn't make sense.

The troops in the leading rank stopped suddenly, which caused the whole troop to pile up in confusion. Cursing, the troop leader ran forward, readying his whip. But what he found at the front caused him too to stop and goggle.

The whole area was wet; although the murky fluid didn't exactly look like blood. And strewn upon it were countless blades, hauberks, shoes, bows, and other debris. It was hard to escape the conclusion that someone had turned three hundred Rrrk, a whole cohort, into liquid. At the turn of a hand. By the Pit!

All the Rrrk were of the same mind. This was sorcerer's work, and they didn't want anything to do with it. They snarled and their eyes showed white.

Other troops had run up by now and the whole mass of them was milling in confusion. The leaders sought each other out, put their heads together. They had their orders. So the lice didn't want to obey? There were ways to overcome that. The leaders picked out one of the troops, fifty Rrrk, and gathered behind them, flexing their whips. "At the double now, you filth!" The whips whined and cracked. Flinching, cursing, the reluctant Rrrk picked their way through the mess.

The little fellow stood up as they reached him. Why, look at him! Look at his knees tremble! This wasn't a sorcerer. They grabbed him and dragged him out of that area, still looking around them mistrustfully.

They flung Tarin at the feet of the senior officer present, then kicked him until he sat up.

The Rrrk bent over him. "You. What happened to the others? The other soldiers. Tell me the truth, or I'll cut yer dick off! If you've got one."

Tarin shook his head. "I don't know." It was truth of a sort.

The officer didn't expect such an insignificant creature as Tarin to know anything. He was just asking a few questions for form's sake. He didn't know what a squirt like this was doing in such an expedition; didn't care. Likely he was a pet or toy of the big fellow, the one that lay dead in that mess. The big warrior, and that dreadful horse-thing that had run off, they were the prime movers in this affair. It was obvious.

Well, quiz the squirt a bit more, then lug him to Master.



“What was you lot doing here? Spying! Was that it? Eh?”

Tarin shrank from the grimace on the monster’s face, the fierce glitter in its black eyes. “We were chasing a girl,” he said in a tremulous voice. “Some men took her. Back west. We’ve come a long way.”

“Oh-ho!” The Orc-captain laughed. “You was after that lot, was you?” He laughed again. He asked no more questions after that, just snarled at his followers in their own language, giving orders. Two of the soldiers came and pricked Tarin with spears until he wavered painfully to his feet.

Tarin had expected that the horrid creatures would take him on to Central, to the dungeons he had escaped from so many years before, and was therefore surprised when they urged him up the fire-mountain so close at hand. Something was clearly happening up there: the eruption had become progressively more active. Jets full of glowing rock fragment were shooting now out of the mouth of the cone before spattering down on the slopes below. The constant tremor under foot was accompanied now by a deep rumble, interspersed now and then by a vast roaring, as from a jet of steam.

However, he had little time to speculate about such matters. The Orcs expected him to proceed on his own feet; but he could not move at any pace faster than a slow and halting limp. They whipped Tarin when he fell, until he staggered up, only to fall again. He tried crawling, but that didn’t satisfy them. He lay there as they whipped him in a fury, crying out under the vicious pain of the blows. He feared they might be going to whip him to death there and then; but suddenly the dreadful punishment ceased. The Orcs were arguing in their own language. Well, maybe they were just consulting with each other, but it always sounded like arguing.

There was a wait of perhaps a quarter of an hour, then two Orcs ran up carrying a long bundle. This turned out to be a sort of mat of fascies, rolled up. They spread it next to Tarin, kicked him onto it, then rolled it up again with him inside. With him trussed like a carpet in this way, two Orcs could lug him, one at each end. The troop began again to trot along the steep path that led up the mountain.

The climb lasted for a time that seemed endless – hours and hours, bumping on the shoulders of the grunting Orcs. All around Tarin, bowed backs, climbing legs; dark glances from cruel eyes, vicious fangs set in grimace. Each jolt of the portage sent a stab of pain through Tarin from his wounded leg. It was throbbing now, hot and heavy. The ceaseless ache of it wore away at Tarin’s spirit. He felt weak and sick.

Towards the end of that long, weary climb, Tarin grew seriously alarmed about the increasing danger from the mountain. The roar of the eruption, now near at hand, was shaking the air. Great lava bombs were being hurled out of the mouth now, often landing well below the troop. Once or twice, a bomb landed far too close for comfort – the great crash of the impact spattering red-hot fragments over a wide area. One couldn’t always spot them coming down through the murk; there wasn’t the least point in trying, of course, but most people prefer to see their death approaching rather than allowing it to sneak up and take them unawares. Tarin kept telling himself that to be killed by lava might be a mercy, compared to what the Orcs or the Master had planned for him, but the foolish heart will insist on continuing to hope, and his was no exception.

Twice all the Orcs unaccountably froze in position, remaining standing there blank-faced, for a minute or two on each occasion. Tarin was mystified. What was this?

The lowering sun began at last to show redly through the far edges of the billowing cloud of ash. The Orcs winced and flinched at each appearance of the dull red disc. Shortly after though, to the creatures’ evident relief, the path dived into a level tunnel lit by torches lining its sides.

Constant pain, the harsh voices of the Orcs, stink of sweat and leather, and now dark walls passing in place of the vast and dreary plain: all these registered on Tarin’s senses. The mind has more senses than these, however. Pressing upon all was the consciousness of entering into a giant presence, as if each step brought them nearer to the heart of some malign power, somewhere in the darkness ahead.

A shouted order brought his bearers to a halt. The officer who had questioned Tarin appeared, his black eyes on a level with Tarin’s. The Orc had a strange, gleeful expression on its face.

“Look there!” The creature pointed to one side. Tarin twisted his head in that direction, saw a cage in an alcove. In it he saw five wasted figures which had surely once been men. Two lay limply sprawled on the floor of the cage, hollow-cheeked and motionless, while the remaining three wandered restlessly from one side to another. All of them bore the same extreme marks of ruin and starvation. Their mouths and eye-sockets were bruised and blackened, their thin and corded limbs the colour and texture of sun-dried meat. Only a gleam in their deep-sunk eyes revealed the crazed animal

spirit that flickered still within.

“You was after these?” crooned the Orc in gloating tones. “You’ve caught ’em. Ha ha ha!”

He barked an order, and the cavalcade resumed.

They arrived at last in a larger chamber, its gloom filled with shouting Orcs. It was hot. Tarin was thrown to the floor. He lay there, dazed and in pain, wondering vaguely what would happen next. Orc voices were arguing over him while the rock floor beneath him trembled continually, as if mighty engines laboured somewhere beneath. He felt a tension in the air, a pressure of some vast and active will; the feeling was almost palpable. Somewhere not far off, something mighty was happening.

But wait – what was that...? Tarin’s attention snapped to a sharp focus. Could he be feeling just the outer fringe of Limm’s strange influence?

As he lay there, straining to tell whether his love was close or not, he became aware that something odd was happening in the hall. The clamour of Orc voices was diminishing. Tarin looked up, saw how the creatures close to him were standing with hanging arms, blank in the face. Only a few voices were muttering now, and as he listened, even those fell into silence. Throughout the space of the dark chamber, lit only by the flicker of torches, the Orcs were all standing, vacant-eyed.

Tarin could feel it: the will that drove the creatures had left them. That mind was now otherwise occupied, somewhere deeper in the mountain.

Good Powers! He must use this chance. Likely, there wouldn’t be another.

Using the power long given to him, the small man sprang his bonds asunder. He gathered himself to stand up, but flinched from the sear of pain in his leg. Sinking back in despair, Tarin wondered what he could do.

It had never occurred to him to use his own power on himself. He had never done so in life, never thought of it; but the realization came to him now. Without thinking twice about the matter, absently almost, Tarin traced the simple path of the damage to his own leg, and undid it. Standing now on a whole and pain-free limb, with all the horrid faintness cleared from his body, he looked around.

The ruddy, flickering light confirmed what he had seen from the ground. All around, groups of silent Orcs stood, vacant of volition. None of them took any notice of him. They weren’t taking notice of anything.

Crouched like a bug in those great halls in the mighty mountain, amid the hot and rumbling darkness, oppressive in its nearness to the centre of power, Tarin considered. A passage led off deeper into the mountain. The Master was down that way, he was certain – and so was Limm. So: act. He walked to the mouth of the passage, his footfalls echoing in the strange silence among the eye-glittering living statues of the clustered Orcs, and entered it.

Here there was no light at all. It was a long passage, and every step Tarin took seemed to push against the increasing beat of power on his forehead. Indeed it was only this directivity, and the growing strength of Limm’s influence that he sensed ahead of him, that enabled him to steer his way.

He felt almost as if he were creeping down the gullet of a giant – a giant made of stone, but filled with a hot power of terrible life. His limbs were shaking for fear of it. There was nothing he would have liked more than to turn around and run like a rabbit, far from this. But Limm was down there, somewhere ahead, somewhere now not far off. He had already taken the first step on this path when he had turned away from Raméas. He could only go on; there was no way back.

Lines of red light flickered before his eyes: light, seeping out the cracks that outlined a pair of doors. Tarin felt along the back of them, found high up an iron ring, hot beneath his touch. Gathering his courage into desperate hands, he grasped it, leaned his slender weight back, and pulled.

The wave of heat that smote him in the face left him gasping. The superheated air seared his face, dried his eyes instantly, drew hot down into his lungs. Wincing, tears springing to moisten his stinging eyes, he turned away, sheltered in the dark again behind the door. It wasn’t possible. Nobody could live in such an oven. How could he go in there?

Need again brought forth the power that he had thought was gone for good. He found, if he concentrated, that he was

able to maintain a kind of constant renewal that undid the burning heat as it sought to damage him. Shielded in this fragile armour, Tarin stepped timidly and sidelong into the room.

Heat, noise, movement. It took Tarin a moment to take in fully what he was seeing. He beheld a wide, disk-like chamber like a shallow amphitheatre, carved out of the rock. The ceiling was two or three man-heights separated from the floor, but the width was far greater: perhaps two spear-casts. Here and there curtains of flame roared and wavered, almost too hot to look at. He saw that these emerged from cracks in the stone floor and passed into matching cracks in the ceiling.

Closer to the centre, dark objects lay arranged in concentric rings. Tarin could not well make out what they were. At the centre of all, at the focus of the fire and the power, he beheld a figure. A kneeling figure, clothed in incandescent white, shimmering amid the flames. The Master. Annatar. Sauron.

All of the Enchanter's terrifying strength of will was focused on something in front of him. Tarin, crouching in the shelter of the obstructions like a rat creeping in the arras, ventured a little nearer. The thought of Limm drew him on. He could sense her presence, not far away. Another timid step; and another.

With sudden disgust, Tarin realized that the dark objects in their rings about the Enchanter were bodies. All kinds of bodies: Biggers, Dwarves, Elves. All were dead – all blackened and encindered; twisted, shrunken, crisp as clinker.

Limm. There she was. Alive still, somehow. But as Tarin assessed her condition, using his internal sense, he felt appalled amid his terror. Such mortal damage! Such a tangle of horror! The Master had caged her mind, and the cage seemed to have seared most of the goodness out of the girl. Tarin could trace some of its white-hot bonds in the picture that lay before his internal sense. How could he undo this? It seemed only these frightful windings that were keeping life in the poor mortal.

Something additional now was happening. Tarin had to look. He saw that the Master knelt before a great anvil, glowing just perceptibly red from its sullen heat. Above this hung now a drop, white hot. The incandescent drop grew, sagged; fell at last to the anvil. Sauron held his hands over it, the glow lighting his face. Slowly the molten blob spread, changed shape, formed into a glowing ring, of a size to fit a finger.

Sauron spoke now, in harsh tones that echoed in the chamber, over the roar of the fires. His words were in a language that Tarin could not understand, but he quailed beneath their power, and shut his eyes. Here was a far greater evil than he had imagined possible. Rank after rank of it; he could not come to the end of it.

But there was nothing he could do about Sauron. His one hope was to remain undiscovered for a few stolen moments more. He crept another step, furtive behind the ranks of bodies; then another. He was there. Limm.

The stricken girl turned her eyes to Tarin, and they held in equal measure recognition, gratitude and despair. Cautiously he extended his shield to enclose her, to give her relief from the fearful heat.

Power was gathering in the room, beginning to swirl in towards the centre. Tarin had felt similar before, when the Elves had made their rings; but this was wilder, fiercer, more awful.

“Oh, you fool,” Limm whispered to him. “Tarin. What are you doing here?”

She closed her eyes as his shield extended to cover her. Her face relaxed in the blessed relief from pain, but this left the approach of death now plain to see. Tarin could have wept to see the damage that had been done to her body. The poor woman had been seared like a steak. Where once had been freshness and beauty was now only ruin. Lines of blisters, wide as a thumb, snaked over her face and arms. She was finished. He could have wept. This was the end of everything.

She opened her eyes again, the green eyes he knew and had loved so long. But there was nothing of scorn or sharpness in them now, only a mortal weariness.

“Tarin,” she whispered.

“Limm,” he said. He laid a hand on her withered arm. “I had to come.”

The dreadful power was mounting, tugging at them. Pouring into the ring at its focus.

“I should have known you'd do something like this,” she muttered. “Only you.”

He shrugged, had nothing he wanted to say. But he was by her; he could feel her feeble life, see her face. It was enough.

“Can we get out?” she whispered.

Tarin for a wild moment allowed himself to dream of it. Running out past the stunned guards, down the mountain. Perhaps Raméas would not have left, they could escape on his back. Perhaps.

But he knew that Limm, in the condition into which she had been smashed and burned, could not take five steps.

He squeezed her hand, shook his head. There was only one way out, and they both knew it. Her eyes had not left his face; she knew.

“We only have a few moments,” he said. They sat there dumbly, cowering behind Tarin’s fragile shield of life, the winds of destruction blowing ever stronger about them.

“Oh Tarin,” Limm groaned, “he’s hurt me so badly. Things he tore out of me. All the connections the Elves put in. He means to follow them back, I know. Nobody will be safe.”

The Rings! he thought. The Elves wove their Rings through her! *That* was what this was all about! Has Sauron captured that weaving? Even as he spoke, he knew it was so. But more than that: he could sense now with mounting horror how the burning wire snakes in Limm’s mind, under their master’s gathering power, were growing further, seeking down the paths within her.

Limm squeezed his hand feebly. “I’ve lived my entire life wrong,” she whispered. She coughed, the breath harsh in her lungs.

“Then start living it right,” he said. “Can you stand up?”

“Chains,” she murmured, but Tarin sprang them even as she spoke. With effort, she stirred herself, trying to rise onto an elbow, gasping at the pain this caused her ruined body.

The roaring power called up by Sauron had by now grown to a typhoon of terrible, unbounded, unbindable strength. The might of the fire-elemental was becoming too great for the sorcerer to control. He began to scream as the whirlwind ripped more and more savagely at his being. It was stripping his own powers away to join the torrent swirling into the Ring.

Tarin had no mind to spare for Sauron’s agony. He put an arm under Limm’s, helped her up.

“Come on, my old love,” he said, from inside their small, sheltered corner of that fearful chamber; the only crevice in that whole bleak land that knew gentleness and love. “Put your weight on me. Come on then, it’s not far now. A few steps, then it’s ended.” Straining under her sagging weight, he was steering for the nearest fire-curtain.

The stricken girl groaned, took one dragging step, another. “I’m frightened, Tarin,” she whimpered. The burning snakes within her were pushing, seeking.

“No cause,” he said. “We’ll be together.” He stopped then, turned his head to her, and even in that frightful extremity he could not resist making a feeble quip. “I’m sorry, Limm – it seems you’re stuck with me after all.”

She looked at him out of her pain, terror and despair. Forgetting these for a moment, her mouth twitched into a smile: a brief warm glance and a turn of blistered lips. Her eyes held more things than she had power to say.

“Come on then, shrimp,” she croaked to him, with a feeble attempt at an embrace. “Together.”

They stepped to the crack, plunged into the roaring curtain. Tarin released his shield, and the incandescent heart of the furnace whirled their lives away. They were gone. Limm’s cage lay empty.

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## Epilogue

Sauron required some time to recover, to come to some sort of terms with the terrible realisation of the worst of his fears, the one that he had quaked under all down the ages: fear of being robbed of his power. Even the smallest of thefts would have been painful enough, but the spirit of the Fire-mountain had stripped away nearly all of it – not just the gatherings of his long existence, his gleanings through the slow thrift of time, but also most of the powers he had been granted at his beginning. It was the most appalling catastrophe.

Slowly, though, he came to realize that all these powers still existed: only they resided now in the Ring. So long as it lived, so would they. And the Ring gave him now, even as he had designed, so very much more.

The loss of the girl was a relatively small matter. It is true that he had hoped, through her, to extend his new power to suborn the three tokens that these Elves, in their presumption, had devised in his despite. But he had already used her to undermine these works of insolence. He had not been able to corrupt them, but he controlled them utterly. So long as he wore his own Ring, there was in fact small difference.

When Sauron was ready, he put on the Ring, speaking as he did so the verses he had spoken in its making, that lay now graven around its span in letters of fire:

*One Ring to rule them all,  
One Ring to find them,  
One Ring to bring them all,  
And in the darkness bind them.*

The instant he did so, Galadriel, Elrond and Cirdan, in their scattered locations, cried out with one voice and stripped their own rings from their fingers. All the joy, all the works they had begun lay now exposed to the winds. One thousand, eight hundred and thirty-one years were to pass before they could be taken up again.

After Eregion lay in burning ruins, the City sacked by Orcs, the Deep-elves scattered and fled, as Galadriel sat mourning in the agony of her vanished dreams, one thought recurred to her again and again.

“I never thanked him!” she said to herself. “I never even thanked him!”

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