

The Lebennin Conspiracy

Khorazir

On a fair, sunny evening in early Viressë of the year 3012 Third Age, a company of horsemen was approaching the City of Minas Tirith, riding along the causeway that lead across the broad fields of the Pelennor from the East. The company consisted of about two dozen men, all of which were clad in green and brown garments of varied hues, and armed with swords, spears and longbows. Quivers with green-feathered arrows were slung across their backs. Green gauntlets covered their hands, and many wore hoods which shadowed their faces. All of them appeared to have spent some time in the wild, for their clothes were ragged and muddy in parts, and both the men and their horses looked weary. But as they drew closer to the City, they looked up and straightened in their saddles, their faces brightening considerably. The sun was just going down behind the mighty, snowclad mass of Mount Mindolluin, and her warm rays reached out to the horsemen, many of whom cast back their hoods to let them shine on their faces. They also played on the slender spire of the White Tower, and let the white banners on its top glow golden as they fluttered in a strong westerly breeze.

One of the men rode up to one who appeared to be their leader. "We should hurry, captain, or they will close the gates before we have reached them," he said.

The other turned to him and smiled. He was a young man in his late twenties, with a pale, somewhat stern face, rather short raven hair, and bright grey eyes. "I am sure they will not close the gates before we are through, Damrod," he said. "If I am not entirely mistaken, our arrival, although not announced by an errand-rider, is already known to the Steward."

"Most likely," Damrod agreed, looking up at the White Tower in the distance, frowning slightly as he studied it. There was a short silence, then he turned to his captain again. "'tis such a beautiful sight – the City, I mean. Have you ever wondered how it must have looked in the days of the Kings of old? They say it was even more splendid then."

The other nodded slightly, his eyes bent on the majestic city ahead, but he replied nothing.

"I wonder if ever we shall have a King again," Damrod mused. "Imagine, to return home from an errand and see the White Tree on black afloat on the Tower of Ecthelion instead of the banner of the Stewards." Then he seemed to realise what he had said, for he blushed slightly, and added swiftly: "Not that things are bad now. The Lord Denethor is a just and able ruler."

But the captain appeared to have barely listened to his talk. He was still looking at the city, a trace of anxiety or worry in his face. Suddenly he tore his gaze away from it to rest it on Damrod. "We shall cover the rest of the way at greater speed," he said. "I guess all of us are looking forward to spend the night in a real bed for a change." With that he signalled to the company, and they spurred their steeds to a canter.

Canamarth

It was beginning to get dark when a fair young maiden with dark brown hair, plaited in quite a fancyful manner, and who was dressed in dark green robes which displayed her – or her father's – wealth, approached the wall of the fifth circle of Minas Tirith. She sat down on a bench from whence she had a good view of the city underneath and the Pelennor fields in the distance. But she did not seem to heed the gorgeous view. She had seen it too often to excite her anymore and besides, she was not of a disposition to indulge in the quiet contemplation of landscapes or the like. She turned her back to the panorama and watched the small garden around here.

She soon grew impatient of that as well and got up to walk to and fro muttering under her breath: "Where can he be?"

How dare he leave me waiting here for him?"

She did not have to wait much longer. At length, the hinges of the garden gate creaked and in stepped a man in a dark hooded cloak.

"Túrin!" she exclaimed. "Where have you been?"

Khorazir

"Shh, not so loud," Túrin hissed as he quickly stepped over to her, embraced her tightly, and kissed her. "Sorry that I'm late, sweetheart," he said as he drew back. "My father had me run an errand to the Steward for him which apparently couldn't wait. Did you have to wait long?"

She made a face.

"Oh, I'm really sorry," Túrin said. "Won't happen again, I promise." He motioned towards the bench, where they sat down side by side. There was a faint smell of primroses in the air, and the still leafless but heavily budded branches of the trees swayed gently in the breeze. Túrin cast back his hood, revealing shoulder-long wavy darkbrown hair, and an open, sympathetic face with warm hazel eyes. Judged by his looks he was in his mid-twenties. He reached out and put an arm around the maiden's shoulders and drew her close to him.

"So, what d'you think we should be doing this evening?" he asked softly.

Canamarth

"I don't know," the girl snapped back. "You go figure something. We can't go to any balls because we could be seen and recognized by other nobles. We can't go into decent guesthouses for a glass of wine for the same reason. We can't just go walking about... Why do our fathers have to have this stupid quarrel?" She looked up into Túrin's eyes pleadingly as if entreating him to come up with a solution to their problem.

Khorazir

Actually Túrin had hoped that she would come up with a clever idea. "This is indeed a rather unfortunate situation," he said, more to himself. "Well, we could stay here for a while," he continued aloud. "It's a fair evening, and here we should be quite undisturbed. Moreover I happen to have" – he rummaged in his cloak – "this with me." And he produced a bottle of wine and two pewter cups.

Meanwhile the horsemen had almost reached the Great Gate. The guards were just about to shut it. The riders increased their speed, and their captain drew forth a horn and blew a signal on it, ending in a long high note. The guards held in, and waited for the horsemen to enter the city.

Canamarth

A smile spread over the girl's face. "What have you got in mind, Túrin? Make me tipsy and then – what? You know that I'm not allowed to drink. My father implicitly forbade it."

Túrin's face was all innocence.

“Give it here,” she said and snatched a cup out of his hands. Túrin poured the wine and they toasted. She emptied her cup with one gulp.

“More! The stuff is delicious!”

Khorazir

“Whoa, don’t drink it too fast,” Túrin said without hiding a grin. “This is quite potent stuff down from Dor-en-Ernil. Father keeps it for special occasions. He won’t be happy when he finds out that I took a bottle. But I’m glad you like it.” With that he refilled her cup. Then he held in, and looked up. From down below he had heard a horn call.

“Hey, I know that signal,” he said after listening intently for a moment. “What a nice coincidence,” he went on with a smile. “Exactly when I’m in town for a while he comes as well! Hope we’ll meet one of these days.”

Then he looked back to the girl, who had almost emptied her cup again. “You know, if you go on at this speed, you’ll soon be more than tipsy. Not that I’d object,” he added under his breath.

Canamarth

The girl answered with a smile, then seized the bottle and helped herself to a third cup. “Who’s coming to the city?” she asked.

“The Steward’s son,” Túrin answered.

“Boromir?” she exclaimed, almost choking on the gulp of wine she had taken. “You know Boromir? You must introduce me to him. Come on, let’s go.” She got up, emptied the cup she was holding and threw it over her shoulder. It sailed over the wall and landed with a loud clang on a roof in the circle below. A dog started barking.

“Oh, Lossiel. You have a talent for getting us into trouble. Let’s get away from here.”

Khorazir

He drew his cloak about him more tightly again, took her arm, and together they left the small garden. Passing swiftly through some small streets amid stately houses, they approached the main street that led up from the lower circles. Lossiel seemed really excited, and kept babbling about Boromir and his great achievements of which she had heard. Túrin only smiled to himself, knowing that she was in for a surprise when they met the Steward’s son.

There were not many people about at this time (not in this part of Minas Tirith at least), but most windows in the surrounding houses were lit. Túrin sent his glance around while they waited. He knew most people who lived here. Many were friends of his family’s which was one of the more wealthy and influential in the city, his father being the Warden of the City’s Keys. Certainly it would get him into trouble if he was seen here in the company of Lossiel, daughter of a family his own was currently having a quarrel with.

Just when he thought that perhaps it would be wiser to step back a little into the shadows than stand openly in the street, he heard hoofbeat approaching, and soon a rider came into view.

Lossiel tucked at his cloak. “Is that him?” she asked nervously, and started fiddling with her hair.

Túrin grinned. “Yep. That’s the Steward’s son.”

The horseman had apparently spotted the two of them from afar, and recognised Túrin, for he urged his horse to a trot, and reined it when he was level with them. “Well met, Master Túrin,” he said with a broad smile. “’tis a pleasant surprise to meet you here. And your acquaintance, of course,” he added, inclining his head slightly to greet Lossiel.

Canamarth

Lossiel looked up at the figure in front of her, squinting slightly so as to better focus on him. The wine had started to take its toll.

“You’re not Boromir,” she at length exclaimed. “I saw him two or three times at festivities. He’s much more of a man than that.”

Khorazir

The horseman gave Túrin a quick, keen glance, upon which he blushed. Then the rider dismounted, and looked at Lossiel. “I am sorry to disappoint you, lady,” he said with a smile which implied that he was quite used to this kind of remark. “I am indeed not my brother. Faramir son of Denethor at your service,” he introduced himself, and bowed slightly. “And who may you be?”

“That’s Lossiel, the daughter of Lord Thorondur,” Túrin explained. They’re visiting the City for a few days, and during that time I ...well ... look after her.”

Lossiel started giggling.

Faramir raised an eyebrow at the two, and suppressed a grin. “An interesting way to put it, Túrin.”

“Well, you know me ...”

“Indeed I do. Be careful that her father does not find out. Or your father, as a matter of fact.”

“Oh, I shall,” Túrin said. “How long will you be staying in town?” he asked then. “It’s long since we last saw each other, and I’m sure there’s much to talk about.”

Faramir nodded. “Aye, indeed. But as for my staying here, that depends on the Steward. As I know him, he will send me off again as soon as possible. Boromir is down in Pelargir to oversee some work in the shipyards, and secure the coasts against new raids of the Corsairs of Umbar, so Osgiliath, Ithilien and the shores of Anduin are my charge at the moment. Most likely I will have to return there soon. I would like to stay here for a while, though. I need a rest. And have you seen Maradir lately? I have not heard of him for several months now. I wonder if he is alright.”

Canamarth

“Now that you say so, I haven’t seen him lately either. I think the last time we met was two weeks ago in some tavern. He said something about an errand which would lead him out of town for a while but he would not say more - as usual. You know how close he is when it comes to his job and...”

“Wait a second,” Lossiel interrupted and turned to Faramir. “You are Boromir’s brother? So, you are the Steward’s son after all. Delighted to meet you.” She moved a little closer to him and almost tripped over her own feet. Túrin caught her just in time.

“Ooops, sorry. I’m usually not that clumsy. Must be the wine.”

Khorazir

"I see Master Túrin is looking after you very well, my lady," Faramir said, and now he grinned broadly. "I hope you are enjoying your stay here."

Canamarth

"Definitely," she replied. "And what are you doing tonight, handsome?"

Khorazir

"Erm," Túrin said, and held her back when she tried to draw closer to Faramir, whose grin broadened even more.

"Well, actually I am on my way to the Steward to report to him what befell in Ithilien. Not something I look forward to, I can tell you. I think you are better off with Master Túrin here." Turning to his friend, he added. "I really must be off. You know Denethor. But perhaps we can meet later. Unless, of course, you have other things planned for tonight," he added with a mischievous smile, and a swift glance at Lossiel, who was beaming at him.

"Perhaps we'll go to the White Tree, down in the Third Circle," Túrin said. "The chance of somebody recognising us isn't that high down there. It'd be great if you managed to come, too."

Lossiel nodded fervently.

"I shall try," Faramir said and mounted. "Have a nice evening, you two." With that he nodded to them, and rode off.

He covered the rest of the way up to the Citadel at greater speed. In front of the tunnel leading up to the seventh gate he dismounted, and gave his horse to a groom. Then he swiftly ascended the tunnel. He knew that it was unwise to keep the Steward waiting, and most likely his father's mood was not bright due to recent developments along the borders. The guards at the gate let him pass silently, and thus he entered the court of the fountain. A few stars were mirrored in the softly rippling waters of the basin, and the silver tinkling of the fountain was the only sound that filled the cool nightair. Looking up, Faramir saw light issuing from the window of Denethor's chamber in the White Tower. Most other windows around were dark.

When he had drawn near to the entrance of the Tower, he saw a person issue from it, and walk towards the gate. It was a woman, and for some reason she looked familiar, although he could not recognise her features in the dim light. Moreover she had bowed her head, and was looking to the ground, as if lost in thought. When they were almost level, suddenly the woman looked up, beheld him, and froze as if in shock or surprise. And so did he.

Canamarth

Lossiel turned to Túrin. "The White Tree? Never heard of it. But I'm definitely up for it. Let's go!" She more or less dragged Túrin on for a few steps till he could make it clear to her that they were walking in the wrong direction. "Oh, sorry." She turned around, walked on for two or three steps, then abruptly halted and looked earnestly at Túrin. "You know what?" she said and drew closer to him.

"No."

"I love you." With that she suddenly gave him a passionate kiss, then unentangled herself from Túrin's embrace just as suddenly and strode on, leaving a somewhat baffled-looking man behind.

Oh dear, Túrin thought, *perhaps she should really be careful with more drink tonight*. Then his face split into a grin. *On the other hand ...* “Hey, Lossiel, wait for me!” he called, and ran a few paces to catch up with her again.

+++

Faramir, meanwhile, had overcome his first surprise. He was not sure, though, if he should be glad or troubled to meet her here. It had been almost two years now since they had met last, and her last letter he had received over a year ago. After that, suddenly, her messages had ceased, and he had not heard from her again for a long while – a fact which had quite astounded and grieved him, as they had entertained their relationship, or however else this could be called, having been deeper and more serious than mere friendship on the one, but no real love-affair on the other hand, since he had been 22. Looking at her now, he realised that his feeling for her had not changed, and he was not sure how to deal with that.

Surely she was still as beautiful as ever: her long wavy auburn hair arrayed in a simple braid, and not yet touched by any grey, although she was approaching her fiftieth year. Her face was more lined with care. Apparently there was something troubling her. Her keen green-grey eyes rested on him thoughtfully, and he thought he detected a trace of grief but also of uneasiness in them. It seemed as if she was not sure how to begin a conversation, either. When silence became unbearable, he took a deep breath, and said: “Hello Lindórië.”

She smiled slightly. “Hello Faramir.”

Again there was silence.

“I ... did not expect to meet you here. Your father did not mention your coming,” she said after a while.

“You have seen him?”

“Yes. Just a short while ago. That was the reason for my coming to Minas Tirith. I am sure you will learn about it soon.”

He looked at her questioningly. Her words had sounded rather serious. “Is everything alright in Lebennin?”

“No, it is not. But your father will tell you of it.”

He nodded, searching for something else to say. “What about you? I trust you are well?”

“I cannot complain. Although” – and now she looked into his eyes – “I have missed our correspondance. But I thought that perhaps you had your reasons for not writing anymore.”

“But I did write,” Faramir said swiftly. “Even when you did not answer. At first I thought that perhaps the errand-rider had lost the message. So I sent another. But when I did not receive an answer, not even in Nanimë ...”

“You were sure that I was not interested in you anymore,” she finished his sentence. He nodded slightly, upon which she shook her head, stepped a little closer to him, and took his hand. “You should have known better,” she said softly. “And so should I. Someone must have intercepted our correspondance, for I did write to you also, frequently. And for you to think that I had forgotten your birthday ...”. Suddenly she smiled slightly. “That would be the last thing to forget.”

He returned her smile, but then his face turned grave again. “Intercepted, you mean? Who should be interested in doing so? Tarannon? Do you think he knows?”

She snorted contemptuously. “I have seen my husband almost less than I have seen you lately, if that was possible. Not that I mourn this fact. No, Tarannon is hardly interested in me, now that there are so many corsairs to fight at the coasts. But honestly I would not put it beyond him to pay someone to have an eye on my doings, and my correspon-

dance. And there are others who might be interested in that as well.”

Canamarth

Lossiel more or less skipped all the way to The White Tree. It was a cosy and clean tavern but definitely no establishment she had ever been in before. Most customers seemed to be workers, honest people but somewhat below her standards.

Túrin sat her down in a quiet corner, ordered two glasses of wine and looked about him nervously to check if there was someone present who could recognise him. When he was satisfied that there was no immediate danger of being discovered he turned his attention back to Lossiel who sat in front of an empty glass of wine and beamed a radiant smile on him. “Can I have another one?”

Khorazir

“Sure, sweetheart,” Túrin said with a slight sigh, and signed to a waitress. He took a sip of his own wine, then edged closer to Lossiel and put an arm around her shoulders. “If we’re lucky, a minstrel will come and sing tonight, or some musicians from Morthond Vale. Perhaps there’ll even be dance. You like to dance, don’t you?”

+++

Faramir gave Lindórië a questioning glance. “Who?”

She shook her head slightly. “You shall learn soon enough,” she said. She looked up at the lighted window of Denethor’s chamber. “You should go and see the Steward now. He does not appreciate to be kept waiting.”

Faramir followed her gaze, then looked back at her and smiled. “Let him wait. He will most likely be furious already because I have reported only infrequently from Ithilien, and moreover not quite obeyed the last command he sent.” She looked at him gravely. “So things are still unchanged between you?”

Faramir shrugged a little dejectedly. “I can do what I want, he will never admit that I have done something right. Always he finds something he can criticise. By now I am quite accustomed to it, and try not to worry about it anymore.”

“And Boromir?” she asked.

“Gondor’s great hero? Father loves him dearly, as he has always done. And rightly so, I guess. He has achieved much lately, especially in South Ithilien.”

She studied him gravely, as if she tried to read in his eyes if he spoke in mockery or in earnest. At length she smiled warmly. “I admire you. I guess I would not be able to deal with the situation so easily.”

He cast down his eyes. “’tis not easy,” he said softly. Then he looked up again. “I guess I should really go.” He stepped a little closer to her. “When will I see you again? You are not leaving tomorrow, are you?”

“The day after tomorrow,” she answered. “And we will meet again tomorrow morning. Your father will tell you why. Good luck to you now.”

“Thank you. I need it. And a good night to you.”

“Thanks.”

There was an awkward silence as both stood looking at each other. Suddenly she stepped forward, embraced him, and kissed him lightly. Faramir was quite startled at this. So far they had always refrained from getting too close – the danger of being seen by prying eyes (of which the City had many) had been too great.

Before he could react in any way, she had already drawn back and walked away. He remained behind, his heart pounding furiously. It took him a while to gather his thoughts again sufficiently so as to go and face the Steward in an appropriate manner. Taking a deep breath, he finally turned, and entered the White Tower.

Canamarth

“I’d love to!” Lossiel exclaimed. “But if there’s no minstrel here, I might as well sing. I’ve got a good voice.” Before Túrin could form any answer to that, Lossiel had disentangled herself from Túrin’s embrace, climbed on the table and started singing a song. It was a merry tune and soon most people in the tavern joined in.

Khorazir

While Lossiel was singing merrily, Túrin took another look around. To his shock he saw that two young women had just entered the tavern, whom he recognised as servants of his mother’s. They eyed Lossiel curiously, and started whispering to each other. Lossiel took no heed of that, but Túrin shrank back into the shadows, trying to hide his face from the two.

+++

Even at the prospect of annoying his father further, Faramir did not hurry with ascending the stairs to the Steward’s chamber. He was confused, and for some reason troubled. The encounter with Lindórië had more than surprised him. And yet he was under the faint impression that it had not been a coincidence at all. Something seemed to be amiss in Lebennin, something serious. Why else would Lindórië consult the Steward? Yes, she was an old friend of the family’s, and one of the few persons Denethor would willingly accept counsel from (she had been his wife’s best and closest friend, and he esteemed her greatly), nevertheless her coming here was remarkable. She had visited the City only very rarely of late. Since her husband Tarannon who shared the rule over the fief of Lebennin with his brother Carandil was often abroad to hunt down outlaws or corsairs, or simply exercise his troops (as he delighted in warfare), she had more or less taken over the office. From what one heard she did an excellent job, much better than Tarannon. Yet she was hardly seen in council in Minas Tirith. Many of the other nobles were opposed to “women meddling with politics”, as Carandil had once put it, and did not take her seriously.

Faramir chased away the thoughts. Most likely he would learn about what exactly was going on soon. Having reached the door of the chamber, he took a deep breath, and knocked.

Canamarth

A round of applause followed Lossiel’s little performance. She courtseyed and scrambled back down on the bench next to Túrin where she emptied the new glass of wine. “Drinking makes one thirsty,” she said and started giggling for no apparent reason. “Túrin, why look you so concerned? Be merry and drink with me!”

Khorazir

“There are two of my mother’s servants over there,” Túrin said in a low voice. “I don’t know what they’ll do if they see the two of us together, but I wouldn’t put it beyond them to start gossiping about it. And you never know whose ears

such gossip will reach." He looked at her, and suddenly he smiled, and leaned forward to kiss her. "But perhaps we shouldn't worry about it too much tonight. I guess you'd like another glass of wine?" Her eyes shone. "Thought so," Túrin muttered with a grin, and signed to the waitress.

+++

"Enter," came Denethor's curt voice from within the chamber. Faramir braced himself, and opened the door. The room was lit by the candles on the Steward's desk, which was littered with papers and books. Denethor himself was sitting behind it poring over what looked like a letter. He did not look up when Faramir stepped in and closed the door again. The old man was dressed in his usual plain, dark-grey robes. An untouched meal stood beside him on a small table. When Faramir studied his father's face, he thought it looked more lined since he had seen him last.

"Good evening, father," he said after a while in which Denethor had taken no notice of him.

"You come late," came as a reply. Denethor folded the letter and put it aside, leaned back in his chair, folded his hands in front of his chest, and finally faced his son. His piercing dark eyes studied him keenly. "I take it you have met Lindórië downstairs."

"Yes, I have. She told me she has been to see you, and that I would learn the reason for her visit to Minas Tirith from you."

Still Denethor's eyes rested on him. As always, Faramir was under the impression that his father could read his innermost thoughts and feelings, and right now he was far from happy about this. He had, over the years, hardened his will against this, and could endure Denethor's penetrating stare better than most, but nevertheless he now soon cast down his eyes. "As indeed you shall," Denethor said suddenly. "In due time. First we will discuss what befell in Ithilien. There are some aspects of your latest errand you better explain to me at once, for else I shall be holden to think that you set at naught my commands out of pure whim."

Faramir nodded somewhat dejectedly, sat down on a low stool, and started to recount the latest events, trying to justify his decision, and knowing at the same time that it was futile.

Canamarth

Just when Lossiel had finished the next glass of wine, her eyes suddenly became wide and she looked at Túrin. "There are strange mists creeping into the tavern."

Túrin looked around but could not see any mists apart from the infrequent inhalations of somebody smoking a pipe. "My love, there are no mists in here. What are you talking about?"

Lossiel slowly got up, swayed back and forth a moment, then collapsed onto the table where she lay unconscious.

Khorazir

"Oh no!" Túrin took a furtive look around, but apparently no one had taken note of them. Swiftly he drew her to a seat beside him, so that her head rested on his shoulder, and started patting her cheeks to revive her. But she did not stir. "Come on, Lossiel," he murmured.

Just then the waitress passed by. "Er, excuse me," he called to her. "Do you also offer rooms? I think the lady is not feeling well, and would like to lie down for a while."

"Aye, we do indeed offer rooms. I shall have one prepared for you," the maid said with a slight grin.

Túrin did not heed it. "Thank you," he said, and turned his attention back to Lossiel.

+++

Faramir had expected his father to get far more angry at him than he had actually done. Nevertheless it had been enough. When Denethor thought he had sufficiently scolded his son for his latest failure, he looked at him again keenly, and said: "And now we shall come to the matter of Lindórië."

Faramir looked up – a little too quickly than he had wanted to. He could see that Denethor took notice. But he did not comment on it.

"I know not what she has told you already. It seems that things are not well in Lebennin. There is much activity of corsairs along the coasts, and lately a band of outlaws has taken over the main road to Minas Tirith. Tarannon and Carandil are busy with fighting the corsairs, thus Lindórië has called upon the Steward to send her aid against the robbers." He paused, taking a sip of wine. "That, at least, is the official reason for her coming."

Faramir gave him a questioning glance. "And what is the unofficial one?"

Denethor studied him. "What do you know of the Lords of Lebennin?"

Faramir shrugged. "Well, they have the office since their father died some two years ago. Both are friends of Falastur of Pelargir, and thus opposed to the Lords of Dol Amroth – and the Steward."

"Exactly," Denethor said. "Of course they do not dare to voice their opinions openly, not in council, at least, but 'tis well known to me that Falastur despises the House of Húrin, as well as that of Dol Amroth. In his case I dare say he has his reasons," he added thoughtfully. "Anyway," he continued aloud, "although those three might loathe the way I rule this realm, neither has ever opposed me. Not openly, at least. Not yet openly. For I know from reliable source that there have been secret discussions amongst Tarannon and others of like mind about the future of Gondor. A future without a Steward, but with a king, perhaps."

"A king?" Faramir asked surprisedly. "Do you think they want to claim the Kingship?"

"Why does that surprise you? There are dark times ahead, with the Shadow ever spreading in the East. In those times people crave for a strong leader, and would willingly support whoever rises to lead them."

"I doubt that there are still people in Gondor who earnestly believe that the King shall ever return," Faramir said. "You would be surprised," Denethor said softly, and a strange light came to his eyes. "Be that as it may," he then continued, "there are many amongst the nobles who think that they are up to this task, and that 'tis high time for someone to take the initiative and reclaim the Kingship. Some have a better claim to the throne than others. Falastur, for example, reckons his chances to be quite good. The fool. Neither Dol Amroth nor I nor most of the other nobles would ever accept him in such a position."

"Well, Imrahil has a pretty good claim himself, has he not?" Faramir said. "As has Boromir."

"As he has indeed," Denethor said. "And he knows that. And yet there are others who may have an even better claim than he."

"Who?" Faramir asked astonishedly, but his father did not answer. Instead he looked at him gravely.

"I guess you can see what it would lead to if one of us did indeed claim the throne of Gondor for himself."

Faramir nodded slightly. "Civil war," he said softly. "The nobles would start fighting amongst themselves, in a time when we can least afford it. Such a strife would greatly weaken the realm. We would be playing into the hands of the Shadow."

Canamarth

She was breathing regularly so there apparently was nothing seriously wrong with her. Túrin tried to wake her but she showed no reaction.

At length, the waitress came back and told him to follow her to a room upstairs. There was no other alternative than to carry Lossiel up the stairs. Túrin shouldered her and tried to make his way through the room as inconspicuously as possible but people turned around and followed him with their eyes.

“A fine lass you got yourself there,” one man cried and laughed heartily. The two servants also looked over and one of them seemed to recognise Túrin who looked into the other direction hastily and muttered an oath under his breath. Upstairs he laid Lossiel softly on the bed. She looked so peaceful and beautiful when she was asleep. He started wondering if he should take off her shoes – or anything else for that matter – when she stirred and woke.

“Where am I?” she asked looking around irritably.

EdaintheRanger

As Faramir discussed affairs of state and other lofty matters with his father, Andanor was hastening to a meeting with his. For at that moment he had just left the Guardhouse. “The Guardhouse” being an Inn that also doubled as a meeting place for the Ithilien rangers when they were blessed with leave from their duties outside the resolutely fair citadel of Minas Tirith. He had changed from his drab ranger garb, to that of a lesser noble, as befitting his stature as one of the exiled heirs of the Ithilien estates. Donning his Green cloak, one so dark that in the shadow of the Inn, it could be called “black”, and tucking his grey, (tooled with just a hint of silver) gauntlets into his narrow black belt, he bid goodbye to his comrades and giving the closest man a hearty slap on the back he set off to his goal.

Ascending with a spring in his step, through the city to the third circle Andanor adjusted his padded blue doublet and brushed the dust from his brown bucket top boots, he attempted to smarten his appearance, reminiscing on past scoldings, Father was fussy about such matters! Satisfied with his countenance he having reached the house that had been given to them by Lord Denethor’s Father, as a “temporary dwelling” till Ithilien could be recovered, he went in and asked to see Anthador.

With due brief ceremony, they met in the offices near the south facing windows and Andanor was shocked to see that his father’s leg was no better than it had been six weeks past, when he had last seen him. Anthador was sitting at the stout table, his heavily bandaged leg resting on a footstool. His father spoke in grave tones. “Son, it looks as though my time as a Ranger are over, my valour is spent. The Healers have done all they can...” at this his voice trailed off and he looked out the window, trying to conceal the fact that his eyes were misting with tears. Andanor moved to sit at the table and tried to console his father.

“No, there is nothing you can do for me, except do me proud!”, Anthador’s voice regained its vigour with the empathise on the last phrase. “Go to the glass case in the front room and bring me my sword.” he commanded his son. With no further ado Andanor fetched the weapon, and went to hand it to his father.

“Nay, lad,” Anthador said, pushing it away “Its yours. May it serve you as it did I!”

Andanor nodded a silent thanks to his father before saying, “Could you give me anymore advice? I have only reached my second year in the service as a Ranger.” He looked to his father for guidance.

At this Anthador gave a warm smile, “That is advice enough, several merely last a few months, never mind years! Remember my words and your book learning and most importantly your heart. They will serve you better than any glib phrases I could give you now. Take the blade, and return to the White tower, I’m sure Denethor the stern coz he is, would find business for you!”

With his father’s words ringing in his ears Andanor left, (after bidding a short greeting and another long farewell to

his mother.) Making his way to the White Tree, where he could grab a quick meal, and ponder on his future.

Khorazir

"You're in a room at the White Tree," Túrin answered. "You ... er ... lost consciousness down there, and I thought I'd better bring you somewhere where you can rest. How are you feeling?"

+++

"Aye, we would indeed," Denethor said gravely. "And that is why such ideas must by all means be quenched."

His son nodded slightly, and there was silence for a while. Then Faramir looked at his father again. "You believe, then, that Tarannon has such plans? I cannot imagine that he considers himself a suitable candidate."

"I do not think he wants to become King himself. But he commands a strong force, and entertains relations to those who do have plans concerning the future of the realm which do not correspond with mine. Moreover I have reason to believe that his dealings with the corsairs are not all of a hostile kind."

Faramir studied him thoughtfully. "But you have no proofs yet, have you? Proofs that would enable you to cause measurements against him."

Denethor gave him a keen glance, and suddenly smiled faintly. "I see you have exercised your ability to read in people's faces and minds. Yes, I cannot prove indeed that Tarannon and his friends plot treason. I do have my spies who provide me with information –"

"Is Lindórië one of them?" Faramir fell in.

Denethor gave him a long glance. "One of the most valuable I have," he said after a while. "But her position in Lebennin has become somewhat endangered. Tarannon may not be the brightest of men, but he has begun to get suspicious about her dealings with the Steward, and the way she runs his fief."

"Yes, she mentioned something of the kind," Faramir agreed thoughtfully. He gazed at his father. "Do you think she is in danger?"

"Not yet. But she may be, soon. And she is prepared to face it. Yet although she can look after herself pretty well, she may need help."

"Is that why you are telling me all this?" Faramir asked.

Denethor nodded slightly. "Do you think I have not noticed what is going on between you? You managed to keep it secret for a long time, but I guess that this over now, is it not?"

"It seems that someone intercepted our correspondance," Faramir said quietly.

"Is that so?" Denethor said, and there was a trace of mockery in his voice. "This is unfortunate for you indeed, in regard of her and your reputation. But it may come in very handy for what I have in mind concerning Tarannon."

Canamarth

Lossiel tried to sit up but halfway there she decided that lying was the better option. The spinning of the room was much easier to bear that way. She looked at Túrin who gave her a concerned look.

"I'm fine, I guess. Just a little - uh - weak?"

She extended an arm, Túrin clasped her hand and she pulled slightly so that he was forced to sit down on the bed beside her.

“Kiss me goodnight, sweetheart and then we shall sleep next to each other just like brother and sister.”

EdaintheRanger

With his head bowed in thought as he made his way up the cobbled streets of the Third Circle Andanor, wandered if Faramir would come down to “The White Tree” later this evening as he had suggested he might. Then with a rueful smile as he remembered the last leave they had had, Faramir could off load his problems to his lieutenant. It always made Andanor feel better as he watched the invisible load lifted from his Captain’s shoulders, as Faramir would first speak seriously about his duties to Gondor and Lord Denethor, before after about the fifth ale, move to the affairs of his pining heart.

Then the noise from the Tavern sprang to his ears and Andanor’s face was bathed in the orange glow from fire and candles lit within, the warm drafts seemed friendly as they struck his cold face. Night was falling in Minas Tirith. As he opened the door two young serving girls curtsied as they made their leave, giggling and whispering to each other as they weaved their way down the street. It seemed rather merry in the White Tree that e’en, and he smiled, although this was a rustic place, the beer was good and the company unpretentious. Thinking of beer, brought his Father to mind again as Andanor recalled how his father was always trying to get him to drink wine as befitted the nobleman he was. “Beer is a oaf’s drink” he used to say. The booming voice of the landlord was the next thing Andanor heard,

“What are you saying that my Ale is not good enough for you!?” and Andanor coloured slightly as he realised that he must have echoed his father’s words aloud.

“No, No” he countered, thinking on his feet “Beer is truly the drink of princes. For in a land far from here, be-crowned halflings with woolly feet sup each other’s health with a mug of foaming ale!”

The whiskered Landlord pondered this ridiculous statement for a second, before giving a bellowing laugh. “Well said.” he said as he plonked a heavy tankard in Andanor’s hand.

EdaintheRanger

Sitting at a nearby table, next to the stairwell, Andanor could see that a well dressed man, who could have been one of his peers, carrying an obviously noble, and more conspicuously a pretty lady upstairs. He looked away, suddenly finding great interest in the pommel of his sword. He could be discrete when decorum demanded. Sipping his ale he lifted his father’s sword on to the table for a closer inspection. Admiring the clever tracery of an intertwined white tree with the leaf of Ithilien and tutting at the state of the weathered leatherwork on the scabbard.

Tugging on a barmaid skirts, Andanor, gained her attention before bantered his way to a cheaper meal. As he watched her walk back into the kitchen, he tugged his rebellious curl straight before letting it spring back into its spiral shape. Listening to the talk in the tavern as he wiled the evening away.

asaris

Curufë rode up to the gates of Minas Tirith with the small group of merchants he had been traveling with. They had paid him fairly well for protection – not that the road between Dol Amroth and Minas Tirith was particularly dangerous, but a group of merchants was conspicuously vulnerable, and even the mere sight of one high elf would deter much that might happen. Curufë didn’t usually go for this sort of thing, but some extra money was always handy, and he was on his way to Minas Tirith anyway. He had thought to stop by the city before heading back to Imladris. It’s been

almost 100 years since I've been back, Curufë thought. I wonder how Elrond's children are doing. After the fell winter, Curufë had wanted nothing more than to go somewhere south, and he had not been to Dol Amroth in a very long time. "Where's a good place to stay in this city?" Curufë asked the merchants. "Try the White Tree," one of them suggested. So Curufë entered the city and rode up to the recommended tavern.

Upon reaching the inn, Curufë left his horse with the stableboy and walked inside. It was a humble place; clean and cozy but not much else. Nevertheless, it would do. At the moment it seemed quite busy – there was even someone carrying his girlfriend up the stairs(who, it seemed, had had too much to drink). Curufë scanned the area for an open table.

Khorazir

"Uh ... well, whatever you wish," Túrin murmured. In truth he was not weary at all, and the "brother and sister" thing also irritated him, but he saw that it would be unwise to just leave her like that. Thus he took off his shoes, belt and tunic and lay down next to her. He wondered what her parents would say if she did not show up this night. His own were quite used to the fact that he was away much, and fortunately did not inquire about where he spent his nights. He put an arm around Lossiel's shoulders as she snuggled up to him. Brother and sister indeed, he thought, and snorted slightly.

+++

Faramir had pricked up his ears at his father's remark. "Come in handy?" he asked suspiciously. "What for?"

"To get at Tarannon. Of late he has not been at home much, which is why Lindórië is not very well informed about his doings. We do have others sources of information, of which I will not speak now, but the truth is that to observe him and his doings more closely, we need him at home."

"And how can I be of any service for you in this matter?" Faramir asked carefully, a dark foreboding stirring in him, as well as slight anger. "Accompany Lindórië back to Lebennin and act as her lover, and see to it that Tarannon learns of it?"

Denethor only looked at him evenly. "I would not have put it like that."

Faramir looked at him partly shocked, and partly angry. "You really mean that, do you not?"

His father leaned forward in his chair, and fixed him with a keen glance. "Tarannon may not care much for his wife, but he is known to be extremely jealous, and to lose temper easily. If his mind is thus occupied, he is less likely to concentrate on other things, and more likely to make mistakes. So far he has been very careful when it came to concealing his treacherous plots, too careful for me to get at him. But if he is distracted, if he is enraged, this might lead him to some rashness. I know him well. Your presence down there would disturb him greatly. And others besides."

Faramir returned his gaze steadily. "And what if I refuse?" he asked.

Denethor's eyes hardened. "You would not refuse to obey a command! Not even you! And surely you see the necessity of the venture."

Faramir felt his anger increase. "But you see not what this would mean to Lindórië and me," he returned fiercely. "Has she agreed to that? I cannot imagine she has, or would. I know you think that you can use everybody for your shrewed plans, not caring about their feelings, but it seems that this time you are mistaken."

Denethor's eyes blazed. "I will not suffer you to speak to me like that," he hissed menacingly. "You will do as I say, or I shall see to it that your relationship to Lindórie comes to an end here and now."

Faramir was about to make a sarcastic remark, but when he met his father's gaze, he swallowed his words. Denethor

really meant what he had said, and it was plain to see that he would find ways to contrive it. They looked at each other for a long time, until Faramir cast down his eyes.

“Tomorrow at noon I will meet again with Lindórië to discuss our proceedings,” Denethor said at length. “I want you to be present also. Go now, and use the night to think about where your loyalties lie.” With that he turned back to his papers.

Faramir rose and without another look at his father left the chamber. He was still boiling inwardly when he rushed down the stairs, yet at the same time deeply troubled. When he had reached the court of the fountain, he slowed his pace. What now? He was in no mood to go down to the White Tree now to spend the evening in merry company. On the other hand, to be alone with his thoughts did not seem very pleasant, either. Thus in the end he decided to visit the inn. Túrin usually managed to cheer him up again, and perhaps he would meet some others he knew also.

Canamarth

Lossiel had hardly lain still ten minutes when she suddenly more or less jumped out of bed, giving Túrin a terrible start. She clutched her head, moaning slightly, then looked about her.

“What am I doing here? Why are you... without tunic...” She looked around bewildered then suddenly some sort of memory seemed to dawn upon her again. “Did I drink wine?”

Khorazir

When the first shock had passed, Túrin sat up, and grinned. “Well, I would not call it drinking ... quaffing may be a better description. But it seems that you’re feeling better now.” He picked up his tunic and belt and put them on again. “I can assure you that nothing happened you could get into trouble for. As you requested, we just lay here side by side like brother and sister.”

+++

When he had almost reached the gate of the Citadel, Faramir realised that he was still wearing his ranger-garments. Thus he turned round and made for his quarters, where he washed and put on some plain dark-blue tunic and dark trowsers. Then he walked down to the Third Circle, not very swiftly. He was lost in thought, and still more than angry at his father, even more so because he knew that his plan was a good one, and might even work. But he loathed the way the Steward used others for his plots – in this case himself. And what could he do? Did he have a choice at all? If he refused – no, he did not want to think about what would happen then. And if he yielded ... However things went, it seemed clear that his relationship with Lindórië would come to an end. And had there been ever hope that it would be otherwise? Had it not been hopeless from the very beginning, and had he not known that all the time?

He almost walked past the inn. There seemed to be a merry company gathered inside. Laughter and snatches of song whafted out to him. For a moment he hesitated, then he took a deep breath, and stepped inside. Scanning the tables and corners for Túrin and Lossiel, he could not find them. Then his eyes fell on a familiar figure sitting alone at a table next to the stairwell. He smiled, and made his way over to Andanor.

EdaintheRanger

Who was halfway through his second tankard of ale. Just as he was about to raise it to his lips Andanor looked towards the door, and saw his fair captain pensively entering the inn. The ale sank to the table forgotten as Andanor grey eyes brightened as he rose to greet his comrade and friend.

“Oh Please sit down Andanor, we are not in the field here,” Faramir spoke feeling slightly self-conscious.

“If my Lord wills it.” Andanor said with mock gravity, before bursting into a broad grin, “Now my friend, sit! Rest your toils and what are you having this fine e’en?” Andanor enquired of the troubled guy.

Khorazir

“I shall go for a glass of wine,” Faramir said, and signed to a waitress. Then he glanced at Andanor, who was watching him curiously, and seemed to be waiting for him to speak up. Apparently Faramir’s troubles were plain to read in his face. “Well, it seems our leave is going to be short,” he said at length. “The Steward has another errand for me. I do not know yet how many men I shall have to take with me – as a matter of fact, I do not even know if I will take the errand –, but I think ‘tis better for you to be prepared to set out again soon.” He took another glance around. “By the way, have you seen a young noble around here, with brown hair, dressed in a hooded cloak, and accompanied by a young lady in a green dress?”

EdaintheRanger

Andanor’s face fell slightly at Faramir’s mention of a short leave, but he told Faramir that a night in a soft, warm bed would be rest enough. Then his smile returning in a sly form he said “Speaking of beds,” pausing to prolong the moment, “I think I have seen, the fellow of whom you speak, a noble of about our age, whom I seem to recall from somewhere is indeed on these premises. He was carrying a fair maiden over his shoulder. Here’s me thinking I that courtship was dead in these darker days!” Andanor touched Faramir’s arm at this, as if to discourage him from springing up in search of the lovers.

While he waited for Faramir to reply or go in search of the couple, Andanor hailed the barmaid and bided her to fetch a carafe of the best red wine in the house. As he attempted not to watch her saunter back to the bar, he shifted his focus back to Faramir, his expression solumn, but with a bright light in his eyes.

Canamarth

“Like brother and sister?” Lossiel frowned. “You mean I said that? I must have been far gone. As to how I’m feeling now... I’m not really decided yet. My head hurts and I feel a little bit unsure on my feet. But my head is clear again. I don’t recall anything really from the moment we left the garden. I mean, I know we came here - The White Tree, isn’t it? But as to what I said or did...” Her voice trailed off and she tried to see from Túrin’s reaction if she had misbehaved in any way. But he only looked at her with an uncomprehending frown.

“Oh, don’t worry. I mean, about me. Things like that happen every time I drink too much – which is – uh – everything more than one glass of wine. But once I tasted that glass I can’t get myself to stop...”

asaris

Curufë noted Faramir walking in, and walked over to say hi to his friend. They had met while Curufë was in Dol Amroth – Faramir had visited that city more than once, and Imrahil had introduced the two. Curufë clapped Faramir on the shoulder in greeting and said, “Faramir! It’s good to see you here.”

Khorazir

“Yeah, I’ve noticed that,” Túrin muttered. “Well, what now? I don’t think you’d like to stay up here. So how about going down to the common room again? There seems to be a merry company gathered there.”

+++

Faramir had grinned broadly at Andanor’s words. “Well, this sounds indeed like my friend Túrin. I do not think we can reckon with him showing up any time soon.”

Then he felt a clap on his shoulder, and heard a familiar voice. He turned and looked up, and swiftly rose to greet Curufë. “Hail and well met, dear friend,” he said with a smile. “’tis indeed good to see you – and quite a surprise.” He introduced Andanor and the Noldo, then offered Curufë a seat at their table, which the Elf accepted.

As usual with the Noldo around, Faramir felt extremely humbled and unimportant. He had marvelled to hear how long Curufë had already dwelt in Middle-Earth (and before that in Beleriand), and what he had seen and experienced in his long life.

“Tell me, do you come from Dol Amroth now?” he asked the Elf. “How is my uncle doing? And what brings you to the City?”

Canamarth

“Yes, I think we should go downstairs again. I need something to drink.”

Túrin raised his eyebrows. “Do you really think that is a good idea?”

“Water. I need water,” Lossiel said and moved towards the door. “And I suggest you put on your shoes and tunic before you follow me.”

She went down the stairs and waited for Túrin at its base. He appeared not long after her, readjusting his belt as he descended and looking around for the two servant girls. He felt relief surge through him when he saw that their table was empty and a smile started to spread on his face. It however froze when he met Faramir’s gaze who sat at a table with some companions.

Khorazir

Faramir’s face split into a broad grin, but he refrained from uttering a comment, simply nodding to Túrin to come over to join them. Then he turned his attention back to Curufë to await his answer.

asaris

“Your uncle is doing well – he is in the most excellent health, and Dol Amroth has never been so prosperous. You are looking well yourself, Faramir. Truly the blood of Numenore runs true in your veins. As for myself, I thought I should head back to Rivendell. It has been some time since I have been there, and my heart tells me I will be needed there soon. Now, what news is there in the guarded city?”

Khorazir

“Well, perhaps you should ask my friend Túrin about that,” Faramir said nodding towards Túrin who still stood at their table a little undecidedly, apparently waiting for Lossiel to state if she would like to join the others or not. “I myself have only just returned from an errand,” Faramir continued, “which confined me to Ithilien for over a month. So I am certainly not up to date when it comes to talk and gossip in the City.”

EdaintheRanger

Andanor had greeted Curufë with smile one that did not reach his eyes. Although he had met a few Elves on his travels and his duties with the rangers, he held a distrust of those not of Gondor, a distrust that was common amongst the Humans of these parts. Andanor however judged people by their actions not their appearances and he sincerely hoped that Faramir’s judgement held true as far as Curufë went.

Greetings over Andanor quaffed his ale, but decided against another, he would need his wits to be clear enough come the morn. He slid his mug away from him and listened to the conversation. Then he spied the noble whom he had seen on entering the tavern, was hovering near the table. Andanor pondered this for a second before he noticed the beautiful woman who had accompanied the noble (who he now knew to be Túrin) standing at the foot of the stairs. His smile broadened and quipped to Túrin, “I’m sure you wish to stand on your honour, but are you not so gracious as to introduce us to your fine lady? Obviously if it is a indelicate situation then, no word will leave my lips, that I’ll grant you.” Andanor finished with a wink.

Khorazir

Túrin had watched the Elf with great interest and no little astonishment, which was increased by the fact that Faramir seemed to know him. Upon hearing Andanor address him, he was startled out of his thoughts. “You’re right, Master, I’m not being courteous,” he said with a slight smile. He lightly tapped Lossiel on the shoulder to make her turn to him -- she also was staring at the Elf with unveiled wonder in her eyes.

“I dimly recall having seen you before,” Túrin said. “You’re one of Faramir’s rangers, right? Well, I really hope you won’t mention it to others if I tell you who she is.” He lowered his voice. “This is the Lady Lossiel, Lord Thorondur’s daughter, down from the Ethir Anduin. My name is Túrin. I’m a good friend of Faramir.”

“Indeed you are,” Faramir fell in with a smile. “Why do you not join us, Túrin – and you too, Lossiel, if you are willing. I am sure the others will not object.”

Canamarth

Lossiel nodded absentmindedly, still gaping at the Elf. She sat down next to Faramir and turned to Túrin. “Could you get me some water?”

He complied immediately and ordered a jug of water to be brought to their table. The whole assembly watched when Lossiel gulped down two glasses of water in a matter of moments. Then she looked up, astonished that all were looking at her. Blushing, she muttered: “I’m sorry. I was thirsty.”

Khorazir

“So it seems,” Faramir muttered, casting a quick glance at Túrin. “Well, although my friends now know who you are,

you have not heard their names yet. This is Andanor, my lieutenant in Ithilien, and a good friend. And this is Curufë, who has just come from Dol Amroth.”

Turning to Túrin, he added: “Túrin, Curufë has inquired about what has befallen in the City recently, and I told him that you might know more about that than I.”

Túrin shrugged. “Well, I’ve picked up a few things in the last weeks, for sure. What do you want to know, Curufë?”

EdaintheRanger

Before Túrin, could continue Andanor confessed that while the Lady Lossiel was thirsty, he was hungry and would the others join him in a light repast, as he would think it rude if he didn’t at least offer.

“Well as one of Faramir’s rangers, I don’t get to mix with such esteemed company often, so I would be glad to hear tales of the city, anything to relieve the monotony of yet another patrol.”

At this comment from his comrade Faramir raised an eyebrow, as their patrols tended to be anything but dull. Andanor then listened to Túrin’s words with interest.

Canamarth

Lossiel more than welcomed Andanor’s suggestion. Wondering what an Elf would want to know about Minas Tirith she sat back to listen.

asaris

“What does an elf want to hear?” Curufë asked rhetorically, in answer to the unspoken gazes, and laughing a little. “The same as men, I should imagine. News, gossip, that sort of thing.”

Khorazir

“Gossip, eh?” Túrin said with a grin. “Well, if I’m not mistaken the latest gossip will be that the son of Húrin of the Keys has been spotted in the company of Lord Thorondur’s daughter, which some people may find remarkable, as these lords tend to not to get along with each other very well.” He went on to relate rumours about other nobles he had picked up, and spoke about planned and cancelled weddings, affairs that those involved had tried to conceal and had failed, about the sudden fire in the shipyards at Harlond that noone had been able to explain, but which had only claimed the lives of a cage of chickens, about the attempted burglary at a crude weapon-shop belonging to a guy who called himself Gothmog that had been foiled by the prompt appearance of the City Watch, and about the latest brawl at the recently resurrected “Troll’s Nose”, the most disreputable tavern in all of Minas Tirith, which had almost caused the whole thing to burn down again.

“And did you know that Lord Carandil of Lebennin has had something with one of his servant-girls?” he asked excitedly. “He had this affair going on for months, until unfortunately his wife found out about it. She must have been really furious, according to what I heard, and actually cast him out, so that he had to take refuge at his brother’s, who was down at the coasts fighting corsairs. But by now it seems they’ve got the matter sorted out, and he was allowed to return home.” Túrin grinned mischievously. “Imagine the shame!”

asaris

“Lebennin...” Curufë mused, half to himself, before continuing, “What of the steward, your lord father? Is he in good health?”

Khorazir

When Túrin spoke about Carandil’s misfortune, Faramir had listened attentively. This information might come in useful, he thought, and immediately reminded himself that as yet he had not agreed to take the errand. So why should he bother? But deep inside him the decision had already been made. And it was not that he had much of a choice anyway, was it?

When Curufë addressed him, he was startled out of his musings. “My father ... yes, he is in good health, I think.”

Denethor’s face appeared before his inner eye. He had noticed the lines on it which grew ever deeper, and which could not be explained by age alone. True, Denethor was old in the reckoning of common men, but not so much for someone of Númenorean descent. To his son he seemed aged before his time, a fact which worried him.

“I have not seen him much lately,” he went on. “Well, but you know him. Even if he was not well, he would never admit it to others – or himself. For years now he has hardly granted himself a respite. I sometimes wonder how he manages to still keep going.”

EdaintheRanger

Andanor remained quiet as he listened to the conversation on the affairs of state and the local information that was trading back and forth. He noted that Faramir was a little troubled and hoped that he would be like his father as he got older. Andanor was finding it hard to divide his attention between Faramir whom he admired, but liked to look out for and Lossiel whom was charming as she was pretty. Andanor found it hard to maintain his gentlemanly demeanor and not just gawp at her. Somehow he managed and was somewhat relieved when the food came.

Tucking into his meal Andanor, made polite conversation with Túrin and offered to get another round of drinks, before remembering what he had observed as he entered the inn, and hastily changed his mind and ordered a carafe of water for them all instead.

Canamarth

Lossiel listened to Túrin and Faramir in silence, occasionally sipping her water. She realised that Andanor was looking at her so she met his gaze and smiled back politely, while at the same time snuggling closer to Túrin. She was definitely not feeling too bold anymore. “Do you really think we were seen together tonight, Túrin?” she whispered into his ear. “You know that I’m in deep trouble should my father ever find out. And I don’t want to know what will be in store for you – if only a tenth of what my father told me about yours is true.”

Khorazir

“Oh, don’t worry about me,” Túrin said, putting an arm around her shoulder and smiling at her encouragingly (more so than he actually felt). “My father may be stern at times, but he’s just. And surely he’s not as bad as your father makes him.”

"We shall see to it that you will not get into any trouble, lady," Faramir said with a smile. "I guess all of us will agree when asked that we have not seen him in your company all evening," he added, nodding at Túrin, who scowled jestfully in return.

Cynara

Alessya smiled over at the group sitting at the far table "You know, if you charged more for water, I'm willing to bet you could get my full might's wages out of them over there." She commented to the barkeeper, grabbing another jug of cool, clear water. After only working two weeks at the White Tree, she already knew the ropes. Putting on her most vapid, empty-headed smile, she walked over to the table. "Here's your water!" she chimed sweetly. "Anything else?"

Khorazir

"I should like some food as well," Faramir said. Watching Andanor eat had reminded him how hungry he was himself – it had been quite some time since last he had had a bite. "The same as he has, please." He looked into the round. "Anybody else?"

Túrin nodded. "Yep. I'm starving. What about you, sweetheart?" he then asked Lossiel, but she only shook her head, turning slightly pale. Túrin gave her a pitiful glance. "Two meals, then," he said, turning to the maid. He studied her for a moment. "You're new here, aren't you?"

EdaintheRanger

"Well I don't know about new, but I reckon she looks bored to me! Túrin " Andanor said across to his new-found comrade, a little louder than he had intended. Realising this Andanor tried to cover his indiscretion with a warm smile, in the direction of the "Barmaid".

Previously Andanor in between eating and gazing into middle distance. Andanor had merely a wistful smile on his lips as he admired the rapport that so obviously lay between Lossiel and Túrin. He was secretly glad in an ambevilous way, however that his life wasn't so perilously "star crossed". Deep down he was a simple man after all.

Cynara

"Two meals, sure." she said to Faramir and Turin. Then she turned to the rude one smiling sweetly, and leaned close to him. "New, not bored." she whispered, and flicked him between the eyes. With another smile, she left to get the two meals, but not before a tremor of what looked to be sarcastic humour disturbed her vacant expression.

Khorazir

Túrin had watched the barmaid with a grin. "Well, seems to be an interesting lady. I wonder where she comes from." Then his grin faded, when his gaze met Lossiel's who gave him a sharp glance and then looked demonstratively away to fix her eyes on the Elf instead.

"Interesting tales, Túrin," Faramir said to bridge the uncomfortable silence which had developed. "Especially the bit about Carandil."

“Yeah,” Túrin agreed. “I daresay this did him good. Haughty guy. My father doesn’t like him.” Suddenly he seemed to remember something. “Speaking of Lebennin, Faramir,” he said mysteriously, not quite able to hide his excitement, “guess whom I saw in town yesterday.”

Faramir studied him. “I think I know what you want to tell me.”

Túrin looked a little disappointed. “You’ve heard of it already?”

“No, I met her on my way to the Steward,” Faramir said shortly, giving Túrin a swift, warning glance to prevent him from pursuing the topic further. Túrin, however, chose not to take notice. He looked at his friend, his eyes shining with curiosity. “And, what did she say?” His face split into a grin. “Did she recognise you at all?”

“Yes, she did.”

“So things are still the same between you? That’s so nice. I mean, how long has this been going now? Five years, six?”

“Seven,” Faramir murmured, blushing slightly as he felt the eyes of his companions upon him. “Honestly, Túrin, I would prefer not to discuss these matters here and now.”

Túrin raised an eyebrow. “Why that? You’re among friends here. I mean, I don’t keep my relationships secret, either.”

“Do you not think that this is a little different?”

Túrin shrugged. “Not really, no. You know, I think it would do you good to talk about these things now and again.”

Faramir gave him a long glance. “Perhaps. But not now.”

Canamarth

Lossiel looked from one to the other and when a short silence ensued she asked Túrin quietly: “He has a girlfriend?”

Khorazir

“Well,” Túrin answered in a low voice, “I don’t know if one can call it that way. Their relationship seems to be somewhat ... I don’t know. Difficult. But there’s someone, certainly. Unfortunately, as you see,” he added pointedly, “lordship is very close about it.”

“For good reason, as even you will admit,” Faramir returned. “But as things are, I think you will not have to wait long before you shall get to know more about it than you may wish. All of Gondor will know.” There was unmistakable bitterness in his voice. “Come to think of it,” he then continued, “since you are so eager to stick your nose into people’s personal matters, you may be exactly the right person to accompany me on my next errand. Because I shall need all the friends I have for this venture,” he added softly.

Cynara

Alessya came back swiftly, bearing the two meals. “Is that all, or do you need anything else?” She looked pointedly at Andanor.

Canamarth

“An adventure?” Lossiel’s eyes brightened. “What about and where will you be going? And who...” Here she was interrupted by the barmaid who asked if they wanted anything more.

Khorazir

Faramir shook his head, glad for the interruption. “Not for me, thank you. But I think we may need another caraffe of water soon,” he added with a glance at Lossiel who had just emptied another glass.

Cynara

Alesya glaced at the girl as well, and did grin, this time. “All right. But, I must ask, did you say something about an adventure over here? I’m looking for a party that could use a good mercenary fighter.”

asaris

Curufë, still sipping on wine, leaned over to Faramir and said very quietly in Sindarin, “I, too, wouldst come with thee. Imrahil hath mentioned the difficulties in Lebennin – I assume this is the venture whereof thou speakest – and he hath suggested that I shouldst perhaps look into it myself. But I thinkest the sellsword shouldst needs remain behind. Thou knowest their only loyalty is to their money, and that mayest be a dangerous proposition in these circumstances. What thinkest thou?”

Khorazir

“I agree with thee,” Faramir returned in a low voice, and in the same tongue. “I can only take people I know I can trust. And I am glad about thy offer to accompany me. Thou art right, there is indeed trouble afoot in Lebennin. As yet I know only little about it. Tomorrow at noon I shall meet with my father again, to learn more about the errand. Wilt thou accompany me to the Steward? There we shall also discuss who is to set out to Lebennin.” Suddenly he smiled slightly. “Dost thou know Lindórië, by the way, Lord Tarannon’s wife? I am sure she will be delighted to meet thee, as she is greatly interested and moreover learned in Elvenlore.”

Túrin, meanwhile, had looked up when the barmaid had mentioned something about mercenary fighter. He studied her curiously. “I knew you weren’t an ordinary barmaid, if you excuse my saying so,” he said. “So, you’re working in this kind of business? Sounds dangerous. And I bet there’s much to tell. You know, of past adventures and the like. And since the conversation here” – he cast a meaningful glance at Curufë and Faramir whispering to each other in Elvish – “doesn’t seem to be meant for all to have a part in it, I guess those excluded would cherish a thrilling tale or two. When you’ve finished your job here, I mean,” he added, grinning a little sheepishly as he remembered that she worked at the inn, and most likely wouldn’t be allowed to just drop the tray and join the guests.

Cynara

“I get off in about an hour. I think you have something else to worry about for now, though.” She looked pointedly at Lossiel, who was glaring at Túrin.

Khorazir

“Yeah, right,” Túrin muttered, blushing slightly. He turned to Lossiel, and raised a hand in a soothing gesture, because she looked rather put out. “I was just trying to make the evening a bit more ... you know ... interesting. It’s nice to meet new people. Moreover I’m sure she has much to tell. And at the moment, as you’ll surely admit, we’re a bit short of entertainment –”

Her eyes hardened.

“Which doesn’t mean that I don’t think your company entertaining, sweetheart,” Túrin went on swiftly. Drawing a little closer, he added in a gentle voice: “You’re the most desirable company I can imagine.”

gladrieltook

A tall woman, handsomely garbed in the traditional uniform of the Captain of the Secret Gaurd, entered the Inn. She looked about, before, to her surprise, her eyes fell upon two faces that she recognized. She walked over to them, but stopped short when she saw that one of them, the one that she had loved deeply, had his arm about another. Visilya was insulted. She drew her dagger, snuck up behind Turin, and placed the blade to his throat. “Are old loves so often cast aside for new ones by you, Turin son of Hurin?”

Cynara

Alessya grinned and left to help another customer.

Khorazir

Túrin froze. Instantly he recognised the voice. His heart started to beat furiously. He had met Visilya four years ago, during the strange events which had led to and ensued the burning down of the “Troll’s Nose”, and immediately had fallen in love with her. Yet for some reason their ways had parted after a while. She, as captain of the Secret Guard, had been extremely busy at that time, and since he, too, had to see to his duties, and was out of town often, they had seen each other less and less – a fact he had mourned greatly. But he had never forgotten her, and now, hearing her voice, all the memories of their time together rushed over him. He swallowed slightly.

“Hello Visilya,” he said quietly, and raised a hand to draw the dagger away from his throat – without success. He sighed and turned slightly so that he could face her. Her stern glance seemed to pierce his heart. “Believe me, I never meant to cast aside anything,” he said gravely. “At times I was under the impression that you didn’t care to see me anymore, and so ... It’s good to see you again, Visilya,” he ended softly.

asaris

“Look here, Faramir!” Curufë said with a laugh in his voice. “Secret councils can wait – we have a jilted lover on our hands!”

EdaintheRanger

A little surprised and disturbed at the sudden turn of events Andanor admiration for Túrin evaporated. “A real ladies

man huh!" he thought to himself. He also didn't want to be involved in some cat fight. So he graciously gave up his chair, He might have been a Ranger but he didn't want any complications with the guard.

He had half an ear to the Sindrian whispers, but he had never been a good pupil, so he let it drift. He had raised his eyebrows on seeing that pointed look, as she had now gone, Andanor feeling the water sloshing about in his belly he decided to go and ask at the bar for a pudding to soak it up.

Khorazir

"So it seems," Faramir agreed, watching Túrin, Visilya and Lossiel curiously. He did not envy his friend for the situation he was in at the moment, and wondered how the matter could best be solved, without hurting either Lossiel or Visilya too much. He did not know how serious Túrin's feelings for Lossiel were, but he sensed that with Visilya things were special. Usually Túrin made no secret of his numerous affairs – when he had been younger, he had quite enjoyed boasting with them -- but Faramir could not recall hearing him mention Visilya in that particular way. On the contrary. He had hardly spoken about her at all, as if their relationship was too precious to have it discussed among his friends. The gaze Túrin was giving Visilya now plainly indicated that his feelings for her had not changed.

"Perhaps we should join Andanor over at the bar for a while," Faramir said to Curufë, with another pitiful glance at Túrin, "and leave the three to settle their affairs in private. Moreover we can continue our talk. Andanor has my full confidence and will most likely be accompanying me, so he can hear about the matter as well."

gladrieltook

Visilya lowered her blade. "I would never, ever, tire of you, Turin. How in Middle Earth did that sort of crazy idea enter your head? And don't even say that I was always busy. Because I was never too busy to think about you." She glanced at the girl. "Who's she?"

asaris

Curufë nodded to Faramir. "Certainly – and if a man is in your confidence, he is in mine. Besides," Curufë added with a grin, "My bottle of wine is almost empty."

Khorazir

While Curufë and Faramir left the table and made their way over to Andanor at the bar, Túrin found himself in an extremely uncomfortable position. He could feel Lossiel's burning gaze upon him as he straightened a little in his chair, glad that Visilya had at least lowered the dagger a little, and so apparently did not intend to stab him at once. He felt thoroughly miserable. True, he liked Lossiel. She was nice and funny and moreover very pretty, and he didn't want to hurt her. But Visilya ... He glanced up at her, and again swallowed hard.

"Her name is Lossiel," he answered Visilya's question. "She's Lord Thorondur's daughter. And Lossiel, this is Visilya, captain of the Secret Guard." He looked at the two of them in turn, searching for words. "I ... I won't claim that I can explain the situation," he managed at length, when he could not bear silence and the stares of the two ladies anymore.

"The fact is ..." – he turned to Visilya – "... I thought you weren't interested in me anymore when we saw each other ever more seldom. I guessed you had your reasons for staying away ... you know ... I thought that perhaps you had met someone else, someone bolder and more ... mature, maybe. Not an irresponsible, lightheaded boy like myself. And so I didn't pursue the matter further. I ... I didn't want to intrude and mess up your life." He held her gaze for a while, then

cast down his eyes. "That was a mistake, I guess." He swallowed again, before raising his eyes to look at her. "Do you forgive me?"

gladrieltook

Visilya laughed. "I could never find any one as wonderful as you, not even if I searched the length and breath of the land. You could never 'intrude' on my life. I accept your apology, and hope that you will accept mine. I'm sorry if made you think that I did not want you around."

Cynara

The Inn had cleared somewhat by now, and so she was able to leave off waiting the tables. Hopping the bar, she got herself a wine, and sat behind the bar. As long as no one called on her, she was free to rest now.

Khorazir

Túrin let out a sigh of relief. "Of course I'll accept your apology," he said softly, and even smiled faintly. Then he remembered Lossiel, and the smile faded. Slowly he turned to her.

Meanwhile Curufë and Faramir had reached Andanor, who apparently was waiting for something he had ordered. There were fewer people around now, and so the barmaid was taking a break behind the bar.

"Poor Túrin," Faramir muttered, casting a glance back to his friend. "I do not know how he manages to always get himself into trouble – especially with ladies involved. He seems to have a special gift for it."

Canamarth

Lossiel only stared back, then swallowed hard. Tears started to run down her face and muttering: "I know when I'm not wanted anymore," she made for the door.

Khorazir

"Oh no," Túrin muttered. He had turned rather pale. "Please excuse me, Visilya," he said, leapt up and ran after Lossiel, catching up with her at the door. "Please Lossiel," he entreated her, "I ... I can explain this. It's not that I don't want you anymore. You're the sweetest, prettiest girl I've ever met, and you mean a lot to me. I don't want to lose you. It's just that ..." he sighed deeply, searching for words "... Visilya and I ... you know ... we're – no, we were, or are again, or ... oh, I don't really know, it's all so difficult – we used to be ... good friends. Perhaps more than that. I mean ... I won't deny that ... that ..." Words at last failed him, and he cast down his eyes and shook his head. "I'm so sorry," he whispered at length. "I didn't know that my feelings for her were still that strong." He looked at her again. "I won't ask your forgiveness. I know you hate me now – with good reason, I daresay. I only hope that perhaps one day we ... we can be friends ..."

Canamarth

They had reached the door now and were standing on the threshold when Lossiel finally stopped and looked into Túrin's eyes. What she saw in them made her tears run freely. She lifted a hand as if to strike him, then softly placed it on his cheek and whispered: "You would have made me defy my father." Then she turned and ran as fast as her feet could carry her.

asaris

Curufë, watching the scene unfold, nodded. "Seems love's more trouble than it's worth." A sad look entered his eyes, and he turned back to his wine.

EdaintheRanger

Andanor was finally served with an ale, he considered going over and chatting up the barmaid, but reckoned at the end of a hard day, the last thing she needed was some fool "hitting on" her. Instead he sipped his ale carefully, appreciating the brew, and listening to Curufë's words made him glad that he didn't have that problem.

Shifting his attention to Faramir he did bid him to tell of his lordship's desire's. In the corner of his eye he detected a movement and turned just to see Lossiel fly out of the tavern.

"Well looks like the bird has flown, maybe Túrin will learn something of this. I hope that he does for the sake of the ladies if not himself!"

Khorazir

Túrin looked after her, her name upon his lips. But he refrained from calling after her. Her words had struck him like a heavy blow. He reeled, clutching the doorframe for support. Then he slowly straightened up again and took some steps back inside the inn. He glanced at his friends at the bar, and at Visilya. Then of a sudden he whirled round and rushed out of the tavern.

"I think the 'lesson' has been a very painful one," Faramir said quietly while watching Túrin's abrupt departure with a troubled expression. "I do pity him. I believe that he really likes Lossiel, and 'tis plain to see how it grieves him to have hurt her thus. But you are right, Andanor – hopefully he will learn from it. Well, I do not think we shall have to worry about him. He will be alright, after a while. I guess it will do him good to leave the City for a while to get across this matter." He paused, sipping at his wine. "Not that the errand is going to be an easy one," he added thoughtfully, his face even more troubled than before.

Cynara

Alessya rose, and walked over to the Steward's son. "I think you should follow your friend. He is in grief, and has enemies likely very willing to exploit that."

gladrieltook

Visilya sighed. What have I done... She sped out the door, and soon over took Turin, and yet still ran full out. As she

reached the girl, she put out a hand and grabbed her shoulder. The girl spun and looked at her. Visilya swallowed, searching for words. "If I have made you seem unwanted, then I am at fault for your heart-ache. But Turin and I, well, we love each other very much, and I couldn't stand to lose him. He showed me what love is, he showed me friendship and compassion. When you are in my position, those things are not easily achieved. I understand your hurt, lady."

Khorazir

"Thank you for your counsel, lady," Faramir said. "But I do not think that Túrin is in danger right now. And certainly he does not want to see me or anybody else at the moment. I know him well. Most likely he will show up here again after a while, either to talk or to get drunk -- or both. Let us give him some moments on his own. If he does not return in about half an hour, I shall go and look for him." Then suddenly recalling her exact words, he studied the barmaid keenly. "What do you mean by Túrin having enemies, by the way?" he asked suspiciously, and with a trace of anxiety. "Surely, Lossiel's family does not like Túrin's, and the other way round, but so far they have refrained from displaying open hostilities. Neither Húrin nor Thorondur would begin a real feud. They are too sensible for that. But is there something else you know about this matter? Something you have picked up here, perhaps?" Concern was now evident in his voice, and the glance he gave Alessya was keen and piercing.

Túrin, meanwhile, had first thought about following Lossiel, but then had decided against it. He had been greatly startled when suddenly Visilya had rushed past him, and vanished. Yeah, leave me too, he thought gloomily, kicking away a stone. I deserve no better. He felt completely miserable. When he started to walk away from the tavern, it was without direction as he was totally absorbed in grief and self-reproach. He only looked up when his feet hit stone, and he realised that he had reached the walls of the Third Circle. A guard was patrolling the battlements a little further down, whistling softly to himself, but all else was quiet and devoid of people – a fact which Túrin praised. He leaned against the thick, cold walls and looked down on the small, narrow houses in the Second Circle, most of which were dark – as gloomy as his thoughts.

Canamarth

Lossiel tried to break away from the woman's grasp but found she was not strong enough. She at length turned and said surprisingly calm: "Whatever there is between you and Túrin is no concern of mine. Why do you follow me and tell me these things? Do you delight in aggravating my misery? Let me go." Her tears had stopped flowing and she glared at her opposite imperiously.

EdaintheRanger

Andanor asked Faramir if he wanted him to check on Túrin. "I'll not approach him, with my skills I can merely shadow him if necessary. The lady's words fill me with an unbidden foreboding. My heart doth tell me so, and my head does nod in agreement for once."

Andanor then drained his ale and gazed intently at Faramir searching his face, which though filled with concern was still guarded.

"Hmm" Andanor thought to himself, "Faramir is indeed maturing, in these last months."

Khorazir

Faramir studied Andanor thoughtfully. "Yes," he said after a while, "perhaps 'tis better if someone has an eye on him. Just try to find out whither he went and what he is about to do, and make sure that he does not notice you, Andanor."

Curufë and I will wait here. Oh, and watch out if there is anybody else around who does not have business there. I shall ask the barmaid again. Perhaps she has indeed picked up something. Her words made me feel uncomfortable as well.”

Lady_of_Rohan

A pair of keen, dark eyes watched Túrin from an alleyway. Yes, him, he looks right, that person thought. He was exactly the type she had been looking for: appeared wealthy, but not too wealthy. Too wealthy translated into lots of trouble if she was caught.

A moment later a shawled, old beggar woman came into view, her walking stick tapping ahead of her, her frail hand outstretched and trembling. As she walked, or rather, hobbled, toward Túrin she her mumbled jargon turned into actual words. “A coin for an old woman,” she rattled, “a penny for a poor mother.”

Khorazir

Túrin nearly jumped in surprise when the frail voice of the old woman startled him out of his sad reflections. He looked at her for a while. Poor thing, he thought. Apparently there were people much worse off than himself. He started searching his pockets for some coins, then thought the better of it, unfastened the whole purse from his belt and handed it to the beggar. “Here, mother. It’s not much, but this should get you decent meals for some days, and a warm bed. At least one of us has reason to be happy tonight, then.”

Lady_of_Rohan

The beggar took the purse, noted the weight, and put it safe in an inside pocket. “Ah, bless you, my son,” the voice grew hard and menacing. In a moment the hunched frame straightened itself to reveal the lithe form of a girl, no more than fourteen years old. With one fluid motion, the girl pounced on Túrin’s back (as he had moved away from the wall) and placed a sharp knife to his throat. “What other pretty baubles might you have?” she hissed in his ear.

Khorazir

In the first moment Túrin had tensed, instinctively reached to his side where he wore a dagger, and considered several ways of how to get rid of her. But the dagger’s point at his throat was very sharp, and the hand pressing it to the skin seemed to have some experience in wielding such a weapon. Moreover Túrin was in no mood to start a fight. He only nodded slightly, shrugged, and then relaxed, letting his shoulders hang dejectedly.

“Well, I guess this is not my day today,” he muttered. “You can search me if you want to,” he then said aloud. “There are some copper coins in my trowser pockets. The dagger may not be worth a lot, but perhaps you can get a decent price for it on the market or wherever you sell your booty. Oh, and the tunic might be of some worth as well. Silver embroidery on the collar, you know. But of course that will be rather spoiled with bloodstains should you decide to cut my throat.”

Cynara

Alessya smiled, and sat down on the bar. “Well, even if not a family feud. I am guessing that many know that he is your good friend. He could be killed to get at you, or used as a hostage. Or he may even be hunted and kiled for an

offense that he didn't even know he committed." she laughed to herself. "And besides all of the hostage and vendetta talk, did you see his clothes? If I didn't have a good job here, I would have robbed him down to his bare skin."

gladrieltook

Visilya sighed. "I don't have a family to defy. I don't want to be your enemy, and I doubt you want me as yours." She knelt down and smiled gently. "I have believed that there is someone out there for everyone. You won't always find them on the first try, it may take a life-time of heartbreak and bitterness. Come, Turin must be worried about you." She gently led the girl back down the alley, but stopped short at a very comical scene. Turin stood, half bent over, with a scrawny young girl clinging to his back, a dagger at his throat. Visilya drew her sword, and placed it under the girl's torso. Using the flat of the blade, she lifted the girl's hold, causing her to tumble to the ground. Visilya's sword flashed to the girl's throat. "Explain yourself. And be quick. By law, I have the right to cut your throat. But I will spare you, if you give a good enough reason."

Khorazir

Faramir had listened to Alessya's talk with great interest, and no little concern. "Kill him to get at me?" he muttered thoughtfully while she was still speaking. "Who would be interested in that?"

But in the end he had to smile slightly. "Well, what you describe here sounds serious and dangerous indeed, but I still think that Túrin is in no immediate danger. He has grown up in the City, and knows it well, and so far he managed to get out of every tight situation by himself (and into it as well). But perhaps we should indeed go and have a look. Visilya has not returned either. What do we owe you?"

For some reason Túrin was not surprised when suddenly he heard Visilya's stern voice nearby, commanding the girl to let go of him. He had gotten quite used to the fact that she popped up in the most unlikely situations. Holding a hand to his throat where the girl's dagger had slightly pricked the skin when Visilya had attacked her, he turned to the two. He gently laid a hand to Visilya's shoulder.

"Cool it, Visilya," he said evenly. "She wasn't trying to kill me – I hope – she only wanted to get my money. She's just a common little thief. Come on, let her go."

Lady_of_Rohan

"I like that idea," the girl muttered, trying to slide her way out from under the sword blade but getting highly frustrated as the tip followed her every motion. "Please, I'm only trying to help my family," she pleaded. "I have seven brothers and sisters and they all need—"

"Only seven? You had ten last week," a guard commented, walking up to them. He had been patrolling a little way down and had seen the commotion and came to investigate. "My lady, lord," he said, "you are right in saying she's a thief, and a very good one at that. She's even managed to pickpocket some of the guards."

The girl's eyes narrowed as she continued swearing softly under her breath. "I wouldn't have to steal if I didn't have to look out for my brothers and sisters," she snapped.

"We both know you have neither brothers nor sisters," the guard said sternly. "It's been long in coming, but it's time for you to meet the just rewards for your thieving, Daewen." The prisoner silently glared at him though her gaze never fully left the sword still resting on her throat. Her clenched jaw and tense body revealed she was not about to go down easily.

Canamarth

Lossiel had let the woman lead her back towards where they had come from. She was too confused to think straight. But when they arrived at the strange scene and the woman rid Túrin of the thief, Lossiel took the opportunity to slip away. She was in no condition to face him so soon again.

Half an hour later she arrived at her father's lodgings and quietly slipped into her bed.

Khorazir

Túrin looked at the guard. "What will you do with her? Put her in prison?"

EdaintheRanger

All this had been carefully seen and noted by Andanor. On leaving the "White Tree" he had at first been at loss to where Túrin had gone, but thinking back to when he had been pained, he headed off down to the lower city. Along with some judicious enquiries he had soon tracked Túrin to an area by the second circle, and with night well at hand, he shrank into his dark cloak.

He noticed the thief, well before Túrin could sense anything, and was a little impressed with the subterfuge, but cursed himself for leaving his throwing knives with his ranger garb. Armed only with his sword he was left to creep slowly towards her. Then detecting movement he stepped back into the shadows and watched Visilya "rescue" Túrin. As the Guard and the Captain of the Secret Watch prepared to lead the beggar girl away, Andanor's hackles rose and bells rang loudly in his mind.

Even in that moment of danger, Andanor couldn't help but think how the young thief's skill could be put to better use in the Rangers. Her defiant stand, one of desperation to feed a family or selfish personal gain? He wasn't too sure which so he knelt ready to spring out if things turned out badly. People could wind up dead, or rotting in gaol here. The stakes were high.

Khorazir

After having payed for their food and drink (and that of their companions as well), Faramir and Curufë also left the inn. Faramir noted that Alessya followed them. After considering briefly whither Túrin could have gone, they made their way to the walls. Even from a distance they could descry four persons, and recognise them as Túrin and Visilya and what looked to be a guard. The fourth person, held firmly by the guardsman and threatened with a sword by Visilya, was rather small, and almost looked like a child.

Faramir sent a searching glance over the shadowy corners in their vicinity to see where Andanor might have hidden. It took him quite some time to spot him, and he smiled slightly to himself. Andanor was excellent at shadowing people while remaining unseen himself. Faramir stepped out of the alley and walked over to the others. "What is going on here?" he asked. "Who is this?"

Lady_of_Rohan

"Prison most likely, though it depends on what the magistrates decide," the guard answered. "Another likely possibility is her having one hand sliced off." The girl visibly shuddered.

"You may be able to lock me up, but all my body parts are staying with me," she muttered. She squirmed a bit under the guard's hold on her shoulder, testing the grip, and was rewarded only with a tighter hold. Grumbling to herself, she paid little heed to the others until someone stepped out of the alley and hailed them. Using the moment's distraction, she twisted violently, using feet and fists as aides. Managing to get partly free, she tried bolting, until Visilya's sword bit into her leg, putting an effective halt to her escape. She cried out, stumbling to her knees, one hand pressed against her bleeding shin.

Canamarth

"Oy, what commotion is that?" the voice of an old woman could be heard from the upper window of the house opposite the whole scene. "I'll call the guards if you don't stop that immediately."

Cynara

Alessya laughed up at the old woman. "The guards are here anyway, you crone! Go to bed!" Then she walked over to the little thief, and helped her up off the street. "Here, now," Alessya said firmly to Visilya, "There's no need for blood. I'm sure that this girl –" with a hard look to the girl, Alessya took the culprit ear firmly, "– would't have spilled any, without good reason."

gladrieltook

"Girl," Visilya said sternly, "you have brought this injury on yourself. I won't let them take any of your body parts, but you must behave and tell the truth. Lies will only get you into more trouble." Turning to the other guard, who was obviously one of the White Tower, she replied, "Any thief could pick-pocket one of the Tower Guards. Half of them are complete nit-wits. I will take this girl with me to the Secret Guard Barracks and interrogate her there." She pulled a sash from her pocket and gently began to clean the girl's wound. She bound the cut, and pulled her to her feet. "Come on, and no funny business, either."

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen didn't know, nor did she care, where the barracks of the secret guards were, as long as she could figure a way out of them. With a whimper she gingerly tried putting weight on her injured leg and found that she could probably limp along on it, but any attempt at running would be useless. Her once defiant head hung low and she let out a dejected sigh. She knew when not to fight, but that didn't mean she stopped looking for a chance to turn things toward her favour. Yet she still felt that the situation was being blown out of proportion. "All this for a few coins and a dagger," she muttered darkly.

gladrieltook

Visilya frowned. "You should have thought of that before you decided to attack him. Don't even think of trying to escape the Barracks. You'll be shot down within seconds. There's a reason we're called 'the elite'."

Lady_of_Rohan

The girl snorted. "Indeed, it must take a special class of people to pick on a poor, wretched, beggar girl." She smiled wryly. "Escaping from an 'elitest' prison – I'm sure it will be invigorating."

Cynara

Alessya fought down a laugh, but couldn't help smiling. "Hard to do, but it's been done," She called after the girl, "And yes, it is invigorating. Know that if you succeed, I'll be waiting to get you!"

Khorazir

Faramir had listened to their talk without interfering, and nodded his consent when Visilya proposed to lead the girl away to interrogate her at the barracks. Upon her last words he had turned to Alessya, and studied her keenly. "You speak as if you have seen the insides of the garrison as well – and "escaped", as you put it," he said thoughtfully. Then he looked at Túrin, who stood a little apart, watching Visilya and the girl disappear in an alley, still holding a hand to his throat. "Are you all right, Túrin?" Faramir called to him. Túrin stirred, gave him a brief glance, then shrugged. "Not really, no. But don't mind me." He sighed slightly, glanced towards the alley again, and finally walked over to them. "What're your plans for the rest of the evening?" he asked. "Return to the inn? I could do with a drink, really. Oh, and where's Andanor?"

Cynara

Alessya raised a brow at Faramir, and smiled mysteriously. "Of course I have. I didn't stay long. If you ask nicely, I might tell you about it, some time.

Khorazir

"Andanor is over there," Faramir said and pointed towards the shadows of a nearby alley. "He wanted to go and have an eye on you. But apparently he did not consider the little thief to be a real danger for you, so he refrained from interfering."

"Visilya was swifter anyway," Túrin muttered. He looked at the others. "Well, what about the inn?" he asked, trying to sound cheerful, at which he almost succeeded.

Faramir shrugged. "'tis fine with me," he said, secretly praising the way things had developed, as Túrin's problems had successfully diverted his mind from contemplations on his own. He turned to Alessya. "Perhaps the lady – please excuse me, but you have not told us your name yet – would like to join us, and relate the tale of her escape from the prison."

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen twisted around to try and see Alessya. For some reason, she hadn't liked her words, they sounded... dark. In the end she merely shrugged and turned back as Visilya pulled her along the dark, twisting streets. No one had kept their word to her yet, and she wasn't expecting anyone to start either. She stumbled over something and almost went to her knees, but Visilya's firm grip on her shoulder kept her on her feet and moving. Daewen muttered under her

breath, but stopped when she caught a glare from the captain of the secret guard.

Canamarth

The old woman closed her window noisily. It seemed there was to be no more entertainment in front of her house tonight.

EdaintheRanger

Andanor left the shadows, and swiftly grasped Túrin's shoulder making him jump. "Oh not so quick am I! I'll remember that." he said in a sharp manner, but his quick wink took the edge off it.

Having rebuked Túrin, Andanor told Faramir, that the thief girl had some promise and displayed skill, if her kleptomaniac ways could be curbed then he wouldn't mind considering her for training.

"Though she would have to learn a little respect for authority, my liege. Oh the days we live in! Where the fairest face have often the foulest intentions. While those that have dour hands toil on the most delicate of tasks."

Andanor realising that he was waxing philosophical, closed his mouth and nodded vigorously at the idea of going back to the tavern.

Khorazir

Faramir smiled slightly at Andanor's remark. "If Visilya leaves the poor girl in one piece, and the little thief shows some cooperation, I may indeed consider her for training. She would make a good spy, although I daresay that she would be of better service here in the City than in the woods of Ithilien. Come to think of it, I think I know people who may be quite interested in adopting someone with her skills. I shall mention it to them when next I get a chance."

It was only a short way back to the White Tree. The number of patrons had increased again when Faramir and his companions entered, but the table they had occupied before was still empty, and thus they returned there. Túrin had been silent for quite some time. When they had reached the table, he slumped into a chair. Then he looked at the others. "Please, before anybody asks: I don't want to talk about the whole thing, alright. Perhaps someone else can provide the entertainments tonight. What about you?" he asked, turning to Alessya. "How about telling us a little about yourself, and about your escape from Gondor's best guarded prison? Oh, and by the way, for what reason have you been imprisoned there at all – I hope you'll forgive that direct a question."

asaris

Curufë mutely accompanied the party back to the inn. He too was interested in the story of how Alessya escaped the dungeon of the secret guard – he had seen the dungeon himself once, and knew how hard it was to escape.

Cynara

Alessya grinned "I'm Alessya. I've lived in Minas Tirath for a short while, but I was born and raised here. In the Seventh Circle. One minute, I'm getting some ale." She rose and walked over to the bar.

gladrieltook

As Visilya and the girl wound their way through the streets, the Barracks soon came into view. They consisted of a low-set building, resembling a warehouse, with thin slits cut into the thick walls. The building seemed completely lifeless. Yet as she drew level with the doors, they swung open, and the young girl beheld a sight that view had never seen and lived to tell the tale of.

Lady_of_Rohan

And she wasn't too impressed with it, either. Of course, her mind was more preoccupied with wondering how much her wound was bleeding, as she felt the trickle of blood wind down the back of her leg. She didn't notice the glimmer of keen, watchful eyes as they passed through the doorway, nor did she realize how utterly silent it was inside. All she knew was that her strength was ebbing quickly. She hadn't eaten since the early morning, and even then it had only been a few bites of stale bread. The entire day had been spent unfruitfully roaming the markets and streets hoping to find a target unaware.

It had been pure luck finding that man leaning against the wall in the second circle as she was going home, tired and dejected. She still wondered who he was. Though she had paid attention when her captors were talking, she hadn't heard his name mentioned. Several possible identities passed through her mind. Maybe he was one of the Steward's sons. Why else would a member of the secret guard be so close, and such a big deal made out of a common thieving? No, a son of the Steward would have a lot more money on him, she thought, remembering the comment of having only a few "copper coins".

She stumbled again and was kept on her feet more by Visilya's hold rather than her own willpower. It had to be getting near midnight, if not later. She wanted to rest.

Khorazir

"You were born in the Seventh Circle?" Faramir asked when Alessya returned with the ale, his even voice betraying his astonishment. "May I ask who your parents are?"

Canamarth

A black cat jumped onto the elf's lap and started purring loudly.

EdaintheRanger

Andanor sat with his head bowed over a mug of mulled wine. He breathed the spiced wine fumes contentedly glad to be out of the cold. He listened avidly to the conversation and tried not to appear as surprised as Faramir was on hearing Alessya's revelation. He broke into his characteristic half grin, and his eyes brightened.

Then as the friendly cat leapt into Curufë's lap Andanor absentmindedly petted it, and the cat playfully swiped at his hand with its paw.

asaris

Curufë started to scratch the cat behind the ears. He had always liked cats, as a matter of fact, but had never been able to have one himself. Something about cats and looms was problematic.

Khorazir

Faramir smiled when he spotted the cat on the Noldo's lap, and waited for Alessya to answer.

gladrieltook

Visilya led her to the main building, then to a small, dark room. She ordered one of the soldiers to bring food and drink for them, then locked the door. Directing the girl to a seat, she gave her a keen glare. "You are in my domain now. You will answer to my questions truthfully and swiftly." A knock came at the door, announcing the return of the errand boy. Visilya took the tray, and set it before the girl. It contained a flask of wine, two cups, one filled with milk, a loaf of bread, and several slices of ham. Visilya smiled, and handed the milk to the girl. "But first, let us eat." She picked up the flask and poured herself some fragrant wine.

Cynara

Alessya smiled at the Steward's son's astonishment. "Actually, you can't. I don't know, either. I was part of a gang of about seven other kids, and we all looked out for each other. What one person knew, we all knew, and what one person stole, we split evenly."

Lady_of_Rohan

The sight of so much food made the girl's eyes widen. The captain probably saw it as nothing more than a light snack, but for her, it was a feast. She hesitantly took the cup and put it to her lips. Letting out a soft cry of delight as she tasted the rich, sweet milk, she tilted her head back and emptied the cup of about half its contents. It had been so long since she'd had milk; she'd almost forgotten the taste. As she looked down into the cup she chided herself for being so greedy. You should have sipped it; who knows how long it'll be before you'll taste milk again. Shaking her head slightly, she leaned forward to find some solid food.

The scent of the ham tantalized her, and for a long moment her hand wavered over the sweet meat. Most likely it's not for me, anyway, she thought, snatching instead one of the loaf slices. She quickly consumed one piece and reached for another. This was fresh baked, certainly not the dry, stale lot she'd been eating, that's for sure. Biting into the bread, she guessed it to be no more than a few hours old. Finishing her slice, she glanced up to see the captain watching her curiously, but paid no heed and reached for the cup of milk. Her order to conserve the liquid forgotten, she drained the last swallows and set the cup down, ruefully looking at it. She took another piece of bread and slouched in the chair, eating slowly this time. Another longing glance was cast at the meat, but for the moment she was contented.

gladrieltook

Visilya smiled softly at the girl's hesitancy to consume the ham. "It's not poisoned," she said. "It must have been a long time since you've had such a meal. I know what it's like. I won't delve into that though. And I've seen people worse off even than you. So I won't punish you. The laws on stealing are for too tight. People must do what they can to survive.

You're no exception." She drained her wine glass, then sat opposite to the girl. "Tell me about yourself. How did you get like this?"

Lady_of_Rohan

The words were hardly out of the captain's mouth before Daewen eagerly grabbed a piece of the ham. She could hardly believe she was being allowed to eat so much! Her surprise at the captain's sympathetic, almost kind, words was replaced by overwhelming shock when she heard, "I won't punish you." She stared with wide, incredulous eyes. Being treated to a meal and then told no punishment was waiting?! I'm dreaming, that's all it can be. I'm in a nasty, nasty dream and I'll soon wake up in the rags, hungry, cold, and wondering how and if I'll make it through the day. So lost was she in her thoughts that she almost didn't hear the question asked. She shook herself slightly to bring her mind back to task. "How did I get like this?" she repeated. While she had not kept eye contact with the captain, she had at least held her head up, but now her gaze and visage dropped. For a moment she debated between the truth or one of her wild creations, but decided to stick with the truth, this time. It was the least she could do to pay off her debt for the meal. "This is the only life I've known," she said quietly, staring at a spot on the floor. "I was born in the dirt, raised in rags, and I try to get by however I can. I don't remember my parents, only an old widow who took me in for a while when I was little. Then she died and I was left on my own again. I don't even know if I have a name." She looked down, embarrassed. "Some of the guards call me "Daewen" – shadow maiden. It's an alright name, I suppose."

Khorazir

"That does not sound like an easy life," Faramir said to Alessya. "I can see now why you sympathised with the little thief. But if you do not know your parents, what makes you think that you were born in the Seventh Circle – given the fact that the Citadel is situated there."

Cynara

Alessya shrugged. "That's where the other kids found me. So I guess that's where I was born. Anyway, I used to live in the Citadel. It's a good place to steal from, it's so big no one hardly notices. Usually."

gladrieltook

Visilya smiled warmly. This child was so like herself. "I too am an orphan. My entire family, save my baby sister, was murdered before I was twelve. The rest of my life was spent training for the day that I would avenge their deaths. I too, was alone, desperate, poor. I wore rags, or whatever a kind weapons master would supply me with when I trained under him. I know how you feel." She poured a bit more wine. "It's not easy, is it? Being alone, that is."

Lady_of_Rohan

The girl had eaten to the point of making herself sick, which didn't bother her at all. It had been glorious to have the opportunity to eat all she wanted, and even if it was poisoned, at least she wouldn't die hungry. She looked regretfully at her empty cup, now wanting something else to drink after the sweet meat and bread. She lifted her head as the captain spoke, listening closely. It was hard to believe what she was hearing. Surely one who wore such fine raiment and held such position had not once been in the slums. The girl's eyes narrowed. "What are you setting me up for?" she asked suspiciously.

EdaintheRanger

Andanor listened to Alessya with more than a passing interest. He had thought that his life was hard! Sure he had suffered misery and hardships in the wilds and in living exile from the Fair boughs of Ithilin but that was not bad.

Not compared to people who went hungry and for whom each day had been a struggle to survive, never mind to live. For the moment he luxuriated in the warmth of the tavern, the smooth taste of a crisp ale, and the pleasure of the company that friends can afford.

The hour was getting late and Andanor eyelids began to droop. He rather fancied some feminine company before he had to leave on the morrow. He then reckoned that he should be getting back to the "GuardHouse".

Maradir

Walking past their table, the barkeeper saw the cat sitting on Curufë's lap. "Oi, Beruthiel, will you stop bothering the guests?"

EdaintheRanger

The sound of the landlord made Andanor start. "Oh don't worry your moggie ain't bothering anyone. Just curious about new people."

Then he stood and gathered his things. Bidding a good night to all Andanor decided to get down the Guardhouse.

Khorazir

"Good night, Andanor," Faramir said when he saw his lieutenant rise and make ready to leave. "Please tell the men that I would like to see them tomorrow at about two o'clock. There may be a new errand for us."

Then he turned to Alessya again, and smiled. "Well, if that is the case, I think I must have a chat with the guards of the Citadel. Normally not everybody is allowed to enter. But I know that some years back security was rather lax, until the Steward got really annoyed about the complaints about thefts and so on, and increased the number of guards. Have you never tried to find out more about your family? If you were indeed born up there, you could be descended from some Gondorian noble. Have you never considered doing some research?"

asaris

Curufë bid Andanor a good night, then sunk back into his thoughts. He wasn't entirely comfortable thinking about poverty – having never been poor himself, he didn't quite understand it. In the end, he tended to attribute it to the weakness of men. After all, even the Silva and Avari lived fine lives, not wanting for anything. Couldn't mortals do the same? Perhaps it was their tendency to breed like rabbits. But nevertheless, he generally felt somewhat guilty around the poor, and consequently avoided them when he could.

Cynara

Alessya looked strangely at Faramir. "No, it never has. What would be the point? I'm nearly positive that no noble is likely to be eager to find the results of his fun with the chambermaid standing on his doorstep some morning. Besides, I'm too busy trying to make money. I'm a mercenary, now, but this is the off season. I'm working here to fill up the time.

gladrieltook

Visilya laughed. "Setting you up? Hardly! I hate to see people taking advantage of one another. Those bafoons up at the Citadel spend far too much time picking on the lower classes. It boils my blood, especially when children lose hands, feet, even lives because of the state that they have to live in." She noticed the girl glancing at her cup. "You are still thirsty. That can be amended." She lifted a small gong, struck it, and a gaurd entered. "The young lady would like some more milk. Please fetch it." The gaurd nodded, then dashed out.

Lady_of_Rohan

The girl looked at the floor, quietly processing the captain's words. It was strange to hear someone of rank sympathizing for the lost children. She shivered slightly, remembering only a few months ago when young Burgil, only seven years old, had had an arm brutally mutilated by an angry fruit vendor for taking a few, slightly bruised, pieces of fruit. The act had enraged her, and she still carried the scar from when she had tried to intervene. A few days later an infection set in and by the end of the week he was dead. "Jackals," she muttered, shaking her head. The guard returned with a full cup of milk, and to her surprise she found it had been heated. She sipped the warm drink slowly. The liquid, combined with her full stomach, was beginning to make her sleepy.

gladrieltook

Visilya sat down. "I have known many children that have died. They were beyond help." she said heavily. She noticed that the girl was beginning to grow weary. "You'll stay here tonight. I have an extra cot in my quarters."

Lady_of_Rohan

Stay here? Daewn looked around, shocked. This night seemed to grow stranger by the hour. Don't get used to it she warned herself. But still, it was a wonderful thought to sleep somewhere other than on hard floor wrapped up in rags. Perhaps she would even be given a blanket. Though it was summer, the nights sometimes dropped into cooler temperatures. The captain stood and beckoned her to follow, which she did quickly. Her leg protested, but she ignored it. She followed the captain through a maze of halls and rooms, and finally stopped before an ornately carved wooden door. Here Visilya produced a key, unlocked the door, and stepped into the room.

Khorazir

Faramir had listened to Alessya's words with a thoughtful expression, and nodded slightly when she mentioned the matter with the chambermaid, as this had brought what Túrin had told them about Carandil back to his mind. Certainly it would be a nasty surprise to a Lord of Gondor to be confronted by his so far unknown offspring. On the other hand to obtain knowledge of such a matter would be a feast for his opponents. Faramir shook his head slightly about himself. I am beginning to think like a politician, he thought with a trace of bitterness. If I am not careful I will

become like my father in a few years.

Then he chased away these thoughts and looked at Alessya instead. "I would have imagined that there was sufficient work for mercenaries now. Many captains have waited with their campaigns against outlaws or pirates or whatever until winter had passed. But now, in spring ... May I ask what kind of errands you have had so far, and for whom – if that is not a secret? I can imagine that one picks up lots of interesting information on those ... missions."

gladrieltook

Visilya reached under her own small bed to produce a wide cot. Several thick blankets, pillows, and linen strips appeared out of a cupboard. "Sit down." THE girl obeyed, easing onto the cot. Visilya carefully inspected and wrapped her leg. "Hmm... Yes... should heal in a day or two. Until then you should stay here. Then we'll find you a good, permanent home. Perhaps away from the city?" She motioned for the girl to lie down, then spread a warm blanket over her. "Sleep well, Shadow Maiden."

She then retired to her own bed, and lay long simply staring at the ceiling, deep in thought.

Lady_of_Rohan

This was all so strange and different to someone accustomed to living with an alley as a bed and the sky as a roof. As she drew the soft blanket closer she wondered what else would happen before she left here. The pain in her leg had greatly diminished after the captain put some sort of ointment on it, and her stomach was delightfully full for the first time in a long, long while. As she lay silent in the dark, something the captain said still echoed in her mind. Then we'll find you a good, permanent home. Perhaps away from the city? The thought was mind-boggling. A home? An actual home? Such a concept was too much for her to comprehend, and in a way, she didn't know if she wanted it. Almost all her life she'd been independent, making her own choices and bearing the consequences alone. And besides, who would want to take in a dirty, ragged, uneducated beggar girl anyway? The clause was even more stunning. Away from the city? She couldn't recall having ever been outside the city once! Of course, there were times when she stood on one of the walls, looking out over the Pelennor, but that was the extent of her "journeys".

Shaking her head slightly, she rolled onto her side and tried to get her mind to rest. Several minutes later her breathing turned to the deep, rhythmic sounds of sleep.

Cynara

Alessya smiled bitterly. "Yes, I've taken part in quite a few missions. However, I refuse to tell anything of either the missions, or the employers. Safety all around, you see. However, I can tell you how your prison system could be patched in a dozen places. Half the escaped prisoners were never noticed missing, at least by the public system. The 'elite' prison always knows, somehow."

Khorazir

"Perhaps because the people imprisoned there are regarded a real threat to society," Faramir said. "On the other hand nobody really cares about some small thieves and burglars. And the worst criminals are unfortunately never caught at all – at least that is what I often come to think. But thanks for your offer. I am sure the people in charge of the prison will appreciate the information you can give, although they may not be overly delighted to hear that there are flaws in the system at all."

gladrieltook

Visilya still lay awake. The girl was already asleep, she could tell by the rhythmic breathing. I'll take her to Lebennin with me. A change will be good for her. And it will be easier to find a home for her. A good, wise, loving home. She deserves that much... Visilya finally drifted into a thoughtful sleep, and dreamt about happier days.

Cynara

Alessya quirked a brow and smiled. "Oh, I see. Like that little girl, eh?"

Khorazir

At the mentioning of the girl Túrin, who had sat silent and lost in thought during their conversation, suddenly stirred. "Certainly she's no threat to society," he said. "Had not Visilya interfered, we would have settled things peacefully. I mean, I'd already given her my purse without her having to draw her dagger at all."

"I am sure Visilya will not treat her badly, or punish her," Faramir said. Turning to Alessya again, he went on: "It may seem unfitting for one of my status to talk thus, but I think 'tis a sign of Gondor's decline that there is so much poverty nowadays. Look at the City. So many houses are empty. People leave it in increasing numbers. Already it is only a mere shadow of its former glory and splendour – I think Curufë will agree to this," he added with a swift glance at the Noldo. "But as long as we are at war with the East, all energy and resources are spent there. The rulers give little heed to interior matters, and one can hardly blame them, the way things stand. Of course we have to defend ourselves, and protect Gondor from the evil of Mordor. And yet ..." he sighed and glanced at his wine. "The widespread belief common nowadays that a warrior is to be esteemed above all others is just another sign that one of the last remains of ancient Númenor is slowly declining to just another petty realm of Middle-Earth. Hardly anyone is interested in lore and arts anymore. In my opinion this attitude is wrong, and moreover highly dangerous, especially in times like these. If we forget our past, we cannot learn from it anymore, and are thus bound to make the same mistakes all over again. But well," he shrugged, "'tis hard to think about ancient lore and wisdom if one has to face a horde of orcs."

Suddenly he shook his head and laughed softly. "And if the Steward heard me talk like this," he said looking up at the others again, "he would most likely have me tried for treason." Despite his smile, there was a strange, stern look in his eyes, and a trace of bitterness in his voice. "At least I would not put it beyond him," he added softly.

asaris

Curufë placed a hand on his friend's shoulder. "'Tis true that Gondor is no longer what she was, and was only ever a shadow of Numenor, but she has not failed yet. And I mark in you and your father – yes, your father too -- the blood of the Edain of old, as I have not seen it in many years." He thought to himself, though: ...in many years, save in one man who is Isildur reborn.

Cynara

Alessya sat silently, regretting some of her words. 'Stupid fool!' she thought to herself, 'you know not who you talk to!'

Khorazir

Faramir had been quite touched by Curufë's words. Not knowing what to reply, he simply nodded slightly. For a while all four sat in silence, lost in thought. Only the cat was purring contentedly on Curufë's lap. Then suddenly Túrin stirred and looked at Faramir.

"You spoke of a new errand, didn't you? What's it about? Ithilien again? Must be pretty important, if the Steward doesn't grant you even a few days rest."

Faramir shrugged. "Honestly I do not know clearly yet what 'tis all about. Father has not been very precise when we spoke about it today. Moreover I had not agreed to accept the errand then."

"But you're going to take it?" Túrin asked.

"'tis not that I have much of a choice. You know Denethor. When he has something in mind, has devised a plan, everybody has to conform and take his or her set place, or lordship gets angry. And you know what that means." Túrin made a face. "Sometimes I'm really happy about my own parents. My father may be strict at times, but he's no comparison to Denethor. Moreover my father often has indeed reason to be angry with me, whereas yours ... I bet he isn't that hard towards your brother."

"Boromir?" Faramir said with a bitter laugh. "Alas, no! But then Boromir does not fail him all the time. Well," he continued, trying to ban bitterness and sarcasm from his voice again, "perhaps I should be grateful that the Steward entrusts me with an errand of this importance. Tomorrow I shall learn more about it. It looks as if I shall need a small company to accompany me, and I would be glad if you were among those I take with me, Túrin and Curufë." He glanced at Alessya. "And there may even be work for you, Alessya, although I cannot decide upon that now. Moreover, and please forgive my saying so, I do not know yet how much we can trust you. But certainly you seem to have some abilities which could come in handy – if what you claim to have done in the prison is true."

EdaintheRanger

Andanor soon weaved his way down to "the GuardHouse" the place was heaving with military types and was consequently extremely rowdy. Song were bawled out at full volume, and copious amounts of alcoholic beverages were consumed, expelled and further consumption attempted.

With his head already thumping Andanor wondered why he had left the fine tavern he had been in before. Waltzing his way through the raucous masses of people, he found his way to his regular table which was occupied by his "Trusted Men" these were a group of a half dozen Rangers who were a cut above the rest, for even in such a esteemed band as the Ithilien Rangers there were betters. Seeing Mablung, Andanor yelled above the roar

"Hey where's Damrod?"

At this Mablung shrugged and the others burst into laughter. Andanor pulled a mock serious face and gritted his teeth. Mablung then offered "He's busy!"

"Yeah, busy with his echings, no doubt," Andanor said breaking into his half-grin, before continuing "Men, we have work on the morrow..." at this he paused for dramatic effect, the Rangers frowned in anticipation, "Our Esteemed Lord and Master Faramir had deemed us worthy of a most important mission! So its sleepytme for you lot!"

At the distinct lack of enthusiasm for this Andanor lept on the table and bellowed over the unholy din.

"Hi! Hey! Silence in the Ranks!"

Slowly the noise subsided. He then continued "Right lets not be uncooperative! I'm sure the Secret Guard would love to be Escorting you all home to your nearest and dearest." there was some hollow laughter at this. Followed by a collective groan as the lights were raised and the party wound down. His task over Andanor slid off the table into his

chair and beckoned his "Trusted Men" close into a conspiratory huddle.

"As for you guys, you'd better have the Rangers ready for inspection by 2 o' clock of the afternoon, of this fine morning. Looks like Faramir may have some business for us." the huddle over he declined to keep them any longer and left to go to his rooms in a nearby house. A house where the beds were much softer than at home.

Cynara

Alessya shrugged. "I'm trustworthy. And even after a job's finish, I don't tell anything about it. It's safer that way, you know."

Khorazir

"Yes, it definitely is," Faramir agreed. "And since you refused to give away your former employers when I inquired about them, I am bound to believe you. Nevertheless, if I am to consider you for a possible errand, I need to know more about you. What skills have you, for example – other than to escape from prisons? How well known are you in Gondor, and how well do you know land and people? I may need someone who is inconspicuous and good at gathering information, and who is no member of my company. That means, if you are interested in doing something else than serving ale."

Cynara

Alessya grinned "I hate it here! The pay's well enough, but some patrons have the odd idea that my hinder regions are for their personal perusal. Anyway, I can be quite inconspicuous, I'm good enough at costumes to be a dozen different people, and I'm fair good at reading emotions. I'm an excellent fighter with swords and daggers, and ccan make my own way in town or forest. You decide if I'm fit."

Khorazir

Faramir studied her thoughtfully for a while. From what he thought he could read in her face the description of her abilities seemed to be no mere boast. At length he nodded slightly. "Very well. I will inform you about my decision tomorrow." He glanced at Túrin and Curufë. "I do not know if you have any further plans for the evening, but 'tis getting late, and I am rather weary. So I hope you will excuse me if I take my leave now. Curufë, there is a meeting with the Steward at noon tomorrow – today –, and I think it would be good if you attended. And you can come to the guardhouse at two, Túrin – if you want to accompany me."

"Definitely," Túrin said. "I need to get away from here for a while."

Faramir smiled and patted his shoulder. Then he rose, and wishing the others a good night, he left the tavern.

asaris

Curufë finished his glass of wine, and said to the others, "I should be going as well. Alessya, if you wouldn't mind, I'd like to spar with you a little tomorrow morning?"

Cynara

Alessya nodded shortly at Faramir, and grinned at Curufë. "Sure, I'll be here. Just tell me when your ready. But I must go for now, my shift's just about done." Alessya left, to clean the bar.

Khorazir

Túrin also took his leave of the others and went home. He managed to enter the house unnoticed by any servants, and after nicking some food in the kitchens (over the years he had turned this skill into a fine art), retired to his chamber, where he lay awake for a long time still, thinking about the events of the day, and about Visilya.

Faramir had taken his time on his way back to the Citadel. The night, though rather cold, was clear and starry, and there was the smell of spring-flowers in the air. When he had reached the Sixth Circle he went to the walls facing south, and stood on the battlements for a while, gazing out over the dark lands towards Lebennin. On clear days one could almost see the Ethir Anduin from here, and the sea. He wondered what was going on in the southern fiefs, and what would await them when they journeyed there in a few days. Suddenly what his father had told him a short while ago came to his mind, about Gondor's nobles vying for the Kingship. He turned towards the City, and glanced at the white banners – now grey in the faint light of the stars – fluttering on towers and battlements. It was hard to imagine that one day the black banner with the white tree, the crown and the seven stars could be replacing them.

A gust of cold wind stirred him out of his reflections and made him shiver slightly (he had brought no cloak), and thus he swiftly left the walls and went home.

EdaintheRanger

Andanor woke suddenly with a start. A stiff breeze was blowing through the suddenly open window, which was unrestrained, and clattered back and forth. He tried to push the haze from his mind, and his right arm reached instinctively to check, the bed was otherwise empty, he expected no less. He rose to close the window and that cold hollow feeling returned. As he closed the windows, a great weariness and responsibility sank onto his shoulders.

Then his hackles raised. The place seemed forboding, he dressed swiftly, stealthily retrieving his arms, and after slipping over a balcony he climbed down the ivy laden trellis and went home.

It had to be early morning, the night clouded as he passed, and slipping through the back streets he made his way to his family's home in exile. He expected the house to be dark, yet a light burned in the study windows. Cursing silently he had hoped to return unchallenged, and it seemed that his father's wound was keepin' him awake.

asaris

Curufë was awake quite early. He figured he'd head back down to the tavern somewhat early, around the third hour of the day, but first he wanted to pick up a short sword at the market. He only had a spear, and somehow he doubted that the spear would be the weapon Alessya was trained in.

Cynara

Alessya woke early the next morning, and rolled out of bed, pulling on some clothes hastily. Digging through her closet, she soon came upon her still-gleaming sword.

“Poor baby, you haven’t seen the light of day for a while, have you? Well, we’re going to work together this morning, aren’t we?” Slowly, Alessya began polishing her blade to a mirror-sheen.

gladrieltook

Visilya woke with the sun, and dressed quickly. Gently she roused the girl and led her to the mess hall for breakfast. “Mind your manners. The boys are alright, but some are a bit proud and full of themselves. If any say anything to you, you just tell them to shove off, or to bite you, whichever suits you best. Eat swiftly, I’m taking you on a bit of a journey.”

Lady_of_Rohan

“A journey?” Daewen repeated. “Where?” But the captain had already moved away to discipline some of the rowdy soldiers at a corner table. Daewen went to sit on a bench a good distance away from anyone else. She eagerly took the plate of food offered to her and devoured the eggs, bacon, and buttered toast in a few minutes. She glanced up every now and then to catch the undisguised curious glances many of the soldiers gave her. She drew up a bare foot and placed it on the rough wooden bench, then rested her head on her knee, waiting for whatever would happen next. A journey... What in the world does she mean by that?

gladrieltook

Visilya returned to find the young girl musing. She needed to talk to her. “Alright you lot!!! Hustle!!! I want you drilling and patrolling by noon!!! Hustle, hustle!!!!” There was a great commotion as soldier marched out of the mess, eager to avoid their captain’s wrath. “I love doing that...” She said as she slid onto the bench and sipped a cup of tea. “They’re so funny when they do that. I have to go to Lebennin today. I’ll have to take you with me, to keep you out of trouble. The White Gaurd already wants my blood. They’ve been trying their hardest to rid the streets of all the ‘thieves’, and I’m just making it harder for them.” She grinned mischeiviously. “So I’m going to give them a few weeks to cool their heels, while my gaurd sees to it that no more children are killed and that they recieve good homes. I’m taking you to Lebennin so we can educate you and find you a suitable home. I want you to be able to have a good, wise, and caring place to stay.”

Lady_of_Rohan

“Thank you,” Daewen said softly, looking away. But I don’t think anyone would want me, she thought to herself. Then she glanced up, a puzzled look on her face. “Leb-in- what? I’ve not heard of that district, or shop, in the city. Is it in one of the upper circles?”

asaris

As Curufë walked down to the tavern, he went over the usual forms of sword play. He hadn’t used a sword in a very long time, but thought he was probably still quite good, and he had been doing training exercises with it off and on for a while. There was no doubt in his mind that most elves who had been trained in the sword could beat him, but imagined he was probably better than most men. If Alessya had enough skill with the sword to warrant her company, she should be able at least to fight him to a standstill. Could she beat him? Perhaps, but she’d have to rank among the best swordmasters in Gondor to do that...

Such thoughts occupied Curufë's mind as he strode up to the tavern and knocked on the door. As Alessya came outside to join him, she noticed that his style was, well, somewhat odd. One might say archaic. Curufë noticed her odd look and said, "I was trained in Beleriand – nobody outside of the elves uses this style anymore, I'm sure." She nodded, and the two began circling, swords drawn. "To first blood?" she asked. "Sure, just try not to kill me. I'd rather not die today."

gladrieltook

Visilya smiled. "Lebennin is a city far south of Minas Tirith, but still in Gondor. I have... acquaintances there that will be able to help me in finding you somewhere to stay. Old friends, if you will." The people of which she spoke were Daerios, an old comrad, 's family. More presicly, his parents. They tutored children in the south and found homes for orphans. Visilya knew this because they had found her first master for her to apprentice under. "I have to make a quick stop first, so we'll have to leave now. Come on." She rose and strode out the door, Daerwen at her heels. After a few brief words with Dearios and the stable boys, they set out, mounted atop the two fastest horses in hte service of the Gaurd. They trotted down to the White Tree Inn, where they found two people deuling. Visilya called out to them. "Who goes there?"

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen's first horseback ride was quite startling and terrifying for her. At first she had been too preoccupied with what and where Lebennin was to notice where Visilya was leading her. But when they'd reached the stables she'd stopped dead in her tracks. Those animals were huge! The only contact she'd ever had with horses was when she tried getting out of the way of the errand-riders of the Steward as they came barreling down the streets at break-neck speeds. Even then the horses had looked big, but when she stood right next to one she realized how incredibly large they were. When she had stood beside the horse she was now riding, its shoulder was higher than her head! Before she could think about it, though, Visilya had given her a leg up into the saddle. Now that was a terrifying experience! Her feet barely reached the stirrups, and she immediately grabbed ahold of the pommel at the front of the saddle. She'd never ridden before, and was extremely relieved when her horse followed close behind Visilya's. Now as Visilya confronted the duelers, she dared to lean back in the saddle, trying to find a comfortable way to sit. Even in the short ride, her leg was beginning to chafe from where it rubbed against the stirrup leather.

Now her mind reverted back to what Visilya had spoken earlier. Lebennin is far south of Minas Tirith... How far south? Would she still be able to see the city? She looked around and the buildings, shops, and inns. This was the only home she had ever known, and now she was leaving it? Maybe she could find a way to slip away unnoticed. *Do you really think that captain will not notice your sneaking? After all the nice things she's done for you, and then you repay her by running away, she'd likely hand you over to the White Guard for that!* She sighed and shifted in the saddle.

Cynara

Still circling, Alessya's eyes flickered over the Visilya "Don't worry, this is a friendly duel!" She called, making a few test probes at the elf, then aiming a light poke at his open side.

Lady_of_Rohan

A saddle was not the most comfortable place in the world for someone not used to riding, Daewen realized. She shifted around again, desperately seeking a more comfortable way to sit. Slouching didn't work, neither did anything else she tried. She didn't have enough confidence in her balance to move around much, even leaning forward a bit made her nervous, especially if the horse moved just a little bit. Summing up her courage, she leaned slightly to the side, try-

ing to determine how high up she was, in case she decided to jump (or fall) off. She quickly straightened back up, positive she felt the saddle slip a bit. Visilya was amusedly watching the combatants, occasionally calling out a heckle or a piece of advice. Daewen watched for a few moments, but found the duel to be of no interest.

asaris

Curufë blocked the lazy thrust with a lazy block, and followed the block with a swing and a cut, trying to judge her strength and speed. He called out to Visilya at the same time, "Just the two of us, a friendly duel."

Khorazir

Túrin also woke rather early the next morning, which rather astounded him, for usually he tended to sleep rather long when he was allowed to do so. But his sleep had not been very nice anyway, as it had been troubled by dreams: dreams of Lossiel pursuing him with a knife and trying to stab him, or attempting to push him off the walls of the Citadel on which he had been balancing for some reason. Thus when the first beams of the sun showed above the mountains of the Ephel Duath in the East and found their way into his chamber, he rose, dressed swiftly, stole down into the kitchen where the servants were already at work, persuaded the cook who knew him since childhood and quite liked him ("Such a charming lad, wish I was twenty years younger!") to provide him with some breakfast and not telling his parents that he was up and gone already, and left the house.

For a moment he was unsure where to go, then he remembered that Curufë and Alessya had talked about meeting this morning to train with blades, and he was quite curious to see them fight. Perhaps he might even join them, he thought, and swiftly and secretly he returned to his chamber to get his sword. He had not handled a weapon for some time, and felt that some training might do him good when he was indeed going to accompany Faramir and the others to Lebennin. Faramir had not disclosed any details concerning the errand to him yet, but he had seemed rather tense when he had mentioned it, and Túrin was sure that it would be dangerous. *Errands Faramir's sent on tend to be just like that*, Túrin mused as he walked down to the inn. Perhaps Denethor's trying to get rid of him that way. Then he became aware of what he had thought, and he shook himself. Not even Denethor would be so cruel. Or would he?

Faramir had also risen early, but not as early as he had intended. The strain of the last months had left its mark on him, even though he had tried to conceal that from the men – and himself. When he finally woke from untroubled sleep he felt well rested, and despite chiding himself mildly for being so lazy, he was thankful for it. For while he washed, dressed and consumed a rather frugal breakfast, the conversation with his father came back to his mind, and the impending new errand. And Lindórie. He had successfully managed to avoid thinking about her all night, but now he could no longer do so. In a few hours he would be meeting her again, her and Denethor. He was looking forward to the first, but not the second. And this errand ... He hardly knew anything about it yet. Going down to Lebennin with Lindórië. He should be glad about the opportunity to spend some time with her. They had seen each other so seldom of late – not that they had met much more before that. But the short conversation yesterday had reassured him that his feelings for her had not changed. And she? Clearly she had been glad to see him, and her kiss had shown that she still loved him as well (if it was indeed love she felt for him – he was not entirely convinced if it was love or just deep friendship), and yet he thought he had sensed a deep sorrow and concern underneath her joy. *She knows it too*, he thought bitterly. *She knows that however this errand will turn out, successful or not, it will bring the end to what is between us – however this can be classified. And yet there is no way to avoid it.*

He finished breakfast. There were about two hours left till noon at which time he was ordered to present himself to the Steward again, so he, too, decided to go down to the White Tree and see how well Alessya could handle a sword.

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen was seriously considering falling off the horse, anything would feel better, she thought. Then she saw some-

one coming toward them.

Khorazir

When he had reached the Fourth Circle, Túrin, not heeding his surroundings since he was busy trying to imagine what might await him in Lebennin, and what he would do when he met Visilya again, was suddenly startled out of his musings when someone placed a hand on his shoulder and turned him about rather roughly. Instinctively he reached for his sword, and then froze, recognising the man in front of him. It was Gondil, one of his father's servants. Túrin gave him a questioning glance, while slight unease stirred in him. Apparently his leaving the house had been noticed after all. "What is it, Gondil?" he asked, trying to sound unconcernedly.

"The Lord Húrin wishes to see you," Gondil replied.

"Tell him I have to see to some important matter and will be back around noon," Túrin said curtly.

Gondil shook his head. "Nay, Master Túrin. Your father wants to see you now."

"What if I refuse to come?"

"Er ...," Gondil said, and then nodded towards two other men that stood nearby. "It'd be sensible to come without further ado, that's all I'll say."

Túrin gave him and the two others a fierce glance, but then shrugged dejectedly. "What's all the fuss about?" he asked as they walked back up the road.

Gondil studied him. "Apparently there came a complaint from Lord Thorondur late last evening. Your father was really furious and sent me to find you, but you were nowhere to be seen. Haven't done anything bad, have you?" Túrin kicked away a stone, thinking of Lossiel and how she had looked at him when he had tried to explain things to her. "Depends on how you look at it," he muttered.

Thus Túrin spent much of the morning trying to ignore the furious tirade his father yelled at him, and to defend himself as best he could. Vainly. In the end the Lord Húrin told him to get out of his sight. Túrin said that he would most likely soon be leaving for Lebennin, to which his father replied that this was all to the best because then he did not have to see him and be annoyed by him all the time. "I hope you will manage to stay clear of mischief for a few days," Lord Húrin said sternly, his face still flushed in anger, "although I doubt it. But whatever you may do in Lebennin will not be my responsibility to set to rights again, but that of the Steward. And he is not as lenient as I, that I can tell you."

+++

While Túrin had to endure his father's rage, Faramir walked down to the White Tree, where he found Curufë and Alessya locked in combat while Visilya and, to his surprise, the little thief, watched them from horseback. The girl looked rather uncomfortable on her steed, judged by the way she clung to the saddle and eyed the ground. Faramir was glad to see that Visilya had not locked her away, but apparently treated her rather kindly. The girl now looked up and beheld him, studying him curiously.

"Good morning," he said.

Lady_of_Rohan

"Hello," Daewen replied hesitantly, not knowing to whom she was speaking. For some reason, the voice sounded somewhat familiar, but then again, she'd heard many voices in her lifetime. She shifted for the hundredth time and

continued to study the stranger, her their's mind still estimating the cost of his clothing and what possible money he could be carrying.

gladrieltook

Visilya saluted to Faramir. "Morning, sir."

Faramir laughed. "Oh give a rest! I'm too tired for that stuff from you!"

Visilya laughed back. "Well, I have to teach this young lady some manners if I'm to find her a reasonable home! Faramir, this is Daerwen, the little theif that I'm going to turn into a presentable young lady. Daerwen, this is Faramir, the steward's son.

Lady_of_Rohan

The Steward's son? The words had a startling affect on Daewen, as she felt the blood rush out of her face, leaving her pale. For a moment, all the tales she'd heard as a little girl about the stewards (which were all false, but terrified her anyway) came back, until her reason and logic returned and she pushed those memories aside. Nevertheless, she stared at Faramir for a moment, eyes wide and frightened, before dropping her gaze to the ground. No doubt that tunic he wore was worth more than her life ever would be. She wore rags, tattered, torn, dirty.. Dirty? Sometimes she wondered what she would look like if all the dirt were washed off of her. She glanced down at her bare foot, calloused, and yes, caked with dirt. *Lovely shoes*, Daewen, lovely shoes. *I'm sure you impress the dear Steward's son greatly. Like it matters anyway.*

Again she wondered why she had fallen into such strange company, and what her purpose was among them. At that moment her horse shuddered in order to rid itself of some of the flies that had settled on it. Daewen gasped sharply and cluthced the pommel of the saddle, terrified.

Khorazir

Faramir went over to the horse, and put a hand to the bridle to hold it and keep it from fidgeting. The girl tried to avoid looking at him and seemed rather frightened, and he thought he could guess why. Most likely she had picked up many tales and rumours which did not shed a friendly light on the Lords of Gondor, and her experiences with the authorities of the City must have confirmed this.

"I am pleased to meet you, Daewen," he said with a smile. "You must be wondering what you are doing here among such terrifying folk. I do not know exactly what Captain Visilya has in mind with you, but I be convinced that it will be all to your good. No one is going to harm you. Not even Túrin, should he come and try to get his purse back."

Then he turned to the two combattants. "How is it going, Curufë?" he asked. "Is she good?"

gladrieltook

Visilya took the reins from Daerwen. "Be still, the horse can feel your nervousness. You have to relax." She gently led the horse around as Daerwen relaxed slightly. "I'm heading for Lebinnin, if you must know, to educate this girl and find her a reasonable home. I came down here in hopes of seeing..." She broke off suddenly, and her eyes grew cold.

Lady_of_Rohan

If there were ever a time Daewen wanted to bolt, now was it. The captian's order to relax was difficult to follow, but somehow she managed to release a slight bit of tension. Why me, why, why me? she wondered. Every time that horse took a step she felt like she was being jolted around, almost losing her balance sometimes. Her mind ran back over the Steward's son's words, and she was surprised to realize that they held no hidden wrath. She gave him a glance. Maybe she would give him a chance, maybe. Had these people been average merchants and vendors, she would have been gone a long time ago. No, I would have been locked up a long time ago, she snorted. Suddenly, the captain's words came back to her. Lebenin... "Why Lebennin?" she muttered.

Khorazir

Faramir studied her keenly. He thought he knew whom she was talking about. But he refrained from inquiring further. Instead he said: "You plan to go to Lebennin, Visilya? What a coincidence. Tomorrow, most likely, I must go there myself, together with a small company." *Which, alas, might include Tûrin*, he added in thought. "So if you do not want to ride alone," he continued aloud, "you might consider accompanying us. Lebennin is a beautiful fief," he added, turning to Daewen upon hearing her muttered question. "Much different from mighty and impressive Minas Tirith. There are only few greater towns there – none of them even a third as large as this one –, but many small towns and villages. Most people are farmers or traders, or sea- and fishermen, those living along the coasts, and the land is fertile and well-tended. 'tis one of the most prosperous realms of Gondor, and so there are many wealthy people down there."

Seeing the girl's slight frown, he added: "And not all of them look down upon those that do not have as much (although, I must admit, they are rather few), but try to share their wealth. I am sure Visilya will find a good home for you down there."

Lady_of_Rohan

"But Minas Tirith is my home," Daewen replied sadly.

Khorazir

Faramir gave her a thought- and also pitiful glance. "Visilya has never asked you if you want to leave at all, has she?" he said softly. "But I can see her point also. You are already well-known to the guards and the City-watch. If you stayed here, sooner or later you would run into real trouble with them, if you continued to thieve – as most likely you would, having no other choice. And they are not as friendly and forgiving as Captain Visilya. Moreover you deserve better than having to scratch a living on the streets here."

Lady_of_Rohan

"I've survived fourteen years by 'scratching a living on the streets', besides," she snorted, "what person in their right mind would want to take in a filthy street urchin like me anyway?" Here she sat up straight and assumed a haughty air, mocking some of the Gondorian lords. "After all, I'm merely someone who 'contributes nothing to society and must be weeded out and exterminated.'"

gladrieltook

Visilya laid her hand on the girl's shoulder. "That mind-set has always been the one that civilizations base their power upon. But you do contribute to society. Children like you make us think and be grateful for what we have, as well as wonder if what we have is worth as much as we deemed it. Lebennin is full of kind people who would love to take in a young lady such as you, and who would never think of weeding you out." She turned to Faramir. "Cleaned up and put in a nice dress she could be as pretty, if not prettier, than most of the nobles' daughters. She definitely is a lot smarter than the lot of them."

Khorazir

Faramir smiled. "And more sensible, too, I deem. Moreover she would 'contribute' much more to society than many of those highborn ladies who only mind their looks and wealth and spend their days waiting for some rich man to come and marry them. Well, in a way they, too, only conform to what is expected of them, so one cannot really blame them. But still, I cannot see much sense in that attitude and behaviour. And as for you, Daewen, there might be something you could do to really be of help to us – and society. Andanor, my lieutenant, observed you stalk and try to rob my friend Túrin yesterday, and he said that you displayed quite some skill at that. Are you that skilled at gathering information as well? Overhearing people's talk while remaining unnoticed yourself, follow them secretly, that kind of thing?"

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen shrugged. "I do what I do. I've not really done much conversation-overhearing, been more concerned with finding food, but yeah, I guess I could probably do that. Over time I've managed to pick up most of the passwords used around the city, and the like." She leaned back in the saddle, feeling slightly more confident in it. "But how could I be of help to you, after all, I'm only a beggar, while you have entire armies under your command."

Khorazir

"That may be so," Faramir replied, "but there are matters which require stealth and guile, and secrecy. A beggar-girl who can prevent being noticed and who keeps her eyes and ears open may achieve more and be of greater value to the venture – and thus the good of Gondor and its people – than the entire host of the realm. Well, I shall leave the decision if you want to help us or not to you. Visilya," he said turning to the captain, "have you had anyone particular in mind who might take her – if she agrees to leave the City at all?"

gladrieltook

Visilya sighed thoughtfully. "Hmm... I have several friends down there who love children, but don't have any for one reason or another. Lebennin is full of prosperous merchants and such who would love to take in Daewen. So, yes." She thought for a second. "And if I can't find anyone to take her in, she'd always make a good spy for a noble, or someone of the sort. What do you think, Daewen. Sound like a good plan to you?"

Cynara

Alessya smiled to herself, tuning out the inconsequential conversation. She knocked aside the cut, and swung at his right. This she turned to a feint, and spun, thrusting the sword in the direction of Curufë's throat. This was also turned

into a feint, and making a hissing S in the air, Alessya gave Curufë a small, controlled slice on his arm, just under the armpit. Dropping back, Alessya, gave Curufë some clean time to adjust to the handicap.

asaris

“Not bad,” Curufë muttered, half to himself. He hadn’t sparred regularly with the sword since Celebrimbor...that had been a little while ago. He responded to Alessya’s cut with a series of slashes – none of them touched her, but they left her a little more tired than before. He then thrust at her right shoulder, but just as she moved to block it, he sliced downward, slicing a cut in her tunic near the stomach.

Lady_of_Rohan

It was almost too much to comprehend. Daewen unconsciously brushed some tangled strands of hair back behind her ear while she thought things through. Conspiring with some of Gondor’s most powerful leaders, a bit of adventure, and at the end, maybe, a family... She shook herself slightly. But what if things didn’t turn out the way they wanted them too? She chewed her bottom lip. Whatever the reason, the trip would most likely be dangerous, at least, that’s what all the talk about secrecy and spying had sounded like.

For a moment her thoughts were interrupted by the clash of metal on metal as the duelers’ swords struck, but she quickly resumed her quiet contemplations. Did she even want a family? After all, she had managed to survive by herself this long, what stopped her from continuing? Suddenly, memories from when she had lived with the old widow came back to mind, one in particular, the widow singing lullabies to her and rocking her to sleep after she’d had a nightmare. Was it possible to have that same feeling again? It’s worth a try, she thought to herself. “Alright, I’ll do it, I’ll go with you.”

Khorazir

Faramir smiled and nodded. “Very good,” he said. He studied the girl thoughtfully. One of the things Visilya had just said running through his mind about people who love children but did not have any of their own. He knew someone of whom this description fitted very well. *She would make an excellent mother*, he thought. But then he discarded the thought again. The way things stood, she was in a very difficult situation at the moment, of which she could not foresee how it would affect her and her husband’s life in the end. What if the errand failed? She was in danger, Denethor had said. And what, if it succeeded? Then, most likely, she would end up without her husband, a fact she would not mourn – *neither would I*, Faramir thought – but would she stay in Gondor then? Would she be safe here? And would her behaviour be tolerated by society?

Only by reflecting on it now Faramir thought he understood how much was at stake for her, how much of her future depended on this errand. *And I am in charge*, he thought, and suddenly he felt that so much responsibility would simply overwhelm him.

The clash of swords stirred him out of his contemplations. He sighed slightly, then turned to Visilya again. “Most likely we shall leave early tomorrow morning. So if you want to accompany us, I think Daewen should have a little tutoring in how to ride a horse, since she is going to spend much time on horseback in the next few days.”

gladrieltook

Visilya smiled. “Well then. That is settled.”

Cynara

Alessya grinned widely, though she was a bit tired.

Doing a long series of short swipes, she ended with a controlled hack at Curufë's legs, making him jump back in surprise. One of his feet landed on a stone, and he slipped to one knee for half a minute.

Lady_of_Rohan

Spending days on horseback? Inwardly Daewen groaned. These last few minutes, almost a half hour, hadn't been what she would consider pleasant, and this was only the beginning? She let out a long sigh and slouched some more. Maybe I should have bolted when I had the chance, she thought. Instead, she tried not to let too much frustration show on her face, and glanced at the duelers again.

EdaintheRanger

Andanor however was in no position to be dueling. Having grabbed a hasty breakfast he was making his way to the barracks where his company was forming up. His eyes were bleary from little sleep and his thoughts filled with his father's words, for far from offering words of wisdom from his distinguished career, he had lamented on his son's choice to follow his path rather than strike out on his own.

"The Wry man he is!" Andanor thought, "Scolding me on my exerpades, never seems to cross his mind." Intent on creeping to his warm bed Andanor had attempted to sneak upstairs, to no avail, a anguished request for mulled wine had tweaked his guilty conscience. Expecting at least an admonishment the wayward son had taken the steaming drink to his suffering father.

Andanor's tired mind, had lost the fine details of this conversation, but he felt perplexed. That in the pain that he suffered, his father whilst they shared a few precious hours together rather than speak of his own problems, had asked after the company, and had wondered whether his Son had regretted taking up his place.

"I know you were interested in reading the archives, and continuing your musical studies, do you not regret giving up your arts?" Andanor had confessed that he had not in fact had chance to regret, he was somewhat busy. Now in the morning light, he wondered. Would there be a time when Gondor would be free from the burden of war. Perhaps one day he could lay down his sword, and take up a pen and a shawm once more?

Looking up he realised that his boots had carried him a little off his route to the barracks, and ahead of him stood "the White Tree" were his contemporaries from the night before all gathered.

asaris

As he slipped, Curufë turned the fall into a roll, forcing himself forward towards Alessya. Surprised, she took a hop back, leaving the two combatants standing again, facing each other and panting for breath.

Khorazir

Faramir also turned to the combatants and watched them fight. Alessya had not merely boasted about her skills with the sword. Her strokes were swift and strong, and she knew many tricks. Curufë seemed a little out of training, which was not to be wondered at. Most likely it had been a while since last he had fought with a sword. *Which goes for me as well*, Faramir thought. In Ithilien there was usually more work for the bow, since the rangers tried to avoid entering

into hand-to-hand combat with the orcs that roamed the woods in ever increasing numbers, and most of the time Faramir's scouts got rid of the patrols when they spotted them. So he himself could use some training as well, he mused.

Then he remembered what the errand was all about. Gathering information, trying to provoke Tarannon and his friends to a rash act. *We will not be going down there to start a fight*, Faramir reminded himself. And yet ... for some reason he was convinced that it would not be achieved without bloodshed, and this prospect troubled him.

When he forced himself to concentrate on the duelists again, he saw that they had stopped fighting for the moment, both rather out of breath. Apparently they had come to the conclusion that they were more or less equal. Then Faramir heard footsteps approach, and turning, he beheld Andanor coming towards them. He looked as if he had not gotten much sleep last night. "Good morning, lieutenant," Faramir greeted him with a smile.

EdaintheRanger

"Good morning, my lord" Andanor answered in a crisp fashion, an attempt to appear alert. An attempt that was betrayed by his lack-lustre salute. Andanor was in his ranger garb again and looked at ease, as he settled back into his adopted profession. After exchanging pleasantries with his friend and commander he then moved to compliment the Elf Lord and the lady on their combat skills, as they stood back from their sparring drill.

Feeling the vigour returning to his limbs and visibly awakening as the situation turned, Andanor attempted to predict Faramir's movements, and seeing his friend's eye flickering to the duel asked, "This is hardly bow work, and you do say that we should be at the peak of our fitness, at all times!" Andanor winked at this and then suggested that Faramir should be looking to his arms, and his own skill. "A sharp mind requires sharp wits, and how better to maintain them than a turn with a sharp blade?"

asaris

"I think..." panted Curufë, "That your skills . . . are adequate."

Cynara

Alessya nodded politely. "Your skills are also more than adequate, master Elf." Grinning shildishly, she threw him a wink.

Khorazir

"I think you are right, Andanor," Faramir said. "It seems a good idea to do a bit of training. We do not know what awaits us – in Lebennin and elsewhere. Would you join me? I know you are a good swordsman. But I fear I am a bit rusty. 'tis quite some time since last I had to handle a blade. Moreover" – he glanced at the others – "I hope that one of you would kindly lend me his or her sword, as I have not brought mine."

Lady_of_Rohan

All this talk about swords and fighting was making Daewen rather nervous and uncomfortable. She had never been terribly fond of swords (due to several encounters with city guards) and from what she was now hearing, it appeared to

her that wherever they were going, they were going to be picking fights. She silently cursed herself for agreeing to the whole thing anyway. You'll be of no use to them, even if they do say you will.

asaris

Curufë grinned back. "I haven't sparred since I lived with Celebrimbor, but that doesn't mean I have been going through exercises. Sometimes the sword is much more useful than the spear." He turned to Faramir. "I think we're finished here – why don't you use my sword."

Khorazir

"Celebrimbor?" Faramir said astonishedly. "Well, this is indeed some time ago. Thanks for the sword." He caught it as Curufë threw it towards him, and weighed it in his hands. It was different from the Gondorian broadswords, lighter and more elastic, but it was an excellent blade.

"Well, Andanor," Faramir called to his friend and lieutenant challengingly, "here is your opportunity to humble your captain in public."

EdaintheRanger

Andanor answered in a more modest fashion, "Oh I don't know about that my lord, I was never born to the arts of war."

At that Faramir answered quite firmly "Well, very few people are, now then ready yourself!"

Not to be rushed Andanor drew his father's blade, slowly. It was a little old-fashioned after the Gondorian style, but it was a well balanced and evenly tempered blade. A contrast to the lithe Elven weapon. Andanor was a little nervous he hadn't sparred for a while and he felt the eyes of the more than competent watching him.

But then Andanor hadn't been trained in the classical styles, some of his skill had been learned from other schools; with "the saturday night in the gutter" school of combat art being a prominent feature. Mentally preparing his body for combat he saluted Faramir with his blade. Shifting into a easy stance, Andanor, swiftly moved to the attack complementing a sweeping flurry of slashes, with more professional short stabs that tested Faramir's parry and guard strenuously.

Sweat was soon breaking on the brows of both men, as Faramir though hard pressed by Andanor's assault was gradually getting into his stride and wearing down his opponent's initiative. Driving Andanor's blade out of line and getting under his guard Faramir thought that he had found an opening, only to find that his own blade beaten aside in the furious action. Andanor felt a little uneasy, his social life seemed to be catching up with him as his limbs appeared a fraction of a ounce heavier than they should have done. Flicking the sweat from his hair he then parried a careful attack from Faramir and dropped into a surprisingly deft combat roll taking him several yards out of range and into a breathing space. With a flashing sweep of his blade Andanor balanced his return to his feet with a defensive response to the follow up attack. Andanor then locked blades with Faramir, attempting to overbear him, when he found that his legs were being swept from under him!

Andanor cursed silently at falling for such an elementary trip, but urgently recovered his balance in a low crouch, fending off carefully placed blows. "Who taught you that?" he called to Faramir between gasps of breath, as he renewed his offensive. Moving to the more conventional modes of dueling, in an effort to recover his energy expenditure.

Canamarth

A small crowd had by now assembled around the combatants. An old woman passing by with two heavy baskets from the market blurted: "Is there never any quiet in the street? Last night they were arguing right in front of my house and now they block my way home..." She sent dark glances at all around her and people hurried to get out of her way.

gladrieltook

Visilya chuckled and shook her head. "You're a trip, Faramir, you really are." She dismounted from her horse and drew her sword. "I'll fight whoever wins this one. Then we'll really see who's the best swords-man, or -woman." She glanced up at Daewen. "You want down from that horse? This must be your first time riding."

Lady_of_Rohan

"It is," Daewen replied, trying to remember how Visilya had gotten down from the animal. She had done it so quickly... Realizing she couldn't remember, much less copy, she decided to go about it her own way. Gulping, Daewen slowly drew one leg across the horse's withers until she was sitting on it like one would a bench. Taking a deep breath, she pushed herself off the saddle and jumped down, stumbling as she landed. She muttered several curses as she hobbled a moment on a twisted ankle which began to feel better a few moments later.

Khorazir

Faramir grinned at Andanor's question. "Surprised you, did it? Well, I do have certain friends who know these tricks. And an elder brother." Diving under a rather friendly blow from his friend he looked to Visilya. "You want to fight the winner? Well, by the looks of it he who wins will be so spent that you shall have an easy match."

With that he turned to Andanor again. The longer they fought, the more confident Faramir got. There are things you do not unlearn, he thought. But he also noticed that, although the last months in the woods of Ithilien had very much steeled his condition, he had sooner been out of breath than he liked. Andanor's unusual way of fighting forced him to concentrate hard all the time, for often his lieutenant's attacks were unpredictable and thus quite dangerous. Several times he barely managed to parry a swift thrust or stroke, and at one time the tip of Andanor's sword lightly grazed his cheek, which startled his lieutenant almost more than himself.

They continued their 'duel' for several minutes, until both were quite exhausted and fighting for breath. Neither had managed to obtain the mastery in the end. Panting, Faramir ran his sleeve over his face to wipe away sweat and the trickle of blood on his cheek. Then he turned to Visilya again.

"Well, Visilya, I think both Andanor and I could do with a little break ere we continue. And I think 'twould be fair if you chose your sparring partner, since neither of us won."

gladrieltook

Visilya chuckled. "Perhaps a pint will get you back into the mood to spar?"

Khorazir

“Oh, only water for me, please,” Faramir said. “I must face Denethor in a short while, and if I showed up there bleeding, sweating and moreover reeking of ale, he would most likely explode and throw me out at once for my lack of ‘proper manners’. If his mood from yesterday has not changed, ‘twill be no pleasure meeting him anyway.”

Just as he spoke, a bell up in the Citadel rang the hour. “Eleven thirty already,” he murmured. “Please excuse me, Visilya, but I think our duel must wait. I have to attend a meeting at noon, and I should like to wash and change before that. Thus I must hurry.” He went and returned the sword to Curufë, thanking him again. “I hope to see you all this afternoon, after I have spoken with the rangers. Then I shall most likely be able to give you more information on the new errand. Prepare to set out tomorrow. And Andanor, good luck. She is a wicked swordsman – or -woman.” With that he waved to them, and left.

On his way up to the Citadel he almost ran into Túrin, who, having finally been released by his father, was on his way down to the inn.

“What happened to you?” Túrin asked when he spotted the scratch on his friend’s cheek.

“We did a bit of sparring down at the White Tree,” Faramir answered swiftly. “The others are still there. Visilya too.”

Túrin nodded, looking rather grave. “Where are you going so hurriedly?” he asked then.

“Meeting with the Steward.”

“Oh dear, good luck.”

“To you also.”

Túrin nodded again with a slightly dejected smile. “I guess I’ll need it,” he muttered, and then they parted.

Faramir managed to reach his quarters, wash, change and walk to the White Tower just in time. The bell had already begun tolling when he hastened up the stairs to his father’s chamber.

Lady_of_Rohan

The second duel had been a bit more interesting to Daewen, perhaps because she wasn’t preoccupied with being on horseback. She knew the style was slightly different, though she wouldn’t be able to tell anyone why or how if she was asked. It was almost a disappointment when it ended and the Steward’s son said he had to be going. It still bemused her to think about the company she now kept. The Steward’s son, captain of the Secret Guard, a ranger, an Elf – and to think, only a day ago she had been wandering the streets wondering where her next bite of food would come from. A hard nudge at her shoulder made her jump. She twisted to see the horse she had been “riding” looking at her curiously. For a moment she just stared at it, wondering what to do. Then she hesitantly reached out and stroked its forehead for a second before quickly drawing her hand back. Her utter terror and confusion had waned, but that didn’t mean her confidence and trust had grown much.

Now it appeared that someone else was coming toward the inn. For some reason, Daewen thought he looked familiar, then the recognition set in. *Oh, this is going to be interesting.*

Khorazir

As Túrin approached the people gathered in front of the inn he felt a sting in his chest when his eyes fell on Visilya,

who apparently was just about to enter into a duel with Andanor. Unconsciously he slowed his pace. Then he noticed a small, slender figure standing close to one of the two horses, one of which he recognised as Visilya's. He was quite surprised when he realised that it was the little thief. Apparently Visilya had treated her rather kindly. Túrin held no grudge against the girl, knowing that she had needed the money in his purse more than he. But most likely she had not been allowed to keep it.

The girl had spotted him and was now watching him curiously. The others had not noticed him yet. Walking over to the horses, he greeted the girl. "Hello," he said. "I see you have managed to avoid imprisonment. That's good. They didn't treat you badly, did they?"

+++

When Faramir entered the chamber, his eyes fell on Lindórië sitting in a chair by the small window. Apparently she had been there for some time, for a half-empty cup of tea stood next to her on the windowsill. Denethor sat behind his desk. He looked as if he had not left it all night (*which was quite probable*, Faramir thought). For some reason he had expected more people to be present, but who else, he thought, was to know of this matter. The fewer, the better. He greeted them. Denethor returned it with a curt nod, but Lindórië smiled warmly. Again Faramir thought she looked troubled when she rested her eyes on him. He took a seat, and waited, not without anxiety, for one of them to speak.

At length Denethor stirred. "I see you have wisely decided to accept the errand," he said evenly.

Faramir gave him a sharp glance. "'tis not that I had much of a choice, is it?" he returned, trying to make his voice sound even as well, but not quite succeeding at it.

"There is no need for you to get angry," Denethor said, still calmly, but with a slight edge to his voice. Then he continued in a more businesslike tone: "I have already discussed matters with Lindórië, and she will inform you of what I have said once you are on your way. You will leave early tomorrow morning, journey down to Linhir, and operate from there. Officially you are sent to help Lindórië against the outlaws that trouble the main roads of the realm. Since Tarannon and Carandil are busy at the coasts, she has called upon the Steward for aid. Inofficially, as I have hinted at yesterday during our conversation, you are to monitor Tarannon's and his brother's doings. I want to know what they are up to. Where their hosts are gathered at the moment, where they fight and whom, and with whom they correspond and about what."

"Would not a small number of inconspicuous spies be more appropriate for such a purpose?" Faramir asked.

"They are at work already," Denethor replied. "Your task is to take Tarannon's attention off their doings, so that they can work in peace and secrecy. The Lords of Pelargir will soon learn that Lindórië has returned from Minas Tirith with a company of rangers. And when they are told who leads this company Tarannon will prick up his ears. He is not stupid. He knows that his wife has a ... good friend, and he has a pretty good idea who this is."

"So we are the bait?" Faramir said, with a swift glance at Lindórië.

"Yes. Once he knows that you are in Lebennin, he and his more clever and more subtle friends will assume that this is some plan of mine, that there is a purpose behind me sending you. He will grow suspicious, and perhaps – hopefully – anxious. And he will be angry. This is what I want. I want to startle him out of his carefully guarded routine, I want to move him to a rash and thoughtless act. I want him to call upon his friends for aid. I want him to avert his concentration from his present doings. In short, I want him, in a moment of thoughtlessness caused by jealousy, to reveal proofs of his treacherous plots, so that I can finally nail him down."

Denethor's voice had turned hard and cold at his last words. Again Faramir looked to Lindórië, but she had cast down her eyes. He pitied her. Although there may never have been much affection between her and Tarannon, still he was her husband, and they had been married for many years now.

"Do you want to have him killed?" he asked quietly.

“Not when it can be avoided,” Denethor answered. “I want to get rid of him, yes, but if I had wanted him dead, he would have stopped hunting corsairs a long time ago. I only want proof of his treachery, and information from him who else is involved. The rest is up to the High Court.”

Over which you preside, Faramir thought.

Most likely Denethor had read his thoughts, for there was a brief glint in his eyes. “Just bring me the proof that he is a traitor to Gondor, and I shall see to the rest,” he said softly.

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen wasn't sure how to respond, having half-expected him to demand his money back. “No,” she answered softly. “The worst thing they made me do was get on a horse.” She flushed, realizing how stupid that must have sounded. She hurried on. “For this first time in my life, I think, I had a full stomach.” That sounded wonderful too, Daewen, she silently berated herself.

gladrieltook

Visilya's smile faded as she heard Turin's voice. Stiffly, without looking at him, she retorted. “You know me well enough, Turin. I pity the underdog,” she turned to face him. “which is anyone I feel is in need. I'm going to try to get this girl back on her feet in Lebennin. I have friends there that will transform her into a lovely young lady, or if I can't find them, we'll put her to work as a well paid spy for a noble or perhaps even myself.” Her eyes narrowed as she said this last statement. She was still stinging from her betrayal.

Khorazir

Túrin glanced at her. To his surprise he felt slightly hurt because of the tone in which she had spoken to him, and the fact that she had not deemed it necessary to face him. “I hope that's what she wants as well,” he muttered. Then he turned to Daewen again. He stroked the horse's nose and asked: “What's so bad about having to ride this one? It seems very nice to me.”

+++

There had been a tensed silence in the chamber ensuing Denethor's words. Faramir tried to avoid looking at Lindórië, sensing her unease, but now and again his glance would stray to her. Denethor watched them thoughtfully.

“Who do you plan to take with you?” he suddenly demanded of Faramir.

“A score or two dozen rangers, perhaps. Rather less,” he answered. “Túrin and Curufë the Noldo want to accompany me as well” – at the mentioning of the latter Lindórië looked up, and it seemed that her grave face brightened a little.

“Moreover there is Captain Visilya and a ward of hers, a young beggar girl, for whom she wants to find new parents in Lebennin. And there is Alessya, who introduced herself as a mercenary.”

Denethor nodded. “I see you chose people of various skills and backgrounds. That is well.”

Oh, he admits that I have done something right, Faramir thought sarcastically. How have I earned this? Turning to Lindórië, he asked: “How many will be accompanying you?”

“I came here with only four guards and two servants. Officially I am here to do research in the library, and only to

uphold this pretence I took them with me at all. They will remain here. I do not think we shall need them.” Picking up a roll of parchment that had lain at her feet, she rose, walked over to the desk, and unfolded a map of Southern Gondor. The next half hour the three spent poring over the map, discussing routes, distances and the time needed to cover them, and the current whereabouts of the Lords of Lebennin and their army.

Lady_of_Rohan

“I’ve never been on a horse before,” Daewen said softly. “I don’t know how or what to do with anything. I don’t even know how to get on or off right.” She looked down at the ground, feeling her face flush again.

Khorazir

“Oh, it’s not that difficult,” Túrin said. “You’ll learn very soon, and moreover you’ll enjoy riding, I’m sure. And look, the horse seems to like you.” He nodded towards the stud that was nibbling at Daewen’s garments in search of a treat. Digging into his pockets, he found a piece of bread he had nicked for breakfast but not eaten. He handed it to Daewen. “Give it to her and she’ll like you even more for it.”

+++

Meanwhile Denethor, Lindórië and Faramir had decided upon the route the company was going to take. It was a journey of five days from Minas Tirith to Linhir, the chief city of Lebennin situated at the mouth of the rivers Gilraen and Serni in the west of the fief, near the border to Dor-en-Ernil where the Prince Imrahil ruled. There had been much discussion if the travellers should follow the road from Minas Tirith south till they reached Pelargir, and enter the city, or if they should rather pass the haven by to prevent being noticed by people there, who surely would spread the word until it reached the ever pricked ears of Falastur, the powerful (and powerhungry) lord Pelargir. But Denethor insisted that it was important that their presence was noticed, and in particular that Lindórië and Faramir were seen together.

“This will make people were attentive and cause lots of gossip, and ensure that Tarannon gets to know of it as well,” he said, looking rather pleased. “So you will not pass by Pelargir. Is it not that you have a house there, Lindórië?” he asked.

Lindórië nodded.

“Excellent. Perhaps you should even pay a visit to Lord Falastur. He will be delighted to have you around.” Now a definitely mischievous smile was playing about the Steward’s lips. “You can deliver a message for me. He has not attended the last meeting of the council in Sulimë, claiming that he was too busy. The true reason was, as I know well enough, that he has not payed last year’s taxes properly, and was loath to have this matter discussed in front of the other nobles. But my letter shall remind him of his duties.”

Despite his uneasiness about the whole errand, Faramir could not avoid smiling slightly when imagining Falastur’s discomfort. But he completely approved of it. He disliked the Lord of Pelargir, and knew that this feeling was mutual.

“Boromir is in Pelargir as well, or so I heard,” he said. “I have not seen him for some time. Perhaps we could meet.”

Denethor shook his head. “He is leaving tomorrow, bringing some new ships up Anduin to Harlond. So you will not meet him on the road.”

Faramir sighed slightly and shrugged.

There was silence for a while, then Faramir said: “I am sure you want me to report regularly?”

"I shall see to that," Lindórië said.

Denethor nodded. He looked at the two, and his face was grave. "Be careful," he said. "Those people we are trying to get at are not to be underestimated. And do not forget what may be the result if the errand should fail. Yesterday I have spoken to you of certain plans to restore the Kingship in Gondor, plans that do not aim at the good of the realm (in which case they would have been supported by me), but at fulfilling certain persons' selfish and highly dangerous ambitions. None of them has a rightful, undebatable claim to the throne of Gondor. As you rightly perceived yesterday, Faramir, strife and perhaps even civil war would be the outcome if any of them did indeed voice his ambitions openly and undertook steps to bring it about." His dark eyes rested on them, and suddenly it seemed to Faramir that they looked less hard and stern. Denethor's voice, too, had an almost gentle note to it when he said softly: "Do not think that I am not aware of how difficult this errand is for both of you, especially for you, Lindórië, and that it may cost you much. If you succeed, you will lose your husband, and your reputation will have suffered greatly. And you may be in danger. Many people will try to get rid of you, or take revenge."

Lindórië nodded slightly. "I know that. And I am willing to endure all of that. 'tis no secret that I have never loved Tarannon. You know the reasons why I had to marry him. I will not miss him over much, although I will not claim that I will not miss him at all. And even though I love Gondor, I would leave it, if I had to, if only to be able to live on in peace. But –" and now she looked at Faramir "– there are others who cannot leave so easily."

gladrieltook

Visilya had to try very hard not to dissolve into tears. Hearing his strong voice only reminded her why she loved Turin so much. She turned her head away, and mounted her horse, where she sat with her proud head bowed.

Khorazir

As Túrin gave the bread to Daewen, noticed that Visilya had mounted again. He wondered if she wanted to leave. Had she not been preparing to duel with Andanor, who now gave her a rather irritated glance? Túrin was reluctant to talk to her, although he knew that talk was needed. Or perhaps he feared it. He was not sure. But she looked sad, and the realisation of this went to his heart.

"You'll excuse me?" he said to the girl. "Just make your hand really flat and place the bread on it. So she won't be able to bite your fingers," he added, patting Daewen's shoulder reassuringly. Then taking a deep breath, he went over to Visilya. "Hello," he said softly as he stood beside her steed looking up to her. "I ... I think we should talk, Visilya. I'm going to leave for Lebennin tomorrow with Faramir, and I don't know when we'd be seeing each other again. And I don't want to let things stand between us the way they're now."

+++

"I can look after myself," Faramir said swiftly, trying to sound lightly and matter-of-factly. "Moreover I spend most of my time in Ithilien anyway, so what damage there could be to my reputation I do not care about." *Neither do you, right?* he added in thought, glancing at Denethor – who understood his son's gaze well enough, but refrained from commenting on it.

"Neither of you has spoken of what really troubles you about this errand," Denethor said suddenly. "And I am sure you do not want me to address this matter now, but there are some things that must be said." He paused, apparently considering of how to continue best. "I do not know what exactly there is between you. And 'tis not my concern, as I know you want to say now. But you have entertained your ... relationship for a long time, so I assume that there is true affection involved. Perhaps even love, which is a precious thing that should not be cast aside or destroyed lightly. But I need not tell you that this love has no future. This may sound hard now, but neither of you has use of soft words, and I am sure I am not pointing out something to you that you are not aware of already. Perhaps, when this affair in Lebennin is over, you will blame me for having destroyed your relationship. You may think that I am abusing your love

for my personal goals under the pretence of working for the good of Gondor and its people only, and deem me as cruel and ruthless as those that I oppose. But only thus can the peace of the realm be maintained. So if you resent me for what I do, I cannot help it. But I am sure that one day –” he bent his gaze on Faramir, who returned it steadily despite his troubled feelings “– you will understand.” Denethor reached out and rolled up the map again, as if in sign that the meeting was drawing to an end.

Both Faramir and Lindórië sat with bowed heads. Neither of them had expected Denethor to know so much about and moreover address their feelings so openly. Faramir had always thought that his father did not care. But apparently he had been mistaken.

Denethor now stood, and they rose as well to take their leave. “Good luck to you,” the Steward said gravely. For a moment it seemed as if there was something he wanted to add, but when he spoke he had completely changed topic, and his voice was even and businesslike once more. “The letter to Falastur will be given to you ere you leave tomorrow, Faramir,” he said.

Faramir nodded, and after bowing slightly to the Steward, he left the chamber. Outside the door he leaned against the cool stonewall, closed his eyes and took a deep breath. A moment later Lindórië also left the room and closed the door behind her. They looked at each other, then without a word she went over to him and they embraced tightly.

Lady_of_Rohan

The comment about finger-biting hadn't soothed her any. Daewen nibbled on the bread a little bit, wondering if she should really give it to the animal. She took a bite, glanced around, then remembering to keep her hand flat, offered the rest to the horse. Grimacing slightly as the muzzle came close to her hand, she quickly realized that the sensation was more like a tickle than anything painful and relaxed slightly. She watched with wonder as the horse took the bread and quickly ate it. A small smile crossed her face. Maybe horses aren't so bad after all. Turning a little, she saw that the captain had mounted her horse again and... oh what was his name, she'd heard it once but forgotten it already... Túrin! That's what she called him, she suddenly remembered. It wasn't difficult to see the tension between them, or was it awkwardness? Túrin seemed to be a likable person, he had been nice to her at least. She wondered why the captain had been so curt to him. A former lover perhaps? Daewen shrugged. It was their problem, not hers. A nudge on her shoulder caused her to turn around and see a curious rub her arm. “I don't have anything else for you,” she apologized. The horse blew gently in her face in response. She giggled, smelling the grain on its breath.

gladrieltook

Visilya looked down at him, her silver eyes shimmering with tears. “It would seem that I cannot escape you, son of Hurin. I too am leaving for Lebennin. Daewen has agreed to join me, also. We will have plenty of time to ‘talk’, if I chose to accompany the Lord Faramir on his journey to the southern fief.” She closed her eyes and turned away, so that he would not see the lone tear that was sliding down her face. It burned as it fell, and she loathed it, but she did not bother to hinder its path.

Khorazir

Túrin swallowed slightly. “Very well then,” he said. He hesitated briefly before adding softly but earnestly: “I hope you'll decide to ride with us.” With that he turned away and walked over to Curufë and Andanor, feeling that he could endure the sad look on Visilya's face no longer.

+++

For a long time Faramir and Lindórië remained in their embrace, unmovingly, and without speaking. They just held

each other, trying to find some comfort in the other's company, and strength for the difficult times that lay ahead. But at length Lindórië stirred and stepped back a little so that she could look into his face. Noticing the cut on his cheek, she reached out and gently ran her fingers along it. "This was not here yestereve," she said.

"I did a bit of training with the sword this morning," he explained. "I thought I might need it."

She nodded slightly. "I hope 'twill not come to any fighting, but 'tis certainly good to try and be prepared for all eventualities."

"Do you think I should bring more men?"

"Nay, I do not think this will be necessary. I have some men in Linhir who can aid us should the need arise. Not all went with Tarannon." She sighed slightly. "There are some things I have to prepare and arrange still ere we leave. So I fear you will have to excuse me now."

"I must see my rangers as well. And inform my friends who want to accompany us what they can possibly expect of the next few weeks – although I must say that father's description was rather vague."

"Does that surprise you?" she asked with a faint smile.

Faramir shook his head, smiling as well. "Not really. I only hope that you know indeed more of the affair, as he claimed you do. I feel terribly unprepared for the whole errand."

Her smile broadened. "Trust me," she said. Leaning forward, she kissed his hale cheek, and, after brief hesitation, his lips as well. And this time he was not too startled to return the kiss, although it ended much sooner than he liked, for a sound from below caused them to draw back. An errand-rider was ascending the stairs on his way to the Steward. He gave the two who were still standing rather close to each other a curious glance before swiftly entering the chamber. They looked at each other and suddenly, despite their worries and anxiety of the days to come, they started to laugh.

"Perhaps the errand will be fun after all," Faramir said.

"Definitely," she agreed. And with that they parted.

EdaintheRanger

Andanor felt a slight chill on the morning breeze, as his body cooled from the exertion. As he watched the effect of Túrin on Visilya he was visibly annoyed. Not so much in that he was missing a duel but on the fop's rash and foolish manner. "Well, by Mordor, I was that age once," he thought to himself, even though he and Túrin were of age.

Seeing that Túrin was heading towards them Andanor turned and asked Curufë's opinion on the fighting styles that he had seen this day.

Khorazir

Túrin noticed that Andanor seemed to be in no mood to enter into a conversation with him. Most likely he was still resenting his behaviour the previous evening, something Túrin could quite understand. He loathed himself for what he had done, and the grief he had caused. He checked his pace, then turned and walked back to Daewen. At least someone who still wants to talk to me, he thought. "Well," he said as he drew near, "how did it go? Did she like the bread?" He nodded towards the horse.

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen beamed a smile at him, something she rarely did. Her words came out in a rushing stream. "Yes, she did! And she didn't bite my hand off! I did exactly what you said about keeping my hand flat and all and she just lightly took it off my palm and ate it! Her nose tickled. I've never had anything like that happen to me before. Do you have any more bread I can feed her?"

Khorazir

Túrin smiled as well. Searching his pockets, he found some small crumbs that had broken off the bread. He collected them in one hand and handed them to the girl. "That's all that's left, I'm afraid. But next time there'll be more, I promise. I heard you might be riding with us tomorrow?"

asaris

"It was interesting; I learned to use blades..." on the swan ships we traveled from Aman he was about to say, but realized this would probably have little meaning for the humans. "A very long time ago, so my style is probably a bit archaic."

gladrieltook

Visilya glanced over to the girl. She smiled softly, glad that the girl was getting along nicely. But seeing Turin's smile nearly broke her heart.

Lady_of_Rohan

Carefully arranging the crumbs into a mound, Daewen held out her hand again, giggling as the horse licked the bread away. "I guess I am," she said somewhat gloomily, turning toward Túrin. "Us? You're going along?" she asked somewhat confusedly. "You're looking for a family too?"

Khorazir

Despite his troubled heart because of Visilya and Lossiel, Túrin laughed. "No, not exactly." Remembering the conversation with his father a short while ago, his mirth decreased somewhat. "I have one, although they're rather angry with me at the moment, because I don't know how to behave properly, or so my father put it. No, the reason for my coming is that my friend Faramir asked if I wanted to accompany him to Lebennin. He said he needed some friends around him. Guess the errand's going to be a rather serious one. It's seldom that he asks for help. And as things are, I quite appreciate the opportunity to get out of town for a while," he added, casting a swift glance at Visilya.

Lady_of_Rohan

The glance had been carefully noted by Daewen, offering further evidence for her 'former lovers' theory. However, the talk of leaving Minas Tirith and the seriousness of the errand dampened her spirit a bit. "How far away is Lebennin?" she asked quietly, idly playing with a strap on the horse's bridle. "And can you see the city from there?"

Khorazir

“Depends on where you are,” Túrin answered. “Lebennin’s a fief of Gondor, one of the largest. It begins south of Minas Tirith, beyond the Rammas Echor, and goes down all the way to the sea. In the east it’s bordered by the Great River, and in the West the border is the river Gilraen. It has two greater cities, one is the great haven Pelargir on Anduin, which officially is a fief of its own, and the other is Linhir in the west, at the mouth of the rivers Gilraen and Serni. That’s where the Lords of Pelargir dwell. I don’t really know where we’re heading. But the big South-Road leads down to Pelargir from here, and it’s a journey of three days. Perhaps we’ll be going there, perhaps we’ll be heading on to Linhir, or stay somewhere along the coast. Faramir has not informed us of that yet. Have you ever been to the coast and seen the sea? It’s beautiful.”

EdaintheRanger

Realising that the fair morn was swiftly ebbing into the noon day sun, to the fall of the afternoon, Andanor decided to bid farewell to Curufë and made his leave.

He offered a curt nod to Turin, and a quick smile to the impish thief, before marching at a double pace to the barracks where the Rangers were stationed. He found the place deserted, save for the quartermaster and the attendant servants. He pursed his lips in annoyance. The Quartermaster was somewhat vague as to their whereabouts. Andanor frowned, Faramir would have said if they had been mobilised earlier. Andanor sighed, the fine troops that made up the rangers were a law to themselves, sometimes. He checked the quarters and he could see that their gear was gone. “At least they are prepared.” he thought. Andanor asked the nearest servant to gather his personal gear together, taking one last glance around the quiet barracks while he waited for the lad to return with his trappings.

Thanking the serving boy Andanor then set off to the “Guardhouse” in vain to look for his company. Unsurprisingly the place was quiet, the landlord giving his solemn word that he had seen neither hide or hair of them. Andanor thought for a while then made haste to the main gates.

gladrieltook

Visilya pulled on the reins, causing her horse to turn around. “I must see the Steward. Daewen, you may come with me, if you wish.”

Lady_of_Rohan

Every single name Túrin mentioned sounded incredibly strange and foreign to Daewen, except the Great River, that she knew well. The others could have been in an entirely different country for all she knew. It reminded her harshly of how much higher up the others were compared to her. “I’ve never been out of the city,” she said quietly, feeling her face flush with embarrassment.

The Captain’s words startled her. The Steward? She felt herself beginning to tremble. “Do I have to?” she asked, frightened.

Khorazir

“Well, I guess it would be good if you went with Visilya,” Túrin said. “I have to go and meet with Faramir and the rangers, and prepare a few things for tomorrow. What about you?” he inquired of Curufë and Alessya. “Want to come with me? Faramir said something about meeting at two, but that’s not that far off.”

Faramir, in the meantime, had left the Citadel and was on his way to the barracks where his rangers were stationed. Like Andanor, he found them all gone. The quartermaster informed him that his lieutenant had just been there and inquired about them as well.

“Master Andanor went down to the Great Gate,” a servant told Faramir as he was leaving the barracks.

“And my company, is it there as well?”

The servant only shrugged.

Faramir thanked him, hiding his frustration. It was almost two already. *Hopefully the errand will not continue as it begins*, he thought gloomily as he hastened down to the Gates in search of his company.

Lady_of_Rohan

Seeing that she wouldn't be getting much support from the others, Daewen sighed gloomily. After a quick lesson from the captain, she somewhat successfully mounted her horse and tried getting comfortable in the saddle again. With a final word to the others, the pair quickly started off for the Citadel.

Khorazir

When Faramir had reached the Great Gate, he saw Andanor and – to his relief – the rangers entering from outside the City. The men were carrying their bows and spears and other weapons, and looked as if they had been doing some training on the Pelennor. Just when they passed the Gates a bell tolled twice. Faramir crossed his arms in front of his chest as he waited for them in the middle of the court that spread in front of the Gates. Slightly raising an eyebrow in a mock serious way, he watched them as they hurried towards him and came to a halt in a ragged line in front of him. He left them stand there for a while, pacing to and fro, then he faced them, his expression stern, while inwardly he was quite amused by their guilty expressions and sweaty faces.

“So, whose idea was it to leave the City without asking permission first, and moreover without informing anybody whither you went?” he asked sternly.

They cast down their eyes nervously, avoiding to having to look at him. But at length Mablung stepped forward.

“It was mine, captain. Since you said we were to present ourselves at two, I thought we might use the morning to get some training. There is not much time for these things in Ithilien, and I deemed it might be better to spend the morning doing something useful than just sit about idly waiting for you.”

Faramir gave him a long glance which visibly increased the ranger's uneasiness, then suddenly he smiled. “It was done well. I hope you did really do some training. You may use it. And 'tis lucky for you that you made it back just in time.” Turning to Andanor, he added: “Thanks for searching them and bringing them back, Andanor. And now follow me all. We shall return to the barracks, where I shall inform you of our new errand.”

gladrieltook

Visilya made sure to travel slowly so that Daewen could keep up. “The Steward is nice enough, if you know how to handle him. I have to get leave proper leave. I really could leave any time I want, but right now we're particularly busy, so I have to let him know, so he doesn't cause a great racuas looking for me when Daerios is in charge! It's happened before. The whole gaurd was in an upraor because I had to leave unexpectedly. It was a grand royal mess.”

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen only nodded. The captain's words mean little to her. As they made their way through the circles, she began receiving instructions and pointers on proper riding. Soon her head was swimming. Sit up straight, straighter! Keep your arms relaxed and your hands firm. Thread the reins through your fingers, like this. Don't pull so hard, that hurts the horse's mouth. Look between the ears, not at the ground beside you! By the time she figured out how to do one thing, she'd forgotten another, or slouched again, or jerked on the reins, or... This is impossible. She snorted. Túrin had said this would be easy.

As they climbed higher, the city grew more and more splendid. But even up in the sixth circle, some of the fine houses appeared empty, looking like they had been for a long time. Finally, they came to the seventh gate and dismounted. Daewen studied the guards curiously. She could honestly say she'd never run across any of them before, at least not while they were in uniform. Their surcoats were black with embroidery of a blossoming white tree under a silver crown and pointed stars. Their silverish (or what she guessed to be silver) helms amused her: there had to be some huge, cosmic inside joke with the wings on the sides of the helms. In her opinion, the guards looked utterly ridiculous with them.

While their horse's were being led away to a stable, Visilya began having problems with the gatewardens. Apparently they found it strange that a captain wanted a peasant girl to enter into the Citadel with her. Daewen listened for a while. It seemed they were going to deny her admission.

gladrieltook

Visilya stood with her hands on her hips and her feet planted firm. "She may be a peasant, but she is a Gondorian all the same. She will accompany me to see the steward." Her glare was so fierce, that the doorwarden backed down, cowering against the gate house wall. "Thank you, Beregond. I will tell the Steward of your excellent work as a guard." She led Daewen up the path to the citadel, laughing. "They're all cowards. Idiots who get drunk every night to drown their woes. It's sad really." Daewen smiled. The regular guards were easy targets, and fun to taunt.

Khorazir

Beregond and the other guards looked after the pair. "Secret guard," one of them sneered. "Think they're a cut above the rest of us. But have they ever done something useful? Wherever they go, chaos follows!"

The others grinned at that, before taking up posture again as an errand-rider approached them from inside the Citadel.

asaris

Curufë nodded to Turin. "Yes, I think I will come with you. I'll need the briefing as much as anyone. Alessya?"

Khorazir

"Excellent," Túrin said as Alessya nodded her consent as well. Together they set out, and made for the barracks. When they reached them Faramir and the others had not yet returned, but Túrin was informed by the quartermaster that the captain as well as his lieutenant had been there and inquired after the whereabouts of the rangers. Just when Túrin and his two companions discussed if they should go in search of the others, they returned. Faramir smiled when he saw the three of them. Some of the rangers, especially the younger ones, gaped at Alessya and her sword and her partly blood-

stained garments. There was some murmur in the company as they discussed the possibility of the lady joining them. Others wondered about Curufë. Some had never seen an Elf before, and were quite amazed.

“That’s going to be a most unusual errand,” one muttered, whereupon another said: “But I wouldn’t want to miss it for sure.” And he winked at Alessya.

Faramir beckoned to them all to follow him, and together they entered the mess. The servants scuttling about and the quartermaster were dismissed, and the doors shut. When all had taken seats Faramir turned to them, and first of all he introduced Alessya, Curufë and Túrin to the others.

“As Andanor has told you already,” he continued, “there is a new errand waiting for us. We shall set out at dawn tomorrow.” There was some grumbling among the men, but not entirely seriously. “Túrin, Alessya and Curufë will join us, as well as – perhaps – Visilya, the Captain of the Secret Guard, and a ward of hers. I do not know of yet how long the completion of the errand is going to take us, but prepare to be out of town for some weeks.”

He sat down on a table. “Our task is to accompany Lady Lindórië of Lebennin first down to Pelargir where I have to deliver a message to Lord Falastur, and then on to Linhir,” he went on, in a slightly lowered voice. “On the road we will be functioning as her guard should the need arise. Officially we go to Lebennin to aid her men in guarding the main roads against outlaws.”

“What about Lord Tarannon?” one of the rangers asked. “Isn’t he responsible for this kind of thing?”

“Indeed he is,” Faramir answered. “But Lord Tarannon is busy fighting the Corsairs that raid his coasts, or so ‘tis said. And his brother Carandil is busy elsewhere, too.”

“Won’t they object to us meddling in their affairs of state?” another man asked.

“I hope they will,” Faramir said. “For now I shall come to the ‘unofficial’ part of our errand.”

gladrieltook

Visilya sighed heavily as they drew near to the doors. She didn’t like seeing the Steward, but she didn’t like having to set the whole gaurd back in order either. The Secret Gaurd worked underground to keep the city in order, making sure justice was evenly distributed.

The doors swung open, and Visilya led Daewen inside. Denethor was pacing at the far end of the hall, his hands clasped behind his back, his head bent. “Pleasant morning, my lord?” She asked sarcastically.

Denethor frowned at her, and then at Daewen. “What is your business, Visilya? No! Don’t tell me. You’re going to Lebennin to educate another street peasant.”

“You know me well enough.”

“Quite.” Denethor sat down and wrung his hands. “How long will you be gone? WHO should I call upon in case I need the services of the Gaurd? When are you leaving?”

“A few weeks. Daerios, of course. Tomorrow.”

“Hmm... Daerios. Yes. Very good, you are dismissed.”

“Eh, sir. I have a proposition to make.”

“Oh?” Denethor sat up, his eyes boring into Visilya’s

“Yes. If I cannot find a home for this girl, or a noble who would take her on as a servant, or a merchant as an apprentice, then I would like to bring her back to Minas Tirith, and perhaps take her under my services. As a spy for the Secret Guard. After all, small children can get in and out of known thieves’ guild much easier than a full grown man.”

“I will think about it. Thank you.” He motioned towards the door. Visilya nodded and led Daewen back into the courtyard.

“See. That wasn’t so bad.” Visilya laughed and clapped Daewen on the shoulder. The drew near to the guards, where Visilya stopped and called. “Looks like you’ll be rid of me for a few weeks!”

Lady_of_Rohan

“Then there really is such a thing as good fortune,” one of the guards muttered. The others struggled to keep from chuckling as Visilya gave them a withering look and passed by.

Daewen remained silent, just as she had in the Steward’s court. Eyes cast down, totally silent, not daring to move, she’d been terrified that the Steward would actually call on her to speak, and was more than relieved when he didn’t. As they gathered their horses from the stable a bell chimed four times. Daewen was surprised with how quickly the day had progressed. She wondered what they were going to do next. Perhaps go to eat? She wasn’t that hungry, but would eat if food was available. Maybe they would go find the others. Hadn’t what’s-his-face... Túrin, mentioned something about looking for Rangers? She shivered slightly. She’d only seen a couple Rangers every now and then, but always at a distance. She just had a sense that they weren’t a band of people to be messed with.

Khorazir

At Faramir’s last words the assembled company had pricked up their ears. Questioning glances were shot at him. He gazed at the rangers and his friends, ere he continued in an even lower voice: “I cannot tell you all I know, which, after all, is not much. I myself am waiting for more information, which I hope to receive while we are on the road. But our true errand is to have an eye on Tarannon, and to gather as much information about him as we can. About him, and about his friends, allies, contacts, enemies and anybody else who has dealings with him as well.”

There was a moment of silence while everybody considered what he had said. At length Mablung looked up. “Why us?” he asked. “We’re rangers. But that’s work for spies. We’re hardly what I would call inconspicuous if we ride down there with a whole company.”

“We are not required to be,” Faramir explained. “On the contrary. We are expected to attract attention and moreover to raise questions, and to make certain people wonder about the true reasons for our coming. You are only a small piece on a large gaming board. But an important one, that I can ensure you.”

One of the older rangers slightly shook his head. “Excuse me, captain, but I still do not see why it should be us going down there. Ithilien is our business, not Lebennin. And even if we were sent there, why would you be required to command us? Surely your leadership would be of more importance for the campaign in Ithilien.”

Faramir shook his head. “This errand has priority. Command of the Steward himself. And as for your question, Hallas, well, I am another piece apparently required for the game.” He hesitated for a moment, thinking about how to best describe the role he was set to play. “I am the one to divert Tarannon’s attention from the really important matters, the one to stir his wrath to make him forgo his caution. The bait, so to say.”

Now the whole company looked definitely puzzled. “How that?” one of the youngsters blurted out.

Túrin who had sat silently in a corner looked up and caught Faramir’s eye. He noted his friend’s troubled expression, and suddenly he thought he understood. “Oh dear,” he muttered. Faramir nodded slightly, as if to confirm the assump-

tion he had read in Túrin's face. Then he looked at the rangers again. He hesitated for a moment longer, before taking a deep breath. "'tis a rather ... delicate matter," he conceded, and fell silent again, waiting for the others to put two and two together.

gladrieltook

Visilya glanced over at Daewen. "You hungry? We're a little late for lunch, but there should be some bread and meat left. If not we'll just eat at an inn." She winked and grinned.

Cynara

Alessya blinked for a moment then slowly began to grin. What a marvelously fun job this could be! She'd have to keep her ears open.

She looked over at the group of rangers, who were still looking at their captain, mostly still blank, but some beginning to comprehend the situation of the 'unofficial' errand. Remembering their slight amazement at the Elf and herself joining the mission, she snorted slightly, in disdain of the general idea that women were made of blown glass.

Khorazir

Faramir watched his rangers' slowly changing expressions as comprehension set in. Some gave him pitiful glances, others, especially the younger ones, started to smirk, or simply looked amazed. Now it was Faramir's turn to grin. Generally the rangers thought he was not aware of what was secretly talked about him behind his back. Now and again he would surprise them with revealing some remarks he had picked up. He knew that many of the men considered him somewhat strange because there seemed to be no women in his life. Some of the rangers were married already and had children, and most of the others had a girl (or more than one) in Minas Tirith or where they came from. In the evenings in Ithilien they delighted in talking about these things, and so far their captain had remained silent or answered evasively when asked about his own love-life. Now most of the men were surprised that he seemed to have one after all. To his silent amusement he noted that Mablung was grudgingly handing Damrod two gold pieces underneath the table. Apparently they had had a bet going concerning this matter.

Hallas the old ranger was the first to break the silence. "This explains a lot," he muttered.

Faramir could see that there were many more questions on his rangers' minds, but apparently the men were too tactful to voice them. At length Anborn, one of the best bowmen of the company, asked: "The Lady's husband, this Tarannon ... does he know?"

Faramir shrugged. "I am not sure. But soon he will." There was some grimness in his voice now.

Lady_of_Rohan

"That sounds good to me," Daewen replied.

gladrieltook

"Good." Visilya smiled as she led the girl back to the barracks.

Khorazir

“Why do you want us to accompany you?” Túrin asked, pointing at Alessya, Curufë and himself.

“I may need people who are not on first glance associated with me,” Faramir answered, “people to gather information – and to watch our backs. It would be useful if each of you made up a story why he or she is going to Lebennin, something you can tell people should they inquire about you. Your official reason for travelling with us may be that you were seeking the protection of the rangers. People will understand that no one is eager to journey alone when there is talk of bandits on the road.”

Túrin nodded. “Well, I have an aunt living near Pelargir at the coast of Lebennin. I could be visiting her, or delivering a message of my father’s or something like that. I’ll think of something.”

“Very well,” Faramir said. “What about you, Curufë and Alessya? Any ideas for your pretended purpose?”

Lady_of_Rohan

After many minutes of riding through the twisted streets of Minas Tirith, the captain and Daewen arrived back at the secret guard barracks. Daewen slowly dismounted and found that her muscles were starting to ache from the unusual usage. She followed the captain, albeit a bit stiffly.

gladrieltook

Visilya noticed Daewen’s stiffness. “You’ll get used to it soon. In the meantime, I’ve got some ointment that’ll take the soreness out of your muscles. Works like a charm. And I should know!” She winked and led the girl into the mess, where she directed two soldiers; one to fetch food and drink, and the other to get the ointment. They returned at the same time, and Visilya dismissed them to their usual duties. “I have to go on Patrol tonight.”

“But I thought you were on leave?”

“I am. But there are some matters concerning a little rift between two noble families. They’ve caused alot of trouble lately, and I have to make sure no more is done.”

Lady_of_Rohan

“Oh,” Daewen responded. She didn’t feel like getting more involved than necessary in the affairs of the noble families. Not right now, at least. The two ate in silence for several minutes. Daewen once again ate until she almost burst. Full and content, she asked to use the ointment, and the captian showed her to a room where she could apply it in privacy. When she came back out a few minutes later, she handed the jar back to the captain, and thanked her.

gladrieltook

“You’re welcome.” Visilya smiled. “You can stay here tonight. I won’t be gone long.” With a nod to the soldiers, she was gone.

Visilya swept out into the night to scout out the two warring families.

Khorazir

Both Curufë and Alessya said that they would think of something, and Faramir was content with it. Turning to the rangers again, he warned them all not to disclose the details of the errand to anybody outside this room, and to be ready the next morning at dawn. Some inquired about the gear that would be required, and he told them that nothing special would be needed, just the usual. When these organisational matters had been cleared as well, Faramir dismissed the men.

Taking Andanor aside, he said: "Please see to it that they really do not talk. You know how they are. I am sure they are going to celebrate a little tonight, and they are welcome to do so, but they should not forget their caution."

Canamarth

Visilya was about to leave the barracks, when a man of the guards entered. "Captain," he saluted. "Bad news from Lord Thorondor. It seems his daughter Lossiel has run away last night."

Cynara

Alessya thought about the suggested guise. 'I suppose it'll work,' she thought to herself, 'But I'd have to look defenseless' *sigh* 'Well, on with the skirts, I suppose.'

gladrieltook

Visilya's insides wrenched with guilt. She nodded, then with her hand to the hilt of her sword, she took off at a run. She moved silently like a cat, yet as swift as a bird in flight. She wound her way through back-alleys, side streets, and sort cuts to the Lord's manor. As she reached the wealthier district of the City, the building became very familiar. This was where she'd spent a small part of her childhood. She walked in silence, her eyes flicking from house to house. They came to rest upon her father's house, the house that Lossiel's(sp?) family now occupied. Visilya blinked back the tears, bite her lip, and strode forward. With a quaking heart, she grasped to old brass knocker, and let it fall. The sound echoed through the dark street.

Canamarth

A servant opened the door. He held a small lantern so that he saw who was knocking. "Captain Visilya!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing here? Has the master alarmed the Secret Guard? I thought he wanted to deal with everything himself. If you're here to talk to him, I have to disappoint you. He has left with all his men. They're looking for Lossiel. That silly girl..."

Khorazir

When this matter had been cleared, Faramir left Andanor in charge of the men, while he took his leave, having to prepare some things yet. Aside from having to pack his stuff, he wanted to go to the library and see if he could find some more maps of the lands they would be travelling in. He was sure Lindórië was well supplied with these and moreover knowledgeable of the regions, but he wanted to have a look for himself and try and memorise what was important, so that he knew what to expect of people and countryside. He had been to Pelargir and Lebennin for several times, as well as having passed through the latter realm on his way to Dol Amroth and the western fiefs, but he

had not travelled much off the main roads.

Túrin, on his way home, accompanied him. "I've told father already that I'd be off with you for a while, and he didn't object," he said. "In fact he was glad to be rid of me."

"Was he very angry?" Faramir asked.

"You bet he was," Túrin said gloomily, kicking away a stone. "It'll be good to be away from the lot for some time."

When they had reached Túrin's home, he said: "Well, I'll be seeing you tomorrow, then. You know, I'm really looking forward to this errand." Then he remembered Visilya, and his smile faded somewhat. "Well, to most of it."

"I wish I could say the same," Faramir said. "But you are right. It does have its nice aspects."

gladrieltook

Visilya nodded. "I must speak with him. Wither did he go?" The servant pointed down the street, opposite to the alley which Visilya had just come down. "Thank you!" She handed him a coin. "Keep this house in good shape my friend! My father's spirit likes a clean home."

With that, she was gone.

asaris

Curufë turned to Alessya. "Would you care to eat dinner with me?"

Cynara

Alessya smiled, and nodded her head gracefully. "Thank you, Curufë, I think I will."

Galhadrin

Pelargir

In the anteroom of Falastur, Lord of Pelargir, surrounded by seasonal flowers and a leafy tree that reached towards the clear sky beyond the dome of glass far overhead, Grendelenoth was kept waiting. He knew the games of state well and expected the time for Falastur to 'become available' would end soon. That would be the first indication of the importance that Falastur would give to the meeting. Against a wall of pale stone, sunlight crawled to mark the passing of time; Grendelenoth watched it carefully.

The doors opened and a well dressed man came out while the waiting time was still short. He bowed and said that Falastur could now receive him. Grendelenoth noted the time and the words and the fact that the announcement came from an assistant of lesser rank. As he entered the inner chambers he smiled at their meaning. Falastur may have well as told him: "I value your message and your liege lord but I think little of you."

To further add to the personal slight, Falastur remained seated at the head of a table made of highly polished soft-wood. It had the worn edges of a well used council table and the warm breeze coming from the open collonade behind Falastur picked up the fragrances of it and the matching chairs and other furniture.

Grendelnoth stood at the foot of the long table and waited half a beat before speaking to let it be known that he had noticed his treatment. "Greetings from my master, Lord Tarannon, to you Falastur, Lord of Pelargir. I thank you for your reception and hope this simple emissary," he bowed as he spoke, "can trouble you for a short while with a message of friendship from Lebennin."

Falastur smiled broadly, raising both arms above the table with palms up in a warm gesture. "Such a message is always welcome from our friends in Lebennin."

Grendelnoth noted the condescending tone of the phrase 'friends in Lebennin.' He would soon shift the power in the discussion but not yet.

Falastur continued. "We will have a dinner tonight in Tarannon's honor. You will represent him as his ambassador, correct?"

"You are most gracious, milord. I will gladly sit with you tonight."

His smile expanding along with his gesture, Falastur stood. "Excellent, excellent. Come walk with me on the balcony."

"I would like that, milord," said the emissary, moving around the table to follow the other man out to a sunny balcony overlooking the waterfront and the sea.

"And how is Tarannon these days? I've not seen him in months."

The two men strolled the long stone balcony slowly, their hands clasped behind their backs. "He is in good health but wears a heavy brow. There continue to be rumors of Corsairs raiding the coast and striking into the heart of our lands."

Falastur harrumphed. "If I may be so bold, good sir, I think Tarannon spends too much time chasing rumors. But I have told him that myself before."

"Milord, we believe the rumors to be well founded."

"Paying for better spies, is he?"

Grendelnoth stopped walking. "Yes, milord, he is. We in Lebennin believe that it is time to get serious about the threat."

Falastur seemed bothered by the tone of the voice speaking to him. "The time to get serious has long passed if he is not already."

"You misunderstand the level of seriousness. We are embarking on a bold new direction."

The Lord of Pelargir now knew what the emissary had come for and his face showed it. "What new direction? What are you here to request of me?"

Grendelnoth looked about to ensure no servants or others were within earshot. "We have made contact with a group of Corsairs that can work for us and feed us information and assistance. We need the cooperation and support of all the Lords in the area."

Falastur immediately turned red and a look of shock came over him. "You're treating with the enemy? Have you all lost your minds? They are barbarian swine!"

Grendelnoth locked his eyes on Falastur's. "Now you listen to me." The soft edge to his voice rumbled deeply through Falastur's core. Like a dark hand gripping his heart, the words slid into him and froze him solid. As the emissary spoke the rest of the world seemed to drip away. "You will give us your cooperation. You will send a message of support back to Tarannon. And you will deliver a chest of hard currency to me as payment for this endeavor."

Falastur could only stammer out a feeble, "I will."

"Very good." Grendelenoth turned and continued walking.

Falastur followed, his mind coming back up out of the murkiness. He couldn't quite remember what the emissary had been talking about but knew that their new plan was sure to be a success.

"By the way, milord, what's for dinner?"

Khorazir

After having said farewell to Túrin, Faramir returned to the Citadel. He took a swift early supper, then informed the servants about what he needed for the journey and what should thus be packed. Since he was required to pay a visit to Falastur, he ordered them to include some more representative garments than his ranger-gear. He did not want to be received and treated as a common errand-rider by the Lord of Pelargir, who was known for the emphasis he put on elaborate lifestyle.

When all was organised Faramir went to the library. Evening was approaching. The sun had already gone down behind Mindolluin, and a soft purple glow rested on the white buildings. Eärendil shone brightly in the east. On the dead tree in the court a blackbird was singing, and Faramir lowered his pace to listen as he crossed the court.

The librarian was far from pleased when Faramir asked her if he could have a look at some maps of Lebennin. "Actually I was about to lock the library two hours ago, young man," the old lady said reproachfully. "But your father the Lord Steward has kept me more than busy all day with all the scrolls he wanted me to find for him in the archives, and the matter with the Lady Lindórië also took much longer than expected. I would tell you to come back tomorrow, but I know that you are setting out early." She sighed – or pretended to – and shook her head. "Come on in," she said. "I'm far too friendly to people, that is what I always say," she muttered as they walked through echoing corridors between the high shelves. Golden lettering on the backs of large volumes glinted briefly in the light of the librarian's small lamp and then vanished again in the gloom. "They think they can come whatever time they like," the old lady went on. "Librarians don't need food or drink – or sleep, that's what they believe, I can tell you. My sister says I should take a holiday. She has been saying that for several years now. But who will do all the work then? No one. Of course. Who would want to. And who would be skilled enough for me to entrust the library to with a good conscience? The young people nowadays, they don't think much of books anymore. There are exceptions, of course," she added with a swift glance at Faramir and one of her rare smiles, "but most of the young lads wish to become soldiers nowadays, and the lasses only think of marriage and such nonsense. Maps of Lebennin, that's what you wanted, right?" she asked suddenly.

Faramir, startled out of his thoughts, nodded.

"That way," the librarian indicated, and pointed down another corridor. "I have heard about the errand, of course. Lady Lindórië has mentioned a thing or two while we went through her list. I hope everything will go well. If you ask me," she halted and stepped a little closer to Faramir, and said in a conspirational voice: "If you ask me it's high time she got rid of this husband of hers. She should have never married him. I remember how happy she was here, when she was still a teacher. She loved teaching so much, and she was good at it, I daresay – as can be seen in people like you, my lad, if you don't mind me saying so." She walked on. "I had hoped back then that she might take over the library one day. There was hardly a person in Gondor who knew more about the treasures hidden here. And I don't speak about the obvious treasures, mind you. It is the really rare and precious books and scrolls I mean. But, well, then the poor girl had to marry this Tarannon, and gone was my last hope to find someone to continue my work. – but, well, you know of this whole sad matter, don't you?"

Faramir nodded again.

The librarian glanced up at him briefly, then smiled slightly. "I remember the evenings you spent at the little table in the corner behind the shelves where the books on Elvenlore and Elvish languages are stored, when she poured out her

heart to you about her unhappy marriage, and you to her about your troubles with your father.”

Now Faramir stopped short and raised an eyebrow at her in a mock serious way. “So you eavesdropped, Andreth?”

Andreth blushed a little. “I wouldn’t call it eavesdropping, lord. It’s the echoes in here, you know.”

“Echoes, right,” Faramir said, and then he laughed. “Well, at least we helped to alleviate your boredom.”

Andreth scowled at him. “Boredom? I do not know the meaning of that word, young man. So, here we are.”

asaris

Curufë and Alessya walked down to a small tavern called “The Leaky Bucket,” in order to eat lunch. On the way, Curufë asked her, “Any idea of a guise you might use for this venture?”

Khorazir

In front of the shelf whither she had led him, Andreth lit another lamp and handed it to Faramir. “Those maps here,” she explained, pointing at a stack of large rolled parchments, “are fairly recent maps of Lebennin. Those up there in the leather cases are older ones. The oldest is the small one in the black case over there, which dates from King Anárion’s times. But I would ask you not to handle it without gloves, as it’s in a poor condition. And I don’t think it’ll be of much use to you in your present research. Down the corridor there is a table where you can spread the maps should you like to, and there you can also find some ink, pens and paper, should you wish to make notes.” She gave him a stern glance. “If I find that there are ink-blobs on the maps, you’ll be in real trouble, young man.”

Faramir rolled his eyes, but could not avoid smiling. “I have handled a pen before now, Andreth.”

“That you have indeed. I still recall what you did to *The Development of Gondorian Trade after the Great Plague TA 1636*.”

“I was twelve years old then. And you must admit that the illustrations in the book were horrible,” Faramir defended himself. “I just thought I could improve them.”

Andreth laughed. “And that you have. Poor King Telemnar. He looks really sick now with his blue face.”

Faramir laughed as well. “I promise to be careful with your maps,” he then said more seriously. “And ere you go ... the Lady Lindórië, you said she was here today. May I ask what she wanted?”

Andreth gave him a long glance he could not read. “You may, but I need not answer,” she said gravely. “Ask her, if you want to know.”

“But ‘tis nothing serious, is it?” Faramir asked swiftly, feeling concern stir in him.

“It is,” Andreth said, and turned again. She went a few steps, then sighed and halted, and said quietly, without looking at him: “She came with a list of the books she possesses. She wanted me to have a look at it, to see which of them we have here already. If something happened to her, she said, all her books should go here, so that they would not be lost.” She turned and looked at him. “You will look after her, right?”

Faramir swallowed slightly. “I ...,” he began, then added firmly: “Yes, I will.”

“Good,” Andreth said, and left.

gladrieltook

Visilya ran and searched through the night, stopping whoever she met if they had seen Lossiel or her father. It's my fault she ran away. I have to find her! The moon was high into the night sky, and Visilya's breathes came shorter, and harder as she continued to run. She was pushing her stamina to the limit. She came before the Citadel at last, and her stride slowed to a walk. "I must find her." She hobbled to the gate house, and banged on the door.

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen had spent most of the evening wandering the guard barracks in an attempt to keep herself occupied. She'd found and, successfully raided, the kitchen, relieving the cooks of half a loaf of bread and a small chunk of cheese. She continued to meander down the dim hallways, every now and then coming across the portrait of some soldier dressed in Secret Guard regalia. She assumed them to be former captains, her illiteracy kept the engraved words on the small brass plates beneath the portraits a mystery. In her roamings, she'd noted that she had received several curious glances from some of the soldiers she'd come across, but none had said anything to her, and that did not bother her in the least.

While she explored, she came across a ladder propped against the wall. Looking up at the ceiling, she saw the faint outline of a trapdoor. Nimbly climbing the rungs, she had a slight mishap trying to get the heavy door open, but was finally able to reach the rooftop. She let out a long breath of satisfaction.

Rooftops were her favourite places in the city. They were excellent places to scurry to when chased by members of the city guard (who were much bulkier than she, thus, had more difficulty scaling trellises and eaves). Rooftops were sometimes storage places for rather interesting items that she could pawn off in the marketplace somewhere. Or better yet, if the day's wash had been left out to dry, a shirt or other random articles of clothing would wind up missing. Yes, she enjoyed rooftops.

Even though twilight had set in a while ago, she walked along the edge of the roof, her bare feet and toes expertly keeping grip on the stone. She came to the corner and sat down, letting her feet dangle in the air. She stayed like that for a moment before drawing one heel up to rest on the edge, then resting her chin on her knee. The city was so pretty at night with all the lamps and candles flickering in the various circles.

She sighed sadly. Could this really be her last night in this magnificent place? She tilted her head into the night breeze, sending tendrils of her dark hair floating on the air current. This was the only place she had ever known. She knew how to get to almost every corner in the lower three circles, how long it took to get there, and the number of guards posted along the way. She knew the least wary merchants and vendors to steal from, the best selling line to get a few coins, how to run and zigzag like mad to evade the city watch... This was her lifestyle, her rhythm. And now, be taken away from it?

Suddenly she stood and started pacing along another side of the barracks. Eyeing the nearest building, she judged the roof to be level with this one and less than fifteen feet away. If she took a long, running start, she'd be able to clear the gap easily. She began walking toward the middle of the roof. Then she stopped as if torn between one conscience and another. They were really so nice to you. The captain took you in, fed you, gave you a comfortable place to sleep for a night... And the man you tried robbing, Túrin, he didn't even try to take his money back or turn you into the city watch or make you feel like a measly dog... She bit her lip, deep in thought. But how do you know that will last once you're outside the city gates, out of your element? She jogged a step toward the edge, hesitated, then stopped altogether. Give it a try, if it doesn't work out the way you want it to, there's always a merchant going to the city, you can sneak in with his caravan.

She looked out over the glowing city once more, then descended back into the barracks and went to bed.

Faramir looked after her. Her words had troubled him. Why should Lindórië take such precautions. What did she expect to befall her. If anything should happen to her ...

Shaking himself slightly to get rid of these thoughts, Faramir collected some of the maps which he thought might be of use, and carried them over to the table, where he busied himself with studying them and sketching down some roads, rivers and towns and the coastline. After searching a little for books on the subject, he found one with the pathetic title: *The Land of the Five Streams – Past, Present and Future*, and a small, rather new volume in Quenya called: “*Pelargir*” or “*Lebennin*”, *i anwa hón ondonórion* (*Pelargir and Lebennin, the true heart of Gondor*).

The latter proved quite an interesting read – especially when Faramir looked up the author: a certain Sorondil of Pelargir, whom he knew to have been the father of the present lord of that fief. Sorondil had died a few years ago, and hardly anyone had mourned this fact, least of all his son, who had truly hated the ruthless, ambitious and highly dangerous man, although he owed much of his present status and wealth to his father.

Just when Faramir had found a very promising passage concerning Pelargir’s relationship to the Stewards, he heard footsteps approach. Andreth came walking towards him. Faramir secretly praised the fact that he had orderly put away the maps already. Andreth stopped in front of the table and scrutinised him sternly. “I don’t want to seem rude, young man, but it’s rather late, and some people are getting on in years and need their rest, not to mention a proper supper.”

Faramir quickly rose and gathered together his notes. “Forgive me. I did not realise that it was that late already. You should have cast me out much sooner.”

“Well, I generally try to support people who seek knowledge,” she said with a faint smile. Her eyes fell on the book he was still holding. “Ah, I see you have taken an interest in Lord Sorondil’s attempt at writing. It’s not what I’d call a proper historical study. Highly biased. Doesn’t have the quality of *I Ernil* by Malvegil, of course– you know that book, don’t you?”

Faramir nodded. Túrin had given him a copy at his coming of age. “And his Quenya isn’t that good either. But I’m sure you’ll enjoy it. Especially you, as the Steward’s son,” she added with a rather mischievous grin.

“Generally I don’t hold with people asking to borrow books,” she went on while returning the other book Faramir had studied to its proper place on the shelf. “You never know in what state you’ll get them back – if at all. But I know you’ll take care of this one. Moreover I have two more copies. So if you’d like to, you can take this one with you. Perhaps you’ll find some time to devote to reading on your journey.”

Faramir smiled. “Actually I doubt that. But thanks nevertheless.”

Andreth led him out of the library and locked the door. Faramir could not see them, but he knew there were guards about to watch the doors. He walked Andreth to the gate of the Citadel.

There the old lady halted and looked at him gravely. “You’ll be careful, won’t you? No unnecessary risks and trying to prove your courage or your skills as a warrior and nonsense of that kind. You don’t need that. You have other qualities. So, and now farewell. And take care of the book. I’d like to get it back in one piece. No grubby fingerprints and torn pages!” With that she winked at him, turned and walked away.

Faramir returned to his quarters, and after packing the last things for the journey, he went to bed, where he spent some time reading until he could not keep his eyes open any longer.

Galhadrin

Pelargir

The festivities of the evening included music and dance from a local troupe that performed well but displayed little daring. Lord Falastur expected precision with his indulgences and was not forgiving of mistakes. Grendelenoth laughed and applauded when appropriate, ate enough to be polite, and joined in the toasts but not to excess. The dinner event crawled into the middle of the night and as it began to break up Grendelenoth said his gracious goodbyes.

Lord Falastur seemed puzzled. "Leaving so soon? You've only just arrived. Surely you wish to rest before returning on such a long trip."

Grendelenoth beamed a smile. "Many thanks for your concern, milord. But I'm afraid urgency drives me to begin my return immediately. You have been the perfect host."

Lowering his voice slightly, Falastur leaned in and said, "The item you requested will be awaiting your carriage. It is a good amount."

"Again, many thanks, milord."

Falastur thought the twinkle in the emissary's eyes was oddly engaging and familiar, but couldn't quite place where he'd seen it before. "Regarding this new endeavor, I'm going to expect a progress report."

"Oh, you're going to get it."

* * *

The carriage pulled away from Falastur's courtyard drawn by four white horses. Four more horses with armed riders rode behind it and they made their way slowly through the confused jumble that made up Pelargir's city streets. Before leaving town the procession stopped at an inn and general store that was just closing. Grendelenoth gave instructions to the carriage driver to get resupplied with food and water.

The establishment's owner grumbled at first but the carriage driver insisted on service for their important mission and the owner soon gave in. Grendelenoth, however, walked down a side alley without making a sound and turned behind some other buildings. He stepped silently and confidently despite the lack of light and entered a humble home without knocking.

The room smelled of old food and sweat. There had been no attempt at cleaning in quite some time but since there were hardly any belongings laying about it was not as noticeable. Sitting at a small table with a single candle burning on it was a distraught and slightly hunched over man with shabby clothes and pale skin. He glanced up as Grendelenoth entered and what little spark seemed to animate him faded away. "I... I knew you were coming." He began to weep quietly. "Please no more, sir. Please no more."

"Scratch, you are vile and pathetic. You're only worth is in service to me."

"No," he said between whimpers. "No, I've done too much. Don't ask any more of me."

"I will ask and you will perform. You have no choice." Grendelenoth sat in the chair opposite him. "First there is a little matter that needs to be attended to. Then we will discuss other things."

The man slumped in his chair, closing his eyes and shaking his head. "No more, no more."

"Scratch! There are consequences to all that we do. You are still living yours. Now, across the street behind the Inn is a man standing in the alleyway. He's been sent to shadow me until I leave town. Without being seen or heard, kill him." Grendelenoth sat back in his chair with a finality and crossed his arms.

The man slowly began to nod. "Will this be the end of it then? Will you finally stop tormenting me?"

"This will lead you to the end. Soon nothing more will be asked of you." Grendelenoth smiled in a warm, fatherly way.

Scratch had heard that line before. It had been a lie then and was most likely a lie now. But he had no choice. He got up to do his master's bidding.

gladrieltook

After thoroughly questioning the guards, Visilya drug herself back to the Barracks. Worn and bruised, she fell into bed, and did not rise till the following morn.

Khorazir

When Túrin had come home, he had tried to avoid running into another member of the family, least of all his father. He also packed some clothes and other useful things for the journey, then went to the kitchens to get some supper. There he met his mother. She looked quite excited. When her eyes fell on him, her eyes grew hard, which surprised him. Usually she was not too stern with him.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Don't tell me you've sided with father and chose to condemn me. How often shall I say I'm sorry for what happened?"

"You are saying it to the wrong people, my son," she said gravely, ushering him out of the kitchen into a room where they could talk without being overheard by the cooks and servants. "Only a short while ago a servant came in reporting the latest rumour she had picked up on the market. It seems that Lord Thorondur's household is in an uproar."

"Why that?" Túrin asked carefully, a dark foreboding stirring in him.

"Why indeed?" his mother snapped. "Lossiel is said to have run away from home. No one knows whither."

Túrin's face lost all colour. "Ran away? But ... but why?"

His mother's face was stern and unforgiving. "I thought you knew why. What on earth have you done to the poor girl?"

Cast her aside for another, Túrin thought bitterly. "I ... I didn't mean to hurt her, really," he said quietly. "It's just that ... something happened I could not foresee and ... Oh, but why did she have to run away?" he asked miserably. "I must go and seek her."

His mother's eyes had softened as she stepped closer to him and put a hand to his shoulder. "I think it is better to leave the searching to her father and brothers. You have caused enough trouble already, do you not think so? Officially we are still on bad terms with Thorondur's family, do not forget this. I think it is best for now if you indeed went with Faramir."

Túrin nodded slowly, hanging his head. Then he looked up suddenly. "Father. Does he know?"

"He does. And he does not wish to see you, as you can imagine. I think it would be best if you quietly retired to your room this evening, and did not show up for what remains of it."

"Yeah, right," Túrin said gloomily.

"You will be careful tomorrow, yes. Try to stay clear of mischief for a few days, and do not get your companions into

trouble, if you can help it – which I doubt. And now go. Your father will return soon.”

Túrin nodded. He swiftly kissed his mother's cheek, and went to his room, where he spent most of the evening trying to occupy himself with reading, but failing at that as his thoughts always returned to Lossiel and Visilya. He felt horrible, and doubted that he would be able to sleep under these circumstances. But when he tried, sleep took him surprisingly quickly. Apparently all the worrying and self-reproaching had worn him out.

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen woke the next morning to the captain shaking her shoulder lightly. She tried to move. She moaned. It seemed like every muscle and joint protested the slightest disturbance. She ached in places she didn't know she even had. “Come on,” the captain said, “we have things to do.”

“What time is it?” Daewen half-yawned, raising one hand to rub her eyes. The captain did not answer and was busy packing something in a bag. Daewen sat up carefully in the cot, shivering slightly as her bare feet hit the cold floor. She stood up slowly, trying not to use more muscles than necessary. The captain motioned her to follow as she left the room. Daewen did so, hobbling a little bit. It was eerily silent in the barracks, Daewen assumed it was still early in the morning. She yawned again and followed the captain into a small room.

“Put these on,” she was commanded, given a stack of clothes. She did so, and found them to be too large for her. She was small for her age, due to lack of proper nutrition and care. Her height barely exceeded five feet and her arms and legs, as well as the rest of her, were terribly thin. The clothes she wore now were the smallest that the secret guard had in storage, but they were still far too big. “They'll just have to do,” the captain muttered, rolling the shirt sleeves back a lot. “Now to find you some footwear.”

Daewen was fully awake now. So, we really are leaving, she thought as the captain led her through yet another room. Here she stopped and threw open a large trunk, rummaging through the contents. “Where are they, where are... aha!” Visilya exclaimed as she pulled out a pair of small, lightly used boots. “These should fit you better than the clothes do, at least.” Daewen tried them on and found they fit well. She found them slightly cumbersome though, having been used to shoeless feet most of her life. She stumbled several times as they walked to the mess hall, almost trying to learn how to walk all over again.

They ate a light but filling breakfast of fruit, eggs, and a little bacon. Daewen found that she could slip several pieces of fruit into her loose clothing and not have it be too noticeable. Breakfast finished, they went to the stable, prepared the two horses from the previous day, and set out for the gate, just as the first rays of sun spilled over Mindolluin.

Khorazir

Faramir had woken when it was still dark. He dressed in his ranger gear and a thick grey cloak, had a bit of breakfast, then called for a servant who helped him carry his arms (bow and quiver with arrows, since the sword he already wore about his waist) and the rest of his gear down to the stables. His horse Narothal had already been saddled, and whinnied softly when he entered. He caressed his head and patted his neck. Apparently the steed was looking forward to the journey.

Together with a groom Faramir swiftly fastened the saddlebags and the other gear behind the saddle, then led the large grey horse out of the stables and mounted. The light of the sun was just glinting on the snowy peak of Mindolluin. The tall spire of the White Tower with its white banners still lay in shadow. The fields of the Pelennor were shrouded in a soft white sea, only here and there small clusters of trees or the gables of a farmstead rose out of the mist. The air was fresh and cold. Faramir urged Narothal to a light trot. The horses' hooves echoed eerily on the paved road. Most people were still sleeping, for the houses were silent and most windows closed with shutters still. When Faramir had reached the Fifth Circle, he heard hoofbeat ahead. Increasing his steed's pace, he soon saw a cloaked and hooded rider on a dark-brown horse. When he had drawn near, the horseman ahead reined his steed and

turned in the saddle, and he recognised Lindórië. Underneath her grey cloak she was dressed like a man, in a plain dark-blue tunic slit in front and back for riding, black trowsers and high boots of subtle dark leather. To his surprise Faramir saw that she wore an eket on her belt, almost concealed by the cloak. Her hair she had tied to a simple braid. She smiled when she saw him, and he returned it.

“Good morning,” he said as he steered Narothal alongside her horse.

“The same to you,” she replied. “It looks as if it is going to be a fair day,” she went on, glancing up at the peak of Mount Mindolluin that was visible through a gap between two houses.

“Yes, we should make good progress today,” Faramir agreed.

She studied his horse and gear. “You are armed as if you are riding to a war,” she remarked with a slight smile.

“I have no mail or other armour with me,” he said, as if to excuse his equipment. “And at least I wear my arms openly,” he added, with a nod at the half-hidden short-sword at her waist, and a grin.

“Does it surprise you to see me carry weapons?” she asked shrewdly.

“Well, I have never seen you do so before, so yes, it does. I have always thought your most deadly weapon was the pen.”

Now she smiled broadly. “You will find me full of surprises, Captain Faramir.”

“I guess so,” he muttered, giving her a thoughtful glance.

EdaintheRanger

After Faramir had delivered their orders, the men had settled into a discussion as regards their task. After allowing the information to sink in Andanor brought them to attention and gave them their duties for the remainder of the day. As they had been on a rather fruitless patrol for the last month, he decided to brush up on their drill and bowmanship.

After an hour of “square bashing” or orderly marching the rangers around the square at the barracks. Then Andanor and the chosen men led the smartly stepping rangers on a “high profile” tattoo around the streets of the fair city. On returning to the barracks Andanor asked the men to brush up on their vocal talents as he wanted them to “do Gondor proud” in their ability to rouse the spirits of the people with a stirring song.

Finally content with their marching order Andanor dismissed them to their homes, under the proviso that they were assembled on the morrow at this designated meeting place.

EdaintheRanger

Andanor had no doubt in his mind that the rangers would probably spend the night carousing, but had the faith in them to know that they would return on the morrow without fail. He pondered briefly on the state of affairs, one of encroaching war, war that made men grasp every spare moment eagerly and savour it, or squander it in desperation.

The dawn broke for him in his adopted home in the third circle. He could hear his mother moving around downstairs cajouling the servants. Tasting those few seconds of freedom before rising, he gathered his thoughts.

After his ablutions, and dressing swiftly, he gathered his gear and grabbing a few rashers of gammon, left. His family’s farewell in the back of his mind, he made to the stables.

With Faramir gone he made his own preparations and instructed a ostler to bring his horse to the Ranger barracks. As the sun sped to the south, he made to go about his duties.

asaris

Curufë rode his horse down to the ranger barracks the next morning, after a pleasant evening spent with Visilya. He wore his full accoutrements, complete with the armor gifted him by his father Mahtan before leaving Aman, and of course, his spear Seregon. He arrived there moments after dawn, and the rising sun turned his helm a burnished red as he awaited Faramir and the rangers.

gladrieltook

Visilya's long hair had been pulled back, for practical reasons, and her hood was thrown over her face. Her leather-garbed hands tightened on the reins as they rode. Visilya had spent a few years studying under the Rohirrim. She hoped to pass on some tricks to Daewen, so that riding was not to terribly uncomfortable for her. Raising her head, the Captain saw that Faramir and a woman were already leaving the stables of the city. As they drew nearer, she recognized the face of Lindorie, a lady she had met at Faramir's coming-of-age feast four years before. She nodded and greeted them, and introduced Lindorie to Daewen.

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen smiled shyly before lowering her gaze a tad. The lady was very pretty, she noted. And her cloak at least would fetch a nice sum on the market, probably enough to eat for days with. She studied the lady a bit longer out of the corner of her eye. The short sword on her side was not lost to her attention. She tensed, almost imperceptibly. She had not reckoned that she might bear arms. As Daewen continued to evaluate what else the lady had (and store the information away, for possible future reference) she was almost disappointed to discover that the rest of her clothing appeared rather plain and dull.

Just then, one of the cuffs on Daewen's long-sleeved shirt started to loosen and slide down over her wrist. She reached with her other hand to jerk it back irritably. She would have much rather preferred her scrappy clothes compared to this. It was only a slight case of vanity that made her wonder how much of an idiot she looked like.

Khorazir

The four of them were just continuing their downward ride, swift hoofbeat from behind made them rein their horses again. The loud clatter of a cantering horse could be heard. Faramir signed to the others to withdraw to the sides of the road when a slender dapple-grey steed with a cloaked rider came into view. The horseman's hood had flown back, and his wavy brown hair fluttered in the wind of his speed. Faramir grinned when he recognised him, and shook his head slightly. "Most likely he thought he is too late."

Túrin now had seen the others, and when he had drawn near, he reined his horse so hard that it reared, the hooves skittering over the smooth pavement. "Morning," Túrin panted while trying to calm the steed. "Thought I'd overslept. You're aware of the fact that "dawn" is a rather vague definition for a time to meet, aren't you, Faramir?"

Faramir shrugged and grinned. "The others knew what I meant. But perhaps they are more familiar with the concept, as they see the sunrise more often than you do."

Túrin gave him a dark glance, but then his face brightened. "Well, it's my luck then that I don't have to rise that early,

isn't it?" He glanced at the others, and smiled and winked at Daewen. For a moment his eyes rested on Visilya. But when she returned his gaze he thought he could not bear the hurt in hers. Giving her a shy smile, he cast down his eyes and then looked to Lindórië instead. "Please forgive my lack of manners, lady," he said. "I should have greeted you properly."

She smiled at him. "I forgive you," she said lightly. "But seriously: since we are going to spend some time together now, I do not think that we shall need this formal conduct. I am not the Lady of Lebennin now, but simply Lindórië."

gladrieltook

Visilya nodded curtly to Turin's smile, then smiled at Lindorie's remark. "Indeed we will, my friend. It is a far way to Lebennin and back."

Cynara

Alessya woke up vaguely when a sunbeam hit her in the eyes. The next second, her was on her feet, and hurriedly dressing in her armour. "Oh, damn!" she muttered to herself, "this isn't dawn!"

Taking a bite to eat, she ran to the stables, and tacked her horse. Having packed the night before, she threw on the saddlebags, mounted outside, and within minutes was cantering towards her destination, sleeping rolls under her arm.

Khorazir

"'tis about 85 leagues from here to Linhir, and if we ride swiftly and are not delayed on the road we should cover the distance in five days," Lindórië said. "But I think we will tarry in Pelargir for a day at least." Turning to Faramir, she said: "Ere you wonder, I have the Steward's letter to Falastur with me. He caused it to be entrusted to me yestereve. You can have it, if you like."

Faramir waved a hand. "Just keep it for now," he said. "You have not met Denethor in person again ere you set out, have you?" he asked.

She shook her head, giving him a grave glance. "Neither have you, I reckon," she said quietly.

Faramir shrugged. "You know how he is. Apparently he did not deem it necessary to bid us farewell."

They had reached the First Circle, and were drawing near to the Great Gate. Faramir saw that his rangers were already assembled on the courtyard before the massive gates. He smiled contently at the sight. Andanor really had a grip on the men. As so often Faramir wondered how he would possibly get by without his lieutenant.

Also there was a rider in shining armour waiting. Faramir had never seen his friend in such an attire, and was quite surprised and moreover fascinated.

"Imagine how it must have been to see a whole host of Noldor in full armour, with bright banners flowing overhead," Lindórië said quietly at his side, reading his thoughts. "I am glad that I shall finally meet your friend. There are so few Eldar left in Gondor nowadays, and the opportunities to speak with and learn from them grow ever more scarce."

Galhadrim

Pelargir

Falastur's morning had proceeded normally until the Captain of the Guard stepped into his chambers. The Captain saluted and waited for Falastur to acknowledge him. "My liege, the agent that we sent to shadow the emissary from Lebennin has been found dead."

Falastur looked up from his breakfast. "How is this now?"

"When he didn't return last night my Night Watchman assumed he had followed for some time and then strayed to pursue a bed. Upon the morning he had still not returned and so searchers were sent out. His body was found behind an inn that the emissary had stopped at for replenishment."

Falastur shook his head slowly. "Brought down by a street thug, no doubt."

"Sir, I'm not certain. The... brutality of the killing seems extreme."

"Well now, this concerns me. What investigation have you begun?"

The Captain shifted slightly as the attention was brought on him and not just his report. "The innkeeper says he noticed nothing out of the ordinary. The emissary's caravan stopped and resupplied then left a short time later. None of the surrounding residents reported seeing or hearing anything. We are continuing to search the area for evidence. There have been murders before in that part of town over the years, no one seemed particularly surprised about this one."

"Continue, then, and keep me informed." Falastur waved his Captain off and sat back to think. In all his time in politics he knew that there was no such thing as coincidence.

gladrieltook

Visilya twisted her head impatiently, cracking her neck in the process. She patted Rebel's neck and whispered some gentle words in her ear.

Cynara

Having caught up with the rest of the party, Alessya took advantage of the slight pause to affix her rolls to the back of the saddle.

asaris

Curufë raised his arm in greeting. "Good to see you. Are we ready to go?"

Khorazir

Looking over his men and the rest of the company, and giving Andanor an appreciative smile, Faramir nodded. "I think we are."

With that he signed to his rangers, and they set in motion, and rode on through the gate. The others waited to follow, and Faramir used the time to introduce Lindórië to Alessya and Curufë, and they to her. The rangers had waited outside the gate, and when all had passed through Faramir rode to the head of the company, and they set out at a gentle trot, following the broad road that led from Minas Tirith to Pelargir and the southern fiefs of Gondor.

On the fields of the Pelennor the mists still lay thick, creeping over the meadows and well-tilled fields like soft veils. But in the golden rays of the rising sun they were slowly dissolving, revealing farmsteads and barns, orchards with flowering apple-, pear-, plum-, peach- and cherry-trees, and green meadows studded with yellow dandelion and clusters of pale lilac lady's smock where cattle, sheep and broad farm-horses grazed peacefully without taking much notice of the riders – except for the foals, perhaps, that delighted in capering about and galloping alongside the travellers until a fence would hinder their merry race.

After about an hour gentle riding the company reached the wall of the Rammas Echor, and the South Gate. The guards looked half asleep still when they let the travellers pass through, but Faramir noticed that they gave the company curious glances and stuck their heads together afterwards. Apparently they were wondering what Ithilien's rangers were doing west of Anduin.

asaris

Curufë rode next to Lindórië as the band rode from Minas Tirith. "I have heard much good about you, lady," Curufë said. "Imrahil speaks quite kindly of you, and it is good to see he did not exaggerate your beauty."

"You are much too kind," she said. "I am sure that you have known many whose beauty outshines mine by far." Curufë grinned. "A few, perhaps." Lindórië continued, "Faramir has not said much about you – where are you from?"

"That's a complicated question. In short, the truest answer is to say that I have no home, but lately I've spent much in Imladris."

"Not Lorien? I had thought that most of the high elves lived there."

"Some do, but most went with Elrond after the fall of Eregion. And . . . well, let us just say that Galadriel and I have not always seen eye to eye." Lindórië's eyebrows rose a little at that, but she said nothing. "My full name is Curufë Fëanorhim; I am the last of the House of Fëanor on these shores. Perhaps that means something to you?"

gladrieltook

Visilya rode in silence, quietly contemplating her feelings. She barely noticed the land which they were passing through. She sighed, finally, and cast her hood over her head.

Khorazir

"Indeed it does," Lindórië said, and there was unveiled wonder in her eyes. "And greatly do I value the chance to speak to one who has seen the light of the Two Trees." Then she smiled and shook her head slightly. "Please forgive my gaping at you like this just now. But you must know that we in Gondor do not have much opportunity anymore to meet one of the Elder Race – and many think this to the best, as they fear and misdoubt the Eldar, because they do not know them anymore, and dread what they know not. But there are some who cherish every time they may meet one of your race. I for one. Almost all my life has been spent with the study of Elvenlore – the little that can be retrieved from the writings that are still stored in places like Minas Tirith or Dol Amroth, having survived the Fall of Númenor. But so much has been lost. So many books and scrolls have vanished or decayed over the years, because no one really tried to preserve them. Sometimes I fear that one day all knowledge of the Elder Days will be lost. Much would I give

for more contact to those who have seen them with their own eyes. Perhaps their knowledge would help to restore Gondor to its glory of old, modelled after mighty Númenor, and lift it out of the darkness it is declining into.”

She sighed slightly, but then smiled again. “I must admit I feel quite humbled in your presence, Lord Curufë, as all the knowledge of your kind I may have acquired by reading and study must seem to you like a raindrop in the sea, compared to what you have experienced in your long life.”

+++

Túrin had listened to snatches of their conversation, but found that they were talking about things he had little knowledge of. For a moment he contemplated riding over to Visilya. She had cast her hood over her head, and judging by the way she hung her shoulders she was not of the happiest mood right now. Túrin knew that they had to talk, but he did not feel like doing so right now. Instead he steered his horse over to Daewen.

“Hello,” he said. “How’s it going today?”

“It hurts everywhere,” she said, but he noticed that she sat more upright and confidently in the saddle, and knew how to hold the reins properly now. Apparently Visilya had given her some tutoring the day before.

“Oh, I know what you mean,” he said. “Most likely I’m going to feel like that tomorrow. I haven’t been in the saddle for some time, and so I fear I’m out of training. By the way, I’ve brought you something – or rather your horse.” He dug into his pockets, and produced an apple and a piece of old bread. “You can give it to her during a break,” he said with a smile. “She’ll adore you for it.”

+++

Faramir rode at the head of the company for a while with Andanor, talking about the lands they would pass through, and what may await them in Pelargir, and beyond.

“I am not looking forward to meeting Falastur,” Faramir admitted gloomily. “He hates my father, I do not know why, and seems to extend his resentments to the Steward’s sons. And his sons are none the better. Some time ago his eldest son, Caranthir, and I had a major discussion because of some mocking remark of his. I do not even remember what it was about. And what he will say when he finds out about Lindórië and me I do not want to know.” He sighed slightly and fell silent.

Then another thought crossed his mind. Turning in the saddle, he glanced over the company until he spotted Alessya. “You excuse me for a moment, Andanor?” With that he held back his horse until he was level with Alessya, nodding to her as a greeting.

“I forgot to do so yesterday,” he said, “which I hope you excuse. But we have not spoken about your compensation yet. I must admit that I do not know how long this errand may take, and what to expect of it in terms of bounty – not much, I deem. But I am sure you did not join us for the sake of adventure only, as you must live on something. I do not know under what terms you are usually employed, and how much you are paid, but I am sure we can agree upon something.”

gladrieltook

Visilya smiled inwardly at Daewen’s confidence of riding. She’s getting better..

Cynara

Alessya smiled comfortably and shrugged. “The pay system is usually based on the length of the journey, the nature of

the journey, and then extra for the number of wounds sustained, and how severe. Spying costs you more than protection, but less than a full-out battle. If I only sustain minor injury, you don't pay me extra, but if I am hurt too bad to ride, it's about 500 extra. If I lose a hand or a leg, you're obliged to give me an annual stipend until one of us dies, and if I die, you're obliged to take care of any remaining family as if it was your own." Alessya smiled again. "In my case, you don't need to worry about the last one."

asaris

Curufë shook his head, and a sadness entered into his eyes. "The history of the elves is a long one, to be sure, but the sadness of it is like none other. Those of the high race who are still here are exiles, and this is not our true home. Indeed, nor was Beleriand our home, though for a time it seemed so. But I await the day when my sins have been atoned for, and I can sail West. But let us talk of happier things! Do you have any cats, perchance?"

gladrieltook

Visilya swallowed her pride and moved her horse up to Turin's. "We need to talk," she said in a low voice, so only he could hear.

Khorazir

"That all sounds fair to me," Faramir said. "So how do you prefer to be paid? On a daily basis, or at the end of the journey. I deem you are going to prefer the former method, as neither of us can foresee what may befall us, and if we are going to survive – although I still hope that the errand is not going to be that dangerous."

+++

Lindórië had given Curufë a pitiful glance when he spoke about him being an Exile, and when she had noted the sadness in his eyes and voice. She was glad when the Noldo changed topic, and smiled at the mention of cats. "I do not have any that I would call my own," she answered, "but in Linhir there are many that like to visit me. Some belong to the servants – the chief cook has a whole host of them, all grey and tiger-striped –, and others come up from the city to my gardens, and like to sleep on the sun-warm stones of the terraces or watch the fish in the small ponds. You like cats?"

+++

Túrin nodded slightly at Visilya's words, and held back his horse a little so that there was a some space between them and Daewen. For a while they just rode side by side, neither of them knowing how to begin. At length Túrin took a deep breath and said: "I am glad that you decided to join us on this journey. And I don't just say this to please you, I really mean it. I have missed you."

gladrieltook

Visilya sighed. "I missed you too." She swallowed hard, then spoke. "I hope I did not make you feel 'left out' these past few years... I just got so caught up in everything. There were orcs to keep at bay, uprisings to stop... I just lost sight of what was really important to me. I forgot how wonderful it felt to be held by another, my arms had grown accustomed to swinging a sword rather than holding you tight..." She stopped and sighed again. "And then I saw you and Lossiel, and it brought back a flood of memories, and they broke my heart. I knew that I had let you go, and that I had let myself fall away from you. I'm so sorry. It was my fault that you thought I had lost interest..."

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen inwardly groaned as each step her horse took sent shooting pain up through her shoulderblades. The realization that the journey was only starting did nothing to soothe her. She shook her head slightly. Why did I ever agree to do this? The pace had picked up to a slow canter, which felt better than a jolting trot, but she wasn't quite as confident moving at the quicker speed.

She had slipped the apple Túrin had given inside one of her shirt sleeves, not having the slightest intention of giving it (well, not all of it) to the horse. The bread, however, she had put in one of the small pouches by the saddle. That she would gladly give to her steed the next time they stopped. The sun was still low in the sky, but had burned off most of the mist in the lower lands and was beginning to warm up the air. Daewen shook her head, letting her hair blow in the slight wind created by the riding. It was looking to be a beautiful morning. In the early morning light she had taken in the new sights and sounds with wide, wondering eyes. She could hardly believe that there could be so much open space surrounding oneself. Of course, she had seen the fields of the Pelennor and the outlying lands from the city, but to be out in that area was a far different experience. She didn't know where they were at, but it was beautiful country nonetheless.

She glanced to the side, catching a glimpse of Túrin and Visilya. What few words she overheard only confirmed her lovers theory and did nothing to discredit it. He is rather handsome she thought, sneaking another glance. Her thoughts were broken as her horse struck out a foreleg at an imaginary object, startling her. By the time she got her nerves back under control the pair had moved away again, making any opportunity to listen in on their conversation practically impossible. *Oh well.*

Khorazir

"But I should have known better," Túrin said quietly without looking at her, his voice slightly hoarse. "I should have waited. I was selfish in courting Lossiel, and because of my selfishness I have not only hurt you but her as well. Moreover I feel I betrayed her. I won't deny that I like her, but I never felt for her the way I felt – feel – for you. And she deserves someone better than me, someone who will love her seriously." He swallowed hard and finally raised his eyes to look at her. "And you, you also deserve someone who won't turn to somebody else the very moment you're busy. So I can understand that now you'll ... – how did you put it? Let yourself fall away from me. It's your good right to do so, after all the pain I've caused you. And perhaps I'm just selfish again when I tell you that I don't want to lose you, Visilya."

Khorazir

The southern coast of Lebennin

At about the same time when the travellers set out from Minas Tirith, about a hundred leagues to the south and west Tarannon, Lord of Lebennin stood upon the high cliffs overlooking a calm, deep-blue sea gazing southwards, where a faint dark line indicated where the island of Tolfalas lay. Some fluffy white clouds were drifting up from the south on a gentle breeze, casting shadows on the sea. The wind rustled in the heather and flowering gorse-bushes on the cliffs, and let the branches of the bent and twisted pine-trees underneath which the tents of Tarannon's small host were pitched sway, and the green banners with the device of five blue and silver lines that stood for the five streams of Lebennin flutter. Sea-gulls floated overhead crying shrilly, now and again diving for small silvery fish in the gentle waves at the cliff's foot.

It was a fair morning, and the sea a calming and inspiring sight, but Tarannon was not a man who gave much heed to natural beauty. His watching the coastal waters of his realm served another purpose. Some time ago rumours had come to his and his brother's Carandil's ears that the dreaded Corsairs of Umbar had landed at the coasts of Lebennin, this time not only to raid the fishing villages and cargo-vessels of the sea-traders, but moreover to try and establish a hold in one of the many hidden bays of the southern cliffs, or in the marshlands of the Ethir Anduin further to the

East, towards Pelargir. Carandil, with whom Tarannon shared the rule of the fief of Lebennin, and who looked after the administrative matters while Tarannon was rather responsible for military campaigns (which generally he enjoyed) had taken counsel with his brother as well as Falastur, the Lord of Pelargir, and they had agreed that Tarannon should take two thirds of the host of Lebennin to hunt down the Corsairs and find their secret hiding places. Much of the last year and all of this had been spent in fighting the Southrons – successfully, as Tarannon had to admit proudly.

He did not mourn the fact that he had not been at home much of late. Neither did he miss his wife, nor the boring business of ruling the fief and having to see to all the petty matters which usually occupied a lord's time. He was happiest when out and about with the soldiers, enjoying every opportunity to exercise the men. He himself was a famed and admired warrior, and he was always pleased to see when in a battle he would fight more daringly and much more skillfully than most of the soldiers, who often were only half his age. Tarannon was in his early fifties now, but as yet there were hardly any strands of grey in his full dark-brown hair and short beard, his blue eyes were still keen, and his jovial and rather handsome face little lined. Most importantly, his strength and litheness of body had not waned over the years, of which he was proud.

As he stood upon the cliffs now in the early morning sunshine, his dark-red cloak streaming behind him in the breeze, revealing a splendid coat of silver fishmail armour over a brightly burnished hauberk, and a green-scabbarded golden-hilted longsword at his side, he was searching the seas for black-sailed ships. Scouts had brought tidings the previous evening that new ships had been spotted. Now Tarannon was almost disappointed to discover that the only sails visible were the white ones of a small fishing vessel that was cruising the waters underneath the cliff, its cargo attracting lots of gulls and other seabirds that surrounded it in a fluttering white cloud.

Over the din they made he heard footsteps approach from the direction of the camp. Wondering who this could be, he turned.

gladrieltook

Visilya sighed again, and lapsed into a silent thoughtfulness.

asaris

Curufë nodded. "I have always loved cats. They seem to me to be an image of myself – hunters, fierce and proud. They are not as intelligent as you might think, though. They mainly just think about meals and naps."

Lady_of_Rohan

It hadn't taken Daewen too long before she was comfortable and confident with the canter pace. It was quite fast enough as far as she was concerned. The road ahead was slightly rutted from wagons travelling during the spring rains, but for the most part it looked to be non-threatening. Most of the deeper ruts the horses side-stepped on their own. They had almost passed through the rough area when Daewen's horse stumbled and fell to its knees. Not expecting this and completely unprepared, Daewen found herself pitched over her horse's neck. With a cry, she hit the ground hard, a loud pop emitting from her left shoulder as it dislocated. Her head smacked the earth rather hard too. She lay stunned, unsure of what just happened. Gritting her teeth against the pain, she told herself that she would not give in to tears like a child. As she tried to move, a second stab of pain threatened to destroy that resolve.

gladrieltook

Visilya yanked on Rebel's reins, causing the horse to rear. She jumped off the frightened animal and rushed to where Daewen lay in the dirt. "Daewen, are you all right?" She gently raised the girl to a sitting position, and felt her shoulder. It's not broken, thank Eru, but it's bad enough."

Lady_of_Rohan

"AAAAAH!" Daewen cried out as Visilya sat her up examined the shoulder. A tear escaped her eye, but she made no move to brush it aside. Her vision was still cloudy and her head pounded, the epicenter coming a few inches behind her left ear. She whimpered as Visilya lightly touched the shoulder again. "I should have never left the city," she muttered through clenched teeth.

Khorazir

Upon seeing Daewen's horse stumble and the girl fall, Faramir had called to Andanor to halt the company, then he had ridden over to where Visilya had dismounted and was kneeling beside Daewen. Túrin was just leaping off his horse as well, and Lindórië and Curufë, startled out of their conversation were drawing near. Faramir dismounted as well and came to Visilya's side. He saw that there seemed to be something wrong with her shoulder, and overheard Visilya's words about nothing being broken.

"How bad is it, Visilya?" he asked concernedly, noticing how the girl's face was drawn in pain, and how she fought to hold back tears. "The shoulder looks as if it was dislocated," he went on, after he had had a closer look. "If so, we must set it. Where else does it hurt?"

Daewen indicated her head with a slightly trembling hand. Faramir nodded, then straightened up again. Turning to the rangers, he called for Dorlas, who turned out to be a middle-aged man with fuzzy dark hair and a sympathetic face. He already had dismounted and now swiftly came over.

"This is Dorlas," Faramir explained. "He has some skills as a healer, and will know what to do to help you, Daewen. But 'tis going to hurt, I fear."

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen nodded slightly, muttering, "Just get it over with." She saw someone come over from the company of rangers. Well, she saw something move, at least. Though the fog had lifted slightly, her eyesight was still unclear and this was certain to drive her mad if it didn't go away soon. She flinched and whimpered as Dorlas touched her injury. After examining it, he said, "I need someone to help keep her still while I set this."

gladrieltook

Visilya raised her head. "I will." Gently she instructed Daewen to sit still and lean against her. "You'll be alright, Daewen, I promise." She took the girl's hands in hers, and held them in front of her.

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen cringed and braced herself against Visilya, her knuckles turning white as she gripped the captain's hands.

Khorazir

Túrin knelt at her side, lightly putting a hand to her hale shoulder to calm her. He knew what she would be going through in a few moments, having had his own shoulder dislocated twice and set again, the second time by someone who had not known how to do it properly. "It's going to be alright," he said softly. "Just try to relax, and think about something else."

Dorlas now gently took Daewen's arm. "Ready?" he asked, and when she nodded faintly, suddenly his grip turned hard as iron as in a swift, sure motion he pulled with all his might and then let go when a soft sound indicated that the bone had slid into its proper place again. "There, all done," he said.

Lady_of_Rohan

As the bone slid back into its socket, Daewen screamed, the sound mostly muffled as she buried her face into Visilya's collarbone. Oh how that hurt! She let hot tears flow unheededly for a few moments. Perhaps it would have been better to just leave it out of place, she reasoned. But shortly after the procedure was finished, she began to feel relief. With a final whimper and snuffle, she raised her head. While it still hurt to move the shoulder even a little, at least it wasn't the searing pain that had been before. She gratefully accepted a few swallows of water from a bottle that someone offered. Her vision was clearing, though still too slowly for her liking. She tried shifting position while she sat, but quickly gave that notion up as both shoulder and head protested. Sighing, she resumed her lean against Visilya. "Thank you," she murmured, barely audible.

Khorazir

While Daewen had drunk Dorlas had fetched linen bandages from his saddlebags. "I am going to bandage your shoulder so that the arm is at ease," he said. "It will hurt again, but after that you'll be feeling better. Then I'll have a look at your head."

While the ranger was working, Faramir signed to the others to dismount, as they would not be able to ride on immediately. Where they had halted there was a row of lime-trees lining the road, their small new leaves casting some shade on the ground. Behind them was a meadow whither the rangers led the horses to let them graze while they waited. Some of the men took the chance to have a second breakfast.

Dorlas had bandaged the girl's shoulder carefully, then he reached out and stroked back her hair where her head had hit the ground. After examining her head critically for some time and questioning the girl, he let out a sigh of relief. "As far as I can judge it, there is no serious damage done. The spot is going to be terribly sore for some time, and you will suffer from headaches, but that seems to be it." Turning to his captain, he added: "But she shouldn't ride for some time, at least not for some hours, and after that only at very gentle speed."

Faramir nodded. "I thought so. Then we shall rest here. Spread some blankets over there, underneath the trees in the shade, so that she needs not lie in the middle of the road," he commanded some of the men. "And look after her horse."

"A short while ago we passed a brook where willows grew," Lindórië said. "I shall ride and fetch some of the bark. A tea of this may help against the headache."

Dorlas nodded and smiled. "I had been about to propose this. Hey, lads, get a fire going so that we can heat some water."

asaris

Curufë took out his flint and tinder, as Alessya began to gather some larger pieces of wood for the campfire. The elven ranger set them up into a teepee, and the fire started rather easily. "Nice work," Faramir said to Curufë and Alessya, as Lindorië came up from the river with some bark. Within a few minutes, the fire was going strong, and the water was starting to boil. "Why don't we get some extra water," Curufë said. "I have some good tea leaves in my pack."

Khorazir

"A good idea," Faramir said, signing to one of the rangers to fetch some more. "I think we should stay here till afternoon at least, so that Daewen does not have to ride under the midday sun. Then we shall see how she feels, and whether she is fit to ride at all. According to my knowledge there are several villages along the road where we can spend the night."

"Indeed there are," Lindórië said. She had sat down on the ground beside the fire and was cutting the bark into smaller pieces with a pocket-knife, "and there are also several inns that can host larger companies. Once we set out again, and can foresee how far Daewen will manage to ride, someone should ride ahead and announce our arrival, so that they are prepared."

"I think you should do this," Faramir said, "as you know the countryside best. I am sure of the others someone will be found to accompany you."

Lindórië nodded in agreement, then she put the cut bark into the boiling water, and took the kettle from the fire. Daewen had been carried to a shady spot underneath a tall lime-tree, where cloaks and blankets had been spread on the grass. Visilya was still at her side, so were Túrin and Dorlas. The ranger had just poured some cold water onto a bandage and now handed it to Visilya, telling her to hold it against the girl's head. Lindórië rose and carried the kettle over to them, then went and fetched a cup from her saddlebags.

In the meantime Faramir had told the rangers to unsaddle the horses and to peg them so that they could graze. Luckily the meadow they had invaded did not look as if it was mown regularly, otherwise, Faramir thought, they might have gotten into serious trouble with the farmer who owned the land. But the horses looked as if they were enjoying the break, and even more the fresh grass studded with flowers. The rangers looked none too unhappy, either. After they had looked after the horses, they got out more food and settled down under the trees. Some looked ready for a nap. Smiling about their laziness, Faramir went to fetch his own saddlebags. Then he returned to the fire, where the water Curufë had asked for was almost boiling. Taking off his cloak, Faramir folded it and put it on the ground, then he stripped off the gauntlets as well, unbuckled the sword-belt and sat down. From his bags he got a cup and, after some rummaging, a book.

gladrieltook

Visilya patted Daewen's good shoulder. "You're a brave one, alright." She smiled gently, seeing herself in those wonderful, liquid eyes.

The change from being on the ground to being carried had started the pounding in Daewen's head again. A few moments ago she had felt embarrassed, and slightly ashamed, when the entire company had to halt for several hours, all because of her. But those thoughts quickly passed and now she returned to feeling miserable. While the shade helped settle her a bit, the cool cloth did even more. If she weren't in such pain, she might have enjoyed being waited on like this. As it was, she sighed carefully and tried to ignore her injuries as best she could. She was sitting upright, but what she wanted was to lay down and sleep for a long, long time. The weariness from her distress and the unaccustomed travel was being to show its effect, along with a little bit of homesickness. For the first time in her life, she'd seen what Minas Tirith looked like from the other side of the walls, and the sight had stunned her. It truly was the White City, she hadn't fully believed that phrase until she saw it sparkling in the morning sun.

Visilya's words broke into her thoughts. "I have to be," she answered softly. She was glad she didn't have to continue as someone came over with a kettle. Turning her head as much as she dared (which turned out to be very little), she recognized the pretty lady who she had met early that morning. She couldn't remember her name, not like that mattered right now anyway. Another person produced a cup and a steaming liquid was poured into it. She was instructed to drink it, slowly, so as not to burn her mouth. She let it sit for a minute or so, waiting for it to cool. She wasn't particularly fond of hot drinks, though she had them rarely. However, once the tea had cooled enough, she found that it did reduce the pain in her head, although she was still quite aware that it remained.

When she had drunk most of the contents of the cup a second time, she realized that she was having a difficult time staying awake. She was helped laying down, and soft blankets and cloaks were placed under her head and both shoulders. She sighed again as someone patted her unhurt shoulder.

Galhadrim

The southern coast of Lebennin

Tarannon turned to see the Captain of one of his companies currently manning the pickets. He walked with a local next to him and looked apologetic even before he spoke. "I'm sorry, milord, but this gentleman says he urgently needs to speak with you. He's the Headman of the village below us. I told him you'd only have a few moments for him."

Smiling with semi-feigned graciousness, Tarannon held out a hand. "Thank you, Captain. What can I do for you good sir?"

The man nodded and seemed to buck up his course before answering. "Well, my liege, I thank you all for doing so much for us down on the coast. Protecting the fleets and all. But you see..." He fidgeted a bit and licked his lips. "You see, there's just so many of you up on the plateau and patrolling through the villages. Not that we don't welcome you, you see. But rather... Well, your man Grendelenoth didn't mention that there'd be so many and that you'd stay for so long."

Tarannon had expected more resistance from the local populace and was surprised that this was only the first mention of it. His smile shifted to one of amusement at the provincial attitude of the man before him. Basically good people, the fishermen could not be expected to keep up with the events of the fief at large. That they had encamped on the bluff for so long without an uprising could only be credited with his advisor's preparation of the villages. Grendel certainly has a way of convincing people, he thought. Hopefully he will arrive back here soon to reassure them all.

Stepping forward, the Lord of Lebennin gently turned the man around and began walking him back towards the waiting Captain. "I can tell you for certain that our time here is not long. The plague of black sails that we began fighting has been depleted and we are confident that safety and security are well and truly within our grasp. Your people can continue their lives without fear. Please, have some refreshment at our tables before you depart for the long walk back." He gave the Captain a brief but telling look. He would not be bothered with such trivialities again. Half the reason he had taken up this crusade was to remain apart from games of state. It was so much better to have his advisor's handle such details.

Khorazir

Curufë had made tea and poured it to those who asked for it. It was excellent tea, Faramir found. He sat with his back to the tree-stem, the book on his outstretched legs, and a cup of the steaming drink beside him. A short way off five of the rangers were playing a game of cards, and were apparently having fun at it, judging from their laughter and agitation. Most of the others were resting. Amdir, one of the youngsters of the company, was writing something – most likely a letter to his sweetheart, Faramir thought with a slight smile. In Ithilien, Amdir generally used much of his spare time to write to her, and then anxiously waited for an errand-rider to deliver the message or bring an answer. The other rangers often jested about his behaviour, but the boy did not seem to care.

“What are you reading?” Lindórië’s voice startled him out of his thoughts. She had returned to the fire and also gotten herself some tea. Now she sat down next to Faramir.

Holding up the book so that she could read the title, he said: “I found it in the library yestereve, and Andreth graciously allowed me to borrow it. Must have been her nice day.”

Lindórië laughed. “Or else she could not resist your charm. I mean, who could?”

Faramir grinned broadly. “Not you.”

“Aye, not me,” she said softly. There was a moment of silence as they looked at each other, then Faramir said: “The girl, Daewen, is she feeling any better?”

“She has drunk some tea, and now she has lain down to sleep, which may be best for her. Dorlas has remained at her side, and Túrin and Visilya are there as well. Túrin said something about having a look at her horse.”

“Oh, the horse is fine,” Mablung called from the round of card-players. “We checked its legs and all. It was just a little nervous and uneasy after the accident.”

“Well, then all we can do is wait,” Faramir said with a slight shrug.

Lindórië studied him. “You are not entirely displeased about the delay, are you?”

“Not really, no,” Faramir admitted. “I am not exactly eager to pay a visit to Falastur in Pelargir and having to listen to his haughty and condescending remarks. And neither of us can foresee what awaits us in Lebennin. Of course there is no use in artificially delaying the journey, but if chance wills a delay, I shall be last to complain.”

gladrieltook

Visilya sipped her tea quietly, indulging herself with silent thought. She thought about Lebennin, and Daewen, and Turin, and many other things. Her thoughts turned to her sister, and how much she missed the silly little girl. She missed many people, family, tutors, and masters she’d lost along the way. Her favorite had been a funny old man in Lebennin, the father of the woman she would be taking Daewen to. He had been a jolly fellow, yet very wise. Visilya could scarce remember his name, she had been so young. Even when she did know it, she couldn’t pronounce it, so he was just ‘Master’.

Khorazir

Túrin had found himself a comfortable spot between the roots of a lime, not far from where Visilya was seated. She looked thoughtful as she was drinking her tea, and he did not want to disturb her. Moreover he was not sure how to begin a conversation anyway. Thus he got some food from his saddlebags and had breakfast – his first for the day, as he had left in such a hurry this morning that he had not found time to eat properly. While chewing his bread and

cheese thoughtfully, his eyes strayed to Visilya. When at one point she looked up from her teacup and caught him observing her, he smiled shyly, then glanced at Faramir and Lindórië instead. Apparently they were talking about the book that lay on Faramir's legs.

"Some fifteen years ago it caused quite an uproar in Minas Tirith when Lord Sorondil wanted to have it published," Lindórië said. "Only a few months before he had had a nasty quarrel with the Steward, and many people thought that with this book he tried to repay Denethor for his opposing the Lord of Pelargir. And they were right."

"I hardly remember Sorondil," Faramir said, "although he died only three years ago. But what I recall marks him as a very fierce man of dangerous character. Father greatly resented him, and I think the feeling was mutual."

"He was more than fierce and dangerous of character," Lindórië said darkly. "Generally I am prepared to believe that there is some good hidden in even the most evil of men, but honestly I am not sure about Sorondil. Even his own son hated him, or so 'tis said."

"Isn't it also said," Túrin fell in, "that he helped bring about his father's end?"

Lindórië turned to him and shrugged. "I am not sure about this. Certainly Falastur did not mourn Sorondil's death over much, and he may have had reasons to indeed kill him, at least if the rumours are true —"

"What rumours?" Faramir asked.

Lindórië gave him a strange look. "You do not know?"

Faramir looked puzzled. "Know what?"

Lindórië sighed slightly. "I thought that perhaps your father had told you."

Faramir laughed humourlessly. "Denethor, telling me anything? He is glad when he does not have to talk to me. But what are you referring to? What should he have told me? Is it about Falastur?"

"Aye," Lindórië said. "About him, his father and F'induilas of Dol Amroth."

asaris

Curufë sat near the stream and meditated quietly while sipping his tea.

Khorazir

Lindórië had slightly lowered her voice at her last words. But of the rangers no one seemed to show any interest in their conversation. Curufë had wandered over to the small river and found himself a quiet spot there, and Alessya was nowhere in sight. Most likely she was looking after her horse. Visilya seemed to still be immersed in her own thoughts and unheeding of other things. But Túrin, always keen on picking up an interesting tale, had drawn closer to Faramir and Lindórië and seated himself opposite them.

Faramir frowned at the lady. "What had my mother to do with the Lords of Pelargir?" he asked.

Lindórië bent forward to pour herself some more tea, then she leaned back against the tree, the cup in her hands. "'tis quite a long and partly confusing tale," she said. "You must know that the Lords of Pelargir and the Princes of Dol Amroth have been enemies for a long time. There has never been an open, bloody feud as between other noble houses of Gondor, but there has always been great dislike and half-veiled enmity. The reasons for this, I do not doubt, have long been obscured by the mists of time. Now, about forty years ago, this hostility was almost as strong as it is now."

And yet it happened that Falastur, Lord Sorondil's only son and heir, and Imrahil, your uncle, became friends. They were of similar age, you must know, Falastur being Imrahil's senior by some four years. Their fathers, of course, were strongly opposed to this. Prince Adrahil as much as Lord Sorondil. But the two did not heed their sires' opinion. I was very young then, but I remember Falastur's frequent visits to Dol Amroth. He and Imrahil had quite a reputation as mischief-makers in all of Dor-en-Ennil. Not unlike certain young men nowadays in Minas Tirith," she added, with a smile and a wink at Túrin and Faramir.

"They would ride along the coasts and look for stranded ships," she then continued, "or go hunting in the woods. And often Finduilas, Imrahil's elder sister, would accompany them."

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen had had a difficult time getting to sleep. Nothing seemed to be comfortable, and almost every time she moved, her shoulder would protest the change. After careful negotiating, she finally found a spot that allowed her to relax. Within a few moments, her eyes drifted shut and she slipped into a light, but restful, slumber.

gladrieltook

Visilya finished her tea with a sigh. Her eyes fell on Daewen, who was dozing quietly. Not a half bad idea she thought. She stretched out on the ground beside the girl, her hand at her sword hilt, ready to spring up at any moment. Visilya was not a deep sleeper.

Cynara

Alessya was up out of sight, in the branches of a tree that overhung a stream. It was a quiet paradise in of itself, and it was quite restful and calm.

This is as good a place as any to change, to be in keeping with my disguise, I suppose. Alessya thought to herself, and leaned down on one of the lower branches. Snapping off an old, dead branch, she used it to hook the saddlebag off of her horse, who was grazing peacefully below. Shaking out the rich, wine-red dress, Alessya wrinkled her nose at the thought of having to ride, and maybe fight in it. Dress under arm, she climbed to one of the thick, sturdy branches nearer the top, where she changed as quickly as possible under the circumstances.

Peering out through the foliage, Alessya dropped her other clothes, which were now in the saddlebag, down to the ground, where they landed with a thump beside her horse, who barely flicked an ear. Her sword was put through her sash, and a pair of daggers were tied to her calves.

There, she thought, satisfied, I'm about ready for anything.

Khorazir

Faramir looked at her surprisedly. "I never knew that my mother enjoyed these things. I only remember her as a very gentle lady who would read stories to Boromir and me, or tell tales. I can hardly imagine her go hunting with her brother."

Lindórië laughed softly at his words, but then her face became grave. "There were not many people who really knew and understood her. When I grew older she befriended me, and we have remained close friends till her death. She did change after marrying Denethor and moving to Minas Tirith, but she retained her courage and strength. And I know

that often she missed the sea and the lands where she had grown up. Or perhaps she missed the opportunity to freely roam the countryside on her beloved horse even more than those.” Lindórië sighed. “But on the other hand she loved Denethor, and for him she was willing to remain in the City and endure what sometimes must have seemed like imprisonment to her. I know Denethor loved her as well, more than anybody else, yet most of the time he was too busy with the affairs of state to notice how she yearned to get out of Minas Tirith for a while. But strangely she never complained, not even to me. And, well, then there were your brother and you to look after, and then came her strange illness and ...” She shook her head slightly and fell silent. The others, too, sat with heads bowed. Faramir had been deeply touched by her words. He scarcely remembered his mother, who had died when he had been five years old, but he knew that her death had been a grievous blow to his father that had very much changed the Steward, and still affected his attitude to his sons.

The silence endured as all seemed immersed in thought or memories, but at length Túrin stirred, and said: “About Falastur ... – you said he and Finduilas spent much time together on these “expeditions”. Am I right to assume that something ... er ... developed between them?”

Lindórië looked up and smiled. “You are right. Soon it was rather plain to see that Falastur had taken an interest in Finduilas.”

“And what about her?” Faramir asked. “She did not love him as well, did she?” There was a trace of disdain in his voice. He did not like the thought of his mother having loved someone as haughty and arrogant as Falastur. But Lindórië’s words somewhat quieted his fears.

“I do not think she loved him,” she said. “At least she said she did not. Certainly she did not feel for him the way she later felt for Denethor. But she liked him, and enjoyed his company.”

“Urgh,” Túrin muttered.

Lindórië laughed. “He was not like that back then. Actually he could be quite charming. And he was handsome, too – he still is, in a way.”

Faramir raised an eyebrow at this, upon which she laughed even more. “Not as much as Imrahil, of course,” she said. “Your uncle was accounted one of the most handsome men of the fief back then, and naturally he had a great deal of female admirers. To admit it, when I was in my teens I was quite taken with him myself. Not that he ever noticed. But to return to Falastur, he never had as many girls who would swoon over his looks as his friend, and he did not care. He knew he had other qualities. Moreover, of all the girls and ladies of Gondor he was interested in Finduilas alone.”

gladrieltook

Visilya opened one eye and looked over at the trio. “When I lived in Lebennin, Falastur was just as awful as he is now. I would wander the streets, to pick up ‘information’ of sorts for my tutor, and I learned all sorts of things about his highness. Most of it was just rumors, but if you knew how to pick the true from the false, well, let’s just say that the rumors weren’t the worse of the two.”

Khorazir

Lindórië turned to her and nodded. “You are right, Falastur is not a very likeable person. Not anymore, at least. But as I said, he used to be different back then.”

“And what changed him?” Faramir asked. “The fact that Finduilas did not want him?”

“In a way, yes,” Lindórië replied. “But ‘tis not that easy. You know, in a way they were the perfect couple, seen from a political point of view. I have mentioned that there was enmity between the Houses of Pelargir and Dol Amroth,

which, after all, is a common thing amongst nobility. Now, often the noble families would attempt, in such a case, to bridge the mutual differences by marrying their offspring to each other. I know what I am talking about, for my marriage to Tarannon was arranged for no other reason. Thus nothing would have been better to marry Finduilas to Falastur. Prince Adrahil was quite disposed to agree to such a union. After all, the Lords of Pelargir were one of the most powerful families in Gondor, and still are. Moreover, even though love is usually not an issue in this kind of negotiations, the fact that Finduilas seemed to rather like Falastur, and he to truly love her, made him think that the heir of Lord Sorondil might be a suitable husband for his daughter. Finduilas was approaching her coming of age and thus the time when a decent daughter should think about marriage” – there was unmistakable disdain and sarcasm in her voice now – “and although she had many suitors, I do believe that she, too, was not entirely against accepting the union, knowing that it could have been much worse. After all, she knew her ‘duty,’” she ended, and there was a faint trace of bitterness in her voice.

“And why didn’t it work?” Túrin asked.

“Mostly because of Sorondil. No one really knows why, but he was totally opposed to the match. He hated the Princes of Dol Amroth too much, perhaps, but even that does not wholly explain his rigid attitude and his strict refusal. Perhaps he simply enjoyed crossing Adrahil’s plans.” She shrugged. “Be that as it may, Falastur did what he could to persuade his father, he appealed to him to change his mind, he even humbled his pride to beg. To no avail. The trouble was, you see, that Falastur had not come of age yet. He was about a year younger than Finduilas, and thus, at the time the marriage was negotiated, he did not have the right to speak for himself. The relationship to his father suffered greatly, of course. In the end Falastur left Gondor to pass the time till his coming of age on a merchant’s ship, planning to return home the day he turned 25, and to go then and propose to Finduilas. His father suspected this, of course, and threatened to disinherit him should he actually carry out his plan. And you know what? Falastur did not care. ‘tis hard to imagine for those who only know him as he is now, haughty and powerhungry and possessive. But he would have renounced all this, the title, wealth and influence he would have inherited, for Finduilas.”

gladrieltook

Visilya raised an eyebrow. “My, he was devoted. But then, if he had succeeded in marrying her, many things would not and will not come to pass. For one, Faramir wouldn’t even exist, and if he did, well, he wouldn’t be a very pretty picture.” She smiled a half smirk, and rolled over to face them. “But yes, I heard many a good thing about Falastur, but his love for Finduilas to that extent was not known to me. I do not like planned marriages. They’re far too messy, and often you get a bad match, and two very unhappy people. I don’t think either really would have been right for each other; inter-family unions can equal less-than perfect off-spring, if you get my drift.”

Khorazir

Lindórië’s face had turned very grave and stern at Visilya’s words. Faramir who was watching her closely thought he knew what she was thinking, and silently reached for her hand and squeezed it softly. She stirred at the touch, gave him a swift smile, then raised her eyes to look at Visilya.

“You do not know how truly you speak, Visilya,” she said. “But, alas, most marriages amongst the gentry are arranged, for more or less ‘noble’ reasons. And I cannot see that it will ever change. So praise the fact that you are under no obligation to ever having to marry whom your parents choose for you, that you are free to decide if you want to marry at all, and if yes, whom. Few are so lucky.” She sighed slightly, but then shrugged, and her face brightened up again. “Well, the story of Falastur and Finduilas is not ended yet. As I have said, Falastur left Gondor to pass the time till his coming of age elsewhere, so as to avoid his father. A few days after his 25th birthday, the merchant’s ship he had been travelling with landed in Pelargir. Without going to see Sorondil nor anybody else of his family, Falastur took a horse and purposed to ride to Dol Amroth. But a friend of his whom he met on the road told him that Finduilas was in Minas Tirith. So he rode thither with all the speed he could muster. He must have wondered about the fact that she was in the City, but his friend had not been able to explain it. But, well, Falastur found an explanation soon enough. For when he reached the City, the first person he ran into was Imrahil, who told him that his sister had married the

Steward's heir about a week ago.”

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen woke with a start. She didn't know how long she'd slept, but the sun was high in the sky now. She blinked repeatedly, clearing her eyes of sleep and allowing her to get her bearings. Why was she on the ground? A slight shift roused the pain in her shoulder and she quickly remembered what happened previously. Lifting her head, she saw the others seated nearby, looking as though they spoke about serious matters. A moment later she realized Visilya was beside her with her back turned. Daewen flinched as she tried to prop herself up on her other elbow, but resisted for the time being as both her head and other shoulder protested. She sighed as she looked up through the tree leaves that made shadow patterns on the ground. If this injury so early into the journey was any indication of what was to come, Daewen questioned whether she wanted to be any part of it. But that doesn't matter, she thought, there's no way you'd be able to get away now, you know too much. She sighed again and flicked an ant off her forearm.

gladrieltook

Visilya's face grew dark at Lindorie's comment. She liked her freedom, but her parents, and worse still, marriage were not two topics she really wanted to discuss. She allowed herself a glance at Turin, but then rolled back onto her back. It was all she could do to keep from crying. She dearly missed her mother and father, they had been the world to her. She stared up at the sky, and waged a silent battle with her grief.

Khorazir

Silence had ensued Lindórië's tale. Both Faramir and Túrin looked rather touched.

“Now I understand why he hates Denethor so much,” Faramir at length said quietly. “And why he dislikes me as well.” Lindórië nodded. “The realisation that he had lost her to the Steward's heir was a major blow to him. His father, although disliking the fact that the House of Dol Amroth and that of the Stewards had now forged a strong alliance, was content. He hoped that Falastur would soon get across Finduilas and mind his duties as heir to the Lordship of Pelargir again. But Falastur refused to do so. He joined the navy, and spent much time abroad. When Thorongil attacked Umbar Falastur accompanied him. But in the end he did return. His father wanted to marry him to Tarannon's cousin, and in the end, after Finduilas had fallen ill and died, Falastur consented to accept the union. Well, I think 'tis more than understandable that he is said to have hated his father – after all the grief he had caused him.” Faramir nodded thoughtfully. Then he looked at Lindórië. “You mean he waited with his own marriage till Finduilas had passed away? Did he think that she might turn to him while she still lived?”

“He hoped it, perhaps. But his hopes were unfounded.”

“Well, it was a pretty stroke of fortune for Sorondil that she did die so untimely, wasn't it?” Túrin said. “Otherwise his son would never have acted according to plan.”

“It was indeed,” Lindórië said softly.

EdaintheRanger

Andanor listened with half an ear to the “Genalogy lesson” and kept the rest of his attention on the rangers. He knew that they were in “soft” country at the moment and that they were a showcase party. Nevertheless he didn't feel that the rangers should have been taking it too easy.

Then he sat back, he had been busy of late maintaining the troop's order. There wasn't much call for horses in the glades of Ithilien and even though the rangers were passable horsemen he wasn't satisfied with the ranks and files, no neat parade ground order here. He just hoped that that they weren't seen by horsemen from Dol Amroth, Andanor felt that they would be mocking in their observations. Nodding to Faramir and the immediate party he made to do his rounds of the rangers, and exchange a light hearted banter in order to maintain morale.

Out of earshot of the nobles he slipped into Westron and wondered aloud how many fatigue duties Mablong had gamed his way out of.

Khorazir

Again there had been silence after Lindórië's tale. Faramir saw Andanor walk about calling some of the rangers to order, and with a sting of bad conscience he remembered that he should have been doing so as well, instead of sitting in the shade and listening to intriguing tales.

"What you just heard might be useful to you once we reach Pelargir, and you have to face Falastur," Lindórië who had watched him closely said with a smile. "Be glad that you have such a dutiful and thorough lieutenant."

"I am," Faramir said, turning to her again. "Have I ever told you that it sometimes really irritates me – the way you seem to read my thoughts?"

She laughed softly. "Nay, you have not. Next time I shall try and keep to myself what I have read, so as not to 'irritate' you again."

"Oh, I'm obliged," he said, and then laughed as well.

Túrin, who had watched the two with a smile, now rose and stretched. He briefly considered going over to Visilya, but she had closed her eyes and seemed to sleep. Thus he decided to pay Daewen a visit. He had seen her stir a while ago. When passing by Visilya who lay stretched out on her back he spotted a small spider crawling over her hair. He bent down and brushed it away carefully.

Lady_of_Rohan

Sensing someone nearby move, Daewen lifted her head to look around. She saw Túrin stand and walk in her direction and also noted how he paused by Visilya and gently stroked her hair. "You like her, don't you," she said before he could even sit down beside her. She had forced herself to at least be partially propped up on her elbows. Her head didn't like the change in altitude much, but it wasn't unbearable pain. She reached into one of her stashes and pulled out an apple and bit into it carefully. She couldn't remember if this one was for the horse or if it was one she had raided, but right now the details didn't really matter.

Khorazir

At Daewen's words Túrin briefly glanced at Visilya. Then sighing softly he lowered himself next to the girl. "It's rather obvious, isn't it," he said with a slight smile, realising that he was blushing. "Yes, I do like her. Very much. And I fervently hope that she hasn't stopped liking me as well, after what happened." Then he shrugged. "Well, but that remains to be seen. How are you? Feeling any better?"

Lady_of_Rohan

Her curiosity piqued, Daewen wanted to ask what had happened, but had to settle with answering questions about her condition. "I guess so," she said indifferently. "My arm hurts if I make a sudden move and my head is kinda sore. I could ride if I had to, I guess, but I'm not looking forward to getting back on that beast." She cast a distasteful glance in the direction of some picketed horses. "When do you think we'll be moving out again?"

Khorazir

"Well, that depends on you, really," Túrin answered with a shrug. "If you say you are fit to ride, I guess we'll be starting soon. Dorlas may want to have a look at you first, though. And don't fear, we'll be riding very slowly. According to what Faramir said, Lady Lindórië is going to ride ahead to organise some accomodation for the night, while we are to follow behind more slowly. If you want me to, I can lead your horse. Then you won't have to worry about the riding-bit.

gladrieltook

Visilya's heart melted at Turin's touch. She smiled, and was angry no longer.

Lady_of_Rohan

Aha! So that's her name! Daewen thought as Túrin mentioned Lindórië. She had to smile wryly when she remembered that she, a ragged beggar girl, was the sole reason why this party of rather noble people had been halted in the first place. It was a rather pleasant thought. A twinge of pain from her injury reminded her that it wasn't quite so pleasant after all. She stuck her tongue out when he brought up the subject of riding. "I've had enough of that, thank you," she muttered. Then she cocked her head to look at him curiously. "Why are you being so nice to me? After all, it was only a few days ago that I tried to rob you blind." She purposefully neglected to tell him that she still had his moneybag tucked away somewhere safe. And she meant to keep it that way.

gladrieltook

Visilya opened one eye. "Turin can't stay mad at anyone, just like me." She pushed herself up and joined the two. "I know you hate riding, Daewen, but it's the fastest mode of travel available to us. The roads are dangerous, and we want to spend as little time on them as we can help."

Khorazir

Túrin's heart leaped when he saw Visilya smile at him. After she had sat down beside him he reached for her hand. Then he looked at Daewen again and nodded. "And the sooner we reach our accomodation today, the sooner you will be able to rest in a nice, soft bed." Then he laughed, remembering her question. "Visilya is right. I can't be angry at people for long. And actually I was not angry about you at all. I guess I thought your attempt – successful attempt, I should add – at robbery served me well that night. You're quite skillful with the dagger, too, it seems," he added, rubbing the spot on his throat where her blade had pricked the skin.

Faramir and Lindórië had remained at the fire talking to Dorlas, who had joined them for a cup of tea. "Give her another hour or two, until the sun has gone down from the zenith a little," the ranger said, "then she should be fit to

ride.”

“Very well,” Faramir agreed.

“Then I shall set out now,” Lindórië said. “It may require some searching to find an inn that has the capacity to accommodate us all.”

“Well, if not, just see to it that Daewen gets a bed for the night,” Faramir said. “The rest of us can camp outside. The weather looks fair enough.”

Dorlas cast a doubtful glance at the sky. “Ah, but I don’t trust it. The wind has lessened considerably. The horizon is getting hazy, and the air somewhat muggy. I do hope the weather is going to hold, but I fear we might get rain tonight.”

“Splendid,” Faramir muttered, then seeing Lindórië rise, he got to his feet as well. “Somebody should accompany you.”

gladrieltook

“And she’ll be even better when I get through with her,” Visilya said with a laugh. She squeezed Turin’s hand. “He is right, you are very good, but I’ll see what I can do to hone those skills.”

Lady_of_Rohan

The girl sat quiet for several moments, absorbing their words. It was rare that she received compliments. The only time she had ever been called good was in the phrase ‘good for nothing’, and then it had been followed by a series of curses and oaths as she made off with several items from a market stall. To be told she was skilled at something was a strange thing indeed. “I have to be able to defend myself somehow,” she said quietly, her eyes focused on a clump of grass instead of those talking to her. “Otherwise, I wouldn’t be living now.” She sighed. “Sometimes, in the city, a band or two of orphan- and beggar-kids will form to look out for one another, but usually you’re on your own. If someone finds a prostitute’s abandoned baby, we’ll try and take care of it, but when you can barely find enough for yourself, it’s hard.” She didn’t feel like mentioning that this was probably how she had been found and raised. It was far from honourable, but if she hadn’t been ‘captured’ by Visilya, in a few years she would have most likely added to the cycle. Sitting up, she sighed and rested her chin on her drawn-up knee. Thoughts like these troubled her, though she knew that her options for her future were limited, unless something unforeseen came up (like the current situation), to either a tavern girl or dead. Neither one was appealing. Yet there was little she could do about it. Suddenly, an inexplicable wave of homesickness enveloped her. Yes, this place was pretty and it was nice to have a full stomach, but it was all unfamiliar, alien. She turned her face away, not wanting the others to see how troubled she was.

gladrieltook

Despite Daewen’s attempt to conceal her troubles, Visilya could see right through her. She let go of Turin’s hand and took Daewen’s. “I’ve been trying to hide my sorrows for years, dear girl. I know all the tricks.” She smiled gently. “I was an orphan once too, remember. In fact, I still am. But I got lucky, just like you, and now you will meet the daughter of the Man who I trained under when I was your age.”

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen lifted her head to look at Visilya, her eyes blazing. “You may have been an orphan, but were you a prostitute’s

child? Did you grow up knowing that the only thing you would ever be able to be was a prostitute, at best?" Her voice remained even, but carried a bit of anger.

gladrieltook

"Please," Visilya, her voice hurt, "do not be cross with me. And no, I was not. But I had to spend my childhood hiding from my father's enemies, living with the visions of my parents deaths burning into my mind with every step I took. I had nightmares every night about it. And you do not have to have the same fate as your mother. I think you are something special. Some roles a hereditary, but others are not." She smiled softy at the young girl.

Lady_of_Rohan

"If that's how you like to see things, so be it," Daewen said, successfully masking the sass in her voice but not the intensity. "And after the things that I've gone through in my life, I really think that any chances I've had of being anything other than street trash are none. No one wants a girl who's been disgraced as I have by a band of lustful boys—" Her hand flew to her mouth as she gasped. Where had that come from?! Hadn't she sworn never to bring that horrible night up again? Angry at herself for slipping up, and angry at Visilya for making her angry, she sprang to her feet and started walking, not bothering with looking to see where she was going.

gladrieltook

Visilya jumped up and grabbed Daewen's good arm. "Daewen, I beg thee not to be cross with me. Such things are in the past. You do not have to let them dictate your future. I took you away from the city so you could get away from the negative past. Please forgive me and do not be angry." She knelt to her eye-level. "You could be anything you wanted. I know you can."

Lady_of_Rohan

"No, I can't," Daewen mouthed, her throat too choked with tears to make any sound. She reached up to brush one from her eye before it fell, and willed the others to stay hidden. That command was difficult to follow as she continued to hold the captain's gaze. The other's eyes and face held a sympathy and genuine concern that Daewen couldn't recall having ever seen before, in anyone. It was almost unbelievable that someone would actually be concerned about her... She shook her head slightly. Things that seemed too good to be true usually weren't.

Khorazir

Faramir had turned to the rangers to see whom he could choose to accompany Lindórië, when he felt her hand touch his shoulder. Turning again, and giving her a questioning glance, he saw that she was looking towards Visilya, Túrin and Daewen. An angry conversation seemed to be going on there, ending with the girl getting to her feet and walking away, and Visilya following, talking to her imploringly. Túrin just remained seated.

"What is going on there?" Faramir asked, no one in particular, and went over to Túrin. When drawing near, he thought that his friend looked very grave. He looked up when Faramir approached him.

"I think it's best if you leave it to Visilya," he said quietly, indicating the captain and the girl who were talking a little way off.

Faramir nodded slowly, watching them. Then he turned to Túrin again. "What happened?"

Túrin shrugged. "I don't really know. They talked, and suddenly Daewen got angry. Must have been something Visilya said. But I'm sure they'll manage to settle it."

"Let us hope they do," Faramir said, studying Túrin closely. "But that is not all that happened, is it?"

"No," Túrin admitted.

"So what is troubling you?"

Túrin looked up at him. "Nothing." He held Faramir's gaze for a while, then looked to the ground. "You know, sometimes I really hate you for that," he said, and although he wanted to let it sound like a joke, it did not quite sound like it, but much fiercer than intended.

"For what?"

"For the way you outstare people. So what is it you want to know – if you haven't read my thoughts already?"

"Hey, there is no need to get angry, Túrin," Faramir returned. "I just noticed you looked troubled and –"

"That may be, but perhaps I didn't want to talk about it right now!" Túrin snapped. "Did you consider that option?"

"Alright, suit yourself then," Faramir said edgily. "And please excuse the interruption." With that he turned and walked back to the others. Lindórië gave him a questioning glance, but he shook his head, and she did not inquire about what had just befallen.

"Andanor," Faramir called to the lieutenant, "have you seen Curufë and Alessya?"

asaris

As if summoned by the mention of his name, Curufë appeared behind the rangers just then. "Alessya's in that tree over there," he said, pointing. The startled rangers just gaped at the elf that seemed to have come out of nowhere.

Khorazir

Despite still being somewhat angry about Túrin's strange behaviour, Faramir had to laugh when seeing the rangers' startled expressions. "Let this be a warning to you, gentlemen, to never let attention slack," he called to them. "Even when not on duty."

Then he turned to Curufë. "I was wondering if you might be willing to accompany Lindórië and ride ahead to organise some accomodation for the night. You can take two of the lads as well, and perhaps Alessya wants to join you, too."

gladrieltook

Visilya gently stroked Dawen's hair. "I know you can. You may not see it now, but I do." She held the girl's gaze, then gently embraced her. "You'll see."

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen sighed, but did not speak. She allowed herself to be embraced, though it was a new and somewhat strange experience for her. As Visilya drew back, Daewen took the opportunity to study her. She searched the other's face intently, then, perhaps not finding the answers to her silent question, said, "I still don't..." Her voice faded as she let her sentence drop. She turned and started walking slowly back toward the lemon trees where Túrin sat.

gladrieltook

Visilya sat down, and watched Dawen as she too sat. She wondered about the poor girls past, where she came from, who her father was. It's not my business...

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen sat quietly in the shade of the lemon trees. When she had first returned to her spot she noticed Túrin seemed a bit more agitated than when she had abruptly left. Sensing that he did not want to be bothered, she made no effort to speak to him. Glancing around, she caught Visilya's gaze. She held it for a moment, before lowering her eyes, pretending to be suddenly interested in the dandelion by her foot. She plucked the stem from the ground and twirled it a few times before tossing it aside. With a sigh, she rested her chin on her knee again, almost an exact reenactment of what she had done a little while before.

Khorazir

In recollection Túrin did not even know what had made him get so angry at Faramir. He realised that he had quite overreacted, but did not feel like telling his friend that he was sorry right now. Moreover Faramir looked busy, and so Túrin stayed seated. He noticed that Daewen had returned, and felt a sting of pity when giving her a quick glance. He had not forgotten what she had let slip during her conversation with Visilya, and it had shocked him deeply. Looking at Daewen, he saw that she was troubled still. He wanted to somehow comfort her and tell her that things would be alright, and improve for her now, but he knew that he could not promise her that, as he had no idea what the future might bring, and honestly he did not quite share Visilya's optimism that her new home in Lebennin would really suit Daewen. Thus he, too, remained silent.

gladrieltook

Visilya stretched out on the ground and stared up at the clouds.

Lady_of_Rohan

Sensing that someone was watching her, Daewen glanced up to see Túrin looking at her with sympathy in his face. She met his gaze for a few moments before lowering her eyes. Had he overheard what she and the captain had said? She felt a flush creep up her face. Only a very few individuals knew about the incident, and having others inadvertently finding out was humiliating. What had possessed her to even mention it? She had wanted to forget that horrible night for over a year now, and for the most part she had succeeded, burying the memories deep, refusing to acknowledge them. Yet there were still times when they came rushing back... With a furious shake of her head, Daewen forced herself to think about something else. She glanced at Túrin again only to find he was still watching her silently. And it was beginning to make her nervous.

Khorazir

Túrin noticed Daewen's nervousness, and also realised that he had been staring at her. "I'm sorry," he said softly, finally withdrawing his gaze, looking at the flowering grasses and dandelions at his feet. Again there was an awkward silence. Túrin felt that he should say something, but could not think of anything – which troubled him, as this was highly unusual for him. But at length he made up his mind and turned to the girl again.

"It must be very difficult for you – having been snatched out of your familiar surroundings, being on the road with total strangers, journeying towards an unknown and perhaps dangerous future – I can see how that must trouble you. During the last two days everybody has told you how your life is going to improve once we are in Lebennin, but I'm sure you can't yet see or believe how this could possibly come to pass. But please be assured that Visilya and we others are really trying to help you. Why? you might ask now. Why should nobles like us be interested in the fate of a beggar-girl? And why indeed? Perhaps you think that there's some profit in it for us? Or perhaps we just want to ease our bad conscience. Or, well, perhaps we're not all as bad as gossip makes us, and do really care about you. Won't you give us a chance, Daewen, and your new future a try? From what you just told Visilya, whatever may await you down south can't be worse than what your life would lead to in Minas Tirith, can it? I won't promise you that everything is going to be alright, because I can't. I haven't seen the future. But chances are good, you know."

Khorazir

The southern coast of Lebennin

After the captain and the villager had left, Tarannon also returned to the camp. What was left of the morning he spent listening to the reports of the scouts he had sent out the previous evening. They, too, spoke of uneasiness in the nearby villages. Of the corsairs they had little to new tell, a fact that somehow troubled the Lord of Lebennin. He knew that there was another band of corsairs on the loose somewhere in these parts, but so far they had found only little trace of them. Apparently the enemy had learned from their earlier mistakes, and finally took the Gondorians seriously. But we shall show them yet, Tarannon thought grimly.

Having finished his business with the scouts, he was just about to take a light lunch when his captain reported to him that an errand-rider from Linhir had just arrived, and sought admittance. Curious about what the messenger could want, Tarannon bade the captain bring the man before him.

The errand-rider entered and bowing to the Lord, he handed a sealed letter to Tarannon. "The Lord Carandil bade me deliver this message."

"Did he say ought else?"

"Nay, lord. But he asked when you might be returning to Linhir."

Tarannon cast a glance at the maps showing the coastline of Lebennin and the Ethir Anduin that were lying next to the table. So many places where the cursed Southrons could be hiding still, he thought. Looking at the messenger again, he said: "Tell my brother that it may take some time yet. But should he indeed require my presence in Linhir – which I doubt –, I think I shall manage to come there for a short while. My captains can deal with the situation here. Go now and take some refreshment. I shall write a reply presently that you can take back with you when you set out again this afternoon."

"Very well, lord," the man said, bowed and left the tent.

Tarannon watched him for a moment, then turned his attention to the letter. He broke the seal and unfolded the parchment. From the elaborate handwriting he could tell that Carandil had indeed written the letter himself. His brother had always had a faible for all things rich and wealthy and intricately ornamented. But what Carandil had put down in his stylish script was much less enjoyable. Tarannon's face darkened ever more as his eyes skipped over the lines. It was only a short letter, but nevertheless rather disturbing. When he had finished he rose, and started to pace

the tent restlessly, his hands folded behind his back, deep in thought. On the table the letter still lay unfolded:

Linhir, Viressë 11th, TA 3012

Dear Tarannon,

*I do not know if this will interest you –
I take it you are still very busy with the Corsairs –
but I thought that you should know that some days ago
your wife has, more or less secretly, left Linhir. My
informants have told me that she rode with few guards
and only one servant, and at first we all thought that
she had only ridden out for a day or two as she is wont
to do. But when she had not returned after three days,
I sent some people to investigate. They confirmed that
she had taken the northward road. I am not sure, but
I believe that she went to Minas Tirith.*

*Now, what business could she have there, I wonder.
Gone to visit her special friend the Steward? Or gone
for good? I do not wish to meddle in your personal
affairs, but has there been any major quarrel between
you of late that could have caused her departure?*

*I will not deny that I do appreciate her absence.
Finally I can deal with the matters of the fief with-
out her annoying interference, but it does trouble me
to think of it that she may be discussion even these
matters with Denethor right now – matters which do not
concern him, him least of all.*

*Anyway, I just wanted to tell you this, and to warn
you that more may come of it. You know her better
than I, and you know that I do not trust her. Perhaps,
when the corsairs leave you any time to do so, you could
send out some spies as well to gather more information.
Perhaps your ingenious counsellour could find out some
more, as he seems to be extremely good at picking up
rumours. Keep me informed should you hear something new
concerning this matter. I shall do so as well.*

Your brother Carandil

Lady_of_Rohan

How was it possible that he could read her thoughts so well, Daewen wondered as Túrin spoke to her. It seemed as though he systematically ran through every thought in her mind; well, almost every thought. She had been idly twirling some blades of grass in her fingers when he began speaking. When he tried to explain why they were so interested in helping her, she glanced at him, making sure his face told the same story as his words. And he truly did seem sympathetic to her. His voice carried a kind note in it, and it didn't appear that he was trying to trap her into anything. But still, it was extraordinary that such an influential group would take and provide for her. She caught his gaze and held it for a while, keeping her own face impassive. Finally, her examination complete, she let her head droop slightly. "You are right," she started quietly, "this is very difficult for me. I don't know where I'm going or what's going to hap-

pen to me once I get there. At least in Minas Tirith I knew how to take care of myself. Out here..." She sighed and waved her hand at the panorama. "Out here I'm helpless. And yes, I am still quite puzzled as to why anyone of your ranking would be interested in a beggar like myself and have noble intentions." Her eyes flitted to the side to catch his reaction, then she continued. "I am willing to take the risk of trusting you," she paused, "as long as I can retreat when I feel it's necessary." She stopped, and chewed on her bottom lip, something suddenly being recalled in her memory. "What all did you hear me tell the captain?" she whispered, her voice trembling somewhat. "Tell me what you heard, all of it."

Khorazir

Túrin looked at her surprisedly, not having expected such a direct question. He swallowed hard and lowered his gaze. "I think I heard more or less everything," he answered quietly at length. "What those boys did to you."

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen closed her eyes and let out a shaky breath. So, she had guessed right. "Please, keep that information to yourself," she implored, "it's not something I'd like everyone to know about."

Khorazir

"Of course," Túrin promised. "I won't mention it to anybody." He was silent for a while, not sure if it was tactful to voice the many questions that were nagging his mind now. At length he took a deep breath and looked at her again. "I understand if you don't want to talk about it, but ... – when did that happen?" he asked softly. "And did you do anything to have those boys convicted? For a crime like that must not go without punishment."

Khorazir

The southern coast of Lebennin

Tarannon was troubled. His brother's letter had unsettled him more than Carandil knew. As he paced his tent, now and again casting a dark glance at the ill-boding piece of parchment on the table, he asked himself what could have caused Lindórië to leave Linhir so secretly. What were her plans? Did she indeed seek out the Steward? Tarannon knew that she and Denethor were friends – if the Steward was indeed able to befriend anyone –, and this fact had always troubled him. Long now had he suspected that she had been forwarding confidential information about the goings on in Lebennin and moreover his and his brother's political decisions to the Steward. But he had not been able to prove it, which was no wonder, he thought, considering how little he had seen his wife of late.

Generally he did not mourn the fact that they were more or less going separate ways now. Their marriage had been a forced one, to end the long, bloody feud between two noble families, and there had never been great love or even friendship between them. In fact Tarannon had never expected to marry for love. But Lindórië, although rather pretty and equipped with a respectable dowry had always been too clever, ambitious and independent for his taste. Then there were her close ties to the House of Dol Amroth and the Stewards. He had never really trusted her. And when, after a few years of marriage, they had found out that she would not be able to bear him an heir, his attitude towards her had – rightly so, in his opinion – cooled even more. I felt that he had been tricked into this union, which, although he was the elder of his father's sons, would inadvertently lead to his brother's descendants taking over the rule in Lebennin (for Carandil had children) when he was no more. Already Carandil ruled half the fief.

Unless, of course, Tarannon would marry anew. But he could not get rid of his present wife so easily. Braking the mar-

riage would mean braking the peace, and reviving the old enmity was the least thing he was interested in. Especially now, when he had problems enough with the corsairs.

But still the question remained how to deal with Lindórië – if she had indeed ridden to Minas Tirith to consult with Denethor. For quite a while now Tarannon had had people watching her and her doings. His trusted advisor Grendenoth was in charge of those, as he was in charge of many other things in Lebennin. Tarannon wondered where his counsellour was now, and what had delayed him. He should have returned from his errand to Falastur of Pelargir some time ago, and Tarannon yearned to inform him about the latest developments and receive his advice. Usually he could rely on Grendel to find a solution to even the most complicated problem. The man, strange and sometimes a little scary though he was, seemed to have a special gift for dealing with people, and for bending even the most unfortunate situation to his and his master's advantage.

While returning to the table and getting out some parchment, ink and a quill to write a reply to Carandil, Tarannon hoped that Grendenoth would indeed be returning soon – perhaps even with tidings of Lindórië and her ominous and disquieting doings.

Lady_of_Rohan

For a few seconds, Daewen stared at him, dumbfounded. She glanced away, then turned back to him with the same astonished expression. “Who could I have told? The guards? They would have sooner arrested than helped me.” She shook her head. “It happened a year ago, arround midsummer. I had mistaken an alley that had no exit for one that did, and to be honest, I still have no idea why I was in that district of the city anyway. I'd reached the end of the alley and was turning around to retrace my steps when I realized there were five people blocking my way.”

Her voice dropped into a dull monotone, eyes looked straight ahead yet focused on nothing in particular. “I don't really know how old they were, in the shadows they looked to be anywhere from fifteen to eighteen years of age. Before I knew what was happening, two of them had pinned me to the wall. I tried struggling, and almost received a broken arm for my efforts. I overheard some of their lewd comments and realized what was happening. I tried screaming, but a hand slammed down on my mouth before I could do anything.” She went silent for several minutes, her face now buried in her arms crossed upon her knees. When she looked up again, a few tears could be seen on her cheeks, the ones in her voice more obvious.

“When they were finished with their ‘fun’, as they called it, one decided that I needed a beating too. I couldn't even stand once they were finished with their original business, much less try and defend myself. So I just collapsed and hoped death would take me soon. I remember several hard blows from hands and feet, but I quickly went unconscious once they started. The next time I opened my eyes, I was in a little nook that I didn't recognize. I couldn't move, could hardly breath, and when I looked in a shattered piece of a mirror, I didn't even recognize my face. I'd been unconscious, sleeping, for a day and a half. I was covered in ugly bruises, swollen; I should have been dead.”

She stopped, and, after drawing a long breath, looked at Túrin. “Who could I have told?” she asked softly. “What would I have said? ‘I was in an alley, I'm not sure which one, and five thugs raped and beat me, I don't know what they looked like or anything, but they need to be punished’? Come on, Túrin, I don't think you're naive enough to believe that anyone would really act on what I would be able to tell them.”

Khorazir

“No,” Túrin admitted softly, his voice slightly hoarse, “I guess they wouldn't.” Then he fell silent and hung his head. He had been deeply stricken by her account, and was still shocked. Moreover he had the vague feeling that more lay behind her words, that there was something about the whole matter he should have remarked upon, because it was important. But he could not recall or define it more closely.

He swallowed slightly and raised his eyes to look at her. “You're right, you know. Perhaps I am naive. Where I grew up

those things were hardly talked about, and I was never exposed to such them. I guess I was very lucky with my family. But I'm not completely unaware of what's going on, you know. Even in 'my circles' these things happen, although they are referred to differently. Outwardly the gentry likes to pretend that crime and violence don't exist in their society. They're shocked and appalled about such acts, and condemn the 'lower classes' for their vile behaviour. But on the other hand they praise the great warriors and ruthless politicians above all others, not caring about the crimes they commit to achieve victory or rise to power. And if there's someone in their way, they have him assassinated secretly, without ever being punished for the crime."

He slightly shook his head. "I am so sorry that this happened to you," he said softly but very earnestly. "Please forgive my remark. I didn't really think before I spoke – which, alas, is a common problem with me. I only wish I could help you somehow."

Lady_of_Rohan

"Forgiven," she said quietly. "And there's nothing you could do to help me anyway; what's done is done." Daewen sighed, fidgeting slightly. "This idleness is starting to aggravate me, I've rarely ever stayed in one spot this long. Usually I'm moving around, trying to find things that no one will miss (and sometimes things that will be) once I've raided it. I don't like being sloth like this. Let's just go already."

Khorazir

"I think the others will welcome it, too," Túrin said. Casting a glance over his shoulder, he saw that Lindórië and some others had mounted and seemed ready to leave. Faramir was talking to her still – most likely telling her that she should be careful, for she smiled and nodded. Then reaching out and gently running a hand along his cheek, she turned her horse, and together with her companions rode off at swift speed. Faramir looked after her, then turned to his men one of them apparently having just made some jestful remark about the lady's gesture. Túrin also smiled briefly, before remembering that there was still an argument between them. His smile faded again somewhat, especially when he noticed that Faramir was apparently about to come over to them. Dorlas was with him.

Knowing that trying to avoid Faramir was impossible now, Túrin sighed and rose. "You'll excuse me for a moment?" he said to Daewen, and went to meet Faramir. Dorlas gave Túrin a quick questioning glance, but walked on towards Daewen.

Faramir's pace slowed somewhat when his eyes fell on Túrin approaching him. There was an awkward silence as they looked at each other, then Faramir took a deep breath and said. "I am sorry, Túrin."

Túrin looked confused. "What for? I'm the one who should be, you know. I wasn't exactly friendly."

"And I was not exactly tactful," Faramir replied. "I should have realised that you did not want to be disturbed back then. I guess I can be pretty annoying from time to time."

Túrin shook his head. "No, it was me. I overreacted. There were so many things on my mind after what I'd just heard and ..." He sighed, and shrugged a little helplessly, before looking at his friend. "I'm sorry, Faramir."

Faramir smiled and clapped his shoulder. But then he cast a concerned glance at the girl whom Dorlas was questioning about her condition. "Is she alright?" he asked quietly. "She looks very sad".

Túrin hesitated for a moment. "No," he then said gravely.

Faramir gave him a long glance. "Please don't inquire further," Túrin said swiftly. "I promised her not to disclose to anyone what she told me."

Faramir nodded slightly. "Then do not."

Túrin could see that his words had only increased his friend's curiosity and concern, and he wondered how much he had guessed or deducted already. I tried to keep his face impassive, but he knew that the shock Daewen's account had given him was still written plainly on his features. And Faramir was good at noticing small details and putting them together.

Now he gazed at Túrin and smiled again slightly. "She can count herself fortunate to have a friend in you. Look after her, alright. There may be hard times ahead."

Túrin nodded. "I most definitely shall." Then, to lighten the serious mood that had settled between them, suddenly he grinned. "Cute," he said, and upon Faramir's questioning glance he added: "The lady and you."

Faramir rolled his eyes. "You are worse than the rangers, you know that? By the way, what about you and Visilya? Got your little problem sorted out?"

Túrin cast a glance at Visilya sitting nearby. "Well, sort of. There's certainly been some improvement," he added confidently.

Faramir smiled. "Excellent."

gladrieltook

Visilya mounted up silently. She, of course, had heard Daewen talking to Turin. Her heart was now laden with sorrow and worry. She swore she'd be half crazy before this venture was up.

Galhadrim

Southern Coast of Lebennin

The carriage arrived with weary horses and riders. Grendelenoth had not allowed a stop, even leaving one of his escorts behind when his mount came up lame. They pushed hard and fast through the countryside to arrive at Tarannon's encampment. When the carriage stopped at last, the driver vowed never to volunteer for duty with the counselor ever again.

Dressed in midnight blue robes with silver embroidery, Grendelenoth stepped out and nodded at the guards near the command tent. His garments were restricted by a broad leather belt and shoulder straps that gave his appearance a more militaristic look; one that he always wore when in Tarannon's presence. The counselor walked with quick purpose straight into the tent and found Tarannon dismissing his General Staff after a strategy meeting.

None of the staff seemed to mind leaving. None of them made contact with Grendelenoth's coal black eyes. He waited as they filed past him, standing just close enough to the entrance to make them adjust and step around him as they left.

Tarannon beamed a clearly relieved smile. "Grendel." He stepped up and shook his counselor's hand, who returned the gesture with a humble bow.

"My lord, it is good to return."

"It is good to have you at my side again. We have been searching the coast since you left and have found nothing."

"That just means there are fewer place for them to be hiding now. Trust you staff and your scouts, they'll lead you to

victory again.”

Tarannon gestured over to a side table with some food and ale on it. “Join me, tell me of Pelargir. How did the discussion with Falastur proceed?”

They sat. Tarannon began to eat but the other did not. “He has seen the wisdom and necessity of your continued campaign against the Corsairs. He agrees that his security depends on your success and has contributed a handsome sum which is now being locked into your treasury chests here in the encampment.”

Tarannon nodded at the news. “Well done, well done. We’ll need that to help appease the locals. They’re starting to grumble about our prolonged presence here. I did not think Falastur would ever agree to aid us.”

Grendelnoth made a dissembling gesture and looked away. “It was simply a matter of putting it in terms he could understand. Of course, in matters such as this there should be no open discussion between you two, even in private. Better to keep score in you mind and remember which way the favors need to go.”

Tarannon snorted and swallowed a drink of ale. “That’s why I have you my friend.” He set his glass down and changed the subject. “Something else has come upon me. I received a message from my brother, my wife has left the city and most likely made her way to Minas Tirith. I fear she could be off on some mission of her own with the Steward, with her own purpose. What can you tell me of this?”

Grendelnoth’s expression did not change at the news. “I had heard she left Linhir but assumed it was on one of her simple journeys. Can we be assured she has gone to Minas Tirith?”

Tarannon shrugged. “My brother has reason to believe so.”

“My lord, I think your brother meddles too much in your private affairs. Does it truly concern him that Lindorie may be speaking with the Steward? She can make no policy for Lebennin and does not speak for us. She knows no secrets to reveal. Denethor is a wise and crafty leader, he would not be overly impressed with the wife of one of the nobles of Gondor.”

“Yes, but there are ties there from the past.”

Grendelnoth sat back in his chair with a relaxed look. “Let the past bury itself. For now our course does not involve the Steward. As a matter of fact, the more phantom intrigues he chases the better. You will crush the Corsair incursions and destroy any settlements they may have begun. Your stature will grow amongst the people and the nobility.” The counselor looked directly into his liege’s eyes. “And if the Steward shows weakness at the growing threats around us then you will have to take stonger measures to assure Gondor’s security.”

Tarannon sat quietly for a moment. “Yes, I suppose the greater security of the land is most important.” He had never heard his advisor speak so directly about the path before them. It was usually himself who was constantly reminded that a tent wall stopped no sound. But the guards outside were most likely not paying any attention and they effectively kept everyone else in the camp away from the command center. He stood and stretched, clearing his mind. “Can you find out about my wife then, what her intentions are?”

“Yes, my liege. It will take some time due to the distances involved but I can make inquiries. I would not let it bother you too much. I’ll have messages to post back to Linhir ready soon. Next I believe it would be best if I made the trip to Dol Amroth in order to gather Imrahil’s support. I’ll need a new carriage team, though, this one is substandard.”

Tarannon shook his head in general disbelief. “I can’t see why you’re even bothering with Dol Amroth. The Prince will never let us get one step up on him.”

“Non-action may be the best we can hope for but I’ll see what can be accomplished. Just leave it to me.”

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen looked up to see Dorlas walking toward her. She saw that Túrin was talking with the steward's son rather earnestly. She briefly wondered what he was saying, but her thoughts were interrupted by Dorlas's question of how she was feeling. "I'm sore and a little stiff, but that's to be expected." The ranger nodded and, after examining the large welt on her head and checking the bandages on her shoulder, told her that she could do some riding at a gentle speed, if she felt ready for it. "I guess I am," the girl said quietly, getting to her feet and brushing some of the grass off her clothes. She wasn't too thrilled about getting on a horse again. With a sigh, she followed Dorlas to where Faramir and Túrin stood.

Khorazir

"She says she's fit to ride," Dorlas informed Faramir, nodding towards Daewen who had been following him. "But we must ride very slowly. The jolting won't be good at all for her head, even at a slow pace."

Faramir nodded. "We shall take our time," he said. Then he turned and signed to the rangers to start gathering their stuff together and saddling the horses.

On their way to the steeds, he cast another glance at the sky. Still there was no wind, but the haze in the south had increased, and the air seemed muggier than before.

Dorlas had followed his gaze. "Like I said, I believe we're going to have rain tonight. Perhaps even a thunderstorm. After all, it's Viressë."

"Well, then we must hope that Lindórië is going to be successful. None of us will appreciate spending a stormy night in a wet tent, I reckon," Faramir said.

"Hah," Túrin fell in, grinning, "and that from a ranger! You're getting soft, my friend."

Dorlas grinned as well. "I could tell you stories, Túrin," he said with a wink. "But this is what you get when you have some noble as captain."

Faramir raised an eyebrow at this. "Careful, Dorlas."

"Oh, forgive me, my lord," he said with a mock bow.

"Ill-disciplined rabble," Faramir muttered, but then grinned as well.

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen ignored the rangers' comments for the most part, watching what was going on with alert eyes. She was surprised at how quickly and efficiently the other rangers stuck the camp and got things back in their proper places. She swallowed hard, however, when she saw one ranger leading her horse in her direction. For several moments she wondered how she would get back on. It was tricky enough (in her opinion) to mount with two good arms, and now with one resting in a sling, the task seemed quite formidable. And she didn't trust the horse this time, not like she had beforehand. Maybe I could get away with walking for a while, she thought for a moment, before admitting that the idea was absurd. Taking the reins from the ranger, she stepped back a couple paces until she was an arm's length away from the animal.

Khorazir

“Don’t be afraid,” Túrin said, coming up from behind her. “Damrod is going to hold the horse while I’ll help you mount it – if you don’t object.”

Damrod stepped to the horses’ head and took hold of the reins near the bit. With the other hand he stroked the mare’s head. But the horse seemed quite calm, rubbing her head at the rangers tunic and snorting gently.

“Ready, Daewen?” Túrin asked. “Then I’ll lift you up.”

Lady_of_Rohan

“Alright,” Daewen sighed, not looking forward to riding again.

Khorazir

Túrin put his hands to her sides and lifted her into the saddle, being quite surprised at her light weight. “There you are,” he said when she had found a more or less comfortable seat, and after he had helped her feet into the stirrups. “Just hold on to the saddle now. One of us will take the reins and lead your horse.”

Damrod held the mare while Túrin mounted his own horse, then gave the reins to him. Most of the others had mounted as well, and soon the company was ready to depart. They returned to the road, and set out at a gentle pace. Faramir rode up to Daewen and Túrin. “If you think that we ride too fast, or the jolting troubles you too much, please say so, Daewen,” he said.

Lady_of_Rohan

Gripping the small pomel with her good hand, Daewen nodded. “I will,” she said weakly, already beginning to feel miserable. And this was only a few steps into the journey. She groaned inwardly. Hopefully things would get better as they went along. She glanced over at Túrin, who was picking out the smoothest patches of road for her horse to walk on (which was a daunting task, considering that heavy spring rains this year had left the road soft and inviting to wagon wheel-ruts). It was greatly appreciated. With a sigh, she leaned back in the saddle as much as she dared and tried not to think too much on how long they would be riding this afternoon.

Khorazir

Faramir watched Daewen concernedly for a while, but when he was convinced that Túrin was doing his best to make the journey as smooth as possible for the girl, he joined Andanor at the head of the company. The rangers were in excellent mood – except those who had lost at cards. At length Falborn, who had a good voice, started a merry song, and most of the others fell in.

“Apparently it does them good to be away from their duties in Ithilien for a while,” Faramir said thoughtfully, casting a glance back at the singers. The last months had been hard work, as the enemy had strengthened his grip upon Gondor’s eastern province, and the numbers of orcs and other fell creatures had greatly increased over the winter.

Lady_of_Rohan

They rode for a long while, until finally Daewen had to ask for a stop. Her head ached so badly that a few tears sprang in her eyes. Her shoulder also pained her greatly from the jolty steps of the horse. "Please, Túrin," she said quietly, "we must stop... I don't know how much longer I can last right now." She swayed slightly in the saddle, adding emphasis to her words.

Khorazir

Túrin called ahead to Faramir who immediately halted the company and signed to Dorlas to accompany him back to the girl. Túrin had dismounted and helped Daewen off her steed. Realising that she was hardly able to stand, he took her up again and carried her underneath the nearest tree.

They had just entered a patch of woodland, oaks and beeches for the most part that were sprouting fresh young leaves. The leafy ground was covered with herbs of various sorts, woodruff and wild garlic amongst them, and a plant with tiny white flowers. Beams of the late afternoon sun were falling through the light-green leaves of the trees, but they were weak. The clouds had almost reached them, and the wind stirring the branches overhead had increased in the last half hour.

Seeing that Daewen's condition seemed to have worsened, Faramir had taken his cloak with him and spread it on the ground so that Túrin could lay down the girl. Dorlas knelt at her side again, watching her with a troubled expression. "It's the head, isn't it?" he asked concernedly. "I feared it was so," he added when she nodded faintly. "Apparently you're suffering from a light concussion. You should have asked for a pause much sooner. Are you feeling sick?"

EdaintheRanger

Andanor was a little annoyed at having to stop the party because of the rag-a-muffin girl. His countenance was stern, and his eyes flashed grey. Then turning away from the others as not to reveal his unprofessional anger, he steadied himself and took it out on the ranger's.

"Come on lads, keep it together, this isn't a holiday trip to the beach!"

He sympathised with Faramir wanting to rest the men a little, but if that was at the expense of their awareness and alertness, then that could compromise their lives and Andanor didn't want that.

Seeing that Faramir was tending to the girl, Andanor set pickets and checked that everything was in order. Then he sighed, ran his hand through his tusled hair and went to seek council.

Lady_of_Rohan

"Not really," Daewen answered weakly. "Can I have some water, though?" For some reason, she never thought to drink when she had the chance, only realizing her thirst once the situation wouldn't allow her to drink. "What's a concussion?" she asked while someone went to fetch a waterbottle. "Is that why my head hurts so much?" A resounding thump seemed to have made its home just above and behind her left ear. For a while it had attacked with accurate sharpness, but now it was just a steady beat of pain. "What's going to happen to me?" she asked softly as an overpowering urge to fall asleep came over her.

Khorazir

“You should rest for a short while,” Faramir said, having overheard Daewen’s words. “But I fear we cannot tarry here long. It looks like ‘tis going to rain soon.”

Then, seeing that Túrin was looking after the girl and helping her to drink some water, he took Dorlas and Andanor aside to discuss their further proceedings. “Is she really fit to ride?” Faramir asked Dorlas. “‘tis still about two leagues to the nearest settlement, where hopefully Lindórië will have found some accomodation for us.”

Dorlas looked concerned. “If it can’t be helped, she must ride. But it’s not advisable. On the other hand she shouldn’t spend the night outside, not in this weather. She needs a bed.”

Faramir thought for a moment. “Build a stretcher, then. Get some stout branches and bind them together, then cover them with cloaks. See to it that we can tie it between two horses. This should make the rest of the journey bearable for her.”

Dorlas nodded, and signing to some of the others, they set to work. Faramir remained behind with Andanor. “When the whole company is assembled again tonight, and we can better judge how the girl’s condition is going to develop, we must discuss how to proceed. Although time is not that pressing, we cannot afford to tarry too long on the road. At least we should reach Pelargir rather soon, so that I can get rid of the letter, and start gathering information about our “business” in town. If Daewen does not feel well enough, she should stay behind with Visilya and perhaps Túrin, and follow when she has recovered.”

Casting a troubled glance at the small group gathered about the girl, he sighed slightly and ran a hand through his hair. “Let us hope the journey is not going to continue the way it has begun.” As on cue, a faint, distant rumble announced that they would be getting more than rain this night.

EdaintheRanger

Andanor nodded in assent to Faramir’s words. Having seen the pain and fatigue in Daewen face softened his heart a little. He wasn’t a complete ogre! Without delay he had the ranger’s construct a stretcher, while the rest of them kept picquet and indulged the Lieutenant in some light drill.

Realising that he knew little of what Alessya was upto Andanor enquired after her and asked her opinion of the Rangers, ensuring that the troops were just in earshot.

asaris

At about the same time, Curufë and Lindorië arrived at a small hostel along the road they had been traveling. It was a small place, and somewhat run down, but there looked to be few horses in the stables, so the two went inside to check it out.

Khorazir

The commonroom was nearly empty when Curufë and Lindórië entered – the two rangers who had accompanied them had remained outside with the horses. Only in one corner there sat three people, two men and a woman, merchants or else travellers by their looks, who were immersed in a lively conversation. Lindórië picked up some complaints about the rising taxes upon the roads, and the outrageously high tolls at the new bridge that spanned the river Erui some leagues further down the road.

The three people took little notice of the Noldo and her, although one of the men gave the Elf a surprised look, and then muttered something to his companions. Then a door on the other side of the room was opened, and in shuffled a stout woman with flaming red hair carrying two buckets of water. She held in when she noticed the newcomers, quickly put down the buckets, and wiping her hand on her apron approached them. She, too, could not hide her surprise when realising that one of them was an Elf, and moreover she seemed greatly startled by Curufë's bright armour. She curtsied a little shyly before them.

"Welcome to the 'Three Beeches'," she said. "What can I do for you, my lord, lady?"

"We belong to a group of travellers that will reach this village in a short while," Lindórië said, "and we rode ahead to inquire about accomodation."

"How many people would you need beds for?" the landlady asked, still casting curious glances at Curufë.

"Thirty-one," Lindórië answered. "But if there are less available, this may do as well. One member of our group has met with an accident on the road. For her we need a bed indeed. We others only need a roof over our heads, since the weather does not look too nice."

"Oh yes, I bet it's going to rain tonight. I feel it in my bones," the landlady said. "I'm afraid I only have about twenty beds. Those gents over there haven't decided yet if they're going to stay for the night. But if you decide to stay, I'll go and tell them that we're completely booked. May I inquire whence you come and whither your journey leads?"

"We come from Minas Tirith and are on our way to Pelargir."

"Ah, I see. But you're no merchants, I take it?"

"Nay, no merchants."

It was plain to see that the landlady's curiosity had been kindled, and that she wanted to find out more about this strange company, but business came first. "Well, as I said, I have about twenty beds," she repeated, putting off the many questions urging to be asked. "Perhaps I can organise a few more. But the rest of your company will have to spend the night in the stables, I'm afraid. I'm really sorry, seeing that you're of the gentry and all ..."

Lindórië smiled. "I am sure this will not be a problem." Then turning to Curufë, she asked quietly: "Do you think we should stay here? It seems good enough to me, and I for one would not mind sleeping in the hay, as long as it is dry. This is the nearest settlement with an inn they are going to reach. Considering the poor girl's condition, she should not be forced to journey on much longer."

Lady_of_Rohan

"They want to put me in that?" Daewen said to no one in particular as she eyed the makeshift stretcher being fitted between her horse and another. It was not a thrilling idea. She hardly trusted sitting on a horse, but having absolutely nothing under her was not comforting either. With a sigh, she lay back down (having propped herself up on one elbow for a few moments) and shut her eyes. The air had cooled, she noticed, and a breeze was beginning to kick up. Someone nearby said it looked like rain was moving in. Túrin asked if she wanted more water. She answered with a slight shake of her head. She wanted to be left alone, and was starting to get cranky and irritated.

A few minutes later, she heard someone talking with Túrin, but made no effort to see who it was. It sounded like Dorlas, but she wasn't sure. Then it was quiet for a little while, and she slipped into a light doze. She woke and whimpered softly when she felt someone lift and carry her. Tensing, she felt herself being laid in the stretcher. Knowing that the only thing below her was empty air did nothing to ease her fears. Someone (she thought it was Visilya) stroked her hair and murmured she should relax, which was a difficult order to follow. Another person was tightening the stretcher's straps near her head, adjusting for the added weight. She was offered water again, and this time she accepted a few swallows. A light cloak was wrapped around her, and soon after she heard the order to mount up. Saddles creaked and

horses snorted as the riders returned to their places.

They started again at the same slow pace. The stretcher swayed with the movements of the horses, something that terrified the girl for many minutes. She could just imagine the knots coming loose, sending her crashing to the ground again. After a long while, the swaying lulled her to sleep.

She woke a long while later. The sky had turned a dark grey, and a light drizzle was beginning to fall when she awoke. At first she had no idea where she was, and that almost sent her into a panic until her memory came back. She realized that another cloak had been wrapped around her, keeping her as dry and warm as possible. The breeze had picked up considerably and was now a cold wind. Her hand went to pull back part of the cloak that shielded her face. "Where are we?" she asked, hoping someone was near enough to answer.

Khorazir

"We're out of the forest," Túrin, who had been walking beside the stretcher leading his horse by the reins, answered. He wore no cloak as he had just wrapped it around Daewen, and his brown hair looked almost grey because it was netted with many fine drops of rain. "Faramir says that now only these fields and orchards are to be crossed, and another small patch of woodland down yonder, and after that we're going to reach a village where there should be an inn we can spend the night at. Should take us another hour or perhaps two to reach it." He cast a dark glance at the greyish sky and the drizzle of rain. "Curse the weather," he muttered.

Lady_of_Rohan

"Another hour," the girl whispered, drawing back into her cocoon as another gust of wind whipped up. Despite the two cloaks, she could still feel a draft of cold, wet air reach her skin. She shifted slightly, trying to block the intrusive draft. That done, she lay still, coughing occasionally. A while later, a long peal of thunder rolled across the sky. The rain started to fall a bit heavier, definite droplets forming now. As another low rumble of thunder started, she could hear one of the horses snort and Túrin speaking to it softly. Another hour, she thought, drifting off into another light sleep.

asaris

Curufë nodded. "It looks passable enough – I've certainly stayed in worse. And I am sure that Daewen will appreciate it. Do you think one of us should ride back and let Faramir know we've found a place?"

Lindorië replied, "That would not be a bad idea. Why don't you ride back, and I will make sure it goes well here setting up the rooms. I shall have food waiting for you guys when you get here!"

Curufë smiled, and left the common area to remount his horse and rejoin with the others.

Khorazir

As Curufë rode off to inform the others, Lindórië went with the landlady to inspect the rooms. Although rather small and plain, they were clean, and would indeed make a passable refuge for the night. For those as were no beds available, the landlady organised spare blankets and pillows, so that they could either sleep on the banks and tables in the common room, or else in the hay in the stables.

"I do not think that they are going to complain," Lindórië said, casting a glance out of one of the small windows as a

dull rumble announced that the thunderstorm had almost reached them, and a heavy gust of wind stirred the branches of the giant blood-beeches in front of the inn. "Most of them are rangers, and used to spending their nights in the open."

"Well, they wouldn't enjoy this tonight," the landlady said with a smile, before excusing herself. "I'm sure the gents will be hungry," she said, and bustled off to the kitchen.

Lindórië returned to the common room, and sat down at a table next to a window. The two rangers had come in as well, and joined her – a little shyly – when she invited them over to her. The three merchants were still there.

Apparently the bad weather had persuaded them to spend the night at the inn as well. Moreover the talk about a larger company seemed to have roused their curiosity, judging by the glances they now and again cast at the lady and her companions.

+++

As the thunderstorm drew closer and wind and rain intensified, Faramir rode back along the line of rangers until he had reached Túrin and the stretcher. He, too, wore neither cloak (it had been used in the stretcher's construction) nor hood. The wind had woven petals of apple-blossom into his wet hair. His horse was fidgeting and snorting nervously. Apparently it did not appreciate the swirls of white flowers fluttering about them like snow, now that they were passing an alley of apple-trees.

Seeing that Daewen seemed to be asleep, Faramir rode close to Túrin and bent down in the saddle to talk to him without having to raise his voice too much. "How is she?" he asked.

Túrin gave the sleeping girl a glance. "She needs a bed. How far to the village?"

"About five miles, if my reckoning is correct. We should have some more shelter from wind and rain once we have reached the forest down yonder."

"Yeah, but sheltering in a forest during a thunderstorm doesn't seem like a good idea to me," Túrin said, casting a doubtful glance at the dark patch of firs dotted with light-green deciduous trees into which the road descended about half a mile away.

"It lies in a hollow, and lightning always strikes at the highest point," Faramir said. "And we do not have much of a choice anyway. If we want to reach the village, there is no way around the forest now."

With that he urged on his horse and returned to the head of the company, hoping that Lindórië and Curufë had been successful in their search.

gladrieltook

Visilya had been lingering on the edge of the company, but now she sat besides Daewen, gazing at the girl thoughtfully.

Lady_of_Rohan

Shortly thereafter, Daewen woke long enough to have a coughing fit and realize that a cold drip was somehow penetrating the thick cloaks. She shivered, and tried to maneuver herself away from the drip as best possible. This is better than Minas Tirith, alright, she thought bitterly. At least in the city she could have retired to one of her snug nooks where it was dry. Or (if she got lucky) she could have perhaps talked an innkeeper into letting her sweep a floor or two until the storms subsided. But this? This was horrible. With another cough, she shifted her weight slightly and tried to

find a way to make the next hour or so pass by as quickly as possible.

Khorazir

As Faramir had proposed the tall trees in the forest provided some shelter from wind and rain, although not much. The stormwind tore at the firs' dark branches and plucked soft young leaves from beech and ash. All about the riders the trees creaked and moaned. The horses were uneasy and hard to govern. Thunder and lightning followed each other swiftly now, indicating that the thunderstorm was right above the travellers, who were riding in a tight cluster now, trying to battle the evil weather as best they could.

"'tis not far anymore," Faramir called back reassuringly over the bowed heads of the rangers, but his voice was all but lost in the furious storm.

As they rounded a corner they suddenly faced a strange spectacle. Their way was blocked by about ten carts heavily laden with chests and barrels. Men were jumping hastily off these carts, trying to find cover behind or between them. For out of the dark forest on either side of the road arrows came whirring in their direction. And almost every arrow hit its target. The men who looked like either merchants or guards fell like flies.

A tall gaunt man in black leather garments and a notched sword in his hand came running towards them in panic. He stopped short when he saw that his escape route was blocked, then was shot in the back before he could say something.

The arrows kept flying out of the forest but they did not hit anywhere near Faramir and his companions.

+++

Back at the inn the three merchants had finally yielded to curiosity, and asked if Lindórië and the rangers would mind their company, which of course they did not. Soon they were engaged in a lively conversation about the goings on in Lebennin and Pelargir, about which the merchants were surprisingly well informed. "One picks up a thing or two along the road," one of them kept saying. The three were rather surprised when Lindórië revealed to them her identity, but refrained from inquiring further as to the reason for her staying here, and in so strange a company, although certainly they were tempted to do so.

"But there's queer folk about a lot lately," one of the merchants said, then catching Lindórië's glance he blushed and added hastily: "No offence meant, my lady."

"None taken," she said with a smile. "But pray tell me what you mean by 'queer folk'?"

"Werl, there's them robbers," the woman fell in. "Waylayed us twice last month. Never found much of worth, 'cause we're smart and hide our valuables. But that doesn't keep them from tryin' again and again."

"Yeah," the other merchant said, "and then there's them other traders. Too much bad blood and competition nowadays, I daresay. Pretend as if the road belonged to them alone, they do. Take those guys as overtook us only a short while ago, before we stopped here. Greater company, with about ten carts and guards and all. Didn't even greet us when they passed us by. That's neither courteous nor proper behaviour for people o' the same trade, that is."

The other two nodded darkly. "In the olden days," the woman explained, "we'd have joined our carts to build one caravan, as that's the best defence against highway robbers. But they wouldn't have anything to do with us. And all for the best, I'd say in recollection. Didn't look all that trustworthy on second glance. Outlandish, like. Some of them guards they had were armed with nasty swords and stuff, but they tried to hide that fact from us, yeh see. Nah, we're better off without the likes o' them, I daresay. Did yeh meet them, by the way? Must have come yer direction."

Lindórië shook her head. "They must have left the road, or else we would surely have seen them."

"I remember having seen fresh imprints of cartwheels when we left the small forest," a ranger said. "Perhaps they indeed left the road to seek refuge between the trees when the weather worsened."

"But why not stay here?" Lindórië asked thoughtfully. "The inn must have been almost empty at this time. And who would prefer a wet and wind-swept forest to this place?"

"Only those that want to avoid unbidden company," the other ranger said ominously.

The three merchants exchanged glances but then shrugged. "As I said, there's queer folk about," one summed up their contemplations.

gladrieltook

Visilya instinctively drew her sword and looked apprehensively from the stranger to Faramir, and back to the stranger. "What do you think, Faramir, my friend?" she said in a low voice, so the man could not hear her.

EdaintheRanger

Andanor rode up and down the line bidding the ranger to dismount and fan out into cover, with five other rangers leading the horses away from the forest with as much speed as they able ere they fall into bowshot. He then looked to the tree line and cursed the density of the foliage that prevented he from getting a clear view even here up on horseback.

He quickly tried to make sense of the situation as a mistake could cost the precious lives of the party and his men. The shooting had been wickedly accurate, and the guards hadn't a chance. "Who in the name of Isildur, can shoot like that?" He mused aloud. "Bandits, Uruk, another company of men?"

By now the rangers were in an open skirmish order, fanned out in a defensive position. Why did the aggressors wait? Andanor rode to Faramir's side to cover him from potential danger.

Khorazir

The arrows continued to fly out of the forest on either side of the road but they had become less because most of the attacked had found shelter between their carts by now.

Faramir had been thinking along the same lines as his lieutenant. "Túrin, Visilya, and you" – he pointed at two men – "stay with the girl," he called. Then signing to Mablung and Damrod he ordered them to take six men each and make their way into the forest to try and catch some of the attackers, or at least cut off their retreat. "No one is to be slain, if it can be helped," he commanded. Turning to Andanor again, he said: "Something is not right here. Whoever the attackers are, they know their business very well. This is no unorganised attack from common bandits. There is military training behind it. And look at the arrows" – he pointed at the feathered shaft sticking in the dead man's back. "They are of excellent workmanship. Not the crude things used by bandits. And they are no orcish darts either – indeed if orcs were here, less than a day's ride from the City, I would be worried indeed. And why do they not attack us as well? We are easily recognisable as rangers." He shook his head. "Take another six men, Andanor, and see if you can capture some of the attackers. Or try and find their steeds and set them loose so that they cannot ride off. The rest of us shall have a look at the attacked, and aid them if it seems fair to do so." With that he leapt off his horse as well, and went to have a closer look at the slain man.

Bardhwyn

The sight of the approaching company of men on horseback caused Gareth to falter. Up till that point Maradir's plan had worked flawlessly and they had the upper hand over these travelling 'merchants' who did not expect their ambush - not on a night like this.

Gareth took his aim off his target.. a retreating man... and quickly counted these men who seemed to come out of nowhere. 'The storm,' he thought, 'their approach was masked by the storm. What fell luck...'

From his position deep in the wood he retrained his arrow on the escaping man and let it loose. He watched as the arrow sunk squarely in the man's back and he fell in front of the foremost of the travellers. Gareth then turned, saw one of his squad positioned not far away behind a large pine and motioned the man to him.

"Find Maradir. I count at least 18, maybe more.", Gareth whispered. The two men's attention returned to the road as a number of the company dismounted and with well trained precision broke into two flanks and fanned out into the wood. Gareth quickly recognized who they were.

".. and tell him they're Rangers...Go!"

Canamarth

In the confusion Maradir and the men around him had not noticed the new arrivals as they were positioned further South along the road, thus cutting off the escape route of any of the merchants in that direction. One of the men he had positioned further to the North arrived and told him that a company of rangers was approaching along the road. There was only one thing he could do.

"Retreat!" he shouted in Sindarin.

Several shadows flitted deeper into the forest and the fall of arrows stopped.

Khorazir

Faramir approached the still body of the man cautiously, but soon realised that caution was not needed anymore. The arrow had pierced his heart from behind, and killed him instantly. Kneeling at his side, Faramir gingerly turned him about. The man was clad in plain garments of black leather, and only scantily armed. He did indeed look like one of the guards merchants would hire to accompany their carts and protect their cargo from robbers. But when Faramir bent down for a closer look at the man's features (which were hard to make out because of the dim light), he thought that his skin had a tanned hue to it, unusual in spring unless one hailed from the Harad. Also he wore golden rings in his ears, like it was fashion amongst the Southrons. True, there were Southron merchants in Gondor, but they were few, and their numbers decreased yearly as war threatened ever more in the Harad.

When swiftly he searched the man's garments, Faramir found a small charm made of what looked like lion's claws tied around his neck. He remembered having seen this token before on Southron mercenaries his rangers had waylaid in Ithilien.

He leapt to his feet again when suddenly a cry from the forest commanded retreat (in Sindarin, as Faramir remarked, and which supported his suspicion that the ambushers were indeed Gondorian troops), and the hail of arrows subsided. Confused but obviously relieved the surviving merchants slowly rose out of their shelter for a better look - and beheld Faramir and the few rangers who were still about him. There was a moment of uncertainty, but then the 'merchants' seemed to have made up their minds. Because Andanor had seen to it that most of the rangers' horses were out of sight, and moreover the merchants had not heeded the company's arrival, having been more than busy with trying to survive the deadly hail of arrows from the forest, they had to assume that Faramir was alone with his few guards.

And they thought that here was a foe they were able to deal with.

Faramir perceived their plan well enough when suddenly the few bows they had turned towards him, and a group of men, numbering around a dozen, advanced with drawn swords. Swiftly calculating the risk (the 'merchants' only had small bows, their range no match for the rangers' longbows), he signed to his men to take aim. Taking off his gauntlet and putting two fingers to his mouth, he whistled shrilly – a signal to Andanor to forgo the chase and return to him. Then at a signal from a small thin man who seemed to be the merchants' leader, their archers loosed their missiles. As expected, their range did not suffice by a few yards, and thus they did not do any damage.

"Why on earth should they shoot at us, captain?" one of the rangers asked while taking careful aim at one of the bowmen. "We're on their side."

"Are we, now?" Faramir mused. "I wonder. But when you shoot, do not aim for killing. I want them alive, as many as possible. I am sure they have interesting tales to tell."

gladrieltook

Visilya took hold of Daewen's horses reins and led the animal back, keeping her sword drawn, and her legs ready to spur her horse into action if the need were to arise.

Canamarth

Maradir and his men reconvened at the appointed meeting point some way South of where they had attacked and further into the forest.

"But there were still some of them alive," one of his company said.

"Don't you think the rangers can deal with them?"

The man lowered his gaze. "But we were supposed to get them all, you said."

"I know. But I'm also supposed to bring you all back alive and, what is most important, to make sure noone knows of our presence here."

He turned to have a look at his companions. "We're only elven. Who's missing?" It was difficult to tell because all of them were totally dressed in black and wore masks which only left their eyes free.

"Gareth?"

No answer came.

Khorazir

Túrin had remained at Daewen's side, and together with Visilya he had withdrawn behind the bend of the road. Some of the rangers had led their companions' horses past them, but then they had returned to Faramir. Now only two rangers remained with Visilya, Túrin and the stretcher with Daewen, and Túrin could see that they were tense and highly alert. The thunderstorm had not diminished, and the wind's moaning in the branches of the trees, the patter of rain and the deafening claps of thunder veiled all sounds of what was going on around the corner. At one point Túrin thought he heard a faint whistle, but what that meant he did not know. He only hoped that Faramir and the others were alright, and that they got the matter sorted out soon.

Seeing that their arrows had not had the desired effect on the rangers, and surmising that Faramir's whistle had been to rally more men to him, the 'merchants' hesitated briefly in their advance. Then, remembering that at the moment they outnumbered the rangers by more than two to one, their courage was roused once more.

"Cursed tarks," their leader hissed while raising his sword and spitting in Faramir's direction. This insult confirmed Faramir's suspicion that the 'merchants' were indeed Southrons, either spies or else mercenaries or pirates, who had donned the guise of traders to advance unmolested into the heart of Gondor.

"Discard your weapons and surrender," Faramir returned calmly. "You are surrounded."

The other took a glance around and then laughed. "By whom? I see only five of you," he sneered.

"That you do not see my men does not mean they are not there. You have experienced what excellent marksmen they are. They are positioned all about you, and at a sign from me they will resume shooting. So drop your weapons, if you want to be spared."

"He's bluffing," one of the Southrons said to his leader in Adûnaic, which Faramir knew sufficiently to understand his words. "And even if he's not, what good will surrender do us? They'd kill us nevertheless, wicked and cruel as they are. So let's attack, and at least die fighting."

The leader contemplated on these words for a moment, then made up his mind. "Kill me those tarks!" he commanded grimly, and with a fierce cry the 'merchants' charged. Their bowmen had left their cover, and advanced as well to shorten the distance so that the rangers would come in range of their bows.

Faramir shook his head when the Southrons decided to attack. "Fools," he muttered, before commanding his men to loose their arrows at them.

Bardhwyn

Gareth watched his comrade merge into the shadows. From the corner of his eye he saw another target emerge from behind an over turned cart on the road and he drew an arrow from his quiver. He notched, took aim.....

A shadow approached and took the shape of a man with sword drawn. Gareth dropped his bow but caught the full force of a hard blow across his face before he could arm himself. His mask shifted on his face, obscuring his vision and he instinctively brought his hands up to correct it. Another blow came, harder again and it sent him reeling and tripping over the wet tree roots. He managed to draw his sword but being so off balance he couldn't parry the blow of the attacker. Within seconds he was disarmed, dazed and had a sword point at his chest.

The call for retreat came.

His eyes met the eyes of his captor. Another man arrived with sword drawn.

"You've caught one, Laren. Well done."

"Andanor! Yes, and he's masked. Strange."

A shrill whistle rang out from the road. Andanor looked in the direction of the sound. "Faramir! He's in need...". He gave a nod to Laren.

Laren sheathed his sword, lifted his bow off his shoulders and began to turn back towards the road.

At hearing that name Gareth stifled a gasp. 'Faramir's men!', he thought, 'Here? Why?' He thought nothing more, however, for the man behind Gareth - Andanor - dealt a heavy blow directly to his head. Gareth sunk into unconsciousness carrying the pain in his head and confusion over what to do.

He had been caught when no one was to know of his company's presence in the area. No one was to know of their very existence.

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen had no conceivable idea of what was happening. She'd fallen asleep again, and had woken only to hear someone talking about bandits and an ambush further ahead. What all was happening, she did not know. She did however realize that someone was leading her horses back the way they had come. When she tried lifting the edge of her cocoon to see better, rain lashed her eyes, forcing her to drop the cloak again. Not that it mattered much, as both the cloaks and herself were soaked with rain. She shivered. Part of her wanted to know what was going on, another part wanted to flee, and a third wanted to simply hide. For a moment she thought she heard Túrin's voice speaking to someone, then a loud thunderclap blotted out any other sound.

The horses had stopped walking and now stood snorting nervously and pawing the ground periodically. Daewen coughed again, a hard, scratchy fit that came from deep within her lungs. When it was over, she whimpered again and tried curling herself up into a tighter ball. Now was one of the rare times in her life when she was truly frightened. She knew she was vulnerable, and this only added to her fright. Her fingers trailed down her side until she came to a small dagger she'd kept with her for many years. It wasn't much, but she would certainly make sure it did damage to at least one person if need be.

Khorazir

When what sounded like a fierce cry came to his ears, Túrin shook the wet hair out of his eyes and finally drew his sword. Looking up to Visilya who was still mounted, and also had a drawn sword in hand, he could see her tenseness. "What's going on there?" he muttered. "This uncertainty is unbearable."

He was tempted to advance around the bend to at least have a look, but then he saw Daewen stir beneath her coverlets, and heard her cough, and decided against leaving. He wished he could tell her that everything was alright, that there was nothing to fear, but in fact he was rather anxious himself. Still, to show her that she was not alone, he gently placed his free hand on her shoulder. Then he jumped slightly in shock when a deafening crack of thunder announced that lightning had struck a tree not far away. "Right," he muttered when he had fairly recovered, "lightning always strikes at the highest point. Tell that to the thunderstorm, Lord Faramir."

+++

Faramir and his few men had also been startled by the mighty flash of lightning and the almost immediate thunder, but not as much as the Southrons, and this fact they had used to their advantage. The rangers had managed to get rid of the other bowmen. Although shooting had been difficult due to the poor lighting conditions and the violent gusts of wind and rain, the four archers had been either shot or at least so wounded that they would present no danger anymore. Only two rangers and Faramir had managed to loose another arrow at the men running towards them, then the Southrons had been too close for archery, and the rangers had been forced to drop the bows. They had hardly had time to draw their swords when their foes had reached them and engaged them in fierce combat. And although the Southrons lacked the rangers' training and discipline, they accounted for this with reckless, desperate ferocity – and their number.

The rangers had closed together in a circle, standing back to back, but it was plain to see that they would not hold out for long. Faramir saw that two of his men received rather serious wounds, but just when it looked that the circle would break at last, arrows came whistling out of the forest. The Southrons, standing in the middle of the road without any cover whatsoever were easy prey. In no time the fight was over.

gladrieltook

Visilya jumped slightly at the sound of the lightning hitting wood. It unnerved her, so she dis mounted, wary of the storm. "We have to get Daewen out of this mess!" She called over the howl of the wind to Turin. "There has to be a fallen tree or something that we can use for shelter!"

Canamarth

"Morus, you follow me. The rest of you retreat to our hideout. We'll see if we can find Gareth. If we're not back by tomorrow morning send a messenger to Minas Tirith."

Maradir and Moras quickly retraced their steps.

Khorazir

Túrin nodded. "But the two horses and the stretcher between them are cumbersome, and the trees are dense," he shouted back. "Still, let us try and get them off the road. Those firs over there" – he pointed at a darker patch amidst the overall gloom of the forest – "look to be a suitable spot. They stand not as close to each other as the other trees" The two rangers who guarded the horses saw what he had in mind, and moved the small herd off the road as well. Soon the five of them were sheltering underneath the swaying and creaking trees, surrounded by a score of wet horses snorting and moving about nervously.

When the last Southron had been accounted for – most of them having been killed despite Faramir's orders –, and Faramir and the two other rangers who had been with him and had remained more or less unscathed were looking after their wounded companions, soon the other squads Faramir had dispatched to capture some of the strange bowmen returned from out of the forest. Andanor and his men, whose instant aid had turned the tide in the fight on the road, were the first to come back. Faramir was pleased to see two of them carrying the still body of a man dressed all in black. Hopefully they have not slain him as well, he thought.

"You've got one," Mablung called to Andanor while stepping down onto the road. "Good work." Then turning to his captain, he explained that although they had found traces of some solitary men, they had seen none of them, and upon hearing Faramir's signal had thought that they were of more use here. Damrod nodded in agreement. "What's going on here?" he asked while taking an astonished look around. "Those merchants attacked you? Why? And who were the ambushers?"

Faramir gave the seemingly unconscious captive a glance. "I am sure he can enlighten us when he wakes up. As for the 'merchants', they appear to be Southrons in disguise. What they are doing here, I do not know – yet. Mablung, take some men and see how many have survived the fight, and how badly wounded the rest is. Take those as prisoners. You" – he pointed at two men – "go and fetch the horses. Dorlas, look after our wounded first, then see what you can do for the wounded Southrons. And now," he turned to his lieutenant and the captive, "we shall see what you have caught, Andanor. Take off his mask."

Bardhwyn

Partly conscious, Gareth could make out some voices and a few words as he lay on the wet road.

"..Merchants appear to Southrons.. prisoners..let's see what you have caught..".

The pain in his head was sharp and throbbing and soon driven deeper as a pair of hands began to peel off his leather mask. He groaned and struggled to stay conscious. His eyesight sharpened and he saw two men standing over him, one of his assailants – the man Andanor and the other was the Steward's son, Faramir.

'Not a word.' he thought to himself. 'I mustn't speak a word. And escape.. at the first opportunity.. once I am able.. I must get away...'

Gareth looked from one man to another. Faramir and Andanor could see a grim and firm resolve rise in the captive's eyes. He wasn't going to be compliant or at all talkative.

Khorazir

Faramir studied the captive with a keen glance. He did not look as if he was to yield information easily, and Faramir was in no mood for a long and tedious interrogation. He was wet to the skin by now (all except his feet, which the boots had kept dry), and cold, and he wished for nothing else but to be able to leave this forest swiftly and find some warm and sheltered place to spend the night. But first there were the matters at hand that had to be dealt with. He sighed slightly, brushed the wet hair out of his face, and fixing the black-clad man with a piercing gaze again, he said: "From your expression I take that you are resolved not to show cooperation, but I hope I can yet convince you to alter your mind. I think neither of us will appreciate to spend more time in this dreadful weather than needs be, so let us get this over with swiftly. What is your name?"

When no answer came, Faramir shook his head slightly, before continuing: "Alright, without introduction, then. You and your companions were under orders to annihilate these Southrons, am I right? Thus I assume that you are Gondorian troops after all, although perhaps not ... official ones. There is no need to look surprised. I know that such people exist, and have an idea of the kind of work they are wont to do. But to determine if we are really on the same side, and to decide if I can risk to spare you, I need to know from you some details of yourself and your errand. Under whose command do you serve? How many companions do you have, and where are they now? And why were you set to kill these men? Come on, speak up, boy. I do not wish to spend all night out here!"

Bardhwyn

Gareth was surprised by Faramir's words. He knew of their existence?!

As he lay on the ground the rain pelted his face and he blinked the water from his eyes. Faramir's command was compelling, even threatening. "if I can risk to spare you" he said.

Of course they were on the same side, he thought, but he swore an oath before the Steward himself to never divulge any information to anyone at anytime no matter what the circumstances.

'If I am to die, better it be with honor at the hand of Faramir than some Southron', Gareth thought. For all he knew one of his own had an arrow trained on him, prepared to silence him were he to speak. This thought gave rise to a slight smile.

He prepared himself.

He looked into Faramir's eyes and silently said 'No.'

Canamarth

Two pairs of eyes were looking out of the forest and beheld Faramir and a few of his men while putting questions to Gareth.

The others were busy tending to their wounded and rummaging through the mess on the road. They found some carts

full of gold and jewelry; others of provisions. One which was more of a carriage than a cart yielded three women. Two were obviously peasant girls of some sort while the other wore travel-stained clothes which looked simple and were yet made of rich fabrics. They sat together huddled in a corner and screamed when the carriage was opened. The rangers soon made clear that they had just been rescued and the three filed out, thanking them joyously.

“Do you want me to shoot him?” Morus’ voice came in a whisper.

Maradir shook his head. “Too dangerous. You might hit the Steward’s son.”

Morus turned and Maradir was sure he would have seen an expression of surprise on his face had it not been covered by a mask. Morus did not miss. None of them missed. But Maradir was not prepared to lose one of his company. *What in the name of the Valar were Faramir and his rangers doing here?* Maradir thought. There was nothing he could do, he decided. Though Gareth was still young and new amongst their company he would hold fast. Besides, Faramir and his men would not torture him. Not too bad, at least.

“Let’s go,” Maradir said. “We’ll get him out while they’re in the inn down the road.”

asaris

Right around then, Curufë finally arrived at the site of the ambush, and was fortunate to happen to see one or two of the rangers out of the corner of his eye. He dismounted, and walked up to them. “Hail! What is it that has happened here?”

EdaintheRanger

One of the Rangers who was tending his previously injured comrade looked up as the Elf in his splendid finery rode to the scene. The Ranger was a little angry.

“By Isidur’s heir! Have your years in these mortal lands told for nothing! We’ve been attacked by...” the young ranger searched for words to spit. “By sedatious traitors!” A stern look from Mablung quieted him for speaking out of place. The young ranger eyes returned to his patient.

Andanor was kneeling close to the captive with his back to the forest. He was also cold and wet, but such trivialities had to be pushed out of his mind. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up and a prickle in the middle of his back concerned his already suspicious mind. Restraining the captive with a grip on his shoulder Andanor peered over his shoulder. He was glancing directly at the patch of wood where the unseen assailants hid. His keen sight saw nothing, even though he scrutinised it closely. He felt that there were men still present at the scene. “The area was not safe” leapt into his brain. Taking a slow measured breath Andanor didn’t allow his feelings show.

Shifting his attention back to the captive Andanor could see that he was a young man, of clearly Gondorian decent, and remembering back to the wood familiar with the military arts. The fierce pride that burned in his eyes even as he mouthed defiance to the Steward’s son Andanor had seen before in the eyes of his rangers as they defended their exploits to members of other companies of the city. Andanor couldn’t help but think that he had seen the boy before, he had that look of someone you could have spoken to in a tavern or on a training ground. He would have to think on this later, if he got the chance.

But now he must turn mind to more practical matters as he advised Faramir that they must be away ere the agressors return, and in greater numbers. Making sure that the captured man was carefully escorted to the nearest cart, Andanor closely searched the man for documents, evidence, anything that may have given him some more “intelligence”. Even checking the seams of his clothes, the inside of his belt for hidden stilettos, his boots for hidden compartments, he could find little of consequence.

Bardhwyn

The man Andanor was thorough, but of course found nothing. Gareth carried nothing save his armaments and his memories. As he searched him, Gareth carefully snatched glances at his face..and thought he looked familiar. But where? If he looks familiar to me then ...I might look familiar him! By the Valar, if I'm recognised!

The thought was enough to cause him to inwardly shudder. He would then be obliged to kill him at all costs. He cursed the fates that brought these Rangers down this road. He didn't want the blood of this man on his hands, but he knew he would take it, if he had to.

Andanor completed he search and turned Gareth around. He looked at his face long and hard and said nothing. Gareth made sure not to look at him but away and to the ground. Andanor gave the order to secure Gareth and within moments his hands were secured behind his back and his feet tied. A nameless Ranger pushed him back hard onto the bed of the cart with a sneer. A sharp pain sliced through Gareth's head and kicked out angrily at the man with this tied legs.

"That's enough!" Andanor called out. "You may get your chance later.." Andanor waved the man off and approached Gareth as he struggled to sit up in the cart. He looked at Gareth once more.

"You're silent now but you may change you're mind 'ere long." Andanor cocked his head in the direction of the aggressive Ranger as he spoke. "Try to escape and we will recapture you.. alive."

With that, Andanor walked off and two Rangers took up guard around him. Gareth leaned on the side of the cart in attempts to still his spinning head and renewed his resolve.

'At the first opportunity.. I must get away...'

Khorazir

"Captain," Dorlas' voice startled Faramir out of his thoughts. He had watched Andanor search the prisoner. The young man's determined refusal to answer his questions, and even more his faint smile had caused Faramir to raise his eyes from the captive and give the dark eaves of the forest to both sides of the road a searching glance. He was sure that they were being watched, and thought he could quite determine the location of the watchers. Andanor's cautious glances at the forest had only confirmed this; he knew that his lieutenant was conscious of them as well, although when Andanor had mentioned that he feared the assailants might return in greater numbers, he had shaken his head. "I do not think so," he had said. "We are not their prey. But surely they will watch us, and perhaps even attempt to either free or kill their companion to prevent him from talking. I shall leave him to you. Disarm him, if you have not done so already. Take care to find all weapons he may have hidden on him. Bind his hands and feet. Then take two men to watch and guard him at all times. Neither I want his companions having chance to shoot him to ensure his silence, nor him having only the slightest opportunity to escape."

"Captain, sir," Dorlas repeated, and Faramir withdrew his gaze from the cart the captive had been shoved into. "What is it?" he demanded of Dorlas, whose garments, as he noticed with some concern, were stained with blood. Dorlas reported what they had found in the carts. "Of the Southrons five are still alive, all of them wounded," he added. "Two won't see the next day, by my reckoning."

"What of Amdír and Hallas?" Faramir asked.

Dorlas' face turned grave. "Amdír has received a wicked cut in his chest, and lost very much blood. Most likely an artery has been severed. I did for him what I could, but I do not know yet if he will make it. And Hallas got a blow to his side. Some ribs cracked, it seems, and also quite some blood lost. But he'll survive."

Faramir nodded, giving the ranger kneeling at Amdír's side and pressing a blood-soaked piece of cloth onto the young ranger's shoulder a concerned glance. "Would Amdír survive transport?" he asked softly.

Dorlas shrugged dejectedly. "He must. Out here in the cold he won't last must longer."

Faramir nodded slightly. "Get them over to the carriage, all the injured. Put the dead Southrons on the other carts. And leave a place in the carriage for Daewen."

"Aye, captain," the ranger saluted and returned to the wounded.

When Dorlas had gone Damrod approached Faramir, followed by the three freed captives. "They wanted to thank you for rescuing them," he said while the girls curtsied to Faramir, who thought that one of them, the one in the once-rich garments, looked somewhat familiar, but his mind was too occupied to give more thought to the matter.

"You are welcome," he said to the girls. "I would like you to accompany us. I need to know how you were captured, and what know about these men, but this is neither time nor place to talk. Damrod, see to it that the ladies are comfortable."

Damrod saluted smartly, and with a slight grin he was off, waving to the girls to follow him.

A whinny from behind made Faramir turn, and he saw Túrin leading the horses with Daewen's stretcher, Visilya, and three rangers round the bend, a herd of horses following solemnly behind. Angrod, the ranger who had been sent to fetch them, had given a short account of what had befallen, but nevertheless the four gave the carts and the dead Southrons surprised glances. Angrod himself was slightly taken aback when his eyes fell upon the three girls, who were looking rather grave when apparently Damrod told them about Amdír.

"Whence came they?" Angrod asked. "Interesting cargo those 'merchants' carry with them."

Túrin grinned. "Indeed. Those three don't look like Southrons. Must have been captives." Just then one of the girls turned towards them – the one in the finer garments – and frowned when her eyes fell on Túrin. His grin faded, and he stopped short.

"What's wrong?" Angrod asked. "You look as if you've just been struck by lightning."

Túrin only stared ahead. "That would be welcome now," he said gloomily. "Better than having to face her again."

Bardhwyn

Slowly Gareth's head stopped spinning and he carefully surveyed the scene. The dead and wounded were being seen to, three women were released and the Ranger's horses arrived along with some sort of stretcher.

Gareth's guards exchanged a few words but said nothing of consequence. He leaned his full weight against the side of the cart in an effort to relax and felt a sharp prick, then the warmth of blood trickle down from his exposed wrist.

Carefully, slowly, he found the exposed nail. He shifted his weight with a groan, making it appear he was in pain, then sat silent. He began the slow, painstaking task of loosening his bound wrists by scraping the rope against the nail. He made a silent prayer to the Gods for enough time to accomplish his goal. He kept his movements as imperceptible as possible and watched his guards as they idly watched the scene before them.

Khorazir

With the horses having arrived, the wounded and dead loaded onto the carts, and the carts manned, the company was more or less ready to depart. Daewen had been transferred into the carriage as well, and the stretcher had been taken apart. The three freed maidens had been offered horses, as there was no room left on the carts.

Just when his horse was brought to him, Faramir saw Curufë approaching him, leading his own steed by the reins. Faramir could not help letting out a slight sigh of relief at seeing the Elf. "tis good to see you, Curufë," he said when the Noldo had drawn near. "I hope you come with good tidings – which would be the first for today. Have you found an inn or similar? And Lindórië, she is alright, is she not? You did not encounter any trouble on your way, I hope."

EdaintheRanger

Heeding his Friend and Master's words Andanor made sure that area was as clear as he could make out. As he returned to the scene of the ambush he could see that the guards were tired and restless, and most of the other rangers were pre-occupied with making the others comfortable. He checked the pickets whom being his best men were alert. He brought them some of the luxury 'sweet' rations in order to cheer them up and eliviate the discomfort of the weather. Curse this storm! It is as if the forbidden one was working against them even now, through the weather. Curse the politicking too, if those lords on their high thrones stopped bickering for once and looked at the greater danger. For while the company dealt with this internal dispute. "Oh if the gates of Morannon opened now the host would be able to march on the fair city unchecked." sped through his mind. Andanor sighed this was going to be a long night...

He called Mablung over and made him aware of the slackness of the guard. "Change the guard often and at irregular intervals" Andanor said in muted tones. "Change the pickets too if we have to. I want to be moving, but till then we will wait." Andanor gave a nod as Mablung moved to comply. Andanor broke open some rations and decided to check on the prisoner himself.

Canamarth

Lossiel almost fainted when she saw Túrin. Had she endured all the hardship of the last two days just to suffer again for her lost love now? She did not say a word but turned from him, not even looking around for the fury which would be sure to accompany him. She was given a horse by one of the rangers and mounted quickly. Then she rode to the front of the company which was now ready to depart. She'd give them the slip as soon as possible.

Maradir and Morus arrived at their camp and told their companions what had happened. "They'll be bound for the inn along the road. That's where we'll try and get him out."

His men started to get up from the fire and prepare for a departure.

"No, you stay here. I'll go alone."

"But Faramir knows you."

"Which is just as well. We'll have a chance meeting in the inn. We don't stand much of a chance if we don't want to harm his rangers. But I'm sure I can get to the prisoner."

"Of course you can. But... He'll know you've been here."

"I'll take Morus and we'll pretend to carry messages from one of the smaller southern fiefs."

Most men seemed to approve of his plan and settled back down.

Maradir forged a letter with some made-up little concern of a small fief south of Poros and sealed it with its seal. Maradir and Morus put on lighter-coloured travelling garments and left their masks behind. They then mounted the horses the men had saddled for them and sped away into the night. They rode hard when they left the forest and came into open fields - well away from the road. They would join it a few miles south of the inn, then make their way back up along it.

Bardhwyn

Seeing Andanor approach, Gareth ceased his efforts to free himself. He painfully shook his head in attempts to shift his wet hair from his eyes, for it was obscuring his vision. His head began to spin once again, though less than before. Andanor was nigh upon him and Gareth tensed.

Khorazir

While Faramir was still talking to Curufë, the company made ready to depart. It took some time to turn the carts about, as the road was rather narrow, and moreover deeply rutted by the wheels of carts that had passed before. But at length they were ready to set out, and Faramir gave the command to move. Darkness had fallen by now, so that when they left the forest a short while later, and wind and rain hit them again with full force, there was not much more to be seen of their surroundings than before. Faramir reckoned that it would take them close to another hour to finally reach the inn, and he fervently hoped that this was not too long a journey for Amdír. Dorlas had not sounded very hopeful when describing the young man's state.

Túrin had overcome his surprise. After having brought Daewen to the carriage and seen to it that she was as comfortable as possible under the circumstances, he had mounted his horse again, and now rode next to the carriage. From there he could steal glances at Lossiel riding somewhat ahead with the other two girls. *What on earth is she doing here?* he thought, and immediately felt his bad conscience stir again. *Someone should tell her family. Poor girl. Most likely she fled from the City to get away from me, and what happens? First she gets captured by Southrons, and then more or less rescued by me. This seems to be a black day for all of us.*

EdaintheRanger

As the party made its way along the road, Andanor rode up and down the column offering encouragement and attempting to maintain morale. Settling to a trot he briefly reflexed on what had gone before.

After passing some of the rations to the rangers and hearing their report Andanor relieved them with a couple of the rations who had been refreshed. He chided them to be careful and alert as they weren't guarding an Orc Brigand, or a mercenary, but a soldier.

Suitably admonished the guards began their watch, as the wagons were packed up and the company prepared to move. "Ah so your awake then?" Andanor said to the prisoner, his voice curt and authoritarian, yet with a hint of concern. He then surveyed the interior of the cart as best he could in the dim light, the shoddy workmanship was apparent and he gave a slight smile, "what would I do in this situation" Andanor thought as he returned his gaze to the captured soldier. He placed a few morsels of food close to the prisoner and asked if he wanted to eat. He shook his head firmly, and Andanor told him that he would be doing his best to help himself if he did cooperate.

"You could at least give your name and the name of the company that you march with for then at least then we can get word to your relatives, that you are alive." Andanor asked of the young soldier. This was met with further silence, "Ah so you are dumb as well as an enemy!" Andanor concluded as regards to the lack of communication. On such close inspection the familiarity of the man rang in his mind, yet Andanor couldn't make a connection. Ruffling his hair, he then checked the prisoners bonds, as much he tried to deny him, the congealing blood on the rope told its own story and Andanor gave the prisoner a sharp look. He called for more rope and re-enforced the bonds. "Look you are now our prisoner, escape attempts do not bode you well." Andanor had said with a sharp tone.

By now the party had travelled most of the trek, and the lights of the inn lay ahead.

Khorazir

When Curufë had been gone for quite a long while, and darkness had fallen, and yet the company had not arrived, Lindórië had begun to worry. The merchants' tales had done nothing to alleviate her concern. She knew of course that the rangers were well-trained and cautious, and that it was unlikely that they would have fallen prey to an ambush or similar, but still a nagging feeling remained that something was greatly amiss.

By now supper was ready, and beds were prepared, and hands from all over the village had been recruited to help out because the landlady's few people would not manage to look after so large a company. Lindórië had just donned her cloak and gone outdoors for a look, when the bark of a dog announced that someone was approaching the village. It was a much larger company than she had been looking out for, as this one consisted of quite a number of carts as well, but when they had drawn close, she could see that there were rangers accompanying it. So they have met the strange merchants the others have talked about, she thought. And 'twas not a friendly meeting. Some of the carts were loaded with bodies, and there were some arrows sticking in their sides. The whole company looked weary. They were entirely soaked by the rain, muddy and cold, and their mood seemed to match their condition. To her surprise Lindórië noticed three strangers amongst the rangers: three girls, mounted on some of the rangers' steeds.

Her eyes searched the caravan for Faramir. At length she spotted him dismounting next to what looked like a carriage. He was pale and looked very grave and worried, and suddenly Lindórië felt the strong urge to go over to him and embrace him, but restrained it, knowing that he had other things on his mind now.

Faramir had briefly spoken to Dorlas who had walked next to the carriage, and inquired about Amdír.

"He lives still," Dorlas told him. "He seems to be stronger than those Southrons. The two that were seriously wounded have died ere we reached the village."

Faramir nodded grimly, then turned towards the inn, and beheld Lindórië. For a moment he simply gazed at her, then he smiled slightly, relieved that she was alright. Giving his horse's reins to another man, he swiftly went over to her. "We need beds for six injured," he said. "One room for Daewen, Amdír and Hallas, another for the three surviving Southrons."

She nodded, deciding to keep her questions – and a proper greeting – for later. "The rooms are prepared. I have already caused some water to be heated. The linen towels can be used for bandages as well, should the need arise. There are grooms in the stables who will look after the horses. The carts can be brought into the courtyard."

"Excellent," Faramir said. "We shall not bother much about the dead tonight. They can stay on the carts till the morrow. But 'twould be wise to get them out of the way. I do not want the villagers to see too much of them." He sighed slightly. "But we must look after our wounded and the prisoners first. Do you know if there is a halfway secure room, at best without windows, where we can put our special charge?"

"I shall ask the landlady."

"Good. Inform her that we are more people than announced. And please tell Galdor and Anborn to come out here and lend a hand."

"Aye, captain."

Smiling briefly at her words, he leaned forward and softly kissed her cheek, before returning to the carriage where Túrin had just lifted Daewen – still tightly wrapped in blankets – and was carrying her towards the door.

Bardhwyn

The cart carrying Gareth stopped and his guards took up their positions near him. He sat and watched the Rangers fan out and see to the wounded, some being moved towards the Inn. Faramir stood and conversed with a lady of some

rank and Gareth studied her. Faramir and she, he could see, knew one another well enough to kiss on the cheek. Gareth smiled to himself for he was behaving as if still on duty, watching, assessing, surveying his surroundings. Two men exited from the Inn and sent a young boy running Faramir. He in turn called Andanor and exchanged words. Andanor approached Gareth and his guards.

“There is a secure room at the back of the Inn where they make the cheeses. Take him around to the back entrance.”

Gareth’s guards each grabbed an arm and began to drag him along.

“Untie my legs and let me walk like a man.” Gareth cried.

The Rangers stopped. These were the first words they had heard from the young man. They looked to Andanor who was himself surprised.

“So, you aren’t dumb. What is your name?”

Gareth, bent over and still held by the arms, stood unsteady on his tied feet. He looked up. “Please, I won’t run. Just untie my legs.” he said, plaintively.

“Your name.”

“They’re numb. Please?”

“Your feet free for a name.”

Gareth dropped his head. He had said too much as it was. He shook his head ‘no’. The Rangers began dragging him once again and he purposefully threw all his weight to the ground, causing them to falter and drop him. The Rangers cursed as the mud kicked up.

With a signal from Andanor the Rangers grabbed him and held him to the ground, holding his legs. Andanor cut the ropes that bound his feet. The Rangers began to lift him up.

“No! Wait, please. I cannot stand. Not yet. I have not feeling in my feet.”

Andanor stepped back and sheathed his dagger. “Wait for him. Let him sit in the mud as long as he desires. Just watch him.”

Andanor strode off and Gareth carefully looked the courtyard over. One of the Rangers kicked him. “Is his Majesty ready?”

Gareth nodded and on his own he attempted to stand, shrugging the Rangers off, angrily.

Pretending to fall forward he successfully put three feet between him and his two guards. Deftly, he kicked a loose clod of mud into the face of the Ranger on his left. Hopping into a front kick, he sent the Ranger to his right reeling backwards, into the mud

He wasted no time. Gareth ran.

Khorazir

While the wounded were brought to their rooms and looked after, the supervision of which Faramir had gladly yielded to Lindórië and Dorlas, he briefly spoke with the landlady, giving her a short account of who they were and what had happened, and informing her that most likely at least some of the company would be required to stay for several days, until the injured were healed again.

That done, he went outside again, to see if the carts and horses had been brought into the courtyard already. Mablung approached him.

“The work is nearly done,” the ranger reported. “The lads have worked really hard as we’re all looking forward to finally getting out of this dreadful weather. The horses, both ours and the cart-horses, are well-nigh all stabled. The inn’s grooms are busy unsaddling them and rubbing them down with straw, and the carts have been covered with tarpaulins so that the villagers won’t be shocked by the dead.”

“Excellent,” Faramir said. “Where is Andanor?”

Now Mablung looked uneasy, and upon his captain’s piercing glance he cast down his eyes and swallowed slightly. “Well?”

“Er ... he’s after the prisoner,” Mablung confessed. “Apparently they had the boy’s feet untied so that he could walk better, and then he just gave them the slip. But I’m sure they’ll catch him again.”

“Let us hope they do,” Faramir said grimly.

+++

Túrin had carried Daewen to the room that was reserved for the wounded, and laid her down onto one of the beds. Shortly afterwards Amdír and Hallas were brought in as well.

“We need hot water and bandages,” Dorlas told Lindórië, and she went to fetch them. “Get them out of their wet clothes.” Then his eyes fell on Daewen. “Perhaps she would prefer sharing a room with the other ladies instead of the wounded,” he said to Túrin. “Then we can bring the injured Southrons in here as well so that I can look after them better. When I’m done here, I’ll come and have a look at her as well.”

Túrin nodded. “Sorry about this,” he said to Daewen when he lifted her up again and carried her to another room. This one was not occupied by anybody else so far, and he carefully laid her down once more.

“Do you need help with undressing?” he asked. “If so, I’ll go and fetch Visilya. Perhaps she even has some spare clothes you can wear.”

Canamarth

Lossiel and her two companions were at length shown upstairs by the landlady’s little son. “There should be a room or two not occupied yet,” he said. “Down the corridor to the left.”

Lossiel followed the two women who were chattering amongst each other. They passed a few doors in which injured rangers were tended to or others put down their gear. They reached a corner and turned left. There were two doors, both stood open. The peasant girls vanished into the first which proved to be furnished with only two beds so Lossiel walked further down the corridor to the next room where she found Túrin carefully tending to a wounded girl.

Khorazir

Túrin looked up when he heard footsteps approach, and beheld Lossiel. For a moment they just stared at each other, then Túrin lowered his gaze. “Hello, Lossiel,” he said softly.

EdaintheRanger

Looking forwards to a pint of good ale after a long hard days work, Andanor headed towards the taproom, he was barely two steps on his way when, he heard the commotion behind him. His ranger reflexes span him around to see the young soldier darting down the road and into the scrub, making his way towards the woods once more.

“Confound that feckless, rash boy!” Andanor shouted as he tore after him. Andanor dismissed the guards with a curt wave. All weariness gone and replaced with a cold anger, he couldn’t help but admire the tenacity of the fugitive. “What cause inspires such loyalty, other than foolish, ideological youth?” raced through Andanor’s mind as he skipped off the road towards the woods.

Although the soldier was rested and comparatively fresh, his hands were still firmly bound, and this curbed his speed a little, ducking and diving through the thick knee high grass, he found it a little awkward keep his balance in the wet. Gritting his teeth he plunged under the boughs of the welcoming trees. He had about an 8 pace lead on the pursuing ranger.

The evening light was dim, but following the soldier was not a great problem, the crashing racket he made as he drove through the undergrowth was loud enough, and the whipping branches unrestrained by a warding arm, dealt stinging retorts across his face and upper body. Andanor drew his knife and poised it to throw as the Soldier slipped down a rough earth embankment. Dashing over to the natural ditch Andanor could see that the fugitive had tucked, rolled, and was getting to his feet.

Knife in hand Andanor shouted, his voice coming in gasps.

“Don’t be a fool! There is nothing to be gained from this! What is it that makes you desire to escape so badly? Stop or I’ll hamstring you!” Andanor hefted the knife purposely.

In the evening light the soldier’s eyes glinted defiance and his own determined purpose. Lurching forward unexpectedly, he spoiled Andanor’s aim and the blade only nicked his calf, merely ripping his clothing. Leaping down the embankment Andanor resumed his pursuit.

In the end it was neither the ranger, nor the soldier whom decided this contest, for it was the rains, the resulting wet underfoot which was sending both men slipping and sliding through the woods. A treacherous footfall sent the fugitive over one time too many and Andanor was able after a furious struggle to subdue him. “Can’t you even tell me your name?” the aggravated ranger asked. It was met with a sullen silence, Andanor breathed out. Not pausing to retrieve his blade and with a unconscious lad over his shoulder he headed back to the inn as fast as he was able.

Lady_of_Rohan

For most of the last hour or so, Daewen had kept her eyes closed as she tried to shut out all the sights and sounds around her. Nevertheless, she learned that the rangers had walked into an ambush in progress (or had they been ambush – she wasn’t sure), many men were killed, some of the rangers were critically wounded (this she was sure of, as they too had been in the carriage with her), and a prisoner had been taken.

But at the moment, she hadn’t cared. She was cold, soaked to the bone, and shivering uncontrollably. Her head ached miserably, as did her shoulder, and strong coughing fits came more frequently. When Túrin had placed her in the carriage, he had made sure the waterlogged cloaks she was wrapped in were replaced with mostly-dry blankets that had been found under one of the carriage seats. The last few miles to the inn had gone well enough. She hadn’t gotten any wetter, though the storm had kicked up again, but with lesser fury than earlier. It had been uncomfortable riding with the wounded rangers, but she had stayed curled up in one corner, silent, lest she disturb them.

Once they’d reached the inn, it was only a few moments before Túrin found her and began carrying her toward the inn door. She was too miserable to even care that she had to switch rooms once or twice. When they had finally found a place for her to rest, she heard Túrin ask her a few questions, but her throat hurt too much to answer right away. (That, and he had turned to speak with another person.) Instead, she turned her face and was immediately caught in a strong coughing fit that left her breathless and brought tears to her eyes. When it was over, she whimpered slightly. It was times like this that she remembered her few months stay with the elderly widow and how the woman had taken

her into her lap when she was sick or hurt and held her until she felt better. She missed that, sometimes. Now, shivering still, she shifted on the bed and waited. Soon she found herself drifting between sleep and awake. She was growing feverish, though she knew it not.

Bardhwyn

The floor tiling felt cool against his face. Gareth opened his eyes, blinking the dried mud away as best he could and he tried his best to shift his body. Not an easy task for his arms were still bound and, yet again, his feet.

He moved his jaw and it felt stiff with pain. He searched his teeth with his tongue.. none were missing or broken. What was his name? ... Andanor... had a placed two good, strong punches to his left jaw before he blacked out.

Gareth heard a shuffle then a cough and looking in the direction of the sound noticed a Ranger seated in the same room, next to the door. He had a drawn sword across his lap. The Ranger silently watched as Gareth came to.

Gareth allowed his gaze to go up to the ceiling as he lay in his dank, mud covered clothes on the hard floor.

He silently reviewed what options were left to him.

Khorazir

Faramir had just been about to command Mablung and Damrod to follow Andanor, when his lieutenant had returned, with the unconscious prisoner over his shoulder. Both looked as if they had had a bit of a fight – with each other, and the forest. Noticing Andanor's furious mood, Faramir did not ask any questions, but just let him carry the lad to the room. He knew that Andanor would see to it that the prisoner was better watched this time, and would most likely try to question the young man further, and Faramir was content to leave the charge to his lieutenant for the present.

By now most of the rangers were inside the inn. The landlady was busy dealing out blankets and towels, and cups of tea and bowls of hot soup. Wet cloaks and tunics were draped everywhere to dry. Most of the rangers had fetched their spare clothes from their saddlebags, and the washhouse had been converted into a change-room. In a corner of the commonroom the three merchants sat, eyeing the whole scene with great curiosity and interest. They started to whisper amongst themselves when they recognised Faramir, and began forging imaginative theories concerning the company's presence here.

In the meantime Faramir went to check on Dorlas and the wounded. The ranger looked somewhat less worried. "It's too early to say anything definite, but it looks as if Amdír is going to make it. But I'm still rather busy here, and could do with another hand. Lindórië has just gone to look after the girl."

"I shall fetch you someone," Faramir said. "What about guards?" he asked with a glance at the Southrons. "Do you think you need more? Are they in any condition to make trouble?"

"I don't think so. But fetch me Anborn. He can keep watch."

After having provided Dorlas with all he needed, Lindórië went to see if Daewen was alright. When she approached the room, she saw one of the rescued girls stand in the doorway. Apparently she did not notice her, staring at something in the room. The 'something', Lindórië saw a moment later, was Túrin. The two young people were gazing at each other awkwardly.

Lindórië slightly cleared her throat, and the girl almost jumped in surprise. "I did not mean to disturb you, but I wanted to have a look at Daewen," Lindórië explained.

"Oh, good," Túrin said, obviously glad about the interruption. "I shall leave you to it, then. I'll be back later, alright?"

he softly said to Daewen. "The Lady Lindórië will tend to you now." Briefly queezing her hand – which was cold as ice – he stood, and brushing past the women he quickly left the room. Lindórië saw the girl look after him with an expression of mingled grief, resent and affection, and wondered what had befallen between them. Apparently they knew each other, and their story was not a happy one.

The room was furnished with four beds, and most likely the girl had come here in search of a free one. Now she was watching Lindórië, apparently undecided between staying or leaving as well.

"You could lend me a hand here," Lindórië suggested mildly. "We must get her out of the wet clothes and see to it that she gets warm again. And we must do something against this cough. What is your name?"

EdaintheRanger

After a mug of ale and a simple meal Andanor anger had abated. As he partook of his repast he had been racking his mind high and low as to where he had seen the soldier before, his face seemed to spring right at him! Andanor had to content himself with the fact that the mystery man was firmly under lock and key. "Well I suppose I should interview him" he thought, and pondered on the ways he could weedle information out of the unknown soldier. Violence obviously didn't seem to work, Andanor could see that it was proving counterproductive, the lad valued his principles more than that. Should he appeal to more base principals? The lad must be hungry by now.

Andanor thought that maybe he wasn't that important to the group he was working for. A new member perhaps? Andanor concluded that it would be better to make sure that the inn was secure from outside assault as if the group did want their soldier back then the dead of night would be a prime time opportunity. There wasn't much that Andanor could do more than make sure that the watch was changed regularly and spirits kept up. A time for a watchful vigilance.

After doing his rounds of the inn and satisfied with the rangers, Andanor asked Faramir and his friends their opinion or suggestions as to how to approach the prisoner.

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen heard Túrin speak to her, though his voice sounded vague and distant, and squeeze her hand. She turned her head to watch him leave and saw two other people in the room with her. After a moment, she recognized the pretty lady who had ridden with the company earlier. She was speaking to another lady, one Daewen did not recognize. It appeared that they were talking about her, but she didn't hear enough of the words to know for sure. Finally, she gave up and drifted back to a semi-conscious doze.

Canamarth

Lossiel had thought about running out of the room immediately but stayed where she was when Túrin turned to look at her with his beautiful eyes. She had been close to tears before the woman behind her had startled her so. Now the Lady Lindórië was alone with her in the room she relaxed.

"My name is Lossiel," she simply said and wondered whether Lindórië knew her family. She walked over to the wounded girl.

There are after all people who are still worse off than me, she thought. "What can I do?"

Khorazir

Faramir was just about to finally go and change into dry clothes as well, when Andanor approached him and inquired about how to best question the prisoner. Faramir sighed slightly and ran a hand through his tangled hair which was almost dry by now. "Honestly I have not given thought to it so far. Just give me a moment to change clothes and eat a little, and then I shall have a look at the boy myself."

On his way to where his saddlebags with the spare clothes had been put he met Damrod wearing only his trowsers who was searching his own bags for a spare shirt. Faramir grinned slightly and shook his head. "Stop showing off, Damrod. There are ladies present." Because just then the two peasant girls arrived in the common room.

gladrieltook

Visilya too had seen Lossiel, and now sat in the corner of Dawen's chambers, her head bowed down to her knees, as she thought about all the trouble she'd caused. It was her fault Lossiel had run away, her fault for letting Daween get hurt. She cursed herself under her breathe. "You stupid git. Look what you've done. Daewen never even wanted to leave the city. All Lossiel wanted was for Turin to love her. Just like you. And you let them be hurt..."

Khorazir

"We must get her out of the wet clothes," Lindórië told Lossiel. "She fell with her horse on our journey here and had her shoulder dislocated. Her head suffered some light concussion as well, it seems. And her cough worries me." Lowering herself carefully to the bed's edge, she placed a hand on the girl's forehead, then slightly shook her head. "It seems as if she is beginning to fever."

Turning to where Visilya sat silently, with her head bowed (at first Lindórië had not even noticed her), she said: "Visilya, would you be so kind and go and get me my saddle-bags from down in the commonroom? They are the red-dish-brown ones with the small blue pattern along the seams. Then please tell the landlady that we need some hot water for tea for the young lady. She must drink something warm."

Turning back to the girl, she began undressing her, beckoning to Lossiel to take off Daewen's shoes. "Your family is greatly worried about you, you know that, Lossiel?" she said without looking at the girl while very carefully, so as not to hurt Daewen's shoulder, she helped the girl's arm out of the sleeve. "They have issued a search-party, but of course they do not know where to look. I will not ask for your reasons for leaving the City – they are rather obvious, and moreover your private concerns –, but I should really like to know how it came to pass that those Southrons captured you and those other girls."

gladrieltook

Visilya silently complied, and returned with the saddlebags and the puffing landlady within a few minutes. The lady lady hauled a bucket of steaming water. Visilya handed the saddle bags to Lindorie, and gave a nod to Lossiel before returning to her corner. She watched them work as she sat. She dared not interfere, as her own healing skills were minimal.

Bardhwyn

Gareth had managed to sit up and lean his back against the bare wall behind him. He now faced his new guard, who had only arrived a short time ago – the man Laren, who first assailed him. Laren sat, as did the guard before him, with

an unsheathed sword across his lap.

Laren seemed a bit older than himself, Gareth noted, but unfamiliar. He thought again of the Ranger Andanor... it was bothering him, how familiar he seemed.

Together two young men had managed, for a good three quarters of an hour, to stare at each other unflinchingly.

The Ranger was good. He showed no emotion, no irritation and he met Gareth's stare and offered nothing more. 'So', Gareth concluded, 'I won't get a rise out of you. Perhaps the next one...'

Noises from the hall drifted into the room: the heavy footsteps of Rangers, the running steps of the Inn's servants, some laughter and one or two scoldings.

A door slammed then came the sound of a few footsteps. Following that they heard a cry and the crashing of crockery. A stream of cursing rolled into the room, pronounced by one of the serving women who had the vocabulary of a sailor.

The tension broke and the two men laughed.

Khorazir

Faramir was interrupted twice before finally he managed to change into some dry clothes (his good ones, which actually he had brought for his visit to Falastur in Pelargir, and which made him look rather out of place, he thought, in the chaos that ruled the commonroom). He was allowed a cup of tea and some food as well, before Andanor approached him again and inquired about how to best tackle the prisoner.

Faramir accompanied him to the room whither the young man had been brought. On their way they met one of the maids scooping up some broken crockery into her apron, cursing violently. Both men exchanged a glance and grinned slightly. The maid spotting them fell silent, blushed, and quickly scuttled out of the room.

Faramir knocked on the shut door of the small room, so that Laren knew who was coming. Then he opened the door, and he and Andanor entered. After having told Laren to leave them for a short while, and Andanor shutting the door again when the other ranger had gone, Faramir for a long time simply stood and looked down upon the young man. He could not recall having seen him before, and Andanor had told him that his search of the prisoner's garments had yielded nothing of interest.

"What shall I do with you?" Faramir said softly, more to himself, after a long while of utter silence. Then fixing his eyes upon the prisoner, he asked: "You know who I am, do you not?" When no reaction came, he nodded slightly, as this was answer enough. "I understand that you would not betray your companions by revealing their identities," he went on. "'tis very honourable of you to stay so adamant. Moreover you have shown extraordinary skill in giving my rangers the slip. So apparently you received a kind of schooling that is usually reserved for a special kind of 'soldier'. I know the Steward employs such people, and I can imagine what kind of errands they are wont to receive, and thus I think that we are on the same side. And so your identity is not of immediate interest to me, and moreover should stay secret indeed. But I am sure you see that I cannot simply let you go either. I need to know what is going on here. It looks as if our two companies unwillingly interfered with the other's errand, which is very unfortunate for both. One of my men may even die because of it. So even if you refuse to reveal facts about yourself and your companions, tell me at least who these Southrons are you apparently had been ordered to slay, what their plan or purpose was, whence they came and whither they intended to go. For three of them live still, and actually the urgency of my own errand leaves me little time to deal with them properly. But I would not just slay them either, without knowing what the reason for your ambush was. So speak up now! Show cooperation, and you know we shall be lenient, and perhaps even let you go."

Lossier watched Visilya as she went back into the corner where she settled down. She turned back to Lindórië. "I was just on my way back home. I could not stay in the city any longer... My parents would have received a message as soon as I was back home. I did not want to cause them any harm."

Lindórië nodded and gave her a short smile as if to encourage her to go on.

"I almost stayed in this inn yesterday night but I thought that my father's men might be looking for me already and I did not want to be caught and brought back. So I rode on for an hour or two and when it started to get dark I saw lights springing to life in what seemed like a village some way off the road on the side of a small hill. I decided to turn there to seek shelter for the night.

When I entered the village I at first thought they were having some sort of a festival because I heard men laughing and shouting. But then I also heard shriller shrieks..." She broke off and shook her head sadly. "I never saw what exactly they were doing to the village folk for someone had crept up upon me from behind and dragged me off my horse. I was brought into the next hut where the village women were kept. We were not allowed to talk to each other and every now and then someone came in and took one or two of the women with him. Some of them returned dishevelled, some with bruises, some did not return at all. I had by then gathered that they came from the South but my Adunaic is not sufficient to have understood much of what they grunted amongst each other. The next day - it was almost afternoon - one of them came in and examined the women who were left. He pointed me out and two of the villagers, the two prettiest to be sure, and we were put into the carriage. 'You be Sheher's companions,' he grunted and grinned at us. We set out an hour later. Though they had lots of heavy carts they did not turn to the main road but followed what was not much more than a path running parallel to it. We only made slow progress and they had to stop to drag a cart out of a mudhole or something similar quite often. They also seemed to argue amongst themselves. Something about waiting for cover of night and turning to the main road. At least I think that's what they said. When it started to get dark and the storm was coming up they finally turned to the road. And Sheher joined us in the carriage..." She again fell silent for a moment, then resumed after she had taken a deep breath. "And then you came and rescued us."

Maradir and Morus at length arrived at the inn. Their horses were steaming and they were splattered with mud and drenched to the bone. They hardly found a place for their horses in the over-crowded stables. Some rangers had to shift closer together to make room. They seemed far from happy about it.

"What are you doing here anyway at this time of night?" one of them asked Maradir.

"We are riding a errand from Lord Dinir to the Steward and were surprised by this fell weather. We rode at night to make up for some time lost in the last inn, if you know what I mean..."

The ranger laughed heartily. "I am afraid you will have to spend the night here with us. The inn is full to the brim." Maradir nodded. "I saw lots of carts in the courtyard. A caravan of merchants?"

"Not exactly, no. You are really lucky. You could have fallen prey to a band of Southrons had we not intercepted them." "Southrons?" Maradir exclaimed in utter surprise. "This far North?"

The ranger shrugged and nodded. They were interrupted by Damrod who came in to look if the rangers in the stables were well-settled for the night. When he saw the two new arrivals who were still dripping wet he challenged them. Maradir and Morus turned. "Damrod! What are you doing here?"

"Maradir? Is that you underneath all the mud?"

"Yes it is."

"What a strange meeting. Come with me. We'll see to it that you and your friend get into something dry. And I'm sure Faramir will want to see you."

“Faramir? Here? This is getting stranger by the moment...”

They followed Damrod to the inn’s main building.

gladrieltook

Visilya had listened quietly to Lossiel’s tale, and felt even worse. She could not contain herself any longer. She rose, and embraced the younger girl. “I am sorry, Lossiel.”

Khorazir

After “fleeing” Daewen’s room at Lossiel’s unexpected arrival, Túrin had also changed into dry clothes and then gone to the commonroom, where he got himself some food. Just when he had finished his second bowl of soup, a gust of cold air announced that someone had entered from outside. He looked up, and beheld Damrod followed by two drenched and mud-splattered travellers – one of which looked very familiar to Túrin.

“Maradir?” he exclaimed, rising swiftly. “What on earth are you doing here?”

+++

Lindórië’s face had darkened at Lossiel’s account, and she had nodded slightly. “It was not us who attacked them in the first place, and I was not present at all. I only heard that our company ran into an ambush upon the Southrons. Anyway, I must tell this to Faramir, as it will certainly weigh upon his decision of how to deal with the prisoners. It seems that those strange bowmen dealt a deserved punishment to the Haradrim,” she ended grimly. Then her expression softened as she gave Lossiel a grave and pitiful glance. “I am very sorry for what you had to go through,” she said softly, before looking up to see Visilya coming over to them and embracing Lossiel.

Bardhwyn

Gareth looked long into the face of the Steward’s son. So unlike Denethor, the thought to himself, but as noble, if not more. ‘Had I met you first, I would be serving you.’ he thought. He laughed to himself and at his situation and he opted to speak. It was going against his training.. his explicit orders but somehow he felt he could trust this man.

“Kill them. Kill the Southrons. Don’t hesitate. If you can’t, then let me. I’ll finish it for you. Then, let me go. You’ll never see me again.”

Faramir listened with an expectancy of hearing more. He quietly kept his gaze on Gareth and waited. Feeling the weight of this gaze, Gareth looked from Faramir to Andanor.

“They ambushed and pillaged a small settlement not far from here. They were brutal - ruthless. Women, children...”

Gareth stopped, choked by the memory of the carnage he had seen. No amount of training could have prepared him for what he saw.

“Of that, they are guilty.”

Faramir and Andanor exchanged glances. Andanor spoke:

“We’ve heard no news of a raid on any settlement ...”

“That’s because they were thorough, very thorough!” Gareth retorted with a grimace. He looked to Faramir.

“My Lord, if you are as informed as you say - please, don't ask me anymore questions and let me go.”

Gareth looked to the floor, determined those were to be the last words he would speak to these men.

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen shivered, either from the chill of wet clothes or fever, before she felt someone dressing her in dry clothing and tucking a warm blanket around her. Her head ached fiercely, but by keeping her eyes closed, she was able to alleviate the pain somewhat. She coughed again, and a few moments later felt a cool cloth on her forehead and heard someone saying that a tea was being prepared.

Khorazir

Faramir gazed at him for a moment longer, reviewing in mind what he had heard, and the young man's expression when he had spoken of the destroyed village. His terror had been genuine, and Faramir was sure the prisoner had not lied to him about the Southrons. He nodded slightly.

“Very well,” he said, “I shall speak with the three girls we freed from the Southrons, and listen to what they can tell. If their story agrees with yours, you are free.” He was about to inquire further about the Haradrim, despite the young man's plea not to, when from the commonroom a cry sounded: someone - it sounded like Túrin - called the name of Maradir. Faramir looked up sharply in surprise, but not without noticing the young man's reaction.

EdaintheRanger

Hearing the commotion outside, Andanor had a quiet word in Faramir's ear, words to the effect of “Thank you, my friend, but I think you should see what is going on. I feel uneasy about this whole episode.”

Faramir just nodded and took leave of the situation.

Immediately after the Captain left Andanor rose and not taking his eyes off the prisoner called the serving maid to quickly fetch ale and bread. He returned to the table, he could see that the young soldier had seen horrific deeds and no amount of training could disguise his manner. Privately he sympathised, war in all its forms was evil and it was a foul stain on mankind, the horror was something that many soldiers had the misfortune to experience and to experience it so young made it no better. Publically he hoped that there was soon to be an end to this secrecy. The lad's outburst had surprised him slightly as he spoke with a cultured City accent, overtoned with grief.

He sat back and spoke, “Lad so you have spoken, please break bread now,”

The guard outside had now entered with two small loaves of brown bread and two small thin horn beakers each holding a draft of Ale.

The smell of the ale was welcoming and triggered a memory in Andanor, of a ale house in the fair city, and a outspoken boy... His eyes widened perceptibly as he offered food and drink to the captive.

Khorazir

Faramir did not quite share his friend's uneasiness, as Túrin's call had rather stirred his curiosity than his concern. On

the other hand he had not missed the young man's reaction when the name had been called. He had been very calm, and had not looked up, but Faramir had thought that he had noticed a slight tremor in the prisoner's pose, which despite his guard he had not quite been able to conceal. Of course, he might have been startled by the sudden sound alone, but Faramir did not believe that. And if it was indeed his best friend Maradir who had arrived here so unexpectedly, this might be a nice coincidence, yet Faramir thought he had cause not to regard it as such – not after all that had happened on this strange day so far.

Thus leaving Andanor and the prisoner (in the hope that his lieutenant might be able to prise some more information from the young man), he returned to the common room. There he saw Túrin greet a fair-haired man in a mud-splattered, dripping wet cloak, and smiled to himself, as this looked to be his best friend indeed.

Bardhwyn

'Maradir! Here!' Gareth steeled his face. 'The Captain, here! How? By the Valar, what next?'

Faramir left and Andanor called for the ale and bread. Gareth's stomach lurched at the thought of food. His thoughts returned to his captain, however, and he pushed the hunger aside. Maradir, here? Perhaps it is another man by that name for how could his captain just walk into the Inn when their secrecy was all?

This and Faramir's foreknowledge of his company caused Gareth's mind to reel. Why wouldn't the Steward entrust his son with knowledge of his company and their mission? Why were Faramir and his men here to begin with?

Gareth suddenly felt overwhelmed, adrift in a very large sea where men, greater than he, were strongly affecting currents that could pull him down and drown him.

Andanor sat himself down as Laren, his guard, entered and deposited food on the table ...'Lad so you have spoken, please break bread now,'

Laren hefted Gareth off the floor and roughly dropping him onto a chair in front of the table opposite Andanor. He then untied Gareth's arms. As Laren silently turned to leave, Andanor gave him a look of reassurance, as if to say 'I can handle him'. Laren left.

Gareth rubbed his wrists in effort to bring life back into his hands and watched as Andanor pushed a beaker and a loaf towards him. Gareth looked at the man, who was, again, closely studying him. Strangely, Andanor was looking at him more knowingly; as if he did know him.

Gareth inwardly groaned, cast his head and eyes down. He grabbed the beaker and bread and brought the ale to his lips.

A flash of memory came to him, of an ale house in the third circle, his friends chiding him and a group of guardsmen, bragging. This man, Andanor, stepped in on a conversation.. so long ago. He often would see him there, this Andanor.

'Yes, of course.' Gareth remembered, 'The Guard House Tavern... damn. I remember him. ' He threw a quick glance at Andanor and knew he'd recalled him as well.

Gareth brought his hand up to his eyes and leaned his elbow on the table. 'Damn this day.', the thought.

Galhadrim

The South Coast of Lebennin

Grendelenoth saw to it that several messages were dispatched to the north. Some were official and carried the seal of Tarannon. Others, slipped to a rider who knew better than to ask questions, were encoded in an ancient language that

was known only to very few in this land. Even if interpreted they would tell a simple story and give no real information. Grendelenoth had messages already in place that would be delivered upon receipt of what he handed off now. The Lord of Lebennin had an extensive intelligence network throughout the various cities. Actually, Tarannon would be shocked if he knew exactly how extensive. But his trusted advisor would never let that happen. Those with clean hands must stay above the muck and the mire, after all.

The riders were dispatched with the setting sun. They rode north with a purposeful speed and would make the fewest stops possible before reaching Linhir. Then other machinations would take messages and people to Pelargir, Minas Tirith, and beyond. Grendelenoth watched them depart, looking into the heavy clouds to the north. It would be rough going but his directions would get through.

Tarannon consulted with his Captains not far away. He broke from them and approached his advisor. "Grendel, your new carriage and team are ready. You'll be leaving in the morning?"

The dark eyes turned towards Tarannon. "No, immediately."

"What now, you won't even get some sleep before departing again?"

"To much to do, milord," said the emissary with a smile. "I'll sleep when I'm dead."

Khorazir

The Southern Coast of Lebennin

Tarannon nodded. Grendelenoth never seemed to grant himself some respite, and often Tarannon wondered how he managed to life through that. But well, these were not the only things he wondered about when it came to Grendel. On the other hand the man was efficient, and trustworthy (other than the snakes in council, Tarannon thought grimly, and my wife and my own dear brother amongst them), so who cared if his advisor was a little mysterious. "Be careful in Dol Amroth," Tarannon told him. "You know Prince Imrahil is no friend of ours. Nevertheless I wish you good luck with your negotiations."

Canamarth

Lossiel was a little shocked by Visilya's embrace and wanted to struggle free at first, but then just hung limp in her strong arm and let her tears flow.

"Túrin?" Maradir exclaimed. "You're here as well? What a strange meeting." He held out his arms and approached Túrin as if to embrace him but stopped short just in time. "I don't want to ruin what looks like a fresh shirt." He smiled and held out his hand instead.

Túrin grabbed and shook it heartily. Then the door behind the bar was opened and out stepped Faramir. Maradir just looked at him in surprise and shook his head. "Strange indeed..."

Khorazir

Lindórië swallowed slightly when she saw Lossiel weep in Visilya's embrace, but at the same time felt anger and even hatred stir in her for the men who had done this to the girl – a feeling which surprised her, since usually she was not one to give in to vengeful thoughts. With a sigh she turned back to Daewen, and roused her gently to make her drink some of the tea she had brewed. "I know you will want to sleep, but you must drink this first," she said softly. "It will help against the cough, and the pain, and prevent the fever from getting worse."

After Daewen had sipped half a mug of the steaming drink, Lindórië put it down again. “Visilya and Lossiel will look after you for a moment, until I return,” she said. “Try to drink the rest of the tea. You need the fluids. I shall be back in a short while.”

Signing to the other two to have an eye on the sick girl, she rose, but only Visilya took notice. “I must go and inform Faramir about the Southrons’ crimes,” Lindórië told her. “Stay with the two, and see what you can do to comfort them.” With that she left the room and made for the common room.

There Túrin had spotted Faramir, and waved to him, grinning broadly. “Look who’s here,” he called.

“I know,” Faramir returned with a smile, “since you have already announced him so loudly that most likely the entire inn has heard.” He also went over to Maradir and shook his hand. “I would say ‘tis a real surprise to see you here, dear friend, but somehow the day has been so full of surprises that this one is wellnigh overshadowed by the rest. But nevertheless ‘tis wonderful to see you again. When was it we met last? Must have been at your birthday in Ringarë, four months ago. But ere we talk, you should get into something more comfortable – and dry –, and take some food and drink.”

gladrieltook

Visilya let Lossiel go and gently wiped the tears from her face. “You have proven brave beyond your years, Lossiel, and I respect you. Friends?”

Canamarth

Lossiel wiped away her tears but they still kept streaming down her cheeks. She looked at Visilya with wide eyes. That woman wanted to be friends with her? Lossiel could not believe what she had just heard. Then she slowly nodded. She turned to look at the sick girl then took up the mug and held it to her parched lips.

“Always the perfect host,” Maradir smiled. “This is Morus, by the way. Lord Dinir sent him with me. But I’ll tell you about that after I’ve done what you requested.”

Damrod had already organised a wash-basin, some fresh water and a towel and within moments Maradir and Morus were rid of a layer of mud and clothed in fresh shirts and trousers.

Then Túrin ushered them into a corner of the common room where bread, wine, some hot stew and Faramir awaited them.

Khorazir

Faramir smiled when he saw Maradir and Morus return. “You must be feeling light as a feather, now that you have gotten rid of several pounds of mud,” he remarked. He waited until the two men (and Túrin as well) had helped themselves to food and drink, and watched them eat while sipping his wine. Now and again he cast a glance at the other people in the room. In particular the three talkative merchants seated at a nearby table and eyeing the newcomers curiously caught his attention. He wondered what tales of this strange night they would spread once they were on the road again.

When the three others had finished their first helping without interrupting talk, Faramir finally addressed Maradir. “By your looks you seem to have ridden far today, and speedily,” he said. “An urgent errand, I take it?”

Upon entering the common room, Lindórië at first did not see Faramir, and surmised that he might have gone to question the prisoner. Then she spotted him at a table in a corner, together with Túrin and two others who had been no members of the company, and judged by their still wet hair had not long ago come from outside. One of the men looked familiar, and at length Lindórië recognised him as a friend of Faramir's, whom she had met at the feast celebrating his coming of age four years ago. Maradir, that has been his name, she recalled, and wondered what he was doing here. A chance-meeting, it seems, she thought with a slight smile.

Since the four men appeared to be immersed in conversation, she did not go over to them, not wanting to interrupt their talk. Instead she approached the two peasant girls sitting at a small table not far from the door, both looking rather weary and downcast. They still wore their wet, mud-stained and slightly torn clothing, and looked not very comfortable on the whole. Lindórië surmised that they, too, had had to suffer at the hands of the Southrons. Seeing her approach, the two looked up. Lindórië smiled and greeted them. "I was wondering if you would like to change into some more comfortable clothes. I have a few spare ones with me, which I can lend you."

Canamarth

Maradir nodded and swallowed his last bite. "Well, not too urgent," he conceded when his mouth was empty. "Lord Dinir sent us to deliver a message to the Steward. Some minor troubles with a few upstart merchants who argued about taxes. But what brings you here? And what is this talk about Southron bandits I heard in the stables? They surely cannot have made it this far into the country without being noticed." He looked from Faramir to Túrin and back with a frown. "Or can they?"

gladrieltook

"I am glad," Visilya said. "I have too many enemies already. And I'm sure you do to." She sat down on the bed beside Dawen. Gingerly, she stroked the young girl's forehead. "Niether of you should have been dragged into all this..."

Canamarth

"Enemies?" Lossiel inquired. "I do not think I have made any serious personal enemies..." A yawn broke her off. "I am sorry but I think I need to get some sleep now." She got up and put the mug into Visilya's hands. "Thank you for - I don't know..."

She sat down on one of the free beds and started to undress.

"I think I now understand why Túrin prefers you. You have a kind heart yet you can be as fierce as any warrior. I wish I..." Lossiel turned her head towards the window, struggling to keep back new tears. She slid underneath the sheats and fell into a deep dreamless sleep as soon as she had closed her eyes.

gladrieltook

Visilya looked down at the mug. Her guilt crept over her like a tide. She set the mug down and rose. She paced, and paced. Finally she could take it no more. She collapsed into the chair and wept. Her head drooped and her back heaved with whole-hearted sobs.

Bardhwyn

Gareth took his hand away from his eyes, shifted uneasily in his chair and, keeping his gaze away from Andanor, he gave into his hunger. He hungrily stuffed a piece of the bread into his mouth and marveled at the flavour. No bread ever tasted better and the mouthful of ale that he washed it down with was better than delicious. He abandoned himself to this meager meal and for a few minutes thought of nothing but his own stomach.

The small smile that Andanor wore slipped his attention.

Khorazir

Faramir gave his friend a long glance. "Apparently they can," he at length answered gravely. "We more or less ran into them on our way here. I do not know yet whence they came and whither they were bound, and what their plans were. Three of them we took as prisoners, the rest was slain. One should think that our borders were well protected against such foes, especially in the South, where the Lords of the Pelargir and Lebennin watch the coasts and rivers. But apparently those Haradrim gave them the slip – or else their vigilance is not as keen and thorough as they claim."

The last sentence he had uttered with only half-veiled contempt. Then he shrugged. "But you asked what brings us in this region. We are on our way to Pelargir to deliver a message to Lord Falastur, and then on towards Lebennin. My rangers and I are riding escort for the Lady Lindórië who is on her way home. Moreover Túrin is with us, and Visilya and a ward of hers, a young beggar-girl she wants to find new parents and a good home for down south. Also there is Curufë the Noldo – the gent over there –" he nodded towards a table where the Elf was talking to some rangers "and a mercenary called Alessya, who, alas, seems to have vanished during our fight with the Southrons."

+++

The two peasant girls had gladly accepted Lindórië's offer, and had accompanied her upstairs, where she went to Daewen's room to fetch her saddlebags. Upon entering, her eyes fell on Visilya, weeping. For a moment she considered stepping back again and leaving her alone, but then she decided to inquire about what was so troubling the young woman. Visilya had not seemed someone who would give in to tears easily.

Stepping over to her and gently placing a hand on her shoulder, she asked softly: "What happened, Visilya?"

Canamarth

Maradir raised an eyebrow. "A company of rangers, the Captain of the Secret Guard, the Steward's son, a Noldo, and this Lordling here," Maradir slapped Túrin on his back, "as an escort for Lady Lindórië? I never knew she was that important."

Khorazir

"Well, actually I only accompanied him because he asked me if I'd like to," Túrin said, nodding at Faramir. "And because Visilya was planning to join us, journeying in the same direction," Faramir remarked with a smile, causing Túrin first to blush, and then to look positively uncomfortable.

"Well, yes," he conceded at length, "it's nice to see her again. But on the other hand ... it also hurts." He sighed deeply.

"You know, I thought it might do me good to get out of town for a while, and away from all those ladies. And after what happened at the inn ..."

Upon Maradir's questioning glance, he gave a short account of the strange evening that had so disturbed both his and Lossiel's life. "You won't believe it, Maradir. I had just made peace with her, so to say, and then up comes Visilya. Poor Lossiel. I never meant to hurt her. Nor Visilya, as a matter of fact. And now most likely both of them hate me." He glanced up at the ceiling. "I bet they have made their peace by now – I do hope they have – and now they're sitting together upstairs talking about what a horrible guy I am." He sighed again and hung his shoulders. "And perhaps they're right," he ended miserably.

Faramir exchanged a meaningful glance with Maradir, then shook his head slightly and patted Túrin's shoulder soothingly. "I do not think they do. I do not think it possible to hate you for long," he said with a smile, but that did not cheer up Túrin much. Faramir shrugged, and then took up Túrin's account, telling Maradir about Daewen and Visilya's plans for her, which had caused the two of them to accompany the Lady, the rangers and himself.

"Unfortunately the girl had an accident on the road, so that we were forced to journey on at gentle speed," he explained. "And then we met the Southrons, and were delayed even further. But as for Lindórië, you are right: she is important. The escort was Denethor's idea, and I guess I need not tell you more – indeed there is little more I could tell you, as he has been even more close than usual towards me. I sometimes feel he does not altogether trust me." He shrugged. "Well, so in fact Lindórië is the real captain here, for she knows what our errand is all about, and I do not. And honestly I am not unhappy about it. 'tis nice not having to bear all responsibility for once."

"And it's nice to finally be allowed to spend some time with her, right?" Túrin remarked, having apparently recovered from his fit of misery and self-reproach.

Now Faramir blushed slightly. "That too," he admitted.

Canamarth

Maradir smiled at Túrin's remark but thought it more politic not to comment. Then an inconsistency in Túrin's account struck him. "Didn't you say that Lossiel and Visilya should have made their peace by now? You surely did not take Lossiel with you, or did you?"

Khorazir

"Alas, no," Túrin exclaimed, "we didn't take her with us."

"But perhaps we should have done so," Faramir put in gravely.

Túrin took a deep breath and swallowed slightly. "Yes, perhaps," he said softly. Then he raised his eyes again to look at Maradir and Morus. "She ran away from home after the disaster at the inn," he explained. "Apparently she fled southwards – her family hails from the vicinity of Pelargir –, and then she was captured by those Southrons, she and two other girls. We found them in one of the carts."

Canamarth

"Poor girl," Maradir remarked. "From the frying pan into the fire..." He wondered why neither Faramir nor Túrin had spoken about the Southrons' other attackers as yet. He sat back and poured himself a glass of Faramir's wine. "You don't mind, do you?"

Khorazir

“Not at all,” Faramir replied with a smile, nodding to Morus to help himself to some wine as well. “You two looked as if you could really do with a rest when you arrived here. You seem to have covered quite some distance today, which must have been no fun in this dreadful weather. But honestly I am somewhat surprised to find you riding errands for the gentry, Maradir. I had imagined your job to consist of other, more dangerous duties than that, since you are always so secretive about it, and reluctant to reveal what it really is you are doing – even to your friends.”

EdaintheRanger

The small smile that Andanor smiled mostly to himself as he could see that discipline could go only so far. He let the lad eat, and signalled that cheese and a sliver of pork be fetched. The beer in this inn was a well-kept brew and potent, Andanor didn't want a hot blooded lad who couldn't hold his ale on his hands, no he wanted a relaxed subject, one who maybe more aimable to his requests...

As the guard ranger returned, (taking care not to be obtrusive or noticed.) Andanor pushed the food towards the boy again, his face taking a more benovolent demenour. He sat and sipped his drink, watchful and distant, waiting. As the lad tucked into these second helpings, Andanor's small smile returned, and “lets see how alert he is now.” crossed his mind.

“Gareth!” Andanor called clearly, and the stalled jerk of the lads head told its own story, confirming what the Lieutenant had been considering for the past few minutes. Gareth had tried to duck his eyes and remain unconcerned, content to eat as if Andanor was calling strange names in the dark.

“Fine then, if you wish to remain ignorant! I shall humour you. But surely your opinion could be given. How does this ale compare...” Andanor held up his cup for effect, “... with that fine amber brew at the Guard House for instance?” he said in a neutral tone.

“Come on, speak up, or has your free opinion, become worthless, I remember that you were rather more, scathing and critical of my ranger's stories, back then!”

Andanor now spoke with a broad grin.

Canamarth

Maradir smiled. “You're absolutely right. I'd never tell you anything about my job. But this isn't strictly one of my missions. We were in the South, officially, and when our task was done Lord Dinir asked us for a favour. Nothing more to it.” Maradir knew that Faramir was very perceptive and wondered if he could call his bluff. He was not worried about the Túrin. He had always been able to tell him the most preposterous stories imaginable and he would swallow them. Maradir's thoughts were interrupted when he saw a ranger coming out of the door Faramir had appeared through earlier. He fetched some cheese and pork from the inn-keeper, then stepped back through the door carefully as if trying not to make too much noise.

Maradir turned his attention back to Faramir. “Are many of your rangers hurt? Sorry I didn't inquire about this earlier but all I met seemed to be unscathed.”

Khorazir

Faramir's face darkened somewhat at his friend's inquiry. He nodded gravely. “Aye, most of them are unscathed indeed. Only two men were wounded during the skirmish. But one's life, alas, is still in jeopardy. Our youngster, Amdír, a

mere lad of nineteen. He received an arrow in the chest, and our healer is still unsure if he is going to make it.” He shook his head sadly. “Alas if he should die,” he said softly, more to himself. “So far I have not lost a single man during an errand, and one should think that the dangers one has to face in Ithilien are much graver than what one can expect to find here, in the very heart of Gondor, protected from all sides by hosts and fleet.” He sighed and looked at Maradir again, and his grave expression had changed to a stern one. “I really wonder how these cursed Southrons managed to come this far without being apprehended,” he said, and there was some fierceness in his voice. “They ravaged a village near here, and who knows what other crimes they committed. ‘tis unbelievable that no one should have noticed. Their disguise was not that good, after all.”

Bardhwyn

Gareth, watching Andanor’s wide grin, took the last bit of cheese and ate it. The food and ale filled his belly and his body was feeling relaxed and warmer for the food. The ale was a heady brew, no doubt. He picked up his horn and washed down the cheese, drinking the last of the ale. He silently wished he had more, much more.

He’d done his best not to react at hearing his name, but he knew he’d failed. ‘Might as well stand up and shout out my whole history at the top of my lungs.’ he thought to himself, miserably.

The Ranger had not only recognized him but remembered his name. It was not surprising, for Gareth had openly challenged two Rangers one evening, many years ago, in the Guard House Tavern when they bragged about an ambush but in the telling had obviously had disobeyed their Captain’s orders. This caused the deaths of one or two of their ranks and Gareth called them on this fault. He was chided by his friends and rebuked by the Rangers and this man, Andanor, had heard it all happen. He could remember him clearly that night, and on many nights thereafter. On that particular night, however, Gareth felt humiliated but still knew he was right in what he said, though no one supported him. And this man, Andanor, remembered it all and remembered him.

For the first time since that night, Gareth wished he’d had kept his mouth shut and let the Ranger’s brag.

Gareth placed the empty ale horn on the table and quickly reviewed his situation, as best he could for the ale was at work. He kept returning to that night at the Guard House, years ago, and the burning humiliation he still carried. Before he could stop himself he heard his own voice blurting out:

“And would you listen to my ‘free opinion’ now? You certainly didn’t then! I was right, you know, that night! They were at fault! Couldn’t you see that? Those men’s lives were wasted!”

Gareth had half risen out of his chair in the course of this outburst and was reseated by a quick shove on the shoulder by Andanor.

Humiliation once again overtook him and Gareth buried his head in his hands, not for things past but for his immediate mistake. He had allowed himself to be taken in and was now known. In frustration and anger he pounded the table with his fist causing the plates and ale horns to jump.

gladrieltook

Visilya started as Lindorie asked what troubled her. She looked up at the older woman. “It’s my fault that Lossiel ran away, that Turin is in pain, that Daewen is injured and ill. I should have left matters be, should have turned away from the Inn door when I had the chance.” She balled her fists. “Why do I always have to be so bloody hot-headed!?”

Khorazir

Lindórië nodded gravely. "I can see how these things must trouble you, and I will not say that you had no part in them, but certainly they were not your fault alone. There is nothing you can do about them anymore. But you can take care that you do not repeat your mistakes." She smiled encouragingly. "And now your help is needed." She glanced at Lossiel and Daewen. Both looked asleep.

Lindórië went and fetched her saddle-bags, then motioned to Visilya to follow her. "I shall look after those two later," she said, gently closing the door behind her. "The two peasant girls, I promised them to provide them with clothes as theirs are still wet," she explained to Visilya when they approached the room where the two were accommodated. The landlady had provided them with a washing-bowl, and as they stood there washing themselves, Lindórië could see that both had nasty scratches and bruises all over their bodies. Visilya and Lindórië tended those injuries as best they could, and Lindórië questioned the two gently about what had befallen. One of them, the younger, apparently, seemed too shocked still to speak, but the other gave a thorough account of the attack on their village and what happened to them afterwards.

Visilya and Lindórië tried to comfort them as best they could, before leaving them so that the two could try and find some rest. Lindórië had given them the two dresses she had brought with her to wear in Pelargir, and the two had been much surprised about the gift. When she and Visilya finally left the room, she turned to the younger woman. "I must go and tell Faramir about what happened to Lossiel and those two. Would you like to accompany me to the common room? Túrin is there, and another friend of yours, Maradir. Perhaps you would like to say hello."

gladrieltook

Visilya sighed and nodded. It would be nice to say hello to Maradir, and ask him if he had any news of Aliya. And she needed to talk to Turin.

Canamarth

Maradir shook his head as if in thought, then said: "I am sure you have someone with healing skills in your party. But Morus here is quite an adept at the art himself. I'm sure he could have a look at Amdír." He gestured to the door where he had seen the ranger emerge and reenter quietly a while ago.

Khorazir

Faramir glanced at the door briefly, wondering slightly why his friend should think that the wounded had been accommodated in this part of the inn instead of the bedrooms upstairs, but then he recalled that Laren had come to fetch some food and drink not long ago, which could have caused Maradir's assumption that he was looking after the injured. Moreover Maradir most likely did not know where exactly the bedrooms were positioned in the house. But still, the fact that he had noticed Laren's actions, where there was so much coming and going in the common room, seemed remarkable to Faramir. And this tale about his errand ... Faramir did not know much about what his friend was really doing for his job, and since apparently he was under obligations not to tell anybody, he had never inquired further about it. But he had a vague idea of it at least. And after what he had witnessed in the forest today, and heard from the young man they had captured, he thought he could flesh out this vague image with some more detailed information. And as much as he enjoyed the unexpected (and long overdue) opportunity to talk to his friend again, he deemed this chance-meeting to in fact have little to do with "chance", but rather with purpose. And the purpose, he supposed, sat behind that particular door.

He looked back at Maradir and Morus. "I shall tell Dorlas. I am sure he would appreciate some help. Amdír is not his only charge. Apart from him and Hallas there are three Southrons we took prisoner. All of them are injured, one

rather seriously. But honestly I am not sure anymore if we should really tend their wounds – after what I have heard of their deeds.”

“I think I can tell you more about those,” a gentle voice behind him said. Lindórië and Visilya had arrived at their table. Slightly surprised, Faramir rose, and introduced the ladies to Morus, and waited until Lindórië and Visilya had greeted him and Maradir. Then, as Visilya took his vacant chair, he excused himself, and went a few steps with Lindórië to a quiet corner, where they talked in low voices.

“I have spoken with Lossiel and the two peasant girls,” she said, and her face showed that what she had heard had not been pleasant. She swiftly repeated to him what they had been able to tell. “They are well, according to the circumstances,” she answered his concerned question.

He nodded gravely. “You will look after them?”

“Of course. What are you going to do with the Southrons?”

He sighed slightly and shrugged. “According to what I have heard I would say it would be just to simply kill them, and this was plainly what those dark-clad bowmen in the forest had in mind – or even what they were commanded to do. But on the other hand ... they are our prisoners, and they are wounded. I cannot just slay them without trial.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I shall decide about this in the morning. Would you please go and tell Dorlas that Morus here is also a healer, and would gladly lend a hand. Tell him also that he must be very careful with the prisoners. Take three more men with you to watch them. I do not want them to cause mischief.”

She nodded. “Aye, captain.”

He smiled slightly at this. “And then try and get some rest,” he said softly, reaching out to carefully brush back a strand of hair that had slipped out of her braid and fallen across her cheek. “You look weary.”

“So do you,” she replied, and stood on her toes to kiss him swiftly. Faramir was aware that well-nigh the whole common room and especially the merchants in their corner were watching them curiously, and thus felt almost painfully reminded of the errand he had all but forgotten during the previous busy hours. Giving Lindórië a gentle smile as she signed to three rangers to accompany her as she went upstairs, he returned to the table where the others were still seated.

Canamarth

“I’ll not tend to any Southrons,” Morus muttered when Faramir had got up. Maradir turned to Visilya and when he saw that she had been crying he asked: “Are you alright?”

gladrieltook

Visilya nodded. “Yes. I’m fine.” She ran her fingers through her hair thoughtfully. “Haven’t seen you in a good while, Maradir, my friend. What have you been up to?”

Canamarth

Maradir told her the story about his errand to the South again. “I thought we were in danger down there but we did not encounter any trouble on the road - if you discount a tavern brawl or two with the local peasantry - just to find that our friends have been threatened up here. I still can’t believe this.”
He heard Faramir returning to their table.

Khorazir

On his way back to the table Faramir had been thinking about their captive. What Lindórië had reported had confirmed the young man's account – not that he had really distrusted him. But finally the matter with the Southrons and their strange ambushers in the forest began to make sense. He remembered what he had promised the young man, and decided to go and inform Andanor that he could set him free.

Then his glance fell on Maradir and Morus, and again he wondered if they had anything to do with the matter – vague and farfetched though the assumption seemed. If so, they would certainly not appreciate the link and thus their true business being revealed to the others. Faramir was not quite sure if he himself really wanted to know about their doings in greater detail. Apparently their job was that secret (and important) that the Steward did not deem it safe to entrust information about it even to his own sons (*although Boromir may know*, Faramir thought with only the slightest trace of bitterness).

Taking a deep breath, he finally made up his mind, deciding against putting Maradir and Morus to the test to just satisfy his curiosity. Signing to them that he would be back in a short while, he turned again and made his way to the room where the captive was held.

Canamarth

Maradir's eyes followed Faramir as he walked through the door behind the bar. "I'll get my little store of herbs," Maradir said. "It looks as if you'll have something to do soon, Morus." He got up and walked into the stables to fetch a small leather bag full of dried herbs from a secret compartment in his saddle.

EdaintheRanger

"Hey, steady there lad, steady!" Andanor said with a note of concern in his voice, and made a pacifying gesture towards the obviously frustrated lad. Realising that the lad had given him useful information, Andanor changed tack. "Yours wasn't the place to judge. Orders and initiative are two separate decisions and that was confused incident, and delivered by men fuelled by ale, you didn't receive the full story. Those rangers didn't stay long in the Lord's service, for your information, if you must know!" He paused as so to let the word register.

Andanor realised that he was breaking his Lords confidence with those words, but the lad wouldn't know that. Andanor head was bowed briefly as he relived that ambush. Looking up his eyes met Gareth's offering a slight challenge.

"In fact they gave their lives, only a few weeks later. All so our people could have the 'freedom' to drink ale and live their lives, the way they chose. The way you chose!"

Andanor looked for an answer from Gareth, but he seemed a little surprised.

"Yet, here a few months down the line, I find you here, in this role. At that deadly place, were men's deeds are reactions made before 'the blink of an eye', I could have killed you back there, and who would have won?" Andanor himself looked frustrated as he spoke, shaking his head three times to reinforce his point. "Not I, Oh no, nor our Lord, but only he beyond the mountains, the name that we all fear to be uttered..."

Andanor allowed this all to sink in before, asking futher in a quiet almost imperceptible voice once which he knew that Gareth would strain to hear, yet feel honour-bound to listen to.

"Garn, what drives you? We are all men of Gondor here, fighting in her long and noble cause. Surely you know the sacrifices that are made in order to keep our people safe in their beds. I am now further convinced that obtusely we are working towards the same cause, for good or for ill. We have broken bread together, now let us speak as equals."

Khorazir

Laren stood outside the door, looking rather bored, and Faramir dismissed him. "Andanor's still in there," the ranger said before he left. "Seems he finally persuaded the lad to open his mouth."

Faramir nodded, knocked at the door, then opened it and stepped into the small room. He saw that Andanor had freed the other's hands so that the young man had been able to eat. Ale had been spilled on the table, as if someone had pounded the table hard or knocked over one of the drinking-horns, and Faramir wondered about this, but refrained from inquiring further.

Both the prisoner and Andanor looked up surprisedly when Faramir entered, and he realised that obviously he had interrupted their talk – and a serious talk it had been, judging from their expressions.

"It seems your account of the Southrons was true," Faramir said after a short while of expectant silence. "Which means that you are free to go. You are welcome to spend the night here at the inn, but if you prefer to return to your companions, you can do this also. No one will hinder you. I hope you forgive the rather rough treatment, but I am sure you understand that I had no choice."

Bardhwyn

"There is nothing to forgive, My Lord. If anything, I .." Gareth stopped himself. For a moment he'd forgotten himself and as Andanor had said, he saw himself as one of them; they were all men of Gondor, fighting desperately for its future. Yet his duty to the Steward and his oath stayed his tongue.

Gareth searched the face of the Steward's son for the slightest trace of deception but saw none. Andanor, at hearing Gareth cut himself short, gave a quick glance to Faramir. He then shifted in his chair and spoke:

'Aye, stay the night, lad. From the looks of it, it will be a while before you sleep in a bed again. Am I right?'

Gareth's eyes narrowed slightly as this suggestion. 'Aye, and then you'll ply me with more ale and questions, no doubt.' He thought to himself. Not answering, Gareth slowly pushed his chair away from the table and, leaning over, began to untie his own legs. While he was doing so, he struggled with what to do and was shocked at the realization he wanted to stay and talk more with this man, Andanor. In just the short time he sat with him, his view had changed – about the Rangers at the Guard House, about the true nature of battle, about his very function as one of the Steward's Men. Unlike Maradir, Andanor had experience and a practical wisdom. From Maradir, all Gareth seemed to hear was 'orders' and 'duty'.

Maradir! Gareth recollected his Captain could very well be outside, yet Faramir mentioned him not. Obviously, there is deception upon deception at work here.

A single word rose in Gareth's mind. Flee.

Gareth sat up and threw the untied rope on the table.

"I will leave now, My Lord, in the dark. Please, do not have me followed." Gareth looked at Andanor, "I would be honor bound to kill them and I will not have the blood of Gondorian on my hands, or have mine on their's – for one of us would have to die. That is the last thing I want."

Gareth stood, took a deep breath and looked the Steward's son directly in the eye.

"Give me your word, My Lord, none of your men will follow me."

Khorazir

Faramir noted the seriousness in the young man's voice as he spoke his demand, a seriousness that was mirrored in his eyes. Whatever code of honour there was amongst these strange men, and whatever their oath to their master, it must be a very stern business. Curse the darkness of our time where such measures are required to ensure that people can live in relative safety, he thought bitterly.

He held the other's gaze for a while, before nodding gravely (without averting his eyes). "You have my word. Of my men no one will follow you. But take heed. There may be others who might want to."

Bardhwyn

'Others?' Gareth grimaced at this remark. He knew Faramir spoke the truth regards his own men, but whom else could there be? He pushed his concern aside and nodded.

"I will have to take that risk then, My Lord." Gareth then bowed low to the Steward's son. Faramir had treated him with due caution but fairly and as he showed his respect Gareth realized, again with surprise, that he bowed to the Steward's son with more conviction than he had done in the presence of the Steward himself.

With a sobered expression he straightened and spoke:

"Is there a back door to this Inn? I am loath to walk through the Common Room, and my mask? Is it lost?"

Andanor, with a start, patted his pockets and withdrew the black leather mask and handed it to Gareth.

"Odd that there are warriors of Gondor wearing masks!"

"Tis not I that has said I am such, Andanor but you. I have only said I will not have the blood of a Gondorian on my hands... if I can help it." Gareth extended his hand to Andanor. "I would extend my hand to you sir, please take it. Then, if you would show me the back door."

Canamarth

The rain had finally abated. Maradir had just fetched the bag and was on his way back into the inn when he saw a figure flitting out of the backdoor. *Could he have escaped from the Rangers?* Maradir thought. But then he saw Andanor standing in the door, holding it open and watching the man depart. *They let him go?*

Maradir dashed back into the stables and traversed them to their far side, waiting for the man to pass by near him. He was not disappointed. He heard someone approach, though ever so quietly, and stepped out of the deeper shadows at the back of the stables.

EdaintheRanger

Andanor the lads hand, and shuck it firmly, gazing deeply into his eyes as he did so, as if he was attempting to view his soul.

"Good go with you, I hope our paths never again cross in opposition, for then one would fall. And they certainly would die hard." He said evenly as he opened the door.

"Speed you on your way, I wish you fortune in your deeds!" He even managed a sincere smile.

As the lad flitted away into the dark Andanor closed the door and let out a sharp breath. Clenching his fist he mut-

tered "I almost had him!" then returned to the tap room, to meet with the party and wish them a good night. He was privately furious with Faramir for letting the lad slip through their fingers, but shrugged and rolled his eyes, the young lord had a lot to learn. Besides Andanor was curious as to what was happening in the inn, ere he was away speaking to Gareth.

Khorazir

After Andanor and the young man had left, Faramir returned to the common room. He had noticed disdain in Andanor's face when he had set the lad free, and reckoned that his lieutenant did not quite approve of his decision. He made a mental note to talk to him later.

Upon entering the common room, he saw that Maradir had left the table, but that Lindórië had returned from upstairs and taken a seat. She was talking to Morus, since Túrin and Visilya seemed to have commenced a rather serious private conversation.

Faramir grabbed another chair and approached the table. "I have good tidings," Lindórië said when he sat down. "Dorlas told me that Amdír's condition has improved. There is still a danger that the lad will start to fever during the night, but Dorlas hopes he can prevent that. And Hallas is quite well – well enough, at least, to demand a hearty supper."

Faramir smiled, not hiding his relief. "Yes, this is a good sign indeed. Hallas is always hungry, except when he is really badly off. And what of the Southrons?" he asked.

"One is unconscious still," she answered, "the other two are sleeping. Apparently Dorlas gave them a potion. They will not cause any trouble tonight."

"Excellent," he said. "Well, Morus, it seems your healing skills will not be required today. By the way, where is Maradir?"

Canamarth

"He's just gone into the stables to get a pouch of healing herbs for me - or better said for Amdír," Morus answered.

Khorazir

"Ah, very well," Faramir said, wondering at the same time if this was the only purpose of Maradir's going in this direction. Perhaps he would try and meet the released prisoner – if there really was a link between them. But this, after all, is his own business, Faramir thought. "I do not hope that they are going to be needed still," he went on, "but 'tis good to know that you also have some with you. Dorlas' supply, I fear, will have been rather used up by now. But tell me what you have encountered in the south. Is there still trouble with the Corsairs?"

"Aye, and what of the Lord Tarannon of Lebennin? Have you heard of him?" Lindórië asked. "It has been some time since last I received a message from my husband, and I should like to know if he is well."

Faramir slightly raised an eyebrow at this. Lindórië took notice and gave him a swift smile and a wink, but then she looked back to Morus to await his answer.

Bardhwyn

Upon seeing the form emerge from the dark, Faramir's words of warning rang clear in Gareth's mind once again.

His hand instinctively went for his dagger, and he felt a flash of gratitude for its return upon his release, for it was his only defense.

The blade flashed as Gareth drew it from its sheath.

Canamarth

Morus looked from Faramir to Lindórië, then back again and shook his head slowly. "I'm afraid I can't tell you much news of the South. We more or less just arrived at the Poros when we met with Lord Dinir and he bade us carry this message to Minas Tirith. As we did not have much else to do we decided to take the errand. Maradir wanted to return home and so did I. There's a girl waiting for me in the city, you know." He managed a crooked smile.

"Hail and well met, Gareth," Maradir whispered on seeing that the man opposite him had drawn his dagger. "I see you have wound yourself out of this all on your own..."

Bardhwyn

"Maradir! You are here!" Gareth whispered in reply. He re-sheathed his dagger but in no way relaxed his guard. He moved in closer to his Captain and into darker shadow.

"I heard your name but doubted it was you being addressed, walking into a tavern full of Rangers. Yes, I am free. If you're here to gather information I can tell, from what I have overheard, all but three of the Southrons perished, and those who survived are wounded. Two Rangers were wounded as well. Did we suffer any loss?"

"Save your capture, no."

Gareth felt the uneasiness of the situation grow. Whispering in dark shadows in the midst of a garrisoned company of Faramir's Rangers was no place for detailed discussion...

"I shall make all haste back to camp. On foot I should be there an hour before sunrise, unless you want me here, to keep watch. Are you alone?"

"Morus is with me. He is inside."

"Then what will you have me do, Captain?" Gareth leaned against the side of the stable barn and thanked the Valar for the concealing darkness. The last thing he wanted was to look into Maradir's face.

Khorazir

"Ah, I see," Faramir said with a smile. "This is what speeds my rangers home, too. Usually they need much less time on the way from Ithilien to the City than in the opposite direction."

Cynara

Alessya melted out of the shadows of the common room, where she had been watching all that had gone on. Sitting at a table close by the others, she pondered the connection between the Southrons and the man Gareth.

Khorazir

While talking to Morus, Faramir spotted Alessya at a small table not far away. During the last busy hours he had all but forgotten about her, and he could not remember what she had done during the fight on the road. He was relieved to see her now, and wondered at the same time why he had not noticed her presence earlier. Apparently she had sat there for quite some time already.

Excusing himself from the others, he rose and went over to her. "I had been wondering what had become of you," he said. "You suddenly vanished during the skirmish with the Southrons. Did you accompany my men into the forest to follow the strange bowmen? Anyway, 'tis good to see you again. It would be a bad sign if I had lost a member of my company on the very first day of our journey."

Canamarth

Maradir thought about this for quite a while. What should they do now? Their errand had been fulfilled. But they had also been sent to keep their eyes and ears open for any other rumours about Southron activities. And Faramir was on his way southwards...

"I told Faramir that I was riding an errand for Lord Dinir... Morus could continue home alone. He can take the others..." The plan seemed to be formulating as he spoke. "I'll travel with Faramir and his company and see what information I can gather along the road. Is there any way you can return? Like pretending to have a decent night's sleep or so? I'd rather have someone of my company with me, though we wouldn't officially know each other, of course."

Bardhwyn

'What, you mean go back into the Inn and ask for a bed? I have only just managed my release!' The words spit out at Maradir in his mind, though he knew well enough not to voice them. Gareth collected himself as they crouched in the dark; the day's events swirling away in his mind. He leaned his head back against the stable and momentarily struggled with the situation.

"You'd have me ask to travel with Faramir's men, then?", Gareth whispered., "Why would they accept me, Captain? I was only moments ago their prisoner"

"Who was willingly released." Maradir answered. "Escorted to the back door, as well by Andanor, Faramir's second."

Gareth didn't reply. 'How much does he know?' he wondered. Gareth recollected Andanor's words, '...Who would win? He beyond the mountains...'

"Aye, that is true, Captain." Gareth let his head drop and a slight tone of remorse entered his voice. "Lord Faramir released me when my account of the Southron's raid was confirmed by the few survivors, all women, they freed from the Southron's caravan. He's aware of our company's existence, Captain, and I found it difficult not be moved by him. He is, after all, the Steward's son. I spoke, Captain, on more than one occasion and disobeyed our orders. I didn't divulge any information about our company," he added hastily, "I merely spoke about the raid on the settlement."

Maradir began to speak but Gareth stopped him..

“There is more, Captain. Andanor recognized me, remembered my name, even, from the Guardhouse Tavern. No doubt he’s reported to Lord Faramir by now. Walking back in there is not as easy as it seems. The only way I could is as a defector. They would then want information from me and I wouldn’t know what to say! This isn’t what I was trained for, I don’t anything about being a spy!”

Khorazir

Túrin and Visilya had withdrawn a little from the table where Lindórië was still chatting with Morus. “You said you wanted to talk to me,” Túrin said quietly, sensing that there was indeed need of talk, but that this conversation was something he would have preferred to avoid. “It’s something serious, isn’t it?” he ventured when she did not answer at once. She nodded slightly. He took a deep breath. “Well, let’s get it over with, then,” he muttered. “Is it about Lossiel?”

gladrieltook

Visilya sighed and nodded. “Among other things. I feel that I have hurt her badly. She loves you, just as I love you, and she feels as though, well, as though she isn’t as worthy of you as me, and I feel guilty.” She massaged her brow, looking for words to express what she felt she had to say. “Lossiel... is a very special young woman, faithful, and yet willful. She forsook her father’s trust for you, and I think that is worth more than anything I could ever give you...” She broke off and looked away. She didn’t know how to say this.

Khorazir

Túrin stared at her, swallowing hard. He could guess what would come now, and he did not know what to reply. He did not want to lose her, but he could see that the situation as it stood now was unbearable for her, for Lossiel, and for himself.

“It’s not you who hurt her, Visilya,” he said hoarsely. “I did. And I hurt you as well. I don’t know what it is you love about me, but honestly, both of you deserve much better than someone like me. I’m irresponsible, selfish, naive – that’s what Daewen said, and she was right. For your own good, you’d better stayed away from me.”

gladrieltook

Visilya shook her head. “Turin, I love you because you are kind, and brave, and honest. You saved my life in more ways than one that night so many years ago. And it was I who disrupted the love that was blossoming between you and Lossiel. She needs love, and she wants it from you, because you are special.” She touched his shoulder, but drew back. “I cannot, and will not, stand between you two.” She stood and walked away.

Cynara

Alessya smiled at her employer. “Indeed, that would be bad luck. But I was up beyond the fight with the archers. I found three young Southron men, apparently traveling to join their companions, but they will bother no one any longer.”

Khorazir

“Visilya,” Túrin called after her, half rising from his chair. She did not turn, but instead increased her pace. Túrin sank back into his seat and buried his face in his hands. He felt completely wretched. So both of them loved him, and alas, he loved them too, differently, perhaps, but equally strong. He had known for some time that apparently he had much the ladies found attractive, and generally he had very much enjoyed this fact, and the situations resulting of it, but now he wholeheartedly cursed his charme or whatever it was that drew them towards him.

When he looked up, he saw Morus and Lindórië glance at him over the table, quite concernedly, in the lady’s case. He returned her gaze for a short moment, before feeling that he could not endure it any longer, that he needed some time on his own, away from company. “Excuse me,” he said hoarsely, stood, and left the common room with a speed close to that of a flight.

+++

Faramir gave Túrin a questioning glance when his friend rushed past, but then shrugged and shook his head slightly. “Seems to be worse than I thought,” he muttered, and there was pity in his eyes.

But when he turned back to Alessya, his face was impassive again. “I take it you did not have an opportunity to question the Southrons you intercepted? Well, it does not matter much if you did not. I have not yet spoken with those we captured on the road, either. Already I know of the crimes they most likely have committed, and I am not sure if I would like to hear more about them. But tell me, have you encountered anything else that struck you as unusual?”

gladrieltook

When Visilya reached the door leading outside, she flung it open and broke into a run. She ran and ran until she could not see the Inn, and then some. Finally, she collapsed on the ground and lay sobbing.

Canamarth

“Not yet, you haven’t been trained,” Maradir muttered then added louder: “Ok, so you have been recognised. And Faramir knows - or guesses - there’s a special troop under the Steward’s command that is especially keen on secrecy. How can we use that for our purposes?” Maradir’s brow creased as he was thinking. “Do you by any chance have any relatives or friends in the south of Gondor? Because you could have hurried back to your camp just to find out your company had already gone and after you’ve been captured and recognised you somehow don’t fancy facing your captain right now. So you decided to march further south instead. How does that sound?” Maradir knew he could just have given Gareth an order but he wanted to know what he thought about the plan. It would not do if it sounded too preposterous.

Gareth was about to answer when they heard somebody running past the stables and further down the road. When the rapid steps had faded, Maradir whispered: “I need to go back now. Anyone could come around the corner and listen in on us. Go back to the camp. Tell the others they can go back to Minas Tirith and that I’ll stay with Faramir. Morus will be with them tomorrow. It’s entirely up to you if you want to join me or not.” With that Maradir stealthily made his way back to the side of the stables and peered around if somebody was in sight. Then he emerged out of the shadows and walked casually back over the courtyard. He had just about reached the door when it was opened and Túrin stepped out.

Khorazir

Túrin looked up briefly, then cast down his eyes again and brushing past Maradir, he left the inn and swiftly walked

down the road till the inn was out of sight, and only the lights of the few other houses of the village could be seen blinking through the trees that fenced the village round. He leaned against a flowering apple-tree that stood to one side of the road, not caring that its bark and branches were still soaking wet from the rain, and closed his eyes, breathing deeply, and feeling horribly tempted to burst into tears. He resisted that urge – barely –, and when after a while the cool nightair had cleared his head, he began to think about how to solve this more than complicated problem without hurting the ladies even more.

asaris

Curufë was quiet that evening, merely sitting alone in a corner sipping his wine. Watching Turin had reminded of his own love, lost to him so many years ago. He had not thought about Narlossë for many years, but her face was still as vivid to him as when they both still lived in Beleriand. She had been the wife of Maedhros, Curufë's brother-in-law, and did not return his affection. It was not that she disliked Curufë, only that she did not feel the romantic pull towards him. For his part, Curufë was always perfectly honorable in word and action, though both Maedhros and his wife knew of his love for Narlossë. She had been one of those who had sailed from Beleriand at the end of the first age, after the death of Maedhros, and Curufë found himself wondering, on this night, what she was doing now, and if she had ever thought of him again. She had been quite beautiful...

gladrieltook

Visilya, through her tears, could hear the footsteps of someone coming after her. She didn't care. They stopped some distance away, and she looked up to see why. It was Turin. She felt like an arrow was piercing her heart as she looked at him. She curled herself into a ball, and lay there, not moving, and praying that he wouldn't see her.

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen woke after several hours of sleeping. For a brief moment she forgot where she was, but a quick review of her injuries soon revived her memory. As she sat up partially, she noted that the room was mostly empty. Someone slept in a bed along the far wall, the form barely visible in the light of two dim candles. She rubbed her eyes, debating whether to go back to sleep or find the others. A half-hearted attempt at standing, which brought about an intense dizziness, made the choice for her. She sat down on the bed again. After coughing a few times, she remembered that there should be some sort of tea nearby. Fumbling around in the semi-darkness, she found the mug and sipped what was left of the contents. She grimaced. It had gone cold.

With a sigh, she lay back down and drew the covers closer to herself. She didn't know where her own clothes were, nor whose she wore now. At least she was dried out; well, mostly dry. Parts of her hair were still damp and were chilly against her skin. Shivering, she buried down deeper into the blankets. *I wonder where the others are*, she thought. Did it even matter where they were? Her head began to hurt, and so she closed her eyes, hoping sleep would come again.

Bardhwyn

As Maradir slipped off into the dark Gareth remained crouched with his head buried in his hands. He heard only one clear order... 'Go back to the camp...' but the rest was useless. He shot up and punched the empty air. 'Damn! What am I to do!' he yelled at himself in his mind. Morus would have to leave and Maradir would be left alone on a mission. This didn't sit well with him and the one clear order he was given took him away. Gareth paced a bit and opted to follow Maradir's order. That, at least, he knew he could do.

More footsteps approached, again at a quick pace and Gareth ducked back down into the dark by the stable wall. A

tall man swiftly paced passed the stable and down the road towards the village. As the figure melted into the dark, Gareth breathed easy once again. Once the sound of the footsteps faded Gareth himself set out down the road, staying close along the tree line. He silently began the long journey on foot back the camp.

Once there, he decided, Morus would soon arrive after him and together they could discuss the next step. In no way did he feel confident to act on his own, not yet.

The lights of the Inn receded into the darkness and only a few lights shown through the trees that surrounded the village. Ahead Gareth saw a shifting form, standing near a tree, that of a man. Quietly Gareth took up a position behind a tree and waited for the man to leave. Peering into the further distance he saw another form shift, low and on the ground. Animal or man, he couldn't tell. He cursed his foul luck and resigned himself to wait in the dark for these obstacles to clear.

Crouching in the dark the words he spoke to his Captain repeated in his mind... 'I don't know anything about being a spy!'... Somewhere deep down he sensed he was going to have to learn, and learn very quickly.

EdaintheRanger

Blithely ignorant of the emotional turmoil around him Andanor decided to leave Turin and his problems alone for the moment, and Curufë seemed to be withdrawn into his own council. Faramir's friend intrigued him though, a military man obviously, but one whom Andanor hadn't see before. Something nagged him at the edge of his sense, danger? Andanor couldn't be sure and he knew that many men took office with the Steward in undertaking his many labours. The watch set against external threat, Andanor couldn't see that there was much else to do save turn in, any business with Faramir could wait till the morn.

He ran his hand through his now greasy hair and looked around. He saw a comfortable inn, one which he would like to tarry at longer, but duty called. Treading softly he climbed the stairs checking that the guests were alright. As he moved through the building he remembered the young charge whom Visilya had brought in and decided to see if she was any better. Finding her room he knocked softly.

Canamarth

Maradir watched Túrin brush past him, wondering if he should follow him but decided against it. He had fled the inn and not gifted him with either word or glance so he probably wanted to be on his own. Or he was running after the person who had left the inn hurriedly just a minute before him. Whatever it was, Maradir shrugged it off and went inside.

He found Faramir talking to a woman he had not seen before and Morus talking to Lindórië. He walked over to the latter couple and put the small bag of herbs on the table. "It's not much but I hope it will help."

Khorazir

Túrin did not know how long he had stood underneath the tree, lost in thought – but without finding a solution to the problems that weighed on his heart like lead. At length a gust of wind stirring the flower-laden branches above him and sending a light shower of rain down onto his head and shoulders stirred him out of his gloomy reflections. It was rather cold, he realised, and wet, and actually altogether uncomfortable. So what now, he thought dejectedly. Back to the inn and get drunk, was the first thing that came to his mind, but he rejected the suggestion almost immediately, knowing that this would achieve nothing, and only make him feel worse on the morrow. But returning to the inn did not seem a bad idea. At least it was warm there, and although he did not appreciate the proposition of much talk and company tonight, he did not want to be left alone with his thoughts, either. Women, he thought bitterly, you can't live

with them, but you can't live without them, either.

He kicked the treestem in frustration, releasing a deluge of water from the branches which he did not quite manage to avoid by jumping back. "Yeah, fine," he complained to the tree, shaking water from his hair, "so you're against me, too. Alright, I'm leaving. Content now, are you?"

With that he returned to the road, and made his way back towards the village. When he had reached the trees surrounding the few houses and farms, suddenly he stopped short. He had the strange feeling of being watched, without being able to define exactly where the person might be situated. I remembered that Visilya had also left the inn. Had she walked in this direction? He did not really want to face her right now, and knew that she would not appreciate meeting him again so soon, either, but he felt that after the strange occurrence with the Southrons, no one should be out on his or her own tonight. He turned and studied the dark trees around him. "Visilya?" he asked quietly.

+++

Seeing Andanor leave the common room and ascend the stairs, Lindórië was reminded that she had promised Daewen, Lossiel and the two other girls to return and see if they were alright. Moreover she wanted to check on Dorlas and inquire if there was anything he lacked still. Glancing around, she saw that Faramir was still talking to Alessya, the Noldo Curufë sitting by himself, apparently lost in some fair – or rather bitter-sweet – memory, the merchants and some rangers sitting together chatting merrily, another group of rangers playing cards, and Maradir who had returned from his expedition to the stables, and had come to their table.

"I am sure Dorlas will find use for it," she said upon his words. "I was about to go and see him, so I can take the herbs with me. I shall ask if he still needs your help, Morus." With that she rose. "Please excuse me for a moment," she said to him and Maradir, and going over to Faramir and Alessya, she lightly placed a hand on his shoulder, upon which he turned to her.

"I shall go and check on the girls and Dorlas. Maradir has provided some herbs he might find helpful," she said. "Is there anything you want me to tell him in regard of the Southrons?"

Faramir thought for a moment. "Honestly I would appreciate not having to deal with them tonight," he answered. "If Dorlas can see to it that they stay asleep, this would be a great help. Then we can be rather sure that they cannot make any mischief tonight."

She nodded, and giving him a gentle smile and a light caress along his cheek, she left the table and made her way to the stairs. Faramir glanced after her for a moment, smiling as well, before turning his attention back to Alessya.

Lady_of_Rohan

"Oh go away," Daewen muttered, not pleased with the knocking on the door. She had just gotten comfortable too. Pushing back the covers, she managed to stand and tried to ignore the dizziness she felt as much as possible. With hesitant, somewhat stumbling steps, she reached the door, and opened it, flinching as the brighter light fell on her pale face. She leaned against the doorframe and shivered as a cool draft of air drifted along her feet. "What do you want?" she asked grumpily, recognizing him as one of her travelling companions. The footsteps of another person could be heard coming down the corridor as well.

Bardhwyn

Pressing himself closer to the trunk of the tree, Gareth watched the dim outline of the walker stop on the road and call out an unfamiliar name in his direction.

'Just keep going...' he silently begged, 'keep going..'

His hand fell on the hilt of his dagger as he silently watched and waited. Deep in the wood an owl hooted its soft call into the dark.

gladrieltook

Visilya winced at the sound of Turin's voice calling her name. Slowly she lifted her head and pushed herself into a sitting position. She shifted herself, and crawled to the edge of one tree. A sudden sound diverted her attention, however. She rose and crept to the edge of the woods, and thrust her hand behind it, catching hold of a cloak edge. She nudged on the cloak, and from behind the tree stumbled a man. In a flash, her dagger was at his throat. "Who are you? Who sent you?" Her voice was a deadly whisper.

Khorazir

Upon hearing the owl, Túrin shrugged, and was just about to continue his way, when a rustling sound came to his ears, and then that as of something hitting the ground. "Visilya?" he called again, with a note of disquiet in his voice. When there came no answer, he drew his sword, and taking a deep breath, he went over to the trees to investigate.

Canamarth

Lossiel drifted close to waking. She thought she heard someone talking and turned around in bed without opening her eyes, yet.

Maradir quietly told Morus of Gareth's release and his plan to stay with Faramir and his company. "You go back to camp tomorrow and take the others to Minas Tirith. Let Gareth come back here if he wants to. I'd like to have some of my company with me."

Morus nodded. "I'll go and have some sleep now, if that healer doesn't ask for me." He rose and walked over to Faramir and Alessya. "Sorry to interrupt. But will the healer need me tonight? Cause if he doesn't I'll get some sleep now."

Khorazir

"I do not think he will require your help tonight," Faramir replied. "If things were that critical, he would have asked for you earlier, I am sure. So have a good night."

Cynara

Alessya shrugged lightly, and smiled. "No, I did not, but it was pretty dark, and the Southrons were making more noise than a horse in a trap. Something may have slipped past me."

asaris

Noting that the common room was beginning to thin out, as the night grew late, Curufë walked over to the table

where Faramir and Alessya were sitting. “May I join you?” the elf asked. Faramir nodded, and he pulled up a chair.

Cynara

Alessya eyed the elf curiously. “I’m afraid we don’t know much about each other...”

Bardhwyn

“Who are you? Who sent you?”

“It is I, Laren”, Gareth whispered, “Andanor sent me, to keep watch” The woman’s body relaxed slightly at hearing this and the dagger moved away from Gareth’s neck slightly. The approaching man’s voice could be heard yet again, quizzing the darkness...

“Visilya?”

This name caught both their attention but the woman more so and she took a quick intake of breath. This was enough of a distraction for Gareth to capitalize on and on seeing the dull glint of the man’s sword he acted quickly. Grasping the woman’s wrist and arm he attempted to disarm her but not without effort. She tried an evasive move, expertly so, and he countered her forcefully, twisting her hand and wrist. With a small cry she loosened her grip on the dagger, dropping it and Gareth, standing upright from his crouched position, flung the woman into the arms of the approaching man with all his strength.

Without looking back he sprinted down the road.

Khorazir

Túrin had trouble to remain on his feet when Visilya was pushed into his arms with all might. He steadied himself as best he could, then staggered backwards again when she pushed herself away from him to dart after the fugitive. Túrin had seen only a glimpse of a dark-clad figure, and he thought he knew who the man was. “Visilya, wait,” he called, and lunging forward, he caught her arm and held her back with all might. “Let him go. I’m sure Faramir set him free. He wouldn’t have been able to escape from that room by himself.”

+++

Faramir smiled at Alessya’s remark. “I am sure the story of Curufë’s life would fill many books, and I cannot claim to know more than a paragraph from one page or so. But you have not told us very much about yourself either, Alessya. Oh, by the way, I would like you to meet a very good friend of mine – my best, actually. ‘tis a lucky stroke of fortune that he chose to spend the night at the same inn as we.” Signing to Maradir to come over to them, he introduced the three to each other, and told Maradir that he had asked Curufë and Alessya to accompany him on his errand.

“Curufë has journeyed in the South recently,” he explained, “as he came to the City from Dol Amroth. And Alessya has skills that might be helpful for the successful completion of our errand. She took care of three Southrons that did not travel with the main caravan while we were busy fighting the others.”

+++

Seeing that Andanor was talking to someone in the girl’s room, Lindórië decided to visit Dorlas first. The healer had finally found time to eat something and change into dry clothes, but he looked extremely weary. Lindórië handed him Maradir’s herbs, and Dorlas’s face brightened a little when he looked through the contents of the small bag.

“This is very nice of this man – Maradir was his name, right? I won’t be needing them tonight, hopefully, but who

knows what tomorrow will bring.” He cast a worried glance at Amdír, whose face was white as a sheet, and who was breathing only faintly.

“Please tell me if you need someone to relieve you of the watch tonight,” Lindórië said. “You should really get some rest. I will be in Daewen’s room.”

Dorlas nodded. “Thank you, lady. How’s the girl, by the way?”

“I was about to have a look. She was sleeping when I left her. But now she seems to be up again. Andanor is talking to her. But as I said, feel free to wake me any time. You should not be forced to stay awake all night.”

Dorlas managed a faint smile, and Lindórië left him to see how the girls were doing.

gladrieltook

Visilya glared after the retreating figure. “Andanor sent him. I should have know.” She picked up her dagger and slipped it back into her boot. Turning, she headed back to the Inn, ignoring Turin, and rubbing her wrist.

Khorazir

Túrin looked after her, taking a deep breath. Turning, he gave the direction in which the dark-clad man had vanished another glance. He fervently hoped that it had indeed been the strange man the rangers had taken prisoner during the skirmish, and that Faramir had ordered his release. Real trouble might result out of it if he was wrong, he mused, but then shrugged off the gloomy thought. After all, he had problems enough. Sheathing his sword again, he also returned to the road and made his way back to the inn.

Canamarth

Maradir looked at both Alessya and Curufë with interest. “You cerainly have interesting friends, Faramir,” he remarked with a smile.

Khorazir

“Indeed I have,” Faramir replied, smiling as well. “And you are not the least interesting of them, for sure. I am really glad to have met you here. What a pity that tomorrow our ways are going to part again when you ride on to Minas Tirith.”

Cynara

Alessya smiled at Faramir. “And I’m sure that you be no less strange,” she teased him. “I’m meeting all sorts on this job, eh?”

asaris

“Despite what you may think, I am probably the least interesting one here,” Curufë said with a self-effacing grin. He turned up his hands apologetically and added, “I am merely a hunter, after all.”

Bardhwyn

Only as the last outlying cottages of the village receded into the dark wood behind him did Gareth break out of his sprint and slowly walk to a halt. Confident he hadn't been followed nor seen he leaned over, in the middle of the dirt road, and tried to catch his breath. Not since his training on the borders of the Mirkwood had he run as had just done... though this time it was real and not an exercise.

He looked up at the sky, searching for stars he could recognize in hopes of finding his direction. The clouds skirted by allowing only a glimpse or two of the night above and the half moon reflected off the edges of most clouds with a silver light. He sputtered in frustration, for there was no guidance from above. He would have to rely on the roads and his memory to find his way back to their camp.

Looking around once again for any sign of being pursued and sensing none, Gareth started off at a jog and soon broke into a comfortable running pace, all the while keeping a sharp eye out for the scene of battle from earlier on that day. Once there, he knew he could find his way back.

Thoughts of meeting his comrades filled his mind as he ran. ‘What are they going to say?’ he mused.

gladrieltook

Visilya shoved open the door to the Inn and hastened up the stairs to her chambers. She barred the door and flung herself upon her bed, ignoring the tea which had been left by the landlady. She lay in deep thought, her eyes shut tight, a slight moisture gathering about her eyelashes. Her mind felt like a great battle were being fought in the midst of a storm inside her head. She groaned and clutched her temples. Why me... She thought with a moan. Her chest and legs were sore and stiff from running so much, then laying on the hard ground for so long. Her muscles screamed, her lungs gasped for air, and yet she lay without sign of life.

Canamarth

“I am sure you will be able to tell lots of interesting tales from your hunts, though, master elf,” Maradir remarked on Curufë's answer. When Faramir indicated that they would have to part again on the morrow, Maradir resumed: “I was thinking about that, my friend. It's not very far to Minas Tirith now and Morus can make the journey on his own without problems. I was actually thinking of joining you if you don't have any objections.”

Faramir looked at him a little surprised but a smile finally spread on his face. “I would be delighted to count you amongst my companions. Especially now that the roads do not seem to be as secure as they used to be. Maradir is an excellent archer, you should know,” he said turning back to Alessya and Curufë.

When Gareth had reached the vicinity of their camp in the woods he suddenly heard something or someone thump to the ground behind him, followed by a challenge in Sindarin: “Who goes there?”

EdaintheRanger

Under his profession exterior Andanor was a little taken aback with the image of the girl, she was quite drawn and pale, weak from her illness. Immediate concern over took his errand, "By Lord Denethor lass, you're not well" he said as without asking or prompting reply he scooped her up and carried her back to her refuge. Once he had got over her glare and disgruntledness he said "Well, I was going to ask if you were going to be able to travel, but even I can see you need rest." Andanor then politely enquired as to her name and how she had found her way onto this road, as Andanor was realising that he knew so little about his travelling companions, being engrossed in his work as he had been.

asaris

"An excellent archer? Well, then, we shall have to have a small competition sometime. The bow is not my favorite weapon, but I have been known to use it from time to time."

Lady_of_Rohan

You certainly are an observant one. Daewen kept the sarcastic thought to herself. She had hoped he would merely be content with seeing that she was ill and then leave. Much to her disappointment, he stayed, and started asking questions. With a somewhat frustrated sigh, she burrowed down under the covers before making an attempt at answering his inquiries. When she spoke, she noticed her voice was carrying a raspy note. "I don't know my real name, or even if I have one. The guards in the city watch back in Minas Tirith always called me Daewen, so that's what I call myself now. As for how I got thrown in with this group – that's a strange tale of its own. A few nights ago I was out roaming the streets trying to pickpocket some unwary people and there was absolutely no one out. Since that wasn't working, I decided to use some force. Well, the next person I saw was Túrin, and, well, he got robbed. And I got caught." Her face took on a slight pout as she recalled that, then returned to her previous demeanor. "I was taken into custody by Captain Visilya, who later told me that she was taking me to Lebennin and going to find a home for me there." She shook her head. "And that's how I got here, half drowned and sick."

Cynara

Alessya grinned.

"I don't see the point to archery, myself. A good throwing knife can do much better, I'd say!"

Bardhwyn

"Who goes there?"

Gareth halted at hearing the Sindarin and raised his hands up and outward, slowly.

"A friend of the Steward." Gareth replied in Sindarin. There was a tense moment of silence. "Is that you, Calmir?" Gareth added.

Gareth felt a hand on his shoulder turn him round. Calmir looked calmly into Gareth's face, but long, as if searching for something lost.

"You look all right. You're free and on foot. Where are Maradir and Morus? Are they close behind? Did they free you?"

"No, they're still at an Inn about half a league from the battle site and no, they didn't free me. Faramir released me. It was his company of Rangers we met on the road. Maradir and Morus are with them now, under some guise or another. I am not sure how. Come, I will tell all..."

Gareth ran his hand through his hair and turned to cover the last little distance that lay between them and their camp. Calmir stopped him, bade him to wait with an open hand and brought his hands to his lips and made a perfect bird call. The call was returned some distance off.

"There, we're safe to advance now." Calmir said, "Added precautions. You wouldn't have made it to that boulder alive, otherwise." Calmir pointed 6 feet ahead to a small boulder partially covered with saplings.

Together the men advanced and as they did so a number of bird calls issued forth into the night air. They were answered and gradually the shapes of darkly clad men emerged from the wood and collected around a small clearing. There were no fires, no lean-tos or beds to be seen; yet this was the company's camp.

"Darmen," Gareth called out, looking for the third in command. Darmen stepped forward, having only just arrived from his perch a little way south of the camp.

"Gareth, good to see you alive. We thought you well on your way to Mandos. Maradir and Morus, where are they?"

Darmen motioned the company to sit and Gareth proceeded to repeat himself and upon learning it was Faramir's company they'd met earlier in the day, there was quiet murmuring amongst the men gathered in the dark.

"Faramir released you?" A voice said.

Darmen watched Gareth nod and thought to himself that there was more to it than the lad was willing to say. "He is a fair man." Darmen interjected, "no doubt he saw no point in keeping you, silent as you, no doubt, were and obviously no enemy to him or his men." Gareth nodded silently yet again and smiled, briefly.

"So, The Rangers – they finished the job did they? Good men..." a voice called out.

"Yes, all but three perished and those three are wounded, dying I think. They found survivors from the settlement, all women and alive." Gareth said, running his hand through his hair. The company murmured amongst themselves yet again.

"So, Maradir will travel on with the Steward's son and we can expect Morus in the morning, then?" Darmen asked. "Good. Morus can ride back with an urgent dispatch that arrived today. The Steward's personal Herald rode out, unaccompanied, brave man, to get it to us. We will wait for Morus, send him back and make for Minas Tirith as ordered."

"No, wait, Darmen." Gareth voice stopped the men from dispersing back into the dark. "Morus can't return. He is supposedly riding with a message to Minas Tirith and for him to return would be strange. I don't think that is what Maradir would want."

Darmen stopped and thought it peculiar this lad would dare speculate what the Captain would want.

"I could go back with it." Gareth offered. "He did ask me to join him, but I couldn't see how I could do so, convincingly."

The company was silent, save for one man coughing slightly.

"Maradir asked you to join him? What are you doing here, then?"

"He didn't order me, Darmen. He said I could if I wanted to. Besides, I'm not trained to be a spy."

'Not yet, you aren't.' Darmen thought as he kicked the ground with his boot. The lad was young, inexperienced but sharp. "We wait for Morus." Darmen announced. If there are further instructions from Maradir, he will carry them.

Meantime eat something and get some rest, Gareth. Somehow, I think you'll need it."

The men slowly melted back into the dark and Gareth was shown to a nearby tree, which had a flet cleverly concealed two-thirds up its trunk. He scaled the tree effortlessly, grabbed a blanket that lay nearby, wrapped himself and tried, desperately to get at least a few hours sleep.

EdaintheRanger

A brief concern crossed the lieutenant's face as he considered her comment on her feelings, while he nodded as she quickly related her story. "Well here's to your recovery, my healers will take care of you. Soon have you fighting fit!" he grinned, but realising that the poor girl was in no need of humour, he made a mental note that it was important that she got adequate attention, if the party was to be underway soon. With a curt nod he quietly left the room. Checking that the inn was under a careful watch, Andanor went back to the common room to trade words with the occupants.

Entering the common room, he found that even at this late hour there were still patrons active. Seeing the mercenary and the Elf-Lord engaged in a rapt conversation he asked if he could join their table, collecting a flagon of ale on the way.

Canamarth

"But a throwing knife doesn't have the range of a bow. You have to get quite close to your quarry to do any harm," Maradir observed. He then turned to the elf. "I'd be honoured to pit my feeble skills with the bow against your undoubtedly accomplished ones. I'm sure you had a lot more time to practice." A smile cracked his face when Andanor asked to join them.

Cynara

Alessya just smiled and shook her head. "It's pretty late, I guess I'll head to my room. 'Night."

Canamarth

"Good night," Maradir prompted and stifled a yawn. "She is right, though, I guess. It's been a long ride for me today. So, if you'd excuse me." He got up slowly and followed Alessya upstairs.

EdaintheRanger

Andanor bid them good night, faintly perplexed as he was none the wiser from their acquaintance.

"Well bugger this for a lark" he thought to himself slipping into a vulgar soldier's argot, and feeling his own weariness beckoning, he quaffed a quick half of ale and headed off to bed. Checking first that the watch rota was vigorously adhered to. The need for vigilance was ensured by a few choice words into the ears of the watching rangers.

Curufë quaffed his wine, and said to those remaining, "I hate to leave, but I think I should join those on watch. I do not really need the sleep, and my eyes could be useful." He then followed Andanor to where one of the guards was stationed.

Khorazir

Faramir had listened to the conversation at the table with a smile. An archery-contest between Maradir and Curufë would indeed be something. He had not seen the Noldo's skill with the bow yet, but he knew that Maradir was a marvellous archer, and nicknamed Curu-cú for his skill. And although his friend's decision to join the company had astounded him, he was glad about it.

When most of the others had left and Curufë also had taken his leave, Faramir rose as well. The common room was almost empty by then, except for those who had settled down there to sleep. Knowing that Andanor had taken care of the nightwatch, and feeling pleased that the Elf had decided to join the sentinels, Faramir set out in search for a place for the night. He doubted that one of the beds would still be vacant, and since he did not want to disturb the sleepers in the various rooms while looking for one, he decided to go upstairs and get himself a blanket, and then to return to the common room.

Just when he had reached the stairs, the door was opened and Túrin stepped in. He looked troubled. When he spotted Faramir and noticed his questioning glance, he held up a hand. "Don't ask, please. I don't want to talk about it right now."

Faramir nodded. "Good night, then."

Túrin shrugged dejectedly. Then he looked up again. "Do you think there's a chance of getting a free bed still?"

"I doubt it. I was about to get myself a blanket and to take one of these comfortable chairs."

Túrin glanced doubtfully at the wooden chairs, then slumped down into one. "Oh well," he sighed, burying his face in his hands for a moment. "Seems not to be my day today. Would you fetch a blanket for me as well?"

"Certainly."

+++

After her visit to Dorlas, Lindórië had gone to the two peasant girls. Both had tried to get some sleep, but the younger had been greatly troubled by nightmares. It had taken Lindórië a while to soothe her so that finally she had fallen asleep again.

The corridor was empty when she left the girls' room. Andanor had apparently left again. The other rooms seemed occupied now, for their doors were closed. Stifling a yawn, Lindórië approached the room where Daewen, Lossiel and Visilya were accommodated, hoping that the fourth bed was not occupied by now. Carefully opening the door, and peering inside, she realised that Visilya had returned by now, and seemed to sleep. Lossiel was also sleeping, but Daewen appeared to be awake still. The fourth bed was empty.

Just when Lindórië was about to enter the room, she heard footsteps on the corridor. Turning, she beheld Faramir, carrying some blankets which apparently he had fetched in Dorlas' room. Quietly closing the door again, she stepped back into the corridor, and smiled when he stopped in front of her.

"Where are you going to sleep?" she asked in a low voice so as not to disturb the sleepers.

"Downstairs," he answered with a weary smile. "I was a bit late with organising a bed for myself, I guess."

"Poor you," she said teasingly. "You know, I would invite you to share mine ..." she went on, her mischievous smile broadening when she saw him blush "... but I think the other ladies would not appreciate your company as much as I."

"What a pity," he said, grinning now. "Well, I could offer you one half of a nice soft chair down in the common room. But honestly I do not know what Túrin and the rangers would say to that."

She laughed softly. "In that case I think I would prefer the bed." Then leaning forward she kissed him gently, feeling warmth surge through her when he put his arms around her, drawing her close, and returning the kiss, carefully and a little reluctantly at first, then more daringly. They kissed for a long time, but at length Faramir drew back a little.

"Túrin is waiting for his blanket," he murmured, his voice slightly hoarse.

She smiled gently, stroking his cheek. "Then you should bring it to him. Good night, Faramir."

He kissed her again swiftly and stooping picked up the blankets he had let drop. "Good night, Lindórië." With that he turned and passed down the corridor. Lindórië watched him, then taking a deep breath she opened the door to the room again and finally entered.

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen lifted her head when she heard the door open a second time. She didn't really care who was coming in, she was just annoyed that it took them several attempts to do so. A moment or two later she put her head back down and tried to get comfortable. It was difficult. Her arm was still in a sling, and finding a way to keep it from protesting while at the same time lying in a semi-restful position was practically impossible. She had shifted her weight, balled up corners of the blanket, yet nothing seemed to help. Add to that a headache that was on the verge of returning and a coughing spell threatening to take hold. It wasn't quite miserable, but it was close. She sighed, and once again rolled onto one side, her back to the doorway.

Khorazir

Seeing Daewen stir, Lindórië contemplated going over to her, but then decided against it. Most likely she will not appreciate any further disturbance, she thought, giving the girl a pitiful glance. Silently she moved through the room and extinguished all candles but one, then she went to her bed and started to undress. Although weary, she felt it hard to fall asleep at first. She heard Daewen movements as the girl apparently tried to find a comfortable position. Staring at the dark ceiling, she recalled the events of the day, and smiled when her thoughts turned to Faramir. *This is much different from writing letters*, she thought, and noticed that it had been a long time since last she had felt so happy. But then, as always when thinking about him, a trace of sadness entered her heart. Whatever there was between them now, most likely it would end soon. *But at least we can try and enjoy what time is left to us.*

Taking a deep breath, she turned upon her side, and only a short while later she had fallen asleep.

+++

When Faramir returned to the common room he saw Túrin sitting deep in thought, and almost untouched glass of wine before him. Only when he had drawn close Túrin stirred and looked up.

"Oh, I was wondering if perchance you had found a bed after all, and had forgotten me," he said. Usually this remark would have been accompanied by a grin, Faramir knew, but Túrin did not seem in the mood for jesting tonight, and neither, to be honest, was he. He handed two blankets to Túrin, took another glance at the chairs and then decided to sleep on the floor instead.

When he lay down on the blanket he had spread on the floor, his folded tunic at a pillow, he noticed that Túrin had hardly stirred. *Poor guy*, he thought, and wished him a good night, upon which he only received a murmured reply. He

did not realise when and if at all Túrin went to sleep, for almost as soon as he had closed his eyes, sleep took him.

Canamarth

Morning dawned crisp and clear, the air cleaned from the night's thunderstorm. Maradir awoke early and woke Morus to tell him to return to his company and report Maradir's plans for them to go back to Minas Tirith.

"And try to convince Gareth to join me," he added. "I'd really like someone of the company with me - even if it's the youngest and most inexperienced. I guess he can learn a lot about subterfuge and politics in Pelargir."

Morus smiled and packed his stuff quickly. He turned to the door, when Maradir stopped him. "Don't forget the important messages you have to deliver to the Steward, errand rider." He handed him the forged papers and went downstairs with him.

The house was only starting to stir. They met a servant coming up the stairs and gesturing for silence. "There's two gentlemen still kippin' in the common room," he whispered.

When Maradir recognised Túrin slopped in a chair in what seemed anything but a comfortable position and Faramir wrapped in his blankets on the floor he could not help but smile.

"Now, look at that, Morus. I'm sure that scruffy ranger on the floor is not used to anything better. But Lord Hurin's son slumped in a chair like that? Mighty strange that. Especially when I recall that there were three unoccupied beds in our room..."

Morus laughed out loud and turned to the door. "Fare you well, my friend," Maradir called after him then turned his attention back to Faramir and Túrin who had started stirring now.

Khorazir

Faramir sat up, rubbing his eyes, and realising to his relief that his back did not ache as much as he had expected. "I heard you, Maradir," he said with a mock hurt expression. "Not very kind of you to confine us to these bedsteads by not telling us about the vacant ones in your room." Then he grinned. "Although I guess I am still better off than poor Túrin here."

At the mentioning of his name Túrin sat up with a start and blinked at the others, then he groaned and sank back into the chair, rubbing his back and shoulders. "Morning," he mumbled sleepily, then groaned again. Noticing that the other two were watching him, grinning broadly, he gave them a sharp glance. "It wasn't the wine, if that's what you think," he said, indicating the glass on the table that was still almost full. "Although I daresay that I have all reason for getting really drunk," he added darkly, as recollection of the last days' events set in. "Women," he complained while rising stiffly to his feet, "they drive me crazy, they really do. And now excuse me please." With that he set off towards the door.

Faramir looked up at Maradir and said in a low voice when Túrin had left: "We may grin about him and his situation now, but it seems to be really serious this time. The fact that he did not get drunk yestereve worries me. It seems so unlike him. But honestly I see no way how we could help him."

gladrieltook

When Visilya finally stirred, sunlight was pouring through the window. She sat up and scolded herself for sleeping so late. She rubbed her hip where her sword hilt had dug into the soft spot between the bones before dragging herself

downstairs. Faramir, Maradir, and, she noted with a cringe, Turin. She walked past them and ordered a strong cup of coffee from the landlady, who gave her a look of understanding and pity. Visilya could only smile weakly and sip her tea slowly.

“You look a fright, dearie.” Visilya started at her voice. The woman smiled and pointed to a mirror behind the bar. Visilya squinted at her reflection, hardly believing what she saw. Her hair was oily and matted; there were bags under her blood-shot eyes; and her face was streaked with dirt and dried tears. The landlady looked sympathetic. “Come on, dearie. Let’s get you cleaned up.” Visilya nodded and gulped the rest of her tea. The large woman led her back to a private parlor and told her to wait. She left, and returned with a great bucket of water. “Here, wash yourself up and make yourself presentable for those gents in there.” With a wink she turned and left, her immense backside swinging as she went, singing some nonsense about spring and love-birds.

Visilya shook her head exsaperatedly, but she was greatly grateful for the water. She striped off her tunic and plunged her head into the water. It was hot, and felt good. She stayed submerged for a few seconds, then came up dripping. The top of her under-shirt clung wetly to her shoulders and chest, and her hair had turned a wet brown. She reached for the towel the lady had left for her and wipped off her face and dried her hair. She felt much refreshed as she tugged her tunic over her wet shirt.

asaris

Curufë had not slept at all the past night, rather spending time by chatting with the rangers Andanor had placed on guard. When the sun had peeked out from under the horizon, he went for a walk to find some small stream. He washed the grime away from his face and drank a little of it before heading back to the inn to break his fast.

Khorazir

Túrin had returned swiftly and taken a seat at the table where Maradir and Faramir were having their breakfast. When Visilya descended to the common room, he looked up briefly, then cast down his eyes and swallowed slightly. Faramir thought that his friend looked greatly relieved when Visilya left again with the landlady. Túrin sighed slightly, then buried his face in his hands for a moment, rubbing his eyes. “I think I’m getting too old for these things,” he said. “I feel as if an entire *éored* has ridden over me. Drat these chairs.”

Looking to Maradir, Faramir saw that he fought to hide a grin. Túrin took no notice. He ran a hand over his cheeks, then looked up, apparently in search of the landlady. When she was nowhere in sight he shrugged. “You know, sometimes I do envy you two,” he said to the others.

“Because we do not attract the ladies the same way as you?” Faramir asked with a slight smile.

Túrin gave him a sharp glance, but then smiled as well. “No, because you don’t have to bother with shaving in the morning.”

gladrieltook

Visilya slipped back into the common room, and took a seat as far from Turin as was humanly possible. She ordered another cup of tea, and for a long while after she had finished, she sat cradling the empty cup, gazing out the window and thinking back. Although the bath had greatly refreshed her, her spirit still felt as though a pack of ravenous dogs were tearing at it. She sighed and set her cup down with a dull clunk. Rising, she walked to the door and stepped outside. The air was cool, and fresh, but she did not feel it. The sun was bright, but she did not see it. She heard not the birds, nor smell the scent of fresh flowers on the dew-covered grass. She only walked, not taking notice of anything. She walked for a good while, only thinking. By the time she came back to her senses, the sun was high in the sky, and

she was far from the inn, even the town. She wondered for how long she had been walking, and where she was.

Khorazir

When Visilya left the room, Lindórië woke. Lossiel and Daewen seemed to be sleeping still, and thus she dressed quietly so as not to wake them, and left the room to see how Dorlas and the wounded were doing. When she entered, she noticed that the guards had changed over night, although neither of the Southrons looked to be in a condition to threaten anyone. Dorlas was standing by the window looking down into the courtyard, a steaming cup of tea in his hands. He looked as if he had stayed awake all night, but he smiled at Lindórië.

“All’s well here,” he said. “Amdír and especially Hallas are much better, although neither will be able to continue the journey today. Neither, I guess, will the girl, Daewen. Has the captain decided what to do with our friends here?” He nodded at the Southrons.

Lindórië shook her head. “I do not think so, but I shall ask him. The dead also have to be dealt with. We cannot just leave them on the carts. Although the delay will be unfortunate in regard of our errand, it might be the best for all of us if we stayed here for another day and night. I think Faramir will agree. What about breakfast, by the way. Do you want me to get you some?”

“The landlady has provided this already,” Dorlas replied with a smile. “But perhaps you could look after the girls.”
“Of course.”

Out in the corridor she met the two peasant girls, who seemed in much better spirits this morning than last night (and who were obviously enjoying the new clothes Lindórië had given to them). Together they went down to the common room, where so far only three tables were occupied: one by Túrin, Maradir and Faramir, one by the three merchants, and one by the rangers of the nightwatch and some of their companions who had risen early (one still had hay in his hair as he had spent the night in the stables). Moreover Curufë had just entered from outside, and was glancing about, apparently considering which group to join. The rangers waved at the two girls to come over. After brief hesitation and an encouraging nod from Lindórië they went, while she steered towards Faramir and his friends.

asaris

Curufë, after considering for a moment which table he should join, walked over to join Faramir and company. “It’s a beautiful day out there just now,” the elf said by way of introduction as he was pulling up a chair. “Nice day for traveling.”

Bardhwyn

The signs marking the perimeter of the company’s watch were evident to Morus and he pulled his mount to a halt. Dropping the reins, he brought his hands up to his mouth and mimicked a birdcall, thus signaling the sentries watching to allow him safe passage. The call was returned, another call went up, this time different, and the remainder of the company was alerted to Morus’ arrival, at last.

Gareth heard the calls but chose to lay, motionless, on his flet. His comrade had descended earlier to collect his breakfast ration of dried meat and fruit, offering to return with a portion for Gareth, but he’d refused his kindness. He just wasn’t hungry. His mind was full of the events of the previous day and he struggled with the realization that nothing was as he’d imagined it to be; the adventure he had longed for had found him and he didn’t like how it felt, at all.

Morus walked into the clearing leading a tired looking horse and happily exchanged quiet greetings with the men who collected together. More were emerging from the thick undergrowth of brush and saplings, a few dropped out of their

flets. Gareth rolled over and looked down, off the edge of the floor he slept on and saw the smiles and handshakes go round. A groan escaped him. 'I guess I better go down.' He grumbled to himself. He dragged a hand through his brown-black hair, threw off his blanket and agilely leapt from crouched position onto a limb, down to the next, then dropped the 10 feet remaining to the ground with a well footed thump.

Morus handed off his mount and taking a wine flask from Darmen, dropped down on a fallen log with the man and began to converse quietly. Darmen still held onto to the leather satchel containing the Stewards dispatches. They both looked up and over as Gareth alighted from the nearby tree.

"Ah, Gareth, there you are!" Morus called out. "Quite an adventure you've had, I've learned. Still, good thing you're safe and free. I still don't understand how – no matter, because of you Maradir and I got to sleep in a bed last night." Morus laughed as he withdrew the forged papers handed off my Maradir. He ripped them up and handed them Darmen, asking him to bury them, deep.

"Maradir asked me to encourage you to return to the Inn." Morus took the satchel from Darmen, opened it, read the contents and sighed. Gareth stood before the two seated men, shifting slightly on his feet and feeling his stomach growl as Morus read the dispatch.

"In light of this," Morus held up the parchment displaying a long, graceful script and the seal of the Steward, "it falls on me not to ask, but to order you back there. Maradir must see this and you're the logical choice. Besides, he wants a member of the company at hand. Anyone else arriving, looking for him with a message would be strange, seeing as no one knows he travels now with Faramir. So, Gareth, it's up to you."

Gareth blinked and felt his stomach curl into a knot.

"How..." he swallowed hard, his throat suddenly dry; Ambushes, raids, archery, sword combat – these were the things he was trained to do, not subterfuge. "How do I make my way back in, and suppose I do, then what? I walk up to Maradir and say 'Hello, Captain, a message from the Steward for you?'" There was a tinge of sarcasm in his voice that he heard but heard too late. Darmen and Morus's face fell grim at the sound of it and Gareth's face reddened slightly with immediate regret.

"I'll go." Darmen offered. "The boy is too..." Morus raised a hand, quieting his comrade. He pursed his lips slightly and studied Gareth for a moment. He could chastise him, he considered, berate him for his insolence but Morus thought better of it. Gareth was lesser nobility, brave, intelligent and, as Maradir said, young and inexperienced. A different tack was needed. Placing the parchments back into the satchel he looked up at the uncomfortable young man.

"Gareth, I will say it again. Maradir asked for you. Its quite a thing, that. He wants you to go and he wants you at hand. Do you accept?" Morus held the satchel out to Gareth who stood, quietly but awkwardly in front of his commanders. A few of the other men had gathered round leaning on their strung bows, pretending to idly talk amongst themselves but keenly intent on the exchange between the young man and the commanders.

Gareth reached out and took the satchel.

"I could go back, say I found the camp deserted, you thinking I was good as dead. I could ask to join with Faramir, pretend to defect and make up some story as to why I didn't follow... I don't know." Gareth pushed his hair back, looking pensive.

"Tell them you feared for your life." Darmen answered. "Tell them you broke with an oath – to take your own life if captured and allowed to live so to return to your company, to follow them would mean certain death. Tell them you couldn't kill yourself, either. Though truly, Gareth," Darmen's eyes narrowed, "had it not been Faramir who captured you, you would be dead by now, either by their hand, or your own, yeah?"

Gareth nodded. It was true. At one point he, himself, had contemplated how to take his life so be spared any further interrogation. That was the oath taken and for a moment he stood perplexed. The oath was the oath and yet Maradir, Darmen and Morus had not disciplined him for his disregard of it. 'Not all is black and white it seems...' he thought to himself.

“Yes, Darmen, I will tell them that. Thank you. I need to eat then perhaps I could ride with another back to the Inn, stopping before hand. I could then make the rest of the way on foot. It’s almost mid-day. I want to make it look as if I turned right around. I certainly feel un-slept, no doubt I look it, too.”

Morus laughed and stood up from his seat on the pine log. “I have seen you look worse, like that time Esgaroth on leave. Very well, eat and we’ll ride you three quarters of the way back to the Inn. After that, may the Gods watch over you.” Morus clapped Gareth on the back. “Remember, Maradir won’t know you, yet it is imperative he sees this dispatch as soon as possible and also,” Morus’ gripped tighted on Gareth’s shoulder, imperative you follow his lead at all times. Your next level of training has just begun, lad. A bit sooner than expected but you’ll learn all the more.”

A birdcall rang out marking intruders nearby. It was quickly answered and the members of the company hastened in the calls direction.

“Bring the horse!” Morus barked in a whisper. “Darmen, take Gareth now - cut through the trees as best you can then pick up the road. We will cover you.” Morus signed to the company, instructing them silently as to the mission at hand.. ‘Get Gareth away safely, at all costs’ he motioned. The men of the company acknowledged and continued to disperse into the brush.

Khorazir

Faramir looked up and smiled at Curufë, and his smile broadened when he noticed Lindórië who had just arrived at their table and greeted them. When the two had taken seats he said: “You are right, Curufë. And I would like nothing better than being able to set out soon. Our errand bodes no delay. But I fear that we shall be confined to this place for some time still. At least we must inspect the carts and bury the dead, and then I must consider what to do with the prisoners. Also there are our wounded.”

“Dorlas said that neither of them is fit to travel,” Lindórië said.

Faramir nodded. “The trouble is that I do not have men to spare. But it seems that someone has to remain behind to look after Amdír and Hallas, and Daewen, if she does not feel well enough to continue the journey. I am sure Dorlas would remain here with his charges, but honestly I do not like the thought of travelling on without an able healer. After what happened yesterday ...” He ran a hand through his hair. “I shall talk to Andanor,” he said. “And perhaps Visilya wants to stay here, too, until Daewen is better.” At the mentioning of the name Túrin stirred uncomfortably. “Also I shall write a message to the Steward to ask for some men to come here and take care of the carts, and perhaps the prisoners. What a pity that Morus has left already. He could have taken it with him.”

“What do you intend to do with the Southrons?” Lindórië asked.

Faramir shrugged. “According to what I heard about their deeds it would be just to simply slay them. The trouble is that they have been captured by us, so that now the matter is official. They are prisoners of war, so to say, and cannot just be killed without trial – although it would be the most easy and comfortable solution. Moreover, personally I am highly reluctant to simply execute them, whatever their deeds. And I am not allowed to speak justice in this fief, anyway. I am not the Lord of this realm.”

“Does this part belong to Minas Tirith or Lossarnach or already to Lebennin?” Túrin asked.

“Normally the river Erui marks the northern border of Lebennin,” Lindórië said. “But as far as I know these lands have been given to the Lords of Lebennin as a liege as well, and there is constant trouble with Lossarnach because of that.”

“In that case your husband would be responsible, or his brother,” Faramir said. “Or you,” he added with a smile.

Canamarth

When Faramir said that it was a pity Morus had departed already, Maradir shrugged and cut in: "I'm sure he'll tell the Steward what has happened here. And your father knows what procedures to take. He'll probably send men all of his own accord."

Then he listened attentively to what they planned to do with the Southron prisoners.

Khorazir

Lindórië laughed. "How very convenient for you, captain. So you intend to leave them to me to spare yourself the trouble?"

"That was my intention, yes," Faramir replied with a grin, and swiftly edged away from her to avoid a gentle blow from her elbow she had aimed at his ribs.

"No, seriously," he went on. "We can either leave them here under guard, to be fetched by the men from the City who, as you have rightly pointed out, Maradir, the Steward is most likely going to send. Or we see to it that they are handed over to either Carandil or Tarannon."

"Tarannon," Lindórië said coldly. "After all, he is the one who boasts about having secured our coasts against attacks and invasions from the South. He should learn who has slipped his cunning nets, and what grief they caused."

Canamarth

Maradir smiled at Lindórië's ruthlessness but refrained from commenting.

Khorazir

Faramir nodded thoughtfully. "And this would give us a good reason to seek him out, or ask him to come to Pelargir to meet us there, since first we have to deliver this message to Falastur. The problem is that I do not know if the Southrons will be fit to travel. They are seriously injured, and to take them with us would mean to travel at a very low speed. We would have to take a cart with us. And some men would have to watch them all the time." He reached for his teacup and drank a sip, then he sighed slightly. "Well, I shall have to talk with Dorlas about the matter. Has anybody seen Andanor this morning?"

gladrieltook

Visilya looked around her, trying desperately to get her bearings. Out of nowhere, she heard voices. She began to sweat, and drew her sword, praying that it wasn't Dellom, or worse.

EdaintheRanger

Andanor was one of those guys who liked to get up disgustingly early in the morning, so as soon as it had been lightening in the Eastern sky he had arisen quietly. After checking the watch and a quiet greeting to Curufë, he had gathered his personal arms and moved out into the local area to scout it out, and maybe find something fresh for the pot.

Senses heightened he moved stealthily through the woods and flora, around the inn. His hunting lore, eventually managed a brace of wildfowl, which were now tied and slung over his shoulder. Gazing to the sky, he couldn't but marvel at the ferocious speed at which the sun had made its leap into the new morning. Feeling its warming rays on his face and revelling in that soft pink light that seemed almost tangible at that certain moment of day, he turned to head back to the inn.

On the return journey with the better light, Andanor examine the land for signs of disturbance and the passage of other people. For the moment he found none, or if there had been it was well beyond his ranger skill. He travelled the path further for what seemed like but a few moments before his ears could pick up soft footfalls. They were intermittent and seemed unsure. Andanor stopped to reckon the direction of the noise and through the foliage he could see the shape of a woman, in the dappled light of the glades he recognised the dress of the Guard captain. Not wishing to alarm her he started to call softly in a monotone voice. She stopped and Andanor made to move into the open, before he could do so she whirled around and drew her sword. Andanor not wishing to provoke an unnecessary fight, moved slowly and carefully into the open, his palms raised, as he again spoke this time he said clearly.

“Greetings Lady.”

gladrieltook

Visilya narrowed her eyes at the man approaching. “You're Andanor, aren't you?” The man nodded, and Visilya lowered her sword, then sheathed it.

EdaintheRanger

When Visilya answered Andanor face cracked into a formal smile and said “Yes, that is correct, I am Andanor lieutenant to Lord Faramir in the ranger company.” His brow creased as he searched for the lady's name, before continuing “... and you are Visilya the Guard Captain! As to your being out here at this hour I'll not enquire further. I felt that I should scout the area, but so far I have found nothing, save for you. Are you alright?” Andanor could see that she was obviously vexed, and wondered whether he could help. His countenance took on a more concerned, human look.

gladrieltook

“I'm fine,” Visilya replied. “I simply walked to far and to fast, that's all.” She turned away and started looking about her for a trace of the road. Unsuccessful, she looked up at a tree, and, with some effort, clambered up the trunk. Grasping a bough, she looked out over the horizon till she saw what she was looked for. Visilya slid down the tree and set off at a jog for the winding dirt road which led back to the Inn.

Khorazir

When the others shook their heads at Faramir's question, he shrugged slightly and then smiled. “Most likely he has been up for quite some time already, and seen to it that none of the rangers slept too long. He just forgot to rouse his captain also. I sometimes actually have a bad conscience when seeing how seriously he takes his job – in comparison to others.”

Just as he spoke, another group of rangers entered the inn in the search of breakfast, and some others came down the stairs, looking definitely better rested than the others. Lindórië now rose and said: “I shall go and see if Daewen and Lossiel are awake already, and if they are well.”

“Very well, do that,” Faramir said, smiling at her. “We will have a look at the carts once breakfast is over,” he said to the others when Lindórië had left. “And until then I must write a message to the Steward, and find someone to bring it to Minas Tirith, so please excuse me for a moment.” With that he rose as well, and went in search of his saddlebags where he had bestowed his writing equipment.

Bardhwyn

The Steward’s Men silently took up positions, birdcalls punctuating the forest’s gloom with each advance and placement. Each man, highly trained, knew not to utter one word or make a single sound that was not endemic to the forest they blended with. The information came, coded by birdcalls, two intruders, and minimal armaments. One man, one woman.

Morus grinned. ‘Ah, lovers wandering.’ He thought to himself. He watched as Darmen and Gareth artfully made their way through the woods. Walking, stopping, quickly shuffling, stopping... the horse obediently matching the two men’s varied pace, masking the sound of the men retreating back through the bush to the road. The result: the two men and the horse sounded like any innocuous woodland animal shuffling for nuts in the leafy forest floor. He called to them and they halted at hearing his coded command, both men peering in Morus’ direction though unable to see him – so well hidden was he in trees.

One intruder wandered into the clearing. From his position high in a tree Morus could see it was Andanor with fresh kill slung over his shoulder. Nearby and separately wandered the woman who he recognized from the Inn - Visilya, Turin’s woman, or was she? He couldn’t quite make heads or tails of all the comings and goings at the Inn the night before but one thing was certain, these two weren’t lovers. He motioned a sign commanding all to hold off engaging them and quickly that command was relayed to all the men hidden in the forest.

The exchange between the two wanderers was brief and Morus’ heart seized as he saw the woman skillfully scale a tree. Fortunately she chose one in which none of his men had taken up position. He let out a long, slow breath as she descended and made her way towards the road leaving Andanor alone in the glade wearing a bemused expression.

‘Ah, Andanor, of course! There is your way back and in, Gareth!’ Morus watched until the woman was well out of sight, keeping Andanor still in sight as he wandered west at a slow pace. Morus then made a few more calls to Darmen and Gareth.

Gareth recognized the command – ‘horseman, halt; foot, due west.’ He looked quizzically at Darmen who merely raised an eyebrow and cocked his head as if to say ‘you heard the man, due west.’

Gareth positioned the sun then set out using the same haphazard motions; shuffle, halt, walking step, halt, quick hops, gradually making his way due west. He caught sight of a figure walking through the thin undergrowth and darting behind a tree, carefully leaned out and took the figure in.

It was Andanor.

Gareth’s eyes rolled back in his head and he stifled a groan. ‘Morus, you son of a...’ he thought to himself as he braced himself against the tree. It was clear what Morus wanted him to do. Approach Andanor and begin the mission. Taking a deep breath and placing his hand over the dispatch under his tunic - checking once again to see if it was secure, Gareth stepped out from behind the tree and spoke out:

“Andanor.”

Cynara

Alessya walked into the Common Room through the front door. She'd been awake for a good few hours, now, and had opted to climb out her window when she awoke, rather than use the door and risk awakening someone. Dressed in a fresh dress, it was no mean feat, to have reached the ground, especially with a sword slung over her shoulder, but she managed it in fairly short time. Actually practicing her swordfighting in a dress was another story, though, and so Alessya had given up after a fairly short span, and visited the stable, instead.

Canamarth

Maradir had finished his breakfast and was about to turn to the elf to see if he could get any interesting stories out of him when the door opened and the woman came in with whom Faramir had spoken the night before. "Do you know her?" he asked Curufë.

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen's eyes flew open at the sudden sound of someone slamming a door down the corridor. The knowledge of her surroundings and the events of the previous day were completely forgotten in the first few seconds of consciousness. What she did know was that this was not her usual cubbyhole in one of the run-down districts of Minas Tirith. Far from it! She sat up slightly in the bed, propping herself up on one elbow.

A slight twinge of pain in her shoulder quickly reminded her of her injury, and soon the memory of the past day came back. So many strange and new things had happened, and suddenly she met many people far above her in social class. It was quite odd, now that she had a chance to reflect upon it. She shifted her weight so that she leaned entirely on her good arm as she attempted to move her injured one. Except for an intense stiffness in her shoulder as she rotated it, the pain was practically gone. Her head injury, on the other hand, was still continuing to show itself. Even though she had been awake a few minutes now, her vision was still somewhat blurry and a dull pounding had started up again behind her left ear.

With a long sigh, she lay back down among the wadded up blankets and pillows. She didn't know where she was in the inn to be exact, the things that had taken place while she was feverish were unclear and confused. To be honest, she didn't know if the others were still even here. There seemed to be a few other people still asleep in this room, but she didn't know if they were friends or not. *I'm probably just slowing everyone down again, if they're still here even. If they are, someone will probably come looking for me soon enough.*

Khorazir

Lindórië made her way to Daewen's room and carefully opened the door. Giving the room a swift glance, she saw that the girl was awake, and that Lossiel was stirring also. Smiling, she walked over to Daewen. "Good morning," she said. "I was wondering how you were feeling this morning, and if you wanted some breakfast."

asaris

Curufë nodded. "That's Alessya, a mercenary. We met her in Minas Tirith, and decided to hire her as protection for our trip." The elf waved at her, and motioned for her to come join them at the table.

Canamarth

Maradir frowned at the elf's words. Since when did Faramir hire mercenaries, especially when he had a full troop of rangers at his disposal? He adjusted his features to a welcoming smile nevertheless when Alessya made her way to their table. He even got up, minding his manners, and gave her a small bow. "We haven't been introduced yet, I believe. My name is Maradir and I'm an old friend of Faramir's."

+++

Lossier was woken by the slamming of a door but refused to get up yet. She turned around in bed, eyes still closed, till she heard someone open the door and walk over to the other girl's bed. It was Lindórië asking her if she wanted breakfast.

And who's going to wake me like that and ask if I want breakfast, Lossier thought sadly. But then she remembered that the other girl whose name had slipped her had been injured and deserved a lot more attention than she did. She sat up now and uttered a "Good morning" through a yawn.

Lady_of_Rohan

"I'm feeling alright, I guess," Daewen said, rubbing her eyes. "My shoulder's stiff and my head still hurts." She blinked rapidly a couple of times before looking up at the lady. "Breakfast does sound good, though." When Lossier sat up and said a jarbled good morning, Daewen looked over, startled. She hadn't known anyone else was awake. "Who are you?" she asked with a quite puzzled face. Turning back to the other she said, "I've forgotten your name, but I recognize you from yesterday... And where am I anyway? And what happened? And..." She stopped suddenly, as her head began to hurt a little more. "Would someone just tell me what's going on?" she finally asked in a small voice.

Cynara

Alessya made her way over to the table and dropped a grin and a flamboyant curtsy. "Hey, I'm Alessya. Have you guys eaten yet?"

Seating herself at the table, she forgot to make the customary tuck-and-swish with her skirt, and it got in the way of her feet. Recovering from her slight stumble, she heard a small rip. The hemline of the dress came undone, and as Alessya bent to check the extent of the damage, she muttered what sounded strangely like a very un-ladylike, "Bloody damned little..."

Canamarth

"My name is Lossier," she said while getting up. "I gave you some tea last night." Then she started dressing and left further explanations to Lindórië. She did not want to tell her own story and decided she knew not enough of what had befallen the others. So she kept quiet while donning her dress.

Canamarth

Maradir could not hide the smile that was spreading on his face when he heard Alessya's comment. "I have breakfasted already. But I'm more than willing to keep you company a while longer, lady Alessya."

Khorazir

“Good morning, Lossiel,” Lindórië greeted her, then let her dress while turning back to Daewen. “I am glad to hear that you feel slightly better this morning, Daewen,” she said to the girl, smiling. “As for the plans for today, they are being decided upon at the moment. It looks as if we are going to tarry here today, so there is no hurry with getting up. I do not know how much you remember about yesterday, but we have had an encounter with Southrons, and some of the rangers and Haradrim were wounded. The other Southrons are dead, and must be buried. That is what the rangers are going to do today. What do you think, do you feel well enough to go down for breakfast, or do you want me to bring you some?”

+++

Having fetched his writing stuff, Faramir settled down at a table underneath one of the small windows in the common room and began writing his account. As usual he felt uncomfortable about having to write to the Steward – he found that each time he had to do this, lacked the right words to express his thoughts, always aware of the Steward’s shrewd ability to read between the lines. Moreover he wondered how much his father knew already about the Southrons and the strange men who had attacked them. *Perhaps they are indeed the Steward’s personal, very secret killers*, he thought.

Looking up from the letter, Faramir gave Maradir who was talking with Alessya a thoughtful glance, then he smiled slightly and shook his head. *If I am not careful I am going to end up like Denethor*, he reproached himself, *who distrusts even his closest friends – if indeed he has any*.

Lady_of_Rohan

“I’d like to go down,” Daewen replied softly. She looked at her wrinkled nightclothes, then glanced around the room, a lost look on her face. “But I don’t know where any of my things are, or even if they’ve been brought up here.” She glanced away, feeling the hot flush creep up in her cheeks. The recollection of who this lady was had come back to her, and now she felt rather embarrassed. *I must seem really stupid to her. After all, she’s so much finer than I am*, she thought to herself. The news of Southrons and a fight jogged her memory a bit more, and suddenly she remembered the storms and trying to seek shelter. She shivered unconsciously. Yes, she remembered the previous day. “Yesterday was horrible,” she whispered.

Khorazir

“Yes, it was,” Lindórië agreed softly, “especially for you. But today should be rather calm and comfortable. The weather has very much improved, too. As for your clothes, the landlady took them with her to dry them. I shall inquire about them. Until then you can have a spare shirt and some trowsers of mine, if you want. That is all I have left, I am afraid. My two dresses I gave to the two peasant girls the rangers rescued from the Southrons, since theirs were rather torn.”

Lady_of_Rohan

“Thank you,” the girl said, surprised that the lady would make such an offer to her. She let out a long breath and made the decision that she would try sitting up again. Propping herself up on her elbows, she reached a half-sit position before a wave of dizziness, light but enough to make her hesitate, overtook her. Closing her eyes, she took several deep breaths before finally sitting up all the way. That done, she rested back against the headboard for a few moments, breathing steadily in hopes of relieving the dizziness. The spell lasted only a few seconds and afterward she was fine, or rather, as fine as her condition would allow at the moment. Taking the opportunity to rotate her arm again, she did so, flinching slightly as she asked a little too much of it at times. “What’s Lebennin like?” she asked suddenly, turning toward Lindórië. “And why are we all going there anyways?”

Khorazir

Lindórië had fetched her saddle-bags and had returned to Daewen's bed where she drew up a chair and began rummaging through them. At the girl's question she looked up. "Why we are going to Lebennin? Well, Captain Faramir, the rangers and I were sent down there by the Steward. Apparently things are not quite right there, and we are commanded to have an eye on the Lords of that realm to see if they are involved in any conspirational affairs that, were they allowed to continue, might endanger the peace in Gondor. The difficulty is," and now she lowered her voice, "that one of those lords is my husband. I have not seen him for quite some time, since he is "exercising the host", as he calls it, and honestly I did not mourn this fact. But now we are most likely going to have to seek him out, and I do not think that our meeting will be a happy one."

She sighed slightly, then shrugged and smiled. "But Lebennin is a beautiful country. I am sure you will like it there. In the East you get broad farmlands with many small villages and well-tilled fields and orchards, and in the west there are large forests and hilly regions. Most of the oakwood-timber they use to build ships from in Pelargir hails from these forests. The coasts are beautiful, too, steep and rocky in the west, flat and gentle in the east, where Anduin, the Great River, joins the sea divided up in many small rivers amid marshy islands, and wide fields of swaying reeds. The old people still tell many fascinating tales of these coastlands. Of the strange creatures haunting the marshes of the Ethir Anduin, or of the pirates and smugglers hiding out in the caves and hidden villages among the cliffs. The latter are said to install false beacons on the cliffs in stormy nights to lure ships onto the rocks, so that they can pillage the wreckage afterwards. And if the weather is clear, you can see as far as Tolfalas, the large island down in the Bay, and there are many seabirds living and nesting in the cliffs. Ah, the din they make." She fell silent, smiling. "'tis much different than Minas Tirith, but I am sure you are going to like it. And certainly Captain Visilya will find a good new home for you."

EdaintheRanger

Andanor heard the rustling of the undergrowth and his hand instinctively went to the short bow that was his hunting companion, he only carried a small clutch of arrows though, he wasn't out to start a war! In the close quarters of the woods its range was enough for him, a longbow he found too cumbersome and a disturbed branch could prove risky. Back in the tavern's rangers argued back and forth whether the stopping power and range of a longbow out-matched the compactness of its shorter cousin. A long skinning knife, more useful than his long sword for the now accomplished task, accompanied his bow. Carefully he shrugged his kills to ground with a soft thump. As he half-turned he could clearly see Gareth stepping out of the shade of an Aspen tree and sounding his name. A disgruntled expression crossed his face as if he had rather had seen an Orc. Andanor slung his bow back over his shoulder and stooped to retrieve the brace of wildfowl. He didn't take his eyes off the lad for one second. Andanor could see that Gareth had not changed his clothes and was again bearing his dagger, openly this time. Andanor rolled his eyes in a theatrical way that his father had used to do when he had snuck back into the house from his own misdemeanours. "So good morning, Gareth! What brings you back to my path once more?" he called with that customary hint of sarcasm.

Bardhwyn

"I saw you and I couldn't believe my good luck." Gareth leaned over and plucked a long blade of grass and tore at it, idly. He took a few steps and looked about the clearing, full knowing at least ten pairs of ears heard every word he was about to say.

"I returned to find all of them gone... I decided not to follow them. I ..." Gareth allowed his voice to falter and he threw the shredded grass to the ground with a sigh of exasperation.

"I just couldn't. They would have killed me; I know it. I took an oath to take my own life if captured and I didn't have the nerve." He took a deep breath and took a few more faltering steps toward the Ranger, carefully watching his sword hand.

“So, that makes me an oath breaker and a coward. I can never show them my face again.” Gareth allowed his face to take on a fearful expression; he imagined the stiff hand of his father ready to beat him as he often did when he was a lad...

“I need to get away, go south - I have relatives in Dol Amroth and in Pelargir. They will take me in, help me. Would Faramir allow me to travel with him, at least for a while? I could hide among your men. I will offer my services in return for my keep. You know my skills - I can fight well. What say you, Andanor? Will he allow this?”

Cynara

Alessya nodded and thanked Maradir, then turned to the barmaid who approached to take her order.

“I'd like...hmm, bacon, eggs, and apples, I think. Thanks.”

Turning back to Maradir and Curufë, Alessya smiled again. “Are we setting out immediately, or are we going to wait a couple days?”

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen sat quietly absorbing and trying to picture what Lindórië described. She came up with several vague images, but most of the time she had no idea what the other was talking about. A marsh was a completely foreign concept for her, as were pirates and crashing rocks into ships... or was it the other way around? The lady certainly made it sound like a lovely place. But talk of spying and conspiracies... that was something else. Of course, she wasn't quite a novice in the ways of espionage. The main reason she was still alive was because she'd watched fruit and other food vendors long enough to determine when they would fall into a doze on slow days and when they would be distracted at busier times. But this... this was something far larger. After all, she had only worked with stupid vendors; these people were talking about nobility!!!

The comment about finding a home caught her attention. “The captain isn't even sure if she'll be able to find me a home.” The girl sighed. “If she can't, she's said that maybe someone would take me in as a servant or spy,” she continued quietly, idly tugging on a loose thread on one of the sheet hems. “And if that doesn't work out either, I'll probably go back to living on the streets again.” She didn't even know why she was saying this. Drawing up a thin leg, she rested her chin on her knee. Her head didn't like that too much, but she felt more comfortable and secure like this. She scratched a patch of caked mud on her leg, which only succeeded in getting more under her short fingernails. She sighed, and went back to tugging at the unravelling thread.

Khorazir

“I do not think that you will be forced to return to living on the streets,” Lindórië said earnestly. “If Visilya is not successful, I shall see what I can do. I have many friends in Lebennin and especially in Dol Amroth who would certainly take you into their household, and not necessarily as a servant or a spy. My sister-in-law, for example. Her own children have left the house recently to have families of their own, and my brother, her husband, died a few years ago. So she would very much welcome company. Often of late she has complained to me of feeling lonely. She lives in Dor-en-Ernil, close to the border to Lebennin. If you want me to, I can write to her once we are in Pelargir, and ask her opinion of the matter.”

Reaching into her bags, she retrieved a linen shirt and some breeches. “If things were otherwise, I would offer you to stay with me,” she said quietly, looking down at the intricate, but unobtrusive embroidered pattern at the shirt's collar. “But honestly I do not know how this whole matter is going to end, neither for the others nor indeed for myself, and I do not think I could provide a safe home and a stable future for you right now.” She sighed slightly, then looked at the girl again and smiled. “But now we should get you dressed and ready for breakfast. You must be very hungry.”

EdaintheRanger

Andanor rubbed his now stubbly chin as he considered the young man's words. Alarm bells were ringing in his head, and he had that uncomfortable feeling that he had felt before the skirmish with the southrons. He listened carefully, but as usual all he could hear the sounds of the forest, with irregular birdcalls. So maybe he was paranoid and suspicious, but that had helped him the past, though now at this moment in time it wasn't all that helpful. With Gareth reappearing everything seemed to be too much of a coincidence, Andanor didn't really follow the fate ideology at all. He believed that life was dictated by a man's deeds not what was set in the stars. Yet paradoxically he was superstitious to an extent, all soldiers were. If something could be seen that would help them survive a deadly situation for a while longer then it was welcomed, nevermind how banal the omen may be.

Andanor locked his steel grey eyes with Gareth, challenging him.

"So you are an oath-breaker hey? So how does that make you useful to Faramir? We have little need for those who lack faith."

Andanor was simply letting the lad stew for a minute, as he prepared to move. Andanor's face remained open, betraying little emotion. He studied Gareth for a moment as if weighing up his integrity. Then his head bobbed as he stifled a quick snort of laughter. He ran his free hand through his lank hair and waved Gareth back towards the trail.

He then said loudly "This is an overt patrol, nothing else. Let us pick up as many waifs, strays, vagabonds and minstrels as we can. All the better, for our sport and entertainment. You, hear me Faramir?" Andanor called as if expecting his Lord to appear at any moment. Gareth looked around accordingly. Andanor chuckled ironically.

Andanor then muttered half to himself.

"Valinor's teeth. Let us away, I have tarried here long enough." Picking up his catch Andanor called over to Gareth. "Well! What are you waiting for? Breakfast beckons and I don't like my fowl, gamey, I'd rather it was fresh." with that Andanor strode off towards the inn.

gladrieltook

Visilya continued down the road, running now, the heat of the sun beating down on her back. She was sweating heavily by the time she reached Inn. She sat down on a tree stump outside, and let herself cool off before venturing back inside.

Canamarth

"I think we are going to stay a day or two longer," Maradir replied. "There are a few people lightly injured who will be able to travel on with us after a short rest. That's at least what I gathered. You'd have to ask Faramir, though. He's in charge after all." Maradir studied the woman eating her breakfast keenly. "How did you meet him anyway?" he asked.

Lossiel had left the room after Lindórië had fetched her saddle-bags. She did not want to appear to listen in on their conversation. She slowly descended the stairs, apprehending another awkward meeting with Túrin. She saw him at a table in the common room and quickly made her way into the kitchen where she grabbed a piece of bread and two sausages, then went outside through the back door. She sat down underneath a tree next to the road, just outside the inn.

Where can I go? she asked herself. Back home was the sensible answer but she was not desperate enough yet to return as a penitent.

When she looked up she saw a ranger, Andanor by the looks of it, and another man - or better said: youth - come up the road.

EdaintheRanger

Andanor swift pace soon covered the distance back to the inn. Gareth could easily keep up the stride as he was younger. Andanor couldn't help but notice that the trail and path passed the field that he had crossed less than 12 hours previously in pursuit of this same youth. He grinned and motioned to the field which stretched towards the woods.

"Look familiar?" Andanor asked as he playfully tapped Gareth's jaw with his weathered fist. As they neared the inn Andanor could see Visilya had made it back and was talking to a Man whom Andanor recalled as a friend of Faramir. "So good that a falsely detested son, has so many people he can call friend." he thought.

Approaching the door Andanor held up his prize with a ill-stifled pride. "Would you care for Breakfast?" he asked the patrons of the inn.

Khorazir

Seeing Lossiel descend the stairs, Túrin felt his heart sink. He had managed not to think about either her or Visilya for the last few minutes, listening to Maradir's and Alessya's conversation, and now he was suddenly reminded of the fact that their problem was by no means solved yet. With great relief he saw Lossiel steer towards the kitchen, and at the same time he wondered what had happened to Visilya. She had left the inn quite some time ago, and had not returned yet.

+++

Faramir had finished his letter, and had left the common room in search of a ranger he could send to Minas Tirith with the message. He made his way to the stables, where he roused those as had tried to give sleep another chance after Andanor had made his round in the morning. Faramir chose one to deliver the message and sent him off, then commanded the others to begin with unloading the carts.

"Take care that there are not too many villagers milling about," he told the men. "'tis inevitable that they should pick up some information, but I do not want them to know about what really befell with the Southrons. Assemble a list of what valuables you find on the carts, and search the dead. We shall seek a place to bury them in the afternoon. For now put them in one of the barns, out of sight."

When the men began to busy themselves among the carts, Faramir returned to the common room and told those rangers as were still there to go out and help their companions. Just when he was about to set out towards the kitchen in search of the landlady, he saw Andanor and, to his great surprise, the young man who had been their prisoner the previous night, enter the common room. The youth did not look to be the ranger's captive this time, and Faramir wondered what had befallen out there in the woods that had caused the young man to return. He cast a swift glance at Maradir, but his friend's face only showed mild interest and curiosity. Faramir smiled slightly, and shifted his gaze to the young man instead. Was not the glance he gave the table where the others were gathered, and Maradir in particular, a little too casual as to be believable in his situation? Faramir decided to keep a keen eye on this one.

"Greetings, Andanor," he called to his lieutenant. "I see your hunt as been successful this morning. Although I daresay the inhabitants of the woods around here are of a most unusual kind." He waved for Andanor and the other to come over, indicating a small, out of the way table.

"I must admit that your reappearance here is quite a surprise to me, young man," he said gravely in a low voice when the two had drawn near. "And I would very much like to hear an explanation for it."

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen sat silent while Lindórië spoke, her eyes growing wide at what she said. It was too much to fathom. While finding a family wasn't something she was deeply concerned about (having been on her own most of her life), the more the others talked about it, the more she started to think there really was something to look forward to after all. She had been stunned when the lady mentioned the possibility of some of her friends taking her in (and Daewen was sure that she had rather upper class friends) and more stunned when she admitted that she would have taken her in, if the circumstances were different.

So lost was she in her thoughts that she didn't quite register when Lindórië mentioned breakfast again. "Wow! Um, I mean, what? Oh... yeah, I am hungry," she said, startled. "I haven't eaten since around lunchtime yesterday." The other nodded.

"You'll feel better once you eat," she said kindly while handing the girl the clothing.

"I think I'll need some help," Daewen asked hesitantly. The lady smiled and helped the girl get her injured arm and shoulder out of the sleeve of the shirt she was wearing. Daewen looked over and grimaced at the purplish-yellow bruises forming all around the joint before Lindórië wrapped it again with new bandages, then eased it into the linen sleeve. *That didn't look too good*, she thought. A few minutes later she was dressed, after rolling sleeves and pant legs so she wouldn't be swimming in them, and had even had her hair brushed back and tamed a little (though she was sure that such tough tugging in some of the rougher places hadn't been necessary.) Lindórië passed her a small mirror and she smiled slightly when she looked at her reflection. She hardly recognized herself!

Canamarth

When the door opened yet again, Maradir looked up to see Andanor and Gareth enter. He wondered what kind of story the latter had devised to be taken back in again.

He looked back to Alessya who was still chewing on a piece of bread. She did not seem very talkable but he would get a bit more out of her yet. "Well, my lady?" he prompted.

They had not even really noticed her. Lossiel grew more dejected by the moment. Andanor had not seemed to see her at all when they passed her. The boy had at least looked up but not shown any reaction when his eyes met hers. He had neither spoken nor even nodded in her direction.

He had looked interesting, though. She was not sure if she had seen him with the rangers the night before. But somehow he did not look like one of them. Not as neat and crisp. His hair was tousled, his clothes caked with dirt and disarrayed. And he had looked really tired.

She followed them with her eyes till they entered the inn. She was still unsure of what to do next. But she could not stay underneath that tree all day. If she wanted to get away from Túrin she at least needed to get provisions. But she was not so sure about leaving the company as yet. Her curiosity had been stirred. Maybe even something more. She got up and slowly walked back towards the inn.

Bardhwyn

Andanor motioned towards an empty seat and Gareth sat, feeling suitably awkward.

"My Lord," Gareth said with a slight bow, before seating himself. He looked up and noticed the young woman they'd passed outside enter the common room and walk by. He returned his attention to Lord Faramir but spoke quietly. "I

chose not to return to my comrades. I ...” Gareth looked to Andanor, who silently nodded encouragement for him to continue. Gareth shifted in his seat. “I have broken an oath...to take my life ere I was captured. Were I to return, they would kill me, I am sure of it. So, .. I am too young to die thus. Dying in battle is one thing, the other, oath or no oath it’s....” Gareth cut himself off and looked at the Steward’s son. Gareth felt panic to creep in his voice...

“Please, My Lord, I can’t stay here, I must away, go south. I have relatives there; in Dol Amroth, in Pelargir. I hoped I could travel with you, hide..” Gareth shamefully cast his eyes down for a moment, “..hide amongst your men.” Gareth swallowed hard and continued.

“I offer you my sword in return, in exchange for my keep. I am skilled and I’m no coward, My Lord, despite the fact I failed in my oathkeeping. Please...

Andanor placed a firm hand on Gareth’s arm. Gareth had raised his voice and for a moment attracted the attention of the others. Andanor addressed his Captain:

“He came upon me whilst I was hunting in the woods. He hasn’t slept, nor eaten either, I take it, since he left us.”

“And you saw no signs of that company of men?” Faramir asked.

“No, and I was looking.” Gareth gave Andanor a puzzled look. “What, boy, do you think we’re starving here at an Inn, thus forcing me to go hunting?” Andanor laughed.

Gareth forced a laugh in reply. He returned, still smiling, to Faramir’s steady gaze. Gareth took a deep breath and asked again:

“Please, My Lord, may I travel with you? I have only one thing to ask, however...” Gareth watched as Faramir and Andanor exchanged quick glances.

“Please, help me keep my other oaths. Don’t compel or force me to answer your questions. I cannot tell you anything.” Gareth then cast his eyes down and waited.

Khorazir

Just when Túrin was about to go outside to see if he could help the rangers (he felt he had to find something to occupy himself to divert his thoughts from the two ladies), he saw Lossiel returning, and thus decided to wait a little longer for her to pass by. Also, when looking up, he spotted Lindórië and Daewen descend the stairs to the common room. The girl apparently wore some of the lady’s clothes, which were rather too large for her, but looked much better than she had the previous evening. Túrin smiled, and waved for them to come over.

+++

Faramir studied the young man for a long time, perceiving his unease. Although he had made his account sound quite believable, Faramir strongly doubted that this was what had happened. Of course the youth was withholding information. He cast a swift glance at his lieutenant. Andanor also seemed to have his doubts about the young man’s tale, but apparently he was prepared to give him a chance.

Shifting his gaze back to the youth, Faramir at length said: “Your attempt at escaping showed that you are indeed skilled with arms, and moreover quickwitted and courageous. Of course I could use you in my company, even more so as some of my men may have to stay behind with the wounded. So in this regard I have no objections against you joining us and travelling with us as far as Pelargir. But on the other hand – our journey is not for mere pleasure’s sake. We have an errand to accomplish, and errand that should not be revealed to others outside our company. So should I trust you, a total stranger? An oathbreaker, too. And someone who must not, by his own account, tell me more about himself and his background. Why so, now that you cannot return to your former company anymore? All combined this does not make you seem a very trustworthy companion, does it? And your tale ... I would like to believe you, real-

ly, but it does sound a little too smooth to me, to be honest. Perhaps in truth you did meet your companions last night, and they sent you back to spy on us.”

Canamarth

Lossiel milled around near the entrance, loath to approach Túrin's table and also too shy to walk over to where the Steward's son and the newcomers were seated.

When she saw Lindórië and Daewen descend the stairs she felt relieved at first for she knew she could join them. But Túrin waved them over to his table and they followed suit.

So she sat down at the last table which was still unoccupied, for many rangers had come in by now and were eating their breakfast. It was still too close to Túrin's table for comfort for she could hear what they were speaking but she at least managed to turn her back on them. She ordered herself a tea and let the warmth of the cup warm her fingers. She looked out of the window blankly.

gladrieltook

Visilya massaged her temples, then rose, feeling rather pathetic. She sighed, and turned to go back into the Inn, but suddenly thought better of it, and tured instead towards the stables. As she walked down the musty aisle between the stalls, memories of her childhood in Rohan were stirred. Growing up, she had lived with many different people, roaming the free land of Middle Earth, seeking those who would teach her what they knew. She had learned much under Theoden King, who had been, for a time, like an uncle. She smiled fondly at the thought of those memories, then snapped back to reality with a sharp jolt. She had walked right into the doors at the opposite end of the stables. She rubbed her sore nose, which was tuning a bright shade of red, and turned to find her horse. She found Rebel nearby, munching on the hay that the stable-master had provided. “Hey girl,” she said, rubbing the horse's forlock. “Looks like you're better off than I am.” She opened the stall, and found her tack. She saddled the horse, and led her out into the sunshine of the late afternoon. Once out side, she mounted, feeling slightly better now that she was on a horse. She urged Rebel into a gallop, and the two became like one, horse and rider, moving together like the the wind and the leaves in one continous dance as old as time.

Khorazir

While taking a seat at Túrin's table, where Curufë, Maradir and Alessya were seated also, Lindórië saw how Lossiel was glancing in their direction. She was about to invite her to join them, but then remembered that the girl might not be eager to meet Túrin right now. Thus she left it at a gentle smile, and decided to talk to Lossiel later.

Another group of rangers had entered the common room and seated themselves around the free tables for a belated breakfast. According to their looks, they had had to work already, and Lindórië smiled at this. Apparently their captain had set them to work as punishment for sleeping late. While breakfast was being brought to Daewen, and some tea to Lindórië, she stole a glance at Faramir seated together with his lieutenant and a young man Lindórië recalled as having been the rangers' prisoner yestereve. She wondered what was going on there, but they were talking too quietly for her to overhear their conversation.

Túrin had smiled at Daewen when she had taken her seat. “Good morning,” he said. “How are you feeling today? We were really worried about you yestereve, with the cough and all. But you look much better this morning.”

Cynara

Alessya shrugged and started in on the meal that had just been brought. "It's not really a very interesting story. I was working for a short time as a barmaid at the White Tree, in the Third Circle. Awful work, the proprietor only want ladies who could grin and bat their eyes at the customers, but I'm a pretty good actor, and was short on cash. This group, here, decided to come in for some good food, and I happened to overhear some of their conversation. I suggested myself as a mercenary soldier, and long story short, I was hired on." Finishing her eggs, Alessya started on the bacon.

"So," she continued, "How did you all meet Faramir?"

Lady_of_Rohan

"I feel better too," Daewen said, having taken a seat beside Túrin. She was about to say something more when her breakfast was brought out. Surely this is not meant for only one person, she thought, stunned. The platter was heaped high with eggs, bacon, some fried potatoes, and a few soft, hot biscuits set off to one side. And it smelled sooo good! She blinked rapidly, trying to make sure that this really was something real and not just her imagination. A chuckle came from beside her.

"You better start eating before that gets cold," Túrin said and smiled.

Without a word, Daewen took a fork and started into the meal, tentatively trying out some things that didn't look too familiar, but tasted delicious anyway. She gulped down several bites of eggs before realizing that there was a slice of ham underneath. With a muted squeal, she hurriedly sawed a few bites off and gulped them down. If she kept this pace, she would make herself sick within a few minutes, but she did not care. This was a breakfast fit for a king, she reasoned, and there was no way she would let it go to waste, even if that did mean eating until she was stuffed.

Khorazir

Túrin smiled at the girl's appetite, then looked to Alessya to answer her question. "Well," he said, "with me I guess it was the family-thing. I mean, my father knows his father, my elder brother is a good friend of Boromir's and serves in his company, and thus we used to meet on festivities. I recall that it was during some wedding that our friendship really started. I must have been about six or seven, Faramir two years older, and he and his cousin from Dol Amroth were playing this cake-game."

When the others looked at him questioningly he grinned and explained: "Well, they had lots of cakes there, and one very large and beautiful one, decorated all over with nuts and almonds. The game was to try and steal as many of them as possible without the servant who was in charge of serving the cakes noticing. Elphir, Faramir's cousin, had already been caught once and punished, but that hadn't stopped him from returning to the game once released. The two looked as if they were really having fun, and I was totally bored because there was no one else to play with, and so I asked if I could join them, and they, I guess, were glad about another "player" who could distract the servant. We managed to rid the cake of almost all almonds and other decoration, and in the end we retired to a quiet spot to eat it, before setting out to do more mischief. Man, the fun we had that day ...," he ended dreamily.

"Well, at least someone had, then," Lindórië said with a slight smile. "I do not remember the event that gladly."

Bardhwyn

Gareth knitted his eyebrows in puzzlement and then shook his head in disbelief.

"I don't know much about such things as spying, my Lord, but if they wanted to spy on you, I wouldn't send someone the likes of me." Gareth allowed his face to drop. "Send me to make a right hash of things, maybe," he gave a grunt and slumped over the table, "that's what my father would say."

Gareth pushed his hair back and was immediately distracted by a serving woman carrying a tray full of food. Andanor gave an amused snort.

Embarrassed, Gareth brought his attention back to the table muttering 'Sorry, milord' and then dejectedly occupied himself by pulling on a wood knot jutting up from the tabletop with his forefinger and thumb.

Khorazir

Faramir studied the young man a while longer. Most likely he would try and follow us anyway, he thought, be his story true or false. And whatever his purpose – for there is some, other than the reason he gave –, we might learn more about it when allowing him to accompany us.

"Very well," he said at length. "You may travel with us as far as Pelargir to find your relatives. Andanor here will have an eye on you. But have a care that you do not cause any mischief. If anything unusual befalls in this company, I shall know whom to blame."

His stern expression softened, and he smiled. "And now, ere you shall be allowed to finally have breakfast, I would like to know how to call you. Yesterday you were pretty reluctant to tell me your name, and I doubt that your attitude to revealing information about yourself has changed over night. But I would not like to have to call you "boy" all the time."

Canamarth

"What a pity I hadn't been invited," Maradir grinned. "But I'm not sure if I'd met Faramir then already. Can't have been a lot later, though. We met in one of the lower circles of Minas Tirith where he was out exploring with his brother. So, I'm also one of his childhood acquaintances."

Maradir now appeared a little distracted and amused by Daewen's appetite. She was still wolfing down her breakfast but stopped when she realised that almost everyone at the table was looking at her now.

Lady_of_Rohan

What have I done??? Daewen thought, the panic starting to build within her. She was certain that she had done some faux pas, why else would everyone at the table be looking at her? Her eyes darted from person to person. They seemed to be suppressing chuckles or hiding smiles behind cups or mugs. She was quite uncertain of what was going on. Quickly swallowing what was left in her mouth, she pushed the half-empty plate away to the side. Maybe part of it was for someone else after all. The thought didn't keep her from casting a long glance at the platter again, her mouth beginning to water as she remembered how that bacon had tasted. She glanced at her companions again, her puzzlement and confusion evident on her face now.

Khorazir

"You don't want to finish that?" Túrin asked, smiling. "It's all yours," he added reassuringly. "We've already had our breakfast. I guess we were all just marvelling at your speed at extinguishing these eggs."

Bardhwyn

Gareth let out a sigh and looked over at Andanor. He thought for sure he'd told Faramir what he knew by now, what his name was, where they'd met. He guessed wrong. Andanor cocked his head in the direction of his Captain, encouraging Gareth to reply.

"Gareth. I'll be 19 in Narquelie." he said simply, hoping to get across he was not a 'boy', at least to his thinking.

"And what else do you say, boy?" Andanor said, pushing Gareth slightly. Gareth quickly hid his irritation at the word 'boy'. He pushed out from the table and stood up...

"I am most grateful for your permission to travel with you, My Lord," Gareth said with a bow, "I assure you, I will bring no misfortune to this company and I will defend you with my life, if need be."

He sat down, wondering what had gotten into him, saying that. Too late, he had said it, most likely because he meant it. He returned to his seat, again distracted by another tray of food carried by yet another serving maid. His stomach growled loudly.

"May I have some breakfast now?"

Canamarth

"I think we're staying another day or two," Maradir added. "So you can take your time with it." He turned to Túrin. "Haven't you given her enough to eat while you were travelling? That's not very nice, you know. Inviting young lovely girls to accompany you and then not care for them properly."

Lady_of_Rohan

At their words, Daewen pulled the plate back in front of her. She ate much slower this time, mostly because she was starting to get full, and she didn't want to be the entertainment either. When she set aside the platter for good, it was three-fourths empty, and she felt stuffed to the point of being sick. It had certainly been the biggest breakfast she'd ever eaten. She settled back in her chair, occasionally giving the platter a glance, wondering if perhaps she could find a way to eat another bite...

Khorazir

Faramir had been quite touched by Gareth's promise to defend him with his life.

"I thank you for your offer, Gareth," he said gravely, "but hope that such a situation may never occur on our journey. And yes," he added with a smile, and a sign to one of the barmaids to come over to them, "you may have breakfast now."

Turning to Andanor, he quickly told his lieutenant what Dorlas had said about the injured and the prisoners, the need to stay at the inn for this day. Also he mentioned the orders he had given the rangers concerning the unloading of the carts. "I am going to check on them presently," he said. "I am curious as to what they may have found on the carts. And I shall inquire at the landlady's if she knows an out-of-the-way-place where we can bury the slain. When you have finished breakfast, you can introduce our new companion to the men, and instruct him about his duties. He can help with the work. After all, it was his former company's task to get rid of these Southrons."

+++

Túrin's eyes narrowed at the mentioning of "lovely young girls", and for a moment it seemed that his mirth was gone. Then he shrugged, and the frown was replaced by a grin again. "Yes, I know. And I do have a bad conscience, really. But I seem to have somewhat lost track of the many lovely girls that craved my company of late." He looked up and cast a quick glance at Lossiel sitting all by herself at a small table close to the door. He sighed, then looked back to the others.

"Although I daresay the only one of them who can still stand it right now is Daewen."

EdaintheRanger

Andanor nodded a business-like reply to Faramir's words. He was a man who took his work quite seriously and made little time for leisure when he was "on duty". As a result when he was "off duty" and on leave he tended to over indulge himself in many ways.

He was quietly pleased at Faramir's misgivings about Gareth, which he shared, but kept very close to his chest. He felt that deep down that Gareth was a "good lad" who needed guidance and understanding. Presently the game that he had handed to the servants at the inn were roasted and taking one carcass, for himself he gave the other one to the rangers he knew appreciated "a piece of good fowl." They recieved the gift with a light hearted, and humourous banter which was perhaps a little rustic for the present company. Andanor merely joined in the bandied words and reminded them to "keep it clean".

Polishing off his breakfast with a relish, Andanor stood and found his eyes drifting to the other table and particularly the ladies seated there, then snapping back to his duty he asked Gareth to accompany him to the stables and introductions to the senior rangers.

Andanor then asked Faramir premission to leave the table, as etiquette sometimes demanded, rather hastily wiping his fingers on a napkin as he did so.

Khorazir

While Gareth and Andanor had their breakfast, Faramir spoke with the landlady who had come over to their table. She was not overly pleased by the prospect of having a bunch of Southrons buried near her house, and advised Faramir to have them brought to a grove of oaktrees that grew about half a mile away.

"They won't be troubling no one there, lord," she said. "I know the farmer who owns this land, and he won't mind. He only uses the grove for feeding the pigs – and they, I bet, won't mind either if there's dead people underneath their snouts. They only minds their food, they do."

Faramir thanked her, and when Andanor left the table, he rose as well. "I am sorry to have to leave you here by yourself, Gareth," he said, "but duty calls. And perhaps you would like to join the young lady over there." He nodded towards Lossiel quietly sipping her tea, a rather sad expression on her face. "She looks a bit lonely, does she not?"

Canamarth

Maradir noted Túrin's quick glance at the girl sitting alone near the door. And he remembered that Visilya was amongst their company as well.

So that is how things stand, he thought and regretted his remark which had been meant as a light joke. But he was not a mind-reader after all. Better to change the subject.

“So, what are you doing today then? I mean, after you took care of the Southron remains and filed through their loot?” Turning to Curufë he added: “I suggest we try ourselves at a little archery?”

asaris

Curufë smiled. “I would be happy to engage in a friendly competition, though my bow skills are not what they used to be. Are we all finished with breakfast? I'd like to get an early start on burying those corpses.”

Khorazir

Faramir went and swiftly changed into his ranger-gear again which was dry by now, then accompanied one of the landlady's grooms to the stables where he showed him where to find tools. Calling for some of the rangers to come and help him carry, they returned to the others, who by now had looked through the carts and searched the bodies and piled them on one of them. Grooms were fetching horses and strapping them in front of the wain.

“Here's the list you requested, captain,” Mablung said handing Faramir a sheet of paper. “It's not complete, though. We haven't quite finished looking through the cargo yet. There are some valuables, but only little gold or jewelery, and most of it appears to be loot. Apparently they had the intention to try and sell it in Minas Tirith.”

“What of their own gear and garments. Did you find anything that may point at their origin?”

“I'm not sure, captain. A few wore charms about their necks or had strange symbols tattooed on their arms or chests. Damrod has made sketches of those. But on the whole their garments were rather ragged, and of course they were mostly wearing Gondorian raiment for disguise.”

“Very well,” Faramir said. “Let half the men remain here and continue the work. The rest shall bring the cart with the dead. The landlady has described a place to me where we can bury them.”

Galhadrim

The Road to Dol Amroth

The carriage had been moving quickly through the night. The horses were lathered and striving to maintain the pace set for them. When the driver almost dozed off for the fifth time that morning, he called down to the cabin and asked for a break.

Grendelenth supplied a curt “not yet” and continued to stare out at the hills and light woods. He scanned the countryside near and far in a repetitive pattern that he'd been keeping up for some time as the sun climbed higher and higher.

The riders behind the carriage were clearly in pain and the brief hope that they held for rest was dashed when they saw the dejected set of the driver as he sat back up. Their horses were becoming less agreeable and forced them to concentrate on handling the reins.

A few minutes later, the ambassador suddenly called for a stop and the men gladly did so. They dismounted and stretched and thanked Eru for the respite. They were so relieved they paid no concern to what had caused their stop.

Grendelenth stared out the window at a lone wolf on top of a knoll. The lean animal stood with his jaws open wide and his tongue lolling out. He breathed heavily, just completing a journey from the north that took almost all his strength and forced him to run through both night and uncomfortable day. His head low and his eyes locked on the

carriage window, the wolf waited patiently.

The ambassador concentrated on the wolf for several minutes. It remained in place, unseen and downwind, until finally it turned and began loping back to the north.

It knew what needed to be done.

Lady_of_Rohan

Having convinced herself that she wouldn't be able to eat anymore, no matter how hard she tried to tell herself she could, Daewen looked up when she heard Túrin mention her name. "What about me?" she asked.

Khorazir

Túrin smiled. "Oh, I just told Maradir that you might be the only girl around here who can still stand me." Then he looked up when a ranger approached the table. Túrin grinned. "I guess the lazy times are over now, aren't they? I bet you've come to drag us out to work, Damrod."

Damrod grinned back. "Would do you good, I daresay. But nay, actually we are men enough. The captain's just left with half the company to bury the dead Southrons, and the rest is still filing through the cargo. Thus for you there remains little but to sit back and and enjoy the rest." He then turned to Lindórië and handed her a piece of paper. "The captain told me to give you this, lady, saying that you knew a bit about letters and symbols and languages. They're sketches of the tattoos some of the Southrons bore. Perhaps you can find out about what they mean."

Canamarth

Maradir watched Lindórië as she looked at the piece of paper intently. "Why don't you lay it on the table so's we can all have a look," he said. "I mean, Curufë will know his bit about letters and signs and Túrin knows a lot about the Southrons. And even I have seen a sailor or two from Umbar. Maybe we can help as well."

EdaintheRanger

While some of the others still lingered in the common room, and Curufë along with Maradir considered further archery practice, Andanor was in the stables. Faramir had gained knowledge as to where the poor Southrons could be laid at rest. While their liegeland and Captain organised the finer directions, Andanor organised a burial detail. This was one of the least liked tasks, as it was grim and meloncoly work. "Attention! Lets have some volunteers for the burial party." Andanor said clapping his hands together for empathise.

The rangers in the main suddenly found something to busy themselves with and pretended not to hear. Andanor rolled his eyes it was going to be one of those days he thought to himself.

"Have a care!" he called, the sharp turn in his voice attracting his men's attention. Continuing he spoke "I said that I would like some volunteers for the party." As there was no immediate response he took matters into his own hands.

"Right then.... I'll have you, you, you, and You! You slovenly bunch of soldiers!" Andanor winced internally at his last turn of phrase, that was Damrod's favourite epithet. "And to make sure you do the job properly, I'll be helping. Come on! I know that you're all just itching to get your shirts off, an'... Ahem, impress the ladies!"

With that Andanor gathered the shovels, picks and mattocks together, aided by his faithful rangers.

Khorazir

“Of course,” Lindórië said with a smile, spreading the sheet with Damrod’s sketches on the table. “I tend to forget my surroundings (and my manners, apparently), when looking at things like that.” Looking across the table at Túrin, she asked: “You know much about the Southrons?”

Túrin shrugged. “I’m not sure. But I’ve met a few, mostly in certain taverns in Minas Tirith. And my brother’s told me a lot about them. I speak some Adûnaic, but not much, and certainly not as much as other people here. Oh, but I do know some great Haradaic swearwords,” he added with a grin. Leaning forward for a better look at the drawings, he studied them thoughtfully. “They’re really keen on these snake-symbols, aren’t they?”

“They are indeed. Perhaps they mark a certain tribe or people,” Lindórië mused. “Damrod writes here that three of them bore a very similar tattoo. And ‘tis well-known that especially in the deserts south-east of Umbar they live in nomadic tribes, and fight amongst themselves.”

“Ah, I’d like to see the desert one day,” Túrin said. “You hear so many fascinating tales about it. Oh, look at that,” he grabbed the sheet and turned it round so that the others could see it from his point of view, “doesn’t that look like a strange kind of writing, underneath that serpent-like animal there?”

+++

Faramir grinned at his lieutenant’s remark. “Well, I guess you can leave on your shirts. There will not be any ladies present, unless Captain Visilya shows up unexpectedly, or one of the others decides to follow us – which I doubt.” Taking the horses’ reins, he led them and the cart out of the courtyard, the rangers carrying the tools following. They swiftly passed the few other houses of the village, following the main road which was still riddled with deep puddles from last night’s thunderstorm. At the southern end of the small settlement they turned left into a narrow, grassy lane that cut through orchards, fields and meadows where cattle grazed. About a mile ahead a dark patch of woodland showed.

“This should be the grove the landlady mentioned,” Faramir said.

Bardhwyn

“When you’re finished with your breakfast, boy, come out to the stables and I will introduce you to the men.” Andanor said, throwing his napkin on the table.

Gareth nodded, having just shoved in a mouthful of food and noticed Faramir rising from the table as well.

“I am sorry to have to leave you here by yourself, Gareth,” Faramir said, “but duty calls. And perhaps you would like to join the young lady over there.” He nodded towards Lossiel quietly sipping her tea, a rather sad expression on her face. “She looks a bit lonely, does she not?”

Gareth, chewed on his food and looked over at the young woman he’d passed outside. She did look lonely. As the two men turned to leave he forced down his mouthful of food and spoke, hoping excuse himself from going anywhere near her...

“My lord, we’ve not been introduced. I don’t know her name. I can’t just walk..”

Faramir leaned over the table. “Her name is Lossiel.” He said with a smile. Andanor grinned, swatted Gareth on the arm and followed his Captain out the door.

Lossiel, absorbed in the loose tealeaves floating at the bottom of her mug, was startled by Faramir's voice.

"His name is Gareth. Consider yourselves introduced." He said. Faramir gave the young lady a slight bow along with a gentle smile and left the common room, Andanor following close behind.

Gareth looked down at his half finished breakfast, actually, his half finished second helping of breakfast, then to the young woman he'd just been 'introduced' to. He groaned inwardly. This was not at all what he envisioned. Maradir, he could see, was still chatting with the party at the other table and it occurred to Gareth that he needed to stay close to his other Captain. The parchment hidden under his shirt scratched at him, lightly reminding him of his immediate objective.

He stood up from his place, taking with him his breakfast and mug of pale ale and walked to the young woman's table.

"Good morrow. Lord Faramir asked that I join you. May I?" Gareth stood before the young woman's table, feeling a bit foolish and hoping she'd say yes just so he could sit down and quickly. "I'm sorry" he added. "My name is Gareth. I will be traveling with the Company as far as Pelargir. Do you mind?" Gareth gestured towards the empty bench opposite.

gladrieltook

Visilya watched the men go from behind the stables. She heard Faramir's words, and grinned to herself. She dismounted and tethered her horse to a nearby fencepost, then hurried after the men, keeping her head low, and her footfalls light. She reached the grove as the others did, and she hid herself behind a tree to watch. She could have some fun with this. Cupping her hands to her mouth, she let out a low call, like a wolf's howl. Several of the men were quite shaken by this, and looked about them, their bows at ready. Visilya had had much practice at throwing her voice about, so all the arrows were pointed about 10 yards to her right. She doubled over with silent laughter, then stepped out. "Jumpy, are we?" she laughed. "My, my, my... I shall have to tell this story to the boys back home. They could always use a good laugh." She took a shovel from one of the younger men, who had already removed his shirt. "Put that back on," she snapped, pointing to the shirt with the shovel. The soldier hastily obeyed.

asaris

"I will be of little help here," Curufë said, shaking his head. "I have spent very little time in Harad, and that was a long time ago. But if they are words indeed, I might be able to decipher them."

Khorazir

Faramir had watched the rangers' reaction to Visilya's pranks with some amusement. "Visilya, I am not sure if I can tolerate you trying to command my men," he said jestfully. "But you are right, they should have been more heedful of their surroundings." Then his expression turned grave again, as he remembered the grim task at hand.

Glancing about the grove, he saw that there was little brush underneath the stately oaktrees. The grassy ground was rutted by the farmer's pigs digging for roots and other edible things. "We cannot move the cart in there," Faramir said thoughtfully. "And we should not dig too close to the trees. The roots would only hinder our progress."

"There's a little clearing further inwards," a ranger said. "The pigs have been very active there, but that should prove helpful, as they've already dug quite a hole."

"Very well. Those with tools can begin to dig, the others help me carry the bodies over. And then we should gather

some rocks to cover the grave with. I do not want the pigs to unearth the bodies again.”

+++

Lindórië bent forward to take a closer look at the strange signs Túrin had indicated. “They look indeed like Tengwar-letters,” she said, turning the paper this way and that. “But if so, they are very stylised, and there are neither tehtar nor vowels. But see, if turned this way this figure could be hyarmen, and this tinco, with a strange spiral in the loop. And this ... to me it looks like formen, but I could be mistaken. The descender irritates me, as formen usually does not have one.”

“Do they use Tengwar in the South?” Túrin asked.

“In Umbar they do,” Lindórië answered, “and in Harondor and the lands about the river Harnen as well. As for the lands south of Umbar ... who knows? I have heard once that they have their own systems of writing down there, but no one has ever journeyed thither to find out more.”

gladrieltook

Visilya threw the shovel back to its owner, and offered to take a few men in search of rocks. Soon she had chosen three stout young men to help her. They disappeared into the trees, and soon their footfalls died away.

She led the soldiers to the edge of the forest, where they split into teams of two. Soon they had a large pile of rocks collected. Then slowly and carefully, they carried the largest rocks back into the forest. Some were so big that it took two of them to carry each. The pile was slowly transferred to the clearing where the dead would be buried.

“Stout they are, but not the brightest stars in the sky,” Visilya whispered to Faramir in Quenya. Her own men were not so easily tricked. But that was the quality that Visilya looked for when hand-selecting each new recruit.

Khorazir

Faramir smiled slightly. “Well, they are not of the Secret Guard, after all,” he replied softly in the same tongue. “But honestly, I would be more worried if they had taken the fake wolf-howl seriously.” Then his voice took on a more serious note. “For them this journey has been more or less a vacation so far, and a well-earned one, I daresay. Things are grave in Ithilien, and we have seen some very rough times there recently. And believe me, I would not have any men in my company whose senses are not keen and alert if the situation calls for it, and who have only wits enough to grab the sword at the right end.”

gladrieltook

Visilya chuckled in return. “It would be a sad day indeed when a soldier knew not how to hold a sword.”

Canamarth

Maradir squinted at the small letters but could not make much sense of them. He saw the similarity to Tengwar letters when Lindórië pointed them out but could not have come up with this observation on his own. The snake symbol seemed familiar somehow, though. He had probably seen it in some tavern in the lower circles of Minas Tirith. He tried to think of the occasion but could not quite grasp it with Túrin and Lindórië talking right next to him. He needed to clear his mind. And there was one thing which always helped him to focus.

"I need some fresh air to think," he said and rose. "What about our little competition, Curufë? Would you be ready to join me in a little practice of archery now?"

Lossiel had watched the man, whom Faramir had introduced as Gareth, approach her table. He now stood before her, asking if he could join her.

What's this supposed to be? she thought. Was Faramir trying to lift her spirits by sending that boy to keep her company? She was about to refuse his request when she realised how nervous and eager to just sit down he was. Something like curiosity awoke in her and she said: "Yes. I mean, no. I don't mind. You can sit down."

Khorazir

"Or a spade," Faramir said, before joining the men who carried the bodies over to the hole they had dug. Swiftly they laid the Southrons to rest, and covered the hole again with earth, and then with the rocks Visilya and the three rangers had gathered. Nobody spoke. Looking at the rangers' expressions, Faramir saw that there was little regret about the Southrons' deaths. The men seemed to think that their foes had earned it. Moreover it was not the first time they had to bury or burn the corpses of fallen enemies, so that they all were hardened against these things.

When the task was done, they returned to the cart. While following the narrow lane back towards the village, Faramir joined Andanor. "I would appreciate if you had an eye – or two, rather –, on young Gareth," he said. "He seems a man both brave and honest, and I do not think he will cause any trouble in the company. But there is some mystery about him, and I would really like to know more about him and his background. Also there is the matter of the surviving Southrons. I shall have to question them, and then decide what to do with them. Any suggestions?"

Cynara

Alessya quickly finished her breakfast, nodded to those at her table, and rose. She had planned on helping bury the dead Southrons, but the detail party had already left, and the task was likely finished by now. Mounting the stairs to her room, Alessya decided quickly on taking a ride. Changing into the proper clothes for such an activity, Alessya made sure to belt on her sword, as well as strapping on a bandolier of throwing daggers that went under her light shirt.

Exiting the inn, she went to the stables, and quickly groomed and tacked her horse. Leading her mount out of the stables, Alessya swiftly mounted, and took off at a quick canter, leaving behind in the stableyard only the sound of hooves and laughter.

Bardhwyn

"Thank you. Your name, is it Lossiella?"

"Lossiel" the young woman said curtly, but with a quickly added smile.

"Uh, sorry, Lossiel. Gareth." Gareth placed his plate down on the table along with his mug and utensils and was immediately distracted by Maradir rising to leave.

"Yes, Faramir told me.." Lossiel said but quickly noticed he wasn't paying attention but listening to Faramir's new companion. ...

"I need some fresh air to think...What about our little competition, Curufë? Would you be ready to join me in a little practice of archery now?"

“Archery.” Gareth said seating himself. Lossiel had sat back in her chair and was looking at him somewhat bemused. “I am very good at archery. Do you like archery?” Gareth asked, casting a glance back at Maradir and the Elf. “Perhaps they will let us join them. I can teach you if you don’t know.” He picked at the remains of his breakfast. “Aren’t you going to eat anything? The food is very good. Why are you over here by yourself, anyway? Did they take you in off the street or something?” Gareth said, with a smile and a small laugh.

Khorazir

“You do not want to join them, Túrin?” Lindórië asked, indicating Maradir and Curufë.

Túrin let out a short laugh. “Aye, perhaps I should. For amusement’s sake. I’m not that good with a bow. And with Maradir shooting beside me, and the Elf who I bet isn’t that unskilled at archery either, I’d be the laughing stock. But I guess I should go and see if the rangers need any help with the carts – if you ladies want to get rid of me, that is. What are you going to do?”

Lindórië shrugged. “When Faramir returns he most likely is going to interrogate the prisoners. Perhaps he will need an interpreter. And I would like to question the Southrons about these strange symbols. So until we visit them, I shall remain here, and keep Daewen company. Perhaps she would care for a stroll outside. The fresh air would do her good.”

EdaintheRanger

Andanor had be a little less condesending with his remarks about the rangers and their reaction to Visilya’s prank. The men were glad of the diversion and anything would help to distract from the grim job in hand. If the Secret guard wanted to think that they were better than the rangers at their job, then they were entitled too. But then all they ever did was file reports whilst sitting in their comfy armchairs. In between snooping at keyholes like the errant butler or nosey servants. He would like to see them risking their necks in the open field, rather than dreaming up conspiracies.

He was about to relate his opinion to Visilya, when he became aware that Faramir was asking him a question. Focusing his attention, Andanor’s fingers rasped on his unshaven chin. “Well if I were you, I’d make them feel at ease, are we letting them go too? If they are just ordinary soldiers then they will be wanting two things, home and food. They know what they face if they make advances towards the city, perhaps you should suggest that to them to reinforce it. Be firm but fair. Perhaps you could ask them about what’s happening in their lands, then coach them towards the areas which you really wish to know about. Or...”

A gleam appeared in Andanor’s eye, as he paused for effect “You could suggest that we have come to an agreement to prisoner exchange with The tower of the Moon, (Andanor refrained from using its latter day hateful name) I’m sure they would like to discuss leave arrangements with a Nazgul.”

asaris

“Indeed. Let me get my bow – it’s up in my room.” Curufë went up the stairs, and returned with a magnificent bow indeed. It was much longer than most of the bows used by the Gondorians, and was inlaid with mithril along portions of its length. Curufë smiled as the Gondorians took in the princely bow. “It was a gift,” the elf said. “Well, shall we shoot?”

Khorazir

Faramir smiled grimly. "Aye, the prospect of this should indeed loosen their tongues. But seriously, I am not sure if they are indeed simple soldiers. They seemed more like mercenaries or mere outlaws to me, and they were all but disciplined in fight. And the way they ravaged the village ...," he shook his head in disgust. "The question remains how they managed to pass through Lebennin unnoticed for so long. 'tis not that they did much to conceal their vile deeds. Well, perhaps they can enlighten us about the nature of their plans. And then ... what to do with them afterwards? That is our chief problem. I have spoken about it with some of the others, but we have not come to a satisfying solution."

He fell silent, thoughtfully picking some petals of apple-blossom out of the mane of the cart-horse he was leading by the reins. "It would be just to execute them in punishment for their deeds, I guess," he said quietly after a while. "And yet ... I do not consider myself to possess the authority to decide about their lives and deaths."

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen looked up when she heard someone mention her name. She had been idly tracing the pattern in the wood of the table while the others poured over some papers. She didn't quite understand what they were looking at, but after a few moments of listening in she decided that she wouldn't be any use to the brainstorming anyway. It had sounded like they were talking about letters and foreign words, two things that were far beyond her comprehension. So instead she found something to keep herself occupied. Now it appeared that a couple people were going to leave the inn and do... something. Archery? Carting? They'd said something, but she hadn't paid close enough attention to catch what it was. *Doesn't really matter*, she thought, *you aren't going along anyways*. She looked up and saw Lindórië watching her. "What did you say about me?" she asked hesitantly.

Khorazir

"Oh, I was wondering if you might like to go out for a short walk. The others are about to try themselves at archery, and Túrin actually wants to work" – she gave him a wink. "'tis a fair day outside, and a bit of fresh air would do you good. Moreover it should be fun to watch the archers. Do you feel well enough to go out?"

Lady_of_Rohan

"I guess so," the girl replied. "If not... well, I guess we'll find out." She managed a weak smile. As they stood she asked, "What were you looking at? Something important?"

gladrieltook

Visilya could see the distain in the Ranger's proud eyes. She could tell he thought very little of the Secret Gaurd. She stepped close and whispered in his ear. "If you think that all the secret gaurd does is sit idle, you are sorely mistaken. We handle jobs that your rangers wouldn't touch. Even dream of insulting the gaurd that my forefathers set up to protect our fair city from villians even you could not begin to comprehend, and I will personally remove your tongue." She stepped away, her eyes hard and filled with the light of many generations of proud service to the stewards and people of Minas Tirth. She was proud of her position, and of the brave men who tirelessly prowled the city in the dark night, bringing to justise guilds of theives and murderers while the rest of the city slept, unaware of the silent patrol. The gaurds recieved no praise, and many had no family outside of the gaurd, but they went on serving, night after night, from dusk until dawn.

Khorazir

“Peace, Visilya,” Faramir said, having partly overheard her whispered words. He was smiling, yet there was a trace of sternness in his voice. “Nobody here doubts that you and your men do an important job, and nightly risk your lives for the safety of the realm. But we work for the same goal, only in a slightly different way, perhaps. I understand your pride at your company, which, as far as I can judge, is well-earned. But still, you should be careful with condescending remarks about the rangers. I do not wish for endless discussions about which company is the better. Let us just agree upon the fact that both consist of the best men for the job. I do not doubt that some of my men would not be fit for the work yours do in the City. On the other hand there might be some among the guardsmen who are no good at ranger-work. So let there be an end to this discussion now.”

+++

“We were looking at sketches Damrod has made of some of the tattoos the dead Southrons bore,” Lindórië explained while accompanying the girl outside. “But we do not know yet if they might be of importance as we could not recognise or decipher the strange symbols. Some looked like letters, but even that is not certain. Do you want to have a look at them as well? The way things stand, everybody might come up with a helpful idea as to what they mean.”

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen raised one eyebrow slightly. “I highly doubt I would be of any help. I can’t even read, much less try and figure out other languages. Besides, I didn’t even understand what you were talking about when there were three of you looking over the sketches.” She went silent. The day’s sun felt warm on her back and shoulders. The morning was still cool, though it promised to heat up soon. At least it’s not raining anymore, she thought. There were still lots of puddles and muddy patches, reminders of the previous night’s storms. She had to admit, it did feel good to be out of doors.

Khorazir

Lindórië shrugged. “I just thought that perhaps you had seen the strange snake-symbol somewhere in Minas Tirith. Túrin had, and Maradir seemed to recognise it as well. And I am sure you know more about the City and its inhabitants than they do. And as for reading ... – would you like to learn it?”

Lady_of_Rohan

The girl kicked at a rock, then shrugged. “I’ve done alright so far without it. Although it would be kinda nice to know what signs said,” she added softly. Suddenly she kicked a rock forcefully, sending it bouncing and rolling ahead of them. “Besides, only little kids can learn how to read. Once you’re my age you’re pretty much out of luck.”

Khorazir

“Who told you that?” Lindórië asked. “You can learn to read no matter what age you are, although generally young children learn faster than adults. Or are you referring to the schooling-system we have in Gondor, and that a common school would not take you anymore because you are too old?” She smiled. “Do not worry about this. If you would really like to learn how to read and write, we shall find a way. For one, as long as we are on this journey and time allows, I can teach you.”

gladrieltook

Visilya nodded, but still glared at Andanor, her eyes flinty. She turned with a scowl, and climbed the nearest tree with a rather startling speed. She sat upon one of the boughs, gazing east and north, towards the fair city of Minas Tirith. She protected that city from the inside, but he protected it from the outside. They were opposites, not quite enemies, but too proud to be allies. The Secret Gaurd was usually shunned by their fellow soldiers, of late because they were led by a woman, but always because they did not gaurd like the Gaurds of the White Tree. They did not intimidate, or try to. They simply worked quietly, without thanks, without recognition, or credit. She had a grudge, she admitted, towards the Rangers. They got to go out and see the real excitement, while she and her men were trapped within the city. They wanted excitement, she could feel it every time she passed the rec-room where they stopped to rest between duties. There was tension in their young hearts. They felt the war drawing ever nearer, just as she did. They felt it even in their sleep. She would not sleep for days on end for dreams about the war, nightmares about the horrors of Mordor. She'd sat upon the outer wall of the gaurd, gazing out at the west for the rise of the sun, or to the east to the creeping dark. It frightened her.

Lady_of_Rohan

"You can?" Daewen asked incredulously. "I thought..." You were wrong about that other part, so you're probably wrong on this too. So she shrugged that comment off. She glanced up as a bird swooped out of a nearby tree and landed on the ground to pick at some spilled grain. "I guess I could give it a try," she said at last, looking up at Lindórië with a weak smile.

Canamarth

Maradir had fetched his longbow from the stables where he had left it with his saddle, then asked the innkeeper if there was anything they could use as a target near. He told him that there was a meadow not far to the south along the road where a local farmer, Marach by name, had set up a target for training purposes. "He'll let you shoot there for sure."

On their way down the road, Maradir looked at Curufë's wonderful bow and nodded appreciatively. "A marvellous piece of work. I hope it is not enchanted. For that would be unfair indeed."

"They didn't take me off the streets," Lossiel replied angrily. "My father is a nobleman in Minas Tirith. I'm not a street urchin like that one over there," she nodded towards Daewen who was leaving the inn with Lindórië. "Or like you, for that matter." She got up, almost knocking Gareth's breakfast over and strode towards the stairs. When she had reached the middle of the room she suddenly turned around and returned to Gareth's table. "And it's my business alone why I sat here on my own. I didn't invite you over to pester me with your questions."

Khorazir

Lindórië smiled back broadly. Actually the possibility of teaching Daewen delighted her. She had loved to teach, and had always considered being deprived of that occupation when having been forced to leave the City and follow her husband to Lebennin one of the saddest aspects of her marriage. *I wonder if I still know how to do it*, she mused. *'tis been how long now since Tarannon returned to Linbir? Twelve years at least.*

"I am sure you will learn swiftly, and moreover enjoy it," she said.

asaris

“Enchantment? I hardly need to enchant my bow, dear friend, to outshoot you,” Curufë said with a wry smile on his face. “Besides, there’s no such thing as magic.”

Bardhwyn

Gareth picked up the bits of egg and potato that had fallen from his plate, not looking at the woman. He cocked an eyebrow and smirked at her sudden return.

“I am sorry, My Lady” he replied with a wry smile, looking slowly up at her from his seat. “It was meant to be a jest. I see I failed to amuse. No, of course you’re no street urchin but the well-mannered and genteel daughter of a Minas Tirith nobleman. I can see that now. Forgive me.”

He stood up, throwing down the serviette on the spilled plate, and found he stood just a bit taller than she. Lossiel’s eyes burned with hurt and anger, more than was reasonable for his little social faux-pas. Confused, Gareth looked away, his faced reddened. Even angry this girl was pretty.

“I shan’t pester you with my questions any longer, my lady. Good day.” With a slight bow he turned and left her by the tableside. Once out the door he caught sight of Maradir and the Elf making their way casually down the road.

“Hey There! Wait for Me!” Gareth bellowed from the Inn’s courtyard.

The two men stopped and turned, waiting for the ‘new young man’ to catch up to them.

“May I join you?” Gareth asked, slightly out of breath. “ I am rather a good archer myself. My name is Gareth, I uh, I have just arrived from Minas Tirith and I will be traveling as far as Pelargir.”

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen shrugged slightly. “We’ll see,” she said simply. It was clear that she was not as confident in her abilities as the other was. They were following the archers at an even leisurely pace, and getting several curious glances from people from the village also travelling along the roadway. A few moments later Daewen muttered a stream of curses and grumblings as her foot slipped into a rather deep and gooey mud puddle, allowing cold, dirty water and some mud into her boot. “Oh hang it all,” she muttered, kicking the heel of her boot against some solid ground, “I finally get dried out from that lovely storm yesterday and now I’m wet again.”

Canamarth

Maradir decided he liked Curufë. “Just what I always say. I have seen a few strange things in my time but I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation for them. And I don’t doubt you will outshoot me. You’ve had a lot more time to practice than I had.”

They were interrupted by Gareth who sped down the road behind them. He played his role as an eager young traveling companion looking for contact quite well, Maradir noted.

“I don’t have any objections,” he said. “The more the merrier. My name is Maradir and this is Curufë.”

+++

Lossiel was taken aback that that insolent boy had left her standing where she was. He could at least have had the manners to ask if I wanted to join him, she thought. But then she had not been too civil with him either. She did not know what had come over her. She had assumed her haughty manners with which she kept her suitors in the city at bay. Since she had met Túrin who would not be daunted by her outbursts, she had become a lot nicer and better-mannered - or so her family and friends said. That boy had made her return to her former rude behaviour to men, though she found she did not particularly want to offend him.

She walked up the stairs, lost in thought, heading for her room where she lay down on her bed for a while to think.

Khorazir

Faramir watched Visilya as she climbed the tree. He could tell that she was troubled, and that the issue of the two companies was not settled yet. He sighed slightly, then walked on.

By now they had almost reached the village again. Soon the lane would join the road. As they drew close to it, Faramir saw several people walk in their direction, and he recognised Maradir and Curufë, both carrying bows and quivers of arrows, who were just joined by Gareth, also equipped with a bow. A little behind them Lindórië and Daewen walked, the latter of whom apparently had just stumbled into a puddle, and was complaining about her wet boots.

“Captain?” a voice called from behind the cart. Turning, Faramir’s eyes fell on Anborn and two other rangers, who were watching the archers excitedly.

“What is it, Anborn?” he asked with a slight smile. He thought he knew full well what the ranger would ask.

“Well, it seems that our work’s done here ... And you always want us to keep practising our skills. So does the lieutenant. And I daresay we sorely need some more training at archery.”

Faramir laughed. “If the others will have you, you may join them. But have a care that you do not dishonour the company.” Especially not if Visilya is watching.

Turning to Andanor, he said: “Why do you not join them as well – to have an eye on young Gareth? Moreover you could finally prove that your shortbow is more than a match for their longbows,” he added with a grin. “I shall return the cart to the inn and see how far the others have come with examining the cargo, and then perhaps join you as well.”

EdaintheRanger

Andanor was smarting a little from Visilya’s comment, though he wasn’t outwardly showing any emotion. He shrugged, muttered something about women and how their suspicious nature suited being watchmen and laughed good naturedly. Then he yawned suddenly and scratched his stubble. He stood apart wandering on the strange tree climbing antics of the sharp guard captain, then dismissed that as well with a half shrug.

Scanning the field he could see that the burial detail had finished and were leaning on their spades. They smartened to attention when they realised that he was watching them and his countenance became stern. Dismissing them for a short while, he dreamt up some new task to keep their idle hands busy. Casting about for ideas he could see that Anborn and his cronies were talking with Faramir. While Faramir’s friend Maradir worked with the Eldar-born one to prepare a tourney. He grinned in response to Faramir’s comment and his eyes flicked first to Visilya’s sentinel tree, then to Gareth. That the lad was eager that was plain, as he bustled around the older men as he helped them.

Andanor marched over to the rangers and prepared to give them a pep talk.

asaris

“Good morning, Gareth,” Curufë said, turning to the young man who had just joined them. “And I wouldn’t be too sure about my practicing, Maradir. I haven’t practiced regularly for a very long time.” In fact, Curufë hadn’t practiced regularly since Nargothrond, but he had still been practicing occasionally and was indeed very, very good.

gladrieltook

But Visilya’s eyes were not on the rangers, but closed, as if in a deep sleep. Her mind whirled uncontrollably, thoughts colliding and mingling. The shadow was coming surer now, growing stronger. The men of Gondor were not at ease, and her Lord Denethor was not well. He had looked oddly strained when she had last seen him, and his face more lined and drawn than was the norm. The air was very warm now, and the sun high. A soft breeze blew through the tree tops, catching a few loose strands of Visilya’s hair. She fought the urge to doze off into a peaceful sleep. She opened her eyes and shook her head, clearing it. Captains don’t nap on duty, she scolded herself. ut she was very tired, and wanted to sleep. Oh how she wanted to sleep. She closed her eyes, giving in to the warmth of the day, and the lulls of peaceful sleep.

Khorazir

Faramir smiled as Andanor went off to talk to the men. He was sure that they would give at least a satisfying show. Anborn was an excellent archer, and his friends were equally skilled with the longbow. And Andanor with his beloved shortbow was a very good archer himself. For a moment Faramir was tempted to sent off the rangers with the cart and to join those preparing for the competition, but then he was reminded of the Southron prisoners. With a sigh he pulled on the cart-horse’s reins again to get it to move. When they had reached the road he hailed Maradir, Curufë and Gareth.

“I hope you do not mind some of my rangers joining your little party. They claimed they sorely needed some archery training, and ‘twould be a pity indeed if that was denied to them. Perhaps you can show them some more tricks, Maradir,” he added with a wink. “Or you, Curufë. ‘tis a marvellous bow you have there,” he ended appreciatively. Then with a nod to them, he continued his way, steering towards Lindórië and Daewen, those rangers as were not eager to join the archers following, carrying the tools they had used for digging the grave.

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen looked up, saw a cart on the road, and immediately moved around so that Lindórië was between her and the vehicle. She had had quite enough experiences with horses for a while, as far as she was concerned. In the distance she could see a half dozen men or so heading off toward a field, carrying bows of various sizes with them. A little ways behind the cart she could see a few other people carrying shovels and other various tools. That puzzled her somewhat, but she did not feel like asking the lady if she knew what had happened.

As the cart drew closer, she recognized the driver. Drat, what was his name again... ah yes, Faramir, the Steward’s son. It appeared that he recognized them as well as he slowed the cart down, the horse tossing its head with impatience.

Canamarth

The company of archers now reached the meadow the innkeeper had mentioned. Marach’s little hut lay right at its border and Maradir jogged over to it to ask him if they could use his target for a little practice. The man who had just finished his breakfast looked at the assembly wide-eyed and speechless - he especially mustered the elf - but then

found his speech again. "Only if I may join yer."

Maradir smiled. "Of course you can."

Marach fetched his shortbow and hurried along behind Maradir to the rangers, Gareth and Curufë who had strung their bows already and were starting to knock on arrows. Some rangers started to shoot already, all arrows hit the target, some closer, some farther off its centre.

Khorazir

Faramir smiled at Lindórië and Daewen as he drew the cart to a halt beside them. "Are you off the watch the archers?" he asked.

Lindórië nodded. "I thought that perhaps Daewen would enjoy a little stroll in the sunshine. Although at the moment I doubt that she is very happy about the suggestion," she added with a pitiful glance at the girl who had stripped off her boot and was emptying it of the muddy water.

"Down in the meadow over there runs a small creek where you can rinse it," Faramir said to her, pointing to a line of alders and willows not far away. "I am sure the cows will suffer your trespass." Then turning to Lindórië, he asked: "Were you able to decipher any of the symbols Damrod sketched?"

She shook her head. "I thought I might question the prisoners about it."

His expression darkened somewhat. "Aye, the prisoners. I have to go and see them now."

"Good luck," she said with an encouraging smile. "I shall join you later. But first I think we should go and find the creek – and hope the cows will indeed be peaceful," she ended with a grin.

Faramir grinned as well. "Good luck to you, too, then." With that he urged on the horse, and the cart set in motion again.

gladrieltook

Through her slumber, uneasy dreams came to Visilya. She dreamt that she was back in Minas Tirith, but in her own home. She saw the death of her father, and the slaughter of her Step-mother. Then the scene changed. She was in a bar, but it was burning, and people were running past her, trying to get out, and she saw Turin, but he did not run, he stood as if frozen, and Visilya tried to get to him, but someone else came. Lossiel flung herself at Turin, and they disappeared from veiw. Then she was no longer in the burning bar, but on a high wall, in the middle of a great storm. The wind lsahe at her, pushing her towards the edge, then a great black shape rose into the sky, like an immense Vulture, with a small figure of a cloaked rider atop it's foul back. The thing flew towards her, and she tried to scream, but no sounds came, and she was falling..... falling..... And with a painful jerk, she was awake. She was on the ground. She gingerly picked herself up and brushed the dust off her clothes. The last bit, she realized, with some amount of amusement, that she must have been trashing about, and had fallen from the tree just as the dream thing came at her. She chuckled, and hoped that no one saw her ungainly fall.

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen pounded on the bottom of her boot once more before finally deciding that it was as empty of dirt and water as it was ever going to be, at least for the moment. Balancing perfectly on one foot, she slipped the boot back on and wiped the mud from her hands. She then eyed the nearby meadow somewhat suspiciously, especially the large, dark

forms that were aimlessly walking about. Lindórië motioned for her to come along, and so they started across the grass toward the line of trees. They seemed to follow a light path, overgrown with grasses and weeds, that was rutted by hoof marks and wagon ruts. Apparently this was the path the farmer used to take his cows to market.

They soon came to a fenceline and a gate, which they found was unlocked and easy to open. By now Daewen could clearly hear the occasional bellow from the one of the cattle. It didn't take long for the cattle to notice the curiosity and meander towards the pair. Some of the animals were solid brown, others were splashed with black and white patches, while others were red or black. A few even had bells around their necks. Only now did she see how big they truly were. They were shorter than horses, yes, but much, much bulkier! She quickened her pace, hoping they wouldn't notice her too much.

The creek could be heard merrily flowing down its trail now. Daewen broke into a slow jog, glancing over her shoulder every now and then to make sure that none of the animals were following her too quickly. She rounded a tree a few yards from the streambank and... "Yipe!" she squealed as she came face to face with one of the brown bessies. The cow blinked lazily at her for a moment, then lowered its head and continued to graze. Several other cows were either standing by or in the stream. Daewen remained rooted in place, not daring to move.

Khorazir

Lindórië had also quickened her pace to be able to follow the girl. She almost bumped into her when Daewen stopped short so suddenly. Touching the girl's shoulder gently, she said soothingly: "They will not eat you, you know."

Passing Daewen by, she slowly walked towards the cows. The large animals watched her curiously at first, then lowered their heads again to drink. A young, flecked one, still hardly more than a calf came towards her hesitantly, but shrank back slightly when Lindórië extended a hand towards its nose. Fear yielding to curiosity, the calf came forwards all the way and sniffed at the hand, then began to lick it with its rough tongue, and suck at the fingers.

Lindórië laughed, and beckoned to Daewen to come over. "I take back what I just said. They do eat you."

Lady_of_Rohan

The girl walked forward slowly, glancing around watchfully. She hesitantly held out her hand and immediately jerked it back when the calf sniffed at it. "I don't think so!" she said quickly.

Khorazir

Lindórië noted the girl's uneasiness with the calf, but did not want to encourage her further. *No wonder she is careful around animals, after what happened to her yesterday*, she thought.

Walking down to the water, she herded the cows away from it. Slowly and without haste the animals returned to the meadow and started to graze. The calf remained behind, though. Apparently Daewen looked or smelled interesting, and the animal watched her with large eyes.

The small stream wound noisily between leaning alder- and willowtrees that were putting forth fresh new leaves.

Moss-grown rocks lay in the stream, under which small fish hid. On one of the overhanging branches a brightly coloured kingfisher was perched, watching the fish intently. The banks of the creek were grown with weeds and grasses of many kinds, but luckily they were yet low enough to reach the water. Moreover in places they were trampled by the cows.

Lindórië looked around and smiled. The creek reminded her of a very similar one in Dor-en-Ernil where she used to play with her brothers, building small dams in the stream, or huts from weeds and branches at the banks. She stooped to the water and washed her hands which the calf had licked, then reached for one of the larger pebbles in the water and turned it about. Small insects and larvae crawled there, and flatworms with their funny eyes and spear-like heads slid over the wet surface.

Lindórië watched them for a while, before putting the stone with its inhabitants back into the water. As children they had collected the flatworms in glasses, and let them race against each other. She sighed softly. So long ago those happy days now seemed. Her three brothers were all gone by now, and only memories remained. These she shook off now as she rose again to see how Daewen had fared with the calf.

Lady_of_Rohan

“Oh go away,” Daewen muttered, sitting down on a rock close to the stream’s edge. She pulled her boot off and, leaning down, rinsed it out with the clear, cool stream water. Behind her she could hear soft steps, and knew that that calf was nearby still. “I don’t have anything for y- Hey!” she cried as she felt the calf nudge her between the shoulders with its head. She turned around, looking the animal square in the eye. “I thought I told you to go- ahhh!” With one hand she tried pushing the calf away, with the other she wiped the slobber from her face where the calf had licked her cheek. Much to her relief, the calf stepped aside and stood watching her, swishing its short tail occasionally.

Shaking her head, Daewen picked up her boot and put it back on her foot. She didn’t like the fact that it was still quite damp, but she felt sure that after a few minutes in the sunlight it would dry out. Standing up, she brushed some of the dirt off herself. The calf gave a bleat and nudged her again. She glared at it, but sighed anyway. “You don’t learn, do you,” she said, breaking into a light jog, hoping to get away from it. To her dismay, the calf gave a little buck and skipped after her. She quickened her pace, leapt into the air, and caught a low-hanging branch of a tree with her good arm. Dangling in the air for a moment, she soon swung one leg over the branch and hoisted herself up. “Ha!” she said, pointing at the bewildered calf, “try that!”

Khorazir

Lindórië laughed when she saw Daewen run away from the calf, and scale a tree in the end. The animal stood beneath her, bleating mournfully. At length waiting apparently became boring, and it strolled off to tease the older cows instead.

Lindórië helped Daewen off the tree again. “Shall we go now and watch the archery-contest?” she asked.

+++

Meanwhile Faramir and the rangers had reached the inn, where he gave the cart into the custody of some of the inn’s grooms. Túrin approached him. “You’re not joining the tourney?” he asked.

Faramir shook his head. “I have to finally see the prisoners. Moreover I am not sure if I would like to shoot if Maradir is there as well,” he added with a grin.

“Right,” Túrin said. “One hardly stands a chance against him when it comes to archery.” He glanced around. “But I guess some of the men here would like to give it a try.”

“And they may,” Faramir said, signing to the rangers that they were free to join the bowmen if they wanted to. About half of the men fetched their bows and left.

“Do you want me to accompany you?” Túrin asked. “I’d like to see these prisoners.”

“Yeah, come with me. You can make notes of what they say.”

Túrin grinned and shrugged. “If you think you can read my scribbling afterwards ...”

Lady_of_Rohan

“I guess so,” the girl replied, wiping some dirt from her hands. She glanced over in the direction in which the calf had run. “At least that animal isn’t bothering me anymore.”

Khorazir

“Now that you mention it ...,” Faramir laughed as he and Túrin entered the inn. The common room was almost empty now, and the landlady and her maids were busy cleaning the tables.

“Those merchants asked for you, lord,” she said to Faramir. “And the two peasant girls. Seems the merchants want to travel on, and have offered the girls to take them back to their people, although that would mean a detour for them.”

“And the opportunity to sell some stuff,” Túrin remarked dryly.

“I doubt that the villagers will be able to afford a lot, after their encounter with the Southrons,” Faramir said, and asked the landlady to fetch the merchants and the girls.

“I had purposed to give the Southrons’ loot to the villagers as compensation,” he told Túrin when she had scurried off. “Are you sure the Steward won’t object?” his friend asked with a trace of concern.

“I care not about his opinion in this matter,” Faramir returned. “I have more than enough to worry about. Most of what the Southrons stole belonged to the villagers anyway, and it should be returned to them. And what they are going to receive beyond that – well, I think if anyone can need it, ‘tis them. After all they lost ...”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Túrin conceded. “But take my word, your father won’t like it.”

Faramir laughed humourlessly. “He would not like most of what is going on here. The lack of discipline in the company, the sloppy organisation of the errand, and most of all the delay. And even if things were going perfectly according to plan, the mere fact that I am the one in charge here would be reason enough for him to find something to criticise. ‘tis best not to worry about these things.”

Túrin studied his friend thoughtfully. “I wonder why he does it,” he said at length. Faramir looked at him questioningly.

“Does what?”

“Treat you like this. I mean, it’s not that you’ve ever been nasty or something of the kind. If you were like me, I’d say he had some reason to complain about and scold you all the time. But you’re not like that. In fact he should be immensely proud of you.”

Faramir glanced down at his hands. Túrin’s words had touched him. “I have tried to think of explanations for his mood, but none of them seems to make sense,” he said quietly. “I still believe that deep down he does indeed like me, and that he just cannot show it. But perhaps this is just wishful thinking,” he ended with a shrug.

Túrin tried to think of some appropriate words of encouragement, when the landlady returned, with the three merchants and the peasant girls trailing behind.

gladrieltook

Visilya found herself suddenly rather hungry. She had not eaten since her rather frugle breakfast, and her stomach growled for nurishment. She set off at a trot for the Inn, jogging psat the archers without a word, then up to the door, where she slowed and Pushed open the door. Faramir and Turin sat at a table nearby, along with the merchants, and the peasant girls. She walked past to the land-lady, who handed her some bread and an apple. Visilya gave her a thankful smile, and sat at a table near enough to hear the conversation between Faramir and the merchants.

Khorazir

Túrin felt both relief and anxiety when Visilya entered the common room. He tried to avoid looking at her, but inevitably felt his glance drawn towards her now and again. When she caught him gazing at her, he swiftly turned away again, and tried to concentrate on the conversation that was going on at their table.

Faramir had explained about the loot to the girls and the merchants, showing the list the rangers had assembled to the former, and having the latter make an estimation of the value of the mostly stolen goods. The girls had been much surprised when he had stated that most of the cargo was to be compensation.

“Although I know that it would need much more to compensate you for the horrors you suffered,” he said, “I hope that with the help of these goods you will at least be able to rebuild your village, and start anew.”

The girls thanked him shyly, too moved to say more, apparently. The merchants seemed touched also. Faramir had questioned them inobstrusively, and was rather convinced of their honesty. It was agreed that they would take the girls back to their people, and receive a small share of the loot in return.

“You may also keep the carts and the horses you use for the transport,” Faramir said.

When all was settled, they rose. The merchants went in search of grooms who would help them load the carts, and the girls wanted to say farewell to Damrod. Faramir told them to look for him at the archers. “Well, and now to our Southron friends,” he said grimly, handing paper and writing utensils to Túrin. Then his eyes fell on Visilya, and before his friend could object, he had addressed her. “I was wondering if you would like to join us, Visilya,” Faramir said. “I have to question the prisoners. Oh, and have you seen Alessya? She seems to have vanished again.”

+++

Lindórië smiled. “But it seemed to like you,” she said.

They made their way back over the meadow and through the gate, then up the lane towards where the archers had gathered. Soon the whistling of arrow and the dull thuds when they hit the mark came to their ears, and laughter (or curses) from the archers.

“Haha, seen that, lads?” a burly voice now called in triumph. “That’s shortbows for yeh! Only the lieutenant here knows ter appreciate them weapons properly.”

asaris

“Are you going to take a shot, Curufë?” Maradir asked as Lindórië walked up. “I was going to wait a little while,” the elf replied. “The target seems awfully close to me. How are you, Lindorië?” he continued, turning to the new arrival.

Khorazir

Lindórië smiled at the Noldo. “Very well, thank you, Master Curufë. And yourself? How is it going? I can see that some of the rangers have been quite good – the green-feathered arrows are theirs, I reckon. And whose are the white?”

EdaintheRanger

Andanor was quite pleased with the rangers for once; the promise of the competition and the daily practise was paying off. Even the spearmen specialists were becoming proficient with the longbow. The Longbow was a beautiful weapon, deadly up to two hundred yards, but cruel, especially to those who hadn't dedicated their early lives to learning its ways. Or were not blessed with a great physical strength. The ranger lieutenant observed the shooting and noted that Curufë was only watching too. Andanor couldn't help but notice that Gareth and Marach could both shoot to a reasonable standard. Though he could see that Gareth could do with a few pointers. “The lads got time to learn.” the gruff officer thought.

“Well here is you're moment to prove your theories.” Andanor thought as he strung his own bow with practised ease, the shortbow was light and so made for aimed precise shots if necessary. Its smaller size could prove useful in difficult terrain, you could carry a few more arrows, and you could fire at a marginally faster rate than the longbow. The Bow was now strung and Andanor ran his hand along its length checking for possible transit damage. The bow was fine as always. His left hand slid to the grip, hefting it, checking the balance. He shifted his quiver to an easier position on his right hip, the longbow men could afford to thrust their arrows in the ground for swift firing. Then without taking his eyes from the target, Andanor let five arrows in swift succession fly their way to the hapless targe. Before he let the last arrow fly he twirled it around his fingers. “Poser” he berated himself. Turning to Maradir, Gareth, (Curufë who was in conversation with Lindórië) and the Rangers Andanor grinned a sensation of relief. He then winked to the fellow shortbowman who stood nearby, as he could see that he had shot well. As a n afterthought he conceded that it was not his best shooting to the more experienced archers, as he had misjudged the faint breeze, which pushed the arrows out of the boss of the targe, but he was happy with the tight grouping of the shots. He expected the bantered humour and sarcastic comments to start in earnest.

Canamarth

Maradir turned to Lindórië and Curufë. “The white ones are mine, my lady.” He had positioned them in a neat circle about a hand's breadth from the centre. Most would have taken them for decent shots aimed at the centre which had just happened to form a circle around it. Maradir was quite pleased with himself.

He watched Andanor shooting now. “Not bad, lieutenant, not bad. For a shortbow, I mean,” he laughed.

EdaintheRanger

Andanor gave a mock stern conternance, and set his square jaw rigid. He then pretended not to have heard Maradir's backhanded compliment. Andanor then asked Anborn to show the rangers how a longbow should be treated.

Khorazir

Lindórië watched Anborn stepping forth, sticking a line of arrows in the ground at his feet and nocking one to the string. Then he straightened, took careful aim, and released the dart. The others followed in very quick succession. When he had shot the last arrow, the onlookers saw that he had positioned them in a wider circle around Maradir's, so

that each white-feathered arrow was closely accompanied by a green-feathered one. He stepped back and grinned at Andanor. "Satisfied, lieutenant?"

asaris

Curufë smiled. "Let me take a shot." The elf proceeded to stick a number of arrows in the soft earth in front of him. He then drew up his bow, and with only the briefest glance at the target, proceeded to unleash a flurry of arrows. Anborn's arrows were each split in half, except for the last one, where Curufë's arrow missed by two fingers. "I must be out of practice," the elf said, shaking his head.

Khorazir

"Yeah, I bet that was the reason," Anborn said sarcastically, not quite able to hide his jealousy. But then he grinned again and clapped the Noldo's shoulder. "Good shooting, Master Elf. The only thing I won't be able to forgive is the wanton destruction of my precious arrows."

EdaintheRanger

Andanor flipped a salute to the Noldor elf's easy skill. "Well done my friend that was well done, pity you tire so easily, that last shot was well out!" Andanor winked at the matchless archer.

Andanor then gripped Anborn by the shoulder and nodded, pride showing in his eyes even though he said nothing. "Aye that was fine shooting. Consider yourself relieved. Go and have a easy afternoon in the inn."

Anborn's eyes widened at this sudden generosity from the taciturn ranger. He was about to leave with a spring in his step, when Andanor continued "If I catch a wiff of ale on you, when you get back, you'll be for it!"

Andanor then gathered the other rangers for some light skirmishing practice, first in the open to check the positions, before moving into the woods for a more practical drill. As the Rangers filed towards the woods and the second part of their duties Andanor asked if anyone else would like to benefit from the exercise.

Canamarth

"That's exactly what came into my mind," Maradir said. "But well done nevertheless. Both of you. I never knew you were such a good shot, Anborn." And he was sure others above him also had not known or they would have made him an offer which was hard not to accept.

Anborn was praised by his lieutenant who now asked them if they wanted to join in skirmishing practice. Maradir declined. "I'd just look stupid amongst your skilled men, Andanor."

He turned back to Curufë. "I better retrieve my arrows quickly before they suffer the same fate as Anborn's."

Khorazir

"Are you four going to continue?" Lindórië asked Curufë when Maradir set out to retrieve the arrows. The rangers had all left by now, and thus only Marach, Maradir, Gareth and the Noldo remained, and the two women.

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen had been watching the archers silently, but with undisclosed curiosity. Now she was more than slightly disappointed that most of the men were returning to the inn. While the archers were shooting, she had sat on a cloak someone had tossed aside, and then had to leave when the owner came back to claim it. (Of course, this was after she had thoroughly searched the pockets but found nothing of interest or profit.)

She now stood a little behind and to the side of Lindórië, quietly listening to the conversation. She nudged at a dirt clod with the toe of her boot, then reached down and picked up an arrow which someone had discarded. Turning it over and over in her hands, she examined it, wondering why it had been left behind. She couldn't really see anything wrong with it, other than a long crack near the end of the wood near some feathers. The lightness of the projectile surprised her somewhat. She continued examining the object, testing the sharp point timidly with one finger. The feathers at the opposite end were an amusement to her, as she had no idea why they were even there.

She glanced up again, just to make sure the others were still around.

asaris

"I'm certainly game for it, if these gentlemen are, though I would not mind seeing the target moved back some. Do you shoot at all, Lindorie?"

Khorazir

"I used to, years ago, before my marriage," Lindórië replied. "I had three brothers, and few other girls my age around to play with, so if I wanted company, I had to put up with the three and their friends. Not that I ever regretted that. There I learned to ride and use a sword – and bow and arrows. But I guess I have unlearned it by now, and even at my very best times I would have stood no chance against you gentlemen."

She turned to Daewen and saw her study an arrow with great interest. "But perhaps the young lady here would like to learn a bit about archery – if her shoulder allows it, of course, and you are willing to teach."

Cynara

Alessya rode through the cool, green-shaded forest in blissful enjoyment. It had been a long while since she'd had the time to do this, and Alessya loved every second of it.

As she skirted her beast around a waist-height patch of brambles, Alessya caught a strain of voices on the wind. Riding at a cautious walk now, she advanced through a small copse of young trees, and peeked around a branch, into the clearing. Recognizing her friends, she grinned and rode openly into the clearing. "Ho, there!" she called, "Who won the archery competition?"

gladrieltook

Visilya shook her head as she moved to sit next to Faramir. "No. Not since yesterday, but then, I haven't been about myself."

Bardhwyn

As the idle banter on the range continued, Gareth grew increasingly impatient and eager to somehow get Maradir alone, so to convey the message he carried a dispatch from the Steward and to learn what was expected of him. He felt the warm parchment scrape against his chest with every shot. At hearing Maradir's comment about retrieving his arrows, and the Elf's suggestion to move the target, he saw his chance, finally.

"Ho, there!...Who won the archery competition?"

Gareth looked up to see yet another woman join the group, this one on horseback, no yet. "Certainly not me..." he grumbled loudly enough for the others to hear. Maradir shot him a quick glance and a smirk as he walked past...

"With some more practice, my new young friend, you'll be shooting as well as our esteemed Noldo here." Maradir said with a smile. Curufë bowed, graciously

Gareth nodded and smiled in return as he stood off to one side, holding the long bow that had been lent to him. Inwardly, he laughed, for Maradir well knew the excellent shot he was, though not as accurate as the Elf – not by any means. It took all of Gareth's concentration to shoot as badly as he did, making sure to grasp with his bow hand as he loosened the arrow, thus driving all his shots off to the right. In that brief hour he'd worked against all the training Morus had pounded into him. It was a sore challenge to his pride, but he swallowed it. Gareth watched Maradir walk a few paces down the range before he followed.

"I shall do likewise Maradir and collect my arrows also.." Gareth called out to Maradir as he walked down the range, "I will move the target for you, sir." Gareth called over his shoulder to the Elven Archer.

"Yes, do, young man. My thanks." The Noldo called out.

Gareth caught up with Maradir after jogging for a few steps and once along side his captain he pointed to the target, pretending to discuss the shoot. His words, however, had nothing to do with the contest and Gareth kept his voice low...

"I have come as you asked, Captain, and I carry an important dispatch from the Steward that arrived this morning. It's on my person. Morus asked that you to read it immediately."

The two men reached the target and began to pull the feathered shafts free.

"You did very well to shoot so poorly, by the way. Good work. What does it say – the dispatch?" Maradir asked.

Gareth blinked at hearing the compliment from Maradir. He replied: "I don't know, sir. Morus read it but did not divulge its contents to anyone, not even Darmen."

"Where is it?"

"Under my tunic, here." Gareth touched his chest quickly before pulling the last arrow free.

"Count your arrows, Gareth.

"What?"

"Pretend to count them...then we'll make out as if you had a miss. We can take more time down here, pretending to search behind the target."

Gareth obeyed and together he and Maradir began scouting the field behind the target.

"How is it Faramir allowed you to accompany us?"

Gareth felt a bit embarrassed but pushed back the awkwardness...

"I told him that I would be killed were I to return, that I was an oath breaker for not taking my own life after being captured. I am posing as a defector heading for Pelargir or Dol Amroth where I have relatives. Andanor is to watch over me while I travel with you."

Maradir nodded as together they paced the tall grass.

"Pretend to find an arrow."

Gareth followed the instruction and stepped to one side, pretending to retrieve an arrow from the grassy field.

"Right, let's move the target and head back."

Maradir turned about and made for the target. Gareth stood for a moment, struggling with a sudden upwelling of frustration.

"Captain, wait," he hissed, "How do I pass this dispatch to you? And what is it you expect of me on this mission." Gareth whispered as he caught up with Maradir. "Please, Captain, I'm like one lost in the dark. What is going on? Why are you traveling with them? I need to know if I am meant to help you."

Khorazir

"Curufë and Maradir were best so far," Lindórië answered Alessya. "And one of the rangers, Anborn. But he has left already." She then turned back to Daewen. "How about it? Would you like to give it a try?"

"I'll lend yeh me bow, lass, if yeh want ter shoot," Marach the farmer said. "Should be easier ter handle for one o' yer size than them longbows."

+++

"Very well," Faramir said. "Let us hope she returns soon." He rose. "You must excuse us now, Visilya – unless you would like to accompany us, of course –, but I have to go and see the prisoners. Túrin is to make notes."

Túrin stood as well and gathered together paper, pen and ink, and together they left the table and crossed the room towards the stairs. On their way to the upper storey they encountered one of the rangers Faramir had dispatched to watch the Southrons.

"Ah, captain," he said. "Dorlas sent me. Our special guests are awake now, and quite lively, too, one of them. He tried to escape through the window while I was helping Dorlas exchange Amdír's bandages. Had hidden a stiletto in the matrace before he was searched, apparently. But Cirion caught him again, and he didn't manage to do any damage. But still, they're a wicked bunch, these Southrons."

"Thank you, Valandil," Faramir said. "I shall have a look at them myself now." With that they ascended the remaining steps, and approached the room where the Haradrim were held captive.

gladrieltook

Visilya followed apprehensively, gripping her sword hilt like a vice. She'd had some experience with southrons, and judging by the ranger's report, these were no different.

Lady_of_Rohan

"I guess I could give it a try," the girl said, taking the bow from the farmer. Then she glanced at where the target had been, and saw that it had been moved even further back. She looked back to the others. "So... what do I do?" She had watched the archers closely, of course, but watching and actually shooting the bow were very different things.

They will look for his coming from the White Tower. But he will not return.

Khorazir

Marach and Lindórië showed Daewen how to position her feet and hold the bow properly. For Lindórië the shortbow was rather unfamiliar, but Marach knew his favourite weapon well, and moreover he was able to recognise and explain what Daewen did wrong. Lindórië assumed that the farmer had once been a soldier.

"Now hold yer right arm a little higher," Marach said, "and don't let yer elbow drop again. That's it. Pull back the string. More. More. And don't let yer left arm go all stiff. Keep it at a slight angle. And yer left shoulder must point towards the target. Right. That's well. But don't look here. Keep yer eyes on the target all the time. Nothing else matters ter yeh now, understand. Just yeh and the black dot over there."

He waited until Maradir and Gareth had moved away from the target and were standing at a safe distance from it, before continuing: "Pull back some more now. More. An' let go!"

EdaintheRanger

Andanor and the rangers drilled diligently in the woods, they were already quite adept at preparing ambushes, tracking, stalking, and the worst part hiding and waiting for the foe to approach. Even so the perfectionist lieutenant couldn't let that stand, the more drill the better was one of his mottos. So he pushed them that little bit further, as actions that were instilled into good troops became second nature. Then the "said troops were not forestalled by fear when the dreaded battle came". That quote of his father's lept into Andanor's mind unbidden.

Andanor grinned to himself then finding himself catching the end of a ranger's request, he cursed his daydreaming, that favoured the musician not the soldier. "Well we've finished that, sir. What now sir?" the earnest ranger repeated. The lieutenant's face became impassive and he gathered the rangers around for a evaluation of the exercise, and to at least hear their opinions.

We shall head back to the inn ere the sun sets, Andanor thought to himself and wondered whether the other bowmen were as bad or as good as they had made out. Then a thought struck him, Gareth seemed a little edgy, especially around Maradir. Then as a question from a ranger sent him onto another line of thought.

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen squinted at the target, and loosened the arrow, but flinched slightly in the process. The arrow went wide, and fell short of the target by a few feet. She shook her head. "I turned my shoulder slightly just before I let go, and the shot went wide." He told you to keep that shoulder pointed at the target, she chided herself silently.

Khorazir

"Ah, don't worry, lass," Marach said, handing Daewen a second arrow. "Just yeh try again. Was not bad for yer first shot. Just keep in mind what I told yeh about the shoulder. And yer right elbow."

While Daewen listened to the farmer's advice and fitted another arrow to the string, Lindórië turned to Alessya. "Do you also practise archery?" she asked.

+++

Dorlas opened the door when the four of them approached it. He looked weary, and Faramir told him to go and get some rest, to which the ranger agreed only reluctantly.

Upon entering the room, Faramir saw that Hallas was sitting on a chair by the open window, his arm in a sling and a cup of steaming tea in the other, looking quite lively on the whole. Amdír was awake, too, a fact which surprised his captain. The young ranger still looked deadly pale and very weak, but he managed a faint smile when asked how he felt.

"A few days, captain, and I shall be as good as new," he said hoarsely.

Faramir smiled, feeling great relief about the youngster's state. "Just you take your time, Amdír. I do not want to see you back in the company ere you are fully healed. Consider yourself on leave now."

"But captain, sir –," Amdír began. Faramir raised a hand to calm him. "I'm sorry I let you down," the young ranger murmured dejectedly.

Faramir shook his head. "You did not. You are not to blame for what happened. So be comforted. Rest now, and look forward to your time in Minas Tirith. I heard there is a certain someone in the City who would very much appreciate the opportunity to spend some extra time with you."

Some colour returned to Amdír's pale cheeks as he blushed. Faramir gave him another encouraging smile, before turning to the Southrons, who were bound to beds in one corner of the room. Cirion was sitting on a chair, watching them, his drawn sword across his lap.

When Faramir approached them he rose. "We put them all in bonds, captain," he he said, "despite the fact that only one of them has tried to do any mischief so far. Dorlas said the others won't be able to anyway, with the wounds they received. But I thought we'd better take no chances."

Faramir nodded, studying the three men. Two were indeed looking rather spent. One, a tall young man with very dark skin and curly black hair, had received a deep chest-wound, and had apparently lost consciousness again. Another, short and wiry, with brownish skin, a moustache, curiously braided long black hair and golden rings in his ears was awake, but seemed half delirious.

"Arrow in the side," Cirion explained. "Has started to fever, but Dorlas said he'll make it. I wonder why he bothers at all about these fellows. If it was for me, they'd better die of their wounds quickly. But you know how he is, captain."

"And I am glad about his attitude, Cirion," Faramir said sternly. "If you were a prisoner of war, you would expect a decent treatment as well, would you not?"

"But they're no prisoners of war," Cirion objected hotly. "They're just scum. I heard about how they ravaged the village, and what they did to these poor girls. People who behave in such a way can't expect decent treatment. They deserve death, and that's still too good for them, if you ask me."

"I am here now to determine what it is they deserve," Faramir replied calmly. "Believe me, I, too, am appalled by what befell in the village. But I would like to hear their account as well, before I decide upon a punishment. If it is indeed me who is in a position to punish them," he added softly, and more to himself.

Then signing to Cirion to fetch chairs for Túrin, Visilya and himself, he turned towards the third Haradan, the one who had attempted to escape through the window.

Canamarth

Maradir smiled when he heard the stream of questions from the confused Gareth. Loath to follow me without knowing the purpose of our journey, he thought. Much like I used to question my captains. Not that it ever did me much good... He subdued his smile and turned to look at the young man sternly.

"I shall get the parchment when I feel the time is right to relieve you of its burden. I cannot hide it under the light tunic I wear so it is better kept from prying eyes with you for the moment. What I expect of you on this mission - as you term it? Well, first of all, it's not a mission as we were not officially commissioned to follow the Steward's son. But we more or less fulfilled our last one and I am free to do as I like till I get new orders. What I expect of you is only your company. And that you keep your eyes and ears open - and learn what you can. As to what is going on - I admit I don't have much of a clue. I don't know how the Southrons could enter thus far into the country without being seen before and I also don't know why Faramir accompanies Lindórië with so many men. I intend to travel with them because Faramir is my friend. And because I think I can learn more about this whole affair with the Southrons by accompanying them. As I told you before - you don't have to follow me. But I'd very much appreciate your company. And now we should get back to the others and as far away from the target as possible. I don't want to be hit by a stray arrow from that girl."

Maradir turned away from Gareth again and the smile reappeared on his face. The boy still had a lot to learn.

Khorazir

Faramir had felt the man's eyes upon him all the time while talking to Cirion, and now finally turned to study him. With slight surprise he noticed that this captive hardly looked like a "typical" Haradan. He had fair skin, and bright blue eyes. His hair and beard were dark, and slightly curly, and he wore them in Southron fashion, but apart from that he rather looked like a Dúnadan of Gondor than a Southron. Faramir surmised that either this was indeed his origin, or else he was one of the so-called "Black Númenoreans" who chiefly lived in the vicinity of Umbar, and in northern Haradwaith.

The man had a bandage at his left shoulder, and another strip of cloth around his head, but he did not appear to have been badly wounded. The look he gave Faramir now was proud, almost haughty, and very confident, as if he did not deem his current situation dangerous at all, and the fact that his hands and feet were tied securely to the bedposts nothing but a petty little nuisance. He did not look very old, around thirty, perhaps, Faramir reckoned, but his face and the bare shoulders that could be seen above the blanket showed several scars, old and new, that spoke of a rather hard, eventful life.

Faramir moved his chair to his bedside, his eyes still on the prisoner. He tried to recall what the man had done during the ambush, but did not succeed at it. Things had been rather confusing. But something told him that this man had been one of the leaders of the company. And the very fact that he alone had survived the ambush almost unscathed, while most of his companions had died or were seriously wounded, told Faramir that he would have to be careful around this one.

The prisoner had studied Faramir as well, coldly, even condescendingly. Now his mouth formed a slight, contemptuous smile. "I see the great captain has finally lowered himself to conversing with the prisoners," he said in almost accentless Westron, casting a swift, mocking glance at Cirion, who apparently had tried to threaten him by telling him that Faramir would come to question him. "I didn't know you Gondorians had mere children command your forces."

"And I did not know that you Southrons had fools lead your raiding parties," Faramir returned with a friendly smile, upon which both Cirion and Túrin grinned. "But one never stops learning."

The Haradan seemed slightly taken aback by this reply. A shadow of anger passed over his face, but then he laughed grimly. "I see we understand one another, Lord Captain. And you're right. Our leader was a fool. By attacking you our carefully staged disguise was destroyed."

"I take it you would have done better in his place?" Faramir inquired. "Who was your leader, and why did you not dispose of him when he proved unfit?"

The other shook his head, and his expression turned very cold. His eyes were glinting. "I won't tell you anything about us," he said coolly. "Why should I? What do I gain if I talk? You will kill us anyway, or surrender us to the lord of the fief to have us executed. I know you want to get rid of us as swiftly as possible. So let's get it over with, and we'll both be content."

"So, you would be content to die?" Faramir said calmly. "You are right, this would be a nice and easy solution. But not a satisfying one. Nay, nay, you will talk, Master Southron, sooner or later."

The other laughed again. "And if I refuse? Will you torture me, little tark? I thought we were the cruel and barbaric ones around here." He chuckled. "Oh, I'd really like to see you turn nasty. I bet you've never killed a man in cold blood before, and even less tortured him. Because you're noble, and good. Am I not right?"

Faramir heard a growl behind him, and saw Cirion giving the Southron a furious glance – who noticed it. "Ah, I see, you'll let your brute here loose on me," he mocked. "Or the pretty lady who's watching me so darkly." He winked and smirked at Visilya. "All right, now I am afraid."

Faramir signed to Cirion to calm down. "I shall do naught of the kind," he said matter-of-factly, turning to the Haradan again. "Since you seem to fear neither pain nor death, we shall have to find out first what it is you do fear."

"Good luck!" the other snorted, grinning.

Faramir remained unappeased. He shrugged, but at the same time thought: *This is going to be much more difficult than expected.* Trying not to let his frustration show in his face, he folded his hands in front of him and leaned back in his chair. Then a thought struck him. He recalled what his father had once told him about the extreme pride of the Southrons, and their fearlessness, and their indifference towards pain and death. A faint smile began to play about his lips.

"Very well," he said. "Let us talk about your ... honour, then."

Bardhwyn

Maradir's sternness pulled Gareth up short. He'd not seen that before! Maradir was always so 'even'. As Gareth stood and listened to his captain he experienced a strange mix of emotions...embarrassment, respect and lastly - more confusion.

"...what I expect of you is only your company. And that you keep your eyes and ears open - and learn what you can. As to what is going on - I admit I don't have much of a clue..."

He wants my company? Learn what I can? What can I possibly learn? And what does he mean... 'he doesn't have a clue'?! Leaders are supposed to know what's going on!

That swimming feeling hit him again - a sense of being overwhelmed and over his head and he knitted his dark brows together. An image of Morus flashed in his mind - holding out the dispatch saying Maradir had asked for him..

Me? Why me? The faint notion that maybe he could be of some use to Maradir skirted across his mind.

The twang of a bowstring being released could be heard again and the resulting sound of an arrow sinking somewhere into the ground was too close for Gareth's comfort.

"Yes, sir. And they should wait 'till all's clear behind the target..." he muttered behind Maradir as they made their way down the field. He could see the farmer, Marach, patiently standing over the girl who was shooting and he wondered

why the man bothered – the girl was a street urchin after all, like Lossiel said...

gladrieltook

Visilya glared at the ckeeky southron. "If he had any true honour, he would be home, defending a family, not ravaging the Gondorian countryside and terrorizing villages." Her eyes narrowed as she stood and moved closer. "You answer the Captain's questions without so much cheek, or I'll introduce you to two feet of steel." She smirked. The southron obviously had not seen that coming. "You see captain, sometimes all it takes is some positive reanforcement."

Canamarth

"It's getting better," Maradir said to Daewen when he returned. "The arrow was not too far off the target anymore." He winked at her good-humouredly and sat down to watch her progress.

Khorazir

Faramir had studied the prisoner keenly when Visilya had addressed the man. He had indeed be slightly surprised by her action, and her announcement, but he doubted that the Haradan really feared her sword. But what she had said about "honour" seemed to have had some effect on him. He smiled almost imperceptably. Apparently they were on the right track.

The Southron, meanwhile, had overcome his surprise, and moreover seemed to have noticed that more of his emotions than he liked had been visible in his features. He returned Visilya's smirk, winked at her again, then glanced at Faramir, his eyes glinting mischievously. "I do apologise, Lord Captain," he said with a nod of his head. "Of course I shall behave now, for I do fear this cruel lady's sword."

Faramir watched him for a while longer without answering, until he could see that the Southron was beginning to feel slightly uncomfortable under his stare. At least his grin faded, and he narrowed his eyes as if trying to read the other's mind. "You seem to think this all very funny, do you not?" he said at length, softly but sternly. "Perhaps because you have not quite understood the seriousness of your situation yet?"

The other looked genuinely bored now. "We've been at this point already, haven't we? Whatever you try to threaten me with, it doesn't work, don't you understand? I don't fear death, or pain. In fact, you won't find anything at all I do fear, little tark. Thus you can't force me to reveal any of my knowledge. Go and leave me in peace."

Faramir shook his head. "So there is naught you fear? How lucky a man who can claim that of himself. But in your case, I am convinced, this is just a bold lie. For I know much more about you than you believe."

"And what is that, pray?"

Faramir did not answer at once. His mind was working furiously now as he tried to put together everything he had learned about the man in the past few minutes, and combine it with what he had found out about the Southrons on this day and the previous evening. But to the Haradan it must have seemed that the young Gondorian was delaying his answer deliberately, for better effect. His face lost the mocking expression, as he studied him with slight unease.

"Well?" he inquired after a while.

EdaintheRanger

The rangers trooped from the woods in an open order, they were all hot and a little tired from their exercise but the gentle banter, rising from the ranks signalled to Andanor that they had enjoyed it. He was less than happy, but the men had tried hard, were keen and working together in almost complete precision. He was a perfectionist and he could see that you could only whet a knife so far. To hone it more would be to weaken it, and in the next battle it would surely snap. He rubbed his cheek and grimaced at the stubble, he felt more like a rogue than a ranger.

At the rear of the company Andanor could pick up the incipient whining of the company grumbler. "Silence in the ranks!" he called in his best parade ground voice. "Now listen to me. We are travelling to Lebennin on a high profile. Make that so! I want to hear a marching song..." He called.

"and keep it clean." he added before the rangers could burst into that delightfully funny, yet hideously coarse song about Lord Denethor, his wife, and the guards of the white tower. He hummed the first few bars of a popular marching tune to put the rangers in key. The afternoon was bright and the rain clouds were away, "but for how long" Andanor mused, before launching in to the tune with gusto. He led the men back towards the inn, and the impromptu archery contest.

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen beamed at the compliment. Like the first shot, this arrow did not reach the target, but it had come much closer. This is kinda fun, she thought. Reaching up, she wiped a few beads of sweat from her forehead. The afternoon was getting rather warm. The farmer handed her another arrow, told her to try again, and reminded her to keep her one shoulder pointed toward the target.

Taking the arrow, she set it to the string and took aim. She shifted her stance slightly and found that this new position felt more comfortable and natural. Drawing back on the string, she paused a moment, then let it go. Soon after, a faint sound was heard as the arrow hit the edge of the outermost circle on the target. The girl squealed with delight. "I hit it! I hit the target!"

Khorazir

"I told yeh yeh'd be getting the hang of it," Marach said, smiling with satisfaction. "So now yeh try again. And watch yer right arm. Next time yeh're going ter hit the centre, alright."

+++

Faramir let the silence endure for a while longer. "Well," he at length said calmly, "first of all I doubt that you are indeed a Southron. You may have spent some time in the Harad, and aquired some of their customs, but you were not born there, and raised neither."

The other wanted to object, but Faramir did not let him, but instead continued. "'tis not just your looks that betray you. 'tis your manner of speaking as well. Underneath your slight Adûnaic accent there is another, that becomes clearer and more prominent when you raise your voice. What is it? Southern Gondor I reckon. Dor-en-Érnîl, perhaps, or Lebennin? Or Lossarnach – aye, that could be it. The way you pronounce the "r"... And 'tis no dialect the peasants or fisherfolk use, either, but quite upperclass. Makes me wonder who your parents are. Perhaps some noble and his serving-maid? Imagine that: the illegitimate son of a noble family, perhaps even the firstborn of a lord of Gondor, flees his home for all the injustice and rejection he has suffered there, and journeys to Umbar to make his luck – and to plot his revenge. And then, years later, he returns with a band of Haradaic outlaws to "take what is rightfully his". But unfortunately his underlings do not quite act according to plan and indulge in some raids, which make Gondorian authorities prick up their ears and finally send some people to get rid of this nuisance. And soon our noble Haradan of choice finds himself surrounded by rangers – and his dead comrades –, and all his plans of avenging himself upon his father

and Gondorian society who have so wronged him gone awry. What a sad story!”

“What a ridiculous story,” the other returned. “You have a vivid imagination, I must attest you this, little tark.”

“Oh, have I, now? Why, then, did you avoid my eyes when I spoke? And you did not look all too happy when I mentioned your possible descent. All of that gives you away. And how it all makes sense. You were on your way north. Lossarnach lies that way. In fact you are already there, for of old the river Erui was the southern border of this fief. But then there is the question of how you and your companions managed to get that far. I can only imagine that certain people in Lebennin and Pelargir gave you free conduct, or simply looked away when you arrived. Why that, I wonder. You see, certain Lords of Lebennin boast that they have secured Gondor against all invasions from the South. Why should they allow you to roam freely there – unless they gain something by doing so. You did not raid villages down in Lebennin, I reckon. At least I have not heard of any such thing. So, did you make a deal with certain people down there? People, perhaps, who thought they might profit from the disturbing effect your appearance had in Lossarnach? You must know, those two realms are not exactly on friendly terms. Do you see now how it all makes sense?”

He bent his eyes on the Haradan, so as not to miss even his slightest reaction. Although he had made his voice sound extremely confident, most of what he had said had simply been bold guesses. But something about the other’s reaction told him that he was on the right track.

And the longer the Haradan did not answer, the more Faramir’s assumptions turned into certainties. He smiled slightly – which seemed to positively unsettle the other.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” he at length said, but it sounded rather lame, and Faramir knew that he almost had him.

gladrieltook

Visilya had settled back into her chair and was now smirking rather smugly at the unsettled man. She could tell what Faramir was up to, and was glad for it. She wouldn’t have to get her sword dirty.

Khorazir

“Ah, but to me it seems you know exactly what I am talking about,” Faramir said, still smiling at the Haradan. “And you are uncomfortable now because I know so much already. Believe me, I shall have found out everything about you in a very short time, without you telling me anything of your own free will. Your body betrays you, you see. And your eyes – although I must attest you quite an amount of self-control. So why not make things easier for both of us?”

The other snorted. “And what do I gain if I talk?”

Faramir’s eyes narrowed, and the smile was replaced again by a stern expression. “Gain? What do you gain? Have you forgotten why you are here? You are accused of having ravaged a Gondorian village and tortured and slain the inhabitants. And you will pay for this deed. So what do you expect as a gain? That I set you free, without punishment?”

The other endured his intent gaze for a moment, then cast down his eyes. He swallowed slightly. At length he raised his eyes to meet Faramir’s again. “A swift death,” he answered softly.

Lady_of_Rohan

“The center?” The look on Daewen’s face clearly told of her dismay. “I... I... I barely even got it on the target. I... I can’t hit that little circle.”

Khorazir

“Yeh can, believe me,” Marach replied. “Just concentrate on it. Look at it until yeh see nothing else besides. And when yeh see the black dot floatin’ in the air before yeh, yeh shoot.”

+++

Faramir was slightly taking aback by the seriousness of the other’s reply. It took him some effort to conceal the fact that the Haradan’s words had touched him. He studied him, until he was convinced of the Southron’s sincerity. For a long while no one spoke, until at length Faramir stirred.

“I see that you fear what awaits you should I surrender you to the authorities of this fief, or to the Steward himself,” he said. “Most likely you would be executed as well, after much questioning, and a public trial. But this is not what you would consider an honourable death, is it? Your companions were more lucky, as they died fighting.”

The other gazed at him. Faramir thought that suddenly he looked very tired.

“You’re right,” the man said after a while. “In the Harad there exists a very strict code of honour. Not that I ever thought much of it. Those who want to achieve a lot are only hindered in their progress by these sentimental attitudes.”

“So why does the prospect of having the truth about you revealed, and a public execution trouble you so much?” Faramir inquired. “Since you claim that the concept of honour is naught for you. And moreover – was it not for the very reason of confronting certain people here with the truth about your origin that you came to Gondor in the first place?”

The other smiled grimly. “It’s much more difficult than that,” he sneered.

“Then please enlighten me, so that I may understand,” Faramir returned. “If you show cooperation, I shall see what I can do for you in turn.”

The other studied him for a long time, as if trying to fathom the sincerity in his words. Then he cast down his eyes again. “What is it you want to know?” he said at length.

Bardhwyn

Feeling bored Gareth tried to look as if he were interested in the girl’s efforts to shoot when really he thought it a waste of time. Curufë and Lindorie were idly chatting away and Maradir seemed content enough to stay. Without anything else ‘to do’ Gareth studied Maradir, again recollecting all that he said to him while down field. ‘Learn what you can, keep your eyes and ears open.’ Maradir was smiling, making helpful comments to Daewen and he looked as if... then it struck Gareth forcefully, like a cudgel between the eyes. Maradir looked, and behaved, as if he had nothing better to do while Gareth felt weighed down with everything! His next thought was: “How does he do it?”

Maradir left the farmer and the young girl and then sauntered over to the Elf and Lady, easily slipping himself into their conversation. Gareth felt all the more awkward, yet it was slowly occurring to him, he isn’t going to learn one damn thing standing off to onese and behaving like a stranger.

Running his hand through his black hair, he heaved a sigh and, putting on a smile, he walked up to Marach and the girl.

“Daewen – that is your name? My name is Gareth. I’m no great shot myself but I think if you just hold the bow more loosely in your left hand...don’t grab it just let it sit as you release the bow string, you’ll hit closer to what you’re aiming at.”

“Ar, he be right, missy.” Marach chimed in. Daewen nodded, loosened her hand, notched an arrow and shot. She hit the 6th ring.

“See. I told you.” Gareth said, feeling genuinely pleased for the girl. She looked up at him and smiled. “Go on, try again.” He said, forgetting his boredom.

Canamarth

Maradir had walked over to Lindorie and Curufë and listened in to their conversation about the days of yore. Lindorie was very much interested in the study of history and now that she had someone at her side who could provide better answers than any scroll she was not willing to let the opportunity slip by. Maradir could not add a lot but listened with interest.

From the corner of his eye he saw that Gareth first watched him, milling around aimlessly, then finally took heart and joined the archery training. Lesson one: Mix and mingle, Maradir thought.

asaris

Curufë enjoyed talking with Lindorie, though the topic was not entirely to his liking. Since the fall of Eregion, and certainly since the Last Alliance, he had worked hard to forget what had happened in Beleriand and Hollin. There were many misdeeds he wanted to forget. But Lindórië was mostly interested in the Second Age, not the First, and all of the really horrendous deeds had happened in the First. There were still elves in Rivendell and Lorien that he knew thought Kinslayer every time he walked by.

Khorazir

Faramir settled back in his chair once more. “First of all, I would like to hear your name – your real one, and the one you took in the Harad. After that, I want you to tell me about your origin, how you came to live amongst the Southrons, and the reasons for your return. And then I would appreciate some thorough account of your doings in Gondor, and some information about the people that accompanied you.”

EdaintheRanger

Concentrating on Daewen’s archery, few people noticed the singing that came from the woods, and the faint tramp of men marching in step. Gradually it became louder, and as the small dark cloud crossed the sun, deepening the shadows, and for a moment the day appeared cooler. First they could hear the rhythm, the rise and fall of the moderately tuneful male voices, the keen ear could pick out the odd word through the muffle of the foliage. Then there was a pause before the clearest voice piped out to deliver a keen verse of bawdy song. The words escape me now but the gist of it was how the workaholic Denethor neglected his frustrated wife. This continued for several bars, then as if afraid to be heard by unwanted ears, the singer returned to singing a traditional ballad which followed the same tune, a ring of laughter accompanying it derisively.

The singing continued getting closer all the time, to those who were watching the woods faces appeared, mouths moving in unison. In slight disorder due to the traverse through the wooded terrain the rangers trooped out of the trees. Forming a small division they halted, ending their tune with a flourish. His face slightly red from the exertion Andanor prepared to dismiss them.

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen's next three shots progressively went from the outer edges inward, not terribly much, but enough to put a lasting grin on her face. When she held out her hand for another arrow, she was rather surprised to hear the farmer's hearty laugh. She glanced up to find him standing with his arms crossed. "If ye want more arrows, yer going to hafta go out there and find them yerself." The girl's face crinkled up at that prospect. Her pout didn't convince anyone to go out and pick the arrows up for her, so she soon found herself trotting into the tall grass in search of them.

The ones that were stuck in the target were easy to find, she decided to save those for last. Locating the ones that had went wide or fallen short in the grass proved to be a slightly more challenging prospect. She spent several minutes wandering back and forth until the ones that hadn't made it were found. The arrows planted in the target came next, though one required a couple tugs before it came loose.

Making sure she had ahold of all her finds, she scampered back to the others, handing the arrows back to Marach, who put some of them back in the quiver. "Now that ye know how things are done, yer going to hit the center this time." She shrugged and took the offered arrow. Setting it to the string, she took aim, and released. The projectile hit the target a little worse than her previous shot, which sent her into dark mutterings.

Khorazir

The prisoner gave Faramir a dark glance, as if about to make a contemptuous comment. Then apparently he thought the better of it, and shrugged slightly – as much as this was possible with his arms bound. "My real name is nothing to you. It's not important," he sneered. "But as for my aquired name ..." His eyes shone suddenly, and there was a fierce, proud light in them. "In Umbar they called me Agannâlo."

Túrin stirred at this and glanced at Faramir. "I've heard this name before," he whispered into his friend's ear. "My brother once mentioned it: Agannâlo, the Shadow of Death. A friend of his serves in the navy, and they had to fight a corsair of this name not long ago. Didn't succeed, though. Fellow gave them the slip, after sinking two of our smaller warships."

Khorazir

While talking with Curufë about the Elder Days – as much as he would, for Lindórië soon perceived that there were topics the Noldor tried to avoid –, and watching Daewen's attempts at archery, which were improving with each shot, Lindórië wondered if Faramir had begun to question the Southrons already, and how he was faring. She decided to stay a little longer, then return to the inn to see if he required help.

Then the sound of singing came to her ears, and soon after Andanor and the rangers could be seen marching towards them. They looked to be in excellent spirits. Apparently they had enjoyed the exercise.

"Your men are good singers, Andanor," Lindórië called to him. "I did not know the rangers were that musical."

Galhadrin

The wolf continued to run through both day and night. It loped among the hidden glens of Lebennin and fought against all its instincts to hole up and hide, lick its bruised and bloody feet. As it ran it crossed fields in broad daylight. Farmers who had spent their lives protecting their flocks from the hunter now gaped in awe. They quickly hustled their families indoors and shuttered the windows to ward off bad omens. As it ran it had a singular thought running through its mind and, thanks to its simple instructions, a singular target.

* * *

The wide valley spread out ahead of them in the dying sunlight. The horses were frothed and running beyond their limits but the carriage continued to wind its way towards Dol Amroth. Rich farmlands lay all around but none of the riders paid much attention as they had been on the move for two nights and two days with hardly a rest. Although they had all seen battles and faced their own private terrors, none of them would ever forget the drive to reach Prince Imrahil's court.

gladrieltook

Visilya glanced at Turin, then back at the man. "Daerios made mention of this name when he returned from the south last winter. Even then he seemed to speak it in fear, though only a rumour had he heard." She uncrossed her legs and leaned forward to study the man. "But you do not seem so terrible as these stories that spring up in your wake."

Khorazir

"This is the great advantage of these stories, that they make you seem greater and more terrible than you really are," Agannâlo replied. "And you don't even have to do much to generate these tales and rumours. The people do this for you."

Faramir nodded gravely. "But they can destroy one's reputation as swiftly," he put in. "And I do not think that yours is going to thrive any longer once it gets known that you were caught that easily by some mere rangers."

The dark glance the other shot at him indicated that this was indeed something he feared.

"Well, but if you continue to show cooperation," Faramir went on, "I shall see what I can do about it. So tell me about how you came to be called Agannâlo – the truth behind the tales –, and whence you hailed originally."

Khorazir

Agannâlo was silent for a long time, lying motionlessly with his eyes closed, so that Faramir began to wonder if either he was doing this on purpose to test the other's patience, or if he had fallen asleep. But at length he stirred again, glanced briefly at Faramir, then at the ceiling, and began to speak softly.

"What you surmised earlier about my past was almost correct," he said. "I don't know how you did this. Perhaps it was just a lucky guess. Anyway, it's true that I was born in Gondor, and that one half of my parents – my father – is a man of rank, status, power and wealth. He does not hail from Lossarnach, but Minas Tirith, and there occupies a high, influential office at the Steward's court of law. Apparently he once had an affair with one of his servants, about the time he married a lady of the gentry, and the result am I. When it became clear that my existence would endanger his position, he tried to get rid of me. Luckily my mother had some sense and moreover courage, left his house, and took me with her. She had to hide me from his henchmen, she told me later, because my father was bound on destroying every trace of his "adventure", and was going about it rather ruthlessly.

"Not knowing where to flee to, and whom to trust, my mother at last decided to go south. Her grandparents on her mother's side had come from Umbar to Gondor long ago, and the haradaic heritage was still plain to see in her features – which apparently had attracted my father to her. We found a place on a ship bound south, came to Umbar, and there found refuge. That was shortly after the Gondorian campaign against the corsairs, which caused great havoc in the South.

"Well, in these uneasy, warlike times – for the Umbarians were of course bound on revenge –, I grew up in the South,

and very early my hatred for the tarks was kindled, and then fuelled almost daily by reports from the North.

“Very early the wish grew in me to return to Gondor to avenge all the injustice my mother had suffered, and to pay back the haughty tarks. Thus I joined the navy, and soon rose through the ranks until I was allowed to command my own ship. But the caution of the new rulers of Umbar irked me soon. Yes, they would send ships to harry the southern coasts of Gondor now and again, but never dared to attack in more force, or engage the larger warships. Thus I decided to break out of the fleet, to become my own lord, take some ships and hardy, warlike men willing to risk much – and gain even more –, and start to trouble the tarks in my own way.”

He spoke fiercely and proudly now, his eyes shining. “We would ambush the few traders who still dared to travel south, we would harry the coasts of Southern Gondor and estuaries of the rivers, and having fast and not too large ships, and skilled sailors, and fierce warriors, we were able to strike swiftly and then dissappear, before any defense could be mustered. Thus we managed to set fear in the hearts of fishermen and merchants, and moreover of the proud rulers of the southern realms. They would send out ships to hunt us down, but since they never dared to go far, they would not reach us. And if they did, we saw to it that they did not return. Thus I aquired my name, and a fitting name it was. For we were like a shadow of death and fear, spreading along the coasts from Harondor to Anfalas.

“Of course, after a while things grew more dangerous for us as well. The lords of Gondor, especially the new ruler of Pelargir, began to set cunning traps for us, which nearly proved the end of us. But we always managed to elude them. As we got rid of the warships sent after us. But now things have become difficult indeed. The coasts, especially those of wealthy Lebennin, are much better watched and defended now. Apparently the lords of this fief have learned their lesson.

“Well, so I considered my next step. There was still the matter with my hated father, and my revenge. I learned from my contacts in Gondor that his “eldest” son and heir is about to come to age, which to me seemed a fitting time to return to my hometown, and make an appearance in my dear father’s house. Since I had to remain secret and inconspicuous, and yet needed some men about me, as I expected to encounter trouble soon, knowing that people were watching for me now, I decided to join this group of mercenaries, who apparently had found a way to sneak past the army encamped at the southern coast of Lebennin, and to avoid the many spies of the Steward and the other lords. Well, apparently it was not the best way. In retrospect it was a bad idea to join this company. For all they were interested in was booty and destruction, and there was naught I could do or promise them to make them forgo their desires. And so it was only a question of time until we were spotted, and hunted. And caught. So here goes my revenge, by my own stupidity,” he ended bitterly. “Perhaps it serves me right to have failed. And yet, I can proudly claim that I have been a painful thorn in mighty Gondor’s side for many a year. And if you want to punish me for that, Lord Captain, then do so. This is all I have to say.”

Faramir had listened to his tale in silence, watching Agannâlo’s expression keenly to perchance detect an indication of the other lying. But there was none. Also to Faramir things made sense. He had a pretty good idea of who the man’s real father was, and wondered if the Steward had an inkling of his High Judge’s dark past. Most likely. Why else would he have sent his very special troupe to get rid of the Southrons? Faramir decided to question Gareth about this issue in a quiet moment, doubting at the same time that the young man would reveal much information, even if he had it.

“I thank you for your account,” he said at length. “I hope for you that you spoke truthfully, but I think you did. Of course many questions remain, especially that of the “contacts in Gondor” you mentioned. I want to learn more about them. As for your fate, considering the fact that there is much of your past still shrouded in darkness, for which I do not have time at the moment to try and lighten it, you shall remain prisoner, and no harm shall come to you. You will remain here with your companions, and some of my men, until a company from Minas Tirith will come and fetch you, and bring you before the Steward. He shall listen to your account, and then decide what to do with you. As I know him, he will be extremely interested in your descent, and in what you can tell of your dealing with the Umbarians. And who knows, perhaps he will even give you an opportunity to take revenge upon your father after all. I would not put it beyong him – if it should be of any profit for him.”

The other looked at him doubtfully. “I heard the Steward is a very stern and ruthless ruler. What makes you think he will indeed act like this?”

Faramir smiled slightly. "I know him very well," he replied plainly.

Agannâlo glanced at him for a moment, then sighed, shaking his head slightly as understanding set in. "I should have known," he muttered. Then his face hardened again. "I will not reveal my contacts to you. Most of them I do not know personally anyway. But I think you already have an idea where to look for them. And they, let me assure you, will look out for you. You are going to Lebennin, aren't you?"

Faramir cast a swift glance at Vorondil, who blushed. Agannâlo noticed this and smiled thinly. "Yes, your ranger here was rather talkative, I must say. Strange that he did not reveal who you really are."

"Would it have changed your attitude, had you known?" Faramir returned. Then he rose. "I shall visit you again this evening. I hope by then you have decided to tell me about your informants. For the more cooperation you show, the more I might feel inclined to put in a good word for you with the Steward."

Signing to Visilya and Túrin, who swiftly blew upon what he had written last to dry the ink, then rose as well, folded the papers and handed them to Faramir, they left the room, and went down to the common room. It was still fairly empty, as the archers and the rangers had not returned yet (although the noise of many voices chatting merrily could be heard outside, and was growing louder), and the two took seats at a table next to a window. Faramir buried his face in his hands for a moment, then ran them through his hair and sighed. Túrin signed to one of the maids to bring them something to drink, before turning to his friend.

"Strange fellow," he remarked. "But I think you did a good job. We didn't even have to torture him."

"No," Faramir said, "luckily. I was amazed that suddenly he started to talk – although I am sure he has told us only snatches of what could really be of importance for our errand. There is much more behind this matter." He sighed again, then smiled faintly. "Actually I am quite content that soon Denethor may bother about him. I am not quite sure that he is indeed going to appreciate it. But this is no concern of ours. We must see to it that tomorrow morning we set out as early as possible. This whole matter with the Southrons has worried me, and I would like to reach Pelargir as swiftly as possible. On the other hand – who knows what dark conspiracies may await us there."

Lady_of_Rohan

Several shots later, and one dash to retrieve all the arrows again, Daewen was beginning to grow tired of the archery exercise. Her left arm was getting stiff from holding the bow straight and steady, while her other arm was starting to ache from repeatedly drawing the bowstring back. Her weariness carried over into her shots, which were erring more and more. She had gotten to the point where she could hit the outer (and even some of the inner) circles fairly accurately, but now some of the arrows were off to the right or left in the grass. Her instructors chided her gently until the younger suggested she take a rest for a little while. She gladly accepted the offer and moved off and sat under one of the shady trees nearby.

Stretching out on her stomach, she twirled a piece of grass between her fingers while she watched... he'd introduced himself earlier, but his name was lost to her now, try his hand at the shortbow. Glancing around, she noticed the lady talking with the Elf who was accompanying them to Lebennin, along with someone she thought looked familiar, but couldn't quite place. Hadn't he been with them in the inn this morning? Yeah, that's where she'd seen him before.

Picking up a short twig, she began to run it through the loose dirt, making odd shapes and lines, sometimes scraping the ground up dirt into piles. She was still quite full from breakfast, even in the early afternoon. But she was sure that if someone set a plate of food in front of her, she would eat until she stuffed herself sick, or managed to pocket whatever she could. She added another twig and a small rock to her collection, and started a new design.

Khorazir

While some of the rangers had remained with the archers, the larger part of Andanor's company had already returned to the inn. The others were about to leave as well, now that the warm afternoon-sun was waning, and the shadows lengthened between the trees. Marach the farmer said that he had to look after his cows and pigs now, wished them all a nice evening, and whistling a merry tune strode off as well.

Lindórië excused herself from the conversation with Maradir, Curufë, Alessya and Andanor (interesting though this had been), and went over to Daewen, who sat on the ground building small designs from pebbles and branches, while looking, to Lindórië's eyes, rather bored, and a little tired.

"Well, how about returning to the inn for a cup of tea, and some cake?" she asked with a smile. "And afterwards we could perhaps begin with your lessons, if you would like to. I see that you have drawn some nice designs here on the ground. Perhaps you would like to continue doing so with a pen, on paper, and try your hand at Tengwar-letters this time."

Lady_of_Rohan

The girl shrugged. "Okay, I guess." She pushed herself off the ground, effectively scattering the small stones and twigs in every direction. Brushing the dirt and grass stems from herself, she looked around, surprised that only a few people remained in the clearing. She rotated her shoulders, feeling a stiffness and soreness developing, which earned a long sigh.

The walk back to the inn was uneventful. A few villagers gave them curious looks, but they otherwise went on their way. Upon entering the inn, though the noise could be heard outside, Daewen saw that the troop of rangers had returned and had filled most of the tables. Glancing up, she noticed that the lady seemed to be looking for someone. Apparently, after a few moments of searching, she must have found who she was looking for, because she started walking toward a table by the windows.

The girl smiled brightly when she saw who was sitting there. Finally, some people I recognize. She saw Túrin, the captain, and the Steward's son gathered around, and the latter seemed to be troubled by something. The pair wasn't noticed until they had almost reached the table.

Khorazir

Túrin smiled broadly when he spotted Daewen. "Hello," he greeted her. "Did you have a nice afternoon? Did you do some archery?"

"It seems your afternoon was rather stressful," Lindórië remarked quietly while taking a seat next to Faramir, who gave her a weary smile, and nodded. "How did it go with the prisoners?" she asked.

"Only one was in the condition of being questioned," he answered. "And after some discussion, he started to talk, and we learned some very interesting things, which might even weigh upon our errand. Túrin has written everything down." He nodded towards the papers on the table.

Lindórië glanced at them, then back at him. "Perhaps I could write out a copy, so that you can send one version to your father, and take the other with you. That way I shall also learn of what was being said, without you having to repeat the whole interrogation."

Faramir looked at her surprisedly, then laughed softly. "Honestly I had not thought that far. Yes, this sounds like an excellent idea. I told Agannâlo – for that was the name the Southron gave me –, that I would see him again this evening. Hopefully he has decided to reveal some more of his knowledge."

Lindórië nodded. "I think I have heard this name before. Was there not a pirate called Agannâlo?"

"'tis him."

"Then I am sure the account will be an interesting read indeed. But what will you do with him?"

Faramir shrugged slightly. "Since our wounded are not fit to travel, they will have to remain here. I have asked for more men being sent here from Minas Tirith. Most likely they are going to arrive tomorrow evening. They will take the prisoners back to the City. Denethor shall deal with them. We must not tarry here longer. Agannâlo's tale has made me uneasy. Something is greatly amiss in the South of Gondor."

"Aye, it is," Lindórië agreed. "And it has been for some time already." She sighed slightly, then smiled. Looking down at the mug in front of him, she asked. "Is that tea you have there? Smells good."

He smiled as well, and signed to the landlady to bring some more mugs. "Who won the contest?" he asked. "Maradir?"

Canamarth

Maradir had walked back to the inn with Gareth. They had talked about archery, mostly. But Maradir had also told him that he would be going upstairs to put his bow into his chamber. Gareth understood and followed Maradir inside.

They traversed the common room when Maradir heard Faramir utter his name. "What's with me?" he asked and walked over to his table.

"I only enquired who won the archery contest."

"Actually, there wasn't one. We only did a few training shots. I don't think I would have had much of a chance against the Noldo, to be honest. But that girl, Daewen, right? She has learned a few tricks. I'll put my bow upstairs and tell you everything about it when I return. But I think I'd rather hear what you have found out about that Southron."

Maradir went up the stairs and found Gareth milling around on the corridor. He drew him into his room and held out a hand to receive the message from the Steward.

"How interesting," Maradir muttered when he perused it. "Agannâlo... And someone's gotten really nervous up in Minas Tirith..."

The sound of approaching footsteps made Maradir put the paper away hastily. They passed and went on down the corridor.

"Well, my boy. If you'd like to have a bed in this room. Three are still unaccounted for as my companion left this morning. I'll ask Faramir and Túrin if they want to join us in here tonight. Apparently they slept on the floor in the common room last night because someone overlooked these two beds. But I'd be quick or one of Faramir's guards will try to lay a claim on the last bed. Better get your stuff up here quick."

Gareth nodded, still a little confused and apparently curious as to the contents of the Steward's letter. But he went down and out to get his bow and quiver which he had left in the courtyard near the stables.

Maradir followed him a little later. When he had reached the landing, a young woman with long dark brown hair came down the corridor from the other side. He nodded to her, remembering that he had seen her at breakfast.

She nodded back and asked shyly: "Excuse me, Master..."

“Maradir. Just Maradir.”

“Uh, is Túrin still downstairs?”

“Yes, I saw him at the table with Faramir.”

The woman seemed to falter a little. “And... is that woman... Visilya also...”

“She’s sitting right next to him. Why?”

She cast down her eyes and sighed deeply but plucking up courage she finally looked up again and answered. “Oh, ‘tis nothing. I was just curious. Are you going downstairs? I am feeling a little dizzy still. Would you mind offering me your arm?”

“Of course, Lady...?”

“Lossiel. Just Lossiel.” A smile spread on her face and she took Maradir’s arm and they walked down the stairs.

asaris

Upon arriving back at the inn, Curufë sat by himself in one of the corners of the common room. He was a loner by nature; even though he did enjoy the company of others, after a time he found it wearying, and would seek solitude. The conversation with Lindorië had given him much to think about. When will my exile end...

Khorazir

“Well, it seems you will have to recount the Southron’s tale after all,” Lindórië said while pouring herself some tea which the landlady had just brought.

Faramir sighed and shrugged. “Andanor will most likely want to hear it as well, and Curufë too, perhaps,” he said. Then his eyes fell on Gareth descending the stairs, and shortly afterwards Maradir and Lossiel. He cast a swift glance at Túrin, who was talking with Daewen and apparently had not spotted Lossiel yet, and then at Visilya, who had, by the look on her face, and shook his head slightly.

“I know of relationships that are quite as complicated,” Lindórië remarked very softly, and only for him to hear.

Lady_of_Rohan

“Yes,” Daewen said as she leaned against the table, resting her palms on the edge. “I hit the center thing on my first shot.” She smiled smugly.

Khorazir

Túrin grinned. “I bet you did,” he said. “I guess that’s why there was no real contest – the others knew they wouldn’t stand a chance against you if you took part.”

He was about to add another teasing remark, when he spotted Maradir and Lossiel. His grin faded somewhat, and he cast down his eyes, unsure if he wanted her to join them at the table or not. He stole a glance at Visilya, then took a

deep breath. There's no use trying to avoid her. And you don't really want to, either. But the two of them together ...

He took another deep breath, and looked up to face her.

EdaintheRanger

Andanor had dismissed the rangers. He was inwardly pleased with their progress and he was glad to command them. All in all they were a good bunch, with a few audible exceptions...

Now he had just finished talking to Lindórië. The lady was gracious and well spoken and her knowledge of the martial arts was surprising. Andanor said hello to Daewen, and said that she looked a lot better for the exercise.

Heading for the inn he checked that the ranger's were all billeted and occupied, before moving to the common room and the best seats he could find. He could see that Turin and Visilya were sitting side by side, and now Maradir and Lossiel were coming down the stairs. His eyes glinted as he sat down at a table to the side, cracking his knuckles as he did so. While he waited for the ensuing fracas, he wondered how Faramir had got on with his "interview".

Canamarth

Maradir sat down next to Visilya, Lossiel next to him. He felt it would be more prudent to have her sit out of view of both Turin and the Captain of the Secret Guard. He did not know what had passed between them but he had seen the uncomfortable glance Turin had given Lossiel at breakfast and just now. He turned to Visilya and said quietly: "Remind me please that I need to ask you something when we have heard Faramir's tale. When there are not so many people about."

Visilya looked at him with a frown but nodded.

Lossiel was sitting next to Maradir and was looking intently at her hands.

asaris

Curufë noticed Faramir glancing over at him, and so the elf made his way over to his table. "Have a seat, Curufë," the ranger said. "I was just about to tell a story."

Khorazir

While Curufë took his seat at the table, Faramir signed to Andanor to come over as well, so that he could hear his account. He then, with the aid of Turin and Visilya, who now and again put in some of their own observations, recounted the interrogation – quite detailedly even, so that the others not only got an idea of the information Agannâlo had provided, but also of the man himself, his character, and his attitude towards the "tarks".

"As to his fate," he ended his tale, "I am inclined to leave the decision about that to the Steward, who doubtlessly knows much more about this strange matter." Here he cast a quick glance at Gareth. "I have decided that together with Dorlas, our wounded and the prisoners six more rangers are to remain here until the men from the City arrive to relieve them of their charges. They are then to follow us. I shall leave it to you to choose the men who are to stay, Andanor. As for us others, we will leave tomorrow morning. If we ride swiftly, the weather holds, and nothing unusual befalls, we should reach Pelargir in about two days."

Turning to Lossiel, he said: "May I inquire what your plans are, lady? Do you want to return to Minas Tirith – which

I strongly recommend? In that case you could wait here until the other company arrives, and you will have safe conduct back to the City. But if you chose to travel with us as far as Pelargir, I would not deny this to you. I would only warn you that the road might be troublesome.”

Túrin looked up and seemed about to object, but apparently thought the better of it, and cast down his eyes with a sigh.

“Well,” Faramir asked, “what will you do?”

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen looked from the newcomers, to Túrin, then back to the newcomers. It was obvious that there was some tension between some of them. Knowing that whatever she might say would be out of place, she remained silent, studying the floor panels.

Khorazir

Túrin did not study the floor panels, but the table in front of him, and the few drops of tea spilled on the smooth wooden surface. He fervently hoped that Lossiel would decide to return to the City. Journeying to Pelargir with her and Visilya ... unimaginable.

He sighed again, and wished she would answer, so that this horrible uncertainty at least was over.

Lady_of_Rohan

Tired of standing and watching these people stew in their own thoughts, Daewen went over and dragged a chair away from a nearby table. At least sitting down would feel better. She was surprised at how tired she felt. Though the chair wasn't entirely comfortable, she found that if she sat just right, she could rest her head against the back somewhat nicely. Her arm and shoulder muscles were really starting to show their weariness and soreness now. She sighed, tugging slightly on a loose thread on her shirt. Things had hit a dull spot. Tense, but dull as far as she was concerned.

Canamarth

Being thus suddenly put to make a decision, Lossiel was at a loss for words. Everyone was staring at her, all wanted her to say she would return to the city. Everyone wanted to get rid of her. She was just a burden no one was willing to bear. But could she really return home to her father? He would chide her for causing him so much anxiety. And he would scorn her for having taken up with Túrin who had then abandoned her at the sight of some other beautiful woman. He would tell her that he had not expected anything else of the son of Húrin of the Keys.

At length Lossiel looked up. “I will stay here and wait for the arrival of the escort to Minas Tirith.” She thought she heard Túrin utter a sigh of relief. I shall stay and not further bother you with my presence, she thought. But I do not think I shall go back to Minas Tirith...

Khorazir

Faramir gave her a long, keen glance. He knew that it would diminish the tension in the company if she did not

accompany them, but at the same time he doubted that the matter could be solved so easily. Her eyes spoke of hurt and grief, but also showed a fierce defiance, which made him wonder what she was up to. Hopefully she will be reasonable, and not get herself into more trouble, he thought, and cast a dark glance at Túrin, whose thoughtless act had only caused his friend more worries. But then his expression softened again. It was plain to read in Túrin's face that he was suffering as well.

Faramir sighed slightly, glanced back at Lossiel, and nodded. "Very well," he said. "I shall inform Dorlas that you will be staying with them. As for the others," he looked into the round, "please prepare for an early start tomorrow."

He remained at the table for a while, listening rather absentmindedly to the conversation about archery that ensued – which steered the topic away from more serious issues –, and questioned Andanor about the performance of the rangers during the afternoon's exercise. At length, after having finished his tea, he rose, as he had to talk with the landlady about their departure, and with Dorlas – and, later, with the prisoner, something he was not looking forward to.

Lindórië also took her leave then, and after fetching her writing utensils and the account of the interrogation, she joined Daewen at her table. "It must be pretty boring for you – all this talk about prisoners and political intrigues," she said. "But I fear that things will not improve in that department in days to come, and only grow worse."

She spread out the papers, opened the ink-well, then tested the tip of her pen. "Perhaps you are too tired – you did quite an amount of shooting today, and with your injured shoulder, too –, but this may be something to occupy your time, and prevent you from getting bored. If you still want to learn how to read and write, that is. Oh," she added with a smile, "and how about the cake? I know the landlady has some."

gladrieltook

Visilya turned to Maradir with a sigh. "Was was it that you wanted to ask me?"

Lady_of_Rohan

The prospect of even longer political chats down the road didn't thrill Daewen. I should have snuck off when I had the chance, she thought. At least then I wouldn't be any bother to them all. But the again, she thought with a twinge, knowing where my next meal will come from is a nice thing too. She put the thoughts in the back of her mind for a while as the lady spoke to her again, this time concerning a little education.

She watched with thinly-veiled curiosity as Lindórië took out some paper, ink, and a pen. Some of the pages had a little writing on them, and, while she recognized a few of the characters, to her they were nothing more than marks on paper. They didn't mean anything. And, now that she thought about it and realized it would take some effort, it didn't seem as fun or exciting anymore. But she did have to agree with the fact that it would give her something to do to ward off boredom.

One word did catch her attention completely. "Cake? Sure!" Her surprise and delight was evident. Cake was one of the rarer treats in her world, and to actually be offered some was unheard of. And maybe the sweet would give her some energy again. She was feeling rather tired.

Khrazir

Noting the girl's sudden enthusiasm, Lindórië smiled, and signed to the landlady to bring them some tea and cake.

"The tea will take some time yet," the woman said when she brought the cake, smiling at the girl, "but the young lady

here looks so hungry, so I thought it better to bring the cake already. Hope you'll like it." And she heaped a large piece onto Daewen's plate.

Lindórië meanwhile had taken up the first page of Túrin's account, and read the first paragraph. She shook her head slightly, then grinned. "I must say Master Túrin has a very unique handwriting," she commented.

"What's with me?" Túrin asked, who had left the other table, and come over to Daewen's and Lindórië's on his way outside (he felt he needed some fresh air, and moreover did not want to intrude on Maradir's and Visilya's conversation, as he could guess what Maradir wanted to ask her about – or whom, rather). Now he peered over Lindórië's shoulder.

"It's my writing, right?" he asked. "I was in a hurry, you know. They were talking so fast. Is it so bad?"

"I have seen worse, really," Lindórië returned. Then she looked to Daewen, and smiled again. The girl had finished the piece of cake already.

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen surprised herself at how quickly she demolished the piece of cake. What had happened to her plan of savoring each bite? Apparently it hadn't been followed. But it had tasted so good (though she wasn't even sure what flavor it was), and the creamy frosting spread between the two layers of cake was just so delicious; it was torture to keep a civilized pace of eating it. Now, however, her mouth felt dry, and she needed something to wash the crumbs down with. Looking up, she saw the landlady come out of the kitchen with a teapot and some cups.

"My, my, aren't you a hungry one!" she said with a grin, noticing Daewen's empty plate (and putting another, equally large, slice on it.) "Now be sure you don't eat too much, you don't want to ruin your supper," she chided in a motherly tone, then winked.

"I'll try not to," the girl replied, discovering that the tea was still too hot to drink comfortably. She did manage to get a few sips down, enough to wet her parched throat. Starting the second piece of cake, she told herself that this time she would slow down and actually enjoy this one. Between bites, she glanced over at Lindórië, who was still examining the papers in front of her and talking to Túrin.

Khorazir

"Well, if there's a word or passage you can't read at all, just call for me," Túrin said. "I'm going to have a stroll outside, but I won't be going far."

Lindórië glanced at him, then at the company at the other table. "It must be really difficult for you," she said softly.

Túrin took a deep breath and nodded. "Yes, it is," he admitted. "But since it's all my own fault, I'm in no position to complain. Ah well, I'm off now." With that, and a smile at Daewen, he left.

Lindórië looked after him, then sighed slightly, and turned back to Daewen. Pouring herself some tea, and taking a slice of the cake as well, she leaned back in her chair, a steaming cup of tea in hand, and absentmindedly watched the other people in the room. She wondered what awaited them in Pelargir. It was not far thence to Lebennin, and so perhaps the confrontation she feared would come sooner than expected. Surely Lord Falastur would send a messenger to her husband as soon as she was spotted in the city. And what then? It all depended on Tarannon's reaction. Planning ahead was useless. Oh yes, Denethor had made great and cunning plans. He was good at this. But he was not among those who then had to try and make them work. Moreover Lindórië doubted that everything the Steward knew about this matter he had revealed to her or his son. What was this about Agannâlo? Lindórië was sure that it somehow had

to do with their errand as well.” Her glance strayed to the papers spread on the table, then she sighed again. Taking a sip from her cup, she put it down on the table, and reached for the pen to begin copying them. There was no use in worrying too much about what lay ahead.

“When you feel like beginning your lessons, just tell me,” she said to Daewen, looking up briefly from her writing. “But there is no hurry.”

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen nodded. For the moment, she was more interested in this cake than learning how to write. But, after she was halfway through a third piece, she had to force herself to put it aside, mostly from the fact that she felt if she ate another bite, she'd be sick. She leaned back in her chair, burped softly, and glanced at the lady, who seemed to be somewhat troubled by what she read. Reaching out, the girl squished a few crumbs from the plate onto the end of her finger and ate them. After all, she didn't want any more of that cake to go to waste than was necessary.

Khorazir

Although Faramir had already described Agannálo's interrogation to them, and mentioned that it had not been easy to get the Southron to talk, Lindórië was astounded how difficult it in fact had been, according to Túrin's account. She glanced up to where Faramir stood at the other end of the room talking to the landlady, most likely about the preparations of their departure, and smiled slightly. He is learning swiftly, she thought, but then her smile faded. And most likely he will need all he learns in the dark times that lie ahead.

Taking a deep breath, she turned back to her writing. After having copied another page, she looked up from the papers and glanced at Daewen. “I need a break,” she said. “And I would like to try the cake. It was good, yes?”

Lady_of_Rohan

“It was very good,” Daewen replied. “Although I'm beginning to wish I hadn't started on that third piece. Whatcha writing about?”

Canamarth

Maradir turned to Visilya. “I was wondering...” he glanced sideways at Lossiel who was still sitting next to him but seemed lost in her own thoughts. “I was wondering whether you have heard anything of Aliya.”

Khorazir

“About the questioning of the Southron prisoner they have upstairs,” Lindórië answered after she had swallowed a bite of the cake, which was excellent indeed. “Apparently he is a very cheeky fellow, and refused to answer Captain Faramir's questions for a long while, and even insulted him. But well, these are again political issues that so bore you. Be glad that you do not have to worry about them.”

gladrieltook

Visilya sighed heavily. "Only a quick note last spring stating that she was in Lothlorien, and that the elves there were taking care of her." Visilya remembered well the evening that she had received the letter. She had been in the Courtyard of the barracks, drilling for the Steward's inspection, when an elf on a gray horse had burst in, knocking aside several men, and rearing to a halt before her. 'A message from the Lady Aliya', he had said, and turned and ridden off before she could thank him. Her throat tightened, though, when she had read the rest of the not-so short letter. Her sister had gone into great detail her feelings for Maradir, and her reasons for leaving Minas Tirith so quickly, and that she feared that Dellow was on her trail, though she felt that she'd thrown him off by hiding in Lothlorien.

Lady_of_Rohan

"Yeah, I enough to worry about as it is." The girl glanced around the room. There was a whole lot of nothing happening in her opinion. She idly began tracing the patterns in the wooden table with her finger. If she didn't move much, her sore muscles didn't complain, like common sense dictated. But still, there wasn't much to do around here.

Canamarth

Maradir nodded. "That sounds good. I'm sure they're taking good care of her." Better care than I could have provided, obviously. "Well, if you... I mean, should you ever meet her, send her my best wishes..." His voice trailed off and he turned to look out of the window.

gladrieltook

Visilya sighed, and set her hand on Maradir's shoulder. "She did mention you, and that she misses you, but cannot bring herself to come back to Minas Tirith. She is a free spirit, Maradir, and will never be tamed. Just know that she still loves you deeply."

Khorazir

Having finished her cake, Lindórië put the plate down. "All of this must be pretty boring for you," she remarked while watching Daewen. "And I fear there is little we can do to alleviate it. Let me just copy these last two pages, and then we can begin with your lessons, if you want."

She went on with her task, writing swiftly. When she came to Agannâlo's tale Túrin's writing became even more difficult to decipher, as apparently he had been rather excited about what he heard. She shook her head slightly, and wrote on. When she was done, she took the copy, folded it when the ink had dried, and signed to Dorlas who was just about to ascend the stairs to fetch it.

He came and took it. "I shall give it to the men from the City when they come," he said. "Oh, and have you seen the Captain? If you do, you can tell him that he won't have to try and get more information out of our Southron friend tonight. He's asleep now, and I don't think he's going to wake up till tomorrow. He didn't even stir when we loosened his bonds so that I could exchange the bandages. Apparently his wounds are more serious than on first sight. Honestly, I marvel that he managed to endure the interrogation as he did."

"But he will make it?" Lindórië asked.

"Oh, sure. He won't die before the Lord Steward has seen him. But one of the others will, I fear. His fever has not

abated, and I'm at a loss of what to do. Would be best for him if it was over swiftly," he said dejectedly, "but still ..." He shrugged and ran a hand through his hair.

"Ah well, I must look after my charges," he said with a sigh. "At least our companions are better now." He gave the ladies a weary smile, and left their table to return upstairs.

Shortly afterwards Faramir returned, and Lindórië told him what Dorlas had said. "Actually I am not displeased about this turn of events – concerning Agannâlo, I mean," Faramir admitted as he took a seat next to Lindórië. "I was not looking forward to another chat with him, although certainly he is a fascinating fellow. But Denethor is so much better at squeezing information out of people than I, so he may deal with him."

Lindórië glanced at him. "Nevertheless, it seems you have learned some tricks from your father." She nodded at the account. "Other captains would have used torture instead of ... persuasion to make the man talk."

Faramir smiled and shrugged. "Well, I guess I am too softhearted to take to those means – a fact which Denethor likes to criticise, by the way. He seems to think I am not hard and even ruthless enough to make a good military leader, or politician. Ah well, luckily Boromir is going to have to deal with most of these issues later on. Oh, but we must bore you," he said, looking at Daewen. "How are you? Do you think you are fit to accompany us tomorrow?"

Canamarth

Maradir put his hand over Visilya's but did not turn to her. He only nodded. "I know - somehow." Not that he had ever thought of taming himself a woman. He had been impressed by some of the Rohirric women he had met in his travels. They had been just as ruthless with the sword as any soldier of Gondor and could not be daunted by rough men's talk. But only Aliya had evoked more than that. Maybe because he had somehow known that they could never live together.

He finally turned and gave Visilya a brave smile, squeezing her hand slightly before letting go of it. Then he turned to Lossiel who was still sitting next to him. "So, my lady, what are you up to this afternoon?"

Lossiel looked up and shrugged. Maradir could see that she still did not feel quite comfortable so close to Visilya. "I don't know," she said quietly.

"Would you join me in a little walk?" Maradir asked. He needed some distraction and was more than willing to listen to somebody else's problems for a change. Maybe he could even help the girl.

Lossiel assented eagerly and got up, nodding a farewell to Visilya.

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen had been resting her head on her arms, almost dozing off some moments, when Faramir spoke. "Yeah, I guess I'll be able to make it," she said, rubbing her eyes. Her stomach didn't feel so intolerably full anymore, which was good. Arcing her back, she stretched gently, before sitting up straight. "When do we leave?"

Khorazir

"Early, around dawn," Faramir answered. "But there should be sufficient time for sleep," he added with a smile at the tired girl.

"You look quite weary as well," Lindórië remarked, and reached out to stroke back a strand of hair from his brow.

He laughed softly. "A good Captain should be able to conceal his weariness in front of his men – this is what Denethor would most likely say. But you are right, I am weary. Hopefully the beds in Maradir's room are not occupied by others by now. The floor was not that nice a bedstead last night. Ah, but there is still your offer, I guess, should those beds be accounted for already," he ended with a mischievous smile.

"But who tells you that I have not changed my mind?" she returned with pretended seriousness. "You better go and make sure to get a bed in this room, you know."

He nodded. "I see. Thanks for destroying my illusions." He rose. "I shall not bother you any more, then."

"Yes, go and look after your men, as a good captain should," she said. They looked at each other, and they both started to laugh.

"You never fail to remind me of my duties, do you?" he said. "Well, see you later, then."

When he had left, Lindórië turned to Daewen again. "If you are so tired, I think no one would think ill of you if you took a nap. I do not believe that much is going to happen this evening, anyway."

Lady_of_Rohan

"I'm fine," the girl protested, though her sleep-laced words betrayed how she really felt. "Besides, if I sleep now, I'll be awake all night." She yawned.

EdaintheRanger

Andanor had been very interested to hear Faramir's account of the prisoner's interview. He smiled broadly as his captain described how he managed to get the Southron to "talk". He was initially surprised at Faramir's success through subtle means, but then that was his way not Andanor's. Andanor would have forced the Southron to play his hand by playing on the man's inherent fierce pride and macho over-confidence.

Now as the evening wound down and the talk moved to politics and relationships Andanor quickly became bored and started to yawn. Realising that he was fatigued from the days drills and action he nudged Gareth who was mooning into space. "Hey boy!" Andanor exclaimed "I hope you've sorted your billets or you'll be sleeping in the barn with mice." he finished with a grin.

Bidding a polite farewell to the Lady Lindórië, he mouthed a few encouraging words to her cake-filled charge. Then out of sight of the table he stretched, scratched his stomach and wandered off to the kitchen in the search of "food".

Khorazir

Upon leaving Lindórië's table, Faramir went to Maradir's room, and saw that two beds were still unaccounted for. Thus he fetched Túrin's and his stuff and put them there. The fourth bed Gareth had taken, apparently. Faramir thought he recognised his few belongings. Had Maradir offered him the spare bed? Why him?

Remembering that he had told Andanor to have an eye on the young man, Faramir left the room in search of his lieutenant. He finally found him in the kitchen, where seemingly he had just organised a generous supper for himself.

Grinning, Faramir stepped over to him. "The landlady seems to like you," he remarked. "Looks delicious, what you have there. And I shall not delay your supper for long. But tell me, did you notice anything strange about the lad,

Gareth, during the day? 'tis not that I distrust him in any way. Yet nevertheless he still is a very mysterious figure to me. Especially in connection with the matter with Agannâlo.”

Lindórië smiled at the girl. “Well, perhaps you should drink some more of the tea. It might alleviate your tiredness. Ah well,” she sighed, and stretched, “I think I need another cup as well.”

EdaintheRanger

A guilty expression crossed Andanor face as Faramir commented on his supper. The thought “Why does he make me feel like I’ve been caught scrumping apples, like a small child?” crossed his mind. He smiled back a little lopsidedly.

Once the esteemed captain mentioned that foul corsair Agannâlo and Gareth however Andanor returned to a more professional face. “I’m sorry my friend, but I haven’t noticed anything untowards in Gareth’s actions lately. I think that our last ‘discussion’ seemed to have knocked some sense into him. Though I’d be more suspicious and go almost as far as saying I don’t trust him entirely.” Andanor then sighed and ran his fingers through his hair, thinking of the directions that he was taking in these darker days.

Khorazir

Faramir nodded. “Very well. Just continue to watch him, will you?” He sighed slightly. “’tis ill fortune that those who apparently work for the same goal are yet distrustful of the other. But perhaps this is an requirement in times like these.”

He fell silent, looking thoughtful. “I feel terribly ill-prepared for this errand,” he admitted softly at length. “In Ithilien, you usually have a well-defined task at hand. You know who your enemy is. You know what to do. But here ... – I have no idea what awaits us in Pelargir or Lebennin, but I fear that it will be dangerous. Why on earth has Denethor chosen me for the errand? I am no politician. I know naught about these intrigues. I am not even a very experienced captain. How am I supposed to make the right decisions under these circumstances, especially when the fates of my men and even my friends might depend on it?”

He shook his head, and took a deep breath, before looking at Andanor again. A faint smile passed over his face. “Please forgive me, my friend. It ill befits a captain to display his uncertainty like that, I guess.”

Bardhwyn

Wandering out into the Inn’s forecourt, Gareth idly rubbed his ribcage where he’d been solidly poked by Andanor’s elbow. The Ranger didn’t know his own strength, nor did he realize Gareth had already claimed a bunk - the one next to Maradir’s.

Gareth chuckled to himself. Had the Ranger elbowed him one hour earlier, he’d have hit the parcel Gareth had hidden under his tunic. Luckily, Gareth had been relieved of his burden, and none too soon. The Ranger would have felt it, to be sure.

The information offered up by Faramir gave Gareth cause to think. The name in the Steward’s dispatch, spoken aloud by Maradir, was the same name of one of the prisoners. The coincidence was chilling. While Faramir spoke, Gareth had casually watched Maradir. His Captain didn’t flinch. Maradir sat through the entire discussion and at the end spoke of an old girlfriend. What was even more amazing was the fact Gareth was allowed to listen at all. ‘Perhaps Faramir does trust me afterall.’ He thought, watching Lossiel stroll down the path on Maradir’s arm. Suddenly another

er thought intruded.

'I wonder how old she is.' He pondered, watching her skirt sway as she walked.

'How ever old, she's too young for him.' Came the replying thought.

'Like I have a chance...' he retorted to himself, turning for the stable.

Gareth sauntered along, coming finally in line with the outer stable wall, where the previous night, or was it two nights ago, he'd crouched in the dark, conferring with Maradir. Gareth stopped and stared at what was his hiding place when he heard footsteps, many footsteps come up behind him.

"So." A man's voice called out. "How is it you're a prisoner one night and the Captain's guest another?"

Gareth turned and saw the Ranger that had been his guard.. Laren, he thought his name was. Tall, blonde...

"I have asked for Lord Faramir's protection and he's granted it." Gareth replied. "He being a gentleman, knows another. I am Andanor's charge and I owe you no explanation." He counted four Rangers in total, all looking very unfriendly. Laren was the leader, obviously. "If you want to know his Lordship's mind, I suggest you go ask him." Gareth made a move back toward the Inn but was blocked by two Rangers.

"Careful." One of them said. "He's young but I've seen him move. He's well trained."

"Aye, that he is." Laren interjected putting himself in front of Gareth. "Too well trained. So well trained, I smell a rat." The Ranger said, lowly. Gareth stood his ground and held the Ranger's eye, yet said nothing.

Laren saw the confidence in the young man's eyes and grinned. "I don't know who you are or what you're doing here, but mark me, boy, we're watching you, very, very closely. All of us. Harm his Lordship or anyone of the Company and you're a dead man."

Gareth stood silently, looking at Laren's face as the Ranger spoke. It was obvious the Rangers were alarmed at his presence, confused.

"I can see why you'd mistrust me." Gareth said, finally, looking from face to face. "Know that I have sworn my life in defense of Lord Faramir. Does that satisfy you?"

"No." came a voice to Gareth's right.

"Legends tell that the Dark Lord himself swore allegiance to the Kings of the West. What good are the pledges of a liar?" Laren asked.

Gareth clenched his teeth. 'Liar!' The word boiled his blood. Before he could check himself, his fist connected squarely with Laren's jaw, sending the Ranger sprawling backwards. The three other Rangers were soon on top of him, yielding a rain of punches, kicks and blows...

Somehow, Gareth managed to stagger to the back door of the Inn. Throwing the door open he hauled himself over the threshold, face bloodied and clenching his guts, and steadying himself on anything in reach, he made for the dry sink wanting only to press something wet and cold against his bruised face.

"By the Gods! The boy!" It was Andanor's voice. Gareth turned and saw, through puffy eyes Andanor and Faramir standing together.

"What, on Arda, happened!" The Ranger exclaimed, making his way to Gareth. "Who did this? Names! I want names!"

Gareth just shook his head 'no' and thrust a towel into the bucket of water.

Khorazir

Alarmed about the boy's state, Faramir told Andanor to stay with him and look after him, before he himself left the inn in the search of the malefactors. He had feared that the rangers would not tolerate the young man's presence in the company, and suspect him of ill intentions. And Faramir knew he could not really blame them for that. The safety of their captain and their companions was their chief priority. But still, this was no reason to treat the boy like that.

Rounding the corner to the stables, his eyes fell on Laren and his friends. The former stooped over a bucket with water, washing his face. He looked up when one of others nudged him, and Faramir could see that his nose was bleeding. The others did not look too well, either. Apparently Gareth had managed to deal a blow or two at his attackers. None of them looked very happy about their Captain's arrival.

Faramir studied them sternly, then shook his head. "Four against one," he said sadly. "I did not know I had such cowards in my company."

"Captain ...," Laren began, but Faramir interrupted him. "What on earth came into your minds to attack the boy? He is here with my leave, and you are to respect my decisions, even if they do not seem to make sense to you on first glance. I understand your attitude towards the boy, but this is no reason to treat him like this."

"It wasn't us who started the fight, 'twas him," one of the rangers put in.

"So, it was him?" Faramir asked icily. "You want to tell me that he attacks a group of four men, just so, unprovoked? Come on, Edrahil, do not think I am stupid. You waited for him here, and I am sure 'twas one of your remarks that provoked his anger, and made him assail you. Was it not so?"

There was an uncomfortable silence, as the rangers tried to avoid their Captain's intend stare. They nodded slightly. Laren was the first to stir, and raise his eyes again to face Faramir.

"So you really trust him, captain?" the ranger asked disbelievingly.

Faramir hesitated for a moment. Then he nodded. "Yes, I do," he said gravely.

Laren cast down his eyes and shook his head. "Sorry, captain, but I don't."

"That is your good right. Have an eye on him, if you think it necessary. But do not touch him again," Faramir said sternly. "One more outbreak like this, and you can take your leave of this company, you and whoever else thinks he has to beat up the boy. And now go and ask his pardon!"

"But captain ...," Laren protested, but a glance from Faramir shut him up.

"Go now!"

"Yes, captain," he said meekly.

"And your friends as well."

They sighed, and turned to go. "I shall tell Andanor to watch you keenly from now on," Faramir said. "And I shall do so as well. There are hard times ahead, and I have to be able to rely upon all my men. Do not disappoint me."

Canamarth

Maradir listened. It had not needed much to bring Lossiel to talk. He had hardly put a few questions about her family when she had started to tell him the story of her whole life. What a sheltered childhood she had had. That noone had prepared her for the great wide world outside of the walls of Minas Tirith. How she had met Túrin. How he had broken her heart. That her father would scorn her when he heard that she had been left by Húrin's son. Apparently her father and Húrin of the Keys had some sort of score to settle. She even told him of the night she spent with the Southrons. When she had finished she more or less started all over again. She did not cry and did not seem to expect Maradir to comfort her. She just talked and talked and talked.

Though Maradir realised that she had indeed experienced a lot of misery in the recent past he could not help but wonder what had made her so interesting for Túrin a while back, before she had lived through the first adventure of her life. She kept reflecting on how jealous her friends in Minas Tirith would be when she told them about it. Maradir started wishing they would return to the inn soon.

When they had come in sight of it, Lossiel suddenly took one of his hands and stopped him. She looked up at Maradir as if she saw him for the first time since they had left the inn. "You won't tell anyone about this, will you? I mean, you won't tell Túrin..."

"You have my word of honour."

She smiled and got on her toes to kiss him on his cheek. Then she blushed, put a hand over her mouth to stifle a giggle, and resumed her way to the inn.

Well, maybe I do understand what Túrin liked about her, Maradir thought. It did not seem that her mirth could be so easily quenched and that she was acting a lot on impulses. He followed her inside.

Bardhwyn

Blinded, Gareth had to trust Andanor as the Ranger eased him into a chair for his right eye was swollen shut and the left he kept closed tightly, for the dim sunlight he found too strong and bright - causing pains to shoot to the back of his head.

The head injury he'd sustained when first assailed in the forest reared its ugly head once again and the man who had given it to him was now in the opposite position; Andanor was seeing to Gareth's injuries.

"We'll have to slice it." Andanor said, matter of fact, as he withdrew his knife from its sheath and held the blade over a candle flame.

"What? Slice what?" Gareth mumbled, risking the opening of his left eye. He groaned slightly as Andanor took the cold, damp cloth away from the his face.

"Your eye, it's swelling too rapidly. It needs cutting to release the pressure, otherwise you risk damage to your sight, boy. You'll have a scar but they say scars add character. And make an man look older. No doubt Dorlas could do it more skillfully..."

Gareth let out a sharp cry of pain as Andanor deftly drew the knifepoint across his swollen eyelid.

"But Dorlas isn't here." Andanor said, dropping the knife and reapplying the damp cloth to the now profusely bleeding eye.

"AH! I wasn't ready.." Gareth cried.

"Exactly." The Ranger replied, submerging the bloodied cloth into the bucket at hand and wringing the reddish water

out.

The door the kitchen opened and slowly four Rangers entered, led by Laren who absent-mindedly wiped a small trickle of blood from his nose as he passed the threshold. Andanor quickly understood who they were and even why they had come.

“Have something to say, do you?” Andanor asked while laying another cloth over Gareth’s eye.

“Lord Faramir ordered us to apologize.” Laren said. At the sound of the Ranger’s voice, Gareth’s left eye flew open and his body tensed.

“So, we apologize...as ordered. Laren continued, holding Gareth’s one-eyed stare.

“And we were encouraged to keep an eye on you as well.” Another said, the one called Edrahil from what Gareth could gather while being attacked by him.

Gareth said nothing but gave the Rangers a short nod. With Andanor there, he knew they’d not dare try anything else. Gareth then shut his left eye and waited for the stabbing pains to stop. He heard the four Rangers grunt between themselves and shuffle out the doorway.

Once the door shut, Gareth spoke.

“Are they gone?”

“Yes.” Andanor answered, wringing out the damp cloth.

“They will kill me if given provocation, won’t they?”

“Yes.” Andanor answered, again. “They are Rangers, you know.” He said with a grin the boy could not see.

Gareth just nodded and allowed Andanor to carry on with his ministrations.

EdaintheRanger

The older ranger worked quickly, wishing that Dorlas was here to guide his uncertain judgement. But like he had said, the company healer wasn’t, he was away dealing with weightier matters. Besides these were fist fight wounds, the results of common brawling, “by the stars,” he muttered loud enough for the boy to hear, “I’ve dealt with these often enough!”

Andanor applied the home remedies that he remembered, and some witch-hazel to fetch out the bruises. Standing to ‘admire’ his handiwork he quipped,

“Aye lad. You’ll be displaying the seven shades of the rainbow tomorrow!”

Gareth seemed to be ready to move, to follow his instinct, that was to flee to the shelter of his room, but Andanor pushed him back into the chair.

“We are not done yet.” He said reaching for a green bottle that was on the table next to the open field-healing kit. Gareth heard rather than saw the slosh of liquid into the leather tankards that stood on the table.

“Here. Drink this, it will deaden the pain, and put fire back into your belly, if nothing else!”

Andanor pushed one of the tankards into Gareth’s hand. The potent brandy spirit picqued his flattened nose.

“Don’t worry, I won’t poison you.” the ranger said, before quaffing his tankard in one steady drink. For he was sudden-

ly melancholy, despairing of the day. Perhaps it was his own fault that the night events had occurred. He knew his men, but they in turn knew him, his ways and his thoughts even. But they could always surprise him, and this had even shocked his hardened soul. They probably guessed that he had forebodings about Maradir and his companion, and so in their clannish way would declare them an “enemy of the Lieutenant”. Maradir they couldn’t touch, for he was “a noble” one of their “betters”. However the lad was another matter. “Damn them, and Damn this.” he thought turning his befuddling mind to a happier day, as he emptied the bottle into his tankard.

He started to drink again, scanning his mind for good thoughts. Slowly he began to talk.

Khorazir

Faramir had also been shocked by the rangers’ attack on Gareth. He waited outside until he could hear them return. They would have apologised, yes, but this would not really solve the problem, Faramir knew. He could only hope that they would come to their senses once the company was on the road again. This idling about did not do them good, he knew.

On his way back to the inn he spotted Maradir and Lossiel return from a walk. He smiled slightly to himself. At least somebody was looking after her, now that both Gareth and Túrin were too preoccupied with problems of their own. Faramir waited in the shade until they had entered the inn, then followed behind.

Lindórië and Daewen were still sitting at their table, the girl looking half asleep, but fighting her weariness, apparently. Faramir gave them a smile, before making his way to the back of the common room, towards the room where Andanor and Gareth were. He wanted to see how the lad was doing. Moreover there was the matter of Agannâlo he wanted to talk with him about.

Canamarth

Maradir escorted Lossiel in and more or less dumped her at the table where Daewen and Lindórië sat. “I am sure you’d now prefer the company of some ladies,” he said with a smile while withdrawing to where Faramir had just vanished. “Enchanted to have made your acquaintance.” With that he turned heel and hurried after his friend.

He was quite surprised to find Gareth being treated by Andanor in the room adjoining. “Goodness. Have we been attacked while I was being, uh, entertained by a beautiful young woman for once?”

Lossiel sat down next to Daewen who stifled a yawn. “So, what are you up to?” Lossiel asked cheerily.

Khorazir

Faramir turned to his friend. “Unfortunately it were some of my own men who inflicted this upon him,” he explained gravely. “Apparently they consider him a thread. They have been warned not to assail him again, but I fear the problem itself remains unsolved.”

He turned back to the young man. “There is a matter I would like to talk with you about. I know you refused to reveal any information about your errand, but nevertheless I shall ask you again. You heard what I related about this man Agannalo. You were sent to kill him and his men, so you must have more information about them, information which may be important for my present errand. So, what can you tell me about him?”

Canamarth

Maradir stood behind Faramir, arms folded across his chest, an eyebrow cocked. This is going to be really interesting.

EdaintheRanger

Having slugged half a tankard of brandy back, Andanor's head was starting to swim, just like he wanted it to, but it had put paid to his attempts at conversation. "Probably just as well" he thought as he was feeling suddenly vulnerable. He gritted his teeth, then when Faramir and Maradir entered Andanor took the welcome distraction to slump back into a chair.

Bardhwyn

"There is a matter I would like to talk with you about. I know you refused to reveal any information about your errand, but nevertheless I shall ask you again. You heard what I related about this man Agannalo. You were sent to kill him and his men, so you must have more information about them, information that may be important for my present errand. So, what can you tell me about him?"

Faramir's voice was moderate but commanding. Gareth purposely averted his eyes from the Steward's son and watched Andanor instead as he fell into a nearby chair, his tankard empty and wearing a slightly poggled grin. Maradir's stare didn't go unnoticed either. Trying to still his sudden anxiety, Gareth picked up his tankard and took a drink, wincing at the sharp sting in his mouth, brought on by the liquor. He ran his tongue along the inside of his bottom lip and felt yet another tear, blood and damn! A loose tooth...

"Aye, we were sent out to waylay a band of armed men, pity it was a day too late." Gareth replied, his eyes flashing momentarily at Maradir. "We could have intercepted them earlier and spared those poor people their horror." The memories returned, as did the gut wrenching feeling. "As for that name, Agannalo – I heard it for the first time today," Gareth said, truthfully... though he didn't say at what time in the day. He gingerly poked at the fresh cut over his right eye taking the opportunity to frame his words. "My Lord, I am just a foot soldier. I am told nothing except to go and to fight. I don't ask who, or why. That is not my place. I cannot help you." The youth looked up into the face of Faramir, his eyes silently pleading to leave it there.

Khorazir

Although not doubting that Gareth's answer had been truthful, Faramir knew that more lay behind the youth's words. He had noticed how the young man's eyes had flicked to Maradir, as if trying to fathom how much he was allowed to tell. The suspicion that his friend somehow was concerned with this whole matter grew to almost a certainty. Perhaps I should ask him about it, he thought. But then again, most likely he is under an oath not to reveal anything to "outsiders", like Gareth here. *Ah, curse these secret errands and policies.*

Faramir sighed, and ran a hand through his hair. "Very well," he said. "We shall leave it at that. Try and get some rest. We shall leave early tomorrow – of which I would like to remind you as well, Andanor," he added with the hint of a smile, noticing what state his lieutenant was in. Then, nodding to Andanor and Gareth, he left the room.

+++

Lindórië smiled at Lossiel. "I think the lesson at bowmanship has exhausted the young lady, which is quite understandable, considering the nasty fall she suffered yesterday. I have offered to teach her how to read and write, but I think we shall begin with that some other time."

Then she looked up as a draught of cold air indicated that someone had just entered the common room. Glancing over her shoulder, she beheld Túrin. He scanned the room, beheld Lindórië and Daewen at their table, and apparently decided to join them, when Lindórië moved a little so that Lossiel was revealed. Túrin hesitated, braced himself visibly, and continued his way towards them.

“Hello,” he said, making an effort not to avoid Lossiel’s gaze.

EdaintheRanger

Andanor gave a silent groan, and gave Faramir a forced smile. He nodded slowly, before slurring, “I’ll be fine, my sweet lord, I’ll be fine. Fresh as a daisy...” his voice trailing off as his befuddled mind attempted to focus on something else.

Leaning over to the table he grabbed the brandy bottle again, and poured some more brandy, with his clumsy fingers slopping most of it on his britches, he cursed to himself in that drunken way, and tipped the remainder of the bottle in his tankard.

Canamarth

Maradir smiled at Andanor, then let his gaze wander back to Gareth and let the smile spread even wider. He was definitely satisfied with the boy’s account and tired to let it show. Gareth had not uttered a lie and yet not betrayed anything of importance. A lot of Maradir’s men when excellent tale-spinners but Maradir preferred to stick to the truth as closely as possible. Noone had yet been able to prove that he had ever uttered a lie in his life. Of which he was quite proud. Disguise the truth, was what his captain used to say. And he told it to his men.

He now took a closer look at Gareth’s wound. “Now that looks like one nasty blow you received there, my boy. I still have a few of Morus’ herbs. Maybe we can find something that will ease the swelling. If you care to follow me upstairs...”

“Hello,” Lossiel muttered almost inaudibly and cast down her eyes to study her hands again.

Khorazir

Túrin swallowed hard, not sure what to do or say next. “Why do you not take a seat?” Lindórië invited him, and although she was smiling, her face was troubled. This was far more difficult than it had seemed at first.

Túrin shrugged at her words, his eyes still on Lossiel. “I don’t think my presence here is desired,” he said. Then looking up, he beheld Faramir approaching them. He seemed deep in thought, and did not look too happy, either.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, happy about the interruption.

Faramir only shook his head slightly. “Too much,” he replied darkly. Then taking a deep breath, he forced himself to a faint smile. “’tis high time for us to set out again, and to be able to concentrate on our original errand instead of having to deal with matters everybody else seems to know more about than we do.”

Canamarth

An idea suddenly struck Lossiel and she burst out: “So, that Maradir friend of yours. Does he have a girlfriend?”

When she saw Túrin’s bewildered face turning back to her she wished she had not uttered the question.

Khorazir

Faramir glanced at Túrin, then back at Lossiel, and smiled. “I am not sure,” he answered. “We have not seen each other a lot lately. But I think not.”

Canamarth

“Good, good,” Lossiel muttered and blushed deeply.

Khorazir

Faramir’s smile broadened, and it took him some effort not to let it turn into a mischievous grin. Then his expression sobered again. “I have to go and pick the men for the nightwatch – or rather find those that have ... volunteered. And after that ‘tis bed for me. I have to be up early tomorrow, and last night’s sleep was not exactly relaxing.”

He looked at Túrin. “If you are wondering about your stuff, I brought it up to Maradir’s room,” he said, startling his friend out of his thoughts.

“Thanks,” Túrin muttered. “I’m going to go to bed soon, too.”

“I do not think any of us will be up much longer tonight,” Lindórië said, casting a glance at Daewen, who had rested her head on her arms and looked fast asleep.

“Well, good night to you all, then,” Faramir said. He hesitated for a moment, then went over to Lindórië, stooped, and kissed her cheek. “Sleep well,” he said softly.

“You too,” she returned, kissed him as well, and watched him leave with a gentle smile playing about her lips.

asaris

Curufë waved from his table. “Good night. I think I’ll stay up for a while yet.”

Galhadrim

The anteroom of Prince Imrahil, Lord of Dol Amroth, opened to a view of the city under sunset. Yellow and orange light blazed off the whitewashed stone buildings as counterpoint to a starkly blue sky above. The large open window let in a slight breeze which carried the scent of the seacoast and the spicy tang of a population preparing an evening meal.

Grendelenth stood looking out at the sea to the west. He would have much longer to wait before being presented to

the Prince's Court and used it to mull over the ensnaring of Dol Amroth and how to play that when the time came. In the intricate dance of statecraft, it was wise to have allies to blame for failures and treachery.

The door to the comfortable sitting room opened and Grendel turned in slight surprise. His dark eyebrows went up when Imrahil himself came through. The Prince wore a smile and simple clothing. He raised both hands in a greeting and spoke in a confident and welcoming tone. "My good ambassador, sorry to have kept you waiting. It is my honor to receive you."

The emissary bowed with respect. "Milord, the wait has been short. I have not had enough opportunity to enjoy the view of your enchanting city. The honor at your personal attention is mine."

Imrahil motioned to one of the stuffed, tapestry covered chairs. As Grendel sat a servant came into the room with two glasses of wine and set them down on the endtables next to each chair. Imrahil sat and thanked the butler, who nodded and efficiently left the room.

With thanks and a smile, the ambassador took a perfunctory sip and found himself surprised again. "Dorwinion wine?"

"I recalled you enjoyed it last time you were here. It is my pleasure to serve it again." The Prince had a relaxed posture in the large chair and the smile never faded.

"Milord, that was two years ago. You have a wonderful memory. You also have my most sincere thanks." Grendel was sure that a staff member had briefed him on everything he would need for this meeting but the effort denoted an attempt to assuage any fears of conflict. It was a good starting point for the negotiating tactic that he would use.

They talked shortly about the season and the fishing and the city's next festival before Imrahil set down his wine and asked, "So what does Lord Tarranon have by way of message for me. My assumption is it has something to do with the Corsairs he hunts."

"Most directly that is correct. However, there is a new tactic that we believe will result in a more complete victory." He paused for the Prince's mind to assume some more. "If we simply defeat each wave that brings a new shipload of the devils to our shores, there will always be another wave behind it. The south breeds these people faster and faster and they have no choice but to move on us. A more permanent solution must be uncovered, a final solution."

Imrahil's smile did fade now and he thought over the words just spoken. "What does Tarranon propose? How can this tide be turned? We patrol the seas and destroy their raiding vessels already. He cannot seriously think of mounting an attack on Harad."

"No milord, we do not have the manpower to take on such a task. But there are those that do. They can be bought."

"Mercenaries? There can't possibly be enough."

Grendel fixed him with a steely stare. The bustle of the city outside seemed to dwindle as he spoke. "No, good Prince. The Corsairs themselves. Paid, trained, and turned back on their own. We have already begun the process we need but more gold for it. Your gold, which you will turn over to me."

Imrahil stared back at him blankly. He searched for words to respond with and they wouldn't quite come up through a clouded mind. "Yes... Or rather, no." Imrahil blinked rapidly and turned his head towards his city. "No, that will not be done. I'm very sorry to have to turn you down, ambassador."

Grendel froze in his chair. "It is but a small matter, sire. Surely Dol Amroth can support it."

"No, my friend. Let us move on to other matters."

"As you wish." The emissary stared hard at him again. "We would like to improve our trade of wheat and barley."

“That would be acceptable. I have long thought that we should have closer ties in agriculture.” Imrahil’s smile returned. “Now what was it that we were talking about?”

“Nothing of importance, just a simple exchange of foodstuffs. I thank you for your attention on this issue.” The two stood and made more pleasant exchanges before the Prince left the room.

Grendel cursed under his breath. The will of the Prince was far stronger than he had hoped. Nothing would be accomplished here. He could only hope that Imrahil would let the meeting recede into the fog that Grendel had encouraged.

The ambassador turned to leave, fuming at the thought of a wasted trip. He would drive his carriage team even harder on the return.

Bardhwyn

Gareth followed Maradir up the stairs, quickly trooping through the common room – that girl was there. Gareth shadowed his face as they walked through, wondering if she noticed.. would she notice? Damn! Girls! Must be the liquor...

Once in the bedroom he dropped, with a groan, in the empty bed on which lay the very few personal possessions he carried; A small satchel, his cloak, the borrowed bow and quiver. His clothes, and his body, were in need of a wash..

“Any chance I can get a change of clothes, Captain.” He muttered.

“Don’t ever call me that!” Maradir shot back.

“Yessir..”

“Yes, what!?”

“Yes, Maradir,... sir...” Gareth buried his face in his hands.. “ugh.. sorry.”

“Mind your drink while on this mission.” Maradir said, lowering his voice. “Too much and you’ll let something like that slip in their company. That would be interesting, wouldn’t it?” Maradir asked digging in his own satchel looking for Morus’ herbs.

“And if you’re met with any more harassment, walk away. You’re too proud Gareth. The mission is more important than your precious idea of yourself.. this is something you’ve got to learn. Already you’ve had a taste of what can happen if you don’t. Next time you may die.”

Maradir walked over to the lad’s bedside and looked down. Gareth had dropped his hands and lay, his eyes closed on the bunk. He looked even younger than a lad of 19. ‘Too young, yet how old was I?’ Maradir thought to himself.

“And lastly, you did well just now. You didn’t lie, yet you didn’t betray anything of importance. Well done.” Maradir dropped the packet of herbs on Gareth’s chest. “Here you are.”

Gareth picked up the packet. “You do have herbs. I thought that was just a ruse. What do I do with them?”

“I don’t know.” Maradir replied with a broad smile.”I thought you might know.”

“No, I don’t know.” Gareth said, smiling as well – as best he could with the swelling. Suddenly struck by the humor of it, the two men burst into laughter just as the door opened...

Khorazir

After having told Laren and his friends about their impending night-watch, Faramir went upstairs to his room. Maradir and Gareth were there, both in good mood, apparently, since they were laughing. The lad had a small bag in his hands which seemingly contained some herbs. Faramir smiled slightly to himself. If there was something Maradir was never short of it was herbs. And often he would produce them at exactly the right time. He made a remark about it, and added that he was glad indeed about his friend's decision to join them – and about Gareth's, too. "Hopefully you will not have any more trouble with the rangers. Just try and avoid them. If you prove valiant and moreover true to your word – which I do not doubt –, they will accept you in time."

Túrin came soon afterwards, and despite it being still rather early in the evening, they all went to bed, and after a bit of easy conversation about what they could expect on their journey (to which Túrin did not contribute much), Faramir fell asleep.

+++

He woke very early the next morning, even before it was light, and was more than astonished to find Túrin's empty already, and his clothes gone. Usually Túrin was all but an early riser. Washing and dressing carefully so as not to wake the others, he soon made his way down to the common room. One of the maids, who apparently was responsible for lighting up the fire and milking the cows in the morning, was about. She was rather startled when she saw Faramir descend the stairs.

"Oh, you're up early, aren't you?" she said.

"But I do not seem to have been the first to rise," Faramir replied with a smile. "Have you by any chance seen a friend of mine? Brown hair, green and blue tunic?"

"Him? Yes, I have. He helped me fetch wood. Then he went out to the stables. He didn't look too happy, I thought. But it was nice of him to help. Hope he's alright."

"I shall go and have a look. Thank you." With that Faramir left the common room. In the courtyard it was still rather dark, although in the east the sky began to lighten. The air was cold and fresh, and Faramir drew his cloak about him more tightly as he set out towards the stables. There was no sign of Laren and the other rangers who had been on duty this night. *If they have gone to sleep, I shall indeed see to it that they will leave the company*, Faramir thought grimly.

He quickened his pace, but suddenly stopped dead, when his ears picked up a strange, soft, snarling sound. He turned and looked about him attentively, but in the gloom he was not able to see very far. Slowly his hand wandered to the hilt of his sword, as carefully he continued on his way. "Túrin?" he asked.

Galhadrin

Faramir walked carefully to the corner of the stables and looked around back, assuming the noise to be of a dog from a nearby farm. As he came around and heard it again, he knew it was no dog. The growl was deep and evil. It came from the shadow of the stable against the woods which had not been touched by morning's light.

A violent scrape of dirt and brush sounded beneath the feet of the wolf as it leapt out of the darkness. Faramir's sword had just cleared the scabbard when it sprang up at him. He jumped backward to give himself more room but could see the froth covered jaws coming up at him too quickly.

Túrin stepped from the stables in time to see the rushing wolf and in an instant knew that Faramir would not have the precious time needed to bring his sword about. Armed with nothing but a horse brush, Túrin did the only thing his reflexes would allow of him. He threw the brush quickly and shouted, hoping to distract the animal just enough.

Faramir ducked to one side and stopped his backward motion. Falling back any more would likely put him flat on his

back and that would be deadly when facing a vicious beast. He hoped for only a scratched arm and no vise-like grip where its teeth would tear through muscle.

The brush scored a direct hit on the wolf's snout and caused it to flinch and forget its prey. It glanced off Faramir's side and landed beyond him, spinning and immediately launching itself again without stopping. This time Faramir had come around and had his sword ready. The wolf let out a snarling bark and leapt directly at him. He strode forward and pierced the animal's chest, burying his sword halfway through its body.

No squeal, no yelp, the wolf simply kicked about and dropped in front of a disbelieving ranger.

"Are... are you all right?" asked Turin.

"Yes, my friend, not a scratch." The rangers on post for the night had been around front and just now showed up at the back of the inn. They stood surveying the scene.

Turin stepped up to the body. "That was unbelievable."

Faramir stepped on the wolf to pull his sword out. "More than unbelievable. If I had not just seen it I would say it impossible. No wolf, no wild animal for that matter, attacks in such a way. And yet, there it is."

They all looked down at the lifeless body bleeding out on the ground.

Khorazir

"I wonder whence it came," Faramir said, kneeling down to have a closer look at the dead wolf. "It looks as if it has come a long way. The paws are bruised, and it seems famished and exhausted."

Túrin stepped to him to glance over his shoulder. "From the White Mountains, perhaps?" he mused. "There are wolves up there, and I've heard that they come down in hard winters."

"But it is spring," Faramir objected. "And 'tis a long way indeed to the Ered Nimrais. Nay, this is not a normal wolf hunting for food – although certainly it looks half starved. This was a trained killer." He turned to look up at his friend. "Without your help, I think I would have stood little chance against it. Thank you."

Túrin blushed slightly, and muttered something inaudible. Faramir rose again and turned to the rangers. "You did not notice anything unusual last night?"

They shook their heads. "Two riders passed by on the road, about three in the morning," Edrahil said, "and that was it."

"But what we noticed," Laren added, "shortly before you came, captain, was that the horses in the stable were somewhat uneasy. So we went to check. They must have smelled the wolf."

"Any guess whose idea it was to send it – if you're right and it was indeed sent?" Túrin asked.

Faramir shook his head while giving the wolf a thoughtful glance. "I am not sure. It almost looks to me as if somebody was trying to frighten us. I do not think that this wolf was sent to kill a particular person, but more as a reminder that somebody out there knows about our errand, and wants to hinder or at least delay it. I need to talk to Lindórië. She may know more. As for you," he addressed the rangers, "I would appreciate if the people here at the inn did not find out about what happened. So see to it that the body disappears. And then have some breakfast. The others should be up soon as well. I would like to leave before the sun is up."

Andanor awoke his head pounding and his mouth felt like a mouldy cheese. He bed felt soft yet scratchy. Feeling around he found that he was in the barn with the other rangers. With a great effort of will he rolled over and propped himself on his elbow. The place stank of horses and stale drink. The horses were uneasy and were making a racket in their stalls. "Bloody animals" he cursed to himself, disturbing his torpor. The soft smell of brewed herbs filtered through the haze to his nostrils, and his nausea receded. When was he going to remember that he wasn't nineteen any more? The painful morning light was blacked out as the figure of Anborn waved a mug under his nose. "Huh what?" Andanor mumbled as the trusted ranger placed the drink down and left wordlessly. The lieutenant wasn't the best company in the morning, and this day was no exception. Sitting up he found that someone had removed his upper clothing and helped him to bed. The company looked after it's own. He shivered involuntarily and reached for his shirt, his tense, muscled, shoulders cracking as he moved. Scowling at the morning the rugged man sipped his brew and tried to make sense of the past days exploits. Somebody was going to get a piece of his mind, over last night.

Finishing his drink he half dressed and stumbled out into the daylight. Several of the rangers were trussing up a large dead wolf and swiftly carrying it off out off sight. Some of the oher rangers were cleaning blood from the ground. Faramir was about to head into the inn while the noble Túrin stood nearby having picked up a curry comb. "Uuughhh" Andanor groaned, this was too much for a befuddled mind to cope with. Shaking his head in disbelief and attempting to clear it he followed the others into the inn to find out what had happened.

Khorazir

Upon entering the common room, where some rangers had already assembled for breakfast, Faramir noticed that Andanor had followed him (Túrin had returned to the stables to finish brushing his horse). He turned to his lieutenant and greeted him, and wisely refrained from adding a joking comment about his state. He did not feel like jesting anyway, after what had just happened.

While walking over to an unoccupied table, Faramir swiftly told Andanor what had befallen. "It seems someone is much more aware of our doings than we thought," he ended his account, "and this troubles me. We have to be more than careful on our way down to Pelargir, and especially in the city itself."

He looked up at the sound of footsteps approaching their table. "Good morning," Lindórië said, smiling at the two men, but then her eyes narrowed when she studied Faramir. "What happened?" she asked, taking a seat next to him. Faramir told her about the wolf, and noticed while talking how her face turned ever sterner and paler, despite her efforts to hide her feelings.

"You know then, what this is all about?" he asked her when he had finished his account. "Who may have sent the creature?"

Lindórië sat in silence for a long while, feeling Faramir's and Andanor's intend glances upon her. At length she sighed slightly and looked at them. "I think you are right in assuming that the wolf was sent, but I am not sure as to who might be responsible for doing so. There are, however, certain candidates, and my husband ranks highly amongst them. On the other hand ... Tarannon would have sent assassins if he wanted to get rid of us, not a strange wolf. And I do not think that he knows much about our errand. But there some close to him who might, and who, moreover, seem to have strange and dark powers."

"What do you mean?" Faramir asked alarmedly. "Wizardry?"

"I am not sure if that is the right term for it," she replied. "I tend to be careful with labelling something magical, since usually there is another, rational explanation for even the most unusual things. And yet ... there is one amongst my husband's advisors who seems to be gifted with uncanny powers. I do not know his name, unfortunately, nor can I tell you more about him, having met him only once, briefly. He has not been on Tarannon's staff for long, having joined him for the present campaign, apparently. I tried to find out more about him, but nobody could tell me anything. I do not even know if he is still with Tarannon, but I deem it likely."

Faramir nodded slightly, reviewing in thought what he had just heard. Suddenly he looked at her again. "Does Denethor know?" he asked.

"I have told him what I told you, and like you he seemed alarmed, which did not comfort me, as you can imagine. But even if he knew more about this man, he did not tell me. He only advised me to be careful."

Faramir shook his head in frustration. "This whole errand seems to me like a journey in the utter dark. How am I supposed to make decisions as captain, the fate of my men and the whole company depending on them, without knowing what to expect?"

Lindórië smiled gently, and placed her hand on his shoulder and squeezed it. "You do not have to decide alone, you know. You have your wise lieutenant here, and friends who can counsel you. You will see, things will become much clearer once we reach Pelargir."

Faramir took a deep breath, then nodded. "I hope so."

EdaintheRanger

Andanor didn't feel very wise, but he acknowledged Lindórië's comment with a nod and monosyllabic grunt. Another cup of hot brew was making inroads into his foggy head. Mulling over Faramir's words he rumbled out "If we don't know what to expect, we expect the worst." Andanor paused to gather his thoughts, "perhaps more helpfully we scour our brains for clues and evidence that we do have." which on reflection wasn't bad for this early in the morning. Other than that he concentrated on remaining very quiet and very still, his hands trembling. "Garn I wish I was back in the Guard house, Alisé had cures for everything."

Khorazir

"Aye, this sounds reasonable," Faramir agreed. "Trouble is that we seem to have only very few clues. We know whom to suspect, and I am sure that this strange, disquieting matter with Agannâlo somehow is related to our errand as well. But who do not know enough yet to devise any plans. We can only react to what the others do. And I do not like this situation."

He sighed, then looked up as footsteps approached: the landlady bringing breakfast. Faramir's expression brightened considerably. They ate their meal in silence, while the common room slowly filled. Túrin returned from the stables and joined them at the table, as did, after a while, Maradir and Gareth, Curufë, Alessya, Daewen and Visilya, and even Lossiel. When he had eaten, Faramir went to talk to Dorlas, and to give him some last instructions.

"Once the men from the City have taken care of the prisoners and our wounded, follow us to Pelargir," he told the ranger. "Most likely we will be housed at Lady Lindórië's mansion. Here is the address. Be careful on the road. It seems that certain people are aware of our errand, and would do anything to prevent its successful completion."

After that, he returned to the common room to instruct the rangers to get the horses ready. An hour later, when the first rays of the sun gleamed on the soft new leaves of the beeches in front of the inn, and the mists on the meadows began to rise and dissolve, the company was ready to set out.

They journeyed swiftly, which seemed to be to the liking of all, and by noon they reached the large new bridge over the river Erui. There developed some minor hazzle with the bridge-guards, who were loath to let the company pass without payment of the bridge-tolls, saying they did not care if the travellers were emissaries from the Steward: the tolls had to be payed by everybody, they claimed, except for Lebennin and Pelargirian nobility. The matter was solved when Lindórië revealed her identity, and after that the journey continued without disturbance.

Because the weather stayed dry, and even quite warm for the season, the company decided to spend the night outside, and camped in a small grove not far from the road. Nothing unusual befell, and Faramir began to wonder even more about the strange encounter with the wolf. But on the other hand he was glad that they were granted a respite from the troubles the errand had been laden with so far.

The next day they again started very early, and riding as swiftly as the horses could endure, they managed to reach Pelargir two hours after nightfall. Lindórië led the way through the still crowded and busy streets in the centre of the large town, towards a large but rather plain house hidden in one of the narrower alleys. "We could stay at my husband's mansion," she said, "but I doubt that this would be a good idea. Here we are more inconspicuous, and moreover right in the centre of Pelargir, close to the markets and the havens and shipyards. This should enable us to gather information rather easily, without being immediately spotted by Lord Falastur's informants."

The rangers were given rooms in the servant's track (which was now mostly empty, as the house was now managed by a few people only), while the rest of the company was housed in the guest-rooms. When all had settled in, and a group of rangers was already on its way into town (with their Captain's warning to be careful, especially about drink), Faramir and some of the others joined Lindórië for dinner, and to discuss the plans for the next days.

Galhadrin

Dol Amroth

The morning after Grendelenoth's departure, Prince Imrahil awoke with a splitting headache. He rolled and lurched out of bed with a groan that was not loud enough to bring his valet but rang sharply in his own ears. He thought back to the evening's encounter but could remember no details. How could half a glass of wine affect him so?

The weak light from the breaking dawn did not provide much illumination in the room. A chill drifted over him and he continued to chase vague memories. Hard to concentrate. The only thing that wouldn't leave him, besides the pain behind his eyes, was the feeling that he should be concerned. Not knowing more than that, Imrahil trusted his instincts and summoned his valet. The young servant appeared and followed the instructions given to him; the Commander of the Palace Guard was to join the Prince for breakfast.

Later that morning, after an herbal remedy that removed some of his pain, Imrahil and Commander Malloreon dined at an alabaster table on a balcony overlooking the sea. The Prince ate a thin meal, clearly thinking over every word he was to say. "Commander," he started finally. "The ambassador from Lebennin yesterday, did he seem strange to you?"

Malloreon thought it a leading question but was comfortable enough in his position to answer honestly. "They all seem strange to me, milord. This one was no different."

The Prince smiled and sat back. "You always give good counsel, my friend. Refreshing. I have a feeling that I can't deny, I'm afraid Lebennin may be up to something. Unfortunately it is nothing more than a feeling."

Malloreon pushed some fried apples around on his plate. "This feeling is strong enough to require action?"

Imrahil became more serious. "Yes, I believe so."

"Yet you bring the issue to me instead of your political advisors?"

"You may continue to delude yourself all you like, Malloreon," said the Prince, bringing his hands together and resting his fingertips on his chin. "But you are as much a political advisor as any of the others."

The Commander glanced up at the sun, rising behind the clouds. "That form of politics rarely sees the light of day. You feel you need special services, milord?"

"Yes, but not with the usual characters. I cannot form a reason within myself but I feel we must use someone more

innocent. Someone who will not act and react in an expected manner. Someone whose loyalty cannot be bought by a rounder purse.”

“A babe in the woods?”

“No,” said Imrahil, standing slowly. “A mongoose among vipers.”

Galhadrim

Southern Belfalas

Later that day, Lucas rode away from Dol Amroth with a troubled yet resolute mind. A warm and gentle afternoon surrounded him with scents of healthy farms and fields. The shadow of his horse, laden for travel, stretched out ahead of him and he followed it eastward towards Lebennin. He thought back over the strange and hurried day. It had started like any other, leaving his family in the morning and reporting to the palace as a Sergeant of the Guard, but had taken a turn when Commander Malloreon had called for him.

“Lucas,” he had said, after getting through some regular business. “I have a special task for you. It’s difficult, dangerous, and will take you away for some time, but I’ve thought long about it and I think you’re perfect. This mission comes directly from Prince Imrahil and has the highest importance.”

An offer like this could not be refused and he had agreed immediately. What followed was a simple briefing and time for questions. Impressed with the trust being placed in him he never questioned the need for the mission although his mind clouded at its explanation. The hard part had come when saying goodbye to his wife and young son. That’s when the mission became hard to explain; go to Lebennin, ask around, be observant.

She suspected there were details he could not give and she was partially right. He could not tell her he had become a spy.

Outfitted with his normal weapons and a few other odd trinkets of the craft, Lucas picked up the pace to get to an inn on the far side of the valley by nightfall. Now that he was on the road and had time to reflect on it all, he was starting to wonder what he would do. How had Malloreon put it? A mongoose among vipers? He snorted to himself. More like a babe in the woods.

Khorazir

They dined in silence, everybody rather tired from the journey, but at length Lindórië looked at Faramir. “Tomorrow morning we have to go and visit Falastur, and deliver the Steward’s message,” she said, and her wry smile indicated how much she was looking forward to this task.

Faramir nodded gloomily. He cordially disliked the Lord of Pelargir, and knew that this was mutual. He smiled grimly. “Most likely his informants will have told him that we are here, and he will be very curious indeed to find out more about the reason for our coming.”

“And especially he will have been startled by the fact that you were sent to accompany me,” Lindórië added.

Faramir gave her a swift glance. “Do you think he knows, or at least guesses something?”

She shrugged. “I deem the latter more likely. Falastur is very good at picking up and combining information. Certainly he will have heard a rumour or two, and added his own dark suspicions. We should consider well how we present ourselves there tomorrow. If we manage to occupy his mind with the possibility that the Lady of Lebennin has an affair with the Steward’s son, this might distract it from raising questions about the true reasons for our coming here. And

remember, whatever he learns, or thinks he has learned, about what there seem to be between us, he is very likely to send a messenger to Tarannon this very day.”

“And what will your husband do then?” Faramir asked.

“I am not sure,” she admitted. “During the last years I was under the impression that I or our marriage do not mean much to him. But on the other hand ... he is very possessive, and the mere fact that I should entertain such an affair behind his back is very likely to stir his wrath – which is what the Steward aims at, apparently. And that my ...,” she searched for the right expression, and finally settled upon the most obvious one, “... lover should be one of Denethor’s sons will add to this.”

“Yes, this is indeed scandalous,” Túrin, who so far had listened to the conversation in silence, fell in with a grin. “But what are you going to do tomorrow? Walk into Falastur’s palace hand in hand?”

“I doubt we will have to be that obvious to fire his imagination,” Faramir said. Then he looked at the others gathered about the table. “What are your plans for tomorrow?”

asaris

Curufë shrugged. “I’m not really sure. I did want to have a look around the city – I’ve never been here before.”

Canamarth

Maradir had done a bit of thinking on the way to Pelargir. It was time he shared the few bits of information he had with Faramir. That became clear to him when the Steward’s son had been attacked by that wolf. Maradir was sure if Denethor knew what had happened he would tell Faramir himself. Unfortunately news did not travel as fast as they needed sometimes. Maradir only had to find a way not to be found disobeying his orders.

The opportunity finally arose when they reached Pelargir. He went out with the rangers, pretending he wanted to go for a drink, then soon slunk away and went to visit Eddenar and Annavar’s uncle. He had worked with the twins a couple of times and they had given him uncle Rûmar’s address in Pelargir if ever he needed any help or was in some sort of serious trouble.

Rûmar turned out to be a grizzled man, well over 80 and Maradir wondered if he really was the twin’s uncle. On hearing Maradir’s name he ushered him in, casting a nervous look into the streets. “You sure you haven’t been followed?”

“Quite sure,” Maradir said. “But even if I have been and people inquire about my visit to you, you can just tell them I came here to give you a message from your nephews, right?”

“Oh, right.” The old man sat back down to the late dinner he had been indulging in and invited Maradir to join. “So, what news from Eddenar and Annavar then?”

“None, I’m afraid. I haven’t seen them for a few months.”

Rûmar looked up, eyes wide. “So, you’re telling me you’re here on,” here his voice dropped to an almost inaudible whisper, “secret business, like?”

Maradir tried to keep the smile that wanted to spread on his face under control. He more or less succeeded and bent forward to whisper back: “Indeed. I need you to do me a favour. You can write, right?”

"I'd like to join you, Curufë. If you don't mind, that is," Maradir said. "I know my way around a bit, so if you're in need of a guide..."

One of the servants came in. "Sorry to interrupt you but there's a message for Lord Faramir." He handed a folded piece of parchment over to the Steward's son. The seal was plain, no devices whatsoever could be traced on it. Faramir opened it gingerly to find the following message in a spidery handwriting:

Dear High Lord Faramir,

I have recently pertained some information which was not intended for my eyes to see. But as a true citizen of Gondor I thought it my duty to report this to someone in a high place as I do not understand any of this. I heard the Steward's son was in town so I decided to send it to him immediately instead of using a detour over Lord Falastur, may the Valar bless him. Here is what I saw written on a piece of paper:

*I realise it might be too late already
but in case you have not fulfilled your
errand yet I order you to capture the S's
captain. He is the Shadow of Death, of whom
you should have heard. We have only recently
found out that his roots go back to High Court.*

*His new councillor (the one L mentioned)
seems to be in this as well. He has been
seen roaming the southern fiefs lately.
There is almost nothing to be found out
about him. A vague name comes up - Grendol -
but nobody seems to be able to describe him,
leave alone tell us anything of his past.
Keep your eyes open for him.*

*The letter was not signed, oh High Lord, and I do not know for who it was supposed to be. I do not want to get into any trouble
so I shall stay your anonymous friend,
XXX*

Galhadrin

In a lonely place that the sun seldom touched, Scratch set about his work for the day. The Dockmaster was kind enough to explain it well and point out the boxes and crates that needed to be painted red, then leaving him to finish by day's end. Scratch was very careful to only paint the boxes in an up and down motion, always with the side to be painted facing the water. He worked at what the other dockworkers called a 'steady pace' because they grew angry when he went too fast and finished his painting. Despite his asking, they always told him there was nothing else he could do.

He had just placed his sixth crate for the day on the finished side of the alleyway where the wind would dry it, blowing the fumes back at him. A dirty seagull landed on the next crate he was to paint. It looked hassled and angry. It stamped about on the wood, tossed its head back and forth, then stopped and slowly turned to face him.

Their eyes locked and Scratch felt as if weights pressed down on his shoulders. "No... Please not yet. You can't need me so soon."

The bird stood like a graven stone idol.

Scratch could not keep eye contact. He began to fidget and wring his hands. "I'm just supposed to paint today. Just paint. Don't make me do those things. Those bad things."

The seagull leaned forward and let out a shrill caw. The sound made Scratch cringe and look around to see if anyone saw him. An image slowly formed in his mind, one that he remembered from recently. "Yes I saw her on the streets today. With some others. I didn't like the others." He looked down at the paint on his hands. "Haven't I done enough already? Look at my hands. Why do you want more?"

The bird leaped into the air and flew into the wind.

Scratch stood there for many minutes before returning to work. The weights on his shoulders never left.

Khorazir

Faramir had been surprised when the servant had brought the message, and even more by its contents. At first he had been amused about it – nobody had ever referred to him as "High Lord" –, but soon he had realised that the message did contain information that might be important for their errand. And he began to wonder. For whoever had sent it seemed to know a great deal about it, and about recent events. He read the letter a second time, sat for a while in thoughtful silence, then, feeling the glances of the others upon him, he read the message aloud. More silence ensued.

"At first glance it seems like a joke," Lindórië said at length. "But then there are many points only somebody who has been with us recently could know. Well, the matter with the S's, the Southrons has been settled. But what to make of the rest. I am sure T refers to Tarannon. And L, well, this could be me. I did mention something about my husbands new advisor back at the inn. And this name ... I dimly recall having heard it before, or a name not very different."

"So you think that this might be the man to look out for?" Faramir asked.

"Definitely," she said, still lost in thought.

"Whoa, wait a moment," Túrin fell in. "What makes you so certain that this message is genuine. It's exceedingly strange in my eyes. We've only just arrived, and yet somebody knows you're here, Faramir. And what's all this "high lord" talk? And why doesn't the person give a proper name? If you ask me, I'd be more careful about this bit of information."

"We are careful," Faramir said. "But fact is that this might be exactly what we need. A point where to start looking."

"Aye," Lindórië added. "Moreover the Steward hinted that there might be some of his spies down here who could provide us with information, while remaining hidden themselves. This is how things work in this trade."

Faramir nodded, then sighed. "Well, I do not think that there is much we could possibly do tonight. Tomorrow's call at Falastur's may yield more information. Perhaps he even knows something about this Grendol or whatever his name is."

"Certainly he will know more about the goings on in Lebennin," Lindórië said.

"Yes, but will he relate them to you?" Túrin asked.

"He may," she answered. "We shall see. Does anybody of you would like to accompany us?"

asaris

"I would go," Curufë said. "The skills I have learned from hunting have often proven useful in trapping prey other than boar. And if something, Elbereth forbid, should go awry, I might well notice it before others." Inside, he wondered about this. He had never been the most comfortable person in courtly settings, with the subtlety that they called

for, being by nature a forthright and honest person. But his long years at Nargothrond trained him well for operations of subtlety, and a sense for the exact nature of relations between people; it was this skill that had enabled him to lead the Fëanorians at Nargothrond after Orodreth had expelled Celegorn and Curufin. No one else of his house had both the trust of their kin and of Orodreth. Not to mention the political machinations at Eregion, which made Nargothrond look positively tranquil... Yes, he could perform such tasks, even if he would rather be hunting wolves.

Khorazir

Faramir smiled at Curufë. "Actually I had rather hoped you would come," he admitted. "I think both Lindórië and I will be rather busy acting our parts, and will not have much opportunity for a look around. Have you met Falastur before?"

Canamarth

"I shall join you as well, if you don't mind, that is," Maradir added. "I've seen Falastur before and I think you might not be averse to employing yet another bodyguard after the incident with the wolf, Faramir. Or am I mistaken?"

Khorazir

"Well, I hope there will be no need for a bodyguard at Falastur's place," Faramir said with a smile, "but I would be glad to have you around. There may be wolves of another kind lurking there."

Lindórië nodded darkly. "He may not show it when in front of the Steward, but Falastur hates Denethor, and his sons as well. And the letter we are to deliver will be all but to his liking, too. I do not expect a kind reception tomorrow."

"But we shall at least give him something to think and then gossip about," Faramir said with a grim smile. "And to be honest, I am actually looking forward to that."

EdaintheRanger

Meanwhile in one of the seedy dark bars in Pelagir...

After the long trek to the fine white spires of Gondor's premiere seaport, Andanor sensed that the ranger's needed to let off steam, and he knew that he had to get to the bottom of this pent up discontent in the company. The rangers were missing the social atmosphere of the "Guard House" so Andanor felt obliged to replace that with a similar outing in Pelagir. Plus what better way to solve problems than over a few drinks in a tavern. After organising the lodgings back at the Inn, Andanor and Gareth followed the several Rangers who had left to "scout" out the local taverns. When the company had returned to Minas Tirith, Andanor had backdated their pay arrears, so as a happy consequence the Rangers were still, to use the familiar parlance "flush with chink-chink".

Andanor following the law that sediment finds its own particular layer, found that the Rangers had not disappointed him. The City's finest were lounging outside on of the dockside taverns, that smelt strongly of salted fish, stale beer and rum. Padhir, was loudly bemoaning the current state of affairs and the fact that it was left to the elite company, to run page boy errands. On seeing Andanor and his new "shadow" he shut up and looked down into ale in the pretence of deference.

"Good evening lads," Andanor said cheerily "Your round is it Padhir?"

A rumble issued from the other side of the table “No sir, I believe it is yours.”

The gathered rangers glanced at each other, then at Padhir, then at Andanor, expectantly.

Pretending that he hadn't heard the impertinence in the mere rangers tone Andanor replied “My round it is then.” Tossing a money pouch to the youth Andanor continued, “Gareth would you please order a round of Pelagir's finest for the lads?” he asked.

Galhadrim

Belfalas

On his first night as a spy, in his first common room as a spy, Lucas felt like a failure as a spy. He had expected to get some sleep after a weary day on the saddle but realized that he would have to stay awake and strike up conversations with the various strangers there in order to gather the information he would need. How to do that and remain inconspicuous eluded him. Spywork was easier said than done.

After some frustrating and awkward attempts that left him feeling foolish, he retired to a small room and thought over what he'd learned. The local woodsmen were stockpiling lumber so they could make a good show of bounty upon the coming harsh season. Last night a carriage had passed by the inn with lathered horses and grumpy looking riders. The river wasn't as high this year as last because of the lack of rain.

Useless information, all of it. Where was the danger he was supposed to be on the lookout for? He settled into the room and wondered if he'd even recognize it if it passed right by him.

Khorazir

Túrin grinned at Faramir's last words. “I would really like to witness your annoying Lord Falastur, but I don't think it wise to turn up there with a small army. Moreover I'd really like to have a look around the city. I haven't been here for ages.” He glanced to Visilya, and was about to ask her if she wanted to accompany him, but then bit his tongue. She had tried to avoid him during the last days, and although this had grieved him, he had also appreciated it. He still did not know what to talk with her. He cast down his eyes, and turned away.

“Perhaps Daewen would like to accompany you tomorrow,” Lindórië suggested, glancing at the girl who had not spoken much all evening. “The harbour and the shipyards are quite impressive.”

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen looked up from her meal when she heard her name mentioned. “What about me?” She had not been paying much attention to the conversation going around the table, instead herding the vegetables on her plate from one side to the other in an effort to keep her mind from shutting down completely. It had been a long, long day!

They had been on the move from what seemed like the crack of dawn, and now it was long past nightfall. While her steed hadn't given her any trouble, she was nevertheless saddlesore and quite weary of riding for a while. Her shoulder hadn't appreciated all the jolting, but all things considered, it was feeling better. At least the weather had cooperated with them. Sunny, warm, lots better than that horrible thunderstorm a few days ago. Yet, she had still wondered how long it would be before they reached their destination. The idea of so much distance between places baffled her, having only known life inside the great White City. Of course she had been told that it would take several days to get to Lebennin, but the realization did not sink in until later.

For the present, she was exhausted, sore, and thoroughly not impressed with what little she had seen of the city so far. It was all so different, quaint, and... small-scale compared to what she was used to. But she was stuck here now, come what may.

Khorazir

Lindórië noticed the Daewen's weariness and gave her a slightly pitiful but also encouraging glance. "We were talking about tomorrow," she explained. "Most of us are going to be rather busy with dreadfully boring matters as we have to pay a visit to the Lord of this fief. You are welcome to accompany us, but I doubt you would enjoy your time at Lord Falastur's palace. And since Túrin said he would like to explore the town and the harbour instead of going with us, I was wondering if you would like to join him. But of course you can also stay here, if you are too tired from the journey."

Lady_of_Rohan

The girl thought the matter over a few brief moments. If Lindórië said the first option wouldn't be fun, it really must not be fun. Staying here sounded boring and dull as well. That only left the option of going with Túrin around the city and harbor. "I guess I'll go with Túrin," she said after a while.

Khorazir

"Excellent," Túrin said with a smile. Then he looked at the others gathered about the table. "What are the plans for this evening, by the way? I'm sure we're all rather weary, but to be honest I don't really feel like going to bed yet."

"Well, the rangers went off to some tavern a while ago," Faramir said. "It should not prove difficult to find them, even in a busy city like Pelargir. Their presence is most likely being talked about by half the town already."

"Right, how about it, then?" Túrin asked with a grin. "Anybody else for a trip into town, to see if the lads are behaving decently?"

"I am sure they would not appreciate their captain showing up suddenly," Faramir replied with a slight smile. "But a stroll through the city would be entertaining, and moreover helpful. The more information about what is going on here we can pick up, the better."

"Yes, keep your eyes and ears open," Lindórië said. "And be careful out there, all of you."

"You are not coming?" Faramir asked.

"No," she answered. "There are several matters I have to see to this evening which cannot be postponed. So please excuse me now. Feel free to come and go as it pleases you. The servants have been informed, and there will always be somebody to open the doors." She rose. "I shall see you later then, or tomorrow. Have a good time. And again, be careful."

asaris

Curufë rose from his chair and slung his spear across his back. "Good night, Lindorië. I think I shall not go to bed

quite yet, and enjoy Faramir's company. By all means, let us see this city."

Canamarth

Maradir grabbed his cloak and swordbelt and looked expectantly at Faramir. "What are you waiting for? If you don't a hood no one will even recognise you. And we don't have to visit the same tavern as your rangers did. I know a few excellent taverns near the harbour. Some renowned for their good food, some for the rough company they entertain - and all for the amount of gossip you can catch up with there."

Khorazir

"Very well," Faramir said, "let me just go and get my sword - and a hood, of course," he added with a grin at Maradir. "You are coming as well, Túrin?"

"Sure," Túrin answered. "What about you, Daewen?" he asked. "And you, Visilya?" he added more softly after a very brief pause.

EdaintheRanger

Having sent the earnest Gareth off to get his first round of drinks, Andanor narrowed his eyes and rested them on Padhir. He was a large man, broad rather than tall, with brawny forearms, all the better to heave a longbow, amongst the rolling sailors he did not look out of place. Padhir was a veteran of the rangers, and in the main he was a quiet, competent man. On this journey abroad, Andanor had noticed a change in the man: he was sullen, and slow to respond to orders, muttering complaints and criticisms, always just out of earshot. This couldn't go on, as it could be bad for morale. Andanor wanted to get to the bottom of this.

"What's the matter with you Padhir? You're a good soldier, men rely on you, what's with the backchat? You know that it's beneath you."

Padhir looked Andanor directly in the eye, as if he was challenging him, before he spoke again, slowly as if he was considering every word he said.

"Well it's like this sir. Me and the lads have been having a little talk, and lately we don't much like the company you keep."

This riled Andanor, immediately he snapped back, "And what gives you the right to choose my company, Ranger. Know your place!" he jabbed his finger to emphasise this.

The other rangers edged away from the table as Padhir instead of apologising, rose to his feet slowly and with intent.

EdaintheRanger

The ranger voice rumbled on, "...And it's not just that, your only here cause your father had a word in the right ears. You can't even pull a proper bow! What kind of example to the lads is that? You're a wannabe bard. Not a proper officer at all, so you are!"

The other rangers looked shocked at this, that was an insult indeed, and waited to see what would happen. Andanor thought fast, countering with

“Now come on, you’ve clearly had too much to drink, perhaps you should go back to the inn and sleep it off.”

“I’m not taking orders from you! SIR!” the rebellious ranger replied and made to leave.

Andanor placed a hand on the Padhir’s shoulder to stop him.

“Hey cut out the sir, OOF” Andanor automatically replied before a fast blow to his guts tore the wind from his lungs.

“Just don’t touch me!” cried Padhir, his face suddenly filled with a sharp determination, moved in to hit this upstart exile.

Andanor’s eyes watered with the sudden pain, and by instinct ducked and weaved to the right to dodge the following blows. Parrying to buy time he bounced off several tables and past some of the other cliental. Shouts of protest from the disturbed sailors passed unheard. Padhir was surprised. He didn’t think that the Lieutenant could move so quickly, and so, slow to recover from a powerful haymaker he left himself open to a sharp jab on the jaw. He fell back stunned for a few vital seconds. The rangers who were egging Padhir on now hushed, as Andanor attempted to seize the initiative.

Canamarth

Maradir and Curufë stepped out and were milling around on the street outside the mansion, waiting for Faramir and whoever else would be following them.

“Pelargir’s not as impressive as Minas Tirith, of course,” Maradir said to the Noldo who was looking around curiously at the tall buildings lining the street, “but it has a few nice neighbourhoods. This is one of them. Even the docks can be nice, especially at night when lamps have been lit on the ships in the harbour. In the morning you’d see the refuse piling up in the seedier parts.”

He looked at the Noldo who seemed to smile a little. “Oh, right,” Maradir said. “You probably see it even at night - with your keen eyes and all.”

Khorazir

Having fetched his sword and a slender dagger, as well as a cloak and hood, and having exchanged the green tunic that was part of his ranger-garments for a more inconspicuous one, Faramir joined Maradir and Curufë outside the house. Túrin came shortly afterwards, looking rather gloomy.

“Visilya is not joining us, then?” Faramir asked.

Túrin shrugged dejectedly. “She simply ignored me.” He sighed. “Ah, well, it’s not that I really expected her to come.” He looked at the others, and forced his expression into a more cheerful one. “Let’s be off. I haven’t been here for ages. Since you seem to know the place best, Maradir, you should lead the way to Pelargir’s attractions.”

Faramir smiled slightly. “Why am I suddenly reminded of a certain night four years ago?”

+++

In the city’s splendid palace that was perched on the only slight rise of land in the flat country about the Ethir Anduin, and was overlooking the harbours, shipyards and the town itself, Falastur, Lord of Pelargir, and one of the most powerful and influential nobles of Gondor, had just finished dining with his two sons. His wife and daughter were not in the city at the moment, visiting her family in Lebennin. Lady Arúthiel was his second wife, whom he had married after his first had died giving birth to his second son, Vinyaran, who was now a promising youth of nineteen years. His brother Caranthir was four years his senior, and was already highly trained in politics. His father had seen to

that, realising his son's ambition and eagerness to get involved in the matters of the fief, in which Falastur had recognised a part of himself. Vinyaran was different, although he matched his brother in ambition, and moreover, despite his rather young years, displayed a ruthlessness when trying to achieve his goals, and a determination and resourcefulness that filled his father with pride, and disquieted him at the same time. Vinyaran lacked his brother's patience, was rash and bold, and not very good at keeping things to himself. Caranthir was much better at secrecy, but then again he tended to be too much so, and he could be deceitful, and even dishonest.

Thoughts like these passed through Falastur's mind as he studied the two boys. Caranthir was reading *I Ernil* by Malvegil (most likely for the fifth time, Falastur thought with a faint smile), while Vinyaran was sitting at the window glancing out towards the Ethir Anduin, and the sea beyond, although due to the darkness it was unlikely that he could see much. He looked rather bored. It was not often that they dined together like this, for the Lord's duty were plenty, and he saw to it that his sons were kept busy also, as they had much to learn still, and especially in Vinyaran's case Falastur feared that idleness might lead him to indulge in stupid ideas, and unnecessary mischief.

Falastur was a man in his mid-fifties. He was tall and lean, with short dark hair that was already turning ice-grey, although his face did not show many signs of age yet, and since his family prided itself in being one of the few almost pureblooded Númenorean that still remained in Gondor, Falastur did not fear that old age would touch him anytime soon. He had cold, piercing grey eyes that could look very intimidating, and sharply cut features that, if softened by a smile, would have looked quite handsome. But Falastur smiled seldom, and when he did, it usually was in an ironic, disquieting way. He had a reputation of being a skilled speaker in council, and an open opposer of the Steward's policies. Falastur had ever declared his opinions openly (those that were fit for it, at least), and did not care much of his reputation, or the Steward's opinion of him. He greatly disliked Denethor, for political as well as personal reasons, and made no secret of it.

Thus when there was a knock on the door, making Caranthir look up from his book, and Vinyaran stir at the window to look at the servant who entered to deliver a message to Falastur, upon reading it his eyes narrowed, and his expression became sterner as usual.

"Bad tidings?" Caranthir asked.

His father did not answer for a while. "Strange tidings," he said at length, thoughtfully, his eyes flicking over the message again. "It seems that this evening Lady Lindórië of Lebennin arrived in the city, journeying from Minas Tirith, with a most unusual retinue."

"What was she doing up there?" Vinyaran asked. "One should think that she should be at home while her husband is out hunting corsairs."

"Lady Lindórië has never cared much about what her husband did," Falastur said. "'tis common knowledge that they do not get along well."

"But she's friendly with the Steward, I heard," Caranthir put in, closing the book, as the current conversation promised to be more interesting.

"Yes, indeed," Falastur agreed, with a cold glint in his eyes. "And guess who has accompanied her on her journey."

"Denethor?" Vinyaran asked astonishedly.

His father shook his head. "Nay, of course not the Steward himself," he returned with a faint sneer. "I wonder when it was the last time he has set foot beyond the Great Gate. Nay, Lord Denethor sent his son instead."

"But Boromir left Pelargir only a short while ago," Vinyaran objected. "He couldn't have made it to Minas Tirith and back in so short a time."

"I am not talking of Boromir, but of his brother," Falastur said with a faint trace of impatience.

"That's really strange," Caranthir now said. "Why send him? He's usually away beyond Anduin, in Ithilien. I'm sure

Lady Lindórië could have gotten another captain for her escort.” He shrugged, and suddenly he grinned slightly as a thought struck him. “But for someone who has the Steward’s ear like her ... perhaps she asked Denethor for this particular captain, and he granted her the wish for friendship’s sake.”

Vinyaran looked at his brother confusedly. “Why should she want him? Despite being the Steward’s son, there’s nothing special about him, is there?”

“Well, Lady Lindórië might not share your opinion,” Caranthir said mysteriously.

Vinyaran glanced at him irritably.

Caranthir’s grin broadened. “Well, there are certain rumours ...”

Vinyaran was all interest now. “What rumours?” he asked curiously. “Don’t tell me that the Lady of Lebennin has an affair with the Steward’s son. That would be scandalous indeed. Think of it. Not only is she married, but she must be almost twice as old as he. She could well be his mother.” He looked at his father. “Have you heard anything of this? Is it true?”

Falastur shrugged. “There are indeed rumours,” he said. “But I do not know how much truth there is behind them. If they really had an affair, they would try to keep it secret – and wisely so, for if Tarannon found out he would most likely try to kill both. Surely they would not travel together through the country like this, to encourage even more rumours. Unless ...,” he fell silent, glancing down at the message again.

“Unless what?” Vinyaran asked, but his father only shook his head. Then suddenly he folded the message and rose. “Excuse me,” he said, and swiftly left the room.

The two brother’s exchanged questioning glances. “Apparently there is more to this matter than meets the eye,” Caranthir said. “Father looked really agitated.”

Vinyaran nodded thoughtfully. Then he gazed at his brother, and there was an excited light in his eyes. “Hey, what do you think, perhaps we should go and gather some information ourselves. Let’s sneak out and get down into the City. I’m sure we can pick up more rumours down there.”

Caranthir looked skeptical. “You know what happened the last time you had an idea like this,” he reminded his brother.

“Well, yeah, but this time we’re going to be more careful. We can disguise as sailors or similar, and nobody will recognise us. Come on. This could be important, you know.”

Caranthir hesitated for a moment longer, then sighed, and nodded. “Let’s find some old clothes, then.”

asaris

“Yes, indeed I can see quite well. It’s not Dol Amroth or Minas Tirith, but it has its own quaint charm.”

“The call of the sea?” Maradir asked, and Curufë shook his head in response. “No, I have never cared for the sea – I am too much of Oromë’s party for that. But I enjoy seeing new places. Did I ever tell you about my trip east, to Rhun?”

Canamarth

“No, you didn’t,” Maradir replied. “But I’d be glad to hear it. One never knows where one is swept away to and listen-

ing to someone's first-hand experience is surely a rewarding way to learn about a far-off region. Especially if it's told by a keen-eyed elf."

They smiled and Curufë was about to commence his tale when they were interrupted by Faramir and Túrin stepping out of the mansion. Faramir smiled slightly. "Why am I suddenly reminded of a certain night four years ago?"

Maradir shook his head. "I don't have a clue. But this time we have the company of someone with a little more sense." He pointed at the Noldo. "I don't think we'll manage to incinerate a tavern tonight." He noticed Curufë's questioning look. "A tale you'll get in exchange for yours."

They set off towards the docks.

Khorazir

Faramir grinned at Maradir's remark about incinerating a tavern, and even Túrin smiled slightly, before his expression turned somewhat grave again. Being reminded of the events in the "Troll's Nose" meant being reminded of his first encounter with Visilya, something he did not fancy at the moment. He felt Faramir nudge him slightly, and noticed that the others had started to walk, and Curufë had begun his tale.

"I know 'tis difficult, but perhaps you should try not to worry about Visilya for a while," Faramir said softly. "Or Lossiel. You know, 'tis very unusual and even disquieting to see you in this state."

Túrin sighed. "I am shocked myself," he admitted. "But ... I don't know. This time it's really serious, I guess. With Visilya, I mean." He looked at Faramir, and his friend was struck by the look in his eyes. "I don't want to lose her, Faramir," Túrin said very gravely.

"Then give her more time," Faramir replied, before clapping Túrin's shoulder. "Come on, we should better hurry to keep up. I would like to hear Curufë's tale."

+++

Swiftly leaving the chamber where he had dined, Falastur made his way to his study. He was so deep in thought that he almost walked straight into a servant who was on his way to clear the table in the other room. Falastur did not heed him. The arrival of the Lady of Lebennin in so strange a company was no mere coincidence, he knew. Especially not after recent events: the still unsolved problems with the corsairs along the coast, the rumours that Agannâlo was loose in the country, and most recently the disquieting visit of Lord Tarannon's counselor. For some reason Falastur seemed unable to recall exactly what the man had wanted, and this fact worried him, as he prided himself in having a very good memory. He recalled, however, how the next morning, when the dark messenger had hurried off already and left Pelargir, he had woken with a terrible headache – something he usually was not prone to. But what exactly he and the emissary had spoken about he could not recall, however hard he tried.

Having reached his study, he walked over to the window, and gazed out. There was something strange going on in Gondor. What had Tarannon and his counselor in mind? And what had the Steward planned? To Falastur it was plain that the coming of Lindórië in the company of his son was Denethor's doing. And Denethor never did anything without purpose.

Falastur went over to his desk, and retrieved from one of the more secret compartments a stack of letters. They showed two different kinds of handwriting, and two different seals. He filed through them, and picked one that was dated to Neníme of this year. It was the most recent. He opened it and looked at the neat, quite bold and decorative handwriting. The letter was mostly a birthday greeting. No names were given, neither of addressee nor sender, as were in none of the letters. But Falastur thought he knew who had sent the message, and to whom. It had been very difficult to obtain them, yet Falastur had good spies, and they had provided him with this most precious correspondence of what seemed to be secret lovers. Not that the letters yielded much obvious information to support this assumption. But when one read carefully, between the lines, the affection of the two people was obvious. And it was something they had tried to

keep secret.

Falastur smiled grimly. "What have you planned, Denethor?" he asked softly. "Why send him to accompany Lindórië? To trouble Tarannon? Do you want to get at him?" He put the letters away and called for a servant. "Go and find Aldaron," he said, "and tell him to come here." He had to find out more about this, and Aldaron, the teacher of Falastur's sons, although himself totally respectable and inconspicuous, had just the right connections.

asaris

"Well, it was a number of years ago, towards the beginning of the Third Age. I had been at Imladris for quite some time, and was getting a bit restless, so I decided to head east. Once in Rhun, I slowly became aware that something was happening – there was a group of travelers, strangely dressed, that I kept seeing..." Curufë proceeded to weave together a story of love, hatred, and revenge, and of a rightful king reclaiming his throne.

Canamarth

Faramir, Túrin, and Maradir listened in rapt silence. They walked through the streets of the dark city, hardly heeding their surroundings as glimpses of a far off land were brought to life by Curufë's tale.

They reached the docks as the tale was nearing its end and Maradir made them stop. "Let's hear the rest of the story before we venture into one of the loud and crowded taverns."

Light and noise was spilling out of three or four of those that were situated right at the waterfront. A few men and even fewer women were milling about outside of them. They all looked quite packed.

EdaintheRanger

Just a few streets away Andanor was breathing raggedly in the twilight and silhouetted against the lights winking from the tavern. With a quick left and a right he dealt retribution to the rotund ranger's head. The red mist was quickly glazing Padhir's vision as he started to lose control. The other rangers had formed a half-circle around the combatants, but they were soon disturbed, by the tavern's usual occupants. Soldiers and Sailors are by nature, volatile fellows and fuelled by drink, reason was soon thrown through a window. The brawl was fast becoming a free for all as the other rangers looked out for themselves and their scrapping comrades, and the sailors needed no excuse to wade in.

Padhir started to go Bersark. Grabbing the lithe lieutenant around the middle he held him in a vice like grip, even a sly jab to the softer regions, failed to loosen it. His head swimming Andanor began to see stars; wrenching his weight forwards he lurched, desperately trying to loosen the crushing grip, before back-peddalling into the corner post of the tavern. The tavern shook to its very foundations; the ensuing dust fouled the drinks of what few patrons remained in the tavern, making them quite irate. Pad-hir gasped with pain, releasing Andanor, who was gambolled across the gritty street.

He cracked his head into one of the few remaining tables that hadn't been split into makeshift weapons. The other rangers were sparring with mixed success against an unequal number of nautical types, and assorted gutter-swine, several whom were armed with broken furniture. Oaths and curses were batted back and forth that would make an Elf blush, before the opposing sides slammed and crashed against each other.

Groaning Andanor rubbed his head and began to rise. By now two sailors had squared off against Padhir and outnumbered he pummelled at them, venting his pent-up anger. This railed against Andanor's innate sense of fairness and he decked one of the sailors, just as Padhir threw the other sailor through the already broken window into the tavern. Blood ran freely down his chin from a split lip and eyebrow, he eyed the similarly injured lieutenant.

“Why in the name of the Valar did you do that?” he asked Andanor, confounded.

“Well we’re rangers aren’t we?” the laconic lieutenant replied.

Stunned, Padhir answered, “Aye, we are that!” before he threw a mighty punch past the speaking officer, landing a hard blow on the sneaking sailor who was about to drive his fist into the officer’s ribs. Sweeping into a crouch Andanor spun round alarmed. Then back-to-back the two former assailants started to turn the tide on the enraged mob.

Khorazir

Just when Curufë was about to finish his tale, Túrin suddenly tensed and began to listen intently. Faramir turned to see him staring attentively into a gloomy, narrow alley they had just passed by. “Do you hear that?” Túrin asked, walking a few steps in the direction of the alley. “Sounds like cheering, and crashing furniture.” He turned to the others. “Sounds like a brawl,” he said, with an excited glow in his eyes. “Come on, let’s go and investigate.”

Faramir was about to put in word of concern, but Túrin quickly shook his head. “Don’t try and object, Captain,” he said. “You wanted to cheer me up, so forget your usual caution and come. Something like this is exactly what I need!”

Faramir sighed. “Very well. I guess you shall need somebody to carry you home afterwards,” he then added with a mischievous grin.

Túrin grinned as well. “We’ll see.”

Bardhwyn

Inside the Tavern...

Gareth weighed the Lieutenant’s money pouch as he stood, patiently waiting to get a barkeep’s attention. Andanor certainly hadn’t skimped in offering to buy the round for Gareth was sure the man’s entire pay was inside the modest pouch he carried.

The Tavern was interminably crowded and while standing by the bar, the young man learned how several ships had made their way up the Anduin that day and rumour was a merchant freighter had limped into northwest port of Linhir, stripped of her cargo and most of her crew by another vicious pirate attack. Gareth picked out the many foreigners in the Tavern – Harad refugees mostly – and kept his ears alert, listening for any bits of information that would prove interesting to Maradir or Andanor.

‘Maradir or Andanor!?’ he caught himself thinking. For a moment Gareth realized how complicated his ‘assignment’ could become – was becoming! His respect for Andanor and Lord Faramir grew by the hour and strangely so was his respect for Maradir, a man he never could see as a ‘leader’ before this strange ‘assignment’. And yet, he was under Maradir, in reality, and may find himself opposite the Steward’s son and his Lieutenant. Gareth hoped that would never come to pass.

As the barkeep placed three full jugs of the tavern’s best mead on a large tray, as ordered, Gareth tenderly checked his eye. It now sported a tender red scar and his whole face was severely bruised from his ‘altercation’ with Andanor’s rangers only the day before.

“Aye, lad, you’ll be sportin’ a fine scar you will!” the barkeep said with a toothless smile. “Tell me, what did the other man look like when it was over?” he asked with a shapeless grin, holding his hand out for payment. “That will be 5 pieces.”

“Other man?” Gareth said with a wry smile as he fished out the pieces and dropped them into the man’s grubby hands. “Other men, you mean. There were five of them. I daresay they all look as ‘pretty’ as I do.”

The Barkeep took the money with a laugh, not caring if the youth told the truth or not. The sale was done. Gareth picked up the tray and headed out to the Tavern's courtyard just in time to see a semi-circle of Rangers and Andanor held in a vice-like grip round his torso by the Ranger Padhir. Inside the tavern Gareth heard the call go up.... "A fight! A fight, aye and a good one, laddies!"

Pushed ahead by on rushing crowd Gareth was swept up and into the courtyard, almost spilling the newly purchased mead. What ever attempts the young man made to steady the tray were for naught – soon an all out brawl erupted and a sailor, back peddling with the recoil of a well placed right to jaw by the Ranger Laren, fell into Gareth, upturning the tray and covering the young man completely with mead.

Clearly the Rangers were outnumbered and Laren was soon faced with three sailors, one bearing a knife. Drawing his own, Gareth quickly moved in and distracted the man, leaving Laren to the two others.

The sailor was sinewy and fast, his years at sea and the evidence of much experience fighting close soon proved itself, for Gareth was made to work. The two men's blades whizzed and flashed and clearly the sailor, much Gareth's senior, was cocky – fooled by Gareth's youth. The sailor had no idea the sort of training he was pitted against. As with all brawls, when weapons are drawn a natural instinct sets in and the two men were given a wide berth while around them tables crashed and punches flew. Gareth observed the sailor, saw his weaknesses and decided his strategy. He moved in, first with a parry, then a feint, then in a bold move, Gareth allowed the Sailor to cut him, the curved blade of the Sailor's knife connecting with his forearm.

The Sailor, cocky and self-assured did as Gareth expected and for a few seconds the Sailor gloated, giving over to a laugh and also dropping his guard. That was all the young man needed.

Reversing the grip of his knife, Gareth arced his injured arm out - like a scythe – and quickly dispatched the Sailor; a large, thick red welt oozing from one side of the man's neck to the other. Gareth turned to see the two other sailors still on Laren; the Ranger's arms pinned from behind by one Sailor, the other delivering a rhythmic rain of blows the Laren's abdomen. Sheathing his knife and with two steps Gareth was there. The rhythm of the blows quickly ceased, for the Sailor was sprawled on the ground having been squarely kicked in the head. Gareth's eyes met momentarily with Laren's and though no words could be spoken, much was said. Laren broke free of his assailant's grip and soon had the Sailor on the ground with fists flying.

Out of the corner of Gareth's eye he saw Andanor and the sour Ranger, back-to-back, bloodied and defiant. The sight made him smile, but not for long, a fist hit him, and Gareth was soon back in the fray, fighting along side the Rangers.

The last thing Gareth remembered was excruciating pain in his head, blood oozing from his old wound and the experience of being pinned up against the Tavern wall, the hand of one particularly oversized Sailor firmly clasped around his neck. He was grasping at the man's huge hand, desperate for air, when he thought he saw Lord Faramir and his aide, Turin come around the corner into the Tavern courtyard.

Then all went black.

Khorazir

Túrin had hurried towards the dingy alley in front of the tavern in the hope of a good fight, but what he saw when he finally reached the scene quite shocked him. Apparently what had started as a tavern brawl has escalated into a small battle, and many of the combatants were armed with knives and even swords now, or anything weaponlike they had been able to lay their hands on. It was plain to see that the rangers were greatly outnumbered, but he decided to let Faramir deal with that. The young man (Gareth, that was his name, Túrin recalled) pinned against the tavern's wall by a huge brute seemed to need some help first. Túrin was only armed with a small dagger, and he thought of casting it to wound the massive sailor, but then he virtually stumbled about something more suitable: a tankard that once apparently had contained mead and that now was lying on the dirty cobblestones. Túrin picked it up. It was still half-full. He advanced in a few quick leaps and hit the brute over the head with the tankard. The huge fellow grunted, swayed, and just when Túrin was about to hit him a second time, he collapsed, and both he and Gareth went to the ground.

Túrin knelt by the young man's side, feeling for his heartbeat, but then was forced to dive out of path of a club that hit the wall behind him with a dull thud, but which clearly had been aimed at his head.

Faramir in the meantime had armed himself with a handy piece of wood that not long ago had been part of the tavern's window-frame, and had attacked the sailors surrounding the rangers, hoping to thus distract them, and give his men the opportunity to break free. Soon however he found himself forced to exchange the wood for his sword, for almost all sailors had drawn weapons now, and were using them to try and kill, it seemed, or at least to wound severely. Faramir hoped that Maradir and Curufë were close behind, as their help would surely be needed. His distraction had worked as far as to give the rangers a momentary break, enabling them to move into a more advantageous defensive formation, but it was apparent that they were too few to win the fight. He caught Andanor's eyes in the chaos, wondering who had been responsible for starting this fight, but then these thoughts were driven from his mind when another sailor hurled himself at him, driving him back with furious blows of the two cutlasses he wielded simultaneously.

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen lay curled up on the covers of her bed, hugging one of the extra pillows. She wasn't tired enough to go to sleep, but she also didn't have enough energy to do much of anything. She had copied letters on a piece of paper Lindórië had given her for about a minute before coming to the conclusion that this was very boring and required too much concentration.

Watching the shadows from the candles flicker on the wall, she figured that she could sneak out of the house and walk around the city for a little while. The only drawback was that she had no idea of how the place was laid out, and darkness would only complicate the task of trying to figure out a way back here. Maybe she should have gone with Túrin and the others when they suggested a trip into the town.

Reaching down, she untied her shoes and kicked them off her feet, each making a dull thud as they dropped to the floor. With a sigh, she rested her head on the pillow again. Sleep was the best option to kill time between now and the next day. She closed her eyes, only to open them a little bit later when sleep would not come. Looks like I'm stuck like this for a while, she thought, staring at the wall.

Khorazir

Lindórië had spent most of the evening attending to matters concerning the running of her mansion in Pelargir, and dealing with her correspondance. She had written a letter to her sister-in-law about the possibility of her looking after Daewen, and another to Denethor, informing him of the progress of the errand (despite knowing that most likely he was very well informed about it already). She then visited the servants in their quarters, and questioned them about the latest events in the city, and the southern fiefs. Some of them were remarkably well informed – which was no wonder given their secret contacts to people at Lord Falastur's court, contacts neither the lord himself nor his head of intelligence, a certain Aldaron, were aware of. Lindórië suspected that Falastur knew by now about their arrival, and was most likely trying to find out more about them, to be prepared for their visit the next morning. So his spies would be swarming the city, and Lindórië fervently hoped that the others were being careful indeed.

Do not count on it, she told herself, smiling wryly, while returning to her own quarters. 'tis to be expected that they will get themselves into trouble tonight. And this is going to make our visit tomorrow all the more interesting.

Back in her quarters, a servant informed her that apparently the Ladies Alessya and Visilya had gone out as well, as they were nowhere to be found in the house. "And Daewen?" Lindórië asked.

"She should be in her room," the servant answered. "At least there's still light in there."

Lindórië thanked her, and decided to check on Daewen to see if she was alright. All of this must be terribly confusing

and moreover boring for the poor girl, she thought, and wondered at the same time if there was anything she could do to improve her plight.

Lady_of_Rohan

Retracing the pattern on the blanket for what seemed to be the hundredth time, Daewen still couldn't drop off to sleep. The candles had burned down a little bit, which suggested that quite some time had passed since she had curled up here. She had managed to relax, and that felt good for once.

Reaching down, she took an object out of her pocket and examined it. She had picked it up on her way to her room, but this was the first chance she'd had to really look at it. It was a thin block of wood, about the length of her palm and maybe half an inch wide and thick. The wood color was a dark brownish-red. As she looked at it closer, she discovered a set of fine hinges on the backside. *So, it was some sort of box*, she figured. Her next goal was to get it open and see what the contents were. The next few minutes proved this would be harder than she thought. There were no fine lines around the middle of the box telling that this was where the wood was split, and after a while, she began to wonder if those were even real hinges.

So engrossed was she in her task that she did not hear footsteps outside the door. When the gentle knock came, it nearly scared her out of her skin. She yelped, then slammed a hand in front of her mouth. As the door opened, she quickly slid the box back into her pocket and rolled onto her back to see who was entering. She froze for a moment at the sight of Lindórië. *Did she see that?* she wondered. Trying to cover her surprise, she smiled slightly. "Hello," she said.

asaris

And indeed, Curufë was right behind him, using his spear Seregon as a quarterstaff to disarm and incapacitate the sailors and protect himself from harm – it took more than the sword swing of a sailor to break the work of Mahtan. As he made his way through the fray to Faramir, his anger began to shine in his face, and the sailor's were becoming increasingly aware that, in addition to the ranger's, they were facing an elf lord in his rage...

Khorazir

Although he did not turn to see what had made the sailors who had threatened to ring him round give way suddenly, and group together more tightly to attack again in a more efficient formation, Faramir guessed that behind him Curufë and Maradir had joined the fray, and he was more than glad about it. The sailors were still much encouraged by their sheer numbers, and all were experts at fighting dirtily. But on the other hand the rangers were holding their ground against them, and Faramir took pride in that, although he knew that there was still much reason for concern. From the other end of the alley more people were entering, and they did not look as if they would side with the rangers.

+++

Lindórië had not missed the girl's shocked surprise when she had entered, and wondered how her arrival could so have agitated her. But when she stepped into the room she smiled. "Hello," she said. "I was wondering if you might need anything." Her glance fell on the sheet of paper where Daewen had scribbled a few letters, and her smile broadened. "Things must be rather boring for you," she continued, "so I thought that perhaps you would enjoy some company. But if you do not feel like it, I shall of course leave immediately."

+++

Lord Falastur's conversation with Aldaron, his sons' teacher, had been brief. They had only talked for a few minutes,

and Falastur had just began discussing with the old, rather strict and extremely inconspicuous looking man how to best proceed with gathering information about the doings of Lindórië of Lebennin and her companions, when his captain of guard entered. Aldaron seemed not surprised at that, withdrawing a little into the shadows, and smiling slightly and quite amusedly to himself.

"I hope your tidings justify this interruption," Falastur snarled at the guard, who suddenly looked rather nervous.

"There's a brawl in one of the taverns at the harbour ...," he began timidly.

"So what?" Falastur returned impatiently. "Those ale-befuddled brutes of sailors beat up each other almost every night."

"True, lord," the captain said, "but I thought it might interest you that this time they have obviously set their internal quarrels aside to finish off some rangers from Minas Tirith."

Falastur's eyes narrowed, and he quickly turned to Aldaron, who was watching him from the shadows playing with his white beard, his eyes glinting under his bushy eyebrows. "Not surprised, are you, Aldaron?" he asked acidly. "And when were you going to tell me about this minor incident?"

Aldaron shrugged. "I was about to do so, lord," he said calmly.

"Yeah, I bet you were," Falastur muttered while turning back to the guard. "How serious is it?"

"Well, according to what the lads of the night-watch said the rangers are somewhat outnumbered, somewhat serious, I mean, and the fight has ... escalated. By now I'm sure there have been first casualties."

Suddenly Falastur looked immensely pleased. "Get me a score of horsemen, and my own steed. We are going down there."

The captain was surprised. "You are going yourself, lord?"

"Yes," Falastur replied curtly, and dismissed him. "I would not want to miss this for the world," he told Aldaron while arraying himself in a dark, hooded cloak, and a sword. "The Steward's rangers, commanded by his own son, causing trouble wherever they go. Excellent. I could not have arranged it better myself. I shall make certain to mention this to Denethor the next time I see him. As for you, keep your eyes and ears open, more than usual. There is something strange going on here. And contact your people in Lebennin. I want to know exactly what Tarannon and his brother have been up to lately."

"As you wish, lord," Aldaron said softly, and bowed.

A short while later a company of horsemen sped towards the quays, their horses' hooves clattering loudly on the cobblestones, receiving many a confused glance from people they passed by. When they rounded a corner they almost rode into a couple of dark-clad, somewhat burglarish looking individuals. They managed to jump out of the way just in time.

"That was the palace-guard," one of them, the smaller said surprisedly, looking after the horsemen.

"I know," his companion snarled from the ground. "Would you mind helping me up?"

"Sure. But what do you think they were up to? At this time, and they were in a real hurry."

"Stop standing there gawping," his the other said, brushing dirt from his garments, then setting off in the direction the riders had taken. "Come on. There may be more to it than you think. Did you see the one riding in the middle, with the hood?"

"What about him?" the other asked while running a few paces to draw level with his companion, who was walking

very swiftly.

The other sighed. "Didn't he look somewhat familiar?"

His companion stopped short. "You mean ..."

"Will you come now?" came the impatient reply. "And when we have caught up with them, we must make sure that they don't spot us. I'm not keen on father finding out about our little expedition."

Lady_of_Rohan

So maybe she didn't see it, the girl thought, regaining her composure. She sat up, criss-crossing her legs. "I don't mind," she said. "There really wasn't anything to do anyway."

Canamarth

On seeing how things stood in the tavern with Curufë looking after Faramir for the moment, Maradir sheathed his sword again and instead of entering the fray sped away around the corner.

Rûmar's house was already in sight and the door was open as well. The old man stood on the threshold, straining to see or hear what was going on in the tavern around the corner. "I don't know," Maradir heard him say to someone inside.

"I need the bow from over your mantelpiece and every archer and swordsman you can get hold of right now," Maradir said while pushing his way past the astonished Rûmar and into his house. There he found himself facing four men clad in dark travelling gear - not unlike his own. They had drawn their swords and two were now advancing towards Maradir but were stopped by the others. They were twins.

"Annavar and Eddenar!" Maradir exclaimed. "Get your bows and follow me. We need to try and stop a really nasty brawl in the tavern around the corner." He grabbed the bow from over the mantelpiece, strung it, took the quiver Eddenar was offering him and hurried out of the door, past a still flustered Rûmar.

More people were streaming down the alley towards the tavern to see what was going on or possibly join in but many decided against it as they saw how bloody the fighting had become. Two arrows hit the street in front of the tavern door. "Get back!" Maradir shouted and most onlookers sped away, unwilling to risk the ire of five dark-clad archers running up to the tavern.

"Keep our backs clear," Maradir said to one of the two men he did not know. The addressed turned and kept the spectators and willing participants at bay. Maradir and Annavar positioned themselves at the door while Eddenar and the other went to a smashed window. "I want warning shots - as close to those brutish sailors and the other scum as possible."

Maradir knew how difficult it was to position the shots right in chaos like this. They could easily go amiss and hit someone. He only hoped they would not hit one of his friends or the rangers. But he knew that Annavar and Eddenar were accomplished archers, having had to undergo the same training he had.

He nocked an arrow, drew the string, whistled as a signal to the others, and released. Four arrows whirred inches past people locked in fight and buried themselves in walls, ceiling or upturned tables. Another volley followed immediately afterwards.

Many people stopped fighting, some tried to find cover, others just turned to see what was happening.

EdaintheRanger

In the thick of the fray Andanor had marshalled the rangers, and welcomed the support of the bright fury that was an Elf lord.

In a brief stand off he was able to account for all of his party, and he noted that Gareth was being tended out of harm's way, by Túrin. "Poor lad" he had barely time to think.

Then as the fighting was to resume, he heard a familiar sound one that is gut wrenching and fear-filled when you are caught in the open. Hoof beats! Cavalry!

"Ware cavalry" he managed to roar.

Then something equally familiar and deadly occurred. Arrows! Out of the surrounding building flights of arrows zinged past. One arrowfletch sheered past his face, and here the discipline of the rangers told as they went to ground, while the sailor milled around in a mad panic. It had certainly broken up the brawl.

As the hail of arrows fell into a pattern Andanor, setting an example to the others managed to move out of the deadly, surrounded ground, then standing fearless, he waved the rest of his charges out of the area, they were all safe for a while.

Khorazir

When most of the sailors broke up and tried to find cover from the arrows, Faramir finally managed to make his way over to Andanor and the other rangers. To his relief he found that all were still standing, although all of them had received light to considerable injuries. Faramir himself had been lucky. He had only received minor cuts, although one on his forehead was particularly annoying, as he constantly had to wipe his brow to prevent the blood from running into his right eye. Most of the sailors were hurrying towards the broader end of the alley now, urged on by arrows falling between them, when the sound of swiftly approaching hoofbeat came to their ears. They halted, looking about wildly. Anticipating that they would turn and try the other direction, Faramir signed to the weary rangers to block the way. With the archers behind them they had good chances of keeping them at bay, trapping them in the narrow alley.

Apparently the sailors realised the hopelessness of their situation, and banded together tightly again to defend themselves. The horsemen had drawn very close now, and over the packed mass of sailors Faramir could see them round the corner. They were at least a dozen, in full armour, armed with spears and swords. When they passed a lighted window the device on their shields, a golden ship on blue ground, glinted faintly. Faramir's relief about their timely arrival subsided somewhat. He knew this device. Those were Falastur's men, and as much as he appreciated being saved from the sailors, he would have much preferred had their saviours been normal soldiers of the nightwatch – or more of Maradir's skilled archers. "Drop your weapons and surrender!" came a harsh command now. "You are surrounded, and there is no way for you to get out of this alley. "

Because the alley was so narrow, the horsemen did not enter in. Faramir signed to the rangers to advance to herd the sailors towards the horsemen. The fiercer of the brutes apparently considered trying to fight their way through, but some well-aimed arrows out of the darkness behind the rangers let them forgo this plan. Clubs, cutlasses and other crude weaponry cluttered to the ground as the sailors surrendered, and made their way towards the horsemen. Faramir could see now that they were accompanied by quite a number of what appeared to be men of the nightwatch, part of whom were busy trying to keep curious onlookers away. The rest now stepped forward to take care of the prisoners.

"Lock them up," the captain of the soldiers commanded. "We shall deal with them tomorrow. And you," he turned to the spectators, "get yourselves gone, or otherwise you will considered volunteers to help clear up this mess. There's nothing more to see here tonight, understood? So off you go!" This was enough for most of the people to scuttle off.

The captain dismounted, and while the sailors were led away by the nightwatch (except for those who had been lucky to sneak away), he approached the rangers, stopping in front of them. He shook his head slightly. "Dear me, what a

mess,” he said, looking them up and down. Faramir did not miss the sneer in his voice. “Who’s your captain?”

Faramir stepped forward. “I am,” he said calmly.

The captain raised an eyebrow. “Indeed? Well, I guess you can tell me, then, what befell here.”

“Leave him to me,” came a cold voice from behind him. Looking up, Faramir beheld a rider clad in a dark cloak, the hood of which he cast back now. His heart sank. This was worse than the most brutal sailor.

+++

Lindórië drew a chair to the bedside and sat down. “You are right, there does not seem much to do. All the others have left.”

There was a knock on the door. Lindórië rose again and opened. A servant was outside. “I was hoping to find you here, my lady. I was told to give you this.” She handed her a message. Lindórië read it swiftly, and her face became stern.

“You know where Maldor the healer lives? Good. Tell him to come here, with his apprentices. We shall have to treat some injuries tonight. Inform the others to get everything ready.”

The servant bowed and departed, and Lindórië returned to Daewen. “The rangers were involved in some fight,” she explained. “They shall need to be looked after when they return. How about it, would you like to help?”

Canamarth

When the sailors were lead away Maradir signed to his companions to disperse. He handed his bow and quiver to Annavar and slowly inched back towards the rangers. The four came clear in the general confusion and vanished into the night.

Maradir was standing amongst the rangers now, trying to catch what Faramir and the captain of the guards were saying. Then he saw another man step forward who revealed himself to be Falastur of Pelargir. “Oh, bugger,” Maradir muttered under his breath.

Khorazir

Falastur had dismounted as well, and was now standing in front of Faramir, studying him with a mock-pitiful expression. “Well, well, it seems we have arrived just in time,” he said softly, his grey eyes glinting. “Your men do not look very well, do they, Captain Faramir?”

“We were managing alright,” Faramir said coldly.

“Yes, I bet you were,” Falastur said contemptuously, his eyes wandering from Faramir’s bloodied and dirty face to the rangers, then back to him. “Those strange archers were men of yours as well, I take it? I cannot find them amongst your rangers.”

“They are not your concern,” Faramir replied curtly, not quite able to control his rising anger at this interrogation.

“Yes they are,” Falastur returned sharply. “Everything going on in this place is my concern. And after what happened tonight you better watch your tongue, boy. You are in no position to be so cheeky, believe me. So, what befell here? Who started this?”

Faramir held his intense glare for a moment, then looked to the ground. "I do not know. I was not here when it started," he admitted, noticing how some of the rangers about him had begun to look increasingly uncomfortable.

"Ah, I see," came Falastur's reply, "you let your men roam the city freely, to begin trouble where- and whenever it pleased them. How very irresponsible of you, captain. I must say I am extremely disappointed in you. I had expected more of the Steward's son, when his brother is such a famous soldier. But apparently you do not share his qualities. A more experienced – or a more able – leader might have anticipated his men's behaviour, and devised precautions."

Faramir took a deep breath while wiping away some more blood from his brow. He found it increasingly difficult to remain calm, but he knew that Falastur was trying to make him lose patience, and thus forced himself not to speak his mind openly.

"Listen, Falastur," he said with forced calmness, "we can discuss all of this tomorrow. My men are wounded and weary, and before I can report to you I have to listen to their accounts of what befell."

"To find somebody else to blame for this mess instead of yourself?"

Faramir gave him a deadly glance. "No," he said very carefully. "Just to make sure that things are told as they happened."

Falastur studied him with a mocking expression. "Very well, go then. I expect you tomorrow at nine, and I hope you will manage to appear in a more presentable state like this." With these words, Falastur signed to one of the soldiers to bring him his horse, mounted, and without a further glance at Faramir or the rangers rode off.

"Right, you heard what the Lord said. Clear off!" the captain of Falastur's guard, who apparently had enjoyed seeing the rangers and their captain having been thus told off, said.

Faramir fought down his anger and turned to the men to see if all were able to walk back to Lindórië's house. Gareth's condition seemed the worst, but with Túrin's help even he would manage.

"Let us go," he said, and the company set in motion.

Lady_of_Rohan

At Lindórië's news, Daewen's face brightened a little. At last, something she could relate to! Back in Minas Tirith, she had been involved in her own fair share of fights and spars, so she knew how to take and tend injuries well enough.

"Sure! Yeah, I can do that," she said quickly, shifting slightly on the bedspread. Her one leg had felt like it was starting to go asleep, and she didn't want that happening. "How long do you think it will be until they get here?" she asked, looking at the lady again.

Khorazir

"I do not think it will be long," Lindórië replied. "We better go and see how far the servants have got with the preparations. I very much hope that there are only minor cuts and bruises to tend, and nothing more serious."

+++

On the way back to Lindórië's mansion, no one spoke. Some of the rangers looked increasingly miserable, and Faramir was sure that they were worse off than what they wanted him to realise. Almost all of them seemed to try and avoid his gaze, apparently blaming themselves for what had happened. Although eager to hear how the brawl had come to pass, Faramir did not feel like questioning them now. It would have been easy to seek the blame with them, as most

likely they indeed had had some part in the starting of the fight, but he knew that the real problem lay elsewhere. And Falastur had seen it, and addressed it directly, in an attempt to try and hurt Faramir. And although outwardly he was careful not to let it show, Faramir knew that the Lord of Pelargir had very much succeeded at that. It was not so much his pride that had suffered. A public telling-off like this was humiliating, true, but this was not what was troubling him. It was rather the nagging suspicion that Falastur had been right. Ever since they had set out, Faramir had had doubts that assigning him to this errand had been a good idea. So far almost everything seemed to have gone amiss, and he had begun to wonder if the same would have happened to a more experienced (or able, he thought bitterly) captain.

He took a deep breath and lifted his head to see how the others were faring. Maradir and Curufë were walking nearby. Faramir smiled faintly at them. "Thanks a lot, you two," he said. "Without your interference things would have turned out worse, I reckon."

Canamarth

"Hey, that's my job," Maradir said with a wink.

Khorazir

Faramir's smile broadened. "Perhaps I should assign you as my bodyguard," he said, "although I daresay Mablung and Damrod would be offended if I did. How lucky for us that your friends were around, and with their bows handy." He looked over his shoulder to see if the others were keeping up, and froze for a short moment, his eyes narrowing when they were attracted by something a little way behind the company. He turned back to Maradir and Curufë, who apparently had noted his reaction and were looking at him curiously.

"We are being followed," Faramir told them in a low voice. "Two or three people. I saw them briefly before they hid in some doorway. I should really like to know who is so interested in whither we are going ..."

EdaintheRanger

Andanor strode back to the quarters, his face set in a rigid mask, like a statue. A wave of shame passing through his now throbbing system.

"We have fallen to this" was all he could feel pounding in his mind.

asaris

"I can help, I think. I can hide and sneak well enough that they won't notice me, and then the followers will become the followed. I shall see if I can find out what they are up to." In truth, Curufë was nearly invisible when he wanted to be – in the wild, he was as good as invisible, but cities were a bit harder for him to hide in. Faramir nodded, and Curufë snuck into a doorway, quiet as a shadow.

Bardhwyn

Staggering on the arm of Faramir's aide, Gareth stumbled along, delirious with pain. His head bashed like a drum and the blood oozing from his wound of only yesterday obscured his vision. And this throat - his throat felt as if a vice had

been clamped upon him, and had squeezed most of his life from him.

The bestial sailor who last set upon him had taken four kicks to the head - withstanding each as though his brain was encased in stone - before managing to grab him by the throat. It was in that moment of descending darkness, Gareth thought for sure he was a dead man.

Fortunately a well aimed tankard had changed his fate, unbeknownst to him

As Gareth was half carried down the street, the toll of his injuries beset him and nearly fainting, he stumbled and fell, hitting the cobbled street hard. Another man came to Gareth's aid, the blonde ranger, Laren, and together he and Turin attempted to carry the young man forward.

Confused, Gareth pushed them away and attempted to stand on his own. He was, after all, of the Steward's Secret Guard... he needed no help.

"No, no.." Gareth mumbled, delirious. "I can walk, I can...Captain!" He called out, looking around as best he could through bloodied eyes. "Captain, tell them, let me be. I can walk. I must, on my own....must walk on my own...."

After a feeble attempt to take his feet, Gareth collapsed into a heap.

Khorazir

"You know, I think we should see to it that we get home," one of the dark-cloaked figures that had been pursuing the weary company whispered to his companion in the dark corner they were hiding. "Although most of them are wounded and all are weary, don't think that they can't spot us. They're rangers, after all."

"They haven't spotted us so far," the other objected, carefully peering around the corner. "I'd just like to find out more about them. There are strange fellows in this company. Not all of them are rangers. The one who threw the tankard looked like Lord Húrin's son. We had a fight once, at a feast. Mean fellow. And have you seen the Elf fighting? Amazing. Just like the Elf-lords in those old tales."

The other nodded, and swiftly drew his companion back into the shadows. "Listen, Vinyaran, I'm curious about this whole matter as well, but we should really go. It's obvious what direction they're heading. They're dwelling at Lady Lindórië's house, for sure. And you heard what father told the Steward's son. Tomorrow he's supposed to visit us. Ah, that's going to be fun. But if we stay out much longer, somebody is going to take notice, and you can be sure that we won't be allowed to attend the meeting. Come on, let's head back home."

+++

Túrin swiftly knelt at Gareth's side and felt for his heartbeat. He could see that the youth was bleeding rather heavily, and seemed to have trouble breathing. Luckily it was not far now to Lindórië's house. He looked up at Laren. "Come on, we must carry him," he said. Laren nodded. He looked pale underneath his bruises and the bloody smear on his face. Apparently he was regretting the beating he and his friends had given the boy not long ago. Together they lifted Gareth, and carried him. While walking slowly, Túrin wondered who the young man had meant when he had called for his captain. Faramir? Unlikely. Only two days ago he had been his prisoner. Or was he just delirious? Túrin gave him a thoughtful glance. The next moment he stumbled slightly on the uneven cobblestones, causing Laren to give him a sharp glance, and he decided that he should better give his attention to where he was going.

Lady_of_Rohan

"Okay," Daewen answered, knowing full well that there would most likely be a lot more than minor cuts and bruises to tend. "Although if the fights here are anything like they are back in the city, these guys are going to be pretty torn up,"

she said, giving Lindórië a sidelong glance.

Khorazir

Lindórië nodded darkly as she and Daewen headed out of the room and towards the courtyard, where most likely the battered company would arrive soon. "Actually I am not surprised that something like this should have happened tonight," she said. "It was almost to be expected when the rangers set out in the direction of the quays. Well, they have seen to it that our presence in the city got widely known, which we may be able to turn to our advantage. I only hope that they are not hurt too badly."

asaris

Curufë continued to follow the men. If he knew where they lived, Faramir might be able to figure out who they were, and whether they posed any danger to the group at the meeting tomorrow.

Canamarth

The tattered company finally arrived at Lindórië's house. A servant had been on the lookout for them already and had opened the gate and door for them.

"We have had tidings of your ... entanglement and have prepared a room for the more severely wounded," he addressed Faramir with a pitiful glance at Gareth. "If you care to follow me."

He showed them into a parlour which had hastily been changed into an infirmiary. A few armchairs and beds, some make-shift, some proper, had been brought inside and fresh linnens were spread all over them. The first bowl with hot water arrived.

"Make yourselves comfortable. The healer should be here any minute now."

Maradir had brought up the rear of the company, keeping an eye on their backs. He was not sure but he did not think they were still being followed. Not that it was much of a secret where they were heading anyway. But it felt a lot better not being stalked by two ominous figures.

He now went over to Gareth who had been laid on one of the proper beds. "Poor fellow," he observed to Túrin. "Two brawls in such a short time..."

Khorazir

Túrin nodded, checking Gareth's pulse once more, then glancing about to see if there was anybody who could assist him with the young man's care. At this moment Lindórië and to his surprise Daewen arrived, together with an elderly man followed by three youths who were carrying utensils needed for the care of the wounded. "Ah, the healer," Túrin said, and signed to the man to look after Gareth first.

The healer shook his head when he examined his wounds. "A brawl you call that?" he asked reproachfully. "Looks more like the survivors of a battle to me." He glanced up at Maradir and Túrin. "You're unhurt? Then don't stand there gawping. Can't have that. There's plenty to do. So off you go."

"We better leave him to it," Túrin said softly. "But honestly there doesn't seem to be much we can do around here."

Lindórië's servants seem to have taken over the care of the wounded, and I daresay they're better at it than I. Let's go over to Faramir and see if he's got somethings to do for us."

After having seen to it that the servants were attended the wounded, Lindórië had joined Faramir. She could tell that there was something troubling him, but to her great relief he did not seem to have obtained any serious wounds. "How did this come to pass?" she asked, nodding towards the injured. Faramir only shook his head. "To be honest, I do not know. The fight was already in full fury when we arrived. I have to talk to Andanor about it, once he feels better. We were lucky that Maradir and Curufë were with us, and both did their own bit to aid our side, as the rangers were greatly outnumbered by the sailors."

"Well, others will claim that not Maradir's archers or Curufë's fighting-skills saved the day, but the interference of the Lord of the City and his guards," Túrin put in.

Lindórië turned to him and studied him surprisedly. "Falastur came to end the fight?" She glanced at Faramir, who nodded darkly, and repeated Falastur's speech to her.

"I am sorry that things turned that way," she said gravely. "But you know that you must not take his words to heart, do you not? You have done nothing wrong. Moreover we might use the incident to our advantage." She reached out and stroked back some strands of hair from his forehead. "Do not be troubled," she said softly.

He smiled faintly. "I am truly looking forward to tomorrow now," he said sarcastically.

She smiled as well. "You will survive this also. Try and get some rest now. I shall treat your wound a little later," she said, indicating the cut at his brow, "when those that are worse off have been looked after. And I think I can provide you with clothes for tomorrow, to make you "presentable", she added with a grin, then she turned and went to see where she could help. Faramir turned to Túrin and Maradir.

"Has Curufë returned yet? He went after those strange figures that were stalking us. And how is Gareth?"

Canamarth

"Not too well, I deem," Maradir answered. "But he is being cared for by the healer. As to our stalkers: I am quite sure they did not follow us here. It's not as if there's a need to, really. It's no secret we're lodging here. Oh, and Curufë has not returned yet."

Khorazir

"Well, I hope Curufë will be able to enlighten us about the identity of these mysterious people," Faramir said. "You are right, it is strange that anybody should follow us. And in that way. They tried to be secretive, and yet were not very skilled at it."

EdaintheRanger

"Yeah poor lad indeed," Andanor cut in breaking his silence.

"I bet he rues the day he chose military service. That's if he had a choice," Andanor felt his eyes drawn to Maradir, before returning to his current line of thought. "He's a good kid... just unlucky, but he should be right, in the hands of Laren."

Concern was fixed on the face of the officer as he scanned over the casualties of his rash decision. His jaw firm, he

turned to Faramir, finding it hard to look his captain in the eye.

“As for today’s escapade it was my fault. It should have been handled better. If it hadn’t been for Maradir here, we could have been looking at fatalities.” Andanor grudgingly gave praise to the hero of the hour.

“Is that all?” there was a perceptible pause as Andanor hesitated, not wanting to be in that room a moment longer, but duty held him to it. “Or would you like a fuller report?” Andanor concluded his wounds self-consciously throbbing.

Khorazir

“You know I do, Andanor” Faramir said, more sternly than he had intended. “I am expected to explain how things came to pass to the lord of this city tomorrow, something I all but look forward to. And even if it was not for that, I should like to know what befell – if only to be able to judge if you are indeed the person to blame, which I doubt. But I see that you are far from well, and that perhaps you should try and get some rest ere we talk.”

EdaintheRanger

“If my Captain wills it, it shall be done” answered Andanor, rather more stiffly formal than necessary. Privately he was relieved, he could get a chance to talk to the men, perhaps he would get a more balanced view.

Andanor took his leave, and marched off to his quarters. His route took him through the general dorm area, and the less injured rangers were licking their wounds in there. Padhir was there talking to the others who were huddled in a group. Seeing Andanor enter the man shuffled to his feet and made eye contact with him.

The two men stood stock still, weighing up the situation. Padhir’s actions previously were most grave, men had been banished for less.

“Yes ranger what is it? Do you wish to speak” Andanor snapped.

The hostility slipping from his demeanour Padhir replied,

“Well sir, I was wondering... Well me and the lads were wondering, how is the boy doing?”

The moment was a fleeting one of embarrassment and awkwardness.

Andanor couldn’t maintain his severity. His face softened.

“Laren says he should pull through, he just needs to rest.”

The other rangers looked up, and someone said

“Damrod said that that kid, was trying help us.”

“Yes ranger he was!” Andanor answered, “I’m glad someone saw that.”

He was about to leave, but he could sense that Padhir was lingering. Turning on his heel he asked resignedly.

“Yes Padhir?”

“Thank you... Sir”

As he left the room a weight lifted from Andanor’s mind.

Galhadrim

The time passed on towards midnight and the wounded were tended to throughout the manor. Lindorie had changed into a simple dress and moved about the rooms looking in on the healer and his charges. For the most part, Daewen followed in tow and was as helpful as she could be.

Outside, between the stable and the storage buildings, Scratch watched the windows from the darkest spot he could find. There was more commotion than there was supposed to be and he fixated at the thought. There's too many of them. Too many people. How am I supposed to fulfill the master's wish? This is hopeless. This is hopeless. But wait, there she is. There she is. The hair, the dress, the beauty of her face. That must be her. That must be her.

In the darkness, he waited.

Khorazir

When she had made sure that all the injured had been looked after, and most of them had fallen asleep, Lindórië returned to her own quarters. From the bottom of a large wooden chest she retrieved a bundle of clothes wrapped in plain linen. She opened the linen and glanced thoughtfully at a burgundy tunic with silver and blue embroidery along sleeves and collar. A white linen shirt went with it, and dark trowsers. The tunic had been wrought for her brother, for his coming of age. But he had never worn it, as he had been slain only months before he would have reached his 25th birthday. Oh yes, people had claimed that it had been an accident during a hunt in Dor-en-Ernil. But she knew better. Another victim of this cursed feud, she thought bitterly. The vendetta between her family and the House of Lebennin had claimed the lives of two of her three brothers, and many other dear relatives, and only her marriage to Tarannon had prevented more bloodshed.

She sighed and ran a hand over the soft cloth. With a stab of grief she realised that she could hardly recall her brother's face anymore. She swallowed slightly, then with an effort she straightened up again, wrapped the garments again and taking them up, left the room.

Making her way to the room where Faramir was accommodated, together with Maradir and Túrin, she knocked at the door. When she was admitted, she found only Túrin and Faramir inside. Upon seeing her, Túrin cast a swift glance at Faramir, who was standing at the window glancing out, grinned slightly, and swiftly made for the door. "Forgot my comb in my saddlebags," he murmured, indicating his tousled hair.

Lindórië smiled, and closed the door behind him. Faramir turned to her. Apparently he had bathed, for his hair was still wet, and the cut at his brow had been treated. He seemed a little surprised by her visit.

"Oh hello," he said, leaving the window. "How are the others?"

"Most of them are asleep now. Their wounds looked much more serious than they really were. So there is no reason to worry. Not even about the lad, Gareth."

"Good," he said.

She studied him. "How are you?"

"Fine. I was lucky this time," he answered.

Her smile broadened. "Except for Falastur."

He nodded, then shrugged. "Well, at least that left no bleeding wounds, or broken ribs or such. What little damage has been done to my pride and selfconfidence should heal in no time."

"I hope so," she said, more seriously now. "Listen, Faramir, I do not want to you take Falastur and his opinion of you

too seriously. He cannot judge you or your deed objectively, and you know why." She went over to one of the beds and put the bundle down, opened it, and signed to Faramir to come over.

"I take it your own clothes are rather spoilt. So if you want, you can wear this tomorrow. Should make you "presentable" enough for Lord Falastur."

Faramir glanced at the tunic. "Whose was it? Tarannon's?"

"No. It was made for Elendur."

He nodded. She had told him of her brothers, and he knew how Elendur had met his end. "Thank you," he said, quite touched. "I shall be honoured to wear it."

"It should fit you," she said, studying him, "you have about his stature – if I remember his correctly, that is," she added with a trace of sadness. Then her face brightened up again as he took the tunic and put it on.

"Perfect," he said, and smiled at her.

She returned the smile. "It suits you well," she said. They glanced at each other, and she could see that he had blushed slightly. She laughed softly, stepped forward and kissed his cheek.

"What was that for?" he asked surprisedly as she drew back.

"Just so," she replied with a slight shrug.

He smiled again, stepped closer to her and kissed her, too, first her cheek, then her lips. She put her arms about his neck and returned the kiss gently.

asaris

As Faramir and Lindorië kissed, they were interrupted by a knock on the door. "Faramir? It's Curufë," a voice from the other side of the door announced. Faramir sighed and went to open the door. "Good evening, Faramir," the elf said, and then, noticing Lindorië, added, "I hope I am not interrupting you."

"No, not at all. What did you find out?"

"They know where we are staying, for one. They decided not to follow us home, but rather to go home themselves. They are staying in a house on the east side of town – it's a rather odd place, set aside from the other houses, with seven gables. Oh, and one of them said he had fought with Túrin at a feast at some point. That's about it – do you recognize the house?"

Khorazir

Faramir exchanged a glance with Lindórië. "This sounds like Falastur's palace," she said thoughtfully.

Faramir nodded. "And I know that Túrin not long ago had a fight with Vinyaran, Falastur's younger son. Gave him a bloody nose and a number of bruised ribs, and I daresay the fellow deserved it. He is as haughty and arrogant as his father, but not as subtle. Did you manage to see their faces? Did they look similar? If so, the other could have been Vinyaran's brother. Strange that they should follow us like that."

"Still," Lindórië mused, "it might come in handy tomorrow. Should Falastur become nasty, we can always tell him that he cannot even look after his own offspring. That should shut him up for the time. If it really was his sons, that is. Is

there any way we can be assured of it?" She glanced at Curufë.

asaris

Curufë shook his head. "I saw Falastur's sons once in Dol Amroth, but that was about ten years ago, and they have assuredly aged since then. I would probably not recognize them if I were conversing with them during the day, much less stalking behind them at night. But if they were indeed the ones trailing us, I might recognize them if I should see them tomorrow."

Khorazir

"Ah, yes, I had forgotten that you are going to accompany us tomorrow," Faramir said. "To be honest, I am not sure if I would recognise the two. I have not seen them for some time, as we have always tried to avoid each other."

"Well," Lindórië said after a moment of silence, "have a good night, then, you two. 'tis rather late, and you must be weary. Where is your friend Maradir, by the way?" she asked Faramir.

He shrugged. "I do not know. He disappeared when I had a bath. Perhaps he has gone to see how Gareth is doing. I am sure Túrin knows whither he went." Feeling extremely tempted to kiss her again, he nevertheless restrained himself, and left it at a gentle smile as he wished her a good night.

Canamarth

Maradir passed Lindórië in the corridor. He bid her a good night and entered the room where Faramir and Curufë were still talking. They informed him of what the Noldo had seen. "Interesting," Maradir muttered. "I've already heard that Vinyaran is sometimes more curious than he should be..."

"And where have you heard that?" Faramir asked.

"In one of the taverns. I have been stationed in Pelargir for a few months. You pick up quite some gossip. And rumour has it that Vinyaran and his brother sometimes get themselves into trouble by slipping out of the palace and eavesdropping where they shouldn't be. I dare say Falastur would be quite put off to hear about their trip. He likes to be in control of things, especially when his family is concerned."

Galhadrin

Just before entering her room for the night, Lindorie saw two of her servants in the hall discussing a shortage of blankets. When the one said there were more out in the storage sheds, Lindorie smiled and saw an opportunity to clear her mind and ease her sleep. "I'll go to retrieve them, you can continue on with your duties."

"Oh, no milady. I wouldn't hear of it. I will get them." Her servant protested with the firmness of one who would be insulted to have her master perform menial chores.

"No, really, it's no trouble and I'd like the chance to clear my head in the night air."

* * *

Outside in the darkness, Scratch fretted over the situation. The manor still teemed with soldiers who would not go

away and several did not seem to ever sleep. He did not want to break into the house with a reception like that, but if his master was not obeyed he knew the punishment would be high. When an outside door opened he slunk back away from sight and waited.

The footsteps were light and slow, someone taking their time. Coming toward the storage shed. The creak of a latch. The scrape of a door opening.

He caught the faintest glimpse of a dress between the crack in the door. Could it be her? I'm not that lucky. But maybe tonight I am. He moved forward, hands and fingers twitching with anticipation. At the doorway he saw an empty courtyard, empty windows, and his empty heart urged him on. In the darkness of the shed he saw a woman with her back to him, gathering blankets. The hair, the dress, is it her? He glanced about and saw no one. Then, like a mist coming up over the shore, his face went blank and he stepped silently forward. It is her, master. I will do it now.

His rough hands went around her throat. He twisted and squeezed in the way that would silence a woman. He knew very well how to kill.

She bucked about in his strong hands, arms flailing and dropping the blankets. Any scream she may have mustered was caught in her collapsing throat and snuffed out. He brought her close with his arms and crushed her neck until it snapped. He kept twisting and clawing until the lifeless body hung against him and he knew his job was done. Dropping her face first onto the pile of blankets he backed up to the door and glanced out again.

Everything was still and quiet. He slipped out of the shed and closed the door behind him. The night enveloped him as he walked with steady purpose out into the streets.

* * *

Upstairs in her room, Lindorie blew out a candle and laid her head on her pillow. Tired as she was, she was glad she'd let her servant talk her out of getting the blankets.

Khorazir

"Aye, this is the impression I have of him as well," Faramir said. "Well, tomorrow we shall see if we can use our knowledge of his sons' exploits to our advantage. I still hope that we shall not have to lower ourselves to these measures, but as I know Falastur, he is going to provide plenty of reason for us to do so. He was thoroughly enjoying himself tonight when he had the opportunity to criticise me in front of half the town. Ah well, I think we should try and get some sleep now. 'tis late." He pulled the tunic over his head and folded it. Then he turned to Maradir. "Have you seen Túrin, by the way? He has been gone for quite some time now."

+++

Túrin had indeed ambled off to the stables, not so much as to fetch his comb, but as to while away some time ere his return to his quarters. Half leaning against a wooden beam, he stood by his horse, talking softly to it and feeding it pieces of carrots. Now and again he took a bite at a carrot himself.

There was no light in the stables, only what little fell through the small windows. Soft snorts and shuffling of hooves indicated where horses stood, and there was the faint rustling of mice in the straw, and the sacks of oats. After a while Túrin realised that most of the horses seemed strangely alert, even uneasy. Yet he was quite sure that he was alone in the stables. The guards that watched the house were elsewhere; he had seen them briefly on his way to the horses. When the animals' tension increased, Túrin's curiosity was stirred. He went to the doors that led out into the inner courtyard of the mansion, and standing in their shadow he glanced out, surveying the paved court. No one was to be seen, and only few of the windows looking down on the court were still lit. Most people had apparently done to sleep already.

A gust of wind sighed across the courtyard, picking up some dry leaves and bits of straw and twirling them about. A

door was flapping. Túrin looked out for it, and saw that it was of one of the storage sheds next to the stables. He walked over to shut it again. But just before he had closed it, his gaze had fallen inside. He froze, and suddenly felt a chill that had nothing to do with the wind creeping up on him. He had seen a pile of blankets on the floor, looking as if they had been dropped, and, protruding from behind a crate, a foot, and the seam of a dress. Bracing himself, he carefully crept closer to investigate.

Canamarth

“Not since he left the sick room,” Maradir said. “He was on his way upstairs if I remember correctly.”

“He left again to get something from his saddle-bag,” Faramir said distractedly. He was looking out of the window now.

“Why? Are you concerned he could be up to something?” Maradir smirked while taking off his tunic.

Khorazir

“You never know with Túrin,” Faramir said. “But I think this time his prime motivation for leaving was indeed tact. Lindórië had just come to give me this tunic, and apparently Túrin thought that we might appreciate being left alone for a short while. Still, he has been gone for quite some time now.” He glanced out of the window thoughtfully. Then he tensed. A dark figure that looked vaguely like Túrin had just stepped out of one of the storage sheds, a large and apparently heavy bundle in his arms. He was walking very swiftly back to the house. Faramir’s gaze followed him. “I think I found him,” he said, with an anxious note to his voice. “And there appears to be trouble of some kind. Come on, let us go and meet him. He has just entered the house.”

asaris

Since the conversation in Faramir’s room, Curufë had gone down to the common room to meditate, considering the events of the past evening as well as merely regaining his strength. It had been a fairly exhausting evening. But when Turin walked in through the door, carrying a body, he got up right away. “Turin! What has happened? Does she still live?”

Khorazir

Túrin shook his head sadly. His face was pale, his expression grim. “I found her in one of the storage sheds,” he told Curufë while walking towards a table to lay the body upon. “Apparently she had been sent to fetch blankets. Her neck has been broken. Curufë, we must have the house searched. The murderer can’t be gone for long. Her body was still warm when I found her.”

asaris

“Indeed. Where did you find her?”

“The stable.”

“I’ll go see if I can’t track the killer; go and tell Faramir.” Without waiting for an answer, Curufë went to the stable

and began following the tracks. He was fairly unsure about whether or not he could track the main across the hard-packed street, but he had to try. He was not called the best tracker in Middle-Earth for nothing.

Khorazir

When Curufë had left, Túrin covered the dead girl's face with the blanket he had wrapped her body in, and went to fetch Faramir. He met him and Maradir on the stairs. Apparently his friend had somehow expected some trouble to befall this night, for he did not look surprised when Túrin told him briefly how he had found the girl. But he, too, was shocked about the incident.

"Curufë ran off to try and track down the killer," Túrin said when they had reached the common room, and Faramir bent down to examine the dead girl.

Faramir nodded. "If he cannot find him, none of us will stand a chance. I must go and tell Lindórië. Please see to it that the other servants do not find out what happened yet. They will have to be informed, eventually, but I do not want too many rumours about how the poor girl met her end to spring up in this place. And the guards must be questioned. I wonder how the killer managed to enter the house – unless he was here all the time."

Khorazir

"I'll see what I can find out," Maradir said, and left. Túrin wanted to stay in the common room, to try and explain things to the servants and other folk that would undoubtedly be arriving soon, having been woken by the commotion in the house. Faramir went to fetch Lindórië.

On the corridor leading to her quarters he met a servant, who gave him a surprised glance. "I think the lady is asleep already, captain," she said. "Unless, of course ... well, I won't tell anybody." She smiled conspirationally.

But Faramir was in no mood for jesting. "I need to speak to the lady, and inform her of what has befallen down in the courtyard," he said sternly.

The servant's eyes grew wide, for his tone had left no doubt that it was no good news he was bringing. She bit her lip. "I'm sorry, lord," she said, and courtesied a little clumsily. "The lady's bedroom is over there."

"Thank you," he said and went on.

"Lord." He stopped and turned. "What did befall in the courtyard?" she asked, anxiously.

Faramir sighed slightly, and his stern expression softened somewhat. "Go down to the common room. My friend Túrin will explain things to you. Well, and you will see for yourself."

As the servant hurried off, Faramir continued to Lindórië's room and knocked on the door. Judging by the time it took her to light a candle and answer the door he assumed that she had indeed been asleep. She was obviously surprised to see him, but one look at his face showed her that the reason for his visit was a grave one.

"What is wrong?" she asked, inviting him to enter with a gesture of her hand, and closing the door behind him.

"There has been a murder," Faramir said, knowing that any attempt to veil the seriousness of the matter would not be appreciated. "One of the servant-girls, apparently. Down in one of the sheds. Túrin found her on his way from the stables ..."

He broke off when he realised that she had turned very pale for a moment, which to him was all the more alarming as he knew her as somebody who could control and moreover hide her emotions very well. "Gilwen," she muttered, her

voice slightly hoarse. "It must be Gilwen."

She went to the window and leaned against the frame, shaking her head in disbelief. Faramir followed her. "She went down there to fetch some more blankets," Lindórië said softly, without looking at him. "What is more, we had had an argument about this. I had wanted to go myself, since she had worked hard all day. But she insisted, and in the end I let her go. I was even glad about it. And now ... she was looking forward to getting married next month." She bowed her head. Faramir reached out and gently laid a hand on her shoulder.

"It was not your fault," he said softly.

She turned to him, and he was stricken by the fierce light in her eyes. "Yes, it was," she returned. "You surely do not think that it was the killer's intention to murder an innocent servant-girl, do you? She was wearing one of my old dresses. 'tis me they are after."

"And you would prefer them to have been successful at killing you, then?" Faramir asked.

The fierce glow faded from her eyes, and she looked sad again. "Of course not," she admitted softly. "But it grieves me that other people are endangered – and now even killed – because of me. That wolf which attacked you a few days ago was no coincidence."

"I know," he replied. "But what convinces you that it had been sent after you? I am pretty sure that there are people who would not mourn my demise, either."

"'tis not the first time that there has been an attempt on my life," she said, looking suddenly very tired. "For several years now people have been trying to get rid of me. My husband may be behind it, or his brother, or one of their friends, or all of them together. I do not know for certain."

"You never told me this," Faramir said.

"No, I did not, because I did not want you to worry." She looked to the floor for a moment, then sighed and raised her eyes again. "I must go down and speak to Túrin. And to the other servants. Also somebody must go and fetch Gilwen's parents who live nearby. And Gelmir, her betrothed. Please excuse me, I need to change."

"Of course," Faramir said, left the room, and returned to the common room.

Galhadrim

By the time Scratch had turned and twisted through the city and returned to his squalid rooms he was muttering happily to himself. "Free of him, free of him, that's what I am. I've done the deed and I'll not see that wretched man any more. Free to be, free is me." His chuckles and laughter echoed off the bare walls as he climbed into the flimsy straw bed in the corner. "No more of him, no more of him. Free..."

The sleep that took him was the sweetest he had known in years.

EdaintheRanger

Andanor was about to put his feet up when there was a knock at the door.

After the military formalities a ranger entered and quickly told him what had happened. Andanor was annoyed at the fact that security had been breached. In his mind that meant two things either it was an inside job, or this was some serious assassin with no qualms about security what so ever. Unprofessional thoughts passed through his mind as what to do with the assassin and the sentinel who had let his guard drop. All this was concealed from the messenger and

Andanor answered

“Very well, thank you for informing me promptly, I’ll see to it immediately. Make it known to the sentinels that I’m displeased and that all movement in and out of the inn must be stopped or at the least monitored.”

The assassin was probably long gone, but they needed to trace all lines of enquiry. Andanor then followed the man out of the room, his mind slipping back to his training and no longer mused over the poem he had been mentally composing, his previous life far, far, away.

Khorazir

On his way back to the parlour Faramir felt his feet slowing, almost against his will, until at length he stopped at a narrow window overlooking the city. Lindórië’s reaction to his tidings had surprised and moreover alarmed him. He knew her well enough to have noticed that the news had troubled her even more than what she had allowed to show. Obviously she felt guilty that the poor girl had been killed instead of her, but Faramir suspected that there was more than that. Did she fear for her own life? According to what she had said, and in the light of recent developments, she had all reason for doing so. And yet ... apparently this danger was not new to her. There had been other attempts, in the past ...

And she has never told me, he thought, and suddenly he felt a trace of indignation, even betrayal. All these years he had been under the impression that there had been something special between them, that there were no secrets as they had talked (or written, rather, since opportunities to actually talk had been scarce) about virtually anything. He, certainly, had not concealed any of his troubles from her. Had she so little trust in their friendship that she would try and hide matters of such gravity from him? Did she think him too young and inexperienced to handle them? *Well, she is not the only one*, he thought bitterly. Denethor, too, had apparently not considered it necessary to inform his son about the more complicated and moreover dangerous aspects of this errand.

Suddenly Faramir felt angry. How on earth was he supposed to lead his men under these circumstances? Oh yes, Falastur had been right. He was indeed no more than a mere boy in this, who suddenly found himself in a game of dread and danger with highly skilled, unscrupulous players, all of which knew much more about it than himself.

He leaned against the windowframe and sighed. Of a sudden he longed for the woods of Ithilien. Things were so much easier there. There, too, was danger, of course, but of a different kind. The enemy was obvious, and one’s moves straightforward and plain, without the secrecy and backstabbing that was employed here. *I am not made to be a politician*, he thought wearily, and then he left the window, and continued on his way. Once Lindórië had calmed down a little, he would ask her to explain a few things to him – something which, he realised, he should have done much sooner.

When he had descended the stairs, he saw movement ahead on the corridor, and soon recognised Andanor. He called his lieutenant’s name, and quickened his pace to catch up with him. He dimly remembered that he still needed to talk with him about the fight, but now other matters were of more importance. “I take it you have been informed about what happened?” he said when he had reached the other, who nodded. “Curufë and Maradir have gone off to see if they can find out something about the killer. And we must speak with the guards, and the servants.” He looked his lieutenant up and down. “You look better than an hour ago. Were you able to rest?”

Canamarth

Maradir found Curufë in the courtyard, stooping over the dirt in front of the stables. He moved this way and that. Preventing some of the rangers from crossing the yard was all Maradir could do at the moment. “Make sure no one soils any traces. And fetch me the guards.” One of the confused rangers hurried off.

Just as he returned Curufë exclaimed something in Quenya which Maradir did not understand. It seemed he had

found some trace which led him to the back gate. "Curufë!" Maradir shouted. "Wait! I'll watch your back while you follow the track." The Noldo nodded.

Maradir turned to the rangers. "Bring those guards to Faramir or Andanor and have them questioned. Someone might have slipped past your watchful eyes." With that he sped after the elf.

Bardhwyn

"Seems a serving girl has been found murdered.. in the stable." Laren said quietly, stirring the potion into a cup of water.

"Murdered?" Gareth mumbled through swollen lip. He lay on his back in a small bed in a small room, somewhere...

"Aye. It is being looked into. Could be just a local affair.. one hopes. Here, drink this. The Healer said it will reduce the swelling all around and surprisingly not make you drowsy." The Ranger said, handing the cup to Gareth after the lad had slid his aching body into a sitting position.

"My thanks." Gareth said, straining to speak clearly. "Any idea what it is?", Gareth asked, sniffing the sweet drink. Laren shrugged and shook his head as he gingerly sat himself in a wooden, straight backed chair next to the bedside table. Gareth braced himself, brought the cup to his lips and quaffed the liquid, quickly.

"AAAAAargh. Ah.. well, the sheer shock of the taste alone is enough to keep anyone awake." The young and battered man spat. Laren chuckled softly.

"Better you than me, mate." The Ranger said.

Gareth shot a quick glance over to the blonde man where he sat, aware he'd said, 'Mate'. He found himself trying to smile, yet managing only a quick uplift of his bruised lips. "Thanks." He replied, with sufficient sarcasm. "And you? Are you alright?"

"I am bruised, tired but alright. I think my nose is broke again. You, though.. you've surprised us all. Two beatings and you're still alive.. and with your wits, too." The man fell silent for a moment. "My thanks to you, Gareth.. for coming to my aid."

Gareth shrugged off the remark, placing the cup on the bedside table. He then leaned back on the thin pillow behind him.

"So, Laren, where am I? Back at the manor house? And how in the name of Morgorth did that brawl start?"

"Well, I will tell you..", Laren answered and the Ranger proceeded to tell the young man, who was quickly becoming the Company's newest and brightest, the story of Padhir and Andanor... along with many other tales pertaining to the Rangers with whom Laren served.

Gareth listened and marvelled how he'd managed to move from despised prisoner to apparently a valued comrade... and how he was still just a spy.

'I wonder where the Captain is and if he survived?' He pondered while also listening to Laren. Gareth suppressed a shudder at the thought of learning perhaps Maradir had been slain or injured leaving him unsupervised and alone...'

"And then Maradir, friend to Faramir arrived.. with Bowmen. Don't ask me where they came from, I know not."

"Maradir! He was there, I saw him.. he survived, unscathed?" Gareth asked, his interest keen.

"Why... yes. Why?"

“Oh.. he’s very skilled with the bow,” Gareth muttered. “I hope to learn more from him, is all. Good, please, please carry on.. “

And with that Gareth schooled himself once again, reminding himself he was a spy.. he was a spy.. a spy..

Khorazir

Down in the parlour Túrin found himself confronted by an increasing number of servants, guards and rangers, all of them wanting to know what happened. Once having been told, most reacted with shocked silence, although one of the servant girls immediately dissolved into tears. Túrin was glad that the cook, a robust woman with a kind, good-natured face was present to look after her. None of them, the guards the least, were able to explain how the murderer had been able to enter the house, nor why he should have killed the girl. Clearly some of the servants felt threatened themselves.

Túrin felt increasingly uncomfortable among these grief-stricken, anxious people, and was relieved when he spotted Faramir and Andanor arriving. They signed to the guards and rangers to come over, most likely to question them. Then Lindórië came as well, looking paler and more grim than usual. The servants streamed towards her, and she did her best to soothe and console them, and reduce their fears by telling them that the murderers target had most likely been her. Túrin was surprised by this openness. People were sent to fetch the girl’s parents, and her betrothed, the rest were given tasks such as preparing tea, to keep them busy, and their minds off the tragedy, although Túrin doubted that it worked.

After a while, when most of the servants had left to see to their tasks, Lindórië went over to Túrin, and the dead girl. She lifted the blanket and looked at the pale face, then took a deep breath, and covering it again, glanced at him. “Curufë and Maradir are out there looking for traces,” he said, feeling that some statement of his was required. “And Faramir’s questioning the guards.” He glanced down at the body. “She was betrothed.”

Lindórië nodded slightly. “The wedding was already set up,” she said softly, without looking at him.

He swallowed. “I’m really sorry,” he said.

She nodded. “So am I. But this is how these people work,” she added, raising her eyes to give him a keen, almost angry look. “They do not care about who might suffer, if only they achieve their goals.”

“These people?” he asked. “You know who is behind this?”

“I have a good idea, yes. And I think we will have to be both more careful and more offensive in the future, if we are to succeed in our errand. Tomorrow’s visit to Falastur is going to be very important.” She cast a long, thoughtful glance at Faramir. “I only wish I had not gotten him involved in this.”

“Well, it has been my understanding that sending him was the Steward’s idea, not yours,” Túrin said.

“True. But, you see, Denethor can be as unscrupulous and cruel as our enemies, maybe even worse. Perhaps he has to be. At least this is what he claims. And ‘tis obvious that he is willing to sacrifice much for the future of the realm.”

“He doesn’t appear to be the only one,” Túrin observed, and she cast down her eyes at this.

“You are right,” she said. “I am almost as bad as he.”

Túrin shook his head swiftly. “That’s not what I meant, really. It’s rather ... I mean, from what I have gathered during the last days I understand that you’ve had to make quite some sacrifices in your life, to end feuds and secure peace and all. And this errand now ... Well, you said yourself that the assassin had been after you. I’m sure you could have refused to get involved in all this, and spared yourself the trouble and danger. But you didn’t. That’s pretty selfless, in my eyes.”

“Pretty stupid, you mean, although you are too much of a gentleman to put it that plainly,” she said, giving him a brief, weary smile.

Túrin shook his head. “I don’t think the term “gentleman” applies to me. After all, there are some who’d strongly dispute this claim.” *Lossiel and Visilya come to mind*, he added in thought.

“Well, at least you have good manners, then” she returned, smiling again, before turning to a servant who had addressed her.

EdaintheRanger

The two senior rangers had entered the grief-stricken parlour, and for a second Andanor was annoyed at this public display of grief, before reminding himself that these people were “civvies” and so not governed by military protocol. So he merely remained annoyed, but now only at himself, for forgetting that he was in a civilian environment. Accompanying Faramir he followed the situation, carefully sifting for information, knowing that the slightest snippet could provide leads. Unfortunately his tired mind wandered, and he found himself pondering the conversation in the corridor before. It had been short and abrupt and he found himself questioning the orders of a superior like Padhir had done earlier that evening. The boot was on the other foot now! Perhaps he could have handled the situation better, or maybe the situations of the last few days were getting the better of him? Shoving aside his self doubt, Andanor rubbed the back of his neck wearily. There had to be some evidence somewhere.

asaris

Eventually, after following the trail for hours, Curufë arrived at a decrepit building near the docks. The roof looked like it was about to cave in, and half of the windows had been boarded over, probably for quite some time. The door was unlocked, that is to say, had no lock – the landlord had apparently tired of replacing the lock after the many burglaries that must plague a place such as this. As a drunken couple stumbled by behind him, laughing idiotically, the elf entered the building. The trail led to a room on the second floor, behind a locked door.

Curufë kicked in the door to see a small, rather pathetic looking man bolt upright from his bed. The room was barely large enough for the bed and the one chest that apparently doubled as a table. The scraps of dinner still sat upon it, and the floor was strewn with various bits of debris. The man looked at Curufë in surprise and fear and stammered “W-w-what do you w-want?” The elf looked into the man’s eyes and asked him, “Why did you kill Lindorië?”

Khorazir

The questioning of the guards and the rangers that had been on duty or searched the surroundings yielded little information. Not that Faramir had expected that they would be able to tell much. Obviously the mysterious assassin had been very skilled in his trade, and in the arts of stealth and secrecy.

When the men had reported all they knew, Faramir sent them to their posts, doubling the watchforce, although he did not believe that another attempt at assassination would be made tonight. The rest he dismissed, and told them to get some rest. It was getting late, and most rangers had received injuries during the fight in town, and could certainly do with some sleep. Andanor, too, looked tired, when Faramir turned to him. “You should get some rest as well,” he told his lieutenant. “There does not seem to be much we can do, except wait. Hopefully Curufë and Maradir will find out something about the killer, but till they return, we can as well try and get some sleep. I do not know what your plans are for tomorrow morning. I will be required to attend an audience at Falastur’s, which I all but look forward to. You can accompany me, if you want, and I would even appreciate it, but that is your decision. ‘tis not going to be a pleasant meeting, I fear.”

“That’s why I won’t be coming,” Túrin said, walking over to them. “I promised Daewen to show her the town tomorrow. By the way, has anybody seen Visilya and this other lady, Alessya, of late? I was wondering what has happened to them.”

Faramir shrugged. “I do not know. I thought they had gone into town. Why?”

“Just curious,” Túrin said, avoiding Faramir’s glance. “Well, I’m off to bed now. I don’t think I’m required here any longer. Lindórië is looking after the dead girl’s parents and her betrothed. The poor people looked really distressed, and to be honest I couldn’t bear staying around them any longer. She told me to tell you that she would like to talk to you afterwards.”

“Thank you. I shall wait for her, then. Good night.”

“Good night.” Túrin gave Faramir and Andanor a nod, then left. Faramir sighed slightly and closed his eyes for a moment. In truth he was rather tired himself, but he wanted to talk with Lindórië, too. “Hope there is some tea left,” he muttered wearily.

EdaintheRanger

Faramir made his appointment with Falastur sound like having his teeth pulled would be a preference. So Andanor grinned grimly and said that he would gladly offer his support to his young captain. Faramir was fast developing his father’s skill and guile as a politician, Andanor could feel the young man gaining in confidence as the days past by. Though whether Faramir himself could see his own development was another matter. Self doubting youth! So Gandalf had been a benolevant influence indeed! The stories bandied about about the lad being the “wizard’s fool and a starry-eyed pupil” Andanor felt could really be laid to rest after this episode. Though knowing the ways of the military and of Denenthor’s house Andanor suspected otherwise, this song would remain long unsung.

Besides Andanor felt that he could perhaps weight the situation by merely being there, the lieutenant’s presence might be enough to tip the balances in to Faramir’s favour for once. Returning to the events of the evening Andanor seemed to be assured that both Curufë and Maradir (even though he might have suspicions on the latter’s motives) would dredge up clues soon and in the morning’s clear light the perpetrators would be exposed. At this point Túrin left and Andanor unable to break habit gave a crisp farewell salute. The tiredness now threatening to fog his mind meant that he only half heard Faramir’s utterance.

“Beg pardon, Sir?” Andanor spoke politely, then seeing Faramir’s motions towards the stewed tea urn, he preempted the manouevre and swiftly emptied the treacle-like brew into the last clean(ish) mug. Handing the refreshing brew to his captain, Andanor attempted to make his leave.

Canamarth

Maradir followed Curufë at some distance. He kept their surroundings in view and only occasionally glanced at the ground to see if he could see any traces. He managed to discern a certain footprint from time to time but was quite sure that he could not have followed it with all the other imprints of a busy city and the occasional stretches of good pave-way with hardly any dirt and dust to be stirred. But the Noldo rediscovered the trail every time, though it took them several hours till they arrived at a dilapidated house near the docks.

Curufë went in before Maradir was anywhere close. He was further delayed by a drunken couple that blocked his way to inquire where The Black Trout Inn was. He pointed the way he had come from and brushed passed them impatiently. With another quick glance about he followed the elf into the house.

Just as he reached the foot of the stairs he heard a door being kicked in upstairs. He drew his sword and hurried up.

Faramir thanked his lieutenant and wished him a good night. "We are expected at Falastur's rather early," he reminded him. "So be prepared."

When Andanor had left, Faramir sank down on a chair in front of a table, where he placed his mug. The parlour was deserted by now. The girl's body had been removed to a neighbouring room, where Lindórië could be heard softly talking to her parents and her betrothed. Sipping his tea slowly, Faramir tried to shut out the murmurs and quiet sobs, but he did not quite succeed, so he rose again, and taking his tea left the room for a stroll through the courtyard. Two of the rangers that were on duty spotted him, and one went over to report that all was quiet.

"There has been some commotion at the gate, though," the man said. "Apparently the neighbours have noticed that something was wrong here, and people came over to inquire about it. But we managed to fend them off, and sent them home. There's going to be talk in the city tomorrow, I'd reckon."

"Most likely," Faramir agreed. "Please inform me if there are any more disturbances that cannot be solved that easily."

The ranger saluted and returned to his post. Faramir finished the tea outside, then returned to the parlour, where the three bereaved were about to leave with the body. Lindórië accompanied them to the gate, before returning to where Faramir was waiting. She looked tired, but also grim and sad.

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting. You must be weary," she said.

"'tis alright," he replied. "Túrin said you wanted to talk to me."

"Yes, I did, but I am not sure anymore if now is the right time."

He gave her a questioning glance, and she sighed slightly, but then continued: "I realised during our conversation upstairs that I might have hurt you with my curtness, and I could see how you were upset about the fact that I have told you much less about myself than you thought. You must have believed that I had not deemed you mature enough to understand my problems."

Faramir looked at her surprisedly, marvelling at how well she seemed to have read his mind. Then he cast down his eyes. "I will not deny that it did seem to me like that at first, but the more I thought about it I realised that apparently you had good reasons for not informing me of the danger you are in, and that moreover doing so by letter would have been extremely foolish. Still, it made me wonder how seriously you take me, as a friend and all."

She gave him a long, steady glance. "A friend and all?" she replied quietly. "You know that you are more than a friend to me."

He nodded, and for a few moments neither of them spoke. "'tis late," he said at length, when he thought that the silence had turned uncomfortable.

"Yes," she agreed, stepped a little closer and kissed him. He returned the kiss, and they glanced at each other again for a long while, until he lowered his gaze, and swallowed slightly. "It would make things even more complicated, would it not?" he said softly.

She cast down her eyes. "Most likely. Although it might well be worth it," she added, looking up at him again, "if you are as good at other things as you are at kissing." She was smiling now.

He smiled as well, glad that the awkwardness of the situation had thus been resolved in humour. "That remains to be seen," he replied. "But if you feel like wanting to find out some other time, tell me."

"I will," she said, kissing him again swiftly. "Good night, Faramir."

"Good night."

Maradir flew through the door with sword ready to strike. He saw dim light coming from a lamppost outside a window, Curufë standing in the center of a sparse room, and a whining wretch of a man laying in bed and pleading for his life. Sun over sky, thought the ranger. The Elf did it.

Curufë had his war spear in his hand and held it at the throat of the thin and bedraggled man. Maradir kept his sword in one hand, moving over to the table and lighting an oil lamp with the striker next to it. When the light came up he could see that the room held nothing of any worth, including it's resident.

"Now we will discuss your wanderings tonight," said the tall Elf, with more calm and composure than Maradir thought was warranted. "You were at an estate up the hill from here. What was your business there?"

"I've been nowhere, Master Elf, nowhere. I am a simple man and I've have slept the whole night." His groveling whine was pathetic. Maradir had seen the dregs of mankind before but this one reached all new depths.

Curufë nodded down to the boots at the foot of the bed. "Those boots of yours are heavily worn on their outside edges and leave a distinct track. That track also confirms your height. Should I go on or are you ready to tell the truth?"

The pause gave away everything. "I... I may have been out for a walk earlier. But..."

Maradir pounded the shabby table. "Out with it, man! It is late and we are tired."

The groveling wretch curled up with his moth eaten blanket around him. "I don't remember, don't remember. And I can't tell you anything. He won't let me tell anything. I cannot tell, I cannot tell."

Curufë drew back with his spear and looked over at the ranger.

The man continued babbling. "I cannot tell. You cannot make me tell. I beg you not, beg you not. If I tell, the rats will eat my eyes out. He told me so."

Curufë stood his spear up on it's end. "Who is the man who tells you these things," he asked softly.

The wretch's hand went up to his temple and his voice dropped to a whimper. "I... I don't remember. They'll eat my eyes. But tonight, tonight there's something different."

"What's different?"

The faltering hand dropped from the man's dirty face. "I'm... I'm free of him. After tonight I've done what he needed. I'm free of him!"

"Free of who?" asked Curufë.

"What have you done?" asked Maradir.

A wavering smile flitted across his lips and he swayed to his side. "Free of him," he whispered.

Maradir shook his head and sheathed his sword. "Let's bring him to Faramir, this is getting nowhere."

The man suddenly hissed in fear looking into the darkness of his room. "No, curse you! No, I didn't tell!" He quickly covered his eyes with both hands. "Eat their eyes out, not mine!"

The Elf and the ranger looked back and tried to follow the man's gaze. In the dark corner of the room, underneath a chest of drawers with peeling paint, sat a rat.

A violent creaking of the bed snapped their heads back around. The man growled with fierce eyes and outstretched

hands. "You brought him! I was free!" He launched himself up off the bed, dressed only in a long nightshirt. His hands were bent like claws and he jumped up with surprising strength and speed.

Curufë barely got his spear down in time. The man pierced himself on it and the Elf spun around, throwing the wretch onto the floor. With a bloody gasp, the man kicked once or twice and the life drained out of him.

Khorazir

Faramir glanced after her, then he fetched a candle from the table, extinguished the rest, and went to his own room. He opened the door carefully, not sure if Túrin was already asleep. The room was dark, but when he entered he heard the rustle of cloth, and saw his friend sit up in bed.

"Did I wake you?" Faramir asked, walking over to the windowsill where he placed the candle.

Túrin shook his head. "I wasn't sleeping yet. Any news from Maradir?"

"No. Neither he nor Curufë had returned when I left the parlour."

"Hope they're alright."

"I am sure they are," Faramir said beginning to undress. When he had discarded his shirt he noticed a strange look on Túrin's face. He thought he knew what it was about. "No news of Visilya, either," he said. "I know not whither she has gone. But surely she is alright, too."

"How did you know that I was about to inquire after her?" Túrin asked surprisedly. Faramir shrugged.

"You looked as if you wanted to ask something else, and this seemed the most obvious to me."

Túrin took a deep breath, and began tracing the folds of his blanket. "She's been avoiding me for days. Yeah, right, I guess I deserve it. But still ... I miss her."

"Just give her more time."

Túrin sighed and nodded. Then he glanced at Faramir. "What about you and the lady?"

Faramir felt himself blush slightly, and bent down to get rid of his boots so that Túrin would not notice. "What about us?"

"Well, I must admit I'm a bit surprised to find you here tonight. I'm sure she wouldn't mind having you around, and you wouldn't mind, either, am I right?"

Faramir was silent for a moment, feeling Túrin's curious gaze on him. "Yes," he admitted at length.

"So what's the problem?"

"Things are difficult enough."

Túrin raised an eyebrow. "So what? It may be worth it."

Faramir smiled slightly. "That is what she said as well."

"Maybe you should listen to her, then."

"You know, you almost sound as if you wanted to get rid of me," Faramir observed.

Túrin grinned. “Yeah, with Maradir out still, I was hoping to have a room to myself, and not having to endure other people’s snoring for once.”

“I am afraid I must disappoint you.”

Túrin sighed and lay back down. “You’ll wish you’d listened to me.”

Canamarth

Maradir sighed heavily. There had not been much of an alternative. The Noldo had to defend himself. Still, it was most unfortunate that the man was dead now. They had trailed him through Pelargir for hours - and for what? The stammerings of a half-mad wretch babbling about rats and a mysterious master.

A quick search of the room produced nothing, besides a few rags and the rat that was still sitting underneath the chest of drawers. “Let’s go,” Maradir finally said. “There’s nothing more for us here.”

Khorazir

Faramir smiled and went to extinguish the candle. “I am sure it will be a pleasure to you to repeatedly quote your own saying to me in the future.”

Túrin grinned broadly. “Well, you brought it upon yourself. Have a good night.”

“You too.”

+++

The two young men soon fell asleep, but Lindórië did not find rest for a long while. The murder had troubled her more than she had been willing to admit, especially to herself. She truly grieved for the unfortunate girl and her family and loved ones, and felt guilty about her death. But there also was the fact that this had not just been the rage of a madman, but a calculated, planned attempt at assassination. Yes, there had been others in the past, but she had always been careful, attentive, and thus had managed to avoid the stealthy killers, the poison, the arranged accidents. Yet now – only pure luck had saved her this time. And it had been close, so close. Had she insisted on fetching the blankets herself ...

Standing at the window, overlooking the sleeping city, she suddenly felt afraid. The fear and especially its intensity surprised her. As if the danger she had faced almost all her life was new to her. All those years she had done her duty, sacrificed her own happiness to save her family from falling prey to the bloody feud with the Lords of Lebennin. More than twenty years of spying for the Steward, making enemies in high places, enemies of the most dangerous kind. And she was weary of it all. She wanted to be free, rid of the responsibility and the danger. She kept telling herself that this errand, completed successfully, would grant her the freedom she so desired. Freedom to leave Gondor, to travel. Perhaps to find Imladris, truly a place of knowledge and learning, where the Elves dwelled she so loved. Or just to go somewhere nobody knew her and open a small school. She had loved teaching, and yearned to take up her old profession. She smiled at the thought. She wanted this dream to come true, but the fear that had settled on her heart and seemed to squeeze it with cold fingers, told her that she might not live to see it happen.

And even if all went well, there was still the matter with Faramir. She did not want to lose him. Their strange, quiet relationship had been one of the few stable, comforting things in her life, and she knew she would miss him terribly when she left Gondor for good. Then again she had always known – as had he – that their love had no future, and perhaps it was finally time to face this fact, and act accordingly. A faint smile passed over her face. Nay, that time had not come yet. As things looked, there was still a short while granted to them.

She remained for some time at the window, trying to tackle her fears, and after a while weariness took over, and she finally went to bed and fell asleep quickly.

asaris

Curufë nodded in agreement with Maradir, and the two of them wandered back through the slowly emptying streets towards the house of Lindórië. As they approached the house, the morning sun was beginning her journey from the eastern horizon. The mountains prevented any view of her vessel, but the greying of the sky foretold her imminent arrival. Quietly the two men made their way through the house in order to inform Faramir of what they had discovered.

Khorazir

The southern coast of Lebennin

Before the sun had risen, in the misty grey light of early dawn, the camp of Lord Tarannon's company perched on a rocky headland overlooking the sea was already astir with men and horses. The piquets of the night were about to be relieved, grooms were cutting forage for the horses on the windswept grasslands that covered the cliffs between patches of heather, gorse and clusters of trees bent landwards by the steady wind, and the men were getting ready to break up camp. Their task to fight the corsairs accomplished, most of the company was about to return to Linhir with their lord.

The rangers and skirmishers and part of the light cavalry, however, had been ordered to remain behind, to patrol the coast as far as the border with Pelargir. In particular they were to search the mouths of the rivers that were the favoured hideouts of the pirates. The corsairs may have been repelled for now, and their hidden settlements destroyed, but everybody knew they would be back. For years now the Umbarians as well as other raiders from the South (and from Gondor itself) had been harrying the rich coastlands of the southern fiefs, and not even a fierce, dedicated and successful military leader such as Tarannon of Lebennin had been able to get rid of them for good, and secure the coast. There were rumours that the lords were not really interested in that anyway. Some even said that they received a fair share of the booty the pirates stole from seafaring merchants or the settlements near the coast, and in turn saw to it that the corsairs were not troubled overly much in the pursuit of their business. Now and again the population would complain, there would be an impressive campaign, but after a few months the swift ships with their fierce crews would be back. And those people who had complained the loudest would have miraculously amassed a lot of wealth in a short while, or simply disappeared.

Tarannon had never concerned himself much with these more subtle methods of dealing with the corsairs. His brother Carandil usually dealt with them, and he was happy to leave him to it. As for the present campaign, he had enjoyed it. In his opinion there were far too few opportunities to exercise his host, and he welcomed them whenever they came. Therefore he was not entirely looking forward to returning home, especially with the disquieting tidings from Minas Tirith and recently Pelargir weighing on his mind. Very early in the morning a tired errand-rider had arrived from the town, and the message he had brought had definitely spoilt Tarannon's morning. He had read the note at breakfast, and had not touched his food afterwards. The message had been addressed to his advisor in the first place, but Grendel had not returned from his errand to Dol Amroth yet, a fact Tarannon resented. Right now he really needed his trusted, cunning councillor. He wondered slightly why somebody should send a message to Grendel. Usually the man already knew what errand-riders were about to report due to his uncanny powers, but apparently he also relied more normal sources of information.

One of the Grendel's numerous informants in Pelargir had, so said the message, spotted the company from Minas Tirith in the town. They were accommodated at Lindórië's house. It reported the fight the rangers had apparently started in the harbour, and even mentioned the murder. There had been confusion at first who the dead had been, but it had soon become clear that not Lindórië herself but only a servant-girl had been slain.

For a short moment, while reading this, Tarannon was not sure if to feel relieved or disappointed. He had never loved his wife, and during the past years they had become increasingly estranged. Moreover he had reason to believe that she was working for the Steward, and very much opposed to his and his brother's policies. But to have her murdered ... perhaps he was getting sentimental. Sure, she was a nuisance, a danger even. He could see the need of getting rid of her. On the other hand they had been married for twenty years now, and had somehow found an arrangement to live with the other despite all their differences. Maybe he had simply gotten used to her company.

Tarannon sat in thought for a while, before resuming his read. Which caused whatever sentimentality he might have harboured to vanish immediately, to be replaced by anger, and indeed disappointment that the murderer had killed the wrong person. For the message seemed to confirm what he had suspected for some time now, and it did so with a conviction that left little doubt. She had a lover! And not just anybody. Oh no. The bloody Steward's son himself. He felt a deep stab of hatred and, which surprised him, jealousy. He might not feel very warmly towards her, but she was still his wife. His and no other man's. And for a green boy to come and try to snatch her away ... What on earth did she find appealing in this soft, naïve kid barely out of his teens?

Obviously Denethor had arranged this, and arranged it neatly as was his wont. Tarannon was convinced that the Steward had had a hand in this. But for what reason? To make him jealous, to infuriate him? Well, in that he had succeeded. And if there was more to it? If it was genuine? The thought of this even increased his fury. What of these letters Falastur of Pelargir had mentioned at one point? Letters that dated back several years? And those meetings at feasts and other public occasions? He had never thought twice about the long conversations between his wife and the Steward's son. After all, he had been her student. But when he recalled them now he had to admit that there seemed to have been a closeness, a silent understanding between the two. For how long had they entertained their affair? And how serious was it? He is staying at her house now...

If his fierce reaction at these tidings surprised Tarannon, he quickly dismissed this feeling. The notion of betrayal was far stronger. He felt deeply insulted in his pride, and moreover was angry at himself that he had not given more heed to the obvious signs earlier. If this became known to the public – as it would, for these things never remained secret for long – he would become the laughing stock of Gondor. People would think him stupid, and, worse, weak. All because of a woman whom he now counted among his enemies, and her bloody lover.

He strongly considered tearing up the note and tossing it onto the charcoal that was burning in a brazier, but thought the better of it, and strode from his tent. "Captain Ondoher," he called angrily, and the captain who had been overseeing the reshoeing of his horse by the farrier stood to attention.

"My lord," he said carefully, noticing his superior's foul mood.

"There has been a change of plan," Tarannon informed him curtly. "Tell Captain Araval to get his men ready to leave for Linhir, and get the rangers and light horse on their way. You and my household cavalry will remain here."

Ondoher gave him a questioning glance. "Remain here, sire?"

"Not for long. We are leaving for Pelargir as soon as possible."

The captain who had been looking forward to be reunited with his family after months away from home looked disappointed and moreover confused. "Pelargir, sire? May I inquire after the reason for this decision?"

"Believe me, there is a good one," Tarannon replied fiercely, and Ondoher thought it wise not to ask further.

"The men will be ready, sire," he said. Then picking up courage, he asked: "Are we going to stay there for long?"

Tarannon gave him a dark glance that for some reason frightened the captain. "Oh no," he said softly. "Not long. I hope the matter will be settled in a very short while."

The Captain nodded and took that as his dismissal. He turned and signaled to some of his lesser officers, much would have to be reorganized this morning.

Tarranon stood with the breeze in his hair for a long moment. He was just about to return to his tent and begin the arrangement of his own effects when he saw a dusty and road weary carriage pull through the nearby marshaling field. Tarranon waited impatiently and watched the sweating horses pull up in front of him, practically lame. Grendelenoth stepped from the carriage as it came to a halt and didn't look back at either the driver or the mounted guards behind him.

Tarranon waited with his hands clasped behind his back. Grendel smoothed his dark hair and approached his master. "Lord Tarranon, it is good to see you."

"It is good you have finally returned. Although from the look of things you have made the best time possible." The horses all hobbled away and Tarranon could clearly see the angry looks of the riders. "Still, I wish you had not needed to go. This came for you." He handed his emissary the open note. "It is very interesting reading."

Grendel took the paper slowly and watched Tarranon reenter his tent. He followed and read through the message while Tarranon gave orders to his pages. Looking up from the note, Grendel asked, "Going to Pelargir?"

"Yes, immediately. I will not be made a fool of by that woman."

Grendel blinked and looked back down at the note. "But, sire, taking the host into another fief is a... strong and unsubtle message. Are you certain that the timing is right?"

Tarranon cut his hand through the air. "Damn your scheming! This insult cannot continue!"

Grendel glared at the pages as they paused and looked between the two. They had been in Tarranon's court long enough to know when their presence was needed elsewhere and they excused themselves. Watching them leave, Grendel stepped closer to the fuming Lord. "Sire, I understand your anger and your desire to keep your reputation intact but I believe you're missing the true advantage that this provides us. The attempt at her removal has failed us but as with everything we've planned we can turn it to—"

Tarranon raised a fist and stepped towards the councillor. "I never authorized such a move, you fool. You attempt too much!"

Grendel smiled and bowed slightly. "Sire, you said things would be better if she were not around to confound matters."

Tarranon pointed at the note. "That is not what I meant. I grow tired of your wiles. I have an army assembled and already in the field. I can—"

"You can do nothing. You cannot move against both Pelargir and Minas Tirith."

"A show of force and solidarity at the same time! Do not lecture to me on the ways of warfare." Tarranon was growing red faced and his neck muscles bulged.

Grendel looked into his eyes and took two quick steps to close the gap between them. "Now you listen to me." He stood very close to the lord, spoke softly, and held his gaze. "Everything we've planned depends on separating Denethor, Falastur, and Imrahil. Chaos is to our advantage. Now that we have Falastur's personal gold coins to seed amongst the pirates we can cast blame. Denethor will feel slighted. Imrahil, although he resisted me, will look upon all of us in the east as squabbling fools and stay out of it. Now, I cannot change the orders you've so rashly given but as always we can turn it to our advantage. All I humbly ask is for patience and caution. My Lord."

Tarranon blinked and looked slightly dazed. "Yes, patience and caution would be our best course of action."

Grendel back away. "Excellent decision, sire. I will prepare my belongings for our journey. Don't think too deeply on this matter with Lindorie, it will be of no consequence over the longer term."

"Very well. It riles me though. Perhaps a good slap across the upstart's face?"

"Whatever my liege pleases," said Grendel with a wide smile and a bow. He took his leave and exited the tent, setting off to find the courier who'd delivered his message to the wrong person.

Khorazir

Faramir woke while it was still dark. He reckoned that he had not slept more than a few ours, but it would have to suffice. The thought of having to confront Falastur in a short while prevented him from falling asleep again and so at length he rose. Maradir's bed was untouched, and Faramir felt a slight stab of concern. Túrin was sleeping soundly, the only thing visible of him in the dim light was tousled mob of hair between pillow and blanket. Faramir dressed, arraying himself in the tunic Lindórië had provided but taking his sword also, and silently left the room.

The house was quiet, but when he drew near to the parlour he saw that it was lighted, and heard footsteps and soft talk. It did not surprise him that upon entering he spotted Lindórië talking to a servant. She, too, was clad in more elaborate garments than the plain tunic and trowsers she had worn on the journey. She looked tired, but smiled when she spotted Faramir, and walked over to him.

"Good morning," she said, "it looks as if you were not able to get much sleep, either."

He shrugged, then grinned slightly. "Not surprising, is it. I can hardly await meeting Falastur. I have been looking forward to it all night." Then he stooped and kissed her gently. "Good morning to you as well."

She smiled and embraced him, and rested her head against his chest and shoulder. Faramir was surprised by this, as at the moment he felt rather like leaning upon her shoulder than the other way round, but eventually he put his arms round her and drew her close. "It will all go well, you will see," she said quietly, absentmindedly stroking his back. "He will try to shake your confidence and insult you, but as long as you remain calm and controlled he cannot succeed. Just do not take his spite too seriously."

Faramir nodded, but did not reply. For a while neither spoke, and the only sounds in the parlour were the soft clattering of a kettle in the nearby kitchen where apparently the servants were preparing breakfast, and the birds that were waking outside and beginning to greet the new day. And despite his anxiety about the impending audience with the Lord of Pelargir, at this moment Faramir felt utterly at peace, as if there were no concerns and worries in his life. Then Lindórië stirred slightly and sighed. When Faramir looked at her he noticed that she had closed her eyes. "Are you alright?" he asked softly.

"Yes, I am fine," she replied, drawing back a little and giving him a faint smile. "Just tired."

He knew this to be only half the truth, but did not inquire further because he heard footsteps approach from outside. Lindórië and he stepped apart and turned towards the door.

Canamarth

Curufë and Maradir found Faramir and Lindórië in the parlour. They related what they had witnessed and that they would have to tell some official about it, as they had been seen entering the house. "We might as well add it to the list of disturbances we caused when we speak to Lord Falastur," Maradir sighed. "When are we going to him?"

"We are supposed to be there at nine, which is still some time off," Faramir replied. "Enough for us to have a decent breakfast, at least." He took a sip of the tea the servants had brought when Maradir and Curufë had begun their account, and smiled grimly. "Falastur will be delighted to hear about your breaking into a house and killing one of his citizens, although I am sure he does exactly mind having this kind of citizen removed. What a pity you were not able to question him properly. What he babbled about does not make sense at all."

"I do not know," Lindórië said thoughtfully. "According to what you reported the man was clearly terrified, and not by you. Apparently he feared this strange master of his more than he feared you."

"Do you have an idea who his master might be?" Faramir asked.

She was silent for a while. "I am not sure. But I have a suspicion that it might be Tarannon's counsellor, a man called Grendelenoth. I do not know much about him, despite having done a lot of research trying to find out more about his past, which remains a complete mystery. Nobody seems to know whence he came, what he did before he entered into Tarannon's service some years ago, not even how old he is. Or where exactly his loyalties lie. Well, Tarannon trusts him. What is more, he has come to rely rather heavily on his advice, as has his brother Carandil. The rest of my husbands advisors – those he has not gotten rid of yet – fear Grendel too much to oppose him. I have not met him often. He seems to avoid me on purpose, and he is definitely a rather uncomfortable man to converse with, so I did not mind not having to deal with him frequently. In public we have treated each other ... politely, but I know he bears even less love for me than Tarannon does, and would not mind getting rid of me."

"So you think he sent this wretch after you?"

"It seems likely. I would not be surprised if Grendelenoth could and would threaten a man enough to make him a murderer."

"Well, at the moment I would rather face this shadowy Grendelenoth than our friend Falastur," Faramir said darkly.

"No, you would not," Lindórië returned with surprising sharpness and earnest. "Falastur may be haughty and ruthless in his own way, but Grendel is far more dangerous. I hope for you that you will never have to face him."

+++

The sun had risen over the ragged ridges of the Ephel Duath in the East, and her golden beams began to dissolve the thin mists that shrouded the grasslands on both sides of the road, and glinted on the helms and speartips of the horse-men that were following the broad highway in an eastward direction, riding speedily. In the midst of the company that comprised of about two dozen men was a dark carriage, equipped with four fresh horses. Tarannon had never understood why his counsellor preferred this mode of transport. A passionate horseman himself, he considered carriages a thing for delicate ladies. But given the amount of travel Grendel had taken upon him recently, Tarannon could see that not having to sit in the saddle all the time made long journeys more bearable.

Riding at the head of the company, he now turned in the saddle to cast a swift glance over his men. He had all reason to be proud of them. They were his household guard, handpicked, and had proven their valour in many battles. But he also knew that they were not looking forward to this errand. Many of them had not seen their home for months. Still, Captain Ondóher had said that none of them had complained when he had relayed his lord's orders to them.

Tarannon turned again and looked ahead, narrowing his eyes against the level beams of the sun. They were steering away from the coast, following the main road towards Pelargir. It wound away before them through meadows, fields and clusters of woodland. Here and there the roofs of a village or the thatched gables of a farmhouse could be seen poking out of the mist. These were rich, fertile lands, and apart from the fields of the Pelennor and the lands about Pelargir and Dol Amroth one of the most densely populated parts of Gondor. No wonder the corsairs harried these coasts so often.

Even though they were riding swiftly, it was not fast enough for Tarannon. Even at this speed, which was all the hors-

es could muster, considering the long ride that still lay ahead, they would not reach Pelargir before nightfall. He was still aware of Grendel's warning that they must not act rashly, but he could not get the image of him being publicly humiliated by his wife and her cursed lover out of his mind. Grendel, for all his subtlety and guile, simply did not understand this. There were other, more important things than his shrewed plots, simple and straightforward things like honour and valour. And my honour is definitely at stake here, Tarannon thought grimly. He had as yet no clear idea what to do when they reached Pelargir, but he would make sure that Lindórië finally learned to obey him. He had tolerated her antics long enough. And as for the boy ... well, he would be taught a lesson also, a lesson his former teacher had definitely neglected. Is it not said that even his own father dislikes him and prefers his firstborn son? Who knows, in the end Denethor might even be pleased if I free him of that nuisance.

Canamarth

"He is a councillor, is he not?" Maradir interposed. "Councillors usually don't make good fighters."

asaris

"The most dangerous men of this world," Curufë responded, "Are never the fighters, but rather the treacherous. It was not through fighting that Celegorm and Curufin conquered Nargothrond, and it was not through fighting that Eregion was undone! A man with a sword will only be one man, no matter how skilled he is, but a man with the powers of the shadows is a man against whom one must be wary."

EdaintheRanger

Surprising, considering that he wasn't swimming to the back teeth in cheap booze, Andanor began to snore almost immediately as he hit the truckle bed that was his sanctuary that night. He had slipped off his boots and flattened his greasy dark hair, and then was dead to the world. The snores reverberated through the house and disturbed the flies.

Then it wasn't all that surprising after all, the man had barely had chance to close his eyes over the last few days. Of his sleep he remembered little save a strange whisp of a dream involving a giant dog gnawing on his leg. Awaking with pins and needles he was non-plussed about it all.

Khorazir

Lindórië nodded gravely. "Well said, Curufë. The trouble is that we know so little about this Grendel. I think I know Tarannon well enough to judge and partly foresee his actions, yet the other remains a mystery." She took a deep breath. "Be that as it may, first we must concentrate on Falastur. What do you think, Maradir and Curufë, is there anything about your encounter last night he could use against you, or twist so as to get you into trouble? The last thing we need is a trial for murder on our hands."

Canamarth

Maradir looked at the elf. "I don't know. The man certainly did not look like he could have stood up in a fair fight against a Noldo - or me for that matter. But it should also be clear from where he hid away that he's none of the good, necessarily law-abiding citizens of the city either. If Falastur wanted to make any trouble out of it - I'm sure he could."

Maradir sank back into his chair, a little exhausted from a night without sleep, and thinking of Curufë's words. The

most dangerous men are never the fighters, but rather the treacherous. But even the treacherous can be killed with a sword, Maradir thought. He had seen enough of his companions killed while out on a mission pretending to be someone else, double-talking, feigning this and that. They all had been cunning strategists and diplomats. But the elf and Lindórië seemed to hint at something more than that. A man with the powers of the shadows is a man against whom one must be wary. He involuntarily shuddered.

Khorazir

“Let us hope, then, that Falastur will content himself with taking me apart,” Faramir said, “and conveniently forget about your encounter – should he know about it at all.”

“I am sure he does,” Lindórië said. “He has good spies and informants. Well, there is a little we can do to inconvenience him in turn. I have to deliver the Steward’s letter, the contents of which Falastur is not going to like. And there is the matter with his sons – if those were indeed the young men you spotted following the company yestereve, Curufë. He will not be pleased to learn they have been out against this will, and that we almost caught them. Ah, and there comes breakfast. You two must be starving. We still have about two hours ere we have to set out. Hopefully you will manage to get some rest.”

Canamarth

“I’m certainly planning on it,” Maradir yawned. He ate a hurried breakfast before retiring to bed for an hour-and-a-half of sleep.

Khorazir

The others took more time for their breakfast. Curufë, although he, too, had been up all night, did not look very tired. Nevertheless there was little conversation at the table. Lindórië sat deep in thought, apparently considering what she had just heard. Faramir was preoccupied with imagining what might await him at Falastur’s in a short while. When a group of rangers entered the parlour, however, he stirred. They were about to relieve their comrades who had kept watch during the night. When these returned from their posts to have breakfast and then retire to bed, he questioned them briefly. They had little to report. What had remained of the night after the incident had been calm and uneventful.

“What struck us as odd, though,” one of them said, “was the number of folk still about, outside the gate. Obviously there has been some talk about the murder, and these people tried to catch a closer look of what was going on inside the house. They did not dare to draw near, because they knew we were about, but some of them staying on for quite a long time, as if to catch as much information as possible. What do you make of that, captain?”

“It sounds as if they had good reason to stay on. Most likely they were being paid for gathering information, and there are several people we know of who would be interested in receiving information thus gathered. Tell the others to keep their eyes open for more of these sneaky fellows. Oh, and when you get to your quarters, see if you can find Andanor. He wanted to accompany us to Falastur. Tell him we are due to leave at 8.30.”

Galhadrin

Grendelenoth sent word forward that he would be taking a short side trip of some importance and Tarranon crumpled the note in his fist and kept riding. He had a very good idea what would soon be happening but preferred to let his emissary deal with such matters.

The carriage pulled off the main road and started winding down a cart path through the trees lit by the bright morning sun. A brook trickled its way down to a stream and the carriage followed it until a village on the sea appeared. The few villagers who had not already departed in their fishing boats turned their eyes and shied their young ones away, naturally knowing that the dark carriage with curtains drawn was something to be avoided.

Beyond the village was a makeshift dock of sorts that held larger ships in need of resupply. Tied up at the moment was a large tradesman vessel that had seen many days upon the ocean. It flew a Gondorian standard but that meant little, as merchants always had a standard available for whatever friendly port they were pulling into. The carriage stopped and Grendel stepped out, carrying a large and heavy bag over his shoulder that clinked when he walked.

Two sailors stood guard at the gangplank of the ship, which looked leaner and faster than most merchant ships if one knew what to look for. Grendel approached them without hesitation. "Send for your Captain."

They glanced at one another and one turned to dash back up onto the deck. The other turned with a nervous smile. "G'day, sire. Is the Cap'n expecting you?"

Grendel kept his dark eyes on the ship, dismissing the sailor with his inattention. "No, but trust me, you'll receive no flogging for doing my bidding."

As if to answer him, a swarthy, red-jacketed man came out from the aft castle. He stood with his hands on his hips before reaching up to his dark beard and scratching his face. "Oh, very well then, bring him aboard."

Grendel followed the Captain into his quarters underneath the wheel deck. The ceiling was low and the room lit by massive glass windows facing out to the Great River, which one could hardly see across at this point. The Captain sat. "I didn't think you'd be here so soon. I'd offer you a drink but I don't think you drink, or even eat or breathe for that matter." His laughter turned to wheezing at his own joke.

Grendel ignored him and dropped the sack on the table with a heavy thump and clinking. "This is twice what I promised you. It needs to be spent like I told you and your men need to be seen spending it. Start today."

The Captain reached forward with a damaged hand that had been cleaved in half a few years before, in an incident that left him with three fingers and a ship of his own. He picked at the bag's opening and looked inside. "Spend your gold, aye sir. There'll be many a happy whore all up and down the coast before nightfall."

EdaintheRanger

Andanor could not hang about worrying about some stupid dream. They were only the mind's way of organising the day's thoughts and all this fate and future revelations through dreams seemed like some kind of hocus-pocus to him. Nevermind he had little time to worry about anything, breakfast beckoned, and he didn't have his shirt on yet!

Jumping into his garb, Andanor was ready just as the knock hit his door. He greeted the hapless ranger with a growl and a cuff around the ear for being tardy about it. (Andanor was never a morning person) Scurrying away with a woe-begotten look the ranger returned to his duties. Going through his early morning stretches as he meandered his way to the breakfast room, Andanor nodded to the other rangers. Who wisely refrained from offering conversation. Realising he was in something approaching respectable company he straightened his face, and greeted the occupants.

Khorazir

"Good morning, Andanor," Faramir replied, smiling. One look at his lieutenant's face had shown him he was not in the best of moods, a usual thing after a short night. He wondered how the poor ranger he had sent to rouse him had

fared. "Have some breakfast. We still have a short while ere we have to depart, and you look if you could do with some nourishment. Moreover," and now his expression sombered, "I would like to hear what exactly led to the fight yesterday. Falastur will doubtless question me about it, and I do not recall having heard your account. I am sorry to thus spoil your morning even more, but I am sure you see the necessity."

EdaintheRanger

"You are correct, Sir." Andanor managed to say, his head starting to throb as he worked his jaw to speak, the fug of sleep slipping from his system as he forced his mind to work.

"Do you mind if I pour some coffee?" He asked formally.

Faramir motioned to the coffee pot, and waited patiently as his errant lieutenant filled his own cup, once this simple task was over Faramir gazed pointedly at Andanor, expecting a reply to his question. Knowing that no more time could be politely expected from his Captain Andanor collected his now refreshed thoughts. They seemed to march out to the beat of his headache.

"Well sir, it seems that there has been a distinct drop in the morale of late. Mutterings in the ranks, so to speak. I wanted to get to the bottom of it. These being the rangers I thought it best to let them speak their minds over a few drinks."

Faramir took this first statement on board and motioned Andanor to go on, his grey eyes gazing deeply into the lieutenant's as if attempting to know his mind.

"Well that wasn't so hard was it?" Andanor felt himself thinking. Then the following raced through his brain: "What do I tell him now? Should I protect the ranger? Or should I simply tell the truth?" Andanor trusted Faramir, for some reason he felt that he would willingly give up his life if need be, so he told the truth.

"The rangers were already at the tavern when I arrived with Gareth. They had not had more than two drinks. It seems that Padhir and the others were a bit upset about being neglected, and were starting to question my judgement, and my ability as an officer. I attempted to quell the situation, but it was not so. I was swept up into a brawl with Padhir, and it escalated from there. I will take full responsibility for the situation if need be."

Then by the way of consolation he added:

"After all that has happened, the difference between me and the men has now being settled."

Andanor gave a half smile, and made to finish drinking the coffee.

Khorazir

"That is something, at least," Faramir said quietly. He had listened to his lieutenant's account in thoughtful silence, and had been genuinely worried by some features. He had known, of course, that the rangers were ill at ease, and unhappy about this errand, and he blamed himself for having neglected them, having been busy with many matters, some of which entirely personal. "There is no need for you to take full responsibility, Andanor," he went on. "You are not to blame. But I can see Padhir's point as well. I know that the rangers feel out of place here, and consider this errand not for them. And they are right. I still wonder what made the Steward consider them the appropriate force to unmask a conspiracy. We can only trust that Denethor knows best, as usual. So far there has not been much to do for the men, which may account for their uneasy temper, but which may change sooner than we like. Moreover our errand has been haunted by misfortune, and part of the blame for that falls not on the rangers and their lieutenant, but on their captain."

He sighed and ran a hand over his eyes. "I feel that of late all my decisions have only led to further chaos," he admitted, "and how we shall accomplish the task set for us I cannot yet foresee. You need not tell them that, but I would rather be on the other side of Anduin as well, and have naught to do with these complicated matters. But now we are caught in the middle of things, and must try and make the best of it. Perhaps morale will rise if you tell the men that this errand is of far greater importance for the safety and stability of the realm than hunting down orcs in Ithilien. They just have to be patient, and prepared, and stay clear of further trouble. I shall talk to them later, after our visit to Falastur. Which reminds me. It should be time to leave soon."

"Yes, we should set out," Lindórië agreed. She had refrained from commenting on Faramir's words, although she had felt tempted to do so. She made a mental note to talk with Faramir later, then informed one of her servants to go and rouse Maradir. The others rose from the table and made ready to leave.

"What about Túrin?" Lindórië asked. "He is not coming, is he?"

"I think he promised Daewen to show her around the city this morning," Faramir replied. "Most likely he is still asleep. Lucky creature."

Canamarth

Maradir was roused by a servant. He felt as if he had just closed his eyes. Considering the confrontation he was about to face, he was contemplating to just turn around in his bed and ignore any further calls. Faramir had after all not ordered him to come. But Maradir knew his friend needed all the support he could muster. And he was sure Denethor would wish him to be present at this interview as well.

He got up quietly so as not to wake Túrin who was sleeping soundly in the bed next to his, donned his tunic and sword and went below stairs where Faramir, Andanor, Lindórië, and Curufë were already assembled.

"I suppose there is no time for breakfast?" Maradir yawned. He saw the expression on Faramir's face and waved him off. "No problem. I'm ready. Or as ready as I will ever be. Let's go."

Khorazir

They set out at a good pace. Falastur's palace lay on a small hill overlooking the harbours and the city spreading along the Ethir Anduin, and could be seen well from afar, but to get there from Lindórië's house one had to find one's way through a maze of small alleys until one reached the Rath Ciryadain, the major thoroughfare of the city that led down from the palace to the main quays where the Gondorian fleet was stationed. Mists that had crept up from the river during the night still lay about the houses where the sun did not reach them yet, but the day promised to be warm and sunny. Many people were about already, especially on the broader streets, going about their daily business. Those who noticed the small company eyed them interestedly, and some began whispering to their neighbours agitatedly when they thought the others would not realise. Obviously the tale of the fight with the sailors and stories of the girl that had been found murdered in Lindórië's house had spread over night, and, as is the wont of such accounts, grown into strange forms during the telling and re-telling.

Upon arriving at the palace-gate, the company was admitted without much ado. The captain of the guardsmen led them across the spacious courtyard with its fountain and ornamental gardens towards the main building, and thence along a number of corridors into the ante-chamber of Lord Falastur's private study, where they were told to wait. The chamber had large leaded windows opening towards the south, set in the thick stone walls with narrow benches to either side. The other side of the room was panelled with dark lebethron, and the high, mosaic ceiling showed a tracery of waves and fish and strange sea-creatures, all in shades of blue and green, with silver lining that glinted faintly in the light falling in through the windows.

Faramir had been very silent during their walk up to the palace. In fact no one had spoken much. Now he stepped to

the window and gazed out, trying to calm his troubled mind. Masts of tall ships stood like a wintry forest at the quays below. Here and there a banner moved gracefully in the gentle breeze, and sea-gulls darted to and fro on the lookout for something edible. For a moment Faramir genuinely envied them.

Then the sound of a door being opened made him turn. An elderly man with a white beard had just left the lord's study. He gave the company a keen glance, then nodded to them politely. "Lord Falastur will see you now," he said, indicating the door, then with another curious glance at them he left.

"If I am not mistaken this was Aldaron, Falastur's chief provider of information," Lindórië told Faramir softly. "I wonder what they have been discussing in there. Aldaron has the reputation of being a very good spy, although to most people he is only known as the teacher of Falastur's sons. Shall we enter?"

Faramir took a deep breath. "No way around it, I reckon," he said, stepped forward and opened the door.

Falastur Lord of Pelargir was seated behind a large desk of dark wood. When the company entered he put down the letter he had been reading, and looked up to face them. Faramir thought he looked immensely pleased about something, and immediately his heart sank even further. He was determined not to show it, though.

Falastur leaned back in his chair and folded his hands in front of him, studying the others with a relaxed, slightly haughty expression. His gaze lingered on Curufë and Maradir for a moment, then on Andanor, before wandering on to Lindórië and lastly Faramir.

"I see you managed to arrive in time, Captain Faramir," he said, breaking the uncomfortable silence at last. "Very good, and quite contrary to my expectations. I had not expected you to show up with such a large and ... colourful retinue, though." He shrugged. "Well, I reckon you need all the support you can get."

Canamarth

Maradir, who had been checking the room with his keen eyes, looked up at Falastur's remark for a second. Their eyes met and the Lord of Pelargir only looked away when he was addressed by Faramir.

Maradir's attention shifted back to one of the panels behind Falastur. It seemed to protude slightly and was roughly the size of a small door. Other than that, nothing exceptional presented itself. The Lord of Pelargir was alone in the room with them but someone might well hide behind the door and listen or charge in if commanded to do so.

Maradir kept his hands folded behind his back and stood by Faramir's side, acting as his guard.

Khorazir

Faramir swallowed the sharp remark he had been about to utter, knowing that insulting Falastur would only make his situation worse. "Yes, perhaps," he said, as calmly as he managed to. "I think I can count myself fortunate to have such support."

Falastur raised an eyebrow. "Is that so?" he asked with slight mockery, studying the young man keenly. "Anyway," he then went on more evenly, "there are some matters I need to discuss with you, and Lady Lindórië. Your friends may stay if you deem it necessary, although I daresay you will have no need of bodyguards in this place," he added with a swift glance at Maradir and Andanor, who had taken up position to both sides of Faramir.

"Firstly, I would like to know the reason for your stay here," said Falastur sternly. "It has already caused a lot of trouble in only a short while, and if rumours be true, there is more to come which I for one wish to avoid. After all, I have been working hard to secure the safety and prosperity of my citizens, and I do not appreciate strangers coming here to mess things up. Secondly, you owe me an account of how last night's fight came to pass. And thirdly, I think I have

some tidings for you which you might be interested in receiving. So tell me, what brought you here? And do tell the truth, if you please. I have neither the time nor the patience to listen to fairy-tales.”

Faramir cast a swift glance at Lindórië, who to his relief stepped forward. “Allow me to explain the matter, Falastur,” she said. “Captain Faramir and his company were sent here as an escort for myself. I am sure you have heard of the recent troubles on the roads. Obviously the Steward deemed it necessary to provide me with a more thorough protection than my own guards could muster. We are on our way to Linhir, and originally only intended to spend the night in Pelargir.”

“I know you are friendly with the Steward, lady,” said Falastur, “but ‘tis new to me that your status warrants an escort like this. Also ‘tis new to me that the Rangers of Ithilien are employed for a simple task as we see here, dangerous roads or no.”

“I see you suspect there is something else behind it. Perhaps you are right,” she said, drawing forth a sealed letter and handing it to Falastur. “I was ordered by the Steward to deliver this message to you. Apparently he considered it of great importance, and wanted to make sure it was not intercepted.”

Falastur’s eyes narrowed as he took the letter. He gazed at it for a moment and frowned, but then he put it down without opening. “Your account does not entirely satisfy me,” he said, “but I shall leave it at that for the moment. Perhaps there is another reason for your choice of escort which you do not wish to reveal to me,” he added shrewdly, his piercing grey eyes wandering from her to Faramir and back to her. “But believe me, these things do not remain secret for long. People have eyes and ears.”

“Aye, and hands as well, to receive money from others who want to know what their eyes and ears have seen and heard,” Lindórië returned coldly. “Think what you like of my motives, Falastur. I am sure you have already made up your mind about me, and nothing I could say now would suffice to change it.”

Falastur shrugged. “Personally, I do not care how you lead your life, and who you ... ah ... befriend,” he said delicately, glancing pointedly at Faramir. “Your husband may be of different opinion, though, and may – nay: will definitely, for he is a fierce and rash and not always a sensible man – want to avenge his slighted honour and reputation. And I do not want him to do so here, you understand, as this would cause upheavals I can well do without. For these are the tidings I have for you: Tarannon is on his way here – in case you have not heard. He has sent the greater part of his force back to Linhir, but accompanied by his household men he is riding like the wind to Pelargir. And his motivation for doing so is not hard to guess, is it? Apparently he, too, has “made up his mind” about you – and about the captain of your escort.”

EdaintheRanger

Andanor felt awkward in the company of high nobility, and at this point in time he felt a little flustered. His uniform felt self-consciously itchy and sweat dampened his hands. Surreptitiously he wiped them on his troos. Taking his mind off his personal distractions, he scanned the hall for things that were out of the ordinary, all the time attempting to maintain a disaffected nonchalance.

Khorazir

Faramir had listened to the discussion with increasing anger. It was plain to see that Falastur was enjoying himself. But to his great satisfaction Lindórië took the tidings of her husband’s impending visit calmly, as if she had known or anticipated such a development all along (although Faramir doubted that she had expected Tarannon to come so soon).

“You seem to enjoy seeing us in trouble, Falastur,” she observed evenly. “You said you want no disturbance of the peace in your realm, but honestly, with your attitude you only invite the upheavals you wish to avoid.”

Falastur frowned at her. "What do you mean?"

"Oh come on, Falastur, I am sure you have certain ideas as to what is going on here," she said mysteriously.

Falatur's eyes narrowed even more as he looked at her, trying to read her mind. But she only smiled. "Considering all I have learned of late," he began cautiously, "I would surmise that Tarannon ... – how to put it ... – has lost the Steward's favour. If ever he possessed it. And now Denethor wants reason to dispose of him. And you are supposed to see to it that he indulges in some rash act to give the Lord Steward the reason he needs ... Ah, I can see it now. How very clever." He smiled very slightly. "How very unfortunate, though, that I am in the know now."

"Unfortunate? You do not seriously consider opposing us, do you?" Her voice was sterner now. "Or would you like to lose the Steward's favour as well?"

Falastur studied her keenly. "That would not be a wise move," he stated. "On the other hand ... Tarannon is my neighbour, and has powerful friends. No, I think I prefer to remain neutral in this matter."

"Which means you will not interfere in any way."

"If you cause trouble, my men will interfere, of course. It all depends on you, really. Another blunder like last night, and I shall not be so lenient with those responsible – although I still have not heard your account, Captain. Think not that I have forgotten. If you want to fight Tarannon openly, then do so outside the gates, or, preferably, across the border in Lebennin."

Lindórië smiled grimly. "How very concerned about your subjects you are, Falastur. Or is it that your loyalties do lie with Tarannon and his powerful friends? I know he has people working for him who can be very ... persuasive."

There was a flicker of doubt and insecurity in Falastur's haughty and self-confident expression, as if he was reminded of something he preferred forgotten. But it vanished in an instant, and no trace remained of it. Nevertheless it made Faramir wonder if Lindórië had touched upon something important.

"As I said, I prefer neutrality in this matter," the Lord of Pelargir said. "I shall neither aid nor hinder you in your undertaking, but I warn you: should you cause any more troubles, those responsible will be punished. And now," he turned to Faramir, "I want to hear what led to the fight last night."

Canamarth

"I might be a mere ranger, my Lords," Maradir suddenly put in and stepped forward to Faramir's side. "But as far as I understand the whole situation, Lord Falastur owes his allegiance to the Steward. Denethor is, of course, not the King but he has all his powers of command. So, how come one of his lords, a very prominent and high one, admittedly, but still with far lesser powers in the state and the military sector, says he wants to stay neutral when the Steward's son and his charge, clearly on an errand supported by the highest authority of Gondor, ask him not to hinder them? They don't even ask for open support, though by law that Lord should offer anything in his power to help them. I really don't understand that. Does he really think that nothing of this conversation will ever reach the Steward? Does he reckon we'll all die before we can speak to anyone about this? I must say, I'm confused, my Lords."

Khorazir

"I am not," Faramir said quietly before the Lord of Pelargir could reply to Maradir's words, and Falastur, who had been studying Maradir with a measuring glance, looked back at him, "only surprised to hear him speak his mind so openly. His attitude has been known to the Steward for a long time. And perhaps the letter he is loath to open and read in front of us is to remind him where his allegiance really should lie, in case he has chosen to forget."

Falastur smiled thinly. "So, you do have some knowledge of politics after all, steward's son. True, my attitude towards your father's policies is no secret, neither is my dislike towards the Lord Denethor, which, as I may add, is mutual. But we have managed to achieve an arrangement which ensures that both parties can go about their business in peace, an arrangement which I would not see disturbed. If Tarannon was foolish enough to annoy the Steward, 'tis his problem, and I have no desire to make it mine. As I have said, I will not hinder your doings as long as you behave while in my realm, but do not expect me to aid you. And as for your possible deaths, well, this is not up to me, either, and certainly I am not planning on bringing them about, for then I would definitely lose what little good will the Steward bestows on me. And you may of course inform Denethor about all that has been discussed here if you deem it your duty, young man," he told Maradir, giving him another keen glance. "And now, if you please, captain, your account."

There was nothing for Faramir but to finally tell of the incident in the tavern. He did not mention the tension in the company Andanor had spoken about, knowing that Falastur was only waiting for further reason to criticise his abilities at leadership. He made it look as if the rangers had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time, and that the drunken sailors on the lookout for trouble had started the fight. He was not far off the truth with that story, and hoped Falastur would swallow it without further ado.

"The rangers were off duty, and we had ridden far that day, so I saw no reason to forbid them to spend the night as they pleased," he finished his account. "True, perhaps they should have chosen another place to do so, but there would have been little trouble had for example the nightwatch patrolled the area more frequently to with their presence discourage the sailors from starting the fight in the first place."

asaris

Curufë merely sat back and watched. Politics, despite the time he had spent on the high council of Nargothrond, were never one of his strengths, and never something he enjoyed either. But he wanted to support Faramir in this, however he could. Falastur's motives seemed clear enough. Stay neutral until he could see how successful Tarannon would be, and then join whatever side would eventually be the victor. But Curufë wondered whether the lord was really as neutral as he claimed. Certainly the appearance of neutrality could often suffice to throw someone off-guard...

Khorazir

Falastur had listened to Faramir's account with a stern but otherwise unreadable expression, but upon his last words he frowned. "I see," he said sharply. "You try to shift the fault on someone else. But that does not surprise me. You act exactly as I expected. How very like to your father you are," he ended with unmistakable contempt in his voice.

"Be glad if I do not say the same about you," Faramir returned. "After all I have heard of Lord Sorondil ..." In the same moment he wished he had controlled his anger better, and refrained from uttering the remark, for Falastur's eyes flashed dangerously. He leaned forwards in his chair.

"And you be glad that it is I and not my father who sits here, listening to your tales, boy," he hissed. "For he would have punished you for your dangerous incompetence, and not just told you off. And now get yourself out of my sight, or I shall assume his style of judgement."

Faramir bowed stiffly. "Thank you for your leave, lord," he said sarcastically. "I hope my "dangerous incompetence" will cause you much more trouble and inconvenience in the future." With that he turned and left the room, and did not bother to close the door quietly.

Canamarth

Maradir raised his eyebrow at Curufë who was getting up to leave as well. Not half as diplomatic as I thought. And he was referring to both lords. He turned and opened the door to hold it for Lindórië, the Noldo and Andanor so they could follow Faramir.

Khorazir

Faramir crossed the antechamber swiftly, and only slowed his pace when he had reached the corridor beyond. He was angry, mostly with himself. Falastur had clearly aimed at making him lose temper, and had very much succeeded at that.

He leaned against the cool stone wall and took a deep breath. Then he heard the sound of a door being opened, and out into the corridor stepped two figures, whom he immediately recognised as Falastur's sons. They spotted him, hesitated briefly, then approached him. Caranthir studied him with a thoughtful expression, but Vinyaran was grinning.

"Enjoyed your visit to the lord of the haven?" he asked mischievously.

"Enjoyed your visit to the town last night?" Faramir returned sharply. The brothers exchanged an alarmed glance.

"What makes you think we visited the town last night?" Caranthir asked carefully.

Faramir sighed. "Because you were seen, perhaps? My rangers are good at spotting people sneaking about, and you two were not exactly careful."

Again the brothers looked at each other, clearly wondering if he had told their father. Caranthir put on an unworried expression. "Well, good for your rangers, I say," he said haughtily. "So what if we were out and about last night?"

"Your father may not like it."

"You told him?" Vinyaran blurted out.

Faramir glanced at him, smiled very slightly just to increase the other's unease, then shrugged. "Ask him."

"Very funny," Caranthir sneered. "You consider yourself very smart, don't you. But I'm sure you weren't as confident in there." He nodded towards the end of the corridor and his father's study. There the door of the antechamber opened, and Faramir saw his friends step through. He turned back to Caranthir, and for a moment considered giving him a fierce reply to his remark, then, remembering how he had fared with Falastur, he simply shrugged again.

"I am sure your father will be delighted to tell you about it," he said evenly, then turned towards his friends.

Canamarth

Maradir fought hard not to shake his head at Faramir when they came out of Falastur's room. He wondered what part of the conversation had let him lose control. Something about his father, probably. If Falastur had not known the Steward's younger son's weak spot before - he now did. Still, the Lord of Pelargir had been unsettled himself, Maradir had to admit as much.

He observed Falastur's sons slink into the room behind them, throwing curious glances especially at the elf. "Are we ready to go?" Maradir broke the silence after Vinyaran and Caranthir had closed the door.

Khorazir

“Yes, let us get out of here,” Faramir agreed darkly. They swiftly and silently made their way along various corridors, through the impressive entrance-hall and across the courtyard until they reached the gates. Only when they were out of earshot of the guards Faramir slowed his pace, and taking a deep breath turned towards his friends.

“Say nothing, I know it myself,” he began quietly. “I messed it up. And in retrospect I do not even know what made me get so angry. I should have controlled my anger, not risen to his bait, but somehow ...” He shrugged dejectedly, and kicked away a small pebble lying on the paving stones.

“He was clearly aiming at hurting you,” Lindórië observed calmly. “And he knows how to succeed swiftly at that. ‘tis no secret that your relationship with your father is rather ... tense.”

Faramir laughed humourlessly. “A considerate way to put it. You know, the more I think about this errand and everything related to it the more I wonder what made the Steward choose me. After all, it must be in his interest that it does not fail. But so far there has been little but failure. Things could not have gone more awry than they did. Were you not also involved in this matter, I would begin to believe this to be a shrewd plan of Lord Denethor to finally get rid of me. They may hate each other, but in their view of my abilities he and Falastur appear to be in perfect agreement.”

Lindórië gave him a stern glance. “Faramir, I do understand that you are upset about what happened,” she said in a tone he had never heard her use before when talking to him, “but it does not justify you doubting yourself like this. Yes, things unfortunate and unforeseen have happened, but ‘tis not your lot to bear the blame for them. You are not the only one responsible for the successful completion of this errand, and if you try and take all responsibility upon yourself, you will simply collapse. And then, yes, Faramir, then the errand will fail. You have done your best as leader of your company, and be sure that your father knows that, even if he cannot admit it to you or himself. And if he is not willing to appreciate it, be convinced there are others who do. Look at me, Faramir!”

He raised his gaze from the pavement and met hers. There was a fierce light in her grey-green eyes, which softened as she looked at him. “Do not take Falastur’s scorn to heart,” she continued in a gentler voice. “Think rather about what else he told us. Tarannon is on his way here, and we have to be prepared when he arrives – should we not decide to ride out ourselves to meet him outside the city. We cannot avoid the confrontation. In fact, it is exactly what Denethor wanted to happen. It would be better for us were we in a position to dictate the terms of the encounter.” She looked at Maradir, Curufë and Andanor. “What say you to this? How and where should we meet him?”

asaris

She looked at Maradir, Curufë and Andanor. “What say you to this? How and where should we meet him?”

Curufë was the first to reply: “I do not know Tarannon as well as the others here, so my advice might be of less weight. But if you think that open conflict is likely, meeting him outside of the city would certainly be best, because of Falastur. It seems to me politic to avoid offending him if we do not have to. Besides which, if he is not in fact intent on remaining neutral...”

Canamarth

“I agree with Curufë,” Maradir chimed in when the elf let his voice trail off. “I expect a confrontation with Tarannon. There is no knowing what it will look like but we should be outside of Falastur’s city when it happens. We should not force him to choose sides for I fear that will not turn out well for us.”

Khorazir

“Aye,” Lindórië agreed, “Falastur is far less neutral than he claims. He and Tarannon are friends – or, well, let us say they share certain interests, and certain dislikes. I am sure Falastur would not be very sorry if Tarannon was defeated, but he would certainly hate Denethor to be successful in his attempt to destroy the conspiracy. Moreover I have the sinister feeling that Falastur may be more involved in this matter than the Steward anticipates. At one point of our conversation I sensed some slight unease, as if he was reminded of something he had to withhold from us at all cost.”

“So you also think we should leave?” Faramir asked.

“Yes. ‘tis not far to the border, and beyond it we are safer than here from any possible interference by the Lord of Pelargir. And he cannot complain anymore about us disturbing the peace in his realm. Also, even though ‘tis not much, I do have some influence in Lebennin. Many people are unhappy about Tarannon’s and his brother’s rule, and the high taxes set to finance their military campaigns. We should be able to muster support swiftly should we have need.”

Faramir nodded thoughtfully. The idea of facing Tarannon in the open field appealed to him more than doing so in Pelargir. He knew that the full potential of the rangers would be better employed there than in the city, should things lead to a violent confrontation – which seemed likely, almost unavoidable. Yet the prospect also worried him.

“The rangers will also prefer to meet Tarannon and his men in the open, especially when we can choose the location of the encounter,” he said. “What worries me is the fact that many of them are wounded, and all are weary. There was little chance of recovery after the journey and the fight. I am sure they will try their best, as usual,” he went on with a glance at Andanor, and a brief smile, “yet ‘tis going to be difficult.”

“If we set out soon we will have plenty of time to look for a suitable location,” Lindórië replied. “In fact, I can think of several just across the border and near the main road. Tarannon will have chosen the swiftest way, and thus will come past these spots. Most likely he will have his household-men as his retinue. They are good fighters, and mostly loyal to him, but there are some sensible fellows amongst them who are not going to fight at all costs. I am sure your rangers will be able to handle them, if the location is to their advantage. They will also be weary due to their swift ride. Tarannon, however, is not that sensible. It would be good if we could set a trap for him, an ambush, but still give him the chance of parley. Remember, he has to attack us first before we can retaliate.”

“What of his counselor?” Faramir asked. “You said he might be even more dangerous.”

“Yes,” she said slowly, her expression stern. “He is the one factor that really worries me, because I know so little about him. Perhaps this could be a task for the two of you.” She glanced at Maradir and Curufë. “Faramir and I will see to Tarannon, and Andanor and the rangers to his retinue. I do not know the plans of the others that journeyed hither with us, but I do not want to endanger them. So if the two of you could have an eye on this Grendel this would be a great help.”

Canamarth

“Fine by me,” Maradir answered. “He should not pose any threat when I have a bow and arrow at the ready.” With a side glance and a smile at Curufë he added: “And a Noldorin elf, of course.”

EdaintheRanger

A little preturbed at his loss of concentration Andanor nevertheless felt that he should add.

“Faramir, an oversight I feel on your part, but by open ground I take it that you mean wooded ground? Seeing our plight we should take as many advantages as we can gain from a tenuous situation.”

He continued, espousing the war-field craft he had gained over the years.

“Ideally we should wish for a steep craggy place, with rocks, not unlike fair Ithilien. Perhaps we could spring an ambush, unchivalrous I grant you, but enough to discourage sensible men (echoing the Lady Lindórië’s words) from giving unnecessary battle.”

Khorazir

Faramir smiled slightly when Andanor corrected his earlier remark. His attention to detail made him such an excellent lieutenant. When he had finished his description of the ideal place for an ambush, Faramir nodded. “With open field I was just referring to a place out of town,” he said mildly. “But as always I am glad about your meticulous attention to detail, Andanor. Do you know a location like the one just mentioned?” he then inquired of Lindórië.

She thought for a moment, then nodded. “I think I do. The river Sirith forms the border to Lebennin. There is a ferry across it near the city, and about an hour’s ride to the North a bridge also. That is where the main road from the west, the road Tarannon will most likely take, crosses it. Beyond the bridge on the Lebennin side there are some low-lying meadows, a rather large village, and then the road rises through fields and orchards and patches of woodland to the peaks of a line of downs. These woods seem a good place for an ambush. They are mostly beech- and oakforests the villagers use to feed their pigs, and for cutting lumber. Due to the season their foliage will not yield much cover. But I remember that in parts they have a thick underbrush of evergreens, boxwood, bay and rhododendron for the most part, and on some of the slopes there are accumulations of moss-covered boulders from where one has a good view onto the road below. I am sure we will find a suitable location there without long search.”

During her last words she had lowered her voice a little, and Faramir knew that she, too, had sensed that somebody was following them. Curufë had noticed him first, and Faramir had watched the Elf closely since, but found no reaction that would indicate an immediate danger. Most likely Falastur had sent someone after them to try and find out what their next course of action was going to be.

They swiftly made their way back to Lindórië’s house. Rangers were still standing guard at the gate, and when questioned gave a quick report about how they had repelled curious neighbours and other townsfolk. Other than them, no one had come or gone. While Faramir and Andanor were still speaking to the rangers, Lindórië discreetly signed to Maradir to wait a moment outside with her. The others went on through the gate, the rangers took up position again, and walking a few paces to get out of their earshot, Lindórië turned to Maradir.

“I must ask another favour of you,” she said quietly. “Perhaps you can guess what about. Fact is that I am more worried about the encounter with Tarannon, and especially with his sinister counselor, than what I wanted to show in front of Faramir. Not so much because I fear the errand will fail. We are not as well prepared as I should like, but our chances are still good. Nay, I am worried something will befall him. I think he was not so wrong in his assumption that the Steward chose him for the errand because he considers him ... expendable. I do not know why, but during the past years their relationship has declined. And we both know it was never a warm and loving one. And now ... Tarannon will most likely try and kill Faramir. I know he is capable of looking after himself, but still ... – it would ease my concern to know you are having an eye on him, as well as on our enemies.”

Bardhwyn

Gareth cracked open one eye, then the other. The sun was high and the air that came in through the open window was warm.

The young man rolled onto his left side and threw the covers off. He swung his legs over and let his feet hit the floor hard.

“Whoa, Gareth..” a voice called out from behind him. Painfully, Gareth turned his head around and saw Laren sitting in a straight back chair next to the door – much like he had done the first night he guarded them. Many things had changed since that night – all the particulars quickly fell back into Gareth’s mind.

Laren had leaned the chair back so that it balanced on its hind legs. The blonde Ranger allowed the chair to fall forward before standing up.

“Don’t you think you ought to lie back down, man?” Laren asked, walking over to the bed.

“No, no, I want to get up.” Gareth mumbled, tenderly feeling his face – or what was left of it. A ceramic cup came into his line of vision, brimming with a grayish green liquid and smelling horribly familiar. Laren held out the potion expectantly.

“C’mon, drink.” He ordered.

“No, please...not more of that..” Gareth pleaded.

“Orders. Drink it.” Laren repeated with a grin. “It is the reason you’re even awake and able to speak, man. I am sure of it. You shouldn’t be alive by all rights, you realize this – don’t you?”

Gareth didn’t reply. He nodded and accepted the mug but tensed at the sound of the door opening. Over his shoulder he saw a young woman, her dark hair tumbling out from under her headscarf. In her hand she carried a bottle.

“Oh, forgive me. I bring another remedy for the young man.” She said haltingly.

“Argh...” groaned Gareth, “another one?” He asked turning to get a better look at her and the bottle.

She stepped into the room and over to the bed – Gareth hastily pulled the covers back over him out of modesty – much to Laren’s amusement.

“Aye.” She said, handing Laren the bottle. “You’re to drink this, 1 quarter to 3 quarters water after every cupful of that there. You’ll see a marked improvement in your face by this afternoon, I warrant. Yes, the doctor’s been mightily pleased by your speedy recovery. Why, you’d think you’d be part Elf!” She finished with a smile and a curtsy before turning to leave.

“Ha, part ‘Elf’.” Laren said with a chortle as he walked to the bedside table. He poured the bottle’s contents into an empty cup and cut it with water. “The young maiden has never seen an Elf, I warrant. You obviously have no Eldar blood in you.”

Gareth chuckled then peered into his mug. “No. No Eldar in me at all.” He replied. ‘The blood of Westernessee, yes.. a small bit.’ He thought to himself. Though, that more or less *is* Eldar.... He mused, choking back the cup of potion. Laren quickly handed him the second one.

“Thanks, I think.” Gareth said, exchanging his empty cup for the full one.

“Drink up. Otherwise you’ll be left behind here. I doubt we’re going to stay here for long and we could use your sword, Gareth.” Laren replied. “The men, they’re talking. We know the signs. We’re up for a long mission and a few more battles. Not all of them with an enemy we’re going to be able to see.”

Laren walked to the window, investigating the sounds of approaching horses below.

“The Captain’s returned. We will soon learn what is next for the Rangers of Ithilien.” Laren commented.

Khorazir

Upon entering the parlour, Faramir saw that most of the rangers were up and having breakfast, even those who had received injuries the previous night. He was pleased about their sense of duty, although he surmised that for most hunger had been the chief motivation to get up when they could have slept long for once. Túrin was there also, chatting with Mablung. All looked up expectantly when they noticed Faramir, Andanor and Curufë. Túrin was the first to speak up.

“Back already? That was quick. How did it go?”

“I messed it up,” Faramir said darkly, and in a tone indicating his unwillingness to relate the encounter in more detail. “Still, we learned that Tarannon is on his way here. On the way back we spoke about how we should react, and agreed it would be best to set out swiftly and meet him on the way, beyond the border in Lebennin. We cannot be sure that Falastur will stay as neutral as he claims he will. Lindórië thinks there are some places suitable for setting up a little ambush for her husband and his men – which should suit these fellows here,” he added with a slight smile and a glance at the rangers, most of whom, especially the younger ones, had looked up at the mention of an ambush, and taken on excited expressions.

“What about the wounded?” Mablung asked. “Some of the lads, even though they are feeling better, aren’t up for fighting yet.”

“They will have to stay here,” Faramir replied. “Perhaps it would be better if Daewen remained here as well,” he went on, looking at Túrin. “I do not know what plans Visilya and Alessya have, but since I have not seen them ever since we came here, unless they come and state their intent swiftly they will have to remain here as well.”

“I’m considering staying, too,” Túrin said. “I doubt I’d be of much help when it comes to fighting. And I promised Daewen to look after her. Also we could have an eye on our special friend Falastur, and see how neutral he remains.”

“Very well. For you others, get ready. I would like us to set out before noon.”

Canamarth

Maradir listened to Lindórië’s words attentively. “I know Faramir and Denethor have had their difficulties but... Alright, yes, I can imagine the Steward thinking he’s expendable. Not that I share his opinion. Isn’t it strange how our scouting mission suddenly turned into planning an ambush - and against your husband, no less. I will certainly grant you your favour, my Lady, as it concerns someone who is close to my heart as well. But I have to ask you something - how far will you go? What - or whom - would you sacrifice to save Faramir?”

Khorazir

Lindórië studied the young man keenly. “This was never a mere scouting mission,” she said quietly, but with the hint of steel in her voice. “For some time now the Steward has been trying to learn more about Tarannon’s and his allies’ doings down here, and now he seems to consider the time right to set an end to them. And subtle and clever as Lord Denethor is, he tries to force Tarannon into bringing about his own downfall. In this he can rely on my husband’s pride and rashness. And the aid of his own allies, such as myself. My occupation is not so very different from yours, Maradir. As to how far I would go ...,” suddenly the grimness left her expression, the steely glint vanished from her eyes, and she sighed softly.

“I will not claim this to be easy for me. True, I do not love Tarannon, but we have been married for twenty years, and got used to each other. And now to bring about his end, for his death is almost unavoidable ... Still, if the choice is him or Faramir, as may well happen, then ‘tis clear for me, even though there is no chance of a joint and happy future in either case. Does that answer your question what or whom I would sacrifice? Whatever is needed to keep him from

harm.”

Canamarth

Things fell into perspective now. “I understand,” Maradir said earnestly and bowed. “If you’d excuse me now, my Lady. I want to see how my friend Gareth is doing.” Lindórië stepped aside and let him enter.

He walked upstairs and entered the room where the injured were lodged. He was quite surprised to see Gareth on his feet already. “What miracle occasioned this speedy recovery, I wonder? You almost look presentable.”

Bardhwyn

“Do I? I feel like I’ve been trampled by a Mumak.” Gareth replied before pulling his tunic over his head with a groan. Once on he pulled on the front of the tunic and inspected it.

“Amazing. It has been cleaned and mended.” He looked up to Maradir. “It is no miracle – just some regular potions. Strong stuff, too. The Ranger Laren, he’s been looking after me and it seems I have won a place among the men for my pains. They want me to travel along with them, with Captain Faramir’s permission of course.”

Gareth paused, recollecting the ‘story’ he’d given to the Steward’s son earlier.

“In all truth, I would rather not find those members of my family who live here.” Gareth went on to say, aware of the people about them in hearing distance. “I would much rather stay with Captain Faramir. Will you put in a good word for me, if and when the time comes?” Gareth asked, hoping he was saying all the right things.

Khorazir

Faramir could tell how excitement took hold of the rangers. Some even began to hurry with their breakfast. Now they were in their element again. No longer an obscure scouting mission, but a straightforward task at hand. He appreciated their motivation and dedication, but was worried that it might lead to rashness. He turned to Andanor. “Please see to it that they get ready in time, and that they do not reveal too much of our plan to the servants. We do not know who else might be listening. I shall go and see how the wounded are doing.”

He had seen that Maradir had come and gone upstairs, and now Lindórië entered the parlour. For a brief moment he wondered what they had been talking about, for she was studying him gravely, and withdrew her gaze when she noticed that he was watching her. Walking over to him, she said: “I need to instruct my servants, and write a few letters. You have informed your men?”

“Aye,” he replied. “They will be ready to set out ere noon. Túrin said he wanted to stay here, with Daewen and those injured that cannot ride with us. He will try and have an eye on Falastur.”

“Good. Now, please excuse me.” As she passed Faramir by, she ran her hand down his shoulder and arm, and for a brief moment their hands met and clasped. This caused some smiles on the rangers’ faces, and Túrin even dared to grin.

“See to it that you get ready,” Faramir said with mock sternness, and went upstairs to check on the wounded. On the corridor he heard voices, and entering the room, to his surprise he found Gareth up and already dressed. Maradir was there also, and for a brief moment suspicion about the young man’s identity and purpose came up again. Then Faramir smiled. “Good morning, Gareth. I see you are feeling better. The healer has worked a marvel on you.”

+++

When Faramir had left and Andanor was out of earshot, Mablung leaned to Túrin, while some of the other rangers, Túrin noted, were watching them expectantly. "Tell me," the ranger said softly, "what's going on between the Captain and the Lady? The lads and I have been wondering about this ever since we set out on this errand. It's quite strange to see them together, because he never mentioned her, even when we teased him about his apparent lack of lady-friends."

"For a long time he didn't even mention her to his close friends," Túrin replied, "who teased him as well, believe me. But given the situation, I can almost understand him. As to what exactly is going on ...," he shrugged. "To be honest I don't know."

"But perhaps you could find out," Mablung said conspirationally. "Because, you see, there's money at stake."

Canamarth

"I sure will," Maradir answered Gareth and smiled. He wondered if the young man was really better placed with the Rangers of Ithilien. He had had a rough time in his company, not as hard as the rangers' welcome to be sure, but he had not made any friends amongst his men either. He seemed to be getting along well enough with Faramir's men now.

"As to when the time comes... You might have already heard that Faramir and his rangers are about to leave the city. I intend to go with him as a friend. If you feel well enough you might as well accompany us. Maybe we will need a swift messenger to Minas Tirith sooner or later."

Before Gareth could answer, Faramir entered.

Khorazir

Túrin raised an eyebrow. "Money, indeed? How much?"

Mablung looked round at his companions, then back at Túrin. "Well, a few silver-pieces."

Túrin shook his head, not able anymore to hide a grin. "Tsk, tsk, squandering your meagre fortunes betting on your captain's love-life. I wonder what he'd say to that."

"You wouldn't tell him, would you?" one of the younger rangers asked alarmedly.

"Well, that depends ...," Túrin's grin broadened mischievously. "No, of course I wouldn't. I once had a bet with Boromir that I would get his little brother drunk. Lost it, of course."

Now Mablung grinned. "I think I heard about that one. The inn you went to burned down in the end, didn't it?"

"Not our fault. Well, not quite. Anyway," Túrin leaned back in his chair and folded his hands over his belly, a rather smug expression on his face. "As a matter of fact, there is something I do know concerning your bet."

"Yes?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"Ah, pity, here comes Andanor." All heads shot round. Túrin chuckled.

“He’s at the other end of the bloody room,” Mablung hissed. “Tell us!”

“Silver-pieces, you said? All right, all right, don’t shoot me. You know that I happen to share a room here with your captain, and last night”

“Yes?”

“Well, last night he slept in his own bed. Alone.”

“Hah,” Mablung said, looking triumphantly at his companions, “I knew it. Thanks, mate.”

“But,” Túrin raised a finger, causing the ranger to turn to him again and frown slightly.

“What?”

Túrin grinned broadly. “Well, he did come quite late, so I have no idea what he did before he went to bed. Sorry, lads, that’s all I know. And now,” he rose and stretched, “if you’ll excuse me. I need to see if Daewen’s up already.” Giving the rangers a nod and another grin, he left the table and made for the stairs.

Bardhwyn

“I sure will.”

The smile that Maraidr gave him surprised Gareth – he was certainly not used to the Captain smiling at him . Scowling, yes. Grimacing, often. Gareth blinked quickly and forced a smile in return, aware that there were others about. It is part of the play...

“As to when the time comes...” Maradir continued, “You might have already heard that Faramir and his rangers are about to leave the city. I intend to go with him as a friend. If you feel well enough you might as well accompany us. Maybe we will need a swift messenger to Minas Tirith sooner or later.”

At hearing the words ‘need a swift messenger’ a mixture of feelings arose and lashed about inside Gareth’s recovering frame.

No! I won’t be shipped off!
I can be of some use!
Let me prove myself - I have done so til now!

But to his shame there was one small part that leapt at the suggestion and begged to leave now! Even with the most banal of messages.

Gareth, surprised to feel this, allowed his eyes to widen slightly – as if those thoughts rested like a badge on his chest. He felt his face grow hot and he smiled in return, wondering how to respond.

He was spared. The door opened and Faramir entered. The Steward’s son stopped and Gareth was aware he was being quickly ‘inspected’. Faramir quickly smiled and said:

“Good morning, Gareth. I see you are feeling better. The healer has worked a marvel on you.”

Gareth bowed stiffly and a grunt of pain escaped him.

“Aye, Captain.” He said as he straightened. “And I am fit to travel, I think. Please, sir - a request: I would like to stay with your company of Rangers, my lord, and not seek out my relatives here.”

Gareth glanced nervously at Maradir. "I was just saying to Maradir that bonds of friendship have now grown between your men and I. They wish me stay, as well. So I have been told."

He bowed stiffly and quickly a second time, careful not to hold the Captain's eyes.

Khorazir

Faramir studied the young man keenly. He had not missed the swift glance Gareth had given Maradir, as if to seek his approval for his request. But before he could answer Gareth, Laren, who obviously had overheard most of what had been spoken, came over.

"Good morning, captain," he greeted Faramir. "The lad is right," he went on with a nod in Gareth's direction. "We would gladly welcome him in the company, and seeing that he's a good fighter, and that some of our lads are not fit to travel yet –"

"Alright, Laren," Faramir interrupted, smiling. "I think I get the idea. Although it slightly astounds me to hear you speak so vigorously in his favour, when only a few days ago you trusted him so little that you were ready to beat him up."

Laren blushed at this, and shrugged. "I was wrong, then. But is it true that we're about to set out, and perhaps even see some action today?"

"Aye, we shall set out ere noon. As for the "action", I hope we shall manage to avoid things getting too serious. Still, we must be prepared. Please tell the men to get ready, those who are fit to ride – and only those. I do not want anybody who is more than slightly wounded on this journey. They would only endanger the rest. I know how the men loathe to be left behind, but there is nothing for it now."

Laren saluted and left the room. Faramir turned back to Gareth and Maradir. "Since you seem to have made some good friends in the company, you may accompany us, Gareth. I greatly appreciate that you and the rangers managed to overcome your differences. 'tis a good sign. Well, get ready, then." When Gareth nodded he smiled slightly. "Pity, though, that your ... relatives will have to do without you now, is it not?" he remarked mildly.

+++

Still smiling about his conversation with the rangers, Túrin made his way up the stairs and along the corridor to Daewen's room. In front of the door he halted, and suddenly his smile faded. He did not remember if she had been assigned lodgings for herself only, or if she shared a room with the other women of the company, Visilya and Alessya. Túrin had seen neither of them ever since their arrival in Pelargir, and even though he knew it most likely was best if he and Visilya did not meet too much right now, still he wished he knew where she was off to.

Drawing a deep breath, he knocked on the door. "Daewen? It's me, Túrin. I was wondering if you're interested in breakfast."

Bardhwyn

Well, get ready, then. Pity, though, that your ... relatives will have to do without you now, is it not?" Faramir asked.

"Well, Sir...er, I really don't know them well - they being distant relations through my mother's side, through marriage or some such tie ..." Gareth replied, winding down before he really stuck his foot in it. He quickly busied himself collecting his things together, moving stiffly as he did so.

“Are you quite sure you’re fit enough to ride?”

Gareth glanced up to see Faramir studying him – having just voiced his concern, his eyes genuinely worried.

“Yes...yes, I am!” Gareth insisted, straightening up and brightening his face as best he could. “I will be just fine and trust me, even worse were I to be left behind.” He finished with a broad confident smile as he dropped the few bottles sitting on the bedside table into his bag.

“May I be dismissed, Captain? I am starving!” Gareth asked, his eyes darting to the door. He wanted to get out from under both their gazes, if only for a short while.

Khorazir

“Aye, get yourself some breakfast,” Faramir told Gareth with a smile, noticing how uncomfortable the young man appeared to be feeling under Maradir’s and his keen gaze.

When Gareth had left Faramir’s smile faded somewhat, and taking a breath he ran a hand through his hair. “At least they have managed to settle their dispute,” he said quietly, nodding in the direction Gareth and Laren had set out.

His gaze lingered on the door for a moment, before he looked at his friend thoughtfully. “I am not altogether sure yet what to make of Master Gareth here,” he admitted. “I know he is concealing something from me, but I have the strong feeling that if I try to get it out of him neither of us would profit from it, and that it would only complicate matters further. Will you have an eye on him – not so much because I consider him a danger, but rather to make sure he stays out of trouble? He seems highly motivated, which is laudable, but I fear he somewhat overestimates his own strength.”

Lady_of_Rohan

Daewen froze at the knock. Rolling back onto her heels, she peered over the edge and across the bed to the other side of the room, making sure that the door was still locked and that the heavy chair she had slid in front of it (as yet another precaution) was still in place. She cursed at sound of Túrin’s voice outside the door. She had been foolish enough to forget what time of the morning it was and there was the room with the evidence of her rummaging in clear sight.

A good-sized piece of a decorated clay pot lay in the middle of the floor. That had been an accident, mostly. The rest of the pot now sat on the floor next to a chest of drawers with the broken area angled into the corner that the furniture made. The shadow would help conceal the damage for a while too. As for the chest of drawers, some of the drawers stuck out a little as she had not been able to get the clothes to fit properly again after she had rifled through them looking for anything worthwhile. The best there was to offer were plain linen shirts and a short, ugly green tunic.

A small, round table occupied the area opposite. Two candlesticks had stood there when she first took up residence in the room, but now they were tucked away, along with a few other items, in one of the linen shirts, which she had stuffed under the bed. She was not sure what the candlesticks were made of, but she was certain she’d be able to find some buyer for them.

At the moment she was crouched on the floor on the far side of the room attempting to jimmy the lock on a trunk she had spied in the early morning light. She had also tried to break the hinges, but that had been unsuccessful as well. She had a splinter in the palm of her hand from where the trunk had decided to fight back.

Cursing under her breath as Túrin called again, she hurriedly slid the trunk back to where it belonged and made sure the bedcovers hung low enough to hide the bundle of items beneath the frame. She had dressed before she began her

scavenger hunt, for which she congratulated herself. Brushing the dust from the clothing, she put the cracked pieces of the pot down inside the still-intact part and started to push the chair aside. It made an obnoxious as it begrudgingly moved across the floor. Daewen cringed at each sound. If that was not obvious then nothing was.

Taking a deep breath, she opened the door, scooted out, and quickly shut the door in one fluid motion. "Let's go then," she said, walking the opposite way Túrin had come.

Khorazir

"Hey, wait for me," Túrin called, running a few steps to catch up with Daewen again as she hurried down the corridor. "Breakfast is downstairs in the parlour. That way." He pointed in the opposite direction, and grinned when Daewen slowed her pace, but seemed determined not to look at him. Her face was slightly flushed, and Túrin wondered what she had been doing while he had been waiting outside her door. He had heard strange noises as of something heavy being dragged across the floor.

"Have you rearranged the furniture in there?" he asked her when at last she raised her eyes to look at him. Her face took on an alarmed expression. He gave her a wink, his grin broadening. "Don't worry, whatever you've done, I think you stand a pretty good chance it won't be noticed. The company is making ready to depart, and will be off by noon. I reckon you don't want to join them. Apparently there's going to be trouble on foot. I'm going to stay here as well to look after the wounded rangers, and to do a bit of spying and information-gathering in the city. Perhaps you'd like to help? I'm sure you're good at these things."

Canamarth

"That is the same impression I had of him," Maradir assented to Faramir's observation. "I will keep an eye on him. Two, whenever I can spare them. [Sorry!] I certainly see great potential in the lad and it would indeed be a pity if he never were to grow old and find out for himself. I think he'd make a good ranger in your company." Maradir nudged his friend. "Don't you?"

Khorazir

Faramir smiled. "Aye, and the fact that he gets along so well with the rangers now also speaks in his favour. Well, were he to apply for a position among the men I for one would not decline him." He laughed softly. "'tis strange, is it not, that we are referring to him as a 'lad', when he is only a few years younger than us."

Canamarth

"I just can't help feeling that he hasn't seen half as much as we did," Maradir mused. "So, when are we leaving?"

Khorazir

"The company should be ready within the next hour. I want to be out of town ere noon, if that can be managed. Lindórië said she knows the countryside pretty well, but nevertheless we will have to search for a good place for our ambush."

Stepping over to the window, he cast a glance down at the courtyard. Several rangers, with the help of Linórië's

grooms, were busy saddling horses, filling saddle-bags and fastening cloaks and blankets behind the saddles. Others were bringing bows and quivers of arrows. Anborn was checking the bowstrings to make sure none would snap under strain. Mablung was instructing two of the younger rangers how to best hone the blades of their swords and daggers, and Hildir who had been a farrier's apprentice before he joining the rangers went around to check the horses' shoes.

Faramir was pleased to see how motivated the rangers were of a sudden – even those who had received injuries in yesterday's fight –, and how quickly and efficiently they worked. Yet there was also a sense of grim alertness about them. They knew they might be riding to a battle, with all its consequences.

He left the window. "Well, I need to change, and get my stuff together," he told Maradir. "Hopefully there will be time still for a bit of lunch before we set out."

Canamarth

"I hope so, too," Maradir answered and stepped aside to led Faramir out. He went to where the Steward's son had stood before and surveyed the busy courtyard. Gareth would indeed be faring better amongst these rangers. He decided to try and talk privately with the lad after he had packed his few belongings.

Khorazir

Swiftly Faramir made his way to his lodgings, where he changed into his ranger-gear. When he had arrayed himself in the familiar garb he thoughtfully glanced at the fine tunic Lindórië had given him. He had been touched by her gift, but all the time he had felt slightly uncomfortable wearing it. It had belonged to her brother. He knew what he had meant to her, and he wondered if there was anything symbolic in her act, beyond the mere practical reason of having somebody wear what would otherwise only collect dust in some chest or drawer. Having been clad in this tunic instead of his ranger-garments had made him feel even more out of place in Falastur's hall than he would have otherwise. More vulnerable, too. He was no shrewd and ruthless politician like the Lord of Pelargir – or, when he thought about it now, Lindórië as well –, and had no desire whatsoever to become one. Ranger was just the right thing for the moment. Not exactly a warrior, for he had never seen this as his true vocation either – unlike Boromir and most Gondorian men of their age – and yet a post with some responsibility. And freedom. That most of all. He did not deceive himself by denying that the true reason he enjoyed his time in Ithilien so much was the fact that he was away from Minas Tirith, and the constant criticism or, more often, cold disregard of his father.

Also he knew that, whatever Denethor's or Falastur's opinion about his abilities at leadership, he did not cut an entirely bad figure as a captain. His men respected and trusted him, and would follow him almost everywhere. Over the years they had developed into a tightly knit company. Being allowed to enlist in the Rangers now constituted a rank of some status in Gondor. While formerly most lads about to become soldiers had wanted to join the fleet or the cavalry or the prestigious Citadel Guard, now many began to learn archery and woodcraft already in their boyhood to one day be accepted as one of the Lord Steward's forayers in Ithilien. And even though Faramir had been their commander for only four years, the men – many of them far superior in years and experience – had overcome their initial suspicion about one so young being made their leader. And now, clad in the familiar garments, he again felt he knew where he belonged. Let Tarannon come, he thought with a sudden surge of confidence.

The sound of approaching footsteps startled him out of his reverie. Most likely this was Maradir about to fetch his stuff. Shaking his head slightly about himself, lost in thought again like far too often, he folded the tunic and put it away. He stuffed the gauntlets into his belt, then slung the quiver of arrows over one shoulder, the saddle-bags and the green woollen hood (which was too warm to wear now but might come in handy should there be rain lateron) over the other, grabbed his bow and made for the door.

+++

Several leagues away to the west, Tarannon halted his company at a small wayside inn, overshadowed by large linden-

trees that were putting forth small bright green leaves. In the courtyard was a well where a groom was pulling water when the horsemen arrived. Also there were several tables and benches in front of the main building.

Personally Tarannon disliked the stop, but Ondoher, the captain of the soldiers had argued that the horses needed a rest – a fact plain to see. They had made good progress so far, and Tarannon was pleased with that, but this pause would cause a delay he did not fancy. Moreover Grendelenoth had not returned from his “short side trip” or how he had called it. If he did not show up soon there would be little chance for him to catch up with the company later on – unless perhaps he got fresh horses for the carriage somewhere.

Tarannon kicked away a stone angrily. Grendel’s absence angered him – as would his presence have unsettled him. He always felt somewhat uneasy with the counsellor about. So far he had proven trusty and loyal, but far too often for Tarannon’s liking he seemed to be about on some dark business of his own. And his counsel today not too worry about the tidings from Pelargir ... Tarannon found he did not recall exactly what his advisor had told him, only that it had seemed the right thing to do at the moment, and that he had agreed to it. Strange that he should not remember. Had this been a trick of Grendel’s? He had strange, uncanny powers. Had he done it before, perhaps? Twisting people’s minds to gain his desires?

The thought occurred to Tarannon that he might be wronging his counsellor now, but at the moment he felt inclined to suspect anybody of working against him. He had lost the Steward’s favour, so much was certain – if ever he had possessed it. He doubted that any help would come from Falastur. The Lord of Pelargir would stay out of this matter so as not to displease Denethor either. And the matter with Grendel ... He would have to watch this one more carefully in the future.

Tarannon had walked back to the road, and now he stood surveying it darkly, one hand clenched about the hilt of his sword. Over there to the east, still hidden behind a line of downs, lay Pelargir. Oh yes, he would deal with Lindórië and her – he did not even want to think of the term and its implications – her little friend, and then he would have a word or two with Falastur about the definition of the term “allies”, should the Lord of Pelargir decide to remain “neutral” in this matter and refrain from sending the support he had so often promised. And then, unless events took a turn yet unforeseen, he might start looking for another advisor.

Canamarth

The door opened before Faramir reached it and Maradir stepped in. “You’re a quick packer,” the latter smiled and went to gather his own belongings. He was soon finished and threw a last glance around the room, making sure neither he nor his friend had forgotten something and wondering when he would be able to sleep in such a comfortable bed again. Then he followed Faramir down the stairs and to the stables where they packed their horses. Faramir’s was already saddled – one of his rangers had seen to that – so he left earlier to oversee the progress of the company’s departure.

Maradir led his horse out into the courtyard where a few of Lindórië’s servants and some rangers held them ready for departure. It had gotten quite busy and crowded. Maradir had seen that Gareth’s horse had not been saddled yet. He was probably still in the kitchen and that was where Maradir was heading when the door into the backyard opened and the young man emerged with a half-eaten slice of bread in his hand. “Gareth!” Maradir hailed.

He perceived the other flinch almost imperceptibly. It almost seemed as if he was waiting to be punished for something as he crossed the busy yard to reach his captain. Maradir put a hand on his shoulder and drew him away from a group of rangers tending to their horses. “I want to ask you something, Gareth. I have seen how you fared in our mission. You do not seem very comfortable with keeping too much secrets. And it shows on your face.” The young man was about to protest but Maradir interrupted him with a sharp gesture. “You have not failed your captain so far but I fear you might do so in the future. You are not cut out for that sort of work. Not yet, that is. You need more training, not with the guards or the footmen, or the cavalry. You should become a ranger. Faramir will take you into his company if you want and I will dismiss you with all honour due. So, what do you say?”

Curufë walked up to the room he had been using, and quickly packed his belongings. I did not take long, since, even compared to a ranger, he traveled lightly. After he had finished, he sat down, and began to meditated to prepare for what might lie ahead. As he did so, his mien shifted from the amiable, if slightly distant, traveler, to the forester, to the woodsman without peer in the Third Age, the warrior who had fought countless battles. If such a thing makes sense, this persona was closer to his true self than any other. Curufë walked downstairs and said, "I am ready."

Khorazir

"So is the rest of the company," Faramir said with a smile. After overlooking the last preparations he had returned inside to speak with those rangers who were to stay behind because of their injuries – only two, who had looked more than a little displeased about the prospect of being more or less confined to the house for some time. "I just need to find Túrin to bid him farewell."

"He is on his way down here with Daewen," came a voice from an adjoining room, from which Lindórië now issued. She was accompanied by an elderly servant who apparently was to be left in charge of the household and the guests, and who carried a pack of letters the lady had obviously entrusted her with. Lindórië had changed into her riding-garments again, and was again armed with her eket, which she now carried openly.

"Have you seen Visilya and Alessya as well, by any chance?" Faramir asked. "Neither the rangers nor any of your servants could tell me of their whereabouts, and if they had spent the night here at all. I am a little worried about them, and somewhat displeased about their behaviour as well. It would have been decent to at least inform us about their plans. And Visilya should be looking after Daewen. After all, it was her idea to bring her here."

"I am sure she will remember her charge. I have sent some of my folk to look for the ladies in town. And sooner or later Túrin will do so as well. So do not worry about them. As for Daewen, one of these messages is for my sister-in-law who doubtless would be delighted to look after the girl – should Daewen be willing to move to Lebennin. We shall see. Ah, but there they come."

Bardhwyn

More training!?

He didn't know whether to be incensed or shamed. *More training!?*

The bread in his hand lost all its appeal. He threw it down into the dirt while he struggled for a response. All those months spent 'training' with the Secret Guard, as a plebe, rolling in mud, running like a mad thing for hours, practicing hand-to-hand combat, the bow, the sword... crawling into his blankets on a hard flet for only a few hours of sleep a night for weeks on end. What the bloody hell was that? A party?

His first instinct was to address Maradir as 'Captain' but he caught himself. He was learning...

Gareth lowered his voice but raised his eyes so he looked Maradir squarely in the face.

"With all due respect I ..."

He cut himself off as two of Faramir's men exited out of the very same door he had stepped from.

"I would appreciate another archery lesson from you, yes thank you." Gareth said aloud, loud enough to be heard.

The two Rangers walked on, uninterested in Gareth and Maradir. Gareth lowered his voice again.

“I would very much like to retain my position in the Steward’s Guard. Perhaps time spent with the Rangers of Ithilien could be regarded as additional training? Of course, if this is an order I will follow it. I don’t want to jeopardize the mission...whatever it is.”

A hoarse voice was raised, hailing all to fall in and prepare to depart.

Canamarth

“We have completed our mission,” Maradir said gravely. “The others are on their way back to report to the Steward. I will accompany my friend as long as I do not receive other orders from Denethor. You are now free to accompany me or go back to Minas Tirith.

The other proposition I made is also wholly your choice. I will not order you to do either. You will have time enough to think about it. But you should remember that you have let yourself be captured. Do not let the fact that your captors were the Rangers of Ithilien cloud your judgement. They could have been a lot harsher to you. Or you could have fallen into the hands of others.”

The first rangers had gotten on their steeds and were starting to move towards the gate. Maradir left Gareth as a group of them passed. He mounted his own horse and only looked back at the young man when he was seated. He was still standing where he had left him, his face seemingly impassive. *He’s learning*, Maradir thought.

Khorazir

“Oh, I didn’t know you’re already on the go,” Túrin said as he and Daewen approached Curufë, Faramir and Lindórië. From outside hoofbeat could be heard, and Túrin assumed that Andanor had told the rangers to mount and move on into the street. He cast a quick glance out of the open door of the parlour, then looked back at the others, with a note of apprehension on his face.

“You’ll be careful, won’t you,” he said, to Faramir.

“Tis strange to hear this coming from you,” his friend replied with a smile. “But yes, we will. Look well after Daewen and the others.”

“And my house,” Lindórië added, her eyes twinkling. “I hope it still stands when I return.”

Túrin grinned. “At least some of it will be up still, that I promise.”

Lindórië turned to Daewen. “I would have wished to have had more chance to talk with you about what is to become of you, now that you have been dragged down here far from your familiar surroundings. But I fear it will have to wait till we are back, or send word for you to come and join us. It should not take long for us to resolve this matter. Meanwhile, perhaps you could think about where you would like to live, and we shall try and arrange it. For now, farewell.”

She gave the two a nod, waved her servants farewell, and left the house with Curufë.

“You’ll send word when you need help?” Túrin said.

“When?” Faramir raised an eyebrow questioningly.

“Well, if,” Túrin corrected himself. “Sorry. It’s just, I haven’t got a good feeling about your planned undertaking.”

“Neither have I. But would you prefer Tarannon to show up here?”

“Alas, no. Ah well, good luck to you.”

“And to you.”

Túrin accompanied him to the door. Faramir and the ranger holding his horse were the last to mount and leave the courtyard. He raised a hand in farewell, and watched until they had cleared the gate and the sound of hooves had died away on the cobbled street. Then returning to the parlour, he saw that Daewen had sat down at one of the tables.

“I reckon you’d be wanting breakfast,” he said.

Khorazir

Faramir caught up with the company when they had almost reached the end of the alley the gate of Lindórië’s house opened onto. Several people were standing at the sides or looking out of windows, and most of the glances the riders were given were dark, almost unfriendly. Apparently people were disquieted about the strange goings on last night. The murder of the servant girl had spread through the neighbourhood and indeed most of the city like fire. Thus the company tried to get out of the city by the least conspicuous route, avoiding the main thoroughfares that were busy with merchants and traders, sailors, fishermen and the local craftsmen at this time of the day. Soldiers were about as well, Faramir soon noticed. Falastur had obviously increased his watchforce, to ensure the safety of his citizens whose welfare was so important to him – according to his claim, at least.

Faramir was glad when at length they reached the western gate, after winding their way through a maze of alleys and narrow streets. At least this way we have made pursuit difficult, he thought with a wry smile. More than once either one of the rangers or of his friends, or he himself had noted a figure that looked conspicuously interested in their destination. Most likely Falastur had not only sent his soldiers out, but informants as well. But none of them appeared to follow them for long.

The guards at the gate had obviously been informed about their departure, and had been told to get rid of them as soon as possible. Moreover, when the horsemen reached the gate a large company of traders just off the ferry that crossed the river Sirith near the gate arrived from the other side, keeping the guards and the small, almost dwarflike scribe responsible for exacting tolls and taxes on their goods and cargo more than busy. A middle-aged lieutenant, his surcoat in the colours of the coat of arms of Pelargir, walked up to the rangers, carrying a huge halbard. “You may pass,” he said gruffly. “If you’re going to take the ferry, you better get a move on as it’s about to leave. The road up north along the river is being repaired in places, if you’re considering that route, so you have to expect some delays. And now, move along. Don’t block the gate.”

And a wonderful day to you as well,” Faramir heard Mablung say beside him, deliberately loud enough for the guardsman to hear. He was about to add some not very favourable description of the other, but Faramir shook his head slightly. “Sorry captain,” Mablung murmured. “But you must agree he deserves it.”

“And so he does, but we cannot afford the trouble right now. You may call him whatever you want once we are out of earshot.”

“Is that an order, captain?” the ranger asked with a grin.

“A suggestion. And now pass on word to the rangers to keep a good lookout for anybody following us. It would astound me if Falastur had not sent a footpad or two after us to keep informed about what we are up to.”

“Sounds like something he would do, right. We’ll be careful.”

Faramir gave him a nod, then returned to the head of the company where Lindórië was talking to Curufë. From what he could pick up without eavesdropping too obviously the Noldo was telling her about Rivendell and the people living

there, and Lindórië was listening with a gentle smile and a light in her eyes he had not seen before. He watched her for a moment, then, feeling too much like an intruder, he reined his horse a little to ride behind them. Turning in the saddle, he saw that Maradir and Gareth were talking quietly to each other near the end of the train, and that Andanor was apparently discussing bowmanship from horseback with Anborn, who was talking agitatedly and kept making vaguely bowlike shapes with his arms, much to the irritation of his horse and the amusement of the other rangers. Faramir smiled briefly as well. At least the company was in good spirits.

Behind the gate the road led through a small settlement of fishermen where several traders had built storehouses. The ferry had just set out on its return journey across the river. Here, shortly before joining the mighty Anduin, Sirith was broad and deep, but nevertheless had a strong current. At the moment it carried lots of water, giving the ferrymen a hard time. The company was not to take the boat, but kept on the main road that now wound upwards through bright-green vineyards, silvery grey olive-groves and flowering orchards of peach, apple and almond trees clad in white and pink to a high, treelined causeway some way above the river.

Faramir enjoyed the sight. The weather was fair and sunny, the sky haze-free and clear, accounting for good views, with the clouds casting shadows on the wooded downs ahead. Down here in the south spring was even more advanced than in the lands about Minas Tirith. The trees along the road, towering oaks and beeches for the most part, were arrayed in fresh leaves of an almost unnatural green, and the meadows and fields were thick with flowers: dandelions, lady's smock, cowslips, pink orchids and many others beyond Faramir's botanical knowledge.

But soon his attention was drawn away from the beauty of the countryside. There was quite some traffic on the road, mostly carts and wains drawn by heavy oxen sweating under the warm sun and because the climb to the causeway had been steep in places. They blocked much of the way, forcing the company to ride slower than they wished, until a strip of grassland next to the road enabled them to overtake the slowest carts, and ride on more speedily. They managed to make good progress for about a quarter of an hour until they reached a river, a small tributary of Sirith. It was bridged by a shapely stone-arch which unfortunately now was in repair. To one side its railing had been dismantled completely, and that side of the road had been closed. A large cart had just arrived with new stones, and the masons and workers were busy unloading it, while the master-mason, his clothes and hair white with limestone dust, was talking to a bunch of farmers waiting in front of the bridge, hoping to be able to pass with their broad wains and their herd of pigs.

"If you can keep your pigs together, you can try and get them across," the mason said patiently. "But you better watch them, or even better tie them together. It's a fair drop down to the river. As for the wains, we will try and make room for them, but it may take a while. The lads must unload first at the other end, so that the cart can be moved. So why don't you move over to that bank where there's shade and nice grass for your animals while we clear the way? Ho, and watch piggy there, will you! It's my lunch he's sniffing at."

It took the farmers a while to collect their pigs and move their carts to the bank. When the way was clear, Faramir rode forward to the mason and hailed him. "Do we have to wait as well? We are in rather a hurry."

The man eyed him and the company curiously. "You're rangers, aren't you. My son applied for a position in the Rangers when he went up to Minas Tirith. But shouldn't you be over in Ithilien?"

"You are quite inquisitive for a mason," Faramir replied, frowning slightly, but speaking mildly. "As you can see, we are riding escort for a lady. And she does not appreciate delays."

"Well, if you think you can get past that cart, you can cross the bridge," the other returned with a shrug. "Your horses should be able to squeeze through, but don't startle the oxen."

"We shall do our best to keep them calm," Faramir said, judging the space between cart and railing, which looked rather narrow indeed. "Good luck to your son."

"Thanks," the mason said, looking friendlier now. "And now be careful. We haven't done the other railing yet. Don't get too close to it when you can avoid it."

EdaintheRanger

Like Faramir, Andanor noted the swift progress that the company had made through the city, it seemed that several of the Rangers knew it well and so they made an elusive progress through the back streets and alleyways. Mindful of being followed and under the guise of amiable chatting to a fellow ranger he kept a careful note of the people around them. The weather was fair, well at least it wasn't bloody raining as he remarked to Anborn, before lapsing into their on-going debate about which was better wood for the making of bows, and whether swan feather flights really made the arrow fly swifter. Anborn was about to test him on his knowledge of the properties of horse-glue, and it's purpose in streamlining when Andanor espied the bridge up ahead.

"Heads up and eyes open!" he called softly, his voice carrying to the men around him "and be alert, for Minas Tirith always needs lerts." He finished on that age, old pun.

He felt a niggle, perhaps he was being over cautious, or maybe he should really stop drinking that "coughy" from Khand. Either way he heeded Faramir's signal and the company shifted into single file. The pigs were grunting contentedly as they nosed around the tree bases, snuffling for truffles and other porcine delights. Clapping the rearguard ranger on the back he grinned wolfishly and said "Hmm those would go down nice with a little dish of apple sauce don't you think?"

Khorazir

"Oi, careful there, Master Ranger," one of the farmers, a stout, red-cheeked man with a curious felt-hat who had overheard Andanor's remark called to him. "They don't like talk of that kind. Gives them the creeps, yeh see, and they stop eatin'." Then he grinned, reached behind the tarpaulin of one of the wains and brought to light a carrot which he threw towards Andanor. "Before yeh starve," he said with a wink when the ranger caught it, causing the rearguard to chuckle.

Faramir also smiled about the exchange. He had moved his horse to the side to watch the company's progress across the bridge: the vanguard was just now attempting the crossing, with both the master-mason and their captain observing them attentively and a little anxiously. Faramir knew that some of them men were not very experienced horsemen, and their steeds were nervous because of the narrow passage, the odd sound their hooves made on the partly loose cobble-stones, and because of the smell and sounds of pigs and oxen, and the white limestone dust hovering in the air.

"Take it slow," he told them. "And only one at a time."

At his side the mason shook his head slightly. "It's a shame, really," he said. "The condition of the bridge, I mean. It should have been repaired ages ago – well, in fact it has been repaired many times, but sloppily. Look at the railing, crumbling away. A later addition to the bridge, by the looks of it, despite it being very old as well. And the masonry ... my dear father as was mason also would turn in his grave if he saw it."

"The bridge itself is from Númenorean times, is it not?" Faramir observed, causing the other to regard him with new interest.

"Aye, so it is. But what made you think so, if I may ask?"

"The shape of the arch, and the fact it was built without the use of mortar. Moreover, according to my knowledge this road was first established at the end of the Second Age."

"According to your knowledge, eh? You are well-read for a soldier. Although I believe you are more than a mere ranger."

Faramir smiled slightly. "I had an excellent teacher," he said, with a glance at Lindórië who was about to cross the bridge. "As for your assumption concerning my identity, it seems to me that you have not told me all you guess, or know. You did not complain to me about the condition of the bridge because you just felt like it, did you?"

“Ah well, no, lord,” the mason admitted, scratching his head and grinning a little sheepishly. “You see, you look a lot like your father when he was a young man, and I used to serve as his guard at one time, before I quit military service and returned to the occupation I had learned as a lad. And as for the bridge, well, I thought I might as well complain to the people in charge of these things. Keeping the roads in good condition and all. What do we pay taxes for, I ask you, if all they’re spent on is war-mongery and not the things they ought be used for in the first place?”

“There are many people in Gondor who would resent this sort of talk,” Faramir replied sternly, but then smiled again, “yet I must admit I agree with you. However, you should address your complaint not to me but to the lord of this fief, whose sole concern, as he assured me only this morning, is the welfare of his people.”

This last statement he uttered with obvious sarcasm, which the mason seemed to find appropriate, for he snorted contemptuously: “Welfare of his people, the Lord Falastur? You must be joking, lord, or referring to somebody else. The only thing he is interested in is his own welfare.” He looked up at Faramir skeptically. “Hope I didn’t get myself into trouble now,” he said.

“Fear not. Apparently our views of Lord Falastur have many similarities.”

The other laughed. “Perhaps I should not tell you, but there are many ‘round here who have even worse views of the nobles, although even they agree that there are exceptions. Like your brother.” He smiled. “Now that’s a worthy man. He is admired throughout the land, because he really achieves things instead of just talking about great deeds and ventures all the time, and he is brave and courageous and honest, not a scheming politician like the rest of the lot.”

“Aye, that is Boromir,” Faramir agreed warmly, smiling as well. “Gondor is lucky to have him.”

“He’ll make a good Steward one day. Or even a king, perhaps.”

Faramir gave him a questioning glance. “A king? What makes you think there may be kings again in Gondor in the near future?”

The mason looked at him with a shrewd expression. “Well, one picks up a thing or two,” he said mysteriously in a low voice, “and there has been talk in these regions that some people think about restoring the kingship on account of them not being happy with Lord Denethor’s rule. Could be just rumours and gossip, but it’s been long-lived for that. Yonder,” he pointed westward, “in Lebennin some appear to have ideas of that kind, or so it’s said. I for one,” he went on louder, “I don’t mind how your father rules Gondor. I only wish he would remind the other lords of their duties now and again, like looking to repair-work before the building comes almost crashing down.”

“I shall tell him when I return to Minas Tirith,” Faramir said, then fell silent, glancing thoughtfully at the swift river underneath the bridge in its steep, narrow channel overshadowed by holly and boxwood and other evergreens. The mason’s words had troubled him. He recalled Denethor mentioning things of a similar kind: lords plotting to replace the Steward by a king, one of their own making. He also remembered conversations he had had with his brother concerning this topic, and Boromir’s excitement and eagerness when he described what a king – what he as king – might achieve in Gondor, and his scarce-veiled disappointment about the fact that, despite the Stewards having ruled Gondor for so long with the authority of a king, they would only remain stewards, to hold the position until the rightful king should return. The rightful king, whoever that was. Was there still anybody of the line of Isildur and Anárion left with an undisputed claim to the throne of Gondor? And what would happen if he showed up suddenly in these troubled times? Would the lords accept him, would Denethor and indeed Boromir yield their power and step aside? Never, Faramir thought, and he felt a shiver run over him despite the warmth of the sun upon his tunic. And where, he asked himself, would he stand? Where would his loyalty lie?

Taking a deep breath, he forced his concentration back to the task at hand, deciding to mention the matter to Lindórië at a later point. It would be his turn to cross soon.

Canamarth

Gareth joined Maradir towards the end of the company after they had left the city. "So, you have decided to accompany us? I hoped you would," the elder said with a smile. Gareth seemed to have lost some of the temper he had shown earlier in the courtyard. The two men exchanged a few words about the road that lay ahead but otherwise kept quiet about the decision the younger man had to face sooner or later. He seemed lost in his own thoughts for most of the time, probably mulling over his captain's words.

Only when they reached a bridge that was half-blocked by a heavy ox-waggon did his acute alertness, so well-trained in Maradir's company, return. He again rode to his captain's side and uttered some concern. "I know," Maradir said. "Just the place for an ambush. Though I do not think the Lord of Lebennin has the same thing in mind as we have. And he should not be so close to Pelargir yet. But keep your eyes wide open!" With that he rode around the company that was still waiting to cross the bridge while catching Curufë's attention with a wave. The elf soon enough sped after him. They came to a halt not far downstream where a sandbank extended far into the river. The water was swift here but narrower than further up or down the stream. Maradir loosened the rope he had attached to his saddle and knotted a sling. "Just in case..."

Khorazir

So far half the company had crossed the bridge. The men had been careful, and things had advanced slowly. Turning in the saddle, Faramir saw that Andanor, Anborn and the remaining rangers were talking to the farmer. Gareth was waiting a little to the side. He was watching the river and its narrow channel attentively, and when Faramir followed his gaze he descried Maradir and Curufë on a sandbank down in the river. Maradir had prepared a rope for catching anybody who should be so unlucky as to fall into the river.

Faramir smiled slightly, glad about this extra security, then he nodded to Gareth to cross, but just when the young man urged his horse forward there was a commotion at the other end of the bridge. There was a crash, and a large cloud of white dust went up. An oxen bellowed, and there was the sound of horses and people moving about and talking agitatedly.

"What is going on there?" Faramir called. The limestone dust was obscuring his sight.

"The masons dropped a few stones," came Mablung's voice, "and one of the beasts seems to have been hurt because some bloody errand-rider caused trouble here."

"What errand-rider, and what kind of trouble, Mablung?"

The ranger's silhouette came into view as he stepped forward onto the bridge. He was on foot. Faramir signed to Gareth to wait and rode forward himself. Upon drawing closer he saw that Mablung looked rather angry.

"The fellow arrived when our vanguard had just crossed," he explained. "He came from up north, and, despite seeing that there was still someone on the bridge, and there wasn't room for two he spurred his horse forward. I think the Lady was on the bridge then. So I rode forward and told him to stop, courteously, too, but he only made a haughty comment and rode on. So I reached out and grabbed his reins, but he flicked the ends at my horses' eyes, causing it to rear and jump aside. I almost fell off. My horse hit one of the oxen, which startled the beasts and the workers." He shook his head so that a small cloud of white dust rose out of his hair. "What a commotion. But at least we managed to catch the fellow. He doesn't look too happy now. One of the workers hit him rather strongly on the back of the head because he attributed the fact that one of the stones landed on his foot to the messenger."

"I shall come across now," Faramir called to the ranger. "Do not inconvenience the man further until I arrive. Gareth," he added, turning to the young man, "tell Andanor and the others to stop chatting with the farmers and get a move on, then cross yourself."

With a farewell-nod to the mason he steered his horse onto the bridge, then left the reins long and let the steed find

its own way over the partly loose cobblestones. The railing looked dangerously decayed indeed. Down in the river he could see Maradir and the Noldo watch the bridge and its surroundings carefully. Then he was across. Dust still hovered thickly in the air. Nevertheless he could see that the rangers had moved their horses to the bank on the left side of the road, and were standing in a circle about something lying on the ground. At the end of the bridge the workers tried to calm the nervous oxen, one of which was still making pitiful noises.

“He’s coming round again, captain,” Mablung said, stepping forward to hold his horse while Faramir dismounted. He nodded in the direction of the form on the ground.

“How hard did the worker hit him?” Faramir asked.

“Not hard enough,” came a gruff voice from the waggon.

Faramir stepped forward. Propped against the bank lay a man. He wore travelling clothes whose condition indicated a journey of no more than a few days, but without badge or device. Apparently the mason’s blow had rendered him unconscious for a moment, but now he was opening his eyes, and giving the rangers surrounding him furious gazes. Then he began cursing.

“I am quite sure he is one of Carandil’s messengers,” Lindórië said softly when Faramir stepped to her side. “I have searched his saddlebags, but found nothing of interest there. He must have the message on himself, should he be carrying a letter or notice at all, and not just an oral message.”

“Do you think this message could be of importance for us?” he replied quietly so that the rider would not be able to overhear him.

“He was in great hurry,” Lindórië answered. “So yes, it might be useful. And the longer we can delay him, the better. Most likely he was on his way to Falastur.”

EdaintheRanger

By the way of apology for startling the yeoman farmer’s porkers, Andanor had struck up a conversation, and his mind slipped away from war, and to his former trade as a promising musician. Not really the best situation for such a lapse and one that could cost the party dear. Nevertheless he managed to haggle some fresh pork for the evening and was busy fixing the catch within his baggage, when the command came down the line. Bidding the farmer farewell, who being several silver pennies richer was quite satisfied with the transaction. Colouring with not a few shades of guilty conscience, he brusquely clipped out orders to the men.

“Okay, playtime over, you ragamuffins. Get to your positions and keep those ears pricked and eyes peeled. Be damned if we’re going to be caught unawares.”

Then mounting he steadied his horse, and patted it’s neck, murmuring reassurances as it made its passage over the sorry looking bridge.

Khorazir

“Back off, you bloody idiots,” came a sharp command from the errand-rider, “and let me get to my feet.” At a discreet sign from Faramir the rangers widened the circle a little. The man struggled to his feet, and began shaking the dust out of his clothes, all the time muttering wild curses under his breath. When he had steadied himself, apparently convinced that nothing had been taken from him, he gave the rangers an infuriated gaze.

“You’re going to be very sorry for this, I promise,” he hissed, glaring at them wildly, his anger obviously increasing when he saw the grins on the their faces. “My master will learn of it in no time, and then you can pack and return to

bloody Mordor where you belong. Don't you know what the penalty is for delaying messengers? You –" he leaped forward suddenly, pointing Mablung straight in the face. "It was you that attacked me. Wipe that smirk off your face, laddy, or I'll make you lose it."

Mablung crossed his arms in front of his chest, looking rather amused than frightened. Faramir knew the ranger was enjoying himself when he raised an eyebrow questioningly. "Really? You and what army?"

With a motion quick as lightning, and a speed nobody would have credited to him, the messenger produced a small dagger and pointed it at Mablung's right eye. "I won't need no bleeding army," he sneered softly. "And now," he called to the others, "my horse!"

"You do not really believe we will let you depart like this, do you?" Faramir said calmly. "Drop the weapon immediately! If you do as much as prick his skin, I shall personally see to it that you will indeed spend the rest of your miserable days in Mordor. You would not believe how quickly one ends up a prisoner of the orcs when doing watch-service at the border."

The other laughed wildly, his eyes darting from Faramir to Mablung to the rest of the company, the rangers waiting only for a sign from their captain to interfere. "Oh yeah? And what authority has a mere captain of a band of rag-pack rangers in these parts? I want my horse, now, or he will need an eyepatch!"

"I've always wanted one," Mablung fell in, still speaking lightly, but looking a tiny bit concerned now, with the dagger's point hovering an inch or so in front of his eye, and not very steadily, too. The errand-rider was clearly out of his mind, although the reason for his fierce and extremely unwise reaction was still a mystery to the company. "Makes you look daring and dangerous, doesn't it?" Mablung went on. "And as for authority, does it suffice to tell you that the captain knows the Lord Steward rather well. In fact, they're very closely ..." he paused briefly for dramatic effect "related."

This last statement, and even more the tone it had been uttered in caused the messenger to regard Faramir again. It took him a short moment ere understanding set in, a moment Mablung used to grab his hand in a firm grip and tear the dagger from him, while two other rangers took hold of the man's arms from behind. The errand-rider was too surprised to struggle. Also he seemed to understand the futility of any escape-attempt. From the direction of the bridge hoofbeat was approaching, and a quick glance told the assembly that the rest of the company was arriving one by one, Andanor in the lead.

Mablung had stepped back a little, looking somewhat paler than usual. He handed the dagger to Faramir. "What are we going to do with him, captain?" he asked. "I strongly object to letting him run off again without punishment, but we can't drag him with us, either."

Faramir nodded darkly. He had no man to spare, and no time to question the messenger properly to learn about his errand, and why he had begun to cause trouble in the first place instead of just waiting a short while to then cross the bridge. He could feel the eyes of the entire company on him. The workers, too, were giving him expectant glances, and the messenger, who apparently had grasped the situation very quickly, was gazing at him haughtily.

"Get me a pen and some paper from my saddle-bag, Mablung," Faramir told him. "You," he nodded at the worker who had dropped a stone onto his foot, "how bad is that foot of yours? Can you still ride?" The man nodded. "Rather than work," he said with a wink.

"Right. You will take this fellow's horse – and you will shut up while I speak –" he told the messenger who had begun complaining and cursing again, "and ride to Pelargir. Do you know your way around the place?"

"I'm from a village nigh the city, so, yeah, I do, lord."

"Excellent. I will give you the address of a house. There you will ask for a certain Túrin."

"Túrin like in the tale?"

"Yes. You will deliver a message from me, and tell him what befell here. He is to come here and take over the prisoner,

whom I will leave in your charge until he comes, or I or one of my men should return. Can I rely on you in the matter?"

"Of course, lord," the worker replied. "What shall we do with him should he try to run off?"

"You are not to hurt him. Tie him to a tree or something like that, and have one man watch him while you wait. Search him for more hidden daggers or other weapons, though. When Túrin arrives tell him to take the man back to Pelargir and keep him there."

Mablung had brought the writing utensils, and Faramir quickly wrote a note to Túrin describing the event, and what was to become of the prisoner. Lindórië then added a short description of the way to her house, and the address. By now the entire company had crossed the bridge except for Maradir and Curufë. The master-mason had come as well. The worker now mounted, was handed the message and given a few last instructions, then he set off. The other masons took charge of the prisoner. Faramir suspected that sooner or later they would have the man help unload the heavy stones, and he considered this a just punishment for him.

There was still some commotion when the newly arrived rangers questioned the other about the incident, but soon the company was ready to continue on their way, only waiting for Curufë and Maradir to rejoin them. Mablung was obviously enjoying the attention he was receiving, and did not tire to repeat the tale of how his eyesight had been threatened over and over again. Faramir rode over to Lindórië, who was watching the errand-rider being tied to a tree with a thoughtful expression. "What do you make of the incident?" he asked quietly. "It does not make much sense, does it?"

asaris

Curufë had actually been fairly amused by the encounter, despite its apparent seriousness. It was clear to him that the messenger was a small man, the type that takes undue pleasure in authority given to him, but no real threat on his own – at least not to this band of rangers. He turned to Maradir and asked, "What do you think?"

EdaintheRanger

Having crossed the river safely they all seemed to converge together to discuss the disturbance. Andanor overheard the Noldo Elf's words and nodded as if in agreement and added. "it's so easy to gain a over developed sense of self-importance in such vocations. Yeah in other words bloody Jobsworth, "

Eitherway while the company were waiting for the Elf, Maradir, and his companion, Andanor took the precaution to secure any papers and identification that the errand rider was carrying. Should there was anything that could enlighten the party on the events that seemed to be brewing in the south, he felt that the chance of finding anything was slight, but nothing ventured then nothing gained as the saying went.

Should anyone complain, then surely they should be lucky the rangers didn't follow the laws of Far Harad at this time...

Khorazir

Upon Faramir's question Lindórië stirred slightly, as if startled out of her musings. "Nay, it does not make much sense," she agreed. "He totally overreacted, or at least so it seems. I reckon his message is really important, and that he was indeed in haste to deliver it. Moreover he seems a malicious character, who enjoys annoying people. On the other hand he could be a skilled actor, and this entire episode a well-conceived and rehearsed attempt to delay us."

"Do you believe, then, that Carandil is in league with his brother?" Faramir asked. "I thought he was trying to stay out

of the affair and remain “neutral”, like Falastur.”

“It may not have been Carandil who instructed and sent the messenger,” she replied thoughtfully. “We should not forget Tarannon’s counsellor. He may pull more strings in this than we anticipate. Well, perhaps we will yet get a chance to question the wretch, when the business with Tarannon is over. For now we should see to it that we continue swiftly on our way. This delay was unfortunate indeed, whether planned by our enemies or not.”

“The company should be ready to depart any moment now,” Faramir said, seeing that Curufë, Maradir and Gareth had almost reached them as well. “How far to the border still?”

“Only a few miles. If we ride swiftly, we should take no longer than half an hour. Thence it is another league up into the hills, and the countryside suitable for setting up an ambush.”

Faramir gave the company a long glance. The rangers were in excellent spirits, some of them now advising the masons how to tie up the errand-rider properly. They would be even more motivated, he knew, when it came to searching the woodlands for a good place for a foray, being in their element then. He, too, felt a certain excitement, and satisfaction as well, at the thought of finally being able to confront Tarannon openly. On the other hand he was not sure to what extent personal dislike would affect his judgement.

“Andanor, did you find anything of interest on him?” he asked, forcing his attention back to the situation at hand, and noticing that his lieutenant had just searched the prisoner, under hissed threats and curses from the messenger.

Galhadrim

Grendelnoth stepped from his carriage and quickly surveyed the advanced guard that Tarannon led. The horses had fanned out along the edge of a small lake, drinking while their riders stretched their legs and filled their own waterskins. The rest break would be a short one, already some squad leaders organized their men for departure.

Tarannon turned from discussing matters with his captains and saw his counsellor approaching. About bloody time. For their part, the captains melted away from the scene. Nobody wanted to be near when Grendel was around.

The lord pulled his gauntlets back on as Grendel came up and bowed. “I trust you’ve been successful in whatever errand you ran this morning?”

The emissary nodded. “Falastur will soon pay for his timidity. I’ve set in motion a plan to link him to the pirates that raid the coast. In a few days you will have rumors circulating about his financing of our enemies. Then will be the time to confront him and inform the Steward. You rise, he falls.”

Tarannon slammed his gauntlets together. “Perhaps you have not been paying attention, but I go now to settle accounts with my wife and her dalliance. When I get to Falastur’s courts I will force action with him as well.”

“And I humbly suggest that you allow the grander design to unfold. Emotions are our enemy at this stage.”

Tarannon raised a threatening finger. “I will have justice! I will have my satisfaction!”

Grendel stepped back a bit. He kept his face perfectly impassive but inside he knew that Tarannon was slipping out of his control. The time had come for an alternate plan. He had hoped to continue using Tarannon but that time was clearly over. The emissary stepped in close to his lord with a shimmering in his eyes. “Now you listen to me,” he said in a whisper. “The Steward’s son has been taunting you, embarrassing you with his impertinent actions. You are seen as a fool amongst the lords of Gondor, everyone knows of your ineptness. Lindorie and Faramir have been cavorting like newlyweds and all have seen it. If you truly want to claim the stewardship, you must break Denethor. What better way to claim your rights than to kill Faramir in single combat?”

Grendel stepped back and Tarannon blinked his eyes. The lord took in a deep breath, as if just waking for the day. "Yes," he growled. "The Steward's whelp will die before the sun sets."

Grendelnoth watched his lord stalk off and call for immediate rally. The troops around him scrambled to their mounts and secured their belongings, all sensing a renewed fury in their master. The counsellor walked slowly back to his carriage, hands behind his back. He would stay with Tarannon until the border and then take a different road to Minas Tirith.

In every game there was a time to switch sides.

Khorazir

Captain Ondoher and his lieutenant had wisely seen to it that all men were ready for departure when Tarannon mounted, and with a curt signal set the company in motion again, leaving the quiet wayside inn and its idyllic lake behind. Tarannon rode in front with his two most loyal personal guards, then came the rest of the relatively small company in due order, then Grendel's carriage. There should be a real rearguard, Ondoher knew, but none of the men, him included, felt great desire to ride near the dark vehicle and its even darker passenger, and after the conversation which had just passed between his lord and his counsellor the men seemed to shun it even more than usual.

Ondoher could see that Tarannon was greatly agitated, even more than before. They were riding at great pace, as if every minute was counting, and the captain wondered what was so important. When only a short while later the company reached the shallow ford of the small, stony river that spilled out of the lake at their resting-place, and was forced to reduce speed, he rode up to Tarannon.

"My lord, may I have a word?" he asked tentatively, knowing how unwise it was to annoy the Lord of Lebennin when he was in a temper – like now.

"What is it?" came the short reply as Tarannon was urging his horse into the water.

Ondoher drew a deep breath, cast a reassuring glance at his lieutenant who had come up behind, and said: "Well, the lads are a bit ... well, worried. We do not have a clear idea yet whither we are going, and whom we are going to meet, or in fact what to expect. And ..." he bit his lip, squirming uncomfortably under Tarannon's angry stare, "well, maybe it is not very wise to dash on like this. We should sent out scouts to survey what lies ahead, and on the whole proceed more carefully."

Tarannon reined his horse in the middle of the stream. "If we had any time to spare, I should deem all your advice good, but unfortunately we are in great hurry. And the men – including, if I may add, their captain – are to follow my orders without questioning them."

"Well, they would follow them more easily if they knew a little about the real purpose of this errand, and why we are in such a desperate hurry," Ondoher dared to object.

"The purpose, Captain," came the fierce reply, "is to repair what damage has been done to my honour and reputation, and to exact some order where it is sorely needed. And to punish those who disturbed that order. And now see to your duties!"

Tarannon spurred his horse so that it leaped forward and galloped to the other shore. But Ondoher, despite the intimidating temper of his superior, was not entirely daunted. He urged his own steed to follow Tarannon, and caught up with him again on the road.

"There is something else, my lord," he said, bracing himself for the thunderstorm to brake loose.

"Did I not make myself clear, Ondoher?"

“You did, sir. But ... forgive me, there is the matter with your counsellor. The men ... they are uneasy in his presence. In fact, some even fear him, and we all have doubts about his true designs. We ... – well, I, am afraid that his counsels may not be to your best.”

“I appreciate your concern,” Tarannon replied, “but in this I trust my counsellor. So far his advice has always led to my advantage, and I cannot see why it should not be so in this case. In fact, he has just approved of my plan. I shall deal out some justice in a few hours. But,” he lowered his voice, casting a quick glance over his shoulder at the carriage now making its way through the river, “you may be right about his “true designs”. I seem to recall dimly that only this morning he tried to persuade me to forgo my plan. So yes, do keep an eye on him. And now return to your post.”

Ondoher nodded, his concern only increased by this exchange. Nevertheless he saluted, deciding to talk the matter through with his lieutenant.

When the captain had left, Tarannon ran a hand over his face to wipe off the drops of water that had settled there during his short gallop through the river. Perhaps the water, or else his captain’s words of caution and concern had slightly cooled his temper, because he found himself thinking about what Ondoher had said, and his recent dealings with Grendel. Of a sudden he felt slightly dizzy, confused. No doubt, Grendel had indeed approved of his plan to get rid of his wife’s cursed lover, and a duel, yes, that would be just the right way to see the little upstart off for good. And yet, only this morning ... had not Grendel tried to dissuade him from this action? He was not sure. The thought hovered just on the edge of actual memory. Or had he imagined this? Again he ran a hand over his face and eyes, feeling a headache coming on. Why could he not recall his conversation with Grendel in the morning? He only remembered that what the other had said had sounded good and true at the time.

He shook his head angrily. *Weariness, that must be it*, he decided. He had not gotten enough rest lately. And yet, and yet ... that Grendel should suddenly so wholeheartedly agree to his plan troubled him. Challenge the Steward’s son to single-combat ... He was not afraid of the encounter itself. Who would win this fight was clear. He himself was accounted one of the best warriors in Gondor, and as rumours went, the Steward’s youngest had other interests than excelling at arms. *Bedding my wife, for example*, he thought, and felt hot fury rise in him again. Perhaps Grendel’s advice was not too bad after all – if it was not for the consequences. Killing the Steward’s son might not be an entirely brilliant idea. Alright, the Steward might not be overly sorry to lose that one, still he would want to avenge him, and punish his slayer. Unless ... unless he was killed in self-defence. Now, if he attacked Tarannon first, and the Lord of Lebennin was very sure he would be able to provoke this, he would be forced to defend himself. And if Faramir got killed thus, no judge would place the guilt on Tarannon.

He smiled slightly, and cast another glance at the carriage. In his undeniable wisdom, perhaps Grendel had foreseen this all along. *Let Ondoher and the other underlings worry*, Tarannon thought, gazing at the company haughtily. *In their narrow-mindedness they do not understand*. Had not Grendel advised him not to lose sight of the “grand design”? Well, killing the Steward’s son would be just the first step in the right direction.

Canamarth

Maradir and Curufë had witnessed the initial commotion caused by the errand-rider from afar. Now that they had joined the ranks again, they were soon filled in on what exactly had befallen. “What I think?” Maradir mused. “That I wouldn’t have thrown the rope after him had he fallen off the bridge.” He eyed the messenger closely as he was searched by Andanor. Something was amiss with the man. He behaved more as a caged beast than an errand-rider intercepted in his task of delivering a message. Maradir almost expected him to claw at Andanor when he parted him from a small sealed packet that could contain a bunch of letters as well as a casket. The lieutenant carefully handed it over to Faramir.

EdaintheRanger

With due ceremony the scruffy lieutenant handed the items to Faramir, before he was knocked off kilter by the man behind him. Anger flaring at this disruption, and the frustration of the last few days boiled over.

“Time you learnt some manners! he cried.

Before felling the errand rider to the ground with a smart right hook. Suitably pacified, the small man fell into a swoon, while Andanor gritted his teeth at the sudden pain in his knuckles. He opened and closed his fist to ease the throbbing. Glowering he looked out under beetled brows at the people around him.

Canamarth

Maradir put a hand over his mouth to hide a grin when he saw how Andanor handled the errand-rider's attack. Unfortunately the latter fell in a swoon. Maradir's eyes met Faramir's and though he knew his friend did not really disapprove, he apprehended what was following. The lieutenant would receive some sort of rebuke. He only hoped Faramir would not be too harsh on the man. He did not decide to stay around to witness it, though. He spurred his horse and rode around the rangers gathered behind the bridge to reach those that had been dispatched as the vanguard.

Khorazir

Faramir had been as surprised as Andanor and the others at the messenger's cunning attack, but not so much at Andanor's reaction. In his unresisting state, the errand-rider was quickly and securely tied to the tree, and the master-mason set a watch for him.

“We'll see to it that he stays just there until your friend arrives,” he told Faramir. “Pity you can't question him now, though.”

“We do not have the time now to do that, anyway,” Faramir replied. “We must leave now. Thank you for looking after him for us.”

He still held the packet in his hands, and moreover felt his lieutenant's gaze upon him. Clearly Andanor believed he was in for some rebuke, now that his anger had abated again a little. Leaning over to Lindórië, Faramir handed her the parcel, deciding to deal with the ranger first before opening the packet.

“Mablung,” he called to the ranger who had just slapped Andanor's shoulder approvingly, congratulating him, obviously, to his fine punch, “get the company going! We need to get a move on; we have tarried here too long already.”

Mablung saluted and mounted, and signed to the other rangers still afoot to do so as well. When they started to follow the vanguard that had already set in motion, Faramir turned to Andanor who by now had also mounted, and had moved his steed alongside his captain's. As they rode off as well, Faramir gave him a keen glance.

“I should thoroughly rebuke you now for your thoughtless action,” he said quietly. “Especially in the light of what befell yestereve, and the consequences of that incident. There, too, you let your anger get the better of you, and stress or no, this will not do for a lieutenant. But I did not want to criticise you in front of the men, who, I know, very much approved of what you did to the messenger, and indeed of your way of leadership in general. 'tis plain to see that they trust and respect you, which is quite an achievement with some of the rascals. Moreover, I know all of us have been through trying times lately, which makes it difficult to keep one's temper – and yes, I include myself in this. However, do try and control your anger better next time you find it aroused. That may also be better for your hands,” he added with a slightly mischievous smile, having realised that Andanor led his horse with his left hand instead of his right.

Meanwhile Lindórië had carefully opened the parcel. Wrapped in a wax-coated sheet of paper were several letters, as well as a small, flat box of dark lebethron. Faramir rode over to her and took the reins of her horse so that she had both hands free to handle the contents.

“All the letters bear Carandil’s seal,” she said, “and the seals are undamaged. Two are addressed to Falastur, and the handwriting looks to be Carandil’s. The others are for merchants and traders in Pelargir. They appear to have been written by a professional scribe.”

“And the box?” Faramir asked.

She shrugged and handed it over to him. “Perhaps ‘tis mentioned in one of the letters. I shall have a look.”

She drew a small knife from her belt and carefully opened the first letter without breaking the seal. Faramir gave the box a closer look. It was plain and unadorned, without lock or hinges to indicate where it opened. Nothing moved or rattled inside when he shook it slightly. Either it was newly made, or else had seen little wear over the years. Its slightly polished surface was perfectly smooth, without dents or scratches.

EdaintheRanger

Andanor started to visibly smart at Faramir comments, but let the foolish pride go. He felt that he was exposing unnecessary flaws, and that was not a wise thing in the soldiering business. So instead he swallowed and took the advice with a better grace.

Absolving to rest his hand, he helped Marblung with the organisation of the company.

Khorazir

“Anything of interest in there?” Faramir asked Lindórië after a while, when even a closer inspection of the box’ surface had yielded no indication of how it might be opened.

She turned to him, lowered the last letter she had been perusing and shrugged. “The first letter deals with things that should interest the mason we have just met: apparently Falastur has complained to Carandil about the state of some of the main roads in Lebennin, which somewhat annoyed the latter, because here he indulges in a long account of certain roads and bridges in the fief of Pelargir that are in desperate need of repair. He also criticises Falatur’s reluctance to provide more support for Tarannon’s expeditions.”

“How interesting. Obviously they do not get along as well as they generally pretend,” Faramir remarked. “What of the other letter? Does it mention the strange box at all?”

“It does not. It contains a list of merchants in Pelargir who also own contors and storehouses in Linhir. It seems Carandil has become aware of certain discrepancies in taxation these traders are subject to in Pelargir and Lebennin. Disguised in flowery speech, Carandil – now all friendly again –, more or less asks Falastur how he can legally raise these taxes in his realm to earn as much as the Lord of Pelargir. The cunning fox! The merchants will not like this.”

“Luckily for them this letter will not go to Falastur,” Faramir said. “I am sure the Lord Steward will be very interested in it.”

Lindórië smiled slightly. “Oh yes, he has suspected certain lords of “modifying” the taxes to satisfy their own greed for some time. This letter will provide him with ample proof to exact some punishment. Both Falastur and Carandil will find their treasury somewhat emptier soon.”

“Serves them right – although I fear in the end their citizens will suffer, not themselves.”

“As always,” she replied, holding the letter up against the sun to study the watermark. Suddenly she started, turned the page over and studied it with great interest. “How good is your Adûnaic?” she asked. “Do you remember aught of it still?”

He smiled a little sheepishly. “Well, ‘tis not as good as it used to be,” he admitted. “A few months ago I tried to read the Akallabeth and needed a dictionary to get through.”

“Then here is your chance to polish up your vocabulary,” she said, handing him the letter.

He grinned. “Always the teacher, eh?” Then he held the sheet up against the light like she had done. At first he could only see the watermark, a stylised image of the five streams of Lebennin, then, along the edges of the paper he faintly descried letter-like lines. After a while he could recognise them as Carandil’s handwriting. The language was indeed Adûnaic. “Oh dear,” he muttered softly, then began to read aloud: “PPS: The box contains that which I ... promised? ... promised you at our previous – no, last – last meeting, though I ... What does this mean?”

“‘Still’, but ‘tis spelled wrongly.”

“Thanks. Though I still do not know – wrong, ‘tis ‘understand’, is it not? Though I still do not understand what you need it for. To open the box, touch the ... the ground lightly? What does that mean?”

“Look at the vowels. ‘tis not ‘ground’”

“Not? Earth? Floor? Bottom? Bottom, alright, how stupid of me. Touch the bottom lightly with both hands, thumbs placed on top, then press gently and pull the box apart. Do not – the word is stressed: it must be an important warning – do not attempt this with the box ... down ... upside down.” He glanced at Lindórië. “How very funny. The box bears no indication which side is the bottom. Both look exactly the same. Do you think there is some kind of magic in it?”

“Magic, or rather cunning craftsmanship? Perhaps Master Curufë could help us,” she suggested, calling to the Elf to come over. “After all, the Noldor are renowned for their skill with these things. Whatever it contains, it must be of some importance to the two lords.”

“And of danger to others, if handled wrongly,” he added darkly.

asaris

Curufë took a careful look at the box. “I have never been much of a craftsman, but perhaps...” His brow furrowed. It was indeed finely crafted; not elvish work, but certainly one of the better mortal works he has seen. His eyes could not detect any seams, but his fingers... “There is a small rune, here,” he said to Faramir. “It appears to be Adunaic – I know not the tongue. It looks like this.” The elf bent down, and drew the rune in the ground.

Khorazir

Faramir had halted his horse when he had begun to decipher the Adûnaic inscription, and now he dismounted, too, to be able to take a better look at the rune Curufë had drawn. It looked familiar, although he was sure he had seen it in an entirely different context.

“It looks like a modified form of a Tengwar-letter,” Lindórië, who from horseback was looking over his shoulder, mused. “At least from up here it does.”

Faramir nodded slowly. “I recall having seen it before, not long ago. If only I could remember ...” He bent his head slightly from side to side, to view the letter from a different angle, and suddenly he smiled. “Now I know. It was on

one of the maps I saw in the library, ere we set out from Minas Tirith. I think it stands for azûl, the East. Which could mean the side with the rune is the bottom, because Númenorean maps were usually aligned to the West. I shall give it a try." With that he took the box again from Curufë.

"Be careful," Lindórië warned.

"Perhaps you should all step back a little in case it explodes or something," he said. Then placing his hands according to Carandil's description, he pressed what he hoped was the top-side with his thumbs, and pulled. There was no explosion. The box slid apart into two pieces. Again he marvelled at the skillful workmanship, then his attention shifted to the contents. Wrapped in a small piece of thin, almost transparent paper upon which was written something in a very minute, flowing script was a flat, sealed glass-phial. It seemed to contain a clear liquid, and something which upon closer inspection looked like a tiny insect.

Faramir showed the phial to Curufë and Lindórië. "Any idea what this could be? It somehow looks like poison to me. And this inscription ... 'tis written in Tengwar, but in a language I do not know. It does not sound very fair, though."

Lindórië took the paper and looked at it closely. Faramir saw how her eyes narrowed suddenly, and her face took on an alarmed expression. "Nay, it does not sound fair at all," she said. "This is Black Speech. I do not understand it either, but I recognise it. I wonder whence Carandil got this box, and the contents. Also, it would be interesting to hear what Falastur wants it for. Put it away again, Faramir, and keep it safe. It should also go to your father, along with the letters. The phial and the writing must be analysed by experts."

Faramir nodded, closed the box again, wrapped it and the letters with their protective wax-paper and stowed them in his saddle-bag. By now the rearguard had caught up with them, and was watching them curiously, waiting for them to ride on. "Are there really experts on Black Speech in Gondor?" Faramir asked as he mounted again.

"A few, yes," Lindórië answered. "'tis always helpful to understand one's enemy. And now that the Shadow is stirring again in the East ..."

"Not just in the East, it seems," he said gloomily. "It was a stroke of luck for us to intercept this messenger."

"Indeed it was. But now we must ride on speedily. This lucky stroke has cost us much time."

Saluting jestfully, Faramir urged on his steed which set off at a canter towards where the vanguard was waiting. He wanted to tell Maradir of the interesting contents of the errand-rider's parcel. Lindórië stayed beside Curufë. "There is something I have wanted to ask you for some time," she said, watching Faramir ride off. Then she turned to the Noldo. "I am not sure if I remember things correctly, but I seem to recall you were about to journey to Imladris ere you agreed to accompany us on this errand. Is that so?"

asaris

"Indeed. I had spent several years in Dol Amroth, but something in my heart bids me back to Imladris. I have no haste, however, and so it is a joy to be able to aid yourself and Faramir. Why do you ask?"

Khorazir

"And your help is greatly appreciated, Curufë, Lindórië answered. "As for the reason for my question ... well, I was wondering if you would mind if I accompanied you on your journey. When all this here is over, however it ends I do not think I will be longer welcome in Gondor. Moreover I have always wanted to one day leave the realm, and journey north to search for the house of Elrond Halfelven. Here in Gondor people seem no longer interested in gaining knowledge and devote time to learning old languages or the history of ages past. Young men train to become warriors instead of scholars or poets or artists, and young women seem content to marry and raise a family. And my heart

years for the exchange with people of like mind as I, people, moreover, who have actually seen and experienced the changing ages of Middle-earth. I think there is a lot I could learn in Imladris – should they permit strangers to visit them.”

+++

At the head of the company, Faramir had given Maradir a brief description of the strange contents of the parcel. “Makes you wonder what kind of people Carandil has dealings with,” he said. “If they can provide him with stuff like that. Lindórië suspected inscription to be Black Speech. And the fact Falastur requested the phial does not speak for his good intentions, either. You do not happen to know someone who could translate the writing, do you?” he added in a low voice. “I know you have very strange but useful acquaintances sometimes.”

Canamarth

“Indeed,” Maradir smiled. “I have all sorts of acquaintances. And I am sure I know someone who knows someone who can translate from Black Speech. But I am sure even your father knows some scholar who has mastered that vile language. It is always good to know what the enemy is up to, you know.”

Faramir remained silent. He seemed more concerned about the phial and its content than he had let on. He stared straight ahead without really seeing anything. Maradir stirred him out of his reveries. “What exactly have you planned for Tarannon? Are we going to meet him on the open road or... are you looking for a place where at least some of the rangers can conceal themselves on the sides of the road? We need to know what to look out for.”

Khorazir

“Yes, I had planned to set up a little ambush,” Faramir answered, forcing his attention back to what his friend was saying. Something about his statement concerning his father knowing some expert on the language of the enemy had struck him oddly. Denethor was learned in many things, and Faramir suspected he might even know that tongue himself. Indeed he seemed to know a lot of what Mordor was up to lately. So far this knowledge had been to Gondor’s advantage. But Faramir was doubtful and worried about the sources of the information. Surely they had a price, and he was not certain if his father had really considered how high that might be in the end.

“I do not want him to know how large – or small, rather – this company really is,” he continued. “Moreover the rangers are better employed in this kind of work than facing a troupe of well-armed cavalymen in the open. Lindórië mentioned that once we have crossed the river the road climbs to the height of those wooded downs over there, and that there are places suitable for hiding men to watch the road. As for Tarannon ...,” he shrugged and gave Maradir a wry smile. “Honestly I do not really know what to expect of this encounter. We are more likely to react than to act, I would reckon. I suppose he is going to be quite angry, and perhaps will try and attack Lindórië or me. If he does that, we shall have reason enough to strike back, although I should prefer if it did not come to a fight. How that could be managed, however, I do not know. We cannot just shoot him from his horse to prevent him from making trouble.”

While they were speaking, suddenly the trees lining the road on the side towards the river receded, opening the view to a large village a little ahead on the other shore, surrounded by meadows and orchards, and with quays for small fishing vessels. Behind it rose slopes of low hills grown with woodland already clad with the bright green of spring, sprinkled with the dark green of pines and cypresses and other coniferous trees. In the middle of the village, which continued on their side of the river, there was a large stone bridge spanning the river with four mighty arches. The road before them began to wind and to fall rather steeply towards the village.

“Sirith marks the border between Pelargir and Lebennin,” Faramir said as they drew near to the first houses, heralded by the barking of a dog. “I very much hope the guards at the bridge will let us pass quickly, and without further trouble.”

The guards at the bridge did not look like troublemakers on first sight. Having just begun their watch after lunch-break, they did not seem very motivated to move at all. They were sitting in front of the small watchhouse, letting the sun shine upon their faces. The sergeant in charge was chewing on a blade of grass, viewing the little traffic on the village's main thoroughfare with a content, unworried expression. Two of the men under his command were just setting up a chessboard, and squabbling amicably over who was to take which colour. The third, a mere boy, looked like he would doze off any moment. Most of the villagers were down at the river, or working on the fields in the vicinity, and those at home showed little interest in the riders now passing through their settlement.

When the company came into view of the watchhouse, their steeds' hoofbeat loud in the peaceful quiet of the village (even the dog had lost interest after a while and stopped barking, to settle down in the shade and rest), the sergeant stirred slightly in his chair and looked up, but decided that actually getting to his feet was too much of a bother. Only when the vanguard had almost reached the watchhouse he stood up with a sigh, stretched, straightened his surcoat and gave the dozing lad a little kick that made him spring to his feet in shock, then begin to search for his helmet and halbard, and stand to attention. The two chessplayers only grinned, and so did the rangers.

The sergeant gave the horsemen a long glance. There was something odd about the company, but he could not quite define what it was. "Who are you and what's your destination?" he asked.

Faramir rode forward. "We are Rangers of Ithilien, riding escort for Lady Lindórië of Lebennin." He turned in the saddle and pointed towards Lindórië who was still talking with Curufë. "Our destination is the lady's home in Linhir."

"Are you carrying any goods with you you intend to sell in Lebennin?" asked the sergeant, but only because it was his duty.

"Nay, none," Faramir answered.

The sergeant took another look at the company, noted that they did not even lead a pack-animal with them, then shrugged. "You may pass," he decided. "At your ease, lad," he added in the direction of the young guard who still stood to attention. With that he settled down in his chair again, and watched the company pass by and over the bridge.

The Lebennin-side of the village was more lively than the part belonging to the fief of Pelargir. There was a small market on the main square, well-frequented by locals and the inhabitants of smaller settlements in the vicinity. When the rangers approached many heads went round to them, and people began to chatter amongst themselves. Apparently some recognised Lindórië, for there was a number of smiles and polite bows and salutes. Curufë received many curious glances, and when he had passed excited talk flared up. Faramir overheard a small group of elderly men who once might have served in the army wonder about the appearance of the rangers in Lebennin, especially remarking upon the fact that they were armed as if for war. Also he noted how many eyes followed his person, and how his identity was then discussed among the people. Most seemed to have been entertaining the right idea, and he was surprised to realise that he seemed to be quite well-known in Gondor. Well, he thought with a wry smile when his glance fell on two girls who gazed at him, turned quickly away when they noticed he was watching them, and began to giggle, most likely they are mistaking me for Boromir anyway.

The company did not tarry in the village, but swiftly made their way through. The road began to ascend again as they rode through meadows and flowering orchards, and continued to do so when it was swallowed by the forest. The woods here consisted mostly of beeches, oaks and chestnuts putting forth fresh, bright-green leaves, were interspersed with coniferous trees or tall evergreens, and had a dense underbrush of holly, boxwood and rhododendrons with thick clusters of buds. Here and there lay large, mossy boulders, their frequency increasing the higher the road wound between the trees, and there were glades covered with a thick carpet of bluebells and wild garlic. The air had a rich, aromatic scent to it. A soft breeze stirred the young leaves overhead, and the sunlight cast flickering shadows on the road. Birds were singing in the trees. Behind him Faramir could hear the rangers chest and laugh. More than one remarked on how the place reminded them of Ithilien. They were in excellent spirits. He himself was touched by the beauty of the place. It seemed so peaceful, so unfit for their planned undertaking.

Then he felt a shadow fall on him, and he noted how the ground to both sides of the road had begun to rise quite

steeply. Rocky slopes grown with moss and trees formed a small gorge. The road began to wind sharply through a deep incline, while still ascending. Deep tracks in the soft, slightly moist ground showed how carts or wains had been forced to go very slow there. He reined his horse and held up a hand to halt the company.

“We should ride no further,” he said to Maradir and Andanor who had come up to him, “lest we also leave tracks here that might betray our passage. Two men shall lead our horses away from the road, hide and watch them. The rest is to take a look at the slopes on both sides of the road, and go as far as the top of this hill, to see how the way goes on once it has reached the highest point of this ridge. I want scouts up there who can inform us the instant Tarannon and his company approach, so that we can welcome them properly as soon as they enter the incline. From up there,” he pointed towards the tops of the slopes to both sides, “one should have a good view onto this incline. Make them look for suitable places to conceal themselves, Andanor, places whence they can shoot whatever passes down on the road, and yet remain unseen from below.”

He then turned to Maradir. “You, Gareth and Curufë are of course free to join the rangers, or take a look at the countryside on your own account.” He smiled slightly at his friend. “It would comfort me to know you were nearby, though, at least when the confrontation starts. You have proven yourself a resourceful bodyguard, and somehow I fear I might need one ere the day is old. And Lindórië, too,” he added, his expression serious of a sudden. “I am quite certain Tarannon will try and harm her, and it would ease my concern to know you were looking after her.”

Canamarth

Maradir nodded in agreement, though he knew he would be better employed with the archers on top of the ridge should they need to spring an ambush. But he would stay close to the Steward’s son and Lindórië, as he had been asked. Maybe he could use his bow near them as well.

He turned to look at Gareth. They had kept apart for most of the ride from Pelargir and Maradir wondered what the young man had been brooding over. Would he continue under his captaincy or would he take the offer to join the Rangers of Ithilien? Whatever course he was about to take – it would be spiked with obstacles. If he stayed with Maradir he would have to face the rest of the company and explain about his capture; would have to face some consequences, some sort of punishment. If he decided to join the Rangers he would have to stake out his place amongst an already close-knitted group of men, dispelling their distrust of the man they had captured.

But this was not the time to ponder these things. Maradir handed his horse to the rangers appointed to bring them into the forest. He strung his bow and, with some distance, followed Faramir and Lindórië wherever they went, keeping an eye on their surroundings. *I could never be a proper bodyguard*, he thought after a while.

Khorazir

When the ranger came for his horse, Faramir dismounted, took his bow and arrows, and began to climb the slope to the right-hand side of the road. Pausing on top of a large boulder, he watched how the rangers filed out and swiftly and silently disappeared into the forest, their green and brown garments merging with the light-speckled underbrush. He saw how Maradir followed him at a distance, and spotted Lindórië, who came towards him. He waited for her, and together they climbed higher. Neither spoke, and a swift glance at her face told Faramir that she was preoccupied with something. She had been talking to Curufë during most of the ride, and he wondered what the topic of their conversation had been.

On top of a formation of tumbled rocks that fell steeply down to one side, and from where one had a good view onto the road winding through the gorge beneath, they halted. Ancient pines and oaks grew here, with younger trees shooting up from cracks and crevasses in the rocky wall, amid moss and thick pillows of thyme and other herbs that love stony ground. Pine-cones and oak-leaves covered the earth. Lindórië walked forward to the brink and looked down at the road with a grave expression, then withdrew a few steps so that she would not be seen from below and lowered herself onto a stone.

Faramir watched her quietly for a moment. Rays of early afternoon sun, where they managed to penetrate the branches overhead, shone on her hair and made it look like burnished copper. In the warm light her face had a gentle glow to it, and despite the worries of the past days having left traces on her features, she looked to him much younger, and very beautiful.

She seemed to have noticed that he was watching her, for suddenly she looked up and her gaze met his. She smiled slightly, then indicated that he should sit down beside her, which he did. The mossy pillow was warm from the sun, and Faramir noted there were tiny flower-like stems growing from it. Again neither spoke, but that seemed just right. To Faramir's feet a line of ants was busily transporting pine-needles to an unknown destination, and in the branches of a tree not far away a little bird was piping excitedly.

"'tis beautiful here," Lindórië said suddenly.

"Yes," he agreed softly. "It reminds me of Ithilien. There are many places like this one there. Even the vegetation is similar."

"You love that land deeply, do you not?" she asked

He nodded. "Even though it has been taken by the Enemy, it still manages to retain its beauty. And 'tis not only that I enjoy its natural beauty. I feel ... free there. Minas Tirith is beautiful, too, but after a while I tend to feel caged in the City. Things seem to be much easier beyond the river. More straightforward, somehow."

"I understand what you mean. Especially now, when nothing is easy and straightforward, but very complicated, and dangerous." She glanced at him thoughtfully. "So you are content with being a ranger, then?" she asked.

The question surprised him. "Well, yes," he answered, after giving it some thought. "At least that way I can spend most of my days in Ithilien, and away from certain ... tensions at home. The men are good company, and it seems I do not cut an entirely bad figure as their captain. I do not care much for the warrior-part of this profession, but such is the need of our times. 'tis not that I had much of a choice of what to do, and I am glad I was not appointed to the fleet or the cavalry. Serving Gondor in Ithilien is just fine."

"And had there been no need for soldiers, or rangers, what would you have done?" she asked.

He shrugged. "To be honest, I do not know. I have never given thought to that. I did what the Lord Steward commanded me to do. If Gondor was at peace, who knows ..." He smiled slightly. "Perhaps I would have become a scholar like you."

She returned the smile. "'tis not too late for that, you know. And who knows, perhaps a time will come when Gondor is indeed at peace. 'tis to be hoped."

He frowned slightly. "At the moment I cannot see how that might come to pass. Ever since I have joined the Rangers the Shadow has grown, and I fear it will grow still, until ... until one side falls. Gondor has been under threat for so long, and for some reason I feel that the decisive confrontation is not going to be in the far-off future. Denethor seems to be fearing something along the lines as well."

"As do many of the wise," she agreed gravely. "You are right, there are signs that dark times are ahead, and of great changes to come. For better or worse, though, no one knows."

He smiled grimly. "So what use is there in making plans for the future, and consider what might or might not be? I have never looked far ahead, and given thought to what I might do in ten or twenty years time. Alright, when I was younger, and first appointed to the Rangers, I hoped to be made their captain one day. But that was about the only ambition I ever had. Others, like pleasing the Lord Denethor, and perhaps being as appreciated and beloved as his other son I buried long ago." His voice had turned bitter at this statement. "And as for the dark times you mentioned, I have long feared they lay ahead. But I cannot see beyond them, and when I look at how things have been going recently, I think I need not bother. Denethor will surely contrive a way to ensure I am not going to have much of a future anyway."

“So this is what has been troubling you so much lately?” she observed quietly. “You think your father wants to get rid of you?”

He took a deep breath. “I would not put it that blandly, but yes. I know he does not care much for me, and of late I have come under the impression he really dislikes me at times. At least he makes it look like he does. And why should he love me anyway? In his eyes I seem to get nothing right, and my opinion and judgement always clashes with his. I have not yet mustered the courage to ask him outright if he really hates me as much as sometimes he displays towards me. Perhaps because I am afraid of the answer.”

Lindórië shook her head. “Faramir, I have told you before that your father does not hate you,” she said quite sternly. “And surely he is not contriving ways of disposing of you. I have known Denethor for many years. He is not a man to show emotion easily, but be certain that in his own way he loves you, and a time will come when he will remember that.”

“Aye, when one of his errands got me killed, most like,” he returned, but meeting her gaze cast down his eyes. “I am sorry. I know that times are difficult for him as well. That is why I wish I could help him, ease the burden he is carrying, but whenever I try I fail. At least in his eyes I do.”

She reached out and ran a hand over his hair and down his cheek, then raised his face so that he had to look at her again. “Do not be too hard on yourself, Faramir. That your father feels unable to acknowledge your abilities and achievements does not mean others do so as well. You will make your way, and one day you will be reckoned among the Great of Gondor. And I do not mean the great warriors. I wish I would be there to witness that.”

His eyes narrowed slightly. The wistful tone of her last statement had struck him oddly. “What would prevent you from doing so?” he asked.

Now it was her who avoided his gaze. She glanced at a pine where a small nuthatch was running up and down the stem, searching the bark for insects. She drew a deep breath, then looked at Faramir. “I intend to leave Gondor, as soon as the matter with Tarannon is resolved,” she answered. “And I do not think I shall return.”

He bit his lip, then nodded slowly. “I recall you mentioning these plans,” he said. “But now you sound far more resolved.”

“I have been speaking with Curufë. He is going to ride north, to Imladris where Elrond Halfelven dwells. I have asked him if he was willing to take me as a companion, and he agreed.”

“Off to see the Elves, eh?” Faramir said, but although he tried to make it sound lightly, he knew he did not quite succeed. He understood that the inevitable parting he had dreaded for so long was much closer now than he had thought.

She seemed to be reading his thoughts. “You knew it would come to that one day,” she said gently, and looking into her eyes, he could see a deep regret and sadness there. “I am going to miss you,” she admitted softly.

He swallowed hard and cast down his eyes again. “I am going to miss you too. Greatly. There is no way to try and persuade you to stay, is there?”

She shook her head sadly. “I am sorry, Faramir.”

“There is no need to apologise,” he replied. “I mean, we both knew all along that this day, this conversation would come eventually. ‘tis just ... I guess I would rather had it come later, not quite yet.”

“So would I,” she said, and bowed her head. Silently he reached for her hand and squeezed it gently, then put his arms around her as she drew close to him and embraced him tightly. For a long while they remained so, unmoving, each lost in contemplations on the time they had had together, until a sudden sound made Faramir look up sharply. A bird had been startled out of a nearby tree. Releasing Lindórië, he stood up swiftly, and took a look at the road. Nothing moved there, nevertheless his senses were alert of a sudden. Lindórië had risen as well.

“We need to think of a plan of how to best greet Tarannon,” she said. “He should be here soon.”

EdaintheRanger

Throughout the long day’s travel Andanor had stuck to his duties, and he was happy to do so, for the lads were in high spirits, and the road was not overmuchly difficult, which by the main made his life easy. His life tended to revolve around translating “Faramir’speak” into “Sergeant-speak” who would then twist the remaining tongue into the various grunts that only the average ranger could understand, that and moderating the company arguments. Not a task that was noted for its popularity, but it was his job and he enjoyed it. The arguments seemed to cycle around, the same old chestnuts cropping up over and over again, with each soldier falling into their parts like a well worn pantomime.

After arbitrating the minor disagreements Andanor turned to the problem of Farbolg. Now Farbolg was by and large the company “moaner”. The slightest problem, slight, object out of the ordinary and he would find cause to complain. In a standard guard company in the City his grumbles would have been punished quite swiftly, but in a more intelligent unit like the rangers where initiative and innovation was prized such mutters were tolerated to a certain degree because they made the men think, at the least of new ways to get Folbolg to shut up! Each man had his pet theory about why Folbolg was the way he was. Andanor was convinced that the man had a tapeworm, it would certainly explain why he was such a “food monster” as well. However in this instant Andanor was investigating the allegation that Folbolg was borrowing the rations of the other rangers, and not returning them.

“C’mon lets see your pack, if you are so innocent as you say, then you won’t object to good, old fair Lieutenant Andanor sorting through the companies property.”

Unable to counter that with an adequate retort, Folbolg reluctantly handed over the pack.

“Bloody heck!” Andanor exclaimed, as the pack’s weight jolted his arm. “What have you got in here?! The jewels of Gondor?”

“Noo, just my stuff. I collect things.” Folbolg said sulkily.

“You’re like a bleeding Magpie, Folbolg. Look at this stuff!”

Out of the pack Andanor pulled a few extra rations, a odd end of rope, a couple of daggers, a hussif*, a box of salt, a pouch of teasweepings**, the usual possessions a ranger was ordained to carry, and a rather heavy sack that seemed to be the source of the excess weight. Working the sack out of the bottom of the pack Andanor marvelled aloud.

“What in the name of the Valar is this?”

“Sommat we acquired. Aww c’mon Loo-tenant, you can’t deny us a bit of booty from time to time?”

Now of all the crimes that a soldier could commit looting was one of the worst. Andanor wasted no more time and whipped open the sack expecting the worst.

He was visibly surprised. For he found not ill-gotten valuables, or even contrabrand. In the rough linen sack lay a couple of handfuls of those vicious iron spikes known as caltrops.

“Lads.” He called. “Come and look at these!” Then grinning he turned back to the grouchy ranger. “Folbolg, I think you can moan as much as you like... For a week at least.” Andanor could not help but adding.

* - *hussif* = *housewife* or a *sewing kit*.

** *teasweepings* = *the sweepings up from the floor of the warehouse; Cheap tea*.

Faramir nodded, silently scolding himself for not having paid more attention to his surroundings while talking with Lindórië. “None of the rangers has signalled yet that Tarannon or anybody else is approaching,” he said as they left the high place and began to climb down again, “but you are right. I need to talk to Andanor. The men are well trained and moreover experienced in setting up ambushes, and can be relied upon to position themselves well, yet they need to know if and when to interfere. ‘tis a pity we do not know how large Tarannon’s company is.”

“I doubt he knows our numbers,” Lindórië remarked, “and with some luck he has little suspicion that we rode out to meet him, and are setting up this trap. Still, better not to rely upon that.” She lightly jumped down a few feet where the ground fell steeply over a large rock, then turned to Faramir who followed behind. “When we have word of his approach, you and I and a small guard of rangers should be mounted again, and meet him on the road, as if by chance. He will of course suspect that more men are hiding in the forest, but I doubt that will prevent him from attacking.”

Faramir looked doubtful. “That is very dangerous. If he brings well-armed and armoured cavalry, they can charge us with their spears, and might get at us before the lads can shoot them, or their horses. We would stand no chance. The rangers do even wear mail, neither do you or I, we have no shields, and only few of them could take on experienced knights in a fight on horseback. I would prefer to stay off the road, and hail Tarannon and company from somewhere up here, and command them to halt and parley.”

“And what then, Faramir?” asked, giving him a keen glance. “Parleying will not provide us with the solution we need. Tarannon may be burning with anger, but he would not be so stupid as to have his men dismount to try and engage the rangers in close combat, when they can shoot his men at their leisure from their hiding-spots. Do not forget, he has spent most of his time in the field, and knows a great deal about warfare and tactics. And it is imperial for us to force him into making the first move. We can do naught unless he attacks us first. When he cannot attack here, he would most likely move on, in the hope that we shall soon live this inhospitable place, and then he would try and hunt us down. No, we must offer him a bait, and the more vulnerable this bait looks the better.”

He took a deep breath. “I see your point,” he admitted, “nevertheless I doubt ‘tis a good idea if you meet him on the road. If there has to be a bait, let it be me. The sight of me should suffice to kindle his wrath. Perhaps, to serve his honour, he might even try and challenge me for a duel.”

“Yes, he might. And if he does you must not, under no circumstance, accept,” she said sternly.

“Why? Do you think I would not stand a chance?” he asked, a little edgily.

She stopped and looked at him, shaking her head slightly. “‘tis unlikely you would, yes. He is an excellent swordsman, and has fought a number of duels before. Have you, other than sparring with your brother or your friends or the rangers? Faramir, if you get caught in this question of honour, and fight him so, we cannot interfere. So do be as reasonable in this matter as you usually are. He will try and insult you – and me –, but you must not heed this. And the less affected we seem by his scorn, the more this will rile him, until he loses all caution.”

She had spoken almost imploringly, and looking at her, he realised that she was deadly serious. Also there was something else. She seemed anxious, even afraid, but not for herself. He stepped to her and raising his hand lightly stroked her cheek, then stooped to kiss her brow. “I shall be careful,” he said softly. “And I shall refrain from accepting his challenge, should he utter one. Does this comfort you?”

“A little,” she replied, still standing close to him and reaching for his hand. “I simply do not want to see you hurt by him. ‘tis bad enough I got you involved in all this. You know what Finduilas asked me so many years ago, when she knew that death was drawing nigh to her?” she said suddenly, raising her eyes to meet his. “She asked me to look after her boys, and especially you. I have tried to do so ever since. And I would not want to let her down now.”

“Never fear,” he said quietly. The mention of his mother and her committing his brother and himself into Lindórië’s care had touched him deeply. “You have been doing a good job so far. Especially with me,” he added with a slight smile. “But you should not forget to look after yourself, too, you know.”

She smiled, ran her free hand through his hair, and leaned forward to kiss him lightly. "We should go and seek your lieutenant," she said, and releasing his hand continued the ascent.

They found Andanor and another ranger a little further down the slope, behind a thicket of boxwood from which they could oversee the road well. The two men looked up when Faramir and Lindórië, and, at a little distance, Maradir approached. "Have the scouts sent word yet?" Faramir inquired softly of his lieutenant when he had reached him. Then studying the other's expression, he frowned slightly. "You look mighty pleased about something, Andanor. What happened?"

EdaintheRanger

With the remainder of the company dotted in the careful shade of the knots of trees that covered the slope, the conversation between their beloved captain and his beloved, was muted into the odd word. Words that wafted, on the pine scented breeze down the hill.

The road that they watched, and it wound its way from Pelargir, the sun glittering off the far Anduin. On the rising slope the rangers gathered a few moments rest, lying in the undergrowth while taking turns at watch. On the other side of the road the land was flatter, in the main green sward, but one marred with rough gorse and yellow broom. Running his hand along his jaw Andanor did not entertain the thought of being found on that side of the highway. "What to do. What to do..." where the words that flickered through his mind like an insistent candle. The Caltrops were an excellent find, but they would only be enough to block the road ahead. There was little use in scattering them on the slopes as no cavalryman worth his salt would ride up there unless to chase a broken foe to ruin. They needed something, a temptation. The rangers near to Andanor looked to him, waiting for a plan, a decision.

His mind slowly pondered ideas, or slips of an idea, and weighed their merits and odds of success against the lives of the company. Slowly something formed. Returning to the now his blue eyes flicked right and left as he watched for signs from the sentries. Moving slowly down the slope he wondered whether he should trade possibilities with Maradir, despite his anonymity to Andanor he was in the same fix, and they needed to survive it. He tilted his head beckoning Maradir on spying him nearby. Wending his way on a steep section he returned to Folbolg, and was about to ask him to do something when Faramir approached.

"Well Captain..." he started, before the grin in his eyes returned to his face. On seeing Faramir's frown he replied.

"Seems one of our rogues." he said with a wry smile, "Has, ahem found something useful."

Faramir raised an eyebrow "So are you going to tell us, Andanor?"

"Yes Captain. Folbolg here has acquired some caltrops. I'm trying to think of the best way to use them, as they are few, if better than none." Looking at Folbolg, Andanor instructed him to unpack the vicious spikes.

Together with Lindórië, and a few others who gathered around they discussed the findings and to formulate a plan. Andanor used this opportunity to quiz the lady on what she knew about Tarannon and his household troops. After hearing what she had told Faramir, he nodded, looking around to include others in the discussion. "Aye, we do need something, a hook a jingle to catch our prey." Andanor unwittingly slipped into the jargon of his former trade.

Then a gleam sparkled in his eye. "Though although we know their horses have all the brains, donkey soldiers are not stupid." he said acknowledging the rivalry between the different arms of the Steward's forces. "We need something that will throw them off their guard, if only for a few seconds so that we can loose our darts. With keen shooting into the confusion we would then be able to shorten the odds against us."

"I humbly suggest this. It would have to be quick so that they don't have time to think. On the approach of the troops of horse, with your permission lady, two of the rangers could drag you into the open they being in the guise of vagabonds. On seeing such a sudden further affront to his honour Tarannon I feel could be spurred to a rash action

and it would be sufficient distraction. Then we could launch our arrows. In the ensuing confusion you could safely disappear and our gristly work would be shortened.”

Andanor twitched his eyebrows, inviting comments.

Khorazir

When Andanor had finished, Faramir and the others sat a while in silence, pondering the lieutenant’s suggestion. At length Faramir replied. “The caltrops may be useful indeed. We could scatter them on the road once the horsemen have passed, and thus cut off that way as a possible route of retreat or escape. If there are enough, we could also prepare the way ahead, and so really pen them in a place we want,” he said.

“As for the other idea ...,” he cast a thoughtful glance at Lindórië, before turning back to Andanor. “If I understand our plight aright, we must make sure that Tarannon attacks first, before we loosen one arrow at him or his men. But I agree, seeing his wife a prisoner in the hands of outlaws should startle him, and I imagine he would try and free her, to be able to deal with her himself.”

Again he looked to Lindórië who nodded, to indicate that he had his assessment of the situation had been right. “Still,” he continued, “this alone would not give us the justification we need to strike back, unless he tries to harm her outright – and I would not like to risk that.”

Silence once more reigned the little round, until Lindórië said: “I like the idea with the vagabonds, but I agree that this alone will not provide us with sufficient reason to attack Tarannon’s company. He will try and kill the outlaws, and take me prisoner, to deal with me at his leisure. But what if, just when the “vagabonds” stumble in his path, there also comes up a small company of rangers that have been following those outlaws in order to relieve them of their prisoner. The sight of those rangers, also interested in freeing his wife from the bandits, should really unsettle him. If our outlaws play their part convincingly, he may not associate them with the rangers as being part of a plan, but he will believe that perhaps more vagabonds are hidden in the forest, which should make him feel uncomfortable. Then the rangers show up, in a place where they have, in Tarannon’s opinion, no business at all, and try to free his wife. That should rile him, and he would not know who to attack first, the outlaws or the rangers. And if the captain of the rangers is revealed to be the Steward’s son ... – well, I do not know what he would do. But I am sure he would be totally overwhelmed by the situation, and act all but rationally and cautiously.”

“I thought you wanted to keep me out of this,” Faramir remarked with a slight smile.

She turned to him and shrugged. “It seems ‘tis impossible. But perhaps one of the others has a better idea?”

Canamarth

Maradir looked at the elf. Maybe one of the Eldar could come up with a more cunning plan. If not, he would play one of the outlaws – if they let him. He knew how much Lindórië meant to his friend, and though the rangers might not trust him, he knew Faramir would.

“I am sure I could play a convincing outlaw – if we do not come up with a better plan,” he said when Curufë did not answer at once.

asaris

“I do not like the plan with the false vagabonds,” the elf said deliberately, tasting the words as they left his mouth. “It would be difficult to convincingly fake your capture, and more difficult to keep you from being hurt. And, though I

know Tarannon not, the plan might not suffice to engender a rage.” Curufë paused for a moment. “How do you feel about picnics, Faramir?” Faramir looked at the elf for a moment, puzzled. “If there is one thing of which I am fairly sure, it is that Tarannon does not appreciate you spending time with his wife. How would he react to find you here, off the road, enjoying a picnic together?” Then, in answer to the question Faramir was about to ask, he continued, “I do not think you will be in any danger. If he charges alone, I can fell him with an arrow. We can spread out the caltrops as well, to break the force of any possible charge. And, of course, I will not be the only archer. What do you think?”

Khorazir

“You are right, Curufë,” said Lindórië, “that seeing Faramir and me together is the best way to kindle Tarannon’s rage. Thus the plan with the outlaws would only have worked had Faramir also been visible, trying to rescue me or something similar. To Tarannon it would have looked as if he had taken over the role as his weak wife’s protector. He is quite conservative in his idea of who should have what place in a marriage – most likely that is why things never worked out between us. What I liked about the idea with the vagabonds was the fact that it was a highly unusual idea, and thus one we can assume has not crossed Tarannon’s mind. The situation, thus, would surely have startled him, and he would have been forced to act swiftly and without much time for thought.”

“But we should not forget what Curufë said about the difficulty of setting up the ambush, and the trouble of making it look convincing,” Faramir put in. “Although I do believe you would make an excellent vagabond, Maradir,” he added, with a wink and a quick smile at his friend. “And there is the danger to Lindórië,” he went on, in a more serious tone. “I did not support the idea more fervently because of that. Most likely not only Tarannon would be startled by the situation, but us as well, since we cannot predict what exactly he is going to do. And I should like to be a little more in control of the situation. After all, I have to make sure that the rangers respond in the right way, and give concise orders for that. The “picnic” sounds like an interesting idea. We must of course make sure that we would be seen from the road – those that Tarannon needs to see. I assume he knows that Linhir is our destination, and we could make things look as if we had simply chosen this place for a rest.”

He glanced at Lindórië, who sat deep in thought. At length she looked up and shrugged slightly. “It seems this is the best choice we have. One thing still troubles me, though. We have not included Tarannon’s advisor into our considerations yet. I know he has a strong influence on my husband, and may attempt to calm him should he appear to be losing control. It would be best if Grendel was not around during the confrontation. In the past he used to journey in a carriage, which he seemed to prefer to riding. I know we do not have much time, nor the right tools, but perhaps we can prepare the road so that the carriage will be slowed considerably, or even break a wheel. It must look like a natural obstacle, however, lest it rouses their suspicion.”

EdaintheRanger

Satisfied that his ideas had started a *imputus*, if not an avalanche Andanor listened to the criticisms of his initial plan, and their counter arguments. He nodded at each suggestion in turn, muttering a faint “aye” occasionally when he heard something he liked.

He could see that the problem lay in the orders that they could issue the rangers, for Tarannon was in his own fief here, and had overall command. However it was imperative that he made a rash, false move, one that shouted “Treason!” in the minds of the men, both the Steward’s and his own. To strike the Steward’s soldiers or his representative while they were on official duty in time of war was such an act, if should one quibble, a rather more trivial one, at this time.

Then the eyes of the men turned once more to Lindórië. She seemed preturbed by the possible cooling influence of Grendel. Her discriptions of his preferred behaviour and mode of travel, made Andanor switch his mind from the pet-tyfogging quibbles over terms of law, to more immediate and tangible problems that he and the men could possibly solve.

“Hmm coaches and wheels, you say?” Andanor muttered half to himself, in his soft burr. He jutted his chin before thinking some more.

“We need uneven ground, a hidden log or two, an unsuspecting rock. Best get the lads weaving sharpish, if we are to do that in the time left to us.”

Andanor said, not noticing the hidden pun.

Khorazir

“Aye, we cannot afford to lose more time,” Faramir agreed. “I shall leave it to you and the men to prepare a trap for the carriage, Andanor. Preferably some distance from that narrow spot down there, so that this Grendel will be well out of the way when Tarannon reaches us. Do also keep watch while you build the trap, and inform us immediately of their arrival. We are going to look for a suitable location for our “picnic” around here. Those rangers you do not need for the work are to remain hidden, to watch the road, and to be ready to interfere with their bows when Tarannon attacks.”

+++

About three leagues to the west, Tarannon was forced to halt his company yet again, a fact he did not appreciate, despite them having made astonishingly good progress so far. Captain Ondoher had apparently told the men that utmost speed was needed, and that they would be subject to their lord’s wrath should they attempt to tarry. Any sluggard was immediately urged to greater speed, with dire prognoses for his future should he refuse to oblige. Nobody dared to complain anymore. Indeed, many of the soldiers had become infected by the strange frantic fever that seemed to consume their lord. None of them had a clear idea when the chase would end, and what to do then, but they considered it their duty to make sure Tarannon reached his destination without delay. Even their otherwise cautious, sensible captain thought he felt the thrilling sensation of the hunt, although he did not know the prey.

Thus their forced stop was met with common disapproval. They had reached the first houses of a large village when it became plain that the carriage-horses would not be able to carry on at this speed, and that the other steeds needed a break as well. In the distance ahead a line of wooded downs mounted. Beyond them, Tarannon knew, lay Sirith, marking the border with Pelargir. He had hoped to reach those hills before the next halt was due, but a crash at the rear of the company shattered this hope. One of the four carriage-horses had stumbled in its weariness, and although it had not fallen, apparently it had hurt a leg, and was lame.

Tarannon cursed, loudly, not just because of the delay this accident meant, but also because it put an uncomfortable choice before him. It would take time to find a new horse, or four, rather, since the other three were spent. Most likely Grendel would not stoop to continue the journey on horseback. And Tarannon was not sure if he wanted him to continue at all. The more he had thought about it in the past hours, the greater his conviction had become that he would do better without his advisor in this matter. Yet doubt remained. So far he had fared well, trusting Grendel’s counsel. Was it really wise to reject it now, when so much was at stake?

Grendel had counselled caution. At first. Or not? Still Tarannon found he could not recall their conversation in the morning. And had his advisor not said he should avenge himself on the young upstart? Or was this his own rage speaking? He ran a hand over his eyes, feeling extremely tired of a sudden.

“My lord, about the carriage,” Captain Ondoher’s words startled Tarannon out of his musings, as he spun round to the speaker. “One of the men says there is a horse-trader in the village. Some relative of his. He may have new steeds for the coach, and perhaps for some of us as well. For ‘tis only a question of time until our own beasts are utterly spent as well, and ‘tis some distance yet to Pelargir. Shall I tell the man to ride ahead to find the trader?”

“Yes, yes do that,” Tarannon replied. *So much for getting rid of Grendel*, he thought.

+

Three quarters of an hour later more than half the company and the carriage had been supplied with fresh horses, and had been told to try and exchange the rest at a farm a few miles down the road. The horse-dealer had been reimbursed well for his efforts, and Tarannon, despite the fact that Grendel was still with them, was in far better spirits than he had been all day. It seemed their errand was blessed with luck, which only encouraged him in his belief that his planned revenge was just. Certain people were in for a nasty surprise.

EdaintheRanger

The rangers allocated to the fatigue duty of preparing the trap moved swiftly, but without haste or a trace of panic. All heedful to the press of the time marching towards them. This far south from the fair city of Minas Tirith, the roads were not quite as well built or maintained as they could have been. The ruts that were made by the local carts and wagons were easily discernable. Andanor divided the men into separate details, and gave them set tasks. At a set point which was a good 3-4 furlongs away from the narrow point indicated by Faramir, a few men with trench tools improved the ruts.

“Hey Lieuiel!” one of the more annoying rangers on that detail said after a few moments digging. “Come and look at this.”

Andanor and a few others went to take a look. “Ahh I see, the top soil doesn’t match that beneath. In that case you’ll have to carefully skim it off and put it to one side. We just need to make the rut suddenly deeper than it appears to be.”

He went off to see how the other men were doing, as they improved on the cover that they had, creating little hides which would make them far less detectable from even a seeking eye.

Time fled away, and so did the colour begin to seep from Andanor’s face, waiting was something he really disliked, but had to be endured. A man of action he was itching to do something, however as an officer he had to appear outwardly calm and resolute, a shining example to the men.

Heading back to Faramir, Maradir and the other principal people, he asked “It seems to be going well. Any suggestions?” He did not face them, but looked outwards awaiting the watcher’s signal.

Khorazir

While some of the rangers were preparing the trap for the carriage, and others were watching the road and the woodlands about, the rest of the company set out to look for a suitable location for the picnic, eventually settling for a spot a little above the road, on top of a formation of tree-grown rocks. It commanded a good view on the road, and although it was not in full view from below, people sitting there would be seen and recognised. Also, with the thick moss and little flowers on the ground and the gnarled trees overshadowing it, the place had a fairly romantic atmosphere.

Faramir had Lindórië’s and his saddlebags brought up there, also their cloaks and blankets, to give the indication of a real camp. Their horses were fetched again, and tied to trees not far from the picnic-place, so that they, too, would be descried by people on the road.

Faramir was just speaking with Maradir, Gareth, Curufë and some of the rangers, trying to decide where they should best place themselves, when Andanor returned, and reported of the progress of their venture. Upon his lieutenant’s question, Faramir shrugged. “Not for the moment,” he replied. “At least I have none,” he added with a glance at the others, inviting them to speak up should they have an idea. “It seems we can only position ourselves and wait. But I shall accompany you to take a look at what you have prepared, Andanor.”

to be continued ...