

Fell Knowledge

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/4233628) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/4233628>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Fandom:	The Lord of the Rings - J. R. R. Tolkien
Character:	Beren Erchamion , Huan , Lúthien , The Maiar
Additional Tags:	First Age , Drama , Canon - Engaging gap-filler , Canon - Enhances original , Canon - Fills plot hole(s) , Canon - Outstanding AU/reinterpretation , Characters - New interpretation , Characters - Strongly in character , Characters - Well-handled emotions , Plot - Can't stop reading , Plot - Dangerous topic w/satisfying end , Plot - Disturbing/frightening/unsettling , Plot - Good pacing , Plot - I reread often , Subjects - Explores obscure facts , Subjects - Legends/Myth/History , Writing - Clear prose , Writing - Engaging style , Writing - Every word counts , Writing - Evocative , Writing - Experimental , Writing - Well-handled introspection , Writing - Well-handled PoV(s)
Language:	English
Collections:	Henneth Annûn Story Archive
Stats:	Published: 2015-06-29 Chapters: 3/3 Words: 9928

Fell Knowledge

by Philosopher At Large [archived by [HASA Archivist](#)]

Summary

To cross the Battle Plain unnoticed on the way to Angband, Beren and Luthien travel in the forms of two deceased servants of the Dark -- but such enchantment carries its own dangers and risks. Silmarillion story, inspired by the Lay of Leithian, rating for dark elements involving those "betrayed ghosts." (02/07/03 - Aftersnotes added.)

Fell Knowledge

He looks out over the battlefield under the coldness of the moon, ash and iron drifting like dark snow beneath the souging winds — there is nothing else he can think to compare it to, the hills and heaps that have no edges, ribbed and rippled like clouds in the evening wind, stirred and eddied unendingly, like the light falls of the coldest days...and knows that any grain of it might be his kin, drawn by a decade's siftings over the burnt plains westward, mingled beyond recall with weapon and steed, friend and foe, as alike the wild growing things that once clothed this fallow, that once fed, grass and tree, covey and herd, together blending in unquiet dust as the dark clouds shiver across the skies over them.

Grim land to look upon — grimmer still, the thoughts that knowledge makes of such grim sight; one would not think it should be better, than to look upon one's own true love! —Better than watching her though he cannot help hearing her voice, low in song, raised unceasing as it has risen and fallen these long slow hours, past time when mortal throat would silence in hoarseness, untiring, in effort of power on which more than life shall depend, rising and falling, now to cajole, coax into quietude, lulling into stillness, then strong to command, bind into submission, that over which she sings.

The warring lights which move under her hands, like to the cold flames that dance betimes in deepest winter (though not this night), still flicker in the corner of his vision like the faintest stars, that are sharpest when not seen direct; but he resists the temptation to look at that which he cannot change, and dare not chance interrupting, for both their sake's.

And so he looks out instead upon the place where his kinsmen died, and their liege lords died, and the death of his people was assured, though none of them should know this then, and wonders when, in the measuring of time's span, his life's course was set upon the irrevocable path towards this: when did he, mortal son of a wandering folk, make that last turning after which there might be no turning back, so that he should stop here now in briefest pause, Aftercomer late-arrived at battle too long-lost?

—Not in the grey dawn, so swallowed up in the dark of this night that it might as well be an Age ago; no more than that season hence, when words bound him, bound them all into this trap, though they should know it not.

A little less than half a year, then? when voice and spirit were unlocked alike and the soul that gave the Springtime voice summoned him from the silent prison of his mind, or nigh to a year ago? when the lands he had known and loved all his short life long had been made strange and terrible by Enemy hands, and no more home to him, and a deep grey stillness like a tranquil mist beyond the unpassed southern mountains spoke to him of Autumns gone and beyond all returning, and a hope of rest that was not death beneath the bitter snows...

Or five years hence, when a ghost hailed him in accents so-familiar and dreaming-strange, warning him to no avail of Doom that he had escaped, passing him by unknown, unknowing, without his willing?

Or longer, when the northern sky burned red not with the celestial glories of the winter but with the sullen anger of a house ablaze, and all that had been built of the great alliance and the power of the Kings was struck down at a blow by the power of him who claims Kingship over all? —But the way to this field of fires cold and dead was beaten wide far back before, in the joining that named his people, and paid a weight of wielded iron for a wide land to till and hunt, deeding Dorthonion to the folk of Bëor. . .

The metal on his hand is warmed by the heat of his skin, and only the small stones bite cold into his cheek when he bows his head into the shelter of his bent arms, against his updrawn knees. All of these, and none, are the truth of it. For his forebears fled shadow of fear and followed a hope passed freely by those who had chosen otherwise, gifting them with word of a Call theirs by first-right, shared vainly with the Second-born — yet not all in vain.

For the world west of the Blue Mountains was good to them, for long generations, and their lords kind, asking naught of them that they in their own part were not willing to give, and if the Darkness that together they held off for the while broke forth at the last and took them all, still were there many bright years between, filled with all manner of richness, of thought as well as thing, prosperity and singing, and the world was good in the days of the Long Peace...

And this story, it seems to him, is strangely the same as the legends he learned as a boy, the true tales of times beyond and the world's making, more of the same than of difference: for was that not how it was, in the farthest West, when the Powers ruled his lord's people, and the land was quiet and filled with light, and all things sang, until the treachery of this their same Enemy led many-legged Death within to steal the shining things their siege was set for? And was it not the same in earlier time, too, when that Enemy overturned the peace of the world with outpoured fire and war, and drove the very makers of the world from these shores, and battle raged across the face of the burnt earth before ever the stars he knows so well were set above it?

—*And I* — *what is it that I do here, confronting a foe the Hunter himself has fought in vain for Ages, notwithstanding all my House, all the Houses of the Edain and our Kings together, as though I were a Power, nay and a greater than our Enemy?* The weight of eternity weighs upon him, heavier than mail: all those who have preceded him, the thought of all his dead, not only who he has lost in his own lifetime but all of theirs in turn, all of those who have fought or fallen as prey or in battle, over the slow years' turning, like a vast army, a wedge of innumerable figures of every Kindred, standing behind, all ending this night in him, one foolish soul, aimed at the Enemy's gates like the needle's point of a drawn arrow, and farther back still the shapes of two tall darkened pillars, and a crowd of brilliant shadows...

It should not be me, he thinks, fatalistic, *not for me this task* — but who else, of Elves or Men, has ever been mad enough to make such try — walk in, without army, without might of arms or power beyond mortal ken, to take the treasured prize as a skulking scurrer on the kitchen-board, never seeking to match might with the householders' fury, only snatches the golden honey-comb and dartles off, trusting to smallness and insignificance to hide...

It is madness, and his thought fills the darkened plain with snow, and then with the glare of fire liquid as a coppersmith's pouring, and the sparks and roaring of a lightning-struck forest, and the haze of steam and smoke that he remembers tainting the horizon so long ago — by his reckoning — overpouring like a kettle-spill on the hearth. But what is now, *is*, and it is solid shadow, unlike anything he has ever known in his life — a frozen midnight sea, glinting in the moonlight, cold and lifeless, stretching to the southern verge where lands he once knew, and once called home, begin their steep arising in a stark black ridge of creaking wood and whispering darkness, like the ghosts of a fleet of ships, tall masts moaning and sails sighing upon the lightless heave of the waves, lamenting their lost makers, lamenting their burning...

He closes his eyes, shivering and not from the winter's chill alone, and cannot escape thus the burden of dreams that are not his, that ride upon his own like a thin veil of mist, cold, troubling, everpresent — and yet he would not be rid of them, even if he might, for they are all that he has, intangible as they are, and no more *his* than anything else that he holds now, from the garments he wears to his very life. Only his war-gear may he claim, won in battle, and so fairly his own, hauberk and deadly knife and beautiful, balanced sword—

The thought of that gorgeous metal makes him shudder anew, the sword in scabbard against his leg, cold its casing of gemmed and gilded bronze, colder in thought than the chill weight of woven links upon his shoulders, than the deadly knife that he scarcely dares to touch, carrying it guardedly, wrapped in such protections as he can fashion, and ever must refashion.

—Foolishness: there is no assurance that this sword was even forged then, nor that if it was, it has not been reforged since, in the endless Elven refinement, the seeking after perfection with no thought for cost or cost of days. But he cannot help but wonder, and regard it with a twinge of revulsion, this blade that might have fallen and risen red with Elven blood, wielded in the second darkness of the world, before the glory of the Battle-under-Stars, the fight against the Lord of Fetters, tainted irrevocably as if set in service before the Black Foe, forever corrupted in slaughter of kin...

He closes his eyes, and he stands at Araman, the pale light of stars bright enough to show the icy waves to his sight, and the cold wastes of this northern land, and beyond the land the Ice — and a Voice that he has never heard, save in dreaming, whose words he cannot understand, and knows by heart, speaks Doom—

Chilled to the bone, he draws the cloak about him more closely, trapping breath in its folds, his hands guarded by the material he fingers beneath its shelter. It is but patches, all of it, made from scraps not one of which is larger than a hand's breadth, a beggar's garment, it would seem, given in mockery...and no mortal lady of highest degree ever had fabric finer, no lord of Men a cape so fair, for all its humble origin.

—Not merely for the grace of the gifting, silent thanks in every patch and stitch, worked in secret to equip him better than all others, whose weaker nature should find the coming Winter harder-wearing: such skill is in it, both seen and beyond his mortal sight's discerning, to transform drab and tattered rags into a work of art, fitting and fashioning the faded pieces into a harmony of form, making of mere necessity an ornament, art indeed learned of mortality in past times, seen and remarked as quaint, such careful hoarding of every least scrap...care not to be mocked now, but sadly made use of in bitter days of dark confinement —

—and now set free, wildest flight of fanciful shaping, changing worn shreds into leaves, wings, stars, all fixed together in harmonious accord, no one piece large enough, of one possessing, and this mattering nothing when all have given, fastened with stitching delicate and lovely in itself, thread twisted of wild flax and other wild-reaped fibers making spirals to strengthen the mesh, in which words are threaded also, some few of which in the common tongue he can read, but most beyond his pains, whether for being in the High Speech or the extravagant ornamenting of the symbols, even as those carved upon the oaken ring and pin, fashioned not in mockery after the customary brooch's bronze and gold...

...and yet beneath his fingers' blind tracing they speak to him, mute, and every stitch bears in faint echo the same song, same meaning that *she* now sings — of guarding, of blessing, —of love. Fear runs through his every nerve, through every upraised hair that is not lifted by the winter's cold alone, far past the sensible and common dread of any soul, of any folk, going into battle against the Enemy, and outnumbered — mortal terror, not borne of knowing, but of what is not, cannot be known. It would be sense to fear the thing they do, seeing *her* fear of it...but that is not what chills him.

When he awoke from the darkness that he had thought should be his last sleep, to a dawning he had no hope to ever see, the Tower fallen outstrewn like a scattering of seed from hand, the waking was as a dream itself, so great its impossibility that he could not think upon it, could not fashion image nor fit tale to it, even seeing the consequences of that deed, hearing it told in wonder by those who

heard that Song...So far from his ability to comprehend, to fit in mind, that thought slipped past it like a giant boulder dropped who might say how, large as a byre, in the midst of stream — as though one might say of a Winter storm that whitens the wide ground and vanishes all familiar things, "I did that." The snow but is, and who may think upon how it comes?

Now — seeing her war in spirit with the work of Morgoth Bauglir himself, setting her strength and skill against the unholy artisanry of death-magic and ancient web of cunning, he must think upon that which he has *not* seen, and upon its significances. There is no way left open to him by which he may evade the truth: that her power too is no less terrible, for all its different nature — terrible as the wind that sings in the trees, that holds the strength to tear apart or cast down, that may bring rain or drought, terrible as the frail might that rises to force stones asunder as seedling grows to sapling grows to standing oak, terrible as water that drowns or saves, terrible as the coming of Spring — none to be blamed for their strength that is so dangerous, far beyond the understanding or withstanding of the small and ignorantly-confident wills that wander amid them without awareness of their danger.

The memory of his efforts to protect her now seem so much in vain, like a child striving to shield elder from distress, distract from grief with a bright flower or a simple jest or antic, when heart breaks and world is ending. How can he comprehend her, who is so far *other* from his nature, whose thoughts and deeds he cannot give true words to, but only the clumsy lipping of thought like the stumbling efforts of a child...?

If he is arrowhead, then they are bow and bowstring, the Lady and the Hound who have set him so far upon this path, all three unwilling, all three compelled by some strength beyond their reckoning. —And he fears her now, as never has he feared the Lord of Dogs, and never thought to.

She ends her song abruptly, as one who has won a hard combat leaves the battleground, without ceremony, and her head droops, and he would rise and go and take her in comforting embrace, unthinking, regardless, but she is afoot with her gruesome burden before he may aught but stand, and the shimmering ice-like pelt with its sheen of power hangs over her arm as though naught but a deerskin brought in from the drying-frame, and her eyes upon his are so sad, so brimming with sorrow, and pity and *regret* that his own fill with tears, and he tastes her own fear as she draws the very breath from his lips and gives him hers in return, and wonders in still-greater fear what it is that gives her such dismay—

And the thought is broken like a dry branch over knee as she parts from him, flesh leaving its memory set in his own for a briefest instant, before she steps back and unfurls the wolf-fell in her hands and flings it over head and back like heaviest of capes—

—and *he* is claimed by darkness, and the Dark, and he can no more resist this violation than he could the rough hands of his enemies riving away the masking overgarments of his disguise and the fine-wrought armour beneath it and his own garb, ripping off all earthly protection from his body while he lay stunned and soul-broken beneath defender's fall, as under lightning-struck oak, in bygone hour—

This taste he knows too well, the repugnant savour of sorcery invading his *self*, permeating his flesh like frost in Autumn earth, twining through his bones as creeper through the picked skeleton of the unburied in Summer — but far more encompassing, so that he cannot even struggle against it: all that is *him* is dissolved, washed apart like a vessel of unfired clay cast back into water for to be rekneaded and shaped anew into something more fitting.

Fitting — but for what purpose?

He knows now, or deems he knows, why Huan left them ere now, ere the change was made and

the setting-forth: for Huan too this form has worn, this self, that is more than merely shape, and must thereby also know this agony of hate, this rage that yearns to slaughter, that rises like the pulse of blood in wrath at even thought of the mighty Hound, the longing to fight, to rend, to give battle renewed upon this earthly realm, battle eternally waged, across depths and gulfs beyond his mortal comprehending—

—have known, too, that mere will alone should not have held back the Beast from its red madness, that their great love — no less profound for its brevity, as though they twain might have known and met as friends in the far ranges of eternity, impossible though that be — should not be enough to restrain the killing rage.

And hence no help could come to them, from such strange thing, of Hound journeying with Wolf in such unnatural consorting, though mortal soul should ride within the demon-shape, and so for love and faithfulness did leave them... and left behind as well the dark and bloody knowledge of these warfain garments, impressed within the spell-forged flesh, and of their winning...

...Hot the heat of heart's blood under the cold and cruel eye of the Moon, sharp as silver the teeth that stab him, as they were the darts of that fierce Archer, spirit-shot splinters of angry scorn, hailing as bright sleet through the shadow-horde that assailed him in the early hours of his journeying — the din deafens, his own angry cries mixing and clashing with those of his ancient adversary — the stones of the causeway, graven for horse-hooves' traction, aid him in his charge and defense — but ever he slips back, forepaws tangling in braced resistance no use against the other, whose strength seems tireless, seems to be flamed higher in exertion, made greater with each contest, and —

—his fangs rip through the pelt and clash together like the violence of icefall, the taste of his enemy's blood — his enemy's hate — hot in him, the fire of his rage fanned as high as the flames that roar against the northern zenith in his memory, when the lands were riven and the winterchill of the starry night made foul with belching smokes and sulfurous steams — he would tear the Unlife from this monster's throat, as he has torn cries of rage and pain, but his rightful prey flees from him back down the darkened bridge, into the stronghold of shadow where he dares not follow...

...the rank stone beneath him, this towering shadowed form of power before him and above him: familiar, too familiar, the alloy of his nightmares this, and yet...it is *help* he seeks and hopes for healing as he crawls over the blackened surface, failing body straining, torn flesh slipping from mind's mastery, towards the looming shadow that glazing eyes but partially discern, not merely duty that compels...but the memory that strives to seal itself upon this scene, as the wooden carved stamp may be pressed again upon the unbaked dough before the baking, to renew, or to change, the pattern, is of terror, and despair, and sickened fury as gnarled claws' seeming blurs into hands' pale press against the unwashed layers of almost a decade's suffering's yield (yet which *I*, which self's remembering is it?) and like a contradiction, or a fading dream, he recollects this slab beneath as marble white and fashioned under fingers' touch (and again, who is it that recalls—?) The dark that silences this clamour as the tall form puts forth hand to touch foam-masked muzzle in almost-kindness and most truthful regret, is most welcome in its coming—

—but that too ends:

Scent has guided him to where his fled foe's corpse has fallen amid stones, where the crushed bones lie flaccid within the pelt, still withstanding a little the unmaking forces of Arda that will undo the spell-work far swifter than mere nature, when Sun rises and night's shade no longer defends this broken carrion that has no dark unblessed *fëa* to hold it unified. The teeth that took that Unlife now take what power remains, the binding spell that weaves about the foul flesh of

Morgoth's breeding, slicing as delicately as knife in hand along the blood-matted throat, the unmoving ribs and hollow belly, grasping as it were a rope cast for a puppy's game the ripped fur-fabric and worrying it free of the falling flesh, that melts to bare bony splinters even under the mere touch of the freshening air.

—A sudden hiss, like adder's, assails his ears and a sharp pang sears his wounded sides anew, as of Orc-arrow's sting, and in the instinct of battle, needing no thought, he turns upon the spot and bears down this lurking assailant and with the merest expenditure of his battle-weary might, he crushes and shakes even as his mind ascertains the nature of the attack, and the attacker — the bird-thin bones splintering beneath his jaws' power, slight limbs and lean frame no match in the least, despite armament of iron, for the huge-muscled weight of the Lord of Dogs — and this beast, no mere scavenger seeking to guard its prey, no more than *he* is seeker after carrion, lies a wrecked and empty shell beneath his paw.

And he sniffs at her, to prove her spirit truly fled, not to arise when flank is turned once more, nor flee, and a thought comes to him, nosing aside the wings like cape of filmy linen, translucent, fine, the slender, delicate arms that wore that burden and were broken in unequal contest, tearing at him in hate and love and agony of heart—

And there is yet one more thing for him to undertake before full day arises, and another thing to hide within the deeps of shadow in the Island's heart...

(Thought and memory there is too, that is all but beyond his comprehending as bat-song all but beyond Man's hearing — recall of a fragrant wind, and the sound of leaves upon it like sweetest music, and a Horn's call that no mortal ear has ever yet heard, that shakes his heart in this distant echo, even in this changed and wolfish state — and other things, and other matters, that are as distant, fair and unfathomable to either of his present selves as the Northern Lights of a midwinter night...)

The shaping anew completed, the change done, he that but a little ago went upon two feet now struggles to comprehend how four shall serve, that are not fitted to socket of bone nor jointed in similar fashion to his true self's shape, and earnestness wars with panic at the effort — and his mortal mind is driven aside as by a hard impatient blow, and like a stunned prisoner he is lifted in a great heave to paws and *shaken*, that reflex that wrings spine in sudden violence that is but nature to hound, or horse, or wolf, resting from work, or rising from sleep, or shaking off the wet.

The flesh is wise in its own way, and needs not hand upon the rein, thought to guide it in its own most natural workings. Sound, smell, *sense* that there are no words in any speech of Free People to name or circumscribe — all these in their extremity would flood and whelm a mortal and send the reasoning mind in crawling panic; yet the Sire of Werewolves knows them all, and comprehends them as he-who-he-once-was knew path of human hands' making and path of forest branch, and all their changes, and they are naught to trouble him.

I am Beren, son of Barahir, son of Emeldir, scion of Bëor, Lord of Dorthonion-that-was—

—remembrance of war in a high hard land — of a shadow that shot and fled from branch to tossing branch, and flames sent into stronghold, blinding night-eyes and maddening with reek of smoke — heaves beneath him like earthquake, shaking such small foothold of mortality in confusion—

—I am Beren, beloved of Lúthien the Nightingale, —Elf-friend—

—anger at the thought of the Firstborn thieves rises like tide of blood, washing away all such collectedness of mind and self in joy and sorrow beneath insatiable hunger—

—*I am Beren*—

—the wind like bitter wine brings distant sense of home and den within its savour, places of safe shadow against the Sun's menace, and memories of food, and familiar throb of power through every fibre, strengthening body and obliterating doubt—

—*I*—

—no more is left than that—

A light prickling touch like the whip of berry-briers against his side startles him, though it is too little and lacking in strength to cause him any pain, and a deep, drawn-out note rumbles from his jaws as he turns — not from feet, as one of the Children of Eru would, in gesture of guard — but from withers, long low neck flexing serpentlike, so strange to feel it! — as bared fang like half-drawn blade warns away unworthy touch.

And the hair that rises slow like the blades of new wheat upon his shoulders springs quick like the spear-hedge in unwilling astonishment, and coldest dread — for the air of the dead Plains no longer touches his mortality, no longer troubles him — sends dreadful ripple of shivers through the heavy coat.

That which holds to him, hooking needle-sharp talons into thick fur, trembling as it crawls upright on limbs not fitted for earthly labour, is as like, and as unlike, to a bat of the sort that haunts the wood about house or hall, as the monster shape he — is — is like unto and far from the form of wild wolf-kind that flits shadowlike in shade, melting away from man's approach like frost under finger. And again he growls, and the sound ceases not, and again his thought splinters, and each fragment yet does know this being, and still — he growls.

The *thing* whose fragile wings straggle behind her, like a most hideous butterfly new-crept from its shell of sleep, this thing with glowing eyes and reek of power like stench of burning upon her fine-haired pelt, with claws of metal ingrafted by means unnatural and fangs that gape, panting with the effort of the change, sharp as needles too, for the taking of the sanguine sustenance—

It is the same whose yearning made her follow him across the dark, daring the wrath and power and discernment of their greatest, the King of the realm, despite all risk and danger, into this dreadful change... they that were Voices clear and bright and holy, bodiless and changeless, joined in paired melody, unison their note within the ancient Song—

—until the harsh and clangorous and haughty cry of one as mighty as his brother, or seeming so, and that incessant demand that caught and held their twined attention, and he should not turn back from that strong lure, and she unable to hold him back, drawn with him to the growing Discord, and they together entered in that raucous ceaseless monotony—

—and after in the confused time when world was spun from Song and strife, and some chose to enter, and others remained without, that Discord still did haunt their music, and ever and again was her love drawn to haunt the margins of that little whorl of substance, set within the measureless deeps of Eä, and ever did she follow him, following that proud call, calling his proud heart, tempting with promise of might and taste of mastery and delectation of tastes, until one time in that measureless span did many of their kin converge, all summoned even as they, and in obedience to *his* will that obeyed great Melkor's will — and the desiring of his own Immortal heart — she followed him, to earthly plane and dividing of flesh and bond of guilt and shame and dread, joined with him in love and spirit — and that alone has never changed, howsoever changed to hate—

And this *she* knows, from the same horrible change that once already has undergone, and

knowingly has worn again, and too knows her risk, knows how this changed one, given earthly name to wear with earthly form, that nameless was but *self*, different, known, and precious to all others of the same untamed eternal fashioning as one jewel, one leaf, one voice is unlike to another, this that was her ancient deathless love did grow to hate her for her earthly weakness, this frail and hesitating *hröa* with its limbs fashioned but for flight, and scant defense saving the same, and for himself grown loathsome as she, Voices now no longer one, but parted forever, the one strong and harsh to howl, the other a thin and grating whine upon the night—

He might so easily snap at her, and break her, that repels him in all ways: for memory of shared delights now lost, for gruesomeness of hairy batwinged form, for thought that it is *he* that has brought this pass upon her; and this too she knows, and does not care, and knew even as she kissed him as might be for the last, and gave him pity, and perhaps the strength to master all such horror, in her unearthly song—

She clings to him, awaiting what ever may come — so much does she love him, and the werewolf's broken spirit, that holds *self* of holy Hound and ancient Power and lost and fragile Man, melts as shards of iron in the misery of mortal heart breaking and the anguish of Undeath's torment and he cries out in anger and despair and defiant plea, and the wild echoes of that howl ring far across the deathly strand.

He stumbles, and again iron claws dig into his hackles, and again he stops himself before he snaps at the thin-boned limbs that cling like brambles, feeling blood well from the gouges, matting and mingling with the older crusts along his withers. The black dust clouds his vision — or is it the daylight itself? — as he presses on beneath the inimical glare, panting, long past caring at the composition of the ashy air he breathes, distress over the thought of the dead indrawn forgotten far leagues hence, when *north* and *east* alone remained of concern to what remained of reason...

It is cold, despite the darkness of the dunes; they hold no heat, and the air burns for that reason too, when he snorts against the choking grains that their going raises about them. The light is a burden, heavy weight upon him, it beats at lowered skull like the pulse of coming storm, presses straining back and stabs burning darts into labouring shoulders, sharper than bite of blood-drinking fly—

Teeth clack shut on nothing, memory like a clamped hand about disobedient hound's muzzle wresting head aside, though jaws strike against bony wrist in dull blow. He is too tired to whine his distress now, throat roughened from the life-stealing chill and dust, and he will forget, and snap at the sting of pain again, and remember, and withhold from striking, ever and anon in this barren traverse.

Another smell, not the dried-blood tang of the wind off the Hells of Iron, nor the choking sear of dust, calls to him, summoning from every other thought and noticing, so that he redoubles his labouring speed into a quickened trot, though the sharp needles stitch the faster into his fur for it, and every pace tears them into his skin. —It is water, a call like the clear icy note of flute in darkness, warbling and changing in accord with rules unknown and complex beyond the hearer's ken, and the dust-clouds rise thicker, increasing the need of it even as the distance diminishes.

She slips from his back, who has not the strength to wing aloft under the angry Sun (with whom once the *self* whose stolen shape now clothes her sang, when the world was but a dream unshaped as yet) and crawls towards the welling puddle, that is stained bloody by sifting through the polluted sands, tainted with their iron, and yet is *water*, that these bodily forms must have — and massive jaws as thick-boned and sinewed as a bear's (but lacking ursine innocence) dip down as a heron's beak towards marsh's surface, and close fast about her scrawny neck, but a little pressure away

from parting head from bony shoulders.

She does not move again, save for the flurried pounding of heart against the cage of bone that shelters it, shaking her where she crouches; nor does he move, held back by reason where the wolfshape's instinct did lunge first, and thus they both are held—

—So great is the temptation to *crush*, to rend and worry, to silence this discordant note that whines at him, even without voice, with its fears and pains and wretchedness, ever moaning of bygone days, ever reproaching him for what he has made of her, of himself, a mere Beast, and a thing of scorn even as they are feared by the ones who might have been their siblings, had they but stayed within the Song, and chosen shapes of lawful making, enduring the work and struggle to embody even as She who now has forsaken her form of flesh forever to guide the Light that still remains against them...

And the memory, of such a deed, done under waning dark, and fading Moon, is strong within his unborn flesh, and spell-wrought sinew tenses, and still the wolf holds, and whines, and another memory arises, of a boy who saw another, this one half-grown into tallness already, and not quite a stranger, with casual and relishing force, crush beneath his walking-stick a half-fledged nestling straying from its nest while parents watched with anxious piping call from the osiers near at hand — and how that boy hurled self like a thunderbolt against the killer, and struck him down in judgment and in fury and in tears, and beat him despite the other's greater strength and height and his own maddening sorrow, until companions parted them, not fully comprehending either the ugly deed or the answering wrath—

—as now, with venom pulsing to be released from root of fang, like adder's deadly kiss, and the Singer whose voice has brought him to this pass cringes beneath his might, and wrath that such a pitiful and ugly thing should go before him — now only too well he does understand both—

And as the Man would weep, a different music from the cruel mesh winds through his tattered soul, that comes as well from the fell that wraps him, that now he must battle to keep from throwing off in rush of horror, for never again could he bring himself to enter its darkness, and dark knowledge, being freed — and it is armour, stronger than meshed iron, woven of love tangible as sound striking upon the ear, not the keen cutting note of silver flute but a softer song, clear as water, clean and present —

He nuzzles her, pointed muzzle pressing softly against the matted fur, keening like a blind pup against its mother's side does seeking for comfort as much as sustenance, and when he straddles her it is not in menace now, though no limb has shifted, but only to shelter her from the angry Fire that courses through the sky above, until she has lapped her fill, and only then does drink himself, still giving her shade with himself. And then he shepherds her, dazed and crawling, from the glare into a scant margin that overhangs the spring, rising like a low island from a mere of shadow; and there she grooms him, licking the dust from his slitted eyes, and then the gritty knots and beads of blood that tangle in his silvery fur, small selfish gesture that is far more than that, while the wolf rests head on paws and tries to flee from the understanding that cannot be escaped, being woven into the wearer, enmeshed within the wearer's skin...

...and through the knowledge of this body comes at last peace, that yields beneath the certainty of too great a matter for its knowing, and all that is left is *one*, and that one is known, and loved, and held within the other's self, folded within the shelter of her Song...

Through the bitter, tainted daylight they rest, curled together, gentleness of unmoving touch, no struggle against the world without to spark pain, to kindle anger; and between them they share, as it were bread, or the sweetness of Autumn fruit, a dreamed memory of life...the remembrance of

shade, and cool dark silences lit by strands of poured gold falling from leaves high above like brightest rain, and rain itself, making the greens glow like beryls on wroughten ornaments in Menegroth against the shadows of the water-sweetened air, and the fish-gleaming depths of the stream between the trees, and the ground soft beneath feet with the deepness of moss, and the little white pearl-flowers shining there, and how he had laughed, thinking she teased him, when she told him they were made for her, a gift of the Lady at her birth, and how the stars glittered between pine-boughs like frost over the mountains, so many, so countless many of them in the clarity of the night sky...

And when the cruel sunlight wanes, afternoon hiding the land's torment in welling shadow, they rouse themselves from this kind delusion, rising with no more than dullest ache of wolf-anger and vampire-despair, nuzzling misshapen face to brutish jaw, only bittersweet yearning left now of the unspeakable pain that love's fearless song has tamed; and on stiff limbs, coats matted with dust, they stretch reluctant measure across the plain, on paw, and on wing.

And as the sun fades into fumes of amber and blood behind the Ered Wethrin, they reach the banked road that scars across the Gaspings Thirst, the gash that goes towards the towering scarps of the Hells of Iron, following wearily, ceaselessly, along the straight track that leads them, like a drawing tether, to the terrible Gate where the Last Wolf waits for him — for *them*—

Introit

Chapter Summary

To cross the Battle Plain unnoticed on the way to Angband, Beren and Luthien travel in the forms of two deceased servants of the Dark -- but such enchantment carries its own dangers and risks. Silmarillion story, inspired by the Lay of Leithian, rating for dark elements involving those "betrayed ghosts." (02/07/03 - Afternotes added.)

Chapter Notes

Note from the HASA Transition Team: This story was originally archived at [HASA](#), which closed in February 2015. To preserve the archive, we began manually importing its works to the AO3 as an Open Doors-approved project in February 2015. We posted announcements about the move, but may not have reached everyone. If you are (or know) this author, please contact The HASA Transition Team using the e-mail address on the [HASA collection profile](#).

"Worse things it holds than to sink into the abyss and so perish:
loathing, and loneliness, and madness; terror of wind and tumult, and silence,
and shadows where all hope is lost and all living shapes pass away."

—Voronwë to Tuor, *Of Tuor and his coming to Gondolin*, J.R.R. Tolkien

Afterword

Chapter Summary

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Canonicity Issues (Spoilers) — or, Where did that come from?

...Now there he laid
before their feet, as dark as shade,
two grisly shapes that he had won
from that tall isle in Sirion:
a wolfhame huge — its savage fell
was long and matted, dark the spell
that drenched the dreadful coat and skin
the werewolf cloak of Draugluin;
the other was a batlike garb
with mighty fingered wings, a barb
like iron nail at each joint's end—
such wings as their dark cloud extend
against the moon, when in the sky
from Deadly Nightshade screeching fly
Thû's messengers.

'What hast thou brought,
good Huan? What thy hidden thought?
Of trophy of prowess and strong deed,
when Thû thou vanquishedst, what need
here in the waste?' Thus Beren spoke,
and once more words in Huan woke:
his voice was like the deeptoned bells
that ring in Valmar's citadels:

'Of one fair gem thou must be thief,
Morgoth's or Thingol's, loath or lief;
thou must here choose twixt love and oath!
If vow to break is still thee loath,
then Lúthien must either die
alone, or death with thee defy
beside thee, marching on your fate
that hidden before you lies in wait.
Hopeless the quest, but not yet mad,
unless thou, Beren, run thus clad
in mortal raiment, mortal hue,

witless and redeless, death to woo.
'Lo! good was Felagund's device,
but may be bettered, if advice
of Huan ye will dare to take,
and swift a hideous change will make
to forms most curséd, foul, and vile,
of werewolf of the Wizard's Isle,
of monstrous bat's envermined fell
with ghostly clawlike wings of hell...'

There are three foundations for this story, which expands upon and illustrates Canto XII of the first Lay of Leithian fragment.

The first is the chill that went through me reading the scene where Beren reaches the edge of battlefield and is looking out over what was once Ard-galen, realizing what it must have meant to the last of the House of Bëor, riding past the Fen of Serech, up to the site of the Leaguer itself, and the place where so many of his relatives, near and distant, died in the Winter Offensive of the Bragollach. The sheer weight of history, recent and ancient alike, and the profound emotional impact of arriving there at last, and seeing the burnt-out countryside, still devastated after over a decade (and never to recover) and the awesome meaning it would have borne for him is inescapable when considered with the story of the Edain as a whole as well as his own personal history, who was raised in the house who "of all Men were most like to the Noldor and most loved by them, for they were eager of mind, cunning-handed, swift in understanding, long in memory, and they were moved sooner to pity than to laughter." (*Silmarillion*, "Of the Coming of Men into the West.")

The second is the fascination that tales of animal transformation have always held for me, going back to my Andrew Lang collections as a child and stories of changed heroines and heroes like the White Cat, Puddocky, the Black Mare, Prince Lindworm, the Laithely Wurm, and the Bear in "East of the Sun, West of the Moon" — as well as those who are not, apparently, changed from anything else but nevertheless possess powers and knowledge as well as speech like the eponymous co-star of "Prince Ivan and the Grey Wolf," or the horses Isengrim and the Young Archer's mount in "The Firebird."

And the third is the unfolding of the first: the increasing awareness of the cyclical and at the same time complex workings of mythic history revealed through the *Silmarillion* and culminating in Lord of the Rings, rhythms and patterns playing out over the Ages with variation and unique event, but with an overarching similarity — and which, I think, that the heir of Bëor would have been able to discern to a significant degree upon reflection.

The extra-canonical element which I have introduced for this story in the series (since all previous assumptions go on in this story) is the speculation that the two dead minions of Tol-in-Gaurhoth might have known each other very well in the days before becoming *mirroanwi*, incarnate beings, within the confines of Arda under Morgoth's ambivalent generosity.

This came from exploring the question of how Thuringwethil might have come to be caught on the ground, when the other bat-messengers took flight from the falling tower, and was the most plausible I could come up with for a deliberate reason. (There would have been no sense, given the situation and the danger and the flight of the others, for her to be looking for carrion to scavenge, for instance.) Hence I put her on the ground, within Huan's reach, as a former beloved of the being who had been embodied as the werewolf Draugluin, mourning and seeking vengeance for her long-lost love, not concerned for her own personal danger, and in fact seeking out death (as well as finding it.)

And while she could have been a random casualty of falling masonry, I elected not to have her merely an accident victim not simply for the angst value, nor for the horror implicit in conceiving of the two living lovers trapped in the memories of a dead and separated couple — nor even because it fits better with the words of the text, which imply battle, because of the use of the word "trophy" for both skins — but as a way of illustrating different kinds (or definitions) of love, in similar situation, and how the outwardly-same circumstances could be enacted in a destructive way, and in a redemptive way.

...His dreadful counsel then they took
and their own gracious forms forsook;
in werewolf fell and batlike wing
prepared to robe them, shuddering.

With elvish magic Lúthien wrought
lest raiment foul with evil fraught
to dreadful madness drive their hearts;
and there she wrought with elvish arts
a strong defence, a binding power,
singing until the midnight hour...

What Lúthien does in the fragment of the Lay of Leithian quoted above to protect them against Morgoth's embedded spells is straight shaman stuff — "singing magic" of the purest sort — and her reasons for the work are deeply grounded in the folkloric traditions of animal transformation and skin-magic that have come down to us in fairy tales and legends. Swan-skins, hawk-cloaks, seal-coats — all of these have been told in stories, along with many other similar and dissimilar animal transformations of various kinds. What all of these have in common is the fact that the *changing* power is held within the fell itself, and thus an item of power that is both natural to the owner, and yet may be stolen, lost, lent or borrowed, conferring its power on the new holder. —Not unlike the Ring in this regard, in fact.

But the power — again, not unfamiliarly — is two edged. Ursula LeGuin did not invent the idea of the enchanter becoming lost in his enchantment for *A Wizard of Earthsea*, when Ged in the form of a hawk forgets himself. This tale is also told in the *Arabian Nights*, when a curious caliph and his loyal vizier exercise an enchantment that will allow them to become birds until the countercharm is invoked — but neglect the warning

that to laugh, at the things they hear while understanding the speech of animals, will cause them to forget the word that allows them to become human again.

And that is a relatively mild and harmless change, though inconvenient for the king and his henchman, and risky for their realm. In one of the Scandinavian legends anthologized in the volume *East of the Sun, West of the Moon*, the morally-ambivalent hero disguises himself in a bearskin to gain access to the princess of his dreams. All well and good — but he is not merely hidden in fur, as Odysseus beneath the Cyclop's prize ram, but has actually become a polar bear, and taken on its nature as well. When one of the princess' handmaids forgets the warning delivered with the "performing bear" and laughs at its antics, he flies into a rage and tears her to pieces, according to the calmly bloodthirsty prose of the authentic folktale. And this is simply shrugged off, as the consequence of disobeying the warning, and the youngest son in disguise is never taken to task for it, nor ever shows any remorse after he has cast off the skin and returned to human form for the purpose of wooing his ideal.

An even stronger cautionary tale of taking on another's form in spirit as in flesh may be found in the stories of the Tarnhelm, or Tarnkappe, that Norse legend of a cape or hood which is the universal transforming agent, with which the owner may take on the shape and abilities of whatever creature is wished. Hence the titanic warrior Fafnir, as immortalized in popular culture through Wagner's versions of the *Nibelungenlied*, becomes the physically vast and awesome, but psychologically diminished and paranoid dragon, whose horizons have become limited to the guarding of his hoard and who cannot conceive of returning to what he once was, so enslaved to his change has he become. (In this case it is of course not a skin, but a work of craftsmanship which replicates and adds to the abilities of all such magical coats.)

Along with the loss of memory, moral compass, and "self" generally, there are other risks involved in these *changes*: we should all remember stories like "Puss in Boots," where the villain is tricked into becoming a mouse by the titular hero — who is himself uniquely suited to deal with such a form!

One interesting point which should be noted is that some of these items are not dangerous to the nature of the wearer because the only wearer is the one to whom they naturally belong, and who ventures to wear them — such is the case with, for example, the Selkies of Gaelic lore and the Swan-maidens of Eastern Europe. The trouble is that their nature is so different from that of humanity that their mortal lovers feel compelled to steal and hide their coats so as to bind them helplessly to the land, thus guaranteeing that they will never be deserted, being unable to trust them not to return to their own elements otherwise. (Needless to say, this never works in the old stories, and in the end leads to greater tragedy, and just about guarantees that the girl of one's dreams will *never* come back, once she gets the chance to leave!)

...Swift as the wolfish coat he wore
Beren lay slavering on the floor,

redtongued and hungry; but there lies
a pain and longing in his eyes,
a look of horror as he sees
a batlike form crawl to its knees
and drag its creased and creaking wings.
Then howling under moon he springs
fourfooted, swift, from stone to stone,
from hill to plain-but not alone:
a dark shape down the slope doth skim
and wheeling flitters over him...

From this it seems inevitable that a certain amount of trauma or at least distress was involved in the change, even apart from the risk of the aforementioned madness. It's rather ironic, I think, that the skin of Draugluin, whose bodily form Lúthien invoked as part of the sympathetic singing-magic of her hair-cloak, is now an essential part of the increasingly surreal situation they find themselves in. Yet even in this her special abilities and different nature come to the fore, as later, as the plan increasingly shipwrecks on unplanned contingencies (such as the existence of Carcharoth, and the fact that the bat-messenger from Sauron has already come and gone) she improvises how to partially transform, taking on the wings only of Thuringwethil without changing fully, and thus being able to wield the power of her cape as well.

—But you must read the poem: I cannot do justice to it in mere summary and excerpt.

My conjecture also extends, for the purpose of both drama and of conveying information, to the notion that the enchanted skins would retain something of the persona and recollections of each previous wearer as part of the spell and risk of madness — this is a device to allow the scenes wherein Huan defeats their owners to be plausibly recollected within the point-of-view format of the story.

The parts where the two former and fallen Maiar consider their past choices, as remembered by the people now inhabiting their skins, are taken from the *Silmarillion*, from the part entitled "Ainulindalë," and from the Quenta Silmarillion, the opening of the chapter "Of the Beginning of Days". That they might have known Arien as a friend before the physical world was created is naturally as much speculation on my part as the idea that they knew each other.

The bit about the pines of Tar-na-Fuin resembling the masts of ships is something which I took almost unchanged from the original quoted above. It is of course possible that it was a scribal interpolation, the addition of imagery by the unknown composer of the original Lay (though I have my guesses as to its "authorship"), as Tuor is the first of mortals in Middle-earth to reach the shores of the great ocean. I have elected to consider it an authentic observation, in keeping with the storyline as developed so far — which also should add to the overall disquieting atmosphere and horror.

As far as the plot goes, I am following the Lay of Leithian fragment entirely, with the only change being one which was introduced later for logistical reasons: in the poem, (unlike the published *Silmarillion*,)

in Canto XII beginning just after Lúthien's furious assertion that her love is "as great a power as thine, to shake the gate and tower of death," Huan has dropped her off and gone back without telling her why, and then returns with both the skins. Logistically it makes more sense for them to stop off and pick them up on the way north, rather than for Huan to backtrack, but I understand the *dramatic* reason for setting it up as Tolkien did in the poem, since it allows for a more intimate moment of dialogue between them, and an almost operatic building up from Beren's sung soliloquy, to Lúthien's entry and answer, to Huan's arrival making it a trio.

As to whether Curufin's sword which Beren confiscated was one used at the fighting at Alqualondë, I know no more than Beren would have — but it's certainly possible. (It is also possible, though no more certain, that it was the same sword that Dior after used to kill Celegorm, and quite possibly Curufin and their brother Caranthir as well — the *Silmarillion* text is unclear as to whether all three were killed by Lúthien's son, or not, but allows both possibilities.)

The Battle of Sudden Flame — the evocation of the battle itself in imagination and the constant reminders of it throughout the journey are simply taken, again, right from the poem, which begins with stanzas devoted to the Leaguer, and then to its breaking as the "rivers of flame" burst forth in the dead of night and transform the snow to steam, ultimately reducing the green plains to the "Ashes and dust and thirsty dune" that "Draugluin" and "Thuringwethil" must cross in the painful manner described, but only again amplified, not original with this story. (Even the more lurid details follow directly from the lines quoted at the beginning, as anyone who has ever carried a cat on one's shoulder, or a taloned bird, will immediately understand.)

...Ashes and dust and thirsty dune
withered and dry beneath the moon,
under the cold and shifting air
sifting and sighing, bleak and bare;
of blistered stones and gasping sand,
of splintered bones was built that land,
o'er which now slinks with powdered fell
and hanging tongue a shape of hell.
Many parching leagues lay still before
when sickly day crept back once more;
many choking miles yet stretched ahead
when shivering night once more was spread
with doubtful shadow and ghostly sound
that hissed and passed o'er dune and mound.

The rest which I have depicted is a gapfiller — that is, there is an entire day of travel through the Waste not described in detail, in which it's very likely that they would have had to rest — but taken from the scene which takes place late in the second day of the crossing, when they have reached the causeway leading to Angband. This subsequent and canonical scene, in which our two champions hunker down in the shadow of the road leading to the Enemy's mountainous fortress while they dream

"...of Doriath,
of laughter and music and clean air,
in fluttered leaves birds singing fair..."

while waking only brings "the trembling sound, the beating echo far underground"
of Morgoth's forges, and

"...aghast they heard the tramp of stony feet
that shod with iron went down that street:
the Orcs went forth to rape and war,
and Balrog captains marched before...."

should, inevitably, remind readers of a similar scene in *The Return of the King*...

Until they pull themselves together enough to go on, and the next Canto begins with the recollection of Fingolfin's challenge, wounding of Morgoth, and fatal defeat at the climax of the Dagor Bragollach, and reminds us of the long-term difficulties that both Beren and Huan have given the Dark Lord, and the renewed fears that Sauron's loss to Huan have caused, resulting in the creation and deployment of Carcharoth, the greatest wolf to ever walk the world, "surpassing all his race and kin," and Beren's own doom as well — until

"...comes stalking near, a wolvisish shape
haggard, wayworn, jaws agape;
and o'er it batlike in wide rings
a reeling shadow slowly wings..."

and Wolf-Beren, seeing from far off the massive shape lying before the door, exclaims, "Long ways we have come at last to meet the very maw of death... Yet hopes we never had. No turning back!"

The title of this story is, indeed, a pun, on the dual meanings of "fell" as a pelt and as that which is dark and beyond unpleasant, and part of my purpose in illustrating this Canto is to make it clear, since I have encountered Usenet discussions which show that it is not beyond debate (though what ever is?) that the two travellers really did transform, and really took on not merely an illusion, but the physical actuality of their dead enemies, and attributes thereof, which is not quite so explicit in the abridged prose version of the published *Silm.* as it certainly is in the Lay of Leithian.

—Mostly, however, to show forth what is to my mind the essence of this and all successful Quests in the Arda mythos — that it is not courage merely, nor skill merely, nor "destiny" merely, which ensure such success as the Quest enjoys, but a love which embodies a mutual self-sacrifice and generosity, not acting out of any expectation of fulfillment or gratification, holding on far past the point when there are any rewards or likelihood of future reward. As George MacDonald said, and cannot be too often recollected:

*Death alone from death can save,
Love is death, and so is brave—*

—but you really must read the fragments of the Lay of Leithian itself!

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