

Tales from Balkadan

The Peddler

By William Lee

Beren awoke to a chill on his skin and an insistent ache in his shoulder. He had slept wrong again. The nest of straw and blankets that served as his bed provided little protection from the hardness of the stone floor and always left his skin with a nagging twinge that took half the morning to go away.

He sat up slowly and tried to massage the stiffness out his joints. Sunrise was still a few hours off, and only a pale predawn glow crept into the narrow space of their apartment. In the corner of the room, Fenn snored gently on his palette. The boy's hands clutched a threadbare blanket around his thin adolescent frame.

Beren pulled himself up from his makeshift bed and wandered over to their small cupboard. He opened it and was greeted by a pair of gray mice who were chewing on one of his bread loaves.

"Damn it, off with ya vermin!" he muttered as he batted a hand at the pests, sending them scurrying into a shadowy corner of the room.

Beren examined the loaf they had chosen to attack. At least the mice had been considerate enough to nibble on the same side. He tore off the chewed end, then grabbed an undamaged loaf for Fenn. He took stock of what remained in the cupboard. Only two loaves left now, and half a pork sausage. Today would need to go well.

Beren wiped crumbs and what he hoped weren't mouse droppings off of their old, splintered table, then set the loaves down on a pair of hammered tin plates edged with rust.

He nudged Fenn with a toe.

"Lad, time to get up," he whispered. The boy groaned and rolled away from the prod.

"Lad," Beren repeated, "Breakfast time."

"It's too early," Fenn protested, still halfway between the waking world and slumber.

"Up, now. We've got to be at The Plaza before dawn to get the first pick of the goods."

The boy's eyes finally opened, and he lifted himself up on knobby elbows.

"First pick of the trash," Fenn grumbled, wiping the dust from his eyes.

"Eat," Beren said, pointing toward the second plate.

The two of them ate their breakfast in silence, the loaves easily a day past fresh. They dressed quickly, and Beren tossed a handful of rags and a bar of soap into a large burlap sack. He ushered his son out the door and down a dimly lit stairway.

...

Beren rapped a knuckle on Almo's door and waited. For a moment, he began to worry that the old potter had forgotten their arrangement and slept in again. Finally, he heard a latch flip, and the door cracked open just enough to let a moss-colored eye surrounded by wrinkles peer through.

"Ya?" asked a voice still heavy with grogginess.

"Almo!" Beren greeted him, "High Lord's blessing to ya this fine morning."

The wrinkly eye narrowed.

"Oh, it's you," Almo said. The door opened to reveal a squat man with rounded shoulders and a thinning mass of gray hair.

"So, anything I can take off ya hands this morning?" Beren asked.

Almo sighed, then disappeared into his shop. A few moments later, the aging craftsman emerged with an armful of clay pottery. He set the pieces down between them. There were three in total. Each pot had some sort of dent, crack, or other defect.

"Jonah left these in the kiln too long again. Foolish boy never learns. Except for this one. There I just slipped," Almo explained with a shrug.

Beren examined the misshapen goods, lined up like a pack of anxious misfits waiting to see if they'd be taken in. The one with the crack would be a tough sell, but the other two he could salvage. He could even pitch their odd shapes as a new artistic direction, Gods willing.

"I'll take these two," Beren said.

Almo raised a gray eyebrow.

"Standards," he said with a smirk. "I'm surprised Beren."

Beren forced a smile.

"Even I can't sell everything. How much for the two?"

Almo rubbed his chin for a moment.

"Five crowns," he said.

Beren's mouth dropped open.

"What? It's a fifty percent discount," claimed Almo.

"You were going to smash them behind your shop!" Beren argued. "Three and half, and that's generous."

"Five, or I'll do just that," Almo replied, crossing his arms, "and you can sell someone else's mistakes at your flea market."

Beren wrinkled his nose, and for a moment he was ready to tell Almo to go ahead and smash the things, then shove the broken pieces where the High Lord's light didn't shine. The truth of the matter, however, was that Almo was one of only two people that would even talk to him in Merchant's Plaza. The other was an urchin who collected chicken bones.

Beren exhaled through his nostrils.

"Five then," he said.

He pulled out five thumb-sized silver discs with the imperial crown stamped on either side, then dropped them into Almo's waiting palm.

"Aye, now git, before a patrol sees you," the old potter said.

"High Lord's blessing to-," Beren said as Almo's door closed in his face.

"Stodgy old prick," he muttered, then looked down at his newly acquired inventory. If he could pitch them for four crowns apiece, they might still be alright.

"Come on lad," Beren called to Fenn, who had been silently inspecting the cobblestones beneath his worn shoes, "let's get these packed and keep moving."

...

Beren pulled their cart in at the end of a long line of merchants, sweat already starting to dampen his armpits. He upended the sack onto the cart, dumping their newly acquired goods onto its counter. He grabbed the hose and a small box containing needle and thread, and began hastily applying stitches to the tear.

"Watch the goods a moment," he told Fenn as he wove the needle in and out of the fabric.

Once the hose were repaired to a satisfactory degree, Beren hung them and the freshly scrubbed tunic over a bar on the cart. He was about to add his own voice to the clamor of the alley when a man emerged from the crowd.

"Beren!" the man exclaimed. He wore a doublet of deep green silk that fit snugly to his tall frame, and a thin black beard ran from ear to ear along a pointed jawline. Beren groaned inwardly.

"Morning Yenos," he replied.

"My dear friend," Yenos said, examining the lopsided pottery, "are we selling Almo's mishaps again?"

Beren ignored the question. Yenos moved on to the tunic next.

"This one isn't so bad. How'd you end up with it?"

Yenos leaned in to take a sniff, then quickly recoiled.

"Ah, and there we have it."

"Is there something I can help ya with Yenos?" Beren asked.

"On the contrary," Yenos said, clasping his hands, "I'm here to get you out of this squalid back alley."

"Oh, and how's that?"

"A new shipment of goods. Real goods, Beren, not these sad specimens you've got here."

Beren frowned.

"We're doing just fine, thank ya. We've got plenty to sell right here."

"Come now, my friend," Yenos said, motioning to cart, "this is a tragedy. You deserve to be back on The Plaza, not pushing bad pottery for a half crown. Come by the Copper King Tavern tonight, and I'll show you something that will put real silver back in your pockets."

Beren's forehead wrinkled as he listened to Yenos's offer.

"Aye, and what are these special goods exactly?" he asked.

"You'll have to come by and find out," Yenos said with a grin. He turned to step back into the crowd, then added, "Think of your boy, my friend. Certainly he deserves better!"

...

By noon, Beren's throat was becoming raspy from the shouting. He could feel the heat of the summer sun burning the back of his neck, and the air in Peddler's Row was becoming thick with the smell of sweat and dust.

"Lad," he asked, turning around, "is there any water left?"

Fenn, whose own brow was dotted with sweat as well, picked up the small water skin lying next to him. He shook it twice, then opened the cork and turned it over. Nothing poured out.

Beren sighed. He considered having the lad run to the Dain. It wasn't the cleanest water, but this heat would suffocate the both of them if they didn't drink something soon. Then he caught the glint of armor working its way toward their end of the row.

"Bollocks," he cursed, then grabbed the tunic from its wrung on the cart and shoved it below the counter. A few breaths later, a slim woman with a braid of chestnut-colored hair strolled up to the cart. Her breastplate gleamed in the noon sunlight, and a silver pendant depicting a rose with eight rays shining out of it hung around her neck.

"Hello, Beren," she said with a hint of mild exasperation.

"Lieutenant!" he replied, "May the High Lord shine his light upon ya."

The woman in armor shaded her eyes from the glaring sunlight.

"Right now I think he's giving us all we can handle."

"Aye, so he is," Beren replied, wiping his brow.

"Beren, I heard a complaint this morning from up on The Plaza," the Lieutenant began, "apparently a man and his son were stealing clothes from one of the sewing houses."

"Ya don't say," Beren said, leaning in conspiratorially. "Sounds like quite a scoundrel."

"Mhmm," the Lieutenant hummed, tilting forward just a bit to peer over the lip of Beren's cart. He could only hope the tunic had been sufficiently tucked away.

"Now, they wouldn't be referring to this man and his son, would they?" she asked.

"No!" Beren answered, raising his hands defensively. "All I've got here is some fine pottery. Would ya like one?"

"I have pots. But thank you."

She glanced behind Beren to where Fenn had curled up on a small stool.

"Is your father keeping you out of trouble, Fenn?" she asked.

Fenn's head jerked up, and for the first time all morning, the boy smiled.

"Yes, my lady!" he answered.

"Good. And are you keeping him out of trouble?"

Fenn laughed.

"Of course my lady."

The armored woman's gaze shifted back to Beren.

"That's good," she said, her eyes fixing on him for an extra moment. "High lord be with you."

The lieutenant continued on, blending back into the relentless bustle that filled the alleyway.

Beren waited an extra moment before finally exhaling. Gods be thanked he saw her coming, or that tunic could have landed him in irons.

Beren turned to see his son staring out into the crowd, a smile still glowing on his round features.

"Oh gods above," he sighed, "that's who ya decide to fancy?"

Fenn turned sharply.

"I don't fancy her," he retorted.

"Of course ya don't."

"I don't!" Fenn insisted. "She's just, kind. The sight of us doesn't ruin her day."

Beren sighed as he turned back to the crowd. The lad had him there. The lieutenant could have easily ordered his cart be searched if she really had a mind to. She never did, though. Maybe she felt sorry for Fenn, stuck in this sad lot at the end of Peddler's Row. Or maybe it just wasn't worth her time.

Beren was about to continue calling out to the crowd when the lad spoke again.

"Hey, da?" he asked.

"Yes lad?"

Fenn thought for a moment before asking, "You think I could ever be a paladin?"

Beren raised both of his thick orange eyebrows at the question.

"Do ya want to be a paladin?"

"I dunno," Fenn answered, "maybe?"

Beren frowned, then said "It's not all parades and shiny armor ya know. Paladins fight wars, lad. They kill men in battle. They die in it too."

"I know," Fenn answered, "but they heal people too don't they? Cure the sick, help out poor folks an all that?"

The warm smell of fresh bread wafted into Beren's nose. One of the baker's carts had just pulled up across from them, piled high with golden-brown loaves and an assortment of glistening pastries. Enough talk about paladins for one day.

"Well ya can help a couple o' poor folks right now by buyin' us some lunch," he said, flipping a half crown to the boy. Fenn almost dropped it in surprise.

"Really?" he asked.

Beren nodded, then motioned to the aromatic bounty of baked goods.

"Come on, I'm starvin'," he said, "and get some water while ya at it."

...

"Stay close, lad," Beren instructed as the two of them maneuvered their way through the cacophonous maelstrom of revelry that was the Copper King Tavern. The smell of ale and grease hung heavy in the air, and Beren felt his gut begin to rumble at the idea of a freshly cooked pork sausage.

After a moment of scanning the benches, Yenos's emerald-colored wardrobe popped out against the wash of less saturated colors. He was having what appeared to be a hushed discussion with a larger man wearing a brown tunic, with a wicked-looking mace at his side. They looked up as Beren approached, and a grin began to spread across Yenos's face.

"You made it!" he said. "Please, sit."

Yenos turned to the other man and told him they'd finish their business later. The man scowled, then stood up and left. Beren watched the large man leave, wondering what he might have interrupted.

"So what's this offer ya got for me then," Beren said as he sat down. Yenos held up his hands as if affronted.

"All in due time, my friend," he said, "you should eat something first. The chicken here is delicious."

Fenn's eyes widened at the suggestion.

"Can we, da?" he asked.

Yenos's smile grew at the lad's question.

"Please, on me," he offered, "consider it a thank-you for hearing my offer."

Beren groaned inwardly at the suggestion. He hadn't come here to have Yenos flaunt his money at them, but it had been a month since they had eaten any meat besides old, dried sausage.

"Aye," he conceded.

"Excellent!" Yenos declared, then flagged down a serving woman and told her to bring the fattest chicken they had.

"And some ale, of course, yes?" Yenos asked, as the young woman waited with a tray full of dirty plates on her arm.

"Suppose so," Beren answered.

"And what about you, boy?" Yenos continued, "want to try your first mug of ale?"

Fenn's face brightened at the idea.

"Can I, da?"

"No," Beren said immediately.

"Please, da?"

"No ale. Ya can have one next time."

Fenn slouched back onto the bench, pouting at the lost opportunity.

Within minutes, a plump bird with skin still crackling from the oven was deposited on their table, along with two portly brown mugs with foam spilling over their tops. Beren tore off a sizable chunk of chicken breast for Fenn before taking a drumstick for himself. Warm grease dripped down his chin as he bit into the tender meat.

"Pretty good, eh?" Yenos said, holding out his mug for a toast. "To your health, my friend."

Beren stared at Yenos across the table, then clinked his own mug against Yenos's tentatively, enough for it to be accepted as a proper toast.

"Now then," Yenos began, setting down the mug without taking a sip, "I have something that's going to change your fortunes entirely, my friend."

Beren pulled off another bite of the chicken, then gestured for Yenos to continue.

Yenos reached into his cloak and deftly retrieved something about the size of Beren's thumb. He twirled it once between his fingers, then held it out low across the table.

Beren squinted at the trinket, its angles glinting in the flickering light of the candles. A large red gemstone was sunk into an eight-sided metal disc, with a symbol etched into its largest facet. Beren felt the bottom of his gut drop out.

"Is that a keystone?" Fenn asked, peaking with curiosity at the sight of the gemstone. Beren shushed him immediately, though the steady racket of the tavern had likely drowned out his question.

"I don't know how ya got a hold of that Yenos," Beren whispered sharply, "but I'm na lookin for that kind a trouble."

Yenos laughed at the retort.

"My dear Beren," he said, leaning forward, "how much of a fool do you take me for? This is merely a replica. It contains no more arcane power than that mug of ale in your hand."

"I see," Beren said.

"Now, if someone were to assume otherwise," Yenos continued, "if they were to believe it that it might bring them great fortune or protect them from sickness, well that would be their assumption."

"And you want me to sell this, replica, for ya. Is that it?"

"Beren, my dear friend," he said, "do you really think I went through all the trouble of asking you here for a single pendant? I have an entire chest of these, and I think they're exactly what you need to get yourself out of that stinking alleyway you call a place of business."

Beren stared at the pendant.

"That's a mighty risk for a few crowns," he said.

Yenos scoffed.

"A few crowns? Do you know how much people will pay for these? If they believe they have the power to make them wealthy, or strong, or irresistible? You could charge ten crowns a piece for them. Twenty crowns, Gods willing! Trust me my friend, nothing is more precious to the unfortunate than hope."

Beren watched the candlelight reflect off the facets of the red gemstone. Yenos was exaggerating, but even if they only sold for five crowns a piece, he could be looking at 100 crowns in a single day. But something about it nagged at his insides. He was accustomed to stretching the truth, but this was a whole different kind of lie. There was a mean edge to it, like stealing from a blind beggar.

"How do I even sell something like this?" Beren questioned, "If I crack open a chest of these in broad daylight, the first patrol that passes by will have me in irons, even if they ain't real."

"You leave that to me, my friend," Yenos said. "People like to think they're clever. They get word that someone's selling special charms, because of course you can't call it what it really is, and they'll think they've got a chance to snag real power right out from under his imperial majesty's nose. I'll make sure interested parties know where to find you."

Of course ya will, Beren thought, as long as you can keep your hands clean of the risk.

"What would the cut be?" he asked. Yenos grinned at the concession.

"Fifty-fifty. We split the profits even."

"Horse shit!" Beren almost shouted, "It's my neck on the line. Seventy-thirty."

"Beren, be reasonable here," Yenos said. "They are my stones after all. Fifty-five forty-five."

"Sixty-forty," Beren shot back, "or we get up and walk outta here. And take the chicken with us."

Yenos's companionable smile faltered a bit, and his fist clenched for a moment before a smirk reappeared across his narrow jawline.

"Beren," he began, "I know things have been hard ever since you lost your guild license. And over what? You had no way of knowing a rat had gotten into that shipping compartment."

"What's your point, Yenos?"

"You deserve better than a cart on Peddler's Row, my friend. You do this for me, and I'll have a discussion with the rest of the guild council about getting your license restored. How does that sound?"

Beren felt the anger that had been welling up in him begin to ebb, replaced by the glimmer of something he hadn't felt in a long while. He glanced over at Fenn, who had been contentedly chewing on the remaining drumstick. A guild license could be passed from parent to child.

"Well? Do we have a deal?" Yenos pressed, hands open in invitation.

Beren stared down into his mug, watching the last of the foam bubbles pop away.

"Where do I get the chest?" he asked, without looking up.

...

End Sample

For complete story, contact info@wleestories.com