I will lift up mine eyes unto the mountain peaks, from whence cometh my help.

I wake before dawn. The hearth fire has burnt down to glowing embers. The small room is filled with the smell of smoke and the stench of sleeping men. I rise quickly, grabbing a piece of stale bread and an empty cup before I leave the house.
Outside the watchdog gives a friendly whine as I pass it on my way to the well. Before dawn the air still has the bite of winter, is almost painfully pure in my mouth and my lungs. The garrison lies dark and silent around me. Everyone but me and the guard at the gate are still asleep, snoring and dreaming. From the forest beyond the palisades the yapping of a fox is heard and the eerie sound of an owl dies away in the darkness of the trees. But dawn is near, and the first birds are stirring. A chittering of tits, a quick trilling of a blackbird, down the road the cackling of magpies.

I pull up the bucket, taking care not to make any noise. The water is black in the darkness and icy. I splash several handfuls in my face, grooming the tangled mane of brown hair with my fingers. Then I fill my cup with water and drink deeply. The water is cold and clear in my mouth. I take a bite from the bread. It is a little hard, tasting like sawdust, but there are no weevils in it. I keep a bit of the crust to sweeten the temper of the mule.

When I open the door of the stable, I am enveloped by warm, musty air and the pungent smell of horse and mule. I close the door behind me to keep out the cold of the early spring morning. The animals have turned their heads to me, flicking their ears in anticipation of food and water, even though they know it is too early. Their dark liquid eyes gleam in the dark as they moved to the front of their stalls, extending their heads towards me as I pass through the stable.

The mule is in the last stall and gives a short braying sound of greeting. We know each other well, the mule and I. I scratch it behind its long, grey ears. Then I feed it the crust of bread. Afterwards the mule endures to be saddled and bridled. The leather feels strong and smooth in my hands. It is a pack-saddle I use, one of those which have fastenings for two baskets to hang to the sides of the mule and additional straps to tie a pack up on the back of the beast. The baskets and the pack are ready. I have prepared them last night.

It is still dark, when I lead the mule out of the stable. The load is heavy; the baskets on either side of the beast are piled high with wood and on its back a large pack with various provisions has been tied to the saddle. From a corner of the stable a cat looks at me, green eyes gleaming in the dusty twilight. The woods around the garrison of Halifirien are still alive with shadows. The sun had not yet climbed above the dark rim of the Ephel Dúath far to the east, although the sky in the east is not as dark as it was an hour ago. Although the garrison is still asleep, the animals and birds of the forest know that the new day is waking. The whispers and wild cries of the night are gone and instead the air is filled with a choir of many voices. It is spring in Gondor and the many birds of the plains, the forest and the mountains are eager to greet the return of the sun.

The mule is calm and willing under my hand. It knows its duty. I lead it to the gate. Tûgon is the guard at the gate this morning. He is grumpy at this hour. Actually he is always grumpy. The work is always too hard and the liquor not strong enough. But he does not drink when he is on duty. For a soldier and a guard he is a good fellow. "Ho, Mernoch, aren't you an early bird! Are you going up then?"

Where else could I be going, rising before dawn, leading a mule laden with wood and supplies? But I nod to him and answer politely. My voice is rough, my words broad and slow with the brogue of the mountains. "Aye, I'm going up to the beacon. I'm to relieve Gerrich, and take up some wood and supplies."

Tûgon knows that, of course. He has the orders from the captain on his desk. Tûgon can read, too – which is more than can be said for other guards. "Well, then," he says. He has never been up in the mountains. For a moment he turns his head and looks up at the looming shadows of the Ered Nimrais. Tûgon was born a lowlander and will die a lowlander. I can see how he shivers at the towering heights.
"Well, then," he says and forces a smile. He hesitates, and then speaks the traditional farewell of the mountain folk. But it sounds wrong, the way he says it. "Godspeed to you."

"Thank you," I reply and incline my head.

Tûgon opens the gate for me. He lifts the heavy beam that secures the gate, and then pulls the gate back using the considerable weight of his body. The gate is heavy and the wood groans as it swings back. The iron fittings of the gatehouse hold two flickering torches. In their dim light no more than three yards of the road are visible in the waning darkness of the morning. I turn to the mule. "Get going, ye old bugger, get going." But my voice is calm and friendly. The mule flicks its ears and starts walking towards the road.

I follow the mule and then take the lead. You have to be careful with a mule. It has to know who is the master and who is the mule. The baskets are creaking with the slow and steady movement of the beast. Behind us the gate is closed again with a resounding thump. After a moment another noise of wood hitting wood tells me that the beam has been replaced in its brackets. We are on our way.

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We follow the road only for a few yards. The road heads north-east, straight through Firien Wood to the Great West Road. But we have to go south. We take a narrow path that leads off the road to the west after no more than a couple of yards. In the shelter of the forest the shadows of the night are lingering, although the glimpse of sky that I can see above me is changing from darkness to blue. The path turns around, skirting the garrison at a distance of a yard and veers to the south.

There has been rain three days ago. The soil is still damp. The forest around me smells damp and cool and green, green with the first growth of spring. The juices are rising in the trees; and not only in the trees, I think, remembering the way Achlan watched Meril last night.

A mile after we have left the fort behind us, the ground begins to slope. The path swings to the east in a slow, sensible serpentine. The Holy Hill of Halifirien is one of the highest beacon hills of Gondor. Although the approach over the northern slopes of Firien Wood is easy compared to the dangerous trails up to the Eilenach for example, it is still long and wearying. But I don't mind. I am used to dangerous, narrow paths between the white peaks and the dark abysses of the Ered Nimrais. I'm a mountain man, born and bred.

The Ered Nimrais stretch in a wide arc from the Cape of Andrast between the Bay of Belfalas and the coast of Drúwaith-Iaur to the east. For more than eight hundred miles the White Mountains rise up to the clouds between black Ras Morthil and blue Mount Mindolluin.

These are the mountains of Gondor, these are the mountains of my home. I grew up with their names on my lips.

Amon Dîn – summit of silence, Eilenach – fire tooth, Nardol – fire head, Ereleas – green vigil of Anórien, Minrimmon – point of Rimmon, Calenhad – green sward, Halifirien – the Holy Mountain. They are the beacon hills of Gondor, they are the last fires that will blaze against the gathering darkness, they are the last, most desperate call to arms.

I know them all. I know the steep paths to their rugged peaks, I know the lop-sided steps that climb to the heights of their towers or the long and easy ascents to their grassy summits, I know them all, have climbed them all. My feet are firmly set on the narrow trail between the violet shadows of deep ravines and the blinding gleam of the glaciers above. My life is walking that narrow path between darkness and light, walking steadily, when you cannot look down or back, because if you do, you
will falter and fall. My life is walking steadily, when you cannot look up or forwards, because if you do, the sunlight hitting the glittering snow and ice of the glaciers will blind you and you will fall. My life is walking, when all you can see is where to place the next step, and sometimes not even that. One step after the other, between the crags and the rocks and the slopes of the mountains.

"He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: He that keepeth thee will not slumber."

I am a mountain-man. Born and bred.

I was born in the small village of Erelas that surrounds the equally small garrison known by the same name. Erelas is the mountain rising up above the signal beacon on the shoulder of the mountain, a foothill of 6,500 feet all told, soft and green and without trees, looking towards the fertile fields of the sun-land of Anórien, to the left is Minrimmon, to the right Nardol, and behind us, looming, is old father mountain, grey and green Erelas.

Seven years I was too young to know about soldiers and mountain-men. Seven years I spent looking up to the heights of the mountains, their blue and green slopes, their pure white peaks, chanting under my breath, the litany of their names, and the old prayer my mother taught me:

"I will lift up mine eyes unto the mountain peaks, from whence cometh my help."

My father was a mountain-man, and his father before him, as was his father's father and so forth. The line of my family goes back in time to the almost forgotten years when the winged ships arrived born out of the West on the drowning wave. Those winged ship with those tall men and women, with their bright grey eyes and their bright silver swords, who fled to our shores from over the sea, from an evil they had woken, and who claimed this land for their own, and who forbade us to utter the name of God, even in the most silent prayer, because they were afraid of His wrath.

What do they know of God, Who is Eru?

What do they know of the One Who sang the mountains, Whose song echoes in the melodies of the eagle and the lament of the wolf?

What do they know of prayer?

What do they know of prayer, they, who had to flee from the dark wings of the Other One, the Dark One, the one they had called upon and who had heard them.

Too much, probably.

For they fled from a wave called upon them by prayer, unstoppable by prayer. Their home fell to the power of their prayers. But their ships were called to these shores, it is said, also by the voice of prayer, the cries of eagles leading them to the east evermore, until the white cliffs of the Bay of Belfalas greeted their weary eyes.

I know nothing of prayer.

My mother taught me His name and the ancient words. My father told me of the eagles' song and the wolves' dance, and about the hallowed hills and His presence on the heights.

But I have never heard Him.

I have never heard the eagles singing. Only raucous cries swiftly dispersed by the wind. And it is not wise to listen to the call of the wolf for long if you want to live to see the morning. I have spent my life on the hills. But He was never there. The only presence that ever touched me, is the cold,
clutching my neck with icy, merciless fingers, and the wind, reaching for my feet to make them stumble on narrow ridges.

Maybe the men of Númenor were right after all, forbidding everyone but the king to even mention God, or speak His name, call upon Eru. And there has not been a king in Gondor for many centuries. And maybe it is true, too, what some of my people say, that they have brought their doom to this land, along with their white winged ships. And we should have united against them and killed them, when they were only a few, and scattered along the shores, and scared and weary of their flight.

Though for my part, I don't hold with that. 'Tis only talk, and centuries after the deed would have had to be done, it's not only talk, it's wasting your breath.

But although I know the ancient holy places and the prayers of old and although I do bow my head today on my way up the mountain, the way my father taught me to, climbing up to the holy heights a supplicant, I have never glimpsed Eru, neither up on the hills nor under hill, and the cries of the eagles have never been songs for my ears.

However, I am a mountain-man, born and bred. I will keep my head bowed as I slowly make my way up to the beacon, and I will whisper His name and I will look up to the mountains and I will hesitate and listen.

But I think I will only hear what I have always heard, on my way up the mountain. The hoarse screams of the eagles and the keen whistling of the wind.

I am a mountain-man.

My people were mountain folk living on the slopes of the Ered Nimrais before Gondor was a realm, and we will stay in these mountains long after the name Gondor is forgotten. And the name of Eru will still be on our lips when their beacons have fallen. For we did not build the beacons on the hallowed hills. The system of signal beacons was established only when the province of Calenardhon was settled permanently, many years after the Númenoreans arrived in this country, borne on a dark wave of desperation. When the beacons were built, the times were dark. Dark were those times; times of war and much toil – but does not every time have its darkness? They built towers and they built beacons high up on the hills and mountains of Gondor, to pass messages swiftly between Calenardhon, which later became Rohan, and Minas Anor, which later was called Minas Tirith. Messages, to call the riders of the plains to war, to war in Gondor. And Gondor was often at war. (Even as it is now.) And sometimes, though not very often, the beacons were lit to summon aid from Gondor to the province of Calenardhon and later to the allied kingdom of Rohan.

"I will lift up mine eyes unto the mountain peaks, from whence cometh my help."

Even the lowlanders know that line, because the fires up on the hills and mountains have always brought help to the war-besieged lands of Gondor and Rohan. As long as they fires burn, even when times are dark, not all is lost. Or so the saying goes.

They have chosen to forget that this line did not always refer to the beacon hills. That once, this line belonged to a prayer, a prayer of my people, and that it called Him with His name.

And no lowlander knows that we are still calling Him by His name. And always will.

"My help cometh from Eru, who made heaven and earth."

I am one of those who keep the fires burning. A mountain-man.

I am not an officer, nor a soldier. I am only a mountain-man. The signal beacons are always manned
with teams of three. It is a strange thing with those heights. They get to men's hearts and minds in the strangest ways. It is not wise to keep a man up on those heights alone for long. It has been tried, of course. Some went mad. Some killed themselves. Others insisted that they had heard voices, voices from above, voices calling down to them from the stars and they would not come down from the mountains again and eventually perished between lonely heights and walls of ice. And if they were forced to leave the mountains, if they were taken by force and carried down to the valleys, they died, too.

It is a strange thing with the heights of the mountains.

So each beacon is guarded by three men: one soldier of the guard, one young officer serving his term, and one mountain-man. One man on duty, one man off duty and one man asleep. One man doing his lonely duty for his people and his land, one boy facing a rite of passage, and one... one who is simply at home here.

It is a strange thing, with these mountains.

"Eru is thy keeper: Eru is thy shade upon thy right hand."

You are not alone in the mountains. My people say that He sees you as you climb up to His holy heights. He sees right to the depths of your soul. You cannot hide on top of the mountains. It has been tried. Now the restless spirits of those who tried haunt the deepest gorges and lowest caverns of the Dwimorberg, forever restless, forever waiting, forever on the run, but they have nowhere to run to. Maybe that is why the Númenoreans forbade us to speak His name – they were afraid that He might hear them, and that this time, when His shadow would be upon them, they would have no place to run to, either.

"Behold, He that keepeth all Eä shall neither slumber nor sleep."

The sun is rising now, just as the path rises, following the slow slope of the mountain. My footsteps grow heavier. My shirt is scratchy on my damp skin. My steps are slow, deliberate and firm. I know where I am going. I am at home here.

If He is at home here, too, and if it is true that He does not slumber and that He does not sleep, where is He then?

After two hours of even stride, the woods around me are changing. Gnarled mountain pines and scrawny oaks replace the lush forest of Firien. Rocks penetrate the thin cover of heather and earth every now and again. The air is clear and piercing. If you are not used to the mountain air and walking hard, this is the time you start gasping. The cold, clear air is a biting pain in your lungs. For me, it is exhilarating. The kiss of a lover I never grow tired of.

Turning around I have a fine view today, of the peaks to the left and to the right, of Firien Forest down below and the silver ribbon of the Anduin in the distance. The weather will stay fine today, but I can't tell what will happen in a day or two. It is still too early in spring to hope for a period of constant good weather. There might even be snow ahead of us.

The mule plods ahead, patiently placing its feet against the rocky trail. It doesn't mind the path up the Halifirien. It knows how it feels to climb the small peak of fire-tooth. Rocky, barren slopes, steep and crumbling. You never know if you will make it up or down the fire-tooth unscathed. Holy Hill Halifirien is easier on a body – be it mule or man.

There are many tales told about Halifirien.
The horsemen claim that the oath that won their kingdom was sworn at the peak of Halifirien. The men of the sea say their sire who came in the white winged ship over the sea, out of the cataclysm, was buried here, before they took him into the city of white stones, Minas Tirith.

Only my people know that Halifirien was a holy mountain long before the Northmen ever came to Calenardhon. Only my people know that Halifirien was a holy mountain long before the Isle of Westernesse was drowned in the floods they had called upon themselves with their prayers and their arrogance.

And yet I have never seen evidence of this holiness.

I have never felt His shade fall on my face, on any one of the seven hills. Maybe what they say is right, after all. That we should not have bowed to the men coming out of the West.

And there are some even among my own people today, who say that maybe it is not true that those hills were hallowed even then. They say that before the time we settled down in these mountains only dark men roamed these lands. Dark men who built dark temples for the Dark One. They spend too much time listening to the lowlanders, those people.

Of course it is true that there were dark men in these lands. Just as there are dark men in the dark land now, and other dark things that are not men, that never were men. It is true that they built temples to honour their master.

But they never came to the mountain tops.

If you want to find those temples of darkness and shadow, you have to look in dark and deep places that have never known the sun. Dark places filled with the whispers of the Damned. There you will find evil places where homage was done upon the vanquisher of life and light. Places where even today no torch will catch fire, and your breath will choke in the dust of many ages and possibly the bones of innocent men.

I know those places exist. My people have not forgotten about those places. We may have no archives filled with precious parchments covered in Elvish letters. But my people remember. Or they should, I add in an afterthought and snort. And those who do not spend so much time listening to lowlanders and admiring their fine silks and pretty linens, those do remember. Yes, we do remember that Halifirien was a hallowed place before the Elves sang to the trees. We remember that this peak was holy long before Númenoreans and Rohirrim arrived.

"I will lift up mine eyes unto the mountain peaks, from whence cometh my help."

They are His. 
His.

They belong to the One. 
The One Who must not be named. 

But I do. 
I do.

As my father did. And his father before him. And his father's father and his father in turn, back to when the first mountain-man climbed these heights and called His name.

His name.

I stop and gasp, the cold mountain air like daggers in my lung. And I raise up my head and blink
against the sun, and I do not know if they are tears or drops of sweat that I wipe from my eyes, standing here, between the rocks and the deep.

And I call His name.

_Eru._

Eru.

ERU!

I gasp, and the wind grasps the word from my mouth and whips it away.

But my breath flows easier, and my eyes are suddenly clear.

Yes.

These mountains belong to Eru. _He_ is their keeper, _He_ sang them from fire and water, _He_ raised them from the very bones of the earth. _He_ Who shaped heaven and earth in _His_ own sacred song, _Who_ is still singing _His_ song in every birth, in every death - _they_ are _His_. And _they_ echo with _His_ song.

Our legends say that you can hear the echoes of _His_ song here, between the gleaming white glaciers and the shadowy blue ravines of the Ered Nimrais, and that this is the reason why we settled down here, amid the crags and crevices, why we did not stay in the fertile, gentle lowlands.

_He_ is still singing _His_ song.

And here, up here, we can hear the echo of _His_ song.

And in moments like this, _His_ name on my lips, the wind in my hair, the glare of the glacier in my eyes, I almost believe.

I almost believe.

That I can hear this echo, too.

For surely I should be able to hear it?

_Am I not a mountain-man?_  
_Am I not one who dares to speak _His_ name?_

But then the moment is gone and I move on, cursing the mule which has turned stubborn as always at the bend of this trail, snorting and hesitating, and looking for a bit of grass instead of continuing up, and up and up, until we reach the hallowed heights of the beacon.

"_Eru is thy keeper: Eru is thy shade upon thy right hand._"

Finally the mule gives in and I can walk on. I walk on. For I do not need to rest yet. I rest in the smooth rhythm of my steps, the melody of the mountain. My footsteps follow my heartbeat. My heartbeat gives harmony to my breath. Thoughts of war and darkness are fleeing in the light and the purity of climbing, in the power of the mountains. Who is Sauron compared to _this mountain_? What is _this mountain_ compared to Eru?

Finally there is the summit. Crowned with a wreath of golden sunshine it is outlined sharply against the pale blue sky of spring in the year 3019 of the third age of the world. The summit of Halifirien is a small plateau of grass and rocks and tangled shrubs. Nothing tells here of a royal tomb or an oath that made a kingdom. There is only the small cone of the guards' hut, nothing but a hut of dry-stones
symmetrically placed one on the other, to ward off wind and weather. There is only a small shelter for the wood of the signal beacon. There is only the signal beacon itself, carefully stocked up in a small dell so that the signal fire can be lit even in inclement weather.

A lowlander would be inclined to say that Halifirien looks like any other peak of the Ered Nimrais.

*But it is not like any other peak of the Ered Nimrais.*

It is the holy hill.

I have arrived. Gerrich is glad to see me. His wife is down below in the valley, days from giving birth to their second child. He has been waiting for me. He grips my hand and takes his leave.

"Godspeed," I whisper, the greeting of the mountain folk, the greeting that causes lowlanders to shift uneasily. Gerrich will reach the village by nightfall and he will hold the hands of his wife in her hour of need and he will pray and he will say His name, even as the babe slips from the womb, for this is the way it is done among my people. And I know that he hopes for a boy, who will follow him in this duty, watching over the hallowed hills.

Because this is what we do: We watch over our holy places, while the lowlanders think we are guarding their beacons on their beacon hills. Guarding their land and their people against the coming of the Second Darkness.

But this is not what we do: We only watch over our holy places, the way our fathers did, and their fathers before them. We climb the mountains with prayers on our lips and we call His name to the stars, and we listen to wind and wolf and eagle, waiting to hear the echo of His song.

We watch over our holy places.
We pray.
And we hope.

And maybe, one day I will hear it, as I watch over Halifirien Hill, this hill and this beacon that is the post assigned to me by the Gondorian guard.

Maybe one day the hoarse cry of the eagle and the wailing of the wolf will resound with the echo of His song.

*Maybe.*

Until then, I will be content myself with doubts and legends, and whispering prayers as I climb this mountain, again and again.

And this is what I whisper:

"I will lift up mine eyes unto the mountain peaks, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from Eru, who made heaven and earth. He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: He that keepeth thee will not slumber. Behold, he that keepeth all Eä shall neither slumber nor sleep. Eru is thy keeper: Eru is thy shade upon thy right hand. The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night. Eru shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul. Eru shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore."

*oooOooo*
The background of this story:

In a footnote to letter no.153 Tolkien mentions that in Númenor "the top of the Mountain, the Meneltarma or Pillar of Heaven, was dedicated to Eru, the One". I think that this belief could have passed with the Númenoreans across the sea and into Gondor. Assuming that the signal beacons of Gondor were indeed as high up on the mountain peaks of the Ered Nimrais as they were shown in the movies, taking care of a beacon would be much more than guard duty. It would mean living in a holy place.

But what would being so close to Eru mean to the men guarding the beacons? How would it feel to be so close to the One?

That is what I am trying to discover in this story.

For this story I have adapted the psalm 121 in the version of the King James Bible to Middle-earth. It is one of my favourite prayers. Please don't take offence, because none is intended.

The information on the beacons of Gondor comes mainly from "The Rivers and Beacon-hills of Gondor" by J.R.R. Tolkien, edited by Carl F. Hostetter, with additional commentary and materials provided by Christopher Tolkien, J.R.R. and Christopher Tolkien's texts ©2001 The Tolkien Trust, but the best source for the etymologies was: quicksilver899 dot com, look for "Tolkien Dictionary".

Please feel free to leave a comment!

Anything at all: If you noticed a typo, if you don't like a characterization or description, if you thought a line especially funny, if there was anything you particularly enjoyed … I am really interested in what my readers think about my writing.

You can leave a comment or mail me off-site: juno underscore magic at magic dot ms

Thank you for reading and I hope you enjoyed this story.

Yours

JunoMagic

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