

The Lebennin Conspiracy continued

After a long time of inactivity in the original thread and upon several requests to continue the tale and bring it to a proper close, I decided to finish the story by myself. I hope this is alright with the other authors to whom I am indebted for creating such wonderful, memorable characters. I try to do them justice, and my sincere apologies to their original creators should I fail. For the remainder of the story I am going to concentrate on “my” characters: Faramir, Túrin and Lindórië (and the bad guys ...), and tell the tale from their point of view. Since it has been quite some time since last I visited this story, should there occur any inconsistencies with what has been told before, I hope you will excuse these.

After almost two hours of swift riding, having just passed another large village nestled in the first folds of the downs the company had yet to cross, Tarannon halted his retinue. They had reached a large crossroads. The road they were about to take climbed on ahead of them, winding its way through orchards and steep, terraced vineyards until it was swallowed up by the dense forest that clad the line of low hills like a soft light-green carpet dotted with dark coniferous trees. To the left and right another road ran, its deep ruts indicating it was used frequently by heavy carts and wains which could not cross the hills and had to be moved around them to reach the border with Pelargir. Tarannon had wondered briefly if it might not be wiser to take the right hand road that led away southwards, to meet the main coast-road near the ferry that would take travellers to Pelargir across the border-river Sirith. He had even considered asking Grendel's advice, since his counsellor had travelled often in these parts.

But he had decided against it. The longer the ride had lasted, the more he had felt that he might be better off without conferring with Grendel too much. He had become strangely distrustful of the very man whose advice he had deemed indispensable not long ago. There was something about him ... Why had he never realised it before? Why had he never asked himself what it was that Grendel really wanted. All those journeys, all those visits to Falastur and Imrahil and others. All for the good of Lebennin? Or was he not playing some secret game of his own? Plotting, as it were, his lord's downfall?

Anyway, for a decision in this matter he did not need Grendel, Tarannon decided. The way over the hills was the shortest by far, and since they were encumbered little they should make good progress despite the slightly more difficult terrain. Moreover that way there would be no need to wait for the ferry.

The only thing that might prove an obstacle, he thought, turning in the saddle and casting a dark glance at his advisor's preferred mode of travel, *is the dratted carriage*. So far the exchange of steeds and the good condition of the road had meant that the vehicle had not caused any more delay. But the steep way ahead would mean it would not manage to keep up with the more mobile riders. Tarannon could see some sharp bends ahead, and the road's surface was unlikely to be the best once it reached the forest, either.

Then again ... why bother about the carriage? So what if it gets delayed indeed! The company was large, he could surely spare a man or two to remain with Grendel as an escort so he would not come under impression Tarannon was deserting him. *But desert him I will, at the soonest opportunity*. The more he thought about it, the more this idea appealed to the Lord of Lebennin.

Captain Ondoher rode up to him. “What way are we going to take, lord?” he asked.

Tarannon pointed at the climbing road. “The most direct one.”

Ondoher gazed at it for a moment, scratching his chin thoughtfully with a gloved hand. “What about the carriage?” he asked slowly. “If I recall the road correctly, it gets rather narrow in places. And there is a small creek crossing it. We will not be able to go speedily if we wait for your counsellor.”

Tarannon frowned. “Then we shall not wait,” he replied in a low voice. “Honestly, I would not mind not having Grendel around when we encounter certain people. Although I do value his advice, and surely his counsel has proven useful in the past, in this particular case I do not believe he has fully grasped the meaning of what is passing. He may

know everything about Gondorian politics, but he has less knowledge of concepts like honour, and justice. And the latter we are going to deal out shortly. If Master Grendel is still with us then, so be it. If not," he shrugged, smiling grimly, "just as well."

With that he signed to the men to get moving again. Passing over the crossroads, the company rode on with all speed. At the third bend only half the rear-guard remained with the carriage, and those men, too, were impatient to get on. Again a strange feverish anxiety had taken hold of the men. The hunt was on. Already the forest had swallowed up Tarannon, Ondoher and the vanguard. The coachman urged the horses to greater speed, doubtful, however, that he would manage to catch up with the others again who seemed determined to lose no more time at reaching their destination.

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Setting out with Andanor a little above the road so as not to leave traces on the muddy ground, Faramir noticed that while Curufë and Gareth mounted the slope and quickly vanished in the underbrush, Maradir followed him and his lieutenant at a discreet distance. This struck him as odd. Of course Maradir was under no obligation to obey orders like the rangers and could do very much as he pleased, Faramir wondered why he chose to shadow him like a true bodyguard, even when there was no danger immediately at hand, instead of looking for a spot from where he would be able to use his impressive skill with the longbow to best effect. Unless ...

He cast a glance over his shoulder to where Lindórië had begun to busy herself with preparing the "picnic"-site and make it look convincing. The view was partly obscured by trees now, yet whoever moved there would be spotted from the road – just as they were supposed to. Faramir halted and watched her for a moment as she moved about, unpacking her saddle-bags and spreading a blanket on the ground. Had she perhaps asked his best friend to watch over him during this dangerous venture? If that was so, he was no sure what to think of it. On the one hand he was touched that she cared so much and wanted to prevent any harm to come to him. On the other ... did she think he was not able to look after himself? After all, he had promised her to tread carefully around Tarannon and refrain from accepting any challenge. And he intended to keep this promise. So why have Maradir tail him? Then again ... He recalled the previous evening. Maradir had saved his neck then, and if he was honest, his friend had done so on countless other occasions in the past. In fact, Faramir could not imagine another man he would prefer to guard him, his own brother aside.

"Sir?" Andanor's quiet voice startled him out of his contemplations.

"Coming, Andanor," he replied. "The men have chosen their locations extremely well," he added appreciatively, indicating the forest to both sides of the road. The green-clad rangers were nowhere to be seen, yet the air seemed to be humming with watchfulness. The ambush was as well prepared as possible under the circumstances.

"Aye," answered his lieutenant. "The lads know their job. Although there was a bit of grumbling about digging up the road for the carriage."

"I know 'tis tedious work, nevertheless it has to be done," Faramir reminded him. "I do not know this strange counselor of Tarannon's, but considering what Lindórië has told me I think 'tis best if we get him out of the way ere we start negotiations with Tarannon. I need you to station enough men here to hold the carriage and its escort in check. The scouts reported that there is a rather steep ascent not far from here. Most likely the carriage will have to slow there, especially when Tarannon's company is in a hurry, and so perhaps will get separated from the rest. This would make things easier for us, but of course we cannot count on it. I shall leave you in charge of this part of the road. Your task is to block it so that no one can turn about and escape this way."

Andanor nodded. Faramir could tell from his expression that his lieutenant would have preferred to remain with his captain and the larger part of the company, to witness the encounter with Tarannon first-hand. But he was too much a professional to complain. "You know I need someone to command the men here," Faramir explained, "and moreover someone who is levelheaded and experienced and who I can rely on. I do not think you need to fear for lack of action here, too," he added with a faint smile. "Have you thought about a way to employ these caltrops?"

Andanor, visibly mollified, launched into an explanation which won his captain's full approval. "Just be careful when you scatter them on the road," Faramir told him. "Lest Tarannon's men spot them." He smiled again. "Folbolg never ceases to amaze me. I wonder whence he stole the lot."

“He claimed he didn’t steal them. ‘Acquiring’, he calls it,” replied Andanor, smiling wryly. “I’ve been meaning to punish him for his thievery for quite some time. Never thought it would prove useful one day.”

“Save your punishment for the next occasion, then,” suggested Faramir, clapping his shoulder.

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They had drawn close to the spot where the rangers were working. The ruts had been deepened sufficiently by now, and the rangers were in the process of covering them again with branches, upon which the original layer of earth would be placed. Andanor and Faramir walked down to them, while Maradir remained on the slope, half hidden behind some large boulders, watching the road from his elevated location.

“Captain,” one of the rangers addressed Faramir when he reached the workers. The man was wiping sweat from his brow and was slightly out of breath. “I’ve just returned from a little trip down the road. Round the bend there’s a steep descent into a narrow, densely wooded vale, as perhaps you know. There’s a creek down there – in case we need water later on – and some marshy spots where the road crosses it. Might trouble the carriage. I went up the other side of the valley. The forest is less dense there and I was able to overlook some more of the road. Couldn’t make out any traffic for as far as I could see – about a mile, at best –, so obviously we’ve got some time left.”

“We’re almost finished here, too, sir,” fell in one of the diggers.

“Excellent,” replied Faramir, pleased about the efficient work of his men. “Andanor is going to tell you what to do once you are done here. I want you to return to your lookout beyond that valley, Galdor,” he then addressed the scout, “and to continue watching the road. Take another man with you. Do not leave your post again when you spot movement on the road, but forward the information to the men here via signals. When the company we are expecting draws close, hide yourselves so that they have no reason to suspect anything, and only when they have left the valley follow them and join the men here.”

Galdor saluted and dashed off again. Faramir remained with the workers for a while, until they were finished with their task and in the process of extinguishing the traces of their digging and indeed their footsteps from the road. Then giving some last instructions to his lieutenant and the rangers and wishing them good luck, he left the road to return to the makeshift picnic-site.

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There Lindórië had created the impression of a small group of people camping in the wilderness: five horses were tied to trees so that they were visible from the road below. Their saddles lay beside them on the ground, upside down so that their insides could dry in the sunlight filtering through the swaying branches above. The saddle-blankets had been spread over low branches, and some saddle-bags had been arranged carefully around a small fire surrounded by stones. She was just in the process of adding some more fuel to the fire and preparing a small kettle to heat water when soft footsteps made her look up. She smiled when she noticed Faramir.

“I thought you rangers were supposed to tread soundlessly,” she teased.

“Do not tell the men,” he replied with a slight grin.

Her smile broadened, yet he noted the underlining tension in her features. “I shall not, lest I embarrass you.” Indicating the fire and the kettle, she said, “I thought tea might be a good idea, although I am not sure if there is still time enough to heat the water.”

“There is no sign of Tarannon and his company yet,” Faramir told her while lowering himself to a low, moss-grown stone close to the fire and running a hand over his eyes. He knew he should be wide awake, yet he felt weariness creep up on him. Yesterday’s and last night’s events had shortened his hours of sleep considerably, and he was beginning to feel the exhaustion. Casting a glance around, he tried to spy a sign of the rangers hidden in the underbrush, but he could not see any, except for the three men who were to act as the obvious guards watching the picnic site, and who were lounging in the shade of a large rhododendron bush. Even Maradir appeared to have vanished, although Faramir was certain his friend had accompanied him back to the camp. Recalling that unlike himself, Maradir had not had any sleep at all the previous night, Faramir hoped he would manage to get a bit of rest ere the action started.

"We can only wait, then," Lindórië stated with a soft sigh, withdrawing from the fire which was now burning merrily while giving off only little smoke, and sat down next to him.

Faramir shrugged and nodded. "So it seems. Not too long, hopefully. The men will soon be getting restless – or else bored –, despite being used to situations like these."

Lindórië glanced up at the swaying, brightly green-clad branches of the trees surrounding them, then at the sunlight playing on the ground, casting flittering shadows on moss, grass and last year's leaves, and the blue-bells swaying gently in the soft breeze. "I would not mind if Tarannon took a little longer getting here," she admitted at length, without looking at Faramir, and in a soft voice as if speaking to herself. "True, I want this to be over, too. And yet ... whatever happens when he arrives, things will not be the same afterwards. And no one can foresee in what direction they are going to change. For good or ill." She gazed at him. "I think I am a little afraid of this change."

Faramir glanced at her for a long time, then cast down his eyes. He was reminded of their conversation a short while ago. For some reason it had felt like a good-bye, and the solemn mood of their talk now only deepened this impression. There seemed to be a strange distance between them already. "I wish I could tell you something to encourage you, but I fear you are right," he replied gravely. "I am anxious about what is to happen, too. So much could go awry. And even if things go well ..." He took a deep breath and raised his eyes to meet hers steadily. "You are going to leave."

"Yes, I am," she said softly. "Although you giving me this look almost makes me change my mind," she added with a faint, sad smile. She reached out to brush some strands of hair from his brow. "Have I ever told you how much you remind me of your mother?"

He shook his head. "I hardly remember her," he admitted. "And people keep saying I have inherited Denethor's looks."

"And they are right," she said, reaching out to trace his forehead and then his cheeks and the line of his nose and mouth with her fingers. "You do look much like him when he was your age. But there is also a lot of Finduilas in your features. Your hair is much like hers in colour, only that hers was wavier. Your lips are similar to hers, too, only not so full. And your eyes, they are typical for the House of Dol Amroth, sea-grey and keen and bright. Also, you share so much of her character; her gentleness, her ability to see the good in people and to perceive what was troubling them. Her ability to pity. You know, she would be very proud of you if she could see you now. And so am I. Of all my many students, you were the one I enjoyed teaching the most."

Faramir blushed at her words. "Why?" he asked.

"Because you were so keen on learning. I doubt you realised it back when you were a child or an adolescent, but sometimes the questions you asked really challenged me. You noted things all the other students overlooked, either because they lacked interest in the subjects, or concentration, or wit. I recall one afternoon I spent in the library perusing all I could find about a certain passage in the account of the Oath of Cirion and Eorl because you had pointed out a mistake in the translation. You had raised the question during lessons, and I had been unable to come up with an explanation. Which riled me. I would never have expected any of the children to remark on this questionable fact, and in retrospect found the oversight inexcusable. And you were only, what, eleven then? And you know, from then on I prepared my lessons even more carefully, knowing that there was a this small boy with the dark hair and bright eyes who, if I made a mistake, would surely notice it, as he would spot any inconsistencies, and who moreover was not satisfied with quick explanations, but wanted to know everything I could possibly tell about a subject. And who shared my passion for learning so much that he would remain concentrated throughout lessons even if there was brightest sunshine outside and his brother was roaming the City in his mind already, or when his friends were throwing small pebbles against the windows of the classroom to lure the Steward's sons out of the building."

"Did I really unsettle you with that question?" asked Faramir, touched by her words. He had indeed enjoyed her lessons, and had had to endure countless hours of teasing from his brother and Túrin every time he had preferred learning about the history of Gondor or the declinations in Quenya to a sunny afternoon on the battlements or an exciting stroll over Minas Tirith's lively markets with their many opportunities for troublemaking.

"Oh yes," she laughed. "But to be honest, you unsettled me even more when I saw you again, several years after I had ceased being your teacher. That evening in the library. How old were you then? You had not come of age yet."

"Twenty-two," he replied with a faint smile, recalling that remarkable evening. "'Twas when it all started, was it not?"

"Yes," she said softly. "I never told you this, but when I first spotted you among the shelves, I was angry about the disturbance. I had fled to the library because I wanted to be alone. You may remember, I had had this bad row with Tarannon, and I really did not want to see or have to speak to anybody. I simply wanted to occupy my mind elsewhere and to get on with my translation. Even Andreth had left me in peace. And then this young ranger shows up between the shelves not far from the corner I had withdrawn to, and begins to rummage among the precious books, his boots and garments still stained from travel, his dirty gauntlets stuck in his belt, and his hair still tousled from the ride. *Go back to the woods where you belong, I recall myself thinking scornfully. Go and hunt some orcs or otherwise excell at arms, which is all you young men seem to be interested in nowadays. And do not dirty those fine books with your sword-worn hands, whose real worth exceed your comprehension anyway.*"

"That is what you thought?" Faramir asked incredulously. "I never knew you could be that prone to prejudice."

"Neither did I. Yet for my defence I must say I was really troubled then," she explained. "For a moment I considered speaking up to vent my frustration, but then I decided against it, and continued to simply watch you balefully from behind the piles of books I had set around me, as if to shield me from the hostile world beyond their pages. And then you turned so that the light of my small lamp fell on your features. I did not recognise you at first, I have to admit to my shame. I had last seen you as an adolescent youth hardly out of boyhood. I noted that this dirty ranger in the library had a striking resemblance with the Steward. I think I first mistook you for your brother, until recognition truly set in. You had grown so much. The boy had become a man. And, if I may add, an extremely handsome one, too."

Faramir felt his face flush yet again. "Well, the rangers swear 'tis the garments we wear," he said with a wink, to divert from the fact he was somewhat abashed by her compliment. "They add to our appearance. And the ladies love that, they say. Seems to be working with you as well, does it not?" He sat up straighter and jestfully tugged at the collar of his tunic.

Lindórië studied him sceptically for a moment. "I think there are colours which suit you better than ranger-green. Moreover, although some of your men may be in need of certain clothing to enhance their looks, you can rest assured that their captain has no need of a special livery to attract the ladies."

"Indeed. After all, he is the Steward's son after all, and such a title increases one's attractiveness ten times more than a dashing attire," he teased.

"Are you making fun of me?" she asked with a mock frown.

"A little, perhaps," he replied jestfully. "But do tell on. You had finally recognised that extremely handsome ranger – *ouch*." She had dug her elbow in his side.

"I begin to believe I should not have told you this, lest now you become all conceited. But nay, seriously, when I saw you again that evening in the library I was in fact less stricken by your looks than by the conversation that ensued once you had spotted me, we had greeted each other and begun to exchange tidings. I found it so incredibly easy to talk to you. Even though we had not seen each other for such a long time, and certainly had never spoken about private things during our lessons, I soon witnessed myself telling you of my troubles and sorrows, some of which I had carried about with me for a long time without sharing with anyone. Perhaps you reminded me of your mother, whom I have dearly missed ever since she passed away, and with her the only close friend I had ever had. The way you listened, and looked at me – 'twere so like Finduilas. You have your father's gift of perception, too. I had the impression you could read my emotions like a book, and with your questions made me tell you much more than I had originally intended. But unlike Denethor, I somehow knew that you would not use this knowledge to gain advantage over me, but to try and understand me. I could tell how my sorrow touched you as well, and that you pitied me. I realised that my secret griefs were well-placed with you, and that I could share them with you without fear for them becoming common knowledge. I think I never really thanked you for what you did for me back then."

"Oh yes, you did," he said softly, deeply moved by her words. He recalled the evening slightly different, however. Had not he been the troubled one, having fled to the library after a fierce discussion with his father? To then realise that his troubles were petty in comparison to those of his former teacher who he still held in high regard. "You were willing to listen to what bothered me, and I really needed someone to talk to, with my brother and my friends all out of town. I knew you would understand, because you knew my background." He looked into her eyes. "I think I needed your sup-

port back then as much as you needed mine – although I am still doubtful I could indeed counsel you much.”

“It was rather your willingness to listen, and your quiet understanding,” she said. “You know, that night I lay awake for a long time, praising the fact that Tarannon, in an unprecedented bout of wisdom, had decided to spend the night elsewhere and I was thus left alone, free to think of our conversation unperturbed. And of you. And why I could not get you out of my mind. And after our next meeting the following evening, I suddenly realised I had fallen in love with you.”

She smiled at the recollection. “This realisation came as something of a shock, because immediately all those reasons that made this love impossible sprang to my mind. And yet, here we are, seven years later, after hardly a moment alone together and countless letters, and yet with a relationship – for lack of a better word – stronger and deeper than many.” She glanced at him thoughtfully, almost questioningly. “I still wonder what made you stick to me despite everything. I know I have asked you this before, even criticised you about it. After all, you, a promising, desirable young man, wasting your time and affection –”

“You are right, we have talked about this before,” Faramir interrupted her gently, “and as I have told you several times already, I do not consider either my time nor my affection for you wasted. Of course I would have liked to spend more time with you, but looking at my life realistically, with my duties keeping me busy in Ithilien most of the time, what kind of a relationship could I have offered you – or anybody, really – apart from a fairly regular correspondance? For my part, I cherished the knowledge that there was someone out there who truly ... well ... loved me. Not as a brother or a friend or a captain, but simply for who I am. In fact, I often wondered why you, one of the greatest scholars of Gondor who even Denethor would at times ask for counsel, and someone whose opinion and judgement I have always highly respected, chose an immature boy as your love-interest.”

“You were never *immature*, Faramir,” she returned gently. “Even as a child you displayed qualities which quite exceeded your age. While still retaining, I should add, all those others that children should have while they are still young.” A slight frown creased her forehead. “You are truly remarkable,” she said softly but very earnestly. “I only wish your father would finally acknowledge this as well. It would make things so much easier for you.”

The mention of his father dealt him an unwelcome stab, despite his heart being light as a feather after her many compliments. “Perhaps he simply does not share your opinion,” he stated with a slightly dejected shrug. “I often think he does not know me too well – not as well as you do, in any case –, mostly because he is not interested in getting to know me.”

She shook her head. “Do not believe this for a moment, Faramir. He knows you very well. And deep down he loves you, and appreciates what a wonderful son he has. Perhaps this is why he pushes you harder than your brother, because he knows you can achieve more.”

“I wish he would try another strategy from time to time,” he observed with a wry smile. “But as for achievements, fact is that Boromir has done far more than me in recent years. Father does have all reason to be proud of him.”

“That may be true, if you look at military achievements only. As I have mentioned before, you have other qualities. You would make an excellent scholar or politician (despite your claim that you never want to become the latter), and a good teacher, too. Well, hopefully a time will come when there shall be less need for warriors than nowadays.”

He glanced into the fire where a larger log burst in two, emitting a shower of sparks. “Yes, hopefully. I cannot see it, though. Every time we return to Ithilien, another part of it has fallen into enemy hands. Bit by bit, hill by hill and glade by glade ‘tis taken from us. I sometimes wonder how much longer we are still going to be able to cross the river at all. When will Osgiliath fall? And what then? The enemy seems to increase yearly. And we ...” He sighed, picking up a beech-nut lying on the moss next to him and throwing it into the fire. “Things would look brighter, perhaps, without all this internal strife. But looking at people like Falastur or Carandil or Tarannon, I do not see how this will ever cease. And the enemy profits from this contention.” He glanced at her. “This is why I do not want to become a politician. Look at most of our nobles: the more influential they are, the more they are corrupted by their power. I do not wish to become like them. Never.”

She smiled gently. “I doubt you would. You are too scrupulous and just and merciful, and moreover lack the dangerous kind of ambition that drives these lords and gnaws at them day in day out. That is why you would make such a good politician. Because you do not desire power over others, and yet have the farsight and broadmindedness that is required

of someone in a position of high influence.”

He laughed softly. “Hearing you speak like this I cannot help wondering if you confuse me with someone else. I am sure my cheeks are flushed bright crimson from all your compliments.”

She regarded him searchingly, then grinned. “Yeah, well, you do look as if you had caught a light sun-burn.”

He stuck out his tongue, and she laughed. “I wish we had had more moments like this,” she then said, in a more serious tone.

“So do I,” he replied. “I am surprised they left us alone for so long. It cannot be long now ere the company arrives – lest they have encountered some obstacle on the road.”

She gave him a long, grave glance. “You will keep in mind what I asked you?”

“About not accepting any challenge your husband might issue?” he asked. “Yes, I shall keep it in mind. I promised you to be careful, did I not?”

“Aye, you did. I just ...,” she sighed. “I just wanted to be sure. I never wanted you to get involved in all this. But unfortunately the Steward overruled my wishes. We had some heated discussions about this matter. But for some reason Denethor remained adamant that your participation was required. I only hope he can look farther than I.”

Faramir bit his lip. “He must have his reasons. I have come to wonder if this was not some kind of shrewd test. To see how I cope in situations that are not to be resolved with bow and sword and spear. Not that I have cut a very formidable figure so far. These past days have been fraught with disasters, and the visit at Falastur’s was the worst so far. I should have kept my temper in check, I –”

She placed a finger over his lips and shook her head. “Stop this, Faramir. ‘Tis over, and I daresay Falastur got what he deserved. And you are better prepared for your next encounter, which undoubtedly will come sooner than you like. So stop reproving yourself for something that cannot be altered anymore.”

He raised his eyes to hers, a faint smile twitching at the corners of his mouth. “Always trying to raise my self-confidence, are you?” he asked gently, leaning to kiss her cheek.

“You doubt yourself too much,” she replied as he drew back, taking his face in her hands and glancing at him almost sternly. “Do me a favour and stop that.”

“As you wish, my lady,” he said, inclining his head to her, then giving her a smile.

“I was serious.”

“I know. I shall try and better myself.”

“Good.”

His smile broadened. “Anything else I can do for you?” he inquired softly.

She nodded, gently drew his head towards her and kissed him. He put his arms about her and drew her close, relishing her kiss and returning it more passionately than he had intended. He could tell that this surprised her as well, for she hesitated briefly, withdrew a little and looked at him. Then with a smile and a sparkle in her eyes she drew even closer and they resumed their kiss. He felt her hand play with his hair, wander down his cheek and throat to then slide into the collars of his tunic and shirt and trace the line of his collar-bone.

Now he was the surprised one. Never before had their kisses or touches gotten that intense. Involuntarily he tensed, causing her to break the kiss again and gaze at him. Aware that most likely his cheeks were again flushed bright scarlet, he gave her a somewhat sheepish smile. “Sorry,” he muttered, his voice a little hoarse.

“No need to apologise,” she replied softly, and as he looked at her, he noted how she seemed slightly embarrassed, too.

"I think I got carried away a little. It is foolish right now, of course. But then again 'tis all your fault, for kissing so damn well."

"I have a good teacher," he said, his heart still beating fast. It suddenly seemed very hot in the glade despite shade and the soft breeze moving through the trees.

She smiled at the compliment. "And luckily you are a quick learner, given the scarcity of our ... lessons." Leaning against him, she kissed his neck briefly, then rested her head on his shoulder. He put his arm round her shoulders and as he leaned down to kiss her temple, he noted that she was frowning slightly. "Is everything alright?" he asked softly.

"We never had enough time," she replied after a moment during which she had gazed into the fire absently, unmistakable bitterness in her voice. "You have no idea how often I wished for your company when I had to endure Tarannon's instead."

"As often as I tried not to imagine you in his arms," he returned.

She nodded slightly. "It must have been very difficult for you at times, despite us having never had this kind of a relationship." She sighed, still looking at the fire thoughtfully. "I often tried to convince myself that was all to the best, and oft enough I succeeded. It made things easier. Then again there were moments when I would have given everything for a night with you."

"I know what you mean," he said softly, having noted how she was referring to their relationship in past tense already. He knew she was not doing so to hurt him, yet hurt it did, and her confession of so desiring him only made it worse. Deciding he would not let her go so easily, "Are you still resolved to leave, then?" he asked.

She was silent for a moment, then, "Yes," she answered, and her voice steely of a sudden, "yes," she repeated.

"But with Tarannon gone ... And even if you indeed journeyed to Rivendell, we could at least still continue our correspondence."

She raised her head from his shoulder and shook it, looking at him sadly but sternly. "No, Faramir. As much as I love you, we both know – and have always known –, that this is impossible. Let me go. I do not wish to stand in the way when you meet someone who desires your love complete and true, and has every right to receive it."

"I cannot see that happen any time soon," he returned with a shrug.

"But I can. It will happen when you least expect it. In a time of darkness this new acquaintance will give you strength and courage when you most need them, and you will love her more truly than you have ever loved me." She fell silent, as if surprised by her own words.

"But what about you?" asked Faramir, doubtful about this bright future she was foretelling for him, and yet strangely touched by her words that had been uttered with so much conviction. "Who will you have?"

"I shall be with Elves, at the very sources of wisdom and learning," she returned, her eyes glinting. "I do not think I shall desire anything else then." Seeing the doubt in his eyes, she reached out to stroke his cheek. "Do not worry about me, Faramir," she said softly. "I will get by. I always have."

Drawing a deep breath, reluctantly he nodded.

Both fell silent. Lindórië rested her head against his chest and shoulder again, closing her eyes. He held her gently, his heart troubled and heavy, and yet strangely at peace. For a while the only sounds in the small clearing were the sighing of the wind in the branches, the crackling of the fire and the soft shufflings of the horses as they moved about on their long reins, grazing.

Faramir wondered how much time had passed since he had joined her here. With a stab of guilty conscience he realised how gravely he had neglected his duties as captain. Surely, someone would have told him had anything untoward occurred, or if Tarannon's company had been sighted. Nevertheless, what would be men think if they found out that their captain, instead of paying heed to the venture at hand had spent the past hour with his sweetheart. And find out

they would – it was unlikely that the three rangers watching the campsite had not picked up a word or two.

Just when he had made up his mind to finally interrupt the peace and quiet of the moment, he heard footsteps approach. Rather swiftly, too. Lindórië had noticed them as well. Swiftly rising, both turned towards the sound, to behold Damrod come up to them at a brisk walk.

“Sorry for the disturbance, captain,” he greeted his superior, raising his hand in a quick salute yet not quite hiding a grin. “Lieutenant Andanor sends word. Obviously Galdor has signalled. He has spotted a company approaching. Horsemen, and further behind a carriage.”

“That sounds like who we are waiting for,” said Faramir, tense and alert of a sudden. “Are the men informed and ready?”

“Aye, captain.”

“Make sure no one stirs until I or Andanor give the signal. Tarannon must not realise that he is riding right into an ambush until he sees Lindórië and me here.”

“Right. We shall be careful. What about your friends – Maradir and the Elf? And the lad, Gareth?”

“I shall inform them. Most likely they know already.”

Saluting again smartly, Damrod left. Faramir turned to Lindórië. “This is it, then,” he said. “Soon they will be here.”

She only nodded. “Remember your promise,” she said gravely.

“And you be careful, too,” he reminded her. “I shall be back in a moment.” Leaning to kiss her swiftly, he then set out in search of Maradir, Gareth and Curufë.

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Meanwhile in Pelargir, Túrin had spent the morning in Daewen’s company, first providing breakfast for the girl and then accompanying her on a stroll through the city and the havens. The girl seemed excited at the new sights. Túrin recalled that so far she had spent all her life within the walls of Minas Tirith. Surely the Great River, the ships and shipyards, the store-houses and the large fish-market were fascinating for her. And the latter tempting, as well. Twice Túrin had to stop her trying to steal a smoked fish, only to find out later that despite his vigilance she had managed to pinch a larger oyster and a number of sardines and hid them inside her clothes.

“That could have ended us in a lot of trouble,” he scolded her, dividing up the sardines and some bread he had bought between them as they were sitting on the quay, watching a large frigate being outfitted with new sails nearby. “Didn’t you notice the fellows of the City Watch trailing us all the time? I’m sure they’ve been told to watch out especially for us, after what happened last night at that inn. What if they’d caught us? I don’t think the prisons at Falastur’s palace are too nice.”

“But I didn’t get caught, did I?” Daewen returned, her mouth full of fish and bread. Túrin wondered how someone so small and skinny could possibly eat so much – breakfast was not that long ago, and despite being a healthy eater himself, he was not really hungry yet. “Moreover, it’s not my fault the guys are following you. I didn’t get myself into trouble last night, did I?”

“No, luckily not,” he agreed, finishing his sardine and throwing the tail towards a seagull that had alighted close to them in expectation of a meal. Then looking at the girl, he asked the question that had been on his mind ever since the previous evening, and which in fact had been the chief reason for agreeing to the stroll through town. “You don’t happen to have seen Visilya this morning, do you?”

Daewen held out the remains of her fish to the gull and shook her head. “I know she was with us when we arrived at the lady’s house. But I haven’t seen her since.” She turned to look at Túrin. “Why do you ask?”

Túrin bit his lip, looking tense. "I'm worried about her. It's not like her to just vanish ... – right, so it is like her. But not in a situation like this. I mean, she's got you to look after, and she's part of the company. Not even Faramir knew where she'd gone, and usually Vis is very dutiful. And this other woman, Alessya, she's vanished as well. I could tell Faramir wasn't pleased about that, either. What if anything happened to them? After what befell at Lindórië's house yesterday ..."

Daewen shrugged, helping herself to more bread and fish. "Both looked like women who can look after themselves to me."

"Yes, and yet ..." He rose, startling the seagull, casting a glance about them. Not far away, talking to what appeared a naval lieutenant overlooking the work on the frigate, were two men of the City Watch, eyeing, Túrin was sure, Daewen and him in what they obviously thought to be an inconspicuous manner. "Let's get away from here, and try and shake off those two footpads over there."

Reluctantly Daewen agreed, packing what remained of their meal, then hurrying after Túrin as he set out at a good speed. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"They're still following us, aren't they?" he said, turning round the corner of a house. The girl looked over her shoulder. "Yes. What did you do at that inn yesterday?"

"I, nothing. I only arrived to carry out the wounded, really. Stop here. This is getting ridiculous!" With that he halted, turning towards the two men who had just entered the alley. Squaring his shoulders, Túrin approached them. "Good day," he greeted them in a friendly but somewhat wary manner. "What appears to be the problem, gentlemen?"

Visibly surprised by being addressed so directly, the watchmen exchanged a glance, then one said, "No problem, mister. We were just told to, well, follow you."

"Who told you?"

"Our captain. Who answers to Lord Falastur. Who must have his reasons. That's enough for us."

"Yes, I bet he has," Túrin muttered under his breath. Aloud he said, "Well then, to spare you work, we'll return to Lady Lindórië's house. You can tell your captain that. But you could do me a favour and look for two ladies that appear to have gone missing."

The watchmen exchanged another glance. "Members of your company?"

"Yes. They were last seen yesterday – and no, they were not involved in the fight last night. They are called Visilya and Alessya." He provided the men with a thorough description of the two women, although in Alessya's case it was less extensive than in Visilya's. "I would greatly appreciate if you could send word to me if you find a trace of them. And I'm sure your captain would be interested in that as well, as would Lord Falastur."

The men still looked somewhat undecided, doubtful if they could indeed accept orders from a stranger. But searching for some missing (and undoubtedly beautiful, according to the description) ladies seemed a far more worthwhile occupation than trailing the young man and the girl.

"We'll accompany you back to the house," one said at length, "and then have a look 'round for those ladies."

"Good man," Túrin muttered, winking at Daewen who had avoided looking at the watchmen, obviously fearing to get into trouble over the stolen fish. In truth he was not altogether pleased about the development. True, that way they would get rid of their footpads, but they would also be forced to return to the house, and he would have much preferred to keep a lookout for Visilya himself. He was not so much worried about Alessya. Most likely she had decided to leave the company to pursue business of her own, having kept apart from the others during most of the journey anyway. But Visilya ... He was almost sure that the reason for her absence was in fact he, and their awkward relationship. He was even slightly angry, at her and himself, that their personal strife had led to her abandoning her ward. After all, it had been her idea to bring Daewen to Lebennin, and now she had vanished without a word, leaving him to look after the girl. Not that he minded. Daewen was good company, and moreover seemed to get along with him,

too. Nevertheless he would have preferred if Visilya had taken her responsibility more seriously. It was not like her, abandoning her duties on a mere whim. This change in her troubled him, because he blamed himself for having wrought it.

“You make a face like you’ve eaten a bad fish,” Daewen observed dryly, startling out of his contemplations. “Is it because of the captain. Visilya, I mean? You really like her, don’t you?”

Túrin drew a deep breath. “Yes, I do.”

“And you were together and split up?”

“Yes, in a way.” *Because I was an idiot and started something with another girl.*

“And now you want her back?”

“Yes. If she still wants me, that is.” *Which apparently she doesn’t, or she wouldn’t have left before we even had a chance to talk things through.*

“I think she does,” Daewen said wisely. “I noted how she kept looking at you during our journey.”

“Well, that does sound encouraging,” Túrin replied with a smile. “Hopefully she’ll be back soon. Ah, here we are.”

They had reached the alley leading up to Lindórië’s house. As they approached the gate, Túrin noticed a rider that was coming down the alley from the other direction, glancing up at the houses searchingly. He was mounted on a sweating, weary-looking horse equipped like that of an errand-rider, although the man himself did not look like a professional messenger. Like a workman or mason, rather, Túrin thought. There was chalk-dust in his hair and on his clothes. His face was flushed, and he looked exhausted as if he had ridden fast and far. Upon seeing the watchmen trailing behind the couple, his weary eyes lit up.

“Hey there, masters,” he hailed them, “perhaps you can help me. I’m looking for the house of Lady Lindórië of Lebennin to deliver a message, and I fear I’ve lost my way in this maze of alleys.”

“You’re right in front of it,” one of the watchmen replied, indicating a house to his right. “Those two are accommodated there,” he added, pointing at Túrin and Daewen. The rider eyed them curiously. “Your name doesn’t happen to be Túrin, like in the tale, does it?” he addressed the young man.

“Seems to be your lucky day, mate,” Túrin replied, smiling, but unable to shake a slight sense of foreboding. “I’m indeed Túrin. Like in the tale. At your service.”

The man reached inside his tunic and withdrew a small letter which he handed Túrin. “I was told to deliver this to you in Pelargir. It was given to me by a captain of a company of rangers. He said it was urgent, and so I rode as quickly as I could.”

“I see. Thank you. You should accompany us inside. You and your horse look like you could do with some rest, not to mention food and drink.”

“Thank you, master.”

The rider dismounted as Túrin knocked on the gate. Soon after it was opened by a servant and they stepped into the courtyard, the watchmen following. Túrin noticed this and turned to them. “I think I can handle this,” he told them, as friendly as he could, but indicating that they had no business with this matter. The watchmen, however, chose not to catch the hint. “Or were you sent to spy on us?”

“In a way, yes,” one of them admitted awkwardly.

Túrin frowned. “I thought you wanted to look for the two missing members of our company.”

“This message may be important,” the watchman replied stoically.

Túrin sighed. "Listen, I can't cast you out as this isn't my house, but I don't have to show you this message. So come along, if you insist."

He proceeded into the parlour, the watchmen following, albeit a little reluctantly. The rider was already seated at a table, where a servant had placed some water in front of him. Daewen had taken a seat near a window and taken out her oyster, turning it this way and that to try and find a way to open it. Settling himself on a bench opposite the rider, Túrin took out the letter. It was not sealed, and obviously written in a hurry on uneven ground, making the ink blotchy in places. Nevertheless he recognised Faramir's leaning, somewhat spiky and yet quite graceful handwriting:

Dear Túrin,

as you feared, I find myself in need of your help rather sooner than expected.

We have encountered some problem on our journey: a renegade errand-rider of Carandil's who attacked some of the rangers and generally caused mischief on the road. We took him prisoner and left him with a mason and his workers nigh a bridge they are restoring, about three hours' ride from the city. I need you to come there and relieve the men of the prisoner and to take him with you to Pelargir. Take some of Lindórië's servants with you, or Visilya and Alessya should they have returned by now. The man is unpleasant, even dangerous, but as we have not yet had sufficient time to question him, we need to make sure he remains in our charge. So be careful. My sincere thanks for your help!

*In haste,
Faramir*

Following was a description of the house and how to get there, in a different hand which Túrin assumed to be Lindórië's. He whistled softly. "Now we've got a problem," he stated, frowning as he reread the message. Daewen eyed him curiously from her windowseat, and he could feel the gazes of the two watchmen on his back. The taller of them was trying to read the letter over his shoulder, so Túrin folded it again swiftly and stuffed it in the small pouch at his belt. "Seems like I'm going to have to leave the city," he explained towards Daewen. "The question is, what about you? I know you're not keen on riding, and we'll have to move quickly. But it doesn't feel right, leaving you here on your own."

Daewen shrugged. "I don't mind. Or do you fear I'd empty the lady's house?" she asked with a wink. Then realising that the watchmen were still present, she bit her lip and suddenly got very interested in her oyster again.

"No, that's not the problem," Túrin replied. "It's just not right, having dragged you all the way down here and now leaving you all alone in a strange city, in a strange house. Ah, blast Visilya!"

"I can wait for her here," Daewen said. "I'm sure she'll return. And those two said they'd look for her." She nodded towards the watchmen who exchanged a rather uncomfortable glance.

But Túrin saw his chance to finally get rid of them. "You see, gentlemen, that my suggestion for you to set out and find the missing ladies was not uttered out of mere whim, to get rid of you. It's really important that you find them. Captain Visilya is responsible for this young lady there. She's an orphan, and the captain took her as her ward, to find new parents for her in Lebennin. I must leave on an important errand of my captain's, and thus can't look after her. You wouldn't want to leave this poor girl all alone in a city like Pelargir, would you? What if she strayed from this house to search for Visilya herself, and got lost? Or worse? You wouldn't want to have that on your consciences, would you?"

Daewen ducked down deeper behind her shell, to hide a broad grin, Túrin realised. No doubt she found this amusing, having had to fend for herself all her life.

"All right, we're going to look for this Visilya," one of the watchmen conceded. "You are to stay here, young lady. Do tell the servants to look after her until the captain is found," he added, towards Túrin, who nodded. His comrade seemed less eager to leave, and more interested in the contents of the letter, but Túrin did his best to usher them out of the parlour and steer them towards the gate, and with some reluctance, they stepped out onto the road.

“Those were some troublesome fellows,” Túrin stated as he returned to the parlour. Meanwhile, the rider had been provided with food as well, of which he partook hungrily. “I know you must be tired, but would you mind accompanying me?” Túrin asked him. “I’m sure we’ll find a fresh horse for you. Yours looked really spent.”

“It’s not mine. We took it from that errand-rider,” the other said between bites of bread. “Nasty fellow, that. Attacked one of them rangers, and caused me to drop a stone on my foot.”

“Is it bad?”

“Nay, master. I’ll ride back with you. I’d like to see what happens to that man.”

“Was anyone hurt?”

“Only my foot and the fellow himself.” He emptied his cup. “Well, I’m ready to leave when you are.”

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A quarter of an hour later, Túrin and the rider (who went by the name of Orleg and was a stone-mason’s apprentice) as well as two of the guards Lindórië employed to watch her house when she was away were mounted and about to leave. “Don’t get yourself into trouble, Daewen,” Túrin told the girl who had accompanied them to the gate to bid them farewell. Lindórië’s chief cook was standing next to her, having agreed to look after the girl until Túrin or Visilya returned. “I hope to be back by nightfall, but I can’t guarantee that. So don’t worry if I don’t return before tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll be alright here,” Daewen assured him, glancing up to the cook who smiled at her. “She said I can help in the kitchens. They’re making cake.”

Túrin grinned. “Cake, eh? And you tell me that when I’m about to leave? Save some for me, will you?”

“Sure,” Daewen replied and waved her hand at Túrin as he urged on his horse and steered it out into the street.

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Upon reaching the market square, the two watchmen were suddenly hailed by their captain, who was patrolling the place accompanied by two of their comrades and an elderly man dressed in dark robes. “Well, what brings you here, gentlemen,” the captain scolded them. “According to my knowledge your task was to watch the remaining members of the company. You seem to have abandoned your post rather quickly.”

“Nay, sir, that we haven’t,” one of them replied rather indignantly, aware of the keen glance the old man gave them. “Fact is, the young fellow and the girl we set out to watch have returned to the house, and as they’d spotted us and didn’t want us around, we left. But we learned that two members of the company, two ladies, have gone missing, so we thought we’d better go and look for them before they cause mischief.”

“You thought, eh?” the captain replied sternly. “And most likely, without anybody watching the house the two have left already.”

“The girl said she’d stay,” came the reply, upon which the captain raised an eyebrow. “Only the fellow wanted to leave. He’d received a message from his captain which apparently required him to leave town immediately. They must be on the road by now, he and the errand-rider who delivered the message.”

Here the old man grew even more intent and demanded a description of the rider, and every information about the content of the message the watchmen had been able to pick up. “You should have reported this instantly,” he remarked, but without scorn. “Still, despite the delay the information is still valuable. As for the two missing ladies you are looking for, do they go by the names of Visilya and Alessya?”

The watchmen nodded, astounded that this mysterious stranger seemed to know so much. Obviously he was one of Lord Falastur’s trusted advisors.

“Then you need look for Visilya only. The other woman is accounted for. She did indeed cause some mischief last night, or at least was involved in some, and is now in custody until we have time to deal with her.” As one of the watchmen drew a breath to inquire what the woman had done, the old man simply held up a hand as if to indicate that whatever her deed, it was not the underling’s concern. “I suggest you carry on with your search. And should you detect anything, and I repeat, anything noteworthy, make sure to inform your superiors without any further delay.”

With a swift reassuring glance at their captain who only nodded his stern approval of the stranger’s command, the watchmen saluted and trotted off.

The old man turned to the captain. “I shall return to the palace now. Lord Falastur is going to be interested in this bit of information. Do despatch a couple of men to watch the house again, and have some more look for this Visilya. Yourself, swiftly go to the western gate to try and catch sight of young Master Túrin. I want to know at what time he leaves the city, in which direction, and in whose company. I shall meet you at the gate.”

The captain saluted as well, and they parted ways.

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Faramir found Maradir and Gareth on top of a rocky outcrop where they had settled down in the sun-warm moss, partly screened by the branches of a leaning, half-fallen pine-tree. They had hidden so well that Faramir had almost passed them by, had not the light of the sun reflected on the tip of an arrow as Gareth held it up to inspect it more closely. Both looked up when Faramir’s shadow fell down on them. He noted that the young man had obviously borrowed one of the arrows his rangers used, and which apparently was slightly different in make than the ones he was used to.

“We use different arrowheads,” explained Faramir, “depending on the situation. This one is for piercing armour, hence the narrow point. Laren gave it to you, did he not? The mark on the shaft is his.”

“Yes, it’s his arrow,” replied Gareth. “He lent me some more, and Maradir here was just explaining the different heads to me.”

“Yes, he would know about those,” said Faramir, with a smile at his friend. “He is one of the best bowmen I know. However, sorry to interrupt the lesson, but we are going to get company soon. So get ready. You have chosen a good spot. Hold your bows at the ready, but do not, under no circumstance, loose a dart unless I command it. Have you by any chance seen Curufë?”

Maradir pointed towards a large oak-tree a little further up the slope. After a moment’s search, Faramir detected the Noldo in the lower branches, hidden so well he seemed to be blending with the sun-speckled, lichen-grown bark he was leaning against. He also had his bow in hands, and arrow fitted loosely to the string. Faramir wondered if he would manage to keep his balance once he had to draw the bow, but then decided that the Elf would not have chosen this position if that was doubtful. Sensing that he was being watched, Curufë glanced over to the three, then nodded down towards the road with a questioning expression. Faramir gave a nod, to confirm that company was approaching.

Turning back to Maradir and Gareth, “I must return to the campsite,” Faramir said.

“Good luck,” Maradir said, “and be careful.”

“I shall. You too.”

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Contrary to Tarannon’s expectations, by the time his company had covered most of the ascent of the downs, following the narrow road as it wound its way up wood-clad slopes, the carriage was still keeping up, at least so that that the

rearguard never lost sight of it. The coachmen had been chasing the horses relentlessly, which of course meant they had tired sooner than the riders' steeds. *We shall get rid of Grendel on the way down, then*, Tarannon thought grimly.

Having descended into a dark, moist vale where a small creek crossed the road, he reined his horse to wait for Ondoher and the rest of the men to catch up. Due to some loose boulders that had slid down a slope the road had been partly blocked for a furlong or two, and been so narrow for that small stretch that the riders had only been able to progress in single file. Only when he had passed this obstacle by at the very head of the company, without even the vanguard in front of him to ensure his safety, and looked up at the steep slopes to both sides, grown in places with dense evergreens behind which hosts of possible attackers would be able to hide without problem, Tarannon had realised how rashly and indeed foolishly he had acted. Haste or no, he should not be riding at the head of the company like this, not in terrain that virtually invited an ambush. Of course, there should be no danger of outlaws in these parts, due to the regular patrols he had initiated and maintained. Nevertheless, that close to the border ... Perhaps common bandits would not dare attack such a large and well-armed company, but maybe others would.

What are you up to, Lindórië? he silently asked the quiet woodlands around him. Ahead the road climbed again steeply to what looked like the highest ridge of the downs. The trees were denser there, and interspersed with more conifers that stood out darkly next to the deciduous trees in their raiment of fresh, bright green leaves. He decided he would let Ondoher and the vanguard ride in front now instead of dashing ahead himself, and waved to them to overtake him as they gathered behind him on the banks of the creek. Haste was one thing, foolishness another.

His horse had lowered its head to the brook to drink some water, and Tarannon pulled the reins and jerked it up again impatiently. The small river, he noted, had slightly overflowed its weedy banks and turned the road into a mire in places, rutted by the wheels of carts and the hooves of horses and what looked like a herd of cattle. One more obstacle for the carriage, he thought as he urged on his steed again. As it waded the creek, he cast a glance over his shoulder. The carriage had yet to make the descent into the vale. *Take your time, lads. Take your time. We shall meet you in Pelargir.*

"My Lord," Captain Ondoher addressed him, so unexpectedly that he actually jumped a little in the saddle. Tarannon had been convinced the other had passed him by, but in fact the captain had waited for him on the other side. "What?" he demanded sharply.

"Well, the men have been somewhat irritated that we pressed on so, through these woodlands," Ondoher began cautiously, not wanting to risk his superior's temper, strained already, to rise some more. "Without precautions, I mean," he added, watching Tarannon apprehensively.

"I am aware of your concern, captain," replied Tarannon. "True, we have been a little reckless, but honestly I do not see the need to deploy men to scout ahead. Behind that ridge the road should descend again, to Sirith. And there is a village not far away. I do not believe we can expect any danger in these parts." He held up a hand when Ondoher opened his mouth to object. "Nevertheless, as I said, I am aware of your concern. Send some men ahead, then. Not too far, just to make sure nothing nasty awaits us round the next bend. The men need to stay mounted. Scouts on foot would slow us down too much. We have no time to lose."

"Aye, lord," Ondoher acknowledged the order, despite looking worried still, and rode on.

The rutted lane proved difficult for the horsemen, too, as they urged their steeds up the steep climb. Who in his right mind builds such roads for the use of carts and waggons, mused Tarannon as his stallion galloped a few leaps to cover the last few yards, until the ascent decreased and the ground grew fairly level again. Steep rocky slopes drew down on both sides of the road, grown with gorse and hardy evergreen, oaks, beeches and tall pines amidst them. The way was hardly broad enough for three horsemen to ride abreast.

Round a bend the road went. Tarannon had just passed it, when he saw that the vanguard had halted, just in front of another bend. It was impossible to see far ahead, and, quite despite himself, he found a feeling of unease creep on him. The place was most perfect for an ambush, he had to admit, again scanning the hillsides nervously as they reared up to either side. But there was nothing unusual to be seen.

"My lord." Captain Ondoher again. He had turned his horse round and ridden back, looking rather anxious, Tarannon thought. "The men have spotted something ahead. There appears to be a small fire on the hillside – like a campfire –, and one said he heard the sound of horses snorting. And of soft singing."

Tarannon frowned. Upon seeing his captain's worried expression, he had expected everything but this strange report. "Singing?" he repeated.

"Aye, lord," the captain shifted in his saddle uneasily. "They say it sounds like a lady. How shall we proceed?"

Tarannon thought for a moment. This was indeed most unexpected. "We shall ride on carefully, until we can see the singer and that strange campside.

Ondoher saluted and returned to the head of the company. Tarannon waited until they had rounded the bend, then he proceeded as well. Soon he, too, smelled the smoke from the fire, and also heard the singing. He gently tugged at the reins to slow his horse, to also dim the sound of its hooves on the ground, in order to be able to listen to the sound better. He could not catch the actual words, for the language was unknown to him, but he recognised the melody, and the voice. His expression turned grim and his eyes narrowed dangerously.

"So here we meet again at last, my lady," he muttered softly. "And you are not going to like our encounter, that I promise you!"

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"Can you see them already?" one of the rangers that had remained at the campsite quietly asked Faramir as he stood in the shade of a large oak, watching the road intently. Lindórië was sitting by the fire, singing some staves of the Lay of Leithian in Quenya. Any other time Faramir would have been delighted to listen, for she had a good voice, but now he hardly heard the music, as his concentration was wholly bent on the task at hand. He had barely made it back in time to the campside. When he arrived, he heard the soft signal from his men up on the slopes that the company had almost reached them.

Now as he watched the first horseman came into sight, followed by others. They rode slowly. Faramir knew they must have noticed the fire, and most likely had also heard Lindórië's song. According to his expectations, Tarannon's soldiers were far more heavily armed than his own men: clad in long hauberks of brightly polished mail, beneath coloured surcoats which bore the device of Lebennin, with long kite-shaped shields at their arms, their necks protected by mail coifs, and their heads and faces by tall helmets with a stout nose-guard. Some even wore mailed gloves. Most carried long spears, their points glinting in the sunlight falling through the trees, while two had short riding bows at the ready. Others had drawn their swords. They were advancing cautiously, eyes bent on the smoke of the fire. Soon, Faramir knew, they would spot the horses, and himself.

A rider came into view whose helm was adorned with a crest of blue feathers. For a moment Faramir wondered if this might be Tarannon, as his armour was more splendid than that of the soldiers, but then, right after this rider, another rode forward. It was some time since Faramir had last seen the Lord of Lebennin, but he recognised him instantly. He drew a deep breath, leaning against the rough bark of the tree for a moment as if to draw some strength and steadfastness from the mighty trunk, then casting a glance to Lindórië. She had ended her song and risen, and now came walking over to him – in full view, Faramir knew, of the horsemen down on the road.

"No way back now," he said quietly, trying to keep his voice steady despite his anxiety. This was not the first ambush he had set up and executed with the rangers, indeed not. And yet he felt different than he had at these occasions. A heavy weight of responsibility was resting on him, numbing him. He thought he could almost feel the Steward's dark eyes bent on him, watching his every step and decision, ready to scold him should things go awry.

Lindórië looked nervous as well, but also grim, and more prepared than he felt. She extended a hand to him. He took it, and followed her back to the campfire. They had to wait for Tarannon now to make the first move.

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Andanor and the rangers watched as below the company filed along the road. Although now and again one of the riders would send a glance up the cliffs, not one of them seemed to spot anything peculiar. Quiet pride at the efficiency

of his men swelled Andanor's heart. They were indeed the best when it came to this stealthy, secret kind of work. Despite the long wait and the tension, no one had stirred or given forth a sound to betray his hiding. And what hidings they had chosen for themselves! Not even he who quite knew where they stood or sat or lay could spot them. He smiled grimly to himself. Those fools down there, they did not even notice the soft whistled signals that mimicked the calls of woodland birds.

The rearguard passed below them. Now only the carriage was missing, and the trap could snap shut. By the sounds from the ascent just round the bend, the vehicle was just behind forced up this last steep climb. He glanced round at the rangers at his side. All were ready. There was the carriage. Those poor horses looked weary indeed. And there was the prepared bit of road. Just a little further ... If only he knew what was passing up front, where the captain was waiting to welcome this lord with his impressive retinue.

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Upon recognising the song, Tarannon urged his steed forward. Ahead on a low ridge overlooking the road that wound about it, he could plainly see the smoke of a small fire now, curling up between the trees. Horses there were also – he could make them out between the foliage of the underbrush. And there, a sentinel, clad in green and brown of varied hues: the garments of the Rangers of Ithilien. So it was true. Lindórië had come here in the company of her sweet-heart's men. And himself?

There she was. Tarannon gritted his teeth. Clad like a man, but then she never had much interest in adorning herself, nor indeed the proper bearing of a lady. She was holding out her hand to someone. Tarannon's hand went to the hilt of his sword. There was no mistaking those features, even from a distance. The same lean visage like his thrice-cursed father, bloody Lord Steward Denethor, down to the curved eyebrows and the somewhat aquiline nose, he thought, feeling hot anger long contained rise up in him while also feeling a twinge of surprise that her betrayal should vex him so much. His grip on the sword-hilt tightened until the leather of his gloves creaked slightly. Skinny fellow, too, hardly out of boyhood. What should be so special about him, despite him being the Steward's son, of course. *And he is smiling at her like an idiot, curse him. And she, smiling back! Not much longer, my dearies!*

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Andanor realised he had actually been holding his breath as the carriage rumbled into view. Another smack of the whip over the ears of those unfortunate horses, and they leapt forward. A few more yards ... Aye, the lads had done their work well. Not even he who more or less knew where the prepared strip of road began was able to point it out from a distance. But not much longer now ...

A loud crack, followed by a whinny of startled horses as they tried to gallop on, and were restrained by the weight of the carriage as one of its hind-wheels was stuck in the ground. By the sound of it, the rear-axle as well as the wheel had snapped. One of the two coachmen had lost his seat and half-slid down the vehicle. The other had somehow managed to stay seated. He cursed loudly, trying to gather up the reins again and calm the horses, while his companion dismounted completely and made his way to the damaged wheel. He was still somewhat shaky on his legs, Andanor noted.

"What happened?" he heard the driver call to his companion who was inspecting the damage, and the road.

"Bloody wheel got stuck in one of them deep ruts," cursed the second coachman with a broad Morthondian accent, aiming a kick at the wheel. "I told yeh not ter go that fast on this road. What a bloody mess."

"How bad is the damage?" asked the driver while also leaving his seat to get to the horses and calm them by stroking their heads.

"Wheel's broken, axle too, by the look of it. Damn it. How are we supposed ter repair it in this thrice-cursed bloody forest. The next carter or smith must be miles orf."

“Calm it,” the driver told him, fiddling with the trappings of the horses. “There is naught we can do here. Take one of them horses and ride ahead and try and reach the company. Tell them what happened. I’ll stay with the carriage.” Casting a dark glance at the vehicle, he added in a low voice, making it difficult for Andanor to actually catch the words, “And I shall inform him, although he must have noted what happened.” His face showed plainly that he did not relish the task. Andanor wondered that the mysterious traveller in the carriage had not already stuck his head out and inquired or complained about the incident, and the delay it meant. *Perhaps, he mused, he has bumped his head on the ceiling when the carriage crashed.*

While the second coachman went over to continue unfastening a horse, the driver approached the carriage-door. After a moment’s hesitation during which he seemed to gather himself and perhaps draw up some courage, he gently rapped against the door. There came no reply. He cast a glance at his companion who was scrambling onto the horse’s back, took a deep breath and knocked again. When again there came no reply, he gingerly took the door-handle, opened, and peered inside. A moment later he looked up at his companion again who was eyeing him curiously as he gathered the reins to himself, ready to set out. The driver gave him a glance of complete bewilderment.

“He’s alright, isn’t he?” asked the coachman, but without genuine concern for the passenger. “Hasn’t hit his head or something, has he?”

The driver shook his head slowly. “There’s noone in there,” he said.

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Falastur looked up from his perusal of a letter when he felt a soft breeze on the back of his neck, just above his high collar. “This room does have a proper door, Aldaron,” he chided softly when a shadow fell on the piece of parchment before him on his desk. He looked up and turned his head to behold the dark figure of his sons’ teacher and chief gatherer of information. Although he trusted Aldaron more than anybody else, which meant a lot with someone as suspicious and cautious as the Lord of Pelargir, in recent years Falastur had come to dislike the other’s uncanny habit of using the secret passageways of the palace whenever he pleased, and his annoying preference for appearing or disappearing unexpectedly. Sometimes, Falastur imagined Aldaron simply enjoyed startling people, or scaring them.

“Indeed it has, my lord,” came the smug reply. “But I find the ... backdoor, so to say, far more comfortable. And less conspicuous.”

“Is that so?” stated Falastur coldly. “A quiet knock would still be appreciated, though.”

“You sound displeased, my lord,” said Aldaron, walking round the desk and over to one of the large windows overlooking the harbour, his hands folded behind his back. Falastur marvelled how a man of Aldaron’s advanced age still managed to move so smoothly and soundlessly. “And a little stressed, perhaps? Still, I daresay I have something to cheer your chilly mood.”

“Indeed?” asked Falastur, leaning back in his chair. “Out with it, then. Any news of our friends’ doings? Has this Visilya been found?”

“Not yet, lord, but Lord Húrin’s son has just left the city, riding northward along Sirith – the very same direction the Steward’s son and Lady Lindórië took this morning. He is accompanied by some of her servants, and a mason’s apprentice. I made some inquiries, and learned that this fellow works on the bridge you are having repaired, up near the western border.”

“Interesting,” remarked Falastur. “Any idea why he should leave so rapidly, and in such a strange company?”

“He received a letter, and left almost immediately afterwards. The guards who watched this were not able to read the actual words, but it appears the message had been written by Captain Faramir. The mason delivered it.”

Falastur’s eyes narrowed. “Why should he send a mason ... unless ...,” he ran a finger along his mouth, thinking. “Something must have befallen at this bridge, something of import, too, otherwise he would not have sent so strange a messenger. When did they leave the city, you said?”

"I did not say, lord. But they left just half an hour ago. I watched their departure at the gate, then came here immediately."

"Not much of a head start, then," mused Falastur. He sat for a moment thinking quietly. Then of a sudden he rose. "Tell Captain Valandur to have a company and my horse prepared in half an hour. We shall follow Master Túrin and his curious retinue."

Aldaron bowed, his eyes twinkling – most likely in expectation of some mischief. "Very well, my lord," he acknowledged the order, and departed with his dark robes swirling behind him, through the 'proper' door this time.

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Despite his obvious weariness, Orleg proved a cheerful and moreover talkative companion. He hailed from Lebennin, from a little village close to the border with Lossarnach, but it turned out he had plenty of relatives in Minas Tirith, some of which Túrin knew. Orleg had been to the City several times, and was eager about tidings. Túrin, always well informed about the latest gossip of Minas Tirith and vicinity, was happy to update him. In exchange he received a concise account of what had befallen at the bridge.

"So you don't know who sent this nasty messenger in the first place?" inquired Túrin after Orleg had finished his tale.

"I'm not sure, but I think he said something about being the Lord of Lebennin's messenger. Trouble is, we've got two of the kind, so I can't say who he meant exactly."

"Well, we'll find out," mused Túrin, although when he was honest to himself he had no idea what to do with the prisoner instead of keeping him from running away. Interrogating captives was Faramir's or Maradir's job. He recalled the interrogation of the strange Southron Agannâlo some days ago – only days, it seemed so much longer –, and how skillfully Faramir had managed to pry information out of the reluctant man, without having to use violence. Túrin knew he lacked this particular skill. His way of worming information out of people was quite different. Perhaps not suitable for every situation, but useful nevertheless. Drink usually helped, and some merry company, to put people at their ease, and get them into talking mood. Then again, after what he had heard about this renegade errand-rider he was about to fetch he was not sure if he really wanted to chat with him over a drink or two.

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They rode swiftly, and although there was quite some traffic on the road, they made good progress until they reached the bridge. Here they encountered some delay in the form of a company of merchants trying to cross over with their heavily laden waggons, each pulled by a couple of nervous oxen that were difficult to coax over the narrow viaduct. Túrin and his companions waited patiently until the small caravan had finally passed the bridge, and used the time to have a light meal in the shade of the trees lining the road, and for a merry chat with Orleg's mates who were working on the other end of the bridge, and were joking about him and his obvious desire to return to work as swiftly as possible, instead of using the opportunity to spend some time in Pelargir.

When finally they had reached the other side, Orleg introduced Túrin to his master and his fellow masons and apprentices, then led him to where the errand-rider had been tied to a tree. Túrin saw that despite Orleg's dire description of the man's vileness, the messenger had been treated rather leniently by the masons. He was sitting in the shade of a large oak, on soft ground, and his bonds looked rather slack. He had even been provided with a bite of bread and some water. His face and clothes bore the marks of some struggle, however, and the gaze he bestowed upon Orleg and Túrin when they approached was one of pure hatred.

"Yet another idiot to squander my precious time," spat the messenger before Túrin managed to say anything. "What do you want, boy? I won't tell you anything if you don't cut me loose."

"I think you had better leave him to me, Master Túrin," came a soft, cold voice from behind as Túrin was just about to answer. He froze, then turned slowly as recognition of that voice set in. Túrin's heart sank, for dismounting from a horse that plainly showed the marks of a swift, exhausting ride was the Lord of Pelargir.

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Not far from where Andanor lay hidden, Laren had positioned himself, concealed behind a large bush of boxwood with a steep outcrop of rock in his back, his longbow at the ready with a couple of arrows stuck in the ground to his feet. He had, he thought smugly, about the best position there was: impossible to spot from below, he could overlook the stretch of road where the carriage was stuck, as well as the one round the bend, where now Tarannon and his guard had halted, and were staring up to where his captain and the lady had set up their makeshift picnic-site. Something strange seemed to be going on down at the carriage. The two coachmen were all confusion, but Laren decided his lieutenant would take care of this. His focus of attention rested on the Lord of Lebennin and his own captain. *How will this Tarannon react, he asked himself, when he sees his own wife holding hands with another man? And don't they look cute?* he mused with a slight grin. When he came to think of it, this was the first time he had ever seen his captain that close to a lady, and he had joined the company at about the same time as the Steward's son.

Just when he was straining his ears to catch the exchange that was about to begin down on the road, and moreover promised some excitement, he caught a soft sound behind him, like a pebble clattering down the rocky slope in his back. Years spent as a ranger in the wild had honed his senses to sounds like these, and now they tingled with alarm. Nobody should be moving there now. All were to remain hidden and silent until the signal was given. There it was again, closer this time. And animal? Unlikely. They had fled when the rangers had positioned themselves in the underbrush. Lowering his longbow in order to be able to drop it swiftly and draw his dagger or sword instead, he carefully cast a glance over his shoulder, then half-turned for a better view.

There was a brief flash of light as a slender blade caught the sunlight. Laren's eyes widened in surprise as he felt the cold steel pierce his chest. He tried to cry out, but his throat was filled with blood of a sudden. The bow slid from his lifeless hand, and his legs gave way. The last thing he realised ere darkness took him was a dark figure stepping forward to catch him.

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Grendel caught the ranger's body and carefully lowered him to the ground. He checked if the man was dead indeed, before withdrawing the dagger. It had been some time since last he had killed someone this way, but he was pleased to realise that once learned, one did not unlearn certain things, despite getting a bit rusty due to lack of practice. He cleaned the blade on the ranger's green tunic, then swiftly exchanged his own dark hood with the green woollen one of the dead man. Stepping over his body, he peered through the branches of the box-wood to get an idea what was happening on the road below. The coachmen were still searching the carriage for signs of his whereabouts. He smiled to himself. Those fellows were blind and deaf. Then again, not even the keen-eyed rangers had noted him as he had crept through the forest above their heads, after slipping out of the carriage while it had crossed the little creek down in the vale. Still, he had been lucky with his assault on this one – a less fortunate hit with the dagger, and he would have been lost.

Beyond the bend Tarannon was now approaching what looked like a campsite. Ah yes, the fun was about to begin. Originally, Grendelenoth's plans had been laid differently, but in his long career in politics he had learned when it was better to modify one's plans according to new situations, and to move on. Tarannon had been a valuable asset as long as Grendel had been able to control him. But now it was best to get rid of him and get away, before he ran the danger of being caught in the Lord of Lebennin's downfall. There were others who would appreciate Grendel's special skills, knowledge and connections in the future, as well as his dark cunning and ruthlessness. And they would show their gratefulness in return. And as for Tarannon, as things looked, the Steward himself wanted him out of the way. Despite his usual misgivings against Lord Denethor and his policies, in this case Grendel was only too happy to oblige.

He stooped to pick up the ranger's longbow and an arrow, and notched it to the string. He would cause a little mischief, if he could. He took aim at Tarannon's back, and drew the bow to test it, only to lower it again swiftly when he realised how difficult this was. He was not the best of archers, he knew, and those bloody rangers seemed to be shooting bows the strength of trees. Still, released in the right moment, an arrow, even if it hit nothing at all, might cause havoc down on the road. And this was just what he wanted.

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It was plain to see that the company was unsure how to proceed. Many a questioning glance was shot back at the man with the plumed helmet, the captain, obviously, and at Tarannon himself. But the Lord of Lebennin, Faramir noted, was not heeding his men for the moment. His entire attention was bent on his wife, and her companion. And he looked angry, definitely so, his hand already grasping the hilt of his sword, ready to charge at them any moment.

At Faramir's side, Lindórië was watching her husband intently. She had let go of his hand after seeing how Tarannon had spotted it, as if to feign a guilty conscience. "It surprises me that his anger should be that fierce already," she said softly. "And I thought he did not care about me."

Then drawing a deep breath, she stepped forward a little and thus into better view from the road below. "Greetings, Tarannon," she called down to him, her voice calm and almost matter-of-factly. "What a surprise to find you here. I thought you had an errand on the coast."

Tarannon spurred his horse forward until he was in line with the first riders of the vanguard. "Errands change, lady," he returned curtly. "And speaking of surprises, I expected you to stay in Minas Tirith. How come you here, and in such ... interesting company?"

"My task in the City was done sooner than anticipated, and in these troubled times I needed an escort to return home," she replied with a shrug and a smile. "And the Steward was kind enough to provide me with one."

"An escort, is it?" sneered Tarannon, his one hand still resting on the hilt of his sword, with the other he was jerking his horse's head about impatiently, Faramir noted – a sign of his agitation. "A little small for that, I should think. But then again, with a companion like him" – a baleful glance at Faramir –, "every additional man would be pure waste. Having a little romantic interlude up there, are we?"

"Romantic interlude, Tarannon?" she asked with mock surprise and indignation. "What makes you think there is any romance involved here? And even if there was," she went on, her voice cooled by several degrees, "why indeed should you care?"

"Why should I care?" repeated Tarannon fiercely. "Because, my dear lady, I am your husband. Perhaps this has slipped your mind of late, while you were being entertained by your young friend there. My, you are old enough to be his mother! But I will not suffer to be ridiculed by your fancies. You know, there are names for women of your kind, ugly names."

"Aye, and there are ugly names for men of your kind, too," she returned coldly. "Would you like me to use them?"

"You will shut up, if you cannot speak to me with the decency that befits me."

"And you will apologise to her," fell in Faramir who so far had stood by and watched, both Tarannon and his men who seemed to be feeling extremely uncomfortable being caught in a private battle of words of their lord and his lady, "for if there is anyone lacking decency here 'tis you."

Tarannon shifted in the saddle to be able to look at him better. There was pure hatred glinting in his eyes. "I have not addressed you, boy, have I?" he spat. "Stay out of this until I am done with her. Your turn will come later. For you and I, we have a matter to settle, have we not?"

"And what matter should this be?" inquired Faramir calmly, aware of Lindórië's warning glance. "I cannot think of any wrong I have done you."

Tarannon's eyes blazed. "Do not pretend to be more stupid than you are! You know what I mean. You have laid your bloody hands on what is not rightfully yours, Steward's son, and as the owner, I shall have to deal out some punishment. A task I am going to relish, be assured of that."

Faramir folded his arms in front of his chest. If the circumstances of this exchange had not been that serious, he would have laughed about the entire situation. "What exactly do you accuse me of, then?" he asked.

“Oh, that you know very well! Stop feigning innocence, both of you. Already word is all over Gondor about the Lady of Lebennin bedding the Steward’s second-born.”

“Since when have you taken to listening to gossip, Tarannon?” asked Lindórië. “And what is more, taking it seriously? I have heard even more ridiculous tales about you, to be honest, and I regarded them as what they are, no more.”

Tarannon looked startled for a moment, but suspicion and anger returned immediately. “Do not change the subject. Gossip, is it? Only that just now I have seen you hand in hand. Will you claim now that something is wrong with my eyes?”

“I do not know about your eyes, but fact is Captain Faramir is no more than a friend, and, in case something is wrong with your ears, too, I repeat: he and his men are riding escort for me. No more, and no less.”

Tarannon snorted, his eyes narrowing dangerously. “You lie,” he stated.

“Now I demand an apology as well,” she said sternly. “To me, and to him, for you have insulted him gravely, and without reason.”

“I will not apologise to you or him,” Tarannon hissed. “You have betrayed me, and you will be punished for that, along with your lover.”

“Ah, we speak of treachery now, do we not?” asked Lindórië. “Aye, you would know about that!”

Tarannon started. “What do you mean? Are you calling me a traitor? Traitor to whom, if I may ask?”

“To this realm, for example.”

Tarannon stared at her. “You are out of your mind,” he stated flatly. “Completely out of your mind. What is this – an ill-conceived attempt to twist your fate and escape punishment? Or to miscredit me? Vain attempts, the lot of them. I have heard enough from you. Come down from there immediately, both of you, or I shall send my men up to fetch you.”

“Come down, when you are surrounded by a company of heavily armed and armoured soldiers?” returned Faramir. “I think not. I am responsible for the lady’s security, and I cannot guarantee this under the circumstances, not when you are in a mood this fell and unreasoning. But why do you not come up to us, alone and on foot? Then we can continue this conversation, and hopefully find a way to settle things peacefully.”

Tarannon smiled grimly. “Nay nay, Steward’s son. A nice trick, but not good enough. Who tells me your company is as small as it looks, and that there are no others hidden on these slopes? I will not walk into a trap so easily.”

Faramir exchanged a swift glance with Lindórië, and saw a smile tug at the corners of her mouth. “If you say so, Tarannon,” she muttered.

“Come down at once, I repeat!”

“If there are men hidden about here, who tells you they are not commanded to shoot you the moment you try to lay hands on us?” said Faramir when Tarannon raised his hand to sign to six men of the vanguard to advance. But before they even moved, a whistle rent the air: the sound of an arrow. The missile struck the shoulder of Tarannon’s horse which reared and whinnied in pain, almost conveying its rider to the ground. Somehow Tarannon managed to stay seated and force the terrified steed back onto all fours again, while all around him chaos broke loose.

The horsemen whirled about. Some drew round Tarannon to try and shield him from more arrows. Those who had bows loosed some missiles in the direction of the hidden archer, without hitting anything due to the low range of their bows, and the fact they only had a rough idea what they were aiming at. One or two spears flew up there, too, to little avail. The others, especially the rearguard, looked around wildly, searching for an escape route. Some would have ridden off, Faramir was sure, but the captain managed to hold his men together. Tarannon was furious, and did not seem to have realised the danger he and his men were in.

Faramir was as surprised as the rest of the company. He had not given any sign, and was sure neither had Andanor. He caught a glimpse of the arrow and sign on the shaft as Tarannon ripped it ungently from the wound and cast it aside. It was Laren's. But Laren he had known for years: and excellent ranger, and devoted to the company. He would never have acted without his superiors' explicit orders, Faramir was certain. Something was very wrong here.

"Get them, get them!" he heard Tarannon yell to his men while still trying to calm his horse. "This is a bloody trap."

Another arrow whistled down, striking a tree halfway between Tarannon and Faramir himself. Whose aim was so poor, he wondered, hoping fervently that the other rangers would hold their arrows until he gave the signal. So much for waiting for Tarannon to make the first move! Now it would be exceedingly difficult to convict him of an act of aggression. Deciding to nevertheless try and make the best of the crooked situation, Faramir stepped forward. "Call your men back, Tarannon!" he called down to the Lord of Lebennin. "You see now you were right. There are men hidden, and they can shoot everybody on the road, armoured or not. And they will, Tarannon, should any of us be harmed by you and your men. They only await my command. So do be reasonable, I implore you. I should like to avoid any bloodshed. Dismount and join us here, and we can discuss things sensibly."

"You shot my horse," cried Tarannon in reply, the expression on his face far from any reason. "You opened hostilities, not I. Men, get him! I have a score to settle with this upstart ranger."

"What now, captain?" Faramir heard one of the rangers that had remained at the camp whisper to him. The man had positioned himself close by, and had his longbow at the ready.

"Wait," Faramir commanded him quietly, silently praising the fact that the other rangers had not released their arrows yet, as commanded. But how much longer, with the horsemen on the road in obvious turmoil? "Let them come. We must push Tarannon a little further yet, in order to be able to convict him. I wonder what came into Laren's mind to release without command."

"Laren's arrow was that? But he wouldn't shoot like that, without the signal. And he don't shoot that bad, either."

"Nay, he does not," agreed Faramir, before his attention was caught by the men forcing their steeds up the short slope now. It was difficult due to rocks and the tangled underbrush, but they were obviously skilled horsemen, and the tips of their long spears were glittering dangerously as they advanced. "Get yourself some cover," Faramir called to Lindórië, only to notice when he turned his head swiftly to where she had stood that she had left his side and vanished. *Hopefully she has found herself a safe place*, he thought, but something told him she was not far enough from danger yet. Still, right now he could only hope she knew best what she was doing.

Drawing his sword, Faramir stepped forward. "This is my last warning to you, Tarannon. Withdraw these men, or else suffer the consequences. Again I implore you to be reasonable, to avoid any bloodshed." To his satisfaction, he saw some of the soldiers shoot uneasy glances up the slopes. Anybody with a little knowledge of ambush-tactics knew they were in a near hopeless situation – and they did not even know the road ahead had been prepared with the caltrops, and that their retreat was cut off, too, by the remainder of Faramir's company.

"You have led a company of armed men into my realm," cried Tarannon in reply, "without my leave, plainly intending some mischief. For this alone you have earned punishment. If he makes trouble," he called to his men, "you have my permission to wound him so that he can be obtained without further ado. But kill him not."

Heedless of their danger, obeying their lord's command to the latter, the horsemen advanced.

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Something strange was going on down on the road, Andanor noted. The two coachmen seemed to be worrying more about their passenger than about the broken carriage, and from round the bend there were sounds like the attack had begun already – although no signal had so far been given.

"Seems the fellow's gone, lieutenant," whispered a ranger hiding close to Andanor.

He nodded thoughtfully. This was not quite according to plan. By the looks of it, the coachmen seemed troubled by the absence, having mastered their initial surprise. "I wonder how and why he slipped away," he mused.

"Knew perhaps that trouble was coming," replied the ranger. "What now, lieutenant?"

"Go ahead and inform the captain," commanded Andanor. "And see how they're faring round the bend. By the sounds there's some hard handstrokes going down."

The ranger saluted and melted into the shadows, to quickly make his way along the slope.

Andanor whistled the appointed signal to the men: it was their duty to close the road to any horsemen that might try and escape this way. Also, he had to deal with the confounded coachmen, but he reckoned them to be an easy match. They did not look like troublemakers, and did not even wear arms. He watched for a moment as some rangers appeared out of their hiding-places and silently began to file down onto the road, still keeping to what cover they could find. From round the bend cries could be heard and the whinny of horses. He fervently hoped his captain was faring well. Soon, he was certain, the first would come running. But they would not get very far.

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It had been a difficult decision to let Faramir fend on his own against Tarannon, and it had cost Lindórië a lot to overcome the desire to remain at his side. But he would manage, she kept telling herself. He was clever, and reasonable, and he would not endanger himself beyond necessity. Moreover he had his rangers and his friends to watch over him. He would be alright.

And she had an important task now to accomplish. Who was this strange Bowman who had released so early, and by doing so clearly endangered their plans? She had seen from Faramir's shocked expression that he had no answer to this as well. From what she had learned of the rangers during their journey together was that for one they were hard-working and very professional, and moreover utterly devoted to their captain. They would not overrule his command in a matter of this importance, she was convinced.

But somebody seemed to have an interest in interrupting their designs, and she was about to find out who. A dark suspicion had taken hold of her. Perhaps she had underestimated him? Perhaps he had outwitted them all, and not let himself get caught with the carriage? Perhaps he was up there. But if so, he would not interfere further, not if she could hinder him.

As swiftly as she was able, she climbed the slope. Twice she thought she spotted a ranger in the underbrush, but they did not see her, or if they did they apparently recognised her and remained silent, bent on their own purpose. Finally, after an exhausting climb which had left her quite breathless, she approached the spot whence the arrows had issued. She was not entirely certain, but on a shelf of the rocky slope, behind a large bush of box-wood, something seemed to be lying. A body, clad in green. But the green cloth was stained with red. For an instant she considered climbing down the slope for a closer look, but decided against it. The slope yielded little cover and was covered with loose pebbles, and thus she ran the danger of getting spotted from the road below, where, she noted to her horror, some horsemen were charging at Faramir. Just when they were spurring over the last yards of level ground at the campside, the tips of their fell spears glinting in the sun, from the corner of her eyes she caught a movement further up the hill, behind the tall trees that grew on the ridge some thirty yards above her. Torn between watching the events on the road and her own task, she risked a longer glance at the ridge. Her eyes had not cheated her. There, half-hiding behind a tree, was someone. She caught a glimpse of a green hood such as the rangers wore, but underneath the figure seemed to be clad in dark garments.

The figure watched the road, but suddenly seemed to become aware of something else, for it withdrew from the ridge and vanished into the forest behind. Cursing under her breath, Lindórië cast a last glance at the campsite. Faramir had apparently dodged the first advance of the soldiers, with his sword parrying their spears, but he was not out of danger yet. *Give the signal*, she implored him silently. *Do not let them come too close!*

Then biting her lip, with an effort she pulled herself away from the sight, and continued to climb.

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“Bloody idiots, is it so difficult to catch a single man?” cried Tarannon in rage when Faramir had evaded the first charge of the horseman, and even managed to wound one of the steeds with his sword so that the rider was forced to veer aside in order to control his pained and frightened animal again. His three guards sprang to his side, attempting to grab the soldiers and pull them from their steeds, aided by the rugged terrain and the restricted space of the campsite, but hindered by the spears the horsemen were wielding with dangerous skill.

Turning to face another onslaught, Faramir caught movement on the road. Tarannon had broken free of the ring of guards surrounding him, and was forcing his injured horse up the slope as well, his sword held forward. “Captain, the signal,” panted a ranger at his side. “We can’t hold out much longer.”

“Let him approach,” returned Faramir. “Take care of the other soldiers, I shall deal with Tarannon.”

That was easier said than done, he soon realised. Racing up to him as fast as his terrified horse would bear him, the Lord of Lebennin advanced, his face twisted with rage. Just when he prepared to parry his stroke, Faramir heard a sound to his side, and more by instinct than skill he held up his sword just in time to parry the spear one of the soldiers had cast at him. The force of the shaft made him almost lose the grip on his own weapon, and he could feel the wooden staff brush past his back, and heard a dull thud as it struck the root of the tree he had half-covered behind. An instant later, Tarannon was on him, urging his horse against his hated foe and aiming a wicked blow at Faramir. He brought up his sword again, and the blade glanced off it, but the violence of the blow made him stagger back. His legs became encumbered by the spear, and he lost his footing. Tarannon’s horse reared before him; one of the hoofs flailing against his right shoulder, rendering his arm lifeless for a moment. The sword dropped from his hand, and only a quick dive to retrieve it saved him from being decapitated by another blow from Tarannon. The horse landed again on all fours, trodding on the hilt of his sword. Desperately, he grabbed at the spear, and with an effort yanked it from the root. Bringing it up like a quarterstaff, he parried the next blow from Tarannon’s sword. The shaft shattered, cloven in two.

Casting the end without the spearhead at Tarannon, Faramir managed to buy a second of precious time, during which he put two fingers to his mouth and sent forth a shrill whistle. At first nothing happened. Then, as Tarannon’s sword went down again in a wicked blow aimed at Faramir’s neck, as if in answer to his signal there came the sound of an arrow. It struck Tarannon’s horse. Again it reared, screaming in pain, then its hindlegs began to give way. From the corner of his eye, Faramir caught sight of a white-feathered shaft sticking from its chest – Maradir’s arrow.

He had no time to heed the horse. With an agility Faramir would never have credited him with, and despite the heavy armour he was wearing, Tarannon had freed both feet from the stirrups, and the moment his dying horse came crashing down, he hurled himself with all force at Faramir.

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After yet another exhausting climb, Lindórië reached the high ridge. Where was her prey? From far down suddenly a sharp whistle went up. Finally, the signal. Relief washed through her. During the climb, she had not been able to watch the proceedings on the road, and thus had not indication how Faramir had been faring. But this signal gave her hope he was alright. Just when she was about to seek for a spot where there were no trees obscuring her view onto the road, she caught another glimpse of movement. Not far from her, someone was withdrawing from the ledge and moving into the forest. She waited until the figure stepped forth between two trees, and knew she had been right. There was Grendelnoth, her husband’s menacing advisor, and she had no doubt that the murder of the ranger and the unfortunate release of that arrow had been his doing.

Following him swiftly but silently, she finally came upon him in a little hollow fenced round by moss-grown boulders and ancient pines and oaks. He was climbing up the further side when she hailed him. “Greetings, Grendel,” she called to him, her voice calm. Seeing him freeze in his movements and then slowly turn to her, she was convinced he had not heard her advance. He looked up to her, raising a hand to shield his eyes from the sunlight that appeared to be blinding him, then upon recognising her he smiled grimly, giving her a mock bow.

“Greetings, my lady,” he replied, his stance still tense, his right hand resting on his belt where he carried a long dagger. “What a nice surprise to encounter you here. I kept wondering if anybody would remark on the fact that arrows came flying before the appointed signal, but admittedly, I did not expect you to be the one to set out to chase the miscreant. Should you not stay at your beloved’s side?”

“I think I can be of more service here,” she returned, watching his movements keenly.

“Indeed?” he said with some mockery. “And what intend you to do with me?” Casually, he drew the dagger from its sheath, and weighed it in his hand.

She smiled coldly. “You know I cannot let you go free, to do mischief wherever you please.”

“Mischief, is it?” he laughed. “And what about you, Steward’s pet? Meddling in politics just like me, but with less success.”

“That remains to be seen. At least I work for a master less dark,” she returned, advancing cautiously, intend on keeping the sun in her back.

He gave a bark of laughter. “And what know you about my master?”

“Enough. Enough to see that you must be stopped, once and for all.”

“Well, you are welcome to try, lady, but I warn you. Lest you are skilled in the arts of killing far more than you look, I doubt you will stand a chance against me.”

“Are you willing to wager your life on that, Grendel? Do you think my work for the Steward consists of gathering information only?”

“I think I shall chance it,” he replied matter-of-factly. There was a glint in his eyes as he bent them on her, advancing slowly now. She knew well enough to avoid his gaze, as they circled each other in the hollow. She had drawn her eket, which would give her a longer reach than his dagger, although she was certain he had a knife or two up his sleeves or hidden in his boots.

“You can still run for it and let me go free,” he suggested, trying to force her round so that she would be blinded by the sun, yet she was careful. She shook her head in reply, her expression grim and set. She hoped she did not underestimate his skills with the knife. Somehow he had managed to overwhelm a ranger who surely had been superior to him in the art of fighting.

Suddenly he kicked at the ground, sending earth and leaves and pieces of bark flying at her, while leaping forward and louncing at her with his weapon. She had been prepared, however, and parried his thrust with her blade, dealing him a slight cut along the back instead, most of which was turned by the thick woollen hood.

“Good one, lady,” he hissed as he withdrew a little up the wall of the dell, pain and anger showing plainly in his face now. Apparently he had underestimated her, and he was riled by that. But his consternation only lasted a moment, before with a snarl he attacked again.

Soon they were locked in a fierce fight, slashing at the other and trying to parry or evade the swift blades. Grendel fought with all viciousness, trying to catch Lindórië off guard, to either wound her with the knife or else lock her in his gaze, to meddle with her will. She was careful, however, divining his motives, trying to wound him in her turn. His skill with the dagger matched hers with her short sword, so that for a while they were even, neither doing any damage to the other.

Then fortune turned. Obviously thinking her off guard for an instant, Grendel threw his dagger. It grazed her right shoulder, rending the cloth and leaving a thin cut on the skin, and landed on the ground next to her, where it stuck. Undeterred, she advanced on him, trying to force him away from the weapon. With a desperate lunge, he leapt towards it, his hand missing it by inches. He let out a cry of frustration and pain, for her blade dealt him a deep cut on his left side. He rolled over the ground to avoid further blows until he met a boulder, upon which he drew himself up

again, clutching his side, his eyes burning with hatred. "Seems I underestimated you," he snarled, blood running in an intricate pattern over his fingers where they clutched the wound. He was breathing hard, and obviously in pain. "What now, lady? You will have to finish me, if you dare."

She also was exhausted. Her right arm and especially the shoulder hurt, and she was very thirsty. But hopefully the fight would be over soon. "Do not underestimate me again," she returned softly. "For you there is no escape from this dell." Carefully she advanced, suspecting him to draw another weapon any moment, or else try and surprise her with some cunning attack.

He laughed hoarsely. "Neither is there for you," he panted, nodding towards her shoulder where some blood was trickling from the wound. "Or did you believe I rely on blades alone when I kill?"

Her arm heavy of a sudden, her eyes narrowed as she watched him. "Poison?" she asked calmly.

He smiled grimly, propping himself up further on the boulder and drawing a slender knife from his left sleeve. "Of course. Assassin's best friend. You have half an hour, maybe. And there is no antidote."

"You lie. You would not use a poison without antidote, for danger of receiving a dose of it yourself."

He laughed softly. "If that is so, try and find it. Before your fingers are too numb to hold your eket."

She had been fearing that despite her caution she had come under the spell of his gaze, but as he spoke, she indeed felt an increasing lifelessness in her arm and shoulder, spreading quickly. Some venom was at work there.

"Let me go, and I shall give it to you," he offered, giving her a mocking grin. "If you think of killing me and fetching it yourself, forget it. The antidote consists of three ingredients, and only I know the correct quantities to mix it. Let me escape, or do Gondor a service and slay me, and pay for it with your own life."

"Do not try and fool me, Grendel," she told him calmly, shifting the eket to her left hand since the right had started to grow numb and cold indeed. Dizziness was creeping on her, and it cost her some effort to keep her voice steady. The venom was working quicker than she had feared. "You would not use an antidote that needs long to be prepared. Where is it?"

"You know my price," came the malicious reply. Raising his knife, he pushed himself away from the boulder and began to advance again. "I shall go now, and you will not hinder m—" His last word was cut short by the sound of an arrow striking. Lindórië staggered back in surprise, almost losing her footing as the dizziness grew, until her groping hand met a stout tree-trunk to her back, against which she rested to steady herself. But there was Grendel, staring in horror at the arrow protruding from his shoulder. He raised his eyes to hers, then grabbed the missile and drew it forth, flinging it away. "Farewell, lady," he muttered, as with an effort of will and strength he turned and began scrambling up the wall of the dell. Lindórië made an attempt to lunge at him with her short sword, but realised that her legs would not carry her reliably anymore. With a sigh, she sank back against the tree again, the sword dropping from her hand. She did not know how far Grendel would get, wounded as he was, but she would not be able to hinder him. All her efforts, wasted. She closed her eyes wearily.

He had almost reached the lip of the dell, when there was another sharp whistle, followed by a thud and a short gasp. Lindórië opened her eyes just in time to see him staggering on the ridge, then sink to the ground and vanish out of sight. A dark figure dashed over towards him, running lightly despite the rugged terrain. For a moment he halted, looking to where Grendel had fallen, then turned and glanced down towards her. Leaping down lightly, the figure advanced, until she was able to see the other's feature: they were fair, a pale stern face framed by a hood, with a pair of keen grey eyes. For an instant hope welled up in her that Faramir had come, then she recognised the face.

"Curufë," she whispered as the Noldo drew near and lowered himself at her side, looking grave and worried.

"My lady," he said softly, reaching out to place his hand on her brow. Her legs finally gave way, and she began to slide down against the tree, until he caught her and helped her into a sitting position, with the trunk in her back. "What ails you? Are you wounded?"

She nodded towards her shoulder. "Just a cut," she told him softly, "but the knife was poisoned. Where is Grendel? Is

he dead? For if there is an antidote, he must have it on him.”

The Noldo's fair face paled with shock. “Alas,” he said. “He is dead indeed. My second arrow felled him; he toppled down the cliff. Show me the wound.” As he stripped away tunic and shirt from her shoulder and began to search the wound with his fingers, she felt the numbness in her arm lessen a little, and the darkness lift, but as soon as he withdrew the hand, they returned.

“Tis beyond my skill to heal,” said the Noldo sadly, glancing at her with grief in his eyes. “I can only ease the pain, and perhaps slow the poison.” Searching through the pouch at his belt, he handed her a handful of dark, dried berries, looking almost like pepper. “Eat these. Slowly. Chew them well. I shall climb down and search his body. Would that I had come sooner. I saw you vanish in the forest, but you were difficult to track. Forgive my haste in shooting him.”

“Better so than him getting away,” she replied, giving him a weak smile, dropping one of the berries in her mouth. They tasted bitter, and at first she did not feel any change, until slowly she felt some life return to her arm and fingers, like blood flowing again through a limb that has fallen asleep. “You arrived just in time, Curufë. Thank you for coming after me.”

“Hold out until I return,” he encouraged her, pressing her hale hand and springing to his feet. But she held on to him. “Wait,” she whispered. “How is Faramir faring down there? Is he alright?”

“When I left, he was unharmed, and fighting Tarannon.”

She frowned. “Fighting Tarannon?” she repeated with some force. “But he promised me –”

“He did not have much of a choice, my lady,” explained Curufë quickly. “He did not break his promise to you, only defended himself. He kept his word.”

Lindórië sighed, resting her head against the tree again. “Fetch him, Curufë,” she begged hoarsely. “Please, get him out of there.”

The Noldo's eyes widened in surprise at this request, then he lowered his gaze, his expression grieved. “There will be no time to look for the antidote, if I fetch him,” he said softly, pressing her hand again in a gesture of grave appreciation.

She nodded. “I know,” she breathed. “Please.”

Drawing a deep breath, the Elf let go of her hand. “Try to move as little as possible. I shall run like the wind.”

With that he sped off. Lindórië watched him as quickly he disappeared over the lip of the dell, like a shadow flitting between the trees. Then she closed her eyes, chewing another berry. *Hurry, Curufë, she thought. And hurry, Faramir.* Thinking of the young man, she felt a deep stab in her heart. She had known their parting was imminent, but she had not planned on it being like this. Yet perhaps it was for the best. He would be free then, free to meet someone else. And she would be free also. Free from care, and duty, and a life devoted to Gondor, with hardly a moment to herself. She did not feel any fear, only regret. She would have loved to spend more time with her brothers for whose sake and safety she had agreed to marry Tarannon, to end the feud that had claimed one beloved member of her family after another. To little avail, as all of them had died before her. And the journey to Imladris, she had been looking forward to that, despite knowing that a grievous parting lay before her setting out north. And Faramir ... she could see him clearly in her mind; his fair, stern face, his gentle smile, the grave tenderness in his grey eyes which yet could leap to sudden fire, and burn keen and bright, as bright as his wit. If only she could see him once more with her eyes. She ate another berry, feeling the wholesome effect less and less.

Her death would shock and grieve him deeply, she knew. So should she spare him this last encounter, and the chance to say farewell? Nay, it would be better this way: a sad but proper ending to what must have been one of the most unusual lovestories in the history of Gondor. *Perhaps, she thought with a gentle smile, 'tis going to be made into a song or tale some day. I should like that, being remembered in verse, maybe even in the Elventongue.*

Opening her eyes with an effort, she searched the lip of the dell. There was no sign of Curufë or Faramir yet, only trees swaying softly in the breeze, their branches casting flickering shadows on the ground. *Hurry, she implored, and*

closed her eyes.

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As Tarannon came flying at him, Faramir hardly had time to step aside to avoid the Lord of Lebennin crashing on top of him. He dealt him a blow with the end of his spear, but the stroke was mostly turned by the other's mail. Instead, Faramir received a cut along the thigh from Tarannon's sword, followed by another blow which he parried with the spear. Immediately, Tarannon was on his feet again, and now they stood face to face. Faramir had no idea where his sword might be – most likely it was buried underneath the body of the horse.

"Finally I have you, boy," hissed Tarannon, quite breathless, a fell fire burning in his eyes. An arrow whistled past him, but he heeded it little. "So, you set up an ambush here, did you not? To what purpose, I wonder." He feigned an attack, but Faramir did not fall for it.

"You are acting quite according to my purpose," returned Faramir, eyeing the movements of the other's sword warily. The remainder of the spear he was using as a weapon had already received a deep cut along the shaft. One or two blows, and it would break yet again, leaving him with two short pieces only. Tarannon lounged again. Faramir turned the blow with the spear, seeing splinters burst away. There was another arrow whistling overhead, striking a tree behind Tarannon.

"Am I?" said the Lord of Lebennin. "So your purpose is to get slain by me, for that is going to happen, lad. You forgot that you are in my realm now, and that I am the highest authority here in all matters, especially justice. And I am going to deal that out in an instant."

"The highest authority here and everywhere in Gondor is the Steward," Faramir returned, retreating from the heavy blows the other was aiming at him until his back hit a large boulder. To the right a tree grew, and to the left there was another rock, less in height but partly shrouded by bushes. He was trapped.

Tarannon knew it, and he laughed. "The Steward," he mocked, "is far away, and from what I know of him he is unlikely to mourn your demise." He struck again at Faramir, who parried with the spear. The fierce blow neatly carved it in two, and set the iron-tipped part flying into the underbrush. Faramir was left with a wooden staff about a foot in length, and his dagger, but neither were a match for the broadsword Tarannon wielded with skill and excessive force. Tarannon smiled, noticing the other's plight.

"You should have thought twice ere you got involved with her," he hissed, advancing cautiously. "Now it is too late. Pity she is not here now to watch her beloved die." Again he aimed a vicious blow at Faramir, which cost him the last bit of his spear. He drew the dagger, aware, however, of the seriousness of his situation. Tarannon was too skilled a swordsman to allow him to approach close enough for the dagger's reach.

With a cry the Lord of Lebennin leapt forward, sweeping his sword at Faramir. Narrowly, he managed to evade the blow which grazed some moss off the boulder to his back, but the stroke which followed immediately hit his right arm, cutting the cloth of tunic and shirt and even his leather gauntlet and leaving a red trail on his skin. In return, he managed to deal a stab at Tarannon, cutting his cheek so that the Lord of Lebennin let out a howl of rage and pain. They drew apart, and Tarannon, his fury increased beyond all reason, attacked again – and was hurled back with a cry of pain. He crashed against the tree, clutching his right side where an arrow had struck him with full force, piercing his mail.

Apparently heedless of the injury, however, as soon as he had overcome the surprise, he leapt to his feet again, but then Faramir was on him and wrenched the sword from his hand. Setting the point to the other's throat, he checked him. "Enough, Tarannon," he said sternly, whincing slightly when his shoulder protested under the movement. "'Tis over. Be reasonable for once and surrender, which you should have done ere it came to this. Your men are not faring too well down on the road, judging from the sounds."

And indeed, from below came shouts and curses of men hard pressed, amid the screams and whinnies of pained and terrified horses. There was the sound of steeds galloping too and fro, then a cry went up of "The road is blocked! Caltrops!" and "There are more rangers behind!"

Faramir gave Tarannon a grim smile. "You see, there is no escape. Spare your men any more bloodshed."

Tarannon only spat. Faramir heard swift footsteps come up behind. A quick glance over his shoulder revealed Maradir and Gareth approach. Both had their bows in hand, and their quivers looked rather empty. "The men at the campsite are all accounted for," reported Maradir. "But only one has been slain, the others are wounded and have been made prisoner. Those on the road still fight on, without much chance. You should better have a look there. The captain looks like a fairly reasonable fellow."

"Thanks, you two," said Faramir, noticing that it had been Gareth's arrow which had felled Tarannon. "Watch him, and be careful. He is not so badly wounded that he cannot do any more mischief."

Maradir gave him a grin. "We'll make sure he'll make no further trouble."

With that Faramir left him and swiftly made his way to a spot where he could overlook the road. Wounded horses were scattered below, and most of the horsemen had withdrawn into a circle, with their steed on the outside, or sought cover in the underbrush or behind trees. There seemed to be some fighting going on round the bend, where Andanor had positioned the other rangers. Some of the soldiers had been wounded, but there seemed only few serious injuries. The rangers had done their job very well.

"Captain," Faramir called down to the leader of the company, "your lord has been taken captive, after trying to slay me viciously. I know you have sworn strict obedience to him, but obedience is one thing, and folly another. So far you have only lost one man, and I for one should like to keep it at that. Surrender, and no more will come to harm. You have my word on that."

The rangers ceased their rain of arrows for a moment, to give Ondoher the opportunity to communicate with his men. It did not take him long to make up his mind, and Faramir suspected he had been in favour of surrendering ever since he had realised the hopelessness of their plight, and that only his loyalty to his lord had kept him from doing so sooner. He stepped forth from the ring of men and horses and sheathed his sword, then withdrew his helmet and mail-coif and ran a hand through his hair and over his face. "We surrender," he called up to Faramir. "But how fares my lord?"

"He was wounded, though not badly," explained Faramir, beginning to climb down to the other. Only now he realised how his leg hurt. The cut was bleeding steadily, so was the one on his arm, but neither were deep. His shoulder was throbbing with pain as well. The captain was unharmed, yet looked weary and troubled, but also relieved that the uneven fight was over. "My name is Ondoher," he introduced himself, "and I am captain of Lord Tarannon's household men. You chose a good spot for your ambush," he added appreciatively.

"You did not give us much trouble. Why did you not scout the area?"

Captain Ondoher made a face that clearly showed his displeasure about this shortcoming. "We were in a desperate hurry. Lord Tarannon seemed so bound on reaching Pelargir as soon as possible that he did not heed even the most basic requirements of caution." He studied Faramir keenly, taking in his wounds. "He really tried to kill you?"

"Yes."

"But why? And why so openly. He seemed very agitated throughout our ride hither, hence his hurry. Yet I do not understand his reasons. Something about his wife, I gathered."

Faramir smiled wryly. "He appears to hold the conviction that Lady Lindórië and I have an relationship," he explained, upon which Ondoher only shook his head. "So that is the reason? I do not believe it. Aye, he is a proud man who would take matters of honour seriously, but to risk the lives of all his men for this ... this trifle ..." He snorted with anger and contempt. "I would have expected more responsibility of him, and more care about his men's lives. What is going to happen to him now?"

"He remains my prisoner. I shall bring him to Minas Tirith, for the Steward to judge. For he has extended his authority far beyond its limits, and I believe more charges could be raised against him than only attacking me and threatening to kill me."

"Which is not a light charge, either," remarked Ondoher. "What about us, lord?" he then inquired, with some nervous-

ness.

"I hold you blameless," replied Faramir. "You only obeyed orders, which is no excuse for everything, but in this case I think you have naught to fear. Fortunately this affair has been settled with very little bloodshed."

The Captain nodded. Round the corner now came those men who had attempted to escape back along the road. Some were on foot as apparently their horses had been shot. All bore signs of fighting, but, judging from Ondoher's expression, no man was missing. Behind them filed the rangers, with Andanor in the lead, holding the soldiers in check with their bows and swords. Some of them, too, had received minor wounds, but they were stepping proudly, and on the whole looked rather pleased with themselves.

From down the slopes now also came rangers and joined their companions on the road. "Shall we disarm them, captain?" inquired Damrod as he came over to Faramir, who shook his head. "They may keep their weapons. I do not expect them to make any further trouble. I have your word on that, have I not, Captain Ondoher?"

"You have, lord," replied the captain gravely.

"See to the wounded, then," commanded Faramir, "and clear the road. Bring all the injured up to the campsite, and also look after the wounded horses, those that can be saved. Andanor, what news of the carriage?"

"I sent a men to inform you, captain," replied the lieutenant. "Did he not reach you? Well, the carriage was trapped alright. The wheel and the axle are broken. And we have caught these two gentlemen here." He motioned for the two coachmen to step forward. They looked rather relieved that the fighting had finally ceased.

"What of the passenger?" asked Faramir, noticing that Andanor's face took on a slightly uncomfortable expression. "You should ask this of them," he said, indicating the coachmen.

"Well, what happened?" repeated Faramir, turning to the men. The driver bowed awkwardly. "Well, lord, we wish we knew. When we last stopped the carriage to exchange horses he was still there. We've been travelling very fast since then, with no stop whatsoever, but when next we opens the carriage – after the accident, you see – he's gone."

"Vanished," added the other coachmen with a shrug. "We've got no explanation for it, unless he dropped out of the rolling carriage."

"You have not seen him slip out?" asked Faramir of the rangers, a dark suspicion mounting in him as he recalled the unfortunate arrow that so nearly had spoiled all their plans. There was a general shaking of heads and shrugging of shoulders. "Well, search for this Grendel, then," he commanded. "But be careful. The man is cunning and dangerous. And look for Laren as well, as he has not come down with the rest."

Just as some of the rangers began to file out and Faramir had turned to Ondoher, and began to question him about what he knew about Grendel, a clear voice hailed him from back at the campsite. "Faramir, I have found this Grendel," called Curufë. "He is accounted for. But you have to come swiftly."

There was something in his voice that sent a shiver down Faramir's back. "What is wrong?" he asked as he began to walk towards the Elf. What had Grendel been doing up there? And where, where indeed, was Lindórië? He increased his pace, despite the protest of his injured leg running up the slope.

"Hurry," called the Elf with great urgency, and vanished into the forest. Faramir dashed after him. "Faramir, what happened?" asked Maradir as he ran past him, but Faramir only gave a quick shake of his head as he followed the Noldo, who had set out with a speed difficult to match over the rough terrain.

"Watch him, and if he stirs, knock him out," Maradir told Gareth and the two rangers that had joined them guarding Tarannon, and ran after Faramir.

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“Oh bugger,” muttered Túrin under his breath as he watched Falastur walk over to him briskly, his dark cloak flapping behind him.

“Yes, I reckon you must consider my appearance here most unfortunate,” commented the Lord of Pelargir dryly, having obviously overheard Túrin’s soft words. He felt some colour creep to his cheeks, both of embarrassment and annoyance. “As I said, you can safely leave this gentleman to me, Master Túrin,” went on Falastur. “Indeed, he appears to be one of Lord Carandil’s messengers, and actually was due to arrive in Pelargir with a message for me several hours ago. Who detained him here, and why?” He cast a glance round at the masons who had gathered round. The master stepped forward, looking as annoyed as Túrin felt.

“The man made trouble trying to cross the bridge. He hurt one of my apprentices – he pointed at Orleg –, and attacked one of the rangers that were trying to pass. Hurry or no, it wasn’t his turn to cross. The bridge is too narrow for two horsemen. But he would not listen, and got angry.”

“Indeed?” said Tarannon coldly. “What say you to that?” he asked of the errand-rider.

“I have a job to do, lord,” the wretched man replied, his eyes glinting as apparently he saw some hope of the Lord of Pelargir freeing him of his plight. “And those cursed rangers were hindering me. My apologies to you,” he addressed Orleg, “but you shouldn’t have tried and restrained me. The rangers beat me up and their captain commanded them to bind me here. That was hours ago,” he went on complaining to Falastur. “But for the kindness of some of these masons, they would have left me gagged and without food or drink. And they stole my messages, them rangers did. One of them was addressed to you, lord, and urgent, too.”

If this bit of news worried Falastur, he did not show it. Instead, he turned to Túrin. “What brings you here, then?” he inquired sternly.

“I was told to ride here and fetch the messenger.” Túrin put on a defiant expression, despite feeling troubled under Falastur’s stern gaze. “According to Captain Faramir, he attacked and wounded a ranger – and not the other way round, as he puts it now to save his neck –, and he was to be detained for further questioning for when the captain returns.”

“According to Captain Faramir, is it?” repeated Falastur, with a glint in his cold eyes. “And when would this return of his take place? Does he not know that I am the one to dispense justice in this realm? Moreover, Master Túrin, I strongly advise you to heed your manners when speaking to me. I will not abide any cheek in a matter this grave. You are as insolent as your friend the captain. And keep your guess-work to yourself. It has no place here.” Signing to his guards who had come up behind, “Release the man,” commanded Falastur.

Túrin stepped forward. “He remains bound. He is my prisoner, not yours.”

“Are you trying to interfere?” Falastur hissed dangerously. “I thought I had just warned you not to.”

Túrin struck forth his chin defiantly. “I have a duty to my captain, and friend. Your realm or no, this fellow attacked one of the Steward’s rangers, and he is going to be judged by someone who wields more authority in this matter than you.”

Falastur gave him a deadly glance, and so icy-cold was his stare that Túrin cast down his eyes, immediately chiding himself for his lack of willpower. “Guards,” Falastur commanded his men softly, “take care of our young friend here, will you, lest he gets himself into even more trouble with his loose mouth and lack of courtesy.”

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Scrambling up the steep rocky slope in a desperate hurry, for now a dark foreboding had taken hold of Faramir, soon left him breathless and cursing his injuries. And still the Noldo was running ahead lightly, as if the rough ground did not bother him at all. When they were about two thirds up, suddenly Curufë halted, and pointing to his left, Faramir spotted a body lying in a brake of smaller rocks and pepples some way off, where the slope was even steeper. It looked like it had fallen from a height. An arrow was sticking in its back.

"Grendel," explained the Elf, and sped on. Faramir cast a quick glance at the body, then continued to follow the Noldo. Maradir reached the spot only shortly afterwards, and decided to remain behind, to search the fallen, although this would require a dangerous climb along the cliff. Propping his bow and his quiver of arrows against a tree, he cast a last worried glance to where his friend had disappeared up the slope, then saw to the task at hand.

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With an effort, Lindórië opened her eyes briefly when she heard a soft rustle of leaves as if of footsteps approaching, but at first she could only see a dark figure. Somebody knelt down at her side and held a hand to her brow, then took her hand in his. "My lady," a clear voice said softly, and only after a moment she realised it speaking to her in Quenya.

She smiled faintly. "Is that you, Curufë?"

"Aye," replied the Noldo. "I have done as you asked. Faramir is coming. He should be here any moment. So hold out."

"Where is he?" she asked, forcing her eyes to open once more. Curufë cast a glance over his shoulder, his face anxious. Then someone appeared over the lip of the dell and halted there briefly, obviously to catch his breath. Curufë let out a soft sigh of relief. She would not last much longer. "He is right there," he said.

Following his outstretched arm with her gaze, she beheld the young man approach. There were red stains on his trousers and tunic, and he looked pale and exhausted, and even more troubled. But he was alive, and apart from those scratches he seemed unharmed. And despite his dishevelled state he looked beautiful, she thought, as he stepped into a patch of sunlight and his raven hair shone in the beam. She smiled, glad that her wish to see him once more had been granted. "Farewell, my friend," she whispered, then closed her eyes.

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Faramir arrived at the lip of the dell clutching his side. His entire body hurt, and he fought for breath. Steadying himself against a tree for a moment, he looked down to whither Curufë had run. There he knelt, next to someone resting against a tree. Faramir felt a deep stab in his heart. His sense of dark foreboding seemed to prove true. He caught a glimpse of auburn hair shining in a swift ray of sunlight, and pushed away from the tree, covering the last yards of ground with a few leaps despite the steep ascent into the dell. And yet his legs did not seem to be going fast enough.

When finally he reached Curufë's side, the Noldo lifted his bowed head and looked at him. There was a strange, burning light in his eyes. Faramir halted, glancing from his grave face to hers, quiet and peaceful, then back at the Elf. The Noldo held his gaze for a moment, then cast down his eyes, shaking his head slightly. Faramir only stared at him, then back at Lindórië. There was a slight cut on her shoulder, but otherwise she seemed unharmed as she rested against her tree. In fact, she looked like she was sleeping, and lost in a pleasant dream. Her face was pale, yet it was not the paleness of death. And yet, as he watched her, he realised she lay utterly still, and did not breathe.

Very slowly, he sank to his knees beside Curufë and extended a hand to touch her cheek. It was warm. Almost in shock he withdrew the hand and gazed at the Noldo questioningly. Curufë returned his gaze steadily, apparently searching for the right words. "She pursued Grendel up here and they fought," he at length said softly. "He used a poisoned blade and cut her. I shot him, but I came too late to prevent her coming to harm. She asked me to fetch you. It seemed very important to her." He drew a deep breath. "And again I was too late. She passed away just moments ago. Forgive me, my friend."

"Tis not your fault," Faramir heard himself say, his voice hoarse. Slowly, he reached out again and caressed her cheek, then leaned forward and kissed her brow, and then her lips. Then he closed his eyes, resting his forehead against hers. This was a bad dream. It could not be true. Not long ago they had been talking together, chesting, and kissing. And now she was gone. Poison? How could that be? And why had she taken on Grendel all by herself? And why had he not sent somebody after her, the moment he had realised she had disappeared? Curufë was blaming himself for fetching him too late, but if there was anyone to blame it was him.

A great emptiness welled up inside him. She was gone. He had always known there would come a parting one day, but not like this. Not like this. Not without a proper farewell. There was so much he wanted to tell her still. And he needed her counsel, now more than ever. How could she simply leave him like this? He clenched his hand at her shoulder to stop it from shaking. He was being unjust, he knew it well. It was not that she had planned on dying here, and done so on purpose to hurt him. And yet, for the moment it felt easier to put the blame on her, in an attempt to ease the hollowness and pain and anger he felt.

Raising his head again, he looked at her. Obviously, she had known she would die, and had gone prepared, without fear. She looked relaxed and quite happy and content. Apparently her departure had been painless. A small solace for him, but a solace nonetheless. He kissed her again gently, realising how her lips were beginning to cool now, almost as a sign that she had gone indeed, and that it was time for him to finally let go. "Namarië," he whispered, then slowly drew back and looked at Curufë. "You have not told me all that happened, have you?"

The Elf shook his head, and began to recount all he had witnessed. Faramir swallowed hard when he mentioned the antidote, and Lindórië's decision to have him fetched instead. "She was adamant," said Curufë sadly. "Or perhaps she thought that maybe this Grendel did not have any antidote on him after all. 'Tis a very evil poison if even the berries could not still it for long. I think she knew she would not make it, and thus at least wanted to say farewell to you."

"And I came too late," muttered Faramir, passing a hand over his eyes. They had begun to sting painfully, but no tears would come. He had missed her by moments only.

"Still, she does look quite content," mused Curufë, placing a hand on Faramir's shoulder. "She was a lady both wise and brave, and she loved you dearly. I wish I could have spared you this grief, but, alas, it was an evil fate that led to this end."

"I thank you nevertheless, for all you have done," said Faramir softly. "Will you do one more thing for me? With my injured shoulder I cannot carry her, and moreover you have a steadier step on this rugged ground. Will you bear her back to the camp? She should not remain up here."

Curufë squeezed his shoulder gently, then reached out to lift her into his arms. Slowly, they began the downward climb. They had not come far when Faramir who was walking ahead saw Maradir approach. His friend spotted them and quickened his pace, then froze when he saw what the Noldo was carrying. He looked at Faramir, but the question died upon his lips upon seeing his friend's expression. He just stared at them, fighting for composure and the right words.

"What happened?" he asked softly when they had reached him. Faramir gave him a short account, upon which Maradir's face took on a very grave expression. "I have searched Grendel's body, and found a small phial with a white liquid, and sewn in his sleeve a tiny packet that seems to contain some kind of powder. Nothing else of interest was on him. One could be the poison, and one ..." He bit his lip, gazing at Lindórië's still features. "I am so sorry, Faramir," he said quietly but earnestly. "When I saw her slip away from the debate I wanted to follow her, but then decided against it when I saw these horsemen charge at you, considering I had promised her to watch over you."

"She asked you to do that?" asked Faramir quietly. Maradir nodded. "It seemed very important to her. She was concerned about you, and what might happen if Tarannon involved you in a fight. But I fear she did not heed her own safety as much as yours."

"Nay, I should have done so," muttered Faramir grimly. The more he thought about it, the more the conviction hardened in him that her death could have been prevented if only he had been more careful, and more profound in his planning of the venture. Neither Curufë nor Maradir nor she herself were to blame. He was.

He saw Maradir exchange a swift glance with Curufë, then his friend turned to him again, and putting both hands to his shoulders, he said sternly, "Faramir, look at me." Faramir lifted his gaze and met Maradir's steadily. "I'll tell you this once. I'm aware this is very hard for you. She was a great lady, and I know she meant a lot to you. And you might find it convenient now to blame yourself for her death. Don't object. I know you well, and I think I know what's going on inside you. Making you hate yourself might dull the grief, but it's no solution. What happened is not your fault. It was her decision to chase Grendel, and I'm certain she had considered the consequences. She wouldn't want you to take on the blame for all that went wrong on this expedition, and neither do I, nor your friends, nor the rangers. Blame Grendel, if you want, or Tarannon."

Faramir looked at him for a long time. A brief but powerful flash of anger welled up in him. How could Maradir claim to know what was going on inside him? He had no idea, none whatsoever. For an instant, he was tempted to push his friend away, to yell at him to leave him in peace, to mind his own business, but as swiftly as it had come the mood passed, and reason set in again. He might be loath to admit it right now, but Maradir was perfectly right. Drawing a deep, somewhat shaky breath, he nodded slightly, and squeezing his friend's hand briefly as a sign of gratitude, he walked past him, and together they continued downwards.

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The campsite was busy as a beehive when they advanced out of the forest. All those men who had received injuries had been brought up there and placed near the fire, which had been rekindled with more logs and was now burning merrily. The smell of tea was wafting through the forest. Although they still kept somewhat apart from each other, the rangers and Tarannon's soldiers seemed to be working together well, exchanging food, and herbs and bandages to treat the wounded.

All of this Faramir took in as in a dream, wondering slightly how the rangers were able to so swiftly return to routine, as if this was an errand like any other when for him everything was different, until he heard someone call his name. Pulling himself together with an effort, he found that Andanor had come towards him. "Good to have you back, captain, we were getting worried about you." His face, Faramir noted, looked grave. "We have found Laren," he said quietly. "He is dead. Someone stabbed him in the chest."

"Grendel murdered him," said Faramir, "and used his bow."

Andanor's face darkened. "Curse him," he muttered. "What of this Grendel?"

"He is dead. Curufë shot him."

"After Lady Lindórië had wounded him rather seriously," added Maradir. "I suppose it was her who dealt him the knife-wound. He might have died from it even without the help of Curufë's arrows. It was deep, and bled strongly."

Faramir gave him a brief, grateful glance for his explanation. Apparently Lindórië had not acted rashly, but, as had been her wont, calculated her chances carefully. But for the poison she would have had succeeded. It eased his pain a little to hear her name mentioned with praise and appreciation, instead of speaking of her with pity only.

"The Lady fought him?" asked Andanor in amazement. "That was mighty brave of her. If he could take on Laren so, he must have been pretty swift and cunning, for Laren was a quick and attentive lad. Alas, he is going to be missed. Where is the lady, by the way?"

Faramir gave a nod to where Curufë was stepping out from the trees. He watched Andanor's expression change from surprise, to disbelief, to shock and finally to grief and pity. "Oh captain," he said softly. "I –" he searched for words, then, "I am very sorry," he ended somewhat lamely.

"I know, Andanor," said Faramir quietly. "I am sorry for Laren, too."

"Curse this Grendel!" Andanor went on with some heat. "We should have been more care—" He broke off when Faramir held up a hand. "Do not get started, Andanor," he told him. "I do not blame either you or the rangers, and thus neither should you. It seems Grendel outwitted us all, and yet not enough to save himself. So leave it at that. Tell me, how did we fare? Did we lose anybody save Laren and Lindórië?"

Andanor shook his head, looking somewhat agitated despite Faramir's words, but cooling down again as his mind was recalled to matters he was more familiar with. "Nay, captain, we were lucky. Two lads got wounded somewhat seriously, but I don't think they're in great danger if they can rest a few days. A few more received some scratches or bruises – including you, I should add. Captain, these cuts need to be treated!"

"Later," said Faramir. "What of the soldiers? I see you are making fast friends with them."

“Ah, they’re alright. A bit conceited, but that’s cavalry for you. But after all, it was not their fault that their lord is such a bloody fool. Their captain, Ondoher, he’s a decent fellow. He’s just had a vile discussion with his lord. Tarannon called him a traitor and whatnot, and that he should be executed for disobedience. He won’t be charged for treason, will he?”

“Tarannon might, but that is for the Steward to decide. But Captain Ondoher has done nothing wrong. On the contrary. I for one commend him for his decision to save his men. Tarannon clearly had not grasped the seriousness of the situation. How did they fare?”

“One dead, four with more serious injuries, about half of them lightly wounded. They lost many horses, though, as you commanded us to shoot the steeds rather than the men.”

“You did excellent work,” Faramir told him earnestly. “Please forward this to the men. I am very pleased with how this operation was executed.”

Andanor smiled. “The lads will very much appreciate your praise, captain. Especially now, with Laren gone. He was popular, and to find him murdered like this – some of the lads are pretty downcast. It’s one thing to die in battle, but this ...”

“I know,” said Faramir, putting a hand to his shoulder and squeezing it encouragingly. “I shall speak to the men later. See to the wounded – of both companies – , and look after the injured horses also. We will need them. And remove the carriage and the dead horses from the road.” He cast a glance upwards to where the sun was moving towards the west. Already the trees were casting long shadows. “We will stay here for the night.”

“Aye, captain,” acknowledged Andanor. “I only hope those soldiers have got some tents with them, otherwise things could get a little cramped.”

“We will manage,” said Faramir.

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Many of the men looked up from their tasks when he passed them by, with Maradir and Curufë following, and after they had spotted what the Noldo bore in his arms, Faramir received many a pitiful and sympathetic glance, or even a clap on the shoulder. He was surprised that he was not feeling the loss more keenly, but attributed this to shock and weariness. The pain would come later, he was certain. For the moment, seeing the commotion at the cramped campsite, the numerous men with injuries, he felt rather overwhelmed with the chaos of the situation, until he realised that the men were dealing with it very well themselves. Left to him was Tarannon, not a task he relished. But at least something to occupy his mind with, lest it dwelled on other, more sorrowful matters.

The rangers had cleared a little space between some large boulders, at some distance from the campsite. Upon boughs of young bright-green beech-leaves Laren and the dead soldier had been laid. Thither Faramir bade Curufë bring Lindórië as well. He fetched his cloak, meeting Gareth on the way back to the dead, carrying two blankets. The young man looked pale and grieved, and Faramir recalled how fast Laren had befriended him, even lending him arrows, and this only a few days after beating him up. Gareth’s downcast expression plainly showed he mourned the ranger. Faramir wanted to say something to comfort the young man, but could not think of anything appropriate as his own emotions were rather confused right now. At length he said, “I have not yet thanked you for your timely shot.”

Gareth looked at him, puzzled for the moment what he was referring to.

“I would not have managed to dodge or parry the blow Tarannon was preparing,” explained Faramir. “You saved my life. It was a stroke of good fortune that made you join the company.”

Gareth nodded. Something other than grief seemed to occupy him, for he gave Faramir a thoughtful glance. Then he looked at Laren and sighed. “He said I might be allowed to join your company for good,” he at length said quietly. “Become a ranger, you know. It depended on you, and ultimately the Steward’s good will, he said.”

"You have earned that, and more," Faramir assured him. "Would you like to become a ranger? For good? For I seem to recall you were employed in another company."

The young man's cheeks flushed for a moment, and Faramir watching him knew he had caught him off guard. Yet Gareth regained his composure almost immediately, giving Faramir a keen, searching glance, as if trying to fathom how much the other knew about the secret company he originally had joined. "My captain said it was my choice."

"Indeed?" said Faramir, casting a swift glance over his shoulder to where Maradir was talking to Ondoher. Had he imagined it, or had his friend been watching his exchange with Gareth attentively from where he stood? Still Faramir was not sure to what extent Maradir knew Gareth, but he was certain they had met before, and that neither had told him everything about their former encounters, or was willing to – or indeed allowed. Turning back to Gareth, he asked, "And would this be your choice? To accompany us to Ithilien?"

"If you take me on, sir," replied the young man.

"Consider yourself on trial then for the remaining time, until we reach Minas Tirith again. There I shall mention your case to the Steward. But I do not believe he is going to object. You are a good man in any company."

"Thank you," said Gareth, his cheeks flushing again from the compliment, "Captain," he added, and gave Faramir a brief smile, which the other returned. Then both their mien darkened again as they set to the task of covering the dead with the cloak and the blankets. Faramir hesitated before pulling the heavy cloth over Lindórië's face. She looked beautiful in her pale peacefulness, her auburn hair a vivid contrast to the green leaves upon which she rested. Beautiful, and yet very remote already. It was not her anymore lying there, only an image it seemed. A vision of another lady as pale and still flashed through his mind. He had been a child then, and at first had not understood why she should be lying there, when the evening before she had jested and laughed with her two boys, weak though she had been. But of a sudden the light of her eyes and the warmth of her skin had vanished, and he had withdrawn in shock after running forward to touch her cheek, to cower against his brother's shoulder. It had been so cold.

He could see the scene clearly in his mind. The memory had never faded, and still hurt at times. He could see his father, looming like a shadow next to the pillow upon which the fair head of his beloved wife rested, amid waves of raven hair. Denethor had never recovered from this loss, as Faramir had understood later. With Finduilas, something in the Steward had died as well. Would it be like this for him now, too, with Lindórië gone? Would he become like his father, often cold and distant, or harsh, burying his feelings as deeply as possible. The image shocked him. But then, as he watched her, he seemed to hear Lindórië's voice, chiding him for wandering in grim thoughts, telling him to cheer up again.

"You have always looked after me," he said softly, recalling how she had stood behind Denethor during the wake for his mother, her friend – grieved and sorrowful, yet also strong. And how, during the following years, she had taken it upon herself to teach the Steward's sons, and also, he realised only now, to look after Denethor as well, as much as he was willing to accept. And her teaching and counselling and quiet support had never ceased. Eventually, it had even turned to love. Until now, when suddenly she was no more. How then could he become grim and cold and heartless, against her expressed wish? Despite his sadness, a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "I shall not forget your lessons," he said, "I promise. Thank you, my lady, for everything."

Stooping, he kissed her brow one last time, then covering her head also with the blanket, slowly he rose. Gareth had already returned to the campsite, most likely to give his future captain some privacy, and thither Faramir went as well. His shoulder was throbbing painfully, and a glance down his leg showed that there was still some blood seeping through the cloth of his trowsers. The injury on his arm had closed of his own, and did not trouble him anymore.

"So, she is dead then?" sneered a voice. "Serves her right!"

Faramir halted. Tarannon had spotted him. He was still sitting propped against the tree, watched by Damrod and Anborn. They had bound his hands and legs, yet his wound had not been treated. Fighting for a moment with the desire to simply walk on, for he was in no mood now to deal with the Lord of Lebennin, at length Faramir drew a deep breath, and altered his course.

"He's been saying a lot of courteous things like that," said Damrod, stepping over to his captain as he approached. "We had quite a hard time with him when we bound him, and he wouldn't let us treat his wound. He said we were trying

to poison him. Well, not that there's not a certain temptation, after all the mischief he's caused."

"Thank you, Damrod," said Faramir.

Damrod understood his captain wanted to have a word with the prisoner alone, and together with his companion withdrew a little, keeping in earshot, though. Faramir turned to Tarannon. The Lord of Lebennin looked greatly annoyed, and haughty, and if he was in pain due to his wound he did not show it. The fact Faramir had disregarded him while speaking to the ranger had only increased his anger. When finally the young man bent his gaze on him, he spat on the ground to Faramir's feet.

"Yes," replied Faramir quietly, "she is dead. So is your advisor Grendel, and one of your guards, should it interest you. But for your captain's timely interference – the man you condemned because he hearkened to reason instead of false pride – there would have been more deaths."

If Tarannon was in any way shocked or grieved by his wife's demise, he did not display that, either. Faramir's eyes narrowed as he watched him, and for an instant he felt the ardent desire to strike him for his lack of compassion. But as swiftly as it had come the mood departed.

"Leave the judgement of my actions to those who possess more competence in these matters than you," returned the Lord of Lebennin curtly. "What happened? At least you owe me an account of that, even if the treatment here leaves much to be wished for."

"You brought this upon yourself, and you know it. Do not expect pity from me for your sorry state, after you attacked me viciously, insulted your wife and myself, and endangered your men without need, only to satisfy your wish for revenge. Even now, your speech with me lacks even basic courtesy. If you are referring to your wound, it will be treated as soon as you allow it." He added a short account of what had befallen between Grendel and Lindórië, also mentioning that the counsellor had been responsible for one of his men's death, also.

Tarannon listened in silence. Still no sign of grief, although Faramir thought he detected a trace of relief when he described how Grendel had met his end, as if Tarannon was glad the other was out of the way. "What do you intend to do with me?" demanded the Lord of Pelargir when Faramir had finished. "You cannot keep me here forever. As soon as my brother learns of this, he is going to try and rescue or avenge me. And then you are done for, Steward's son."

"Tarannon," said Faramir sternly, "I warn you. Watch your mouth. Even my patience has limits. You have already insulted me gravely in front of many witnesses. Do not tighten the noose round your neck even more. Your brother is going to do nothing of this sort, for you are the Steward's charge now, and Carandil, the way I know him, is very careful not to get himself into trouble. He is going to stay way out of this. Honestly, I do not think his brotherly affection for you extends that far. You are going to remain my prisoner, and I shall bring you to Minas Tirith, where you will have to answer before the Lord of the City, and most likely the High Court as well."

"The Lord of the City," mocked Tarannon. "And what will he charge me for? Speaking the truth about his second-born and his lover? Hardly a matter Lord Denethor will concern himself with. And surely he will not trouble the High Court."

"Other charges may be found," returned Faramir evenly.

"Indeed? Do enlighten me, boy!"

"You know that best yourself."

Tarannon snorted contemptuously. "Are you referring to my attack upon you? The way I know the Lord Denethor, he might even approve of this. I know very well that his opinion of you is not very high. Are you certain he did not send you here to get you out of the way? Riding escort for her, how ridiculous! All of this was planned, was it not? The ambush, the fact you were here with my wife. Ah, I see it now. You were playing the Steward's game, right? Yes, he would use even his son for his shady designs – perhaps secretly hoping I would dispose of you for him. And Lindórië has long been under his sway. I should have known. Grendel was right after all. He warned me against riding to meet you."

“Why did you not hearken to him, then? Do not tell me you were really troubled by the rumours of Lindórië’s and my relationship.”

“Because,” returned Tarannon, his anger rising again, also because Faramir had in no way reacted to his vicious stabs at the troubled relationship with his father, “I was fed up with his counsels of caution. Also, in our estimation of your worth and competence your father and I seem to be in total agreement – one of the few things I do agree on with the Steward. And concerning your relationship, she was my wife, and no other man’s. And you, you little –”

“Guard your tongue, Tarannon. I shall not warn you again. What are you trying to achieve by insulting me even further? Even if I told you what was between me and her, you would not believe or understand it.”

“Ah, so you admit there was an relationship.”

Faramir gazed at him, wondering if he should really tell him what had really befallen between Lindórië and him. At length he nodded. “Yes. Seven years,” he said, watching Tarannon’s expression with a twinge of satisfaction. Although he had not reacted to his hurtful remarks concerning the Steward’s attitude to his younger son, this did not mean they had not troubled him, although not to the extent Tarannon had been driving at. It felt good to at least repay Tarannon with a small dose of his nastyness now, despite a tiny voice telling him it was wrong to stoop to the other’s level.

“I should have killed you right away!” hissed the Lord of Lebennin. “But then, having you live with her death upon your hands is a nice way of punishing you for your insolence.” He smiled thinly. “You really loved her, I can see it in your face, despite your pathetic attempt to hold your emotions in check. You have much to learn still, Steward’s son, to make it far in politics.”

“Who says this is my intention? I should not like to become like you. And yes, I loved her. And she loved me. Ask yourself why she should turn to me for that, instead of her husband.”

Tarannon laughed coldly. “Do you think I chose to marry her? Even then she was far too independent for my taste, and too closely associated with the Steward. But my family insisted, as did hers. Had I known she was even then spying for your father, I would have killed her on our wedding-night. Unfortunately, I found this out only recently. But I daresay she has met her proper punishment. In the end Grendel was good for something, at least.” He smiled as he watched Faramir’s expression. “You want to strike me now, do you not, Steward’s son?” he said softly. “Or slay me, even? What a pity your conscience always gets in the way, is it not? Why not satisfy it? Unloose me, and we can continue our little duel.”

“Nice try, Tarannon, but nay.”

“Coward!”

“Mock me as you like, Tarannon. It will only add to your discomfort.”

“And what are you going to do? Keep me here without food or drink? Or torture me? Ah, nay, you are too good for that, are you not? ‘Tis not only courage you dearly lack, but also spine, and ruthlessness.”

Faramir smiled thinly. “Do not get me started on the traits you lack, Tarannon. Is there anything of import you wish to tell me, for I have more urgent matters to attend to than having you waste my time or weary my ears.”

“And which ‘urgent matters’ might that be? Weep for your dead lover?”

“Write an account of this encounter for the Steward, for example.”

“Ah yes, the Steward would want to know if his beloved son managed to fulfil the task set for him, or if he messed it up. Doubtlessly, Lord Denethor will be delighted to hear he has lost one of his most valuable spies, but not his son. And that he is going to receive a prisoner who he will not be able to charge for anything, and who in turn will sue him for his attempt of discrediting him, and attacking him on the road. Do not believe I did not mark who shot the arrow that wounded my horse, and which doubtlessly was aimed at myself. I do not believe your tale of Grendel releasing it, after murdering your ranger. Grendel was no fighter, he would have stood no chance against one of yours. And even if

it was so, fact is that you set up this ambush in a vile attempt to waylay me. What actions I undertook against you were mere self-defense.”

“You tried to murder me. You call this self-defense?”

“Aye, and a service to mankind! You are beginning to grow into as great an annoyance and danger to Gondor as your father.”

“A ‘danger to Gondor’, Tarannon?” repeated Faramir quietly. “Do you care to explain this?”

Tarannon snorted again. “Do not tell me you have not noticed what game the Steward is playing. He wants the rule of Gondor all to himself. To make himself King of Gondor, perhaps, or to achieve that title for your brother. That is why he tries to thwart or dispose of everybody in his way, anybody who dares to speak his mind openly, or who goes even further, and works for the good of the realm outside the Steward’s grand designs. Look at how the state of Gondor has declined ever since the last King departed from the realm, and the Stewards have laid their greedy fingers on it. Look at the provinces, like fair Ithilien, that in recent years have fallen to the Dark Lord. Look at majestic Minas Tirith, decaying and falling in ruin bit by bit, like Osgiliath long ago. All signs of bad and unable rulers, interested only in amassing control and power to themselves, not caring about the good of their subjects, and the realm itself. Refusing to invest in new and profitable alliances to increase the wealth and greatness of the realm. Allowing enemies to roam the lands freely. Cowing the lords into strict obedience with cruel taxation, and even trapping them should one dare to step out of line. We do not need rulers of this kind. We do not need the Stewards anymore, if they cannot provide us with a shield against the Shadow in the East, and if they thwart every little attempt to repair what has been going wrong for so long, with such disastrous results!”

Faramir listened to his tirade in silence, careful not to show his excitement about what he was hearing here. Tarannon had been right – previously, unless Denethor had indeed some proof for his treachery, it would have been difficult to convict him. But now, in his rage and hate and frustration, Tarannon seemed to be delivering the evidence required freely. A swift glance to the two rangers showed Faramir they were listening intently. He could not have asked for better witnesses in a possible trial, should his own word be contested. When Tarannon had finally finished, Faramir gave him a slight bow. “Thank you, my lord,” he said. “Even if there was no proof to charge you for treason before, now you have delivered it, of your own accord.”

Tarannon started. His face lost some colour, then his cheeks flushed scarlet. Only now he seemed to realise what had just happened. But soon his expression changed to a haughty one again. “Since when is one not allowed anymore to speak his mind freely in Gondor? Is the Steward going to make this punishable as well, in order to maintain his crumbling position.”

“You can say whatever you like, Tarannon, but unfortunately you did not keep it at words only, but let deeds follow.”

“You have ample proof for this preposterous suspicion, I warrant?”

“The Steward has. And just now you have stated your intentions very clearly.”

“Your word against mine, Steward’s son,” snorted Tarannon.

Faramir nodded to Anborn and Damrod, who came over again, planting themselves to both sides of their captain, as if to with their presence increase his authority. “They heard every word you said,” Faramir told him. “And they are willing to give evidence in a trial. And now, if you will excuse me, there is my account for the Steward I have got to see to. Thanks to your unexpected cooperation, I can now add some features which surely will interest him tremendously.”

With another bow, he left the Lord of Lebennin to himself, not heeding the insults the other called after him. Passing by the campfire, he halted there, addressing the rangers who by now had mostly gathered round and were preparing a meal. He commended them on the near flawless execution of the ambush, and the fact that there had been only very few losses, and not many injuries, either. He tried to find some fitting words concerning Laren’s death, giving a short account of how he had died for those who had not heard the tale yet. He also mentioned Lindórië, but found it even more difficult to speak about her than about Laren. His weariness and the pain of his wounds had increased during the long talk with Tarannon, and in turn had weakened his control upon his emotions, and the defense against the upsurge of grief he had built up in order to keep a clear head in the confusion that had ensued the fight. More and

more, he had to struggle to keep his voice steady, swallowing ever so often.

Finally Andanor released him, escorting him to a tent that had been set up some way above the campsite. His saddlebags had been brought there. Lindórië's, too, he noted. "You need to rest, captain," the lieutenant said gently. "I will send someone up to look after your wounds. The soldiers have a fellow amongst them who appears to be quite skilled as a healer."

"Thank you, Andanor," said Faramir softly, fumbling with the buckle of his belt. "My apologies to the men if I do not seem quite myself right now, and do not attend to my duties as captain the way I should."

"Do not apologise, sir. They understand what you are going through. Indeed, many of them have expressed their astonishment that you seem to be handling the matter so well."

Faramir shook his head slightly. He drew a shaky breath. Finally having opened the belt, he let it drop to the ground, then he ran both hands over his eyes and through his hair. "I am not," he admitted.

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As Falastur's guards stepped round him, Túrin considered for a brief moment putting up a struggle. A spear pointing at his chest dissuaded him. "You can't just take me prisoner," he complained.

"Master Túrin, you see I can. Now, release the messenger," Falastur ordered his men.

"What will happen to me?" asked Túrin.

"That depends entirely on you. Show some cooperation, and you have naught to fear."

"Cooperation?"

"Indeed. For example, I should like to know what your friend and Lord Tarannon's wife are up to. They are on the way to Lebennin. Why? And do not tell me you do not know."

Túrin glared at him. "Even if I knew, I would not tell you. Why don't you go there yourself, if you're so interested in their affairs?"

"You know what, actually your suggestion is not altogether bad. I shall indeed follow them, to make sure they do not end up in trouble. And you are going to accompany me."

"What if I refuse?"

Falastur only shook his head slightly. "Young man, you should have realised by now that you are in no position to refuse anything. Fetch the horses, we are going to set out immediately."

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The sun had vanished behind a layer of cloud in the west, and the shadows of dusk were beginning to grow between the trees. Somewhere up on a high branch a blackbird was singing mournfully. Faramir had lit a small lamp in his tent, and was sitting bent over a sheet of paper, making notes about the events of the day, which eventually would have to be turned into a concise account for his father. His injuries had been treated expertly by the soldier: the cut on his thigh had required several stitches to close; the shoulder was sorely bruised and still showed the print of the horses' hoof, but luckily bones and tendons were undamaged. It had been treated with a cooling paste, since not much more could be done for it. Knowing he should try and get some sleep, nevertheless Faramir could not find any rest, not yet. He was certain that as soon as he closed his eyes, despite his weariness, images of Lindórië death would haunt him, and his sorrow would finally break to the surface. And he did not feel prepared for that yet. It was easier to force his

mind to think rationally, and his hand to write steadily, and thus to occupy himself with matters of routine.

Feeling a stir of air as the flap of the tend was moved, he looked up from his writing. Maradir had entered. He looked tired as well, his eyes shadowed and his face pale and pinched. Faramir recalled his friend had not slept the previous night, and felt a stab of pity that Maradir should drive himself so hard for his sake.

"I have brought you some tea," said Maradir quietly, proffering him a cup that emanated the sweet fragrance of that strong brew the rangers were so fond of. "Your men told me I should bring you something stronger, but I thought you would prefer this."

Faramir gave him a tired but thankful smile. "You were right. Thank you. Tea is excellent." Returning his quill to the small bottle of ink he had set on a flat stone, he took the cup from Maradir and carefully took a sip.

"What are you doing?" asked his friend, indicating the writing.

"Just making notes," replied Faramir, setting down the cup. The tea was still very hot. "About the events of the day and the previous ones. Lest I forget. Denethor requires a thorough account. I do not know if you have heard, but Tarannon has been very cooperative a while ago, when I spoke with him. He told me Gondor was better off without the Stewards, and other such cheerful things, and in front of Anborn and Damrod, too."

Maradir whistled softly, lowering himself to the ground opposite his friend. "How did you manage that? That's exactly what you need, isn't it?"

Faramir nodded. "I hardly did anything. I simply let him talk himself into a rage, until he lost all caution and plunged into this very interesting rant of his. I did have to endure countless insults along the way, though."

"The fool," commented Maradir, shaking his head. "When he should be careful not to annoy you further."

"Indeed. But I do not complain."

"The Steward should be pleased with how things turned out, then," mused Maradir.

Faramir stared at his notes absently for a moment, imagining how his father was going to react to the tidings of Lindórië's death, then sighed slightly and shrugged. "Perhaps. It depends on how you look at things, I suppose." When he looked up again, he found Maradir watching him gravely.

"You know, I think I have to apologise for my hard words to you previously," he said quietly. "In the forest, I mean. I didn't mean to be so harsh. I just ... you know ... I'm not good at these things. I haven't been in a situation quite like this before myself, so I can't pretend to know what you're going through right now. But please, don't think I don't care. I so wish I could help you, and if there's anything I can indeed do, tell me. Don't hesitate. And if it's just that you need someone to listen, or to provide distraction."

Faramir looked at him, deeply touched by his words. "You have done so much already, Maradir," he said, his voice hoarse. He swallowed ere he continued, "and your words were just the right ones. I guess I needed some reminder like this to pull myself together. All this, it feels so ..." he searched for words, "unreal, somehow. In fact, the past fortnight has, ever since we set out from Minas Tirith. Like a weird dream that suddenly has turned into a nightmare. Only that there is going to be no waking up. I thank you for your offer. Believe me, 'tis greatly appreciated. Only, right now I would not know what to say. It is all too close still, and I do not think I have fully grasped what happened. Somehow, it does not hurt yet the way I feel it should. But I fear it will, eventually. And then I think I should like to return to your offer, both for the listening and the distraction."

Maradir nodded. "I'll be there. I wish I could tell you something to comfort you now, but I can't think of anything appropriate."

Faramir gave him a faint smile, and reaching out to place a hand on his shoulder, he said earnestly, "Your support and friendship are an invaluable comfort. As is your tea."

Maradir laid a hand on his friend's arm and squeezed it gently. "It's good to see you smile, despite everything."

“Do not worry about me,” said Faramir. “I will cope, somehow. Right now I am more tired than anything. And so must you be. Take some rest.”

“I will. Later. You should get some sleep, too.”

“I cannot sleep now,” said Faramir.

Maradir nodded, giving his friend a long glance. “I don’t know if this is the right kind of advice, so feel free to disregard it, but perhaps you should ... you know ... let out your grief more. You seem to be dealing with this matter very calmly and rationally, the way you deal with most things. But inside you things look different, don’t they? I can understand you don’t wish to reveal too much of this to your rangers, being their captain and everything. But to your friends? And yourself? You don’t have to subdue your sorrow there. Or perhaps it’s like you said, and you really don’t feel it that powerfully yet.”

“You do not give up, do you?” said Faramir with a wry smile.

“You know how I am. I have overheard the rangers’ talk – and that of the soldiers, too. They have been wondering what should happen with the fallen. Some of the men are holding a wake for them.”

Faramir sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I put off thinking about that for the moment, but of course it has to be dealt with. Laren’s family lives far away, in Lamedon, and as far as I know, he has a girl in Minas Tirith. It would take too long to bring his body either place. I will talk to the men, but I am quite certain they will agree to bury him here. After all, a forest like this should be an appropriate place for a ranger, and so far, when men fell in battle in Ithilien, they were buried there. I do not know about the fallen soldier. Perhaps his companions would like to take him with them, or else he should also rest here.”

“And Lindórië?” inquired Maradir gently. Faramir drew a deep breath, absently watching the steam curl up from his teacup in intricate patterns. Then looking at his friend, he shrugged a little helplessly. “To be honest, I do not know. She is the Lady of this realm, and her befits a proper burial. Moreover, her parents and the remainder of her family might insist on that. She loved her brothers dearly, all of whom are dead now, so maybe she should be laid to rest in the family tomb, at their side. On the other hand ...” His expression took on a hint of grimness. “On the other hand she dedicated most of her life to this family, and the realm, with little thought for herself. And I feel, somehow, that this once she should be regarded as herself. Not Tarannon’s wife or Lady of Lebennin, not the dutiful daughter.”

“So you think she should be buried here as well?”

Faramir looked thoughtful for a moment, then, “Yes, yes, she should,” he said.

“Well, I’d say actually the decision is yours, anyway. It’s going to be some time until messages will reach her family and others of import, and it’s going to take even longer until you receive their replies. You are in charge here, and moreover, you’re the one closest to her. And although I knew her only little, from what I learned of her in the past week I’d say she would like this place, better than any family tomb.”

“Yes, she would,” said Faramir softly. “In her letters, she often described places of beauty to me, close to her home in Linhir, or in Dor-en-Ernil. And often she expressed the hope that one day we may visit them together, the same way as I told her of Ithilien, with the same hope. And now ...” His voice trailed off and he swallowed again. “We never had enough time together,” he said bitterly, as the full scope of the injustice of their fate hit him. “These past days were a picture of how things should have been throughout, and even they were fraught with difficulties, and too short. Always too short.” Misery welled up in him, and he did not have the strength or will anymore to fight it down. “We were not even granted a proper farewell, instead I missed her by a few seconds,” he whispered. “How can this be just? How-?”

His voice broke, and he buried his face in a hand that shook slightly. The next thing he realised were Maradir’s arms around him, holding him as if to steady him. “Yes, I know how that feels,” his friend said softly, patting the other’s shoulder a little awkwardly. “I haven’t had any tidings from Aliya ever since we parted, and that’s more than four years ago now. I don’t even know if she’s still alive. Sometimes I think I should go and seek her, and then I remember her wish.”

Swallowing hard once again, Faramir withdrew and after running a hand over his eyes, he gazed at Maradir. Although he knew that his friend's parting from his great love had been painful for both sides, it had been by mutual agreement. Maradir had never spoken about his feelings in the matter until now. Faramir felt a stab of guilt because he had regarded his sorrow as if it was the only grief in the world. "You love her still," he said plainly.

Now it was Maradir's turn to sigh. He nodded slightly. "Yes, I do. Like I promised her." He lifted his gaze to meet Faramir's. "Foolish, isn't it? When there is hardly a hope of meeting her ever again."

Despite his sorrow, Faramir gave him a faint smile. "You have come to the wrong address for advice in these matters, my friend," he said, "for the only one I could give you is how to maintain a hopeless love for a long period of time, and you seem to be pretty knowledgeable of this yourself."

"Indeed I am," replied Maradir, returning his smile. "What a pity Túrin is not here. He could give us real advice, although I seem to recall that his recent exploits were a bit of a mess."

"It would be good to have him around, anyway, for he hardly ever loses his cheer, and we all could do with a good portion of that right now. I wonder how he fared with the this nasty errand-rider."

"I don't think he gave him much trouble." Maradir lifted his head, listening intently for a moment. "Someone is coming."

Indeed there were footsteps approaching. When the tent-flap was drawn aside Faramir saw that it was already rather dark outside. He looked up into Andanor's agitated face illuminated by the fire behind him and the small lamp in the tent.

"Sorry to disturb you, captain, but I thought you should know that the pickets have spotted a company of horsemen coming along the road with some speed, from down yonder, the way we came. It's too dark already to recognise their livery, but the lads said they're well-armed with spears and bows, and look rather official. By now they must have spotted our fire and the camp."

"Have you removed the caltrops?"

"All those we could find still," replied Andanor with a slight grin, then he sobered up again. "Aye, they're gone."

"Right, I shall come and have a look," said Faramir, slowly rising to his feet under the protest of his injured leg. Andanor left, and Maradir also got up. "I have a dark suspicion concerning these horsemen," Faramir told him as together they exited the tent.

"Falastur?" guessed Maradir.

Faramir nodded gloomily. "Just what I need now."

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The vanguard of the company had almost reached the campsite when Faramir, accompanied by Maradir and his lieutenant reached the elevated spot where he had debated with Tarannon. The horsemen on the road had reined in and were now proceeding slowly and with caution. They halted altogether when Faramir hailed them. The light of the campfire sufficed to illuminate the banners they bore on their spears, and the badges embroidered on the surcoats they wore over their mail and emblazoned on their shields: a golden ship on a blue field, the device of Pelargir.

"I don't believe it, there's Túrin," muttered Maradir in surprise.

Faramir spotted their friend riding some way behind the Lord of Pelargir. Túrin looked grim and defiant, and Faramir noted that he was not leading his horse himself, but that the reins rested in the hands of one of the soldiers, while his own hands were bound. Falastur halted his horse and glanced up towards Faramir, his expression one of haughtiness and silent triumph.

“Good evening, captain,” he called up, almost cheerfully. “I am sure you did not expect to see me again so soon.”

“What do you want, Falastur?” asked Faramir coldly.

“So much for courtesy,” remarked Falastur with a sneer. “What I want? I have come to make sure you do not cause any more trouble.”

Faramir smiled grimly. “Why do you care? We are beyond the border. This is not your fief.”

“Neither is it yours, Steward’s son. Call it neighbourly care, if you like.”

“I call it an incurable desire to meddle in other people’s business,” returned Faramir. “Or are you afraid that things might happen here beyond your control, which nevertheless are going to influence you in the long run?”

Falastur’s eyes narrowed as he pondered this remark, but he refrained from commenting upon it. “Where is Tarannon?” he asked curtly.

“He is here, as my prisoner.”

“Your prisoner? Under what charges?”

“Attempted murder, for one.”

“Murder? Of whom?”

“Me. Tarannon attacked me viciously, wounding me in the process. He was then overwhelmed by my guards and, for his own safety, committed to our care.”

Falastur snorted. “For his own safety, I see. You did not waylay him, of course. What happened to his counsellor, for I am quite certain he accompanied him hither. And where is his wife? Was she not with you?”

“Tell me first why you keep Master Túrin prisoner,” returned Faramir, receiving a thankful glance from his friend who had been watching the exchange with great interest.

Falastur gave Túrin a cold glance over his shoulder. “Master Túrin has a loose mouth that one day will get him into huge trouble. I decided to teach him a little lesson, as he dared criticise me in front of my men, in a matter that exceeded his authority. Since when do you hinder and even captivate my errand-riders, and rid them of their messag- es?”

“The errand-rider in question was not yours, but Carandil’s. And he created havoc on the road, attacking and wound- ing one of my men, and several workers. Túrin acted upon my orders in taking care of the messenger and bringing him to Pelargir, and to detain him there for further questioning, for some of the letters he bore were very ... interesting. You hindered Túrin in the fulfillment of his duty, I see. Do not expect me to approve of this.”

“I can do without your approval, Steward’s son. Now, answer my questions! What of Grendel and Lindórië?”

“Dead, and dead,” Faramir replied calmly, watching Falastur’s expression attentively. Was it a trick of the scarce illumina- tion, or did the Lord of Pelargir look relieved? Falastur dismounted, as did some of his guards. Throwing the reins of his horse to another soldier, he and his companions began to climb the slope.

“We better discuss this in a smaller circle,” he said as he drew close. “We shall stay here for the night, so set up camp,” he called to his men.

“I did not invite you to join us,” said Faramir coldly as Falastur passed him by. The other halted and turned slowly. “Do not make the same mistake as your friend Master Túrin,” he said softly, but with a dangerous glitter in his eyes. “You have already stretched my patience more than sufficiently this morning. You and your friends, you are no more than children meddling in politics. Go back to Ithilien where you can play hide and seek with orcs and other creatures of

that kind. You have no authority here, and the sooner you accept this, the better for all involved. Now, I wish to hear a full account of what happened here. Up in that tent? 'Tis your, is it not? So let us go. And when you have finished your tale, I expect to see Tarannon. And the slain."

He continued on his way, leaving Faramir to glower after him. He was about to utter a fierce reply, when he felt a hand on his shoulder. "Don't," Maradir told him softly but sternly. "It's just what he wants, and you know it. You can repay him later, for I doubt he's going to like what he's going to hear. I know it's tough, but don't lose your temper again. He'll try and make you, but remember, you're in charge here, whatever he says. He has no power here."

Drawing a deep breath and mustering all his remaining will to fight down the hot anger about to burst out of him, Faramir squeezed his hand briefly. "See what you can do for Túrin," he said. "Tell him what happened here, and listen to his account, too. I should really like to know how Falastur found out about the errand-rider."

"I will. Good luck with our friend."

"Thanks."

With that they parted. Andanor followed Faramir dutifully. "What a git," he muttered under his breath, nodding towards Falastur's back. Faramir did not correct him, in his mind devising some even more unfavourable names for the Lord of Pelargir.

In the tent, Falastur had occupied Faramir's seat, and had taken up the sheet with notes when Faramir entered, snatching the paper from the other's hands, then taking a seat opposite him, wincing slightly when he had to bend his leg.

"Tarannon's doing?" asked Falastur without pity, indicating the cut and bloodstained trowsers. "Not a life-threatening wound, according to my knowledge. Did you not claim he was trying to murder you?"

"Falastur, do you want to hear my account or not?" said Faramir wearily. "For if you do, cease your constant taunts and insults. I am in charge here, and you would do well not to contest this."

Falastur watched him keenly, and Faramir thought he detected a brief flicker of something like respect in the other's cold eyes. "Very well, Steward's son," the Lord of Pelargir said at length. "Tell on."

Faramir gave him a quite thorough account, interrupted now and again by shrewd questions, and all the time scrutinized by a keen, searching glance that reminded him of his father's. Falastur's curiosity was not satisfied easily. He questioned Andanor as well concerning his role in the ambush, and requested a detailed description of what had befallen Grendel and Lindórië. Several times Faramir had to consider carefully how to put things, in order not to reveal too much of his own troubled emotions, although he was certain Falastur knew quite well that the death of Lindórië had dealt him a severe blow.

"So, you intent to bring Tarannon to Minas Tirith on charges of attempted murder and high treason?" commented the Lord of Pelargir when Faramir had finished. "Either charge is going to be difficult to prove, even for the Steward. You are aware, of course, that you need my permission to transport the prisoner through my realm?"

"I am under the Steward's orders, and his authority supersedes yours," replied Faramir.

"In any other fief, perhaps, but not in Pelagir. Ever since the time of the kings we have had special laws, and special authority."

"When I have seen these laws written down, I will act accordingly. But I will not take your word for granted in this, for you are likely to bend said laws and authority according to your needs, Falastur. And do not look insulted now. We both know I am right. And would you really try and hinder me, and even aid Tarannon? That would be foolish. He is done for, we both know it, for both of us know my father, and how he deals with those who have become ... let me call it uncomfortable. Do you wish to get caught in his downfall? Nay, you are too clever for that. Tarannon may still count on your support, but you will not give it. Because there would naught but danger in it for you, and no profit whatsoever."

Falastur gave him a long, thoughtful glance, then suddenly smiled thinly. "You surprise me, Steward's son. I had not

expected this insight from you. You are right, it would be foolish for me to get too closely associated with Tarannon, now that he has so clearly invited the Steward's displeasure. But nevertheless I want to remind you that you cannot go about as you fancy, and especially not in my realm. This concerns the matter with the errand-rider as well. I demand those messages that were addressed to me, and I hope for you they have not been opened."

"Why? Do you have anything to hide?"

"Do you? Or why did you snatch this piece of paper from my hands?"

They exchanged a long glance full of tension. Faramir knew the other had made a point, but recalling the revealing content of the letters, he was not willing to surrender them so easily. "You shall have your letters, if you release Túrin immediately. There is naught you can charge him for – his captivity was simply an act to annoy me."

Falastur held out a hand. "The letters, if you please. And your lieutenant may go and release your friend." Nodding to Andanor who, with a last dark glance at the Lord of Pelargir, left the tent, Faramir rose and fetched Lindórië's saddlebags, and after rummaging for a moment, he handed Falastur the letter. He took out the small box as well, weighing it in his hands.

"What is this?" asked Falastur, his eyes bent on the box. If he in any way recognised it, he did not show it. But very obviously it had ignited his curiosity.

"It went with the letter, and contains a small phial with some liquid, and a written note."

"And what says the note?" inquired Falastur. "Since you have already stuck your nose into a matter that is not your concern?"

"I cannot read it, as I am not fluent in Black Speech," said Faramir evenly, but watching the other keenly.

Falastur's eyes narrowed. "Black Speech? Are you sure? I thought you were not able to read it."

"Lindórië recognised the tongue. Tell me, Falastur, why should you be receiving letters with hidden instructions along the margins, and boxes of doubtful content with descriptions in this foul language? Those who did not know of your utter devotion and loyalty to the realm would begin to question just those, in view of this evidence, and would begin to suspect you of entertaining connections with the other side. With our enemies."

Falastur held his searching gaze evenly. "Are you trying to threaten me, or is this an attempt at blackmail?" he asked quietly.

"Why should I be interested in either? I am simply describing what others may think. I of course know that you are not so stupid as to let yourself get caught with evidence of this kind, even if you are entertaining connections with Mordor."

Falastur watched him thoughtfully, as if trying to determine if the other was playing some game with him. If he was unsettled by what Faramir had just said, he did not show it, unless it was in the way his voice had turned even more quiet when he replied, "So, that you know? Tell me, if you are so knowledgeable, why I should be siding with Mordor in the first place?"

Faramir shrugged. "Perhaps you are considering Gondor a lost cause under the Stewards' rule, like Tarannon."

"That he told you?" asked Falastur in amazement.

"Indeed he did."

"Of his own accord?"

"Do you think I tortured him? Nay, let us say he was a little upset by the entire situation, and eventually lost control and his rage got the better of him, so that between insulting me and his wife he let slip several very interesting bits of information."

“What else did he say?” demanded Falastur sharply. “And why did you not mention any of this in your account?”

“I did not consider it of import, as it concerns Tarannon and his future alone. Or do you fear he included you in his very revealing rant?” Faramir added shrewdly.

Falastur gave him another long glance, the unspoken question hovering between them. But at length he broke the connection. Taking on a haughty expression, he declared, “Even if he mentioned me, I am not aware of anything I might have done wrong in the past. My conscience is clear.”

“If that is so, we can move to other topics, can we not? As I have said, Tarannon’s fate rests with the Steward now. And if you are as wise and clever as you pretend, you will do naught to interfere with these proceedings.”

“I shall not. But nevertheless I warn you, Steward’s son. I can see you are revelling in the power your position in this case lavishes on you, but you should remember that situations change, and that you would do well not to treat me with the kind of pride and contempt you are displaying right now. Or is this your revenge for this morning?”

“No, I shall not stoop to your level of malice. I am merely stating facts. Despite the treatment I received from you this morning having been much worse than what you are getting here, you must admit.”

They exchanged another tensed glance, before Falastur said, “How do you intend to proceed? What is going to happen with Tarannon’s men? And the slain? I demand to see both the Lord of Lebennin, and Grendel’s body. What of him anyway? Has he been searched?”

“Yes, Maradir searched his body,” replied Faramir, adding a description of what had been found. “Have you ever met this Grendel?” he inquired.

“Certainly,” said Falastur. “He was often present at my meetings with Tarannon and Carandil. A few times he acted as a messenger, too. But I never spoke with him in private,” he added, but for a tiny moment looked doubtful, or so it seemed to Faramir who was watching him closely. Falastur appeared as if he was trying to remember something very elusive, like a dream. At length he shook his head slightly. “He was an uncanny fellow. I never understood why Tarannon took up with him in the first place. I once questioned him about his advisor’s past and whence he came, but it turned out he had never asked Grendel about it.”

“Did you investigate?” asked Faramir. “To be honest, it would strike me as odd if you did not.”

“Of course I did, but with little success. Grendel has hid his traces very cunningly – this in itself of course a reason for suspicion. There was not much known about him. He seems to have turned up in Lebennin some years ago, and almost immediately won a position of some influence at Tarannon’s and Carandil’s court. How he did so remains a mystery. Some of my informants said he had strange dark powers to meddle with people’s minds and influence their decisions. Some even spoke of magic. Personally, I do not hold with this kind of thing, but fact is that Grendel had very good connections, and some of them extending eastwards, or south across the sea.”

“To Umbar, you mean?”

Falastur shrugged. “Some say so. If you ask me, Grendel has been using Tarannon for some shady purpose of his own. Tarannon was no match for his guile and cleverness, and most likely, after some promises of great military victories to achieve and other nonsense, Grendel had a free hand with him and Lebennin’s resources as well.”

“So you think we should put most of the blame on Grendel, who, very conveniently, is dead?”

Falastur laughed grimly. “Tis going to happen like this if you agree or not. People are always relieved if they can find a scapegoat, and if he is one who cannot protest anymore, the better. Now, I want to see him.”

“I do not think his body has been fetched from the cliff, so you will have to wait until tomorrow.”

Falastur looked annoyed. “Bring me to Tarannon, then.”

“Why? To make sure he is treated well? Never fear, he receives all the care he is willing to accept.”

“Nevertheless, I want to see him. Do not play silly games with me, Steward’s son. I warned you before not to treat me with contempt and insolence, did I not?”

“And I told you I am in charge here, and if I refuse to let you speak with my prisoner because I see no reason why you should, since you yourself said he will not be able to count on your aid, you would do well to accept this. By the way, I would advise your men to set up your camp on the road. This site here is too cramped already, and also I should like to avoid trouble between the companies.”

Falaster gave him a cold glance while rising to his feet. “Very well, I shall respect your wishes, *captain*. But I promise you, I shall not forget the treatment I received from you.” With that he strode from the tent. Faramir remained seated for a moment longer, running both hands over his eyes and face and drawing several deep breaths. Then he reached for his now cold tea and emptied the cup with one long draught. This revived him a little, but nevertheless he felt weariness bear down on him like a black cloud. Fighting the desire to simply lay back and close his eyes for a moment, he stiffly rose to his feet. It was better to check on the Lord of Pelargir, he decided.

He had just stuck his head out of the tent-flap, when he saw Maradir approach with Túrin. The latter had obviously just heard the tale of what had befallen, because he looked pale and troubled. He gave Faramir a sympathetic, pitiful glance, and after obviously searching for some words of condolence, he simply stepped forward and embraced his friend, muttering, “I’m very sorry, Faramir.”

Faramir was touched by the simple gesture, as he had been by Maradir’s, and held on to Túrin much longer than the other expected, once more grief welling up in him, but not as powerfully as before since now it was doused by weariness. “Thank you, Túrin,” he replied softly, finally letting go of the other.

Túrin looked at him and swallowed hard, obviously moved by Faramir’s display of grief. “Anything we can do?” he asked earnestly.

Faramir shook his head. “Maradir has asked already. Things are a little confused right now. I have hardly had time to get to terms with what happened. And now that Falastur has arrived, I doubt I shall have an opportunity for that for some time – which, on the other hand, might not be for the worst.”

Túrin’s brows knotted in a deep frown. “The bloody bastard,” he cursed violently. “Faramir, I’m sorry for messing things up with this errand-rider. But as I’ve just told Maradir, there was nothing I could have done. I’d just reached him when Falastur showed up. Those bloody guards who saw me receiving the message must have run straight to him. He must have left almost immediately after us. And when I protested against his claim of the prisoner, he had me bound and brought here.”

“I do not blame you. Falastur is a tough customer. I have just had to endure some debate with him, and now feel like I have been run over by a cart.”

“Nevertheless, you seem to have fared rather well,” remarked Maradir. “He stormed from your tent with an expression like sour milk. What happened?”

“I refused to let him see Tarannon. But we have to watch him and his men. I told him to camp down on the road, but I fear they are not going to stay there. I was about to talk to the rangers to look out for these fellows.”

“Do you think Falastur is going to free Tarannon?” asked Túrin. “Aren’t they best mates?”

“I do not think Falastur calls anybody friend, but certainly Tarannon counts on their friendship, or ‘neighbourly care’, as Falastur put it. He would be foolish to try and free the other, though, while he is so well guarded, and I am not sure he indeed intends to. Falastur seems more interested in getting Tarannon out of the way for good, lest he develops into a liability with his shady contacts. Nevertheless, we better be careful tonight.”

“Honestly, I’d say you two should be getting a good sleep somewhat soonish,” said Túrin, gazing at his friends. “Both of you look dreadfully weary. If you want, I’ll keep watch with the rangers.”

"I would indeed appreciate this," replied Faramir gratefully. "Have a special eye on Falastur. I somehow doubt he is going to rest much tonight."

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Together, the three made their way to the rangers. Most of those not on picket- or guard-duty had gathered round the campfire and were busy eating. Some had already retired. Tarannon's soldiers had lit their own fire, but close-by, and there was much coming and going between the two companies. Faramir spotted Andanor and Captain Ondoher in deep conversation, and several rangers were playing cards with the soldiers, or singing a rather sentimental song to the sound of a small flute one of the soldiers was playing – perhaps to commemorate their fallen companions.

Faramir took Andanor aside and told him to inform the men concerning Falastur and his retinue, as well as Tarannon. But he realised he needed not have troubled. His lieutenant had already taken precautions and doubled the watch, as well as stationing additional men close to where Tarannon was being kept.

"Get some rest, captain," he told Faramir sternly, "and don't worry. I'll look after things."

Faramir nodded wearily. "Have an eye on Tarannon's men, too. They seem friendly enough, and their captain appears an honest man, and trustworthy enough not to break the parole he gave me, nevertheless – we do not know how devoted they are to their lord. Although I do not expect it, they may try and rescue him tonight."

"Well, they can try, but they won't get very far," said Andanor with a grin. "Good night, captain."

"Good night."

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On his way back to the tent, Faramir passed the spot where the dead had been laid. Torches had been lit there, and three rangers and three soldiers were holding a wake. The had been joined by Lindórië's servants who had ridden with Túrin. For a moment he stood and watched them silently, debating whether to join them for a while. Then drawing a deep, shaky breath, he walked on. He knew that if he went there now, he would most likely remain for the entire night.

Tarannon he had to see, however. When he drew near, the Lord of Lebennin stirred. He had not been provided with a light, but Faramir saw his eyes glint when he raised his head. His wounds had been treated, but his mood seemed to have worsened by several degrees.

"Why have I not been informed about Lord Falastur's arrival?" he spat towards Faramir upon recognising him.

"Because 'tis not your concern. The Lord of Pelargir has no authority here, neither have you anymore, and I forbid him to see you."

"You forbid?" snorted Tarannon. "And he listens to you, does he?"

"Aye, he does. And so should you, in your own interest. Do not attempt to make trouble tonight. Your men are on my side, and your 'friend' Falastur is not going to help you, either. So try not to be foolish."

Tarannon hissed a vile curse after him when he turned and left, but he heeded it not. Making his way to a spot from where he could check the proceedings on the road, he watched the fires and tents and the men wandering to and fro between them for a while. The road was entirely blocked now, but Falastur did not seem to care, or indeed he had purposed this. He himself was not visible, but he had positioned several pickets about, some of whom, Faramir was sure, were staying out of sight from the other camp, in order to be able to spy on the happenings there unnoticed. After making sure that Falastur and his men were sufficiently watched by his rangers, Faramir at last retired to his tent. Someone had brought him some food: dried meat and fruit and bread, and even some stew. He did not touch it, feeling no appetite whatsoever. The lamp had almost burned down, but he did not trouble with refilling it. He simply got

rid of belt and boots and collapsed on his blanket.

There he lay, staring up at the ceiling while slowly the light of the lamp faded and at length died altogether, absently watching the shadows the figures moving in front of the fires cast on the tarpaulin, and listening to the soft sounds of the men talk and sing, the mournful tunes of the flute, and the sigh of the wind in the branches above. All this sounded so familiar. Like a night in Ithilien. Even the smell was similar, of earth and trees and moss, and fire, leather, horses. And yet, all was different here. Here and everywhere, for nothing would ever be like before, with her gone.

He had tried to push the events in the little dell and the emotions linked to them as far from him as possible when he had been forced to deal with Tarannon and Falastur, but now they returned from their dark hiding-place with renewed force. Her pale face with the still yet content, even happy expression ... Curufë's heartwrenching gaze ... Only a short moment sooner ... a minute, perhaps ... He squeezed his eyes shut. Had she seen him still? Curufë had said it had been her expressed wish. Why had he not hurried more, despite his injured leg? And why had not the Elf fetched the antidote despite her command? What good had been her wish to see him when he had been too slow? Why had he not sent someone after her to guard her in the first place? Or done so himself? And what a stupid idea had this been anyway, to send him to Lebennin together with Lindórië? Why not Boromir? Unlikely, that his brother would have messed things up the way he had. But why, why had she asked for him to be fetched, instead of the antidote that would have saved her life?

Then he remembered their conversation, only hours ago, and his eyes began to sting again. Had they not really taken leave of the other back then? It had felt like a farewell, and now it had turned into a final one. And yet ... there was so much he wanted to tell her still. Many things he had kept to himself, always hoping that one day there would come an opportunity where they could really talk to each other. Things that had been difficult to put into letters. And now she was gone, and that opportunity he had longed for was lost forever.

A heavy weight of grief and sorrow and regret and self-reproach seemed to bear down on his breast. He turned upon his side as if this could ease the pain. It did not. It was not the first time he had lost a beloved person. His mother had died when he had been a child, and ever since he had joined the rangers, he had been confronted with the deaths of friends and companions. But he did not recall that he had ever felt a pain that deep before. When Finduilas had died, there had been his brother who he had looked to for comfort. And Lindórië, too. And when a member of the company was slain, or died in an accident, all the men shared the grief, and comforted each other as best they could – as now they did with Laren gone. It did not make these deaths less grievous, but it helped each of those left behind to come to terms with them.

This was different. Even though his men and especially his friends had expressed their regret and condolences, and he, not for a moment, doubted their willingness to help him through this time of darkness, he felt that in this he was all alone. None of them really knew how much Lindórië had meant to him, and what blow her loss had dealt him. If he was honest to himself, not even he had fully grasped it yet, and he was sure that in time his sorrow would even increase. *But who else is now going to mourn her?* he asked himself. *Who really knew her well? Imrabíl and his family, perhaps,* he decided, recalling how his uncle had ever mentioned her fondly. *And Denethor?*

The thought dealt him a cruel stab. Although there was no way to be certain with the stern and guarded Steward who hardly ever displayed his emotions openly, Faramir surmised that as far as his father had any close friends, Lindórië had been foremost of those. What her death would mean to him he did not dare imagine. Too much it might remind him of the death of his wife, the wound of which had never fully healed. Would he blame his son for what had happened? After all, despite his friends' warnings and the better knowledge of part of himself, at the moment Faramir felt it extremely difficult not to seek the blame with himself. And Denethor? Either he would try and bury the grief about Lindórië's death inside him and treat his son coldly and matter-of-factly upon his return, like any other captain reporting about an errand, or, when in a vengeful mood, he would administer some punishment for what he considered failure. Right now, Faramir did not know what he was most afraid of. For he was afraid of meeting his father under the circumstances, despite a tiny glimpse of hope that the Steward, in acknowledgement of their shared grief, would offer him sympathy and understanding.

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For a long time Faramir lay awake, troubled by these thoughts, but still not able to fully surrender to his sorrow. At

length he must have fallen into uneasy, fitful sleep, for he woke suddenly with a start, and noticed that a hand was shaking his shoulder gently but persistently. It was quite dark in the tent, only a soft glow was coming through the open flap. A figure was silhouetted against it. "It's me, Túrin," it whispered hastily. "Sorry to wake you, but this might be important."

"What is it?" asked Faramir in alarm, sitting up.

"It's about Falastur and Tarannon," his friend explained while Faramir began to search for his boots. "You told me to look out for them, and just now Falastur is coming over. Don't think he wants to partake of the rangers' tea, so I guess it's Tarannon he's about to see. I told the pickets and guards to let him pass, and to even give them some privacy, because I thought their conversation could turn out to be very interesting, should they believe they're alone. That's why I roused you."

Faramir was wide awake by now, ceasing his search for the boots as he decided it would be easier to creep up on the two lords in his stockings. "Thank you, Túrin," he told his friend softly but appreciatively, clapping his shoulder. "'Tis a most excellent idea."

In the dim light, he saw Túrin's teeth flash as he grinned. "Right, we have to be careful lest they spot us," he muttered as they slipped out of the tent. The fires had burned low with only a few embers glowing. Men were sleeping round them, rolled in their blankets or covered with cloaks. The night was cool but not chilly. The pickets had indeed hidden themselves, and as Faramir and Túrin crept through the underbrush towards where Tarannon was being held, they only spotted two men who had retired behind some large stones, and were watching the Lord of Lebennin intently. They noticed their captain and his companion approach, and saluted silently, but remained on their posts. Very cautiously, the two young men made their way to a group of trees that grew out of a thicket of boxwood and holly not far behind the tree Tarannon was fastened to. From there they were able to see both the Lord of Lebennin and his visitor, and overhear their quiet conversation.

"Why did you not come earlier?" complained Tarannon. "And have you brought a knife to unfasten me?"

"I am not here to free you, Tarannon," came the stern reply. Falastur was visible only as a dark shadow as he stood leaning against a large rock.

Tarannon strained in his bonds. "What?" he hissed. "Why then are you here? I need to get away. My men have betrayed me, this bloody Ondohor foremost. None of them will stir a finger."

"'Tis not my problem if your men lack fealty. You know that if you manage to escape now, I am going to be the prime suspect, and as I have told you before, this is something I will not burden myself with. You know quite well that the Steward wants to get me out of the way, too, and I am not so stupid as to invite his displeasure the way you have. How could you have been so foolish, Tarannon?" said Falastur reproachfully. "Have I not warned you countless times against rash acts like this? Attacking the Steward's son? What on earth made you lose control? Not this ridiculous affair with your wife, did it?"

"You may call it ridiculous," spat Tarannon, "because you have no interest in maintaining your honour – should it exist at all. But I do. Was I to let this little rat have his way with her, holding hands in front of my eyes and everything? Pity I did not manage to kill him, but at least she got what she deserved."

"Regardless, you should have kept your temper," returned Falastur sternly. "Has the idea ever stricken you that this entire affair might have been play-acted, a deceit to lure you into some rash act against Denethor's agents? He set you a trap, and you walked – or dashed, rather – right into it. And now I am supposed to get you out again, risking everything I have built up in the past years? Nay, Tarannon, I am not as foolish as you."

"You can't just leave me in the hands of this little bastard. For you do not want to lose the favour of me and my friends and kin, either. Carandil is not going to be pleased when he learns about all this, and your conduct especially."

"Carandil is not going to interfere, and who knows, perhaps he is even glad to have you out of the way, and thus to acquire the sole rule of Lebennin. Still, I daresay the road is long to Minas Tirith, and much may happen on the journey."

“So you are going to help me?”

“I have not said so, have I? But I have to admit I would be greatly displeased if our friend the Steward had his way in this matter. So far things have been going rather well for him – apart from losing his valuable spy –, but things should not continue in this vein, not if I can help it.”

“If you can, dispose of this bloody son of his.”

Falastur laughed grimly. “How do you imagine me to achieve this? ‘Tis far too dangerous.”

“Accidents happen all the time.”

“Aye, they do. But the lad is well-guarded, and careful, and clever. Even I underestimated him. I agree with you, he is a great liability, much more than his elder brother. Boromir is a valuable bulwark against the East, for I think neither of us wants trouble with that lot. For that reason, ‘tis somewhat comforting to know that valiant Captain Boromir is holding the forces of Mordor at bay, and we need not trouble about them for the time being. But his younger brother ... we shall have to look out for him in the future. He shares many of his father’s characteristics, and is as perceptive and farsighted as Denethor, and as intelligent, with a keen wit and, when it is required, a sharp tongue. And he is far tougher and more ruthless than his gentle demeanor suggests. Luckily, he seems to be lacking political ambition, but that is about the only positive aspect he displays.”

“As I said, accidents happen. Do not tell me you have no people at hand who cannot get rid of nuisances of this kind in a discreet but effective way.”

Falastur did not reply at once. It was too dark to see what he was doing exactly, but it seemed like he was watching Tarannon thoughtfully. “You speak of assassinating the Steward’s son,” he at length said very softly. “I need not tell you that ‘tis a very grave matter. A tempting one, I admit, though. ‘Tis no secret that Denethor has little love for the boy, nevertheless I would expect his death to deal quite a blow to the old man.” He fell silent. “‘Tis worth some consideration, which is all I shall say to it for now,” he added at length.

“Damn consideration,” returned Tarannon. “I want the boy out of the way now, before he has time to speak with his father, or even send him a message.”

“Why the hurry?” asked Falastur shrewdly.

Tarannon drew a breath. Faramir exchanged a glance with Túrin. “Well, we had a conversation ...,” began the Lord of Lebennin with obvious reluctance, “and I was so agitated – nay, I was furious –, that I may not have been the most ... well ... strategic.”

“Meaning you spoke out openly against the Steward, in presence of his son,” stated Falastur coldly. “I heard. You are a bloody fool, Tarannon.”

“Why? Nobody can condemn me for my opinion, and voicing it.”

“Is that so? Denethor is not stupid. He knows that people in a position of influence with great resources at their hands who dare to criticise him openly are not to be jested with. He tends to take these things very seriously, as do all circumspect rulers. What do you think happens to their outspoken enemies sooner or later? Exactly. And I need not tell you, Tarannon, that right now you are on the very top of his long list of enemies.”

“So what can we do?” asked Tarannon, sounding all but happy now and even a little desperate.

“What can *you* do,” corrected Falastur. “For now, hold your tongue in check. Say naught furtheron that could be used against you in a trial.”

“Trial? I will not stand trial before the High Court and the Steward!”

“Better count on it.”

"Nay. Ere that happens, I am going to escape. And you will help me. I know you fear the Steward, but everybody has his price. What is it you want? You did not come here without a purpose."

Falastur was silent again, and it seemed to Faramir that he was smiling thinly. "You are going to pay me for freeing you?" he asked, with a trace of amusement. "What an interesting idea." There was a rustle of leaves in the underbrush, and both Falastur and Tarannon started. Faramir and Túrin beheld two rangers approach.

"The changing of the watch," explained Faramir softly. "Pity 'tis right now." Túrin only nodded as both watched the Lord of Pelargir slip away. The two young men waited for a while until the new guards had taken up their positions and those they had replaced were retiring, until they, too, made their way back to the tent.

"Couldn't they have waited another five minutes?" asked Túrin with a sigh. "I didn't know who else to inform, otherwise I'd warned them, too."

"Do not reproach yourself," Faramir told him while refilling the lamp and lighting it. "Your idea was excellent, and we learned a great deal."

"Aye, we did," said Túrin with a grim smile. "What a pair! One more corrupt than the other. Do you think Falastur is going to help Tarannon?"

Faramir shrugged. "Somehow, I doubt it. He may accept a bribe, but I cannot see him act accordingly. The situation is too dangerous. Have you noted how careful he was in his choice of words? There was little said by him that could be used against him – almost as if he feared he was being overheard. Tarannon on the contrary, was far less subtle and clever."

"Are you going to confront the two about this conversation?"

"I am not sure if that would be wise," replied Faramir slowly. He ran both hands over his face. "At the moment, I cannot think clearly anyway, so I guess I shall postpone the decision until the morrow."

"Right," said Túrin pitifully. "Try and get some more sleep."

"First, I am going to write down what we have just overheard," said Faramir, reaching for his sheet of notes, pen and ink. "Will you help me?"

They exchanged their recollections and Faramir noted down as much as both could remember. Then Túrin took his leave, and Faramir more or less collapsed on his blankets, and almost immediately fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

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When he woke next it was to a chatter of birds, and the sounds of his company astir. Shadows of swaying branches were playing on the tent's ceiling over his head, and for a while he simply lay there, watching them thoughtfully, trying to recollect what had befallen the previous day and night. Slowly the memories returned, and with them the pain. Before he could fully lose himself in the latter, however, footsteps approached his tent, and a moment later Andanor stuck his head through the flap.

"Morning, captain," he greeted his superior. "I checked on you a while ago, but you were still asleep, and we thought we'd better let you have some more rest."

"Thank you, Andanor," said Faramir, sitting up and reaching for his hood. The morning air was crisp and cool, and without the blanket he was feeling the draught. "How late is it?"

"Second hour after sunrise," replied the lieutenant. "The pickets reported that nothing untoward befell during the night – apart from our secret visitor, but from what I heard he entered with your approval."

"Yes, he did. Is Falastur's company still encamped on the road?"

“Aye, and half asleep still, too,” said Andanor with a grin. He looked at Faramir gravely. “What is the plan for today, captain?” he inquired.

Having put on his boots and fastening the belt and swordbelt round his waist, Faramir glanced at him. “We need to bury the dead. And then I should like to leave this place and return to Pelargir with our prisoner, and thence move on to Minas Tirith. I want to get rid of Tarannon and deliver him to the Steward’s custody as soon as possible, ere Falastur or Carandil have time to interfere. We may even be able to catch a ship from Pelargir and sail up Anduin, as this would prevent us from having to pass through their fiefs. It would be better for the wounded, too. Do you think they are fit to travel already?”

Andanor shrugged. “I shall ask the healer. But they got through the night rather well. What about this Captain Ondoher and his lads? We can’t take them all prisoner. They outnumber us, and if they were really up to mischief, there would be little we could do against it.”

“I am in favour of sending them back to Linhir with a message for Carandil. Ondoher and perhaps two of his men should accompany us, however, to function as witnesses. I shall speak with him later. He seems a reasonable as well as honourable man, and I do not expect trouble from him.” Seeing his lieutenant’s glance, he added. “Nevertheless we shall be careful.”

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Ondoher agreed to Faramir’s suggestion that he and some men of his join the ride north, albeit reluctantly. Yet in the end he was willing to split his company, and to send the wounded and the healer to the nearest village, while the greater part of the soldiers under the command of his lieutenant was to return to Linhir.

In the meantime, the rangers and the soldiers busied themselves with the preparations of the burial. It had been agreed that the graves should be situated on an elevated spot on the hillslope overlooking the road. While some of the men busied themselves with digging, others gathered branches and moss and even flowers to cover the ground with, and others collected stones so that over the bodies low cairns could be raised, to protect them from predators.

Then the bodies were borne up on biers of branches, with rangers and soldiers flanking them carrying torches. Faramir had briefly considered allowing Tarannon to participate in the burial, but then decided against it, knowing he would not be able to keep his temper should the Lord of Lebennin dare to utter an unfitting remark, as most likely he would. Tarannon did not complain about being left tied to the tree, either, thus apparently approving of Faramir’s decision. Falastur, however, could not be prevented from joining the two companies and Faramir and his friends as they were gathered round the graves, and Faramir silently hoped that the Lord of Pelargir would remain quiet and keep his habitual spite to himself for once.

As captain, it was expected of him to say some fitting words about Laren. Indeed, this was not the first occasion he had been forced to do so. In recent years there had been number of deaths in his company, yet even though he had some routine now with this grievous task, he found it difficult every time to think of something appropriate to say. Laren had indeed been popular, and the downcast expressions of the rangers mirrored the loss they were feeling only too clearly. He was deeply grateful when Ondoher stepped forward to take leave of the fallen soldier, giving him some more time to sketch a speech for Laren.

When finally it was his turn, however, he did not find the task as difficult as he had feared. Laren had not only been popular, but also a cheerful, inventive fellow who had been responsible for many pranks in the company. Speaking of those brought forth tears but also smiles on the rangers’ faces, and earned their captain many a grateful glance. When he was finished, both rangers and soldiers sang a dirge for their fallen comrades – if dirge it was, as it sounded more than a marching song, describing a soldier’s life and his adventures abroad, far from home and family and the girl he loved, but in the end returning to her.

The song ended, and silence descended on the clearing. Faramir felt the eyes of the assembly rest on him again. The thought that he might be required to say something about Lindórië as well had occurred to him, of course, but he had banished it from his mind. And what indeed should he say? Only Maradir and Túrin knew a little of what she had

meant to him. And to commemorate her with an impersonal speech – he did not consider it appropriate. And not to say anything and to simply let her vanish beneath a pile of stones? No. He could not let that happen, either.

“Faramir?” he heard Maradir standing next to him ask him softly.

Drawing a deep breath, Faramir looked up at the assembly, seeing sympathy, pity and regret in most faces. Falastur looked expectant and curious, but his usual haughty expression was absent, thankfully. Faramir swallowed, and drew a breath to begin his speech, still not knowing what to say but hoping that inspiration would strike once he had started – when from a little above the gravesite a clear voice was raised in song. All heads turned towards it. Curufë was standing on a large rock, and was singing what sounded like a lay. It was in *Quenya*, in an old mode, to a melody Faramir thought he had heard before even though he could not recall where and when, a tune soft and sad, yet also strong and poignant – grief conveyed into music, and there mingled with hope, and even joy.

It was a song of utter, heartwrenching beauty. Looking into the round, Faramir saw how heads drooped and eyes closed and hands went up to them to brush away tears. He was certain that hardly anybody actually understood the words. He himself only recognised a few, yet it did not matter. As is the wont with Elvish song, the words remained graven in his memory, and together with the sweet music touched his heart in a way that exceeded normal understanding, so that he recognised what Curufë was singing about without having to trouble translating the words. His bitter regret about the brief- and awkwardness of the encounters with Lindórië was turned into gratitude that he had been allowed to spend time with her at all, and for the knowledge that she had truly loved him, and her last wish had been to see him just one more time.

To his right, he heard Túrin sniff loudly. Maradir, too, looked like he was close to tears, and Faramir recalled that he had never actually seen his friend weep before. Then he noted that there were tears in his eyes as well, and he did not bother to brush them away. It felt just right to let them flow, now that finally he was able to truly mourn what he had lost.

The song ended. There was some general sniffing and blowing of noses, while some men stepped forward to place small tokens with the fallen. Faramir saw Damrod walk over and lay Laren’s beloved longbow and a quiver of arrows at his side. Another gave him a pack of cards, and another a small flask, containing some kind of spirit or other, Faramir reckoned. The dead soldier received his helm and shield and sword, and also a number of more personal items. Deeply touched by and grateful for the gesture, Faramir watched as Lindórië’s servants, some of the rangers and even some soldiers placed flowers on and around her body. When they had withdrawn again, he alone stepped forth, and stooping slowly he placed a small book next to her hands folded underneath the cloak she was wreathed in. He had found it in her saddle-bags, a handwritten tome containing poems and short pieces of prose she evidently had collected. He had recalled that during the journey she had often sat poring over it, and the mere fact she had taken it with it on her travels seemed to indicate that it had been very precious to her. A folded piece of parchment protruded from the worn pages, and before releasing the book he endeavored to put it back inside when his eyes fell on the broken seal which partly showed on the old paper. He recognised it instantly, and his hand began to shake slightly. The seal was his. So this was one of his letters. One of the first, most like, judging from the worn and frayed edges of the parchment. Without opening it, he thought he knew which letter it was: the one where he had told her that he loved her. Clumsy had his confession been, he recalled, yet in all earnest. And apparently she had treasured it for all those years.

Tears pricked at his eyes again, and he let go of the book and ran a hand over his face as slowly he straightened up, nodding to the men who were waiting nearby with spades and shovels to begin closing the graves. Soon they were covered by mounds of earth that were then hidden underneath piles of stones. The work was a matter of a short while only. Most men helped, as a last tribute to their fallen comrades. Slowly, the assembly dissolved after the work was done. Faramir remained a while longer at the graves, staring absently at the mounds. A soft sound made him look up. Curufë had stepped to his side.

Faramir drew a deep breath. “Thank you, Curufë,” he said quietly. “The song, it was beautiful. She would have enjoyed it too, I am sure. I cannot think of a better way to honour her.”

The Elf placed a hand on his shoulder and squeezed it soothingly. “May there always be song where she is now.”

Faramir only nodded slightly. “I am deeply grateful to you. I ... I would not have known what to say. Your song summed it up in a way beyond my ability to express what I wished to say.”

“I am glad I could help. Times are difficult enough for you. If there is aught else I can do, tell me.”

“I am deeply indebted to you as it is. But I appreciate your offer, and shall certainly make use of it, once things have settled down a little. Indeed, you could do me a great favour – should it fit into your plans at all. My uncle Imrahil must be informed of what befell here, and he should learn of it swiftly, ere rumour reaches Dol Amroth. I would send an errand-rider with a letter, but actually I think he would prefer to receive the account of an eye-witness. He knows you”

Curufë patted his shoulder. “Do not worry, I can lay my plans accordingly. Actually, I was about to suggest to you to ride to Dol Amroth. So do not worry about inconveniencing me. I shall leave as soon as my horse is ready. Come now, let us return to the camp.”

Faramir thanked him again, not veiling his relief at the Noldo’s readiness to undertake the strenuous journey. He let himself be steered away from the graves, and together they descended to where the rangers and soldiers were already busy taking down the tents and rolling up blankets. Most seemed eager to be gone. Faramir took his leave of the Noldo, wishing him good speed and expressing the hope of meeting him again in Minas Tirith, then walked over to his tent, he saw Falastur interrupt his conversation with Ondoher, and turn slightly to watch him. To Faramir’s surprise, the gaze the Lord of Pelargir bestowed upon him was devoid of its usual haughtiness and disdain. It was difficult to say if there was something like pity in the grey eyes, but at least it seemed obvious that even someone as cold as Falastur had been touched by the Elven-song. He looked thoughtful, and for once strangely sympathetic. But it only lasted for a short moment, for as soon as Falastur realised that Faramir had noticed his observation, his expression changed again.

Leaving Ondoher to look after his men, Falastur approached Faramir. His eyes narrowed as he gazed at the young man. “Quite a touching ceremony, was it not?” he said, his calculating glance betraying the conversational tone of his speech.

“Actually, I am astounded you can be touched by anything,” returned Faramir coldly.

Falastur shook his head. “There is no need to become angry, although of course this matter must have upset you greatly. Tarannon was right all along, it seems. A pity he was not present to see you shed tears for his wife.”

“What is it you want, Falastur?” asked Faramir wearily, in no mood to rise to the other’s bait.

“I want to warn you one last time. I shall not interfere with your plans for the Lord of Lebennin. But others might. And should any trouble arise while you journey through my fief, I shall know who to hold accountable.”

“We shall travel through your fief as swiftly as possible,” said Faramir. “Do you really believe I am doing all this to annoy you? Let me assure you, if there was a way to avoid Pelargir, I would choose it. I have no interest in causing you trouble. And you should not provoke it, either.”

Falastur laughed humourlessly. “My dear boy, since when have I encouraged trouble to come to me? I and my men shall accompany you back to the city, in order to assure your staying out of mischief. I shall even provide a ship for you to get you up Anduin as swiftly as possible.”

“I am obliged,” replied Faramir stiffly, not relishing the prospect of having to travel in Falastur’s company, if only for a short distance, but at the same time not ungrateful about the offer of the ship.

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to be continued ...