

The Night the “Troll’s Nose” burned down

Khorazir

It was an evening in mid-Nenime in Third Age 3008. Below a crude wooden sign carved in the likeness of a huge ugly nose light filtered out through small, smeared and partly broken and barred windows into the narrow lane – one of those hidden backstreets in the Second Circle that a common visitor to Minas Tirith usually did not know about, and never strayed into. In those lanes and crooked alleyways the darker and more secretive inhabitants of the City lived and thrived, trying to avoid close contact with the authorities. The watch came here seldom, and although people suspected that the Lord Denethor knew about the goings on even in this rather remote part of the city (as he appeared to know a good deal about everything happening in the realm, through dark arts and wizardry, as people suspected), he did not seem to care over much, having more important matters on his mind. And this was much appreciated by the inhabitants of this part of the Tower of Guard.

And here the “Troll’s Nose” was situated, reputedly the most disreputable, dirty, dangerous but also exciting tavern in the City. Here folk assembled to discuss business, to meet friends from foreign parts who had to avoid walking openly in the streets under broad daylight, to drink to celebrate, or to drown some grief with the horrible stuff that went under beer in the “Nose”, to gamble or to brawl. There was always some “entertainment” or other going on at the “Troll’s Nose”.

Presently, even though the evening was not that far advanced, there was quite a large crowd assembled at the inn, as Oglof, the burly, one-eyed Morthondian innkeeper noticed with satisfaction. Mostly good and well-known customers. There were the secretive dark-clad and heavily armed guys in the corner avidly discussing some new venture of theirs, there was Dorgil the Red the famous highway-robber and his band of cutthroats gambling with sly Carandur, known for his wicked luck with the dice, there were the drunks who flogged to the “Nose” as soon as it opened, and “left” when they were dragged out and dropped in the gutter somewhen in the early morning, there were the pick-pockets and burglars preparing for their nightly expeditions, and other folk of various dark professions, hailing from various realms. All in all, as Oglof thought proudly to himself, a nice assembly of scoundrels as one hardly found elsewhere in Minas Tirith nowadays.

He was just pushing a pint of “beer” towards a huge blackbearded and grim-looking fellow at the counter, when the door opened, and, hardly discernable through the thick smoke of various burned herbs in the room and because of the rather insufficient illumination, three young men entered. What he could recognise about their looks made Oglof skeptical and very attentive, indeed alarmed. They did not look on bit like his usual customers. All three came from rather wealthy families (*Bloody tarks*, thought Oglof contemptuously, and spat), judged by their clothes (which nevertheless were rather plain), but also by their general bearing and behaviour. The one who had entered first was slightly less in height than the other two, but more richly dressed. He was in his early twenties, had long, wavy dark-brown hair, warm brown eyes and an open, sympathetic face. He stepped in smiling broadly and jovially, as if he owned the place.

The second was tall and slender, with rather short raven hair that created a sharp contrast to his pale skin and clear grey eyes. His face was somewhat stern and grave, and even though apparently he was of the same age as the other two, he looked more restrained, thoughtful and silent, and thus seemed older. Also there was something about his features that appeared familiar to Oglof. He was quite sure that he had seen this one before, and in the kind of company Oglof did not appreciate at all, and usually tried to avoid.

The man – or boy, it was hard to determine at this age – eyed his surroundings keenly and suspiciously. It was plain to see that he did not approve of the place, and wished to be somewhere else. But he had no time to think twice about it, because the third youth behind him pushed him slightly to make him move on. That one was also tall and slender of build and had long blonde hair. Of his face Oglof could see little, because it was half hidden behind the one walking in front of him, but what he could discern was that this one, too, seemed of Dúnadan-stock rather than Rohirrim, as his haircolour suggested.

Eyed curiously (but also darkly and suspiciously) by the crowd gathered in the “Nose”, the first of the newcomers now pointed to an empty table.

“This looks fine”, he said, motioning to the others. “You sit here, and I’ll get the drinks”, he added with a swift glance at his raven-haired companion (who did not look too happy, and rather out of place, Oglof thought with a grin), and a half-hidden mischievous smile, that was returned by the blonde one who now sat down beside the other.

Someone called for Oglof, and he had to draw his gaze from the three newcomers. *I’ll be hanged if those three don’t look like a lot o’ trouble*, he thought as he turned away. He should be right. But nevertheless even he had to admit later that they all had had great fun that night.

Dellóm

Sitting in a dark, out of the way, part of the room, the strange man watched the three newcomers enter the tavern and move to their table.

Keeping part of his attention on them, he turned again to the cloaked stranger at the table.

“You’re sure the information you have given me is true? If so, my master may well reward you handsomely. We have need of spies who are honest...dishonesty will drastically shorten lives.” the strange man whispered to the cloaked stranger.

“I swear it’s true, Lord D...” the cloaked stranger catching himself, realizing that the implied threat had caused him to raise his voice in fear. Continuing in a much quieter voice, “I swear it’s true, Lord Dellóm!”

Nodding, the Dellóm placed a small bag of coins near the cloaked man’s hand, which quickly disappeared.

“Good, now you must hurry back. We do not wish your master to suspect anything and I have meetings with others that I must attend to.” Dellóm said, standing and ending their meeting.

The cloaked stranger removed himself from the table and darting furtive glances at the other patrons of the tavern, slipped quickly out into the night.

Well, and well, Dellóm thought to himself. *Lord Maeglin will find this new information most pleasing. We had no idea the guard strength in the city was that weak.*

Motioning to Oglof, Dellóm ordered another drink. Sitting and studying the three strangers, he continued to think about the spy’s information and of how he could turn it all to his Lord’s advantages.

The opening of the door caught his attention as another cloaked stranger stepped into the tavern. Smiling to himself, he watched the stranger approach his table. *Ah, my next meeting is here.*

Canamarth

“There you go Maradir,” the brown-haired one said to the blonde while putting a mug of beer in front of him. “And here is yours, F...”

“Ssh,” the other two interrupted. A sheepish smile spread on his face. “Sorry. But what am I supposed to call you?”

“Do you really think coming here was a good idea, Maradir?” the raven-haired asked and took a furtive look around.

“No,” Maradir said. “But we’re going to have so much fun!” And he laughed out loud. “But Túrin is right, my friend. You have to tell us your new name.”

Khorazir

“Since it was your splendid idea to drag me here, Master Túrin, I suppose you should invent a fitting one”, the raven-haired one said, giving Túrin a keen glance. Túrin grinned. “Well, let me see ...” - he studied the other - “what about ... er ... Arandur?”

“Very inventive, Túrin, I must attest you this”, the other said dryly. “But it could have been worse, I guess.”

“Yeah, it could”, Túrin agreed with a rather mischievous grin. “Well”, he continued, reaching for his mug of beer and then settling back comfortably in his chair, “it’s really a pity that your brother couldn’t join us tonight, Arandur. Where is he, anyway?”

“Ithilien”, Arandur said shortly. “The usual business. But maybe”, he added in a low voice, “we should not discuss this here.” He took another look around. Some of the figures half hidden in smoke and shadow did not look very trustworthy at all. Neither did the cloaked stranger that had just entered the inn, and joined a similar looking fellow at a table in a corner – a fellow who had been studying the three of them quite attentively all the time, as Arandur had noticed.

Túrin raised his mug to the other two. “Cheers, my friends! As Maradir said, seems we’re going to have much fun tonight!”

Canamarth

Maradir’s intention had been to drown his beer in one gulp. But after the liquid had reached his palate, he could swallow just a tiny amount after struggling not to spit it all out.

“I had forgotten how bad the beer is in here...” He shook himself but took up the mug again. “But who cares?” And he managed to drown half the mug. “It soon won’t matter anymore,” he said to Arandur whose face contorted as if he had bitten into a lemon. “We just have to get through the first five mugs or so.”

“Five mugs?” Turin exclaimed. “I’ll need a lot more to get even tipsy.”

“Right!”

Dellóm

His last meeting of the evening over with, Dellóm turned to study the room again while he pondered the information his last informant had brought him. *Fool, even I know the shire is nothing to a marching army. Still, for such a small race, they have been around for some time now. I shall advise my Lord that we should bypass them if we can. Even an army of ants can route and eliminate a much stronger intruder if you rile them enough. he thought as he pondered the matter more. And the secrecy of our attack is of utmost importance. Attacking the hobbits will carry tales to the far corners.*

Noticing one of the strange trio studying him in turn, Dellóm raised his mug to his lips, the flaring of the lamps of someone opening the door causing the edges of his mask plates to glow within the shadows of his hood. *These three are an enigma for this place. I think I shall stay longer tonight and see what mischief they plan.*

Khorazir

“I should really like to see you endure four more mugs of this stuff, Túrin”, Arandur said, forcing down a mouthful of

his drink. He smiled slightly to himself as a somewhat appalled look stole over his friend's face, something he had not quite been able to conceal.

"Well", Túrin conceded, "I guess I could ask if they sell anything else to drink around here ... but hey, Maradir seems to like the stuff! He's almost finished his first mug ..."

Maradir gave him a deadly glance. "Get you gone Túrin, and get us something decent", he hissed, with a swift side-glance at Arandur and his almost untouched drink. Túrin grinned again, nodded briefly and rose.

That their friend did not notice their silent exchange of meaningful glances was due to the fact that his gaze had again been drawn to the dark stranger in the corner. The man was alone now. Arandur thought he had caught a glance of keen eyes from the depths of the stranger's hood. Then someone rose from a table in between, and so blocked the man from view.

"Interesting folk in here", Arandur said softly to Maradir. "Is it just the light deceiving my eyes, or is everybody except us carrying a whole armoury about with them?"

Dellóm

Using the moment the view was blocked, Dellóm rose and moved to the bar to grab another mug and then turned and leaned against the bar and studied the trio from there.

Odd that these three are here. The first seems to be the lower ranking of the three, he thought, watching him come to the bar and ask for something other than the regular fare. The raven haired one seems to be the more cautious, he bares the most watching. The last, where is he... his view being blocked by moving patrons before spotting him leaning close to the raven haired stranger. Ah yes, he seems to be the one in between...a steadyness for the first and a cajoler for the second.

Motioning to Olof, Dellóm had him give them some of his own private stock that he kept here. He had learned his lesson quickly when it came to the common drink in the Troll's Nose, sometimes they kept dead rats in the barrel to give it that special twang.

Canamarth

"Who says I don't keep my armoury with me?" Maradir replied. Then he saw the man Arandur had been studying, stepping close to Turin and ordering a drink for them.

"Seems we have already made friends. Do you think we should have a chat with him? Since you seemed so interested in him before?"

Arandur nodded and Maradir beckoned the stranger to their table.

Khorazir

"Better watch out that Túrin does not begin to chat carelessly", Arandur whispered to Maradir while watching the approaching stranger attentively. "You know him."

Dellóm

Grabbing his mug, he moves to the table to introduce himself, and to find out more about this strange trio.

Nodding towards the two still seated, the lighting again flickering across the edges of the mask he wore beneath his hood. "Good evening to you, friends. Forgive me, but you made me curious at your visit to this...establishment. Most who dress and move as you do, usually prefer the more finer places near the royal or merchant's quarters."

Quickly grabbing something to sit on from a nearby table, he sat at the trio's table, seemingly ignoring the commotion he just caused at the other.

The person who's seat he just stole looking irate and ready to make something of it, until his friends dragged him back and whisper who it was that claimed the seat. A pale look of fear passing quickly across his face, he quickly found another.

"Let me introduce myself, my name is Mithas, and you are?"

Khorazir

"This is Maradir," Arandur said, nodding to his friend, "my name is Arandur, and our friend's whom you just helped to get other drinks is Túrin. We are pleased to meet you, Master Mithas. You are right," he continued with a smile, "we look rather out of place. I have to admit that I have never been to this establishment, as you put it, before. My friends have, though, and apparently they thought it funny if I would join them tonight."

"Right," Túrin agreed, setting his load of mugs on the table and taking a seat again. "Moreover there's something to celebrate. Or going to be, in about ... uh ... three hours I'd say."

Mithas looked at him questioningly.

"His coming of age", Túrin said grinning, pointing at Arandur, who cast a swift warning glance at his friend, but then shrugged and grinned as well. "I only hope I shall live to experience the event in this company. Some of the people in here do not look too friendly." He cast a swift look at the neighbouring table, where the commotion had died down again. Then his face turned somewhat grave and serious, as he studied Mithas with a keen, searching glance, as if trying to penetrate the shade the hood cast on the stranger's face.

"Those people over there did not look overly pleased when you took the chair", Arandur said matter-of-factly, yet with his eyes still on Mithas' hooded face. "I must say that it struck me as strange indeed that they should refrain from doing anything about it. I would have thought they would start some kind of trouble or other. The one with the scarred face looked ready for it for sure. And yet he settled down peacefully ... You are known around here, I take it?"

Canamarth

Maradir, who had gotten a glimpse of the mask under Mithas' hood, awaited the answer attentively. If there was somebody among the fine fellows in the Nose who had to be watched closely, it was definitely him.

Dellóm

Noticing the look, Dellóm took a drink from his mug before replying.

"Ah, as to that. It's well known that I frequent this place and one night someone came looking for me. I had to disabuse him of his notion that I should no longer breath. Many here saw what happened and what was left when I was finished."

"Fear is a nice moderator to rash actions, I sometimes find."

Pausing in the act of taking another drink, he paused and stared through the opened door as someone entered, his posture becoming tense.

“You must excuse me. I have an errand that I must attend to. I hope to return before you begin your party. Perhaps to help you toast the occasion?”

Quickly saying his goodbyes to the fellows, he stood and moved to the door, a purpose to his stride saying that whatever it was that brought him back out into the night, he was not happy with it.

Canamarth

Maradir looked after him as he left the pub. Turning to his companions he said: “I must say I am not that unhappy at his disappearance. Did you see the mask? Now, if that doesn’t make anyone suspicious.”

“Why, I thought he was a mighty interesting fellow,” Turin said.

“I thought you’d say something like that,” Maradir muttered. “Well, seems we will have to make do with ourselves, for the time being.”

Khorazir

“Well, we could invite some of the fellows playing dice to come over and have a drink with us”, Túrin said grinning.

Arandur turned in his chair to look at them. “Looks as if they are rather busy right now”, he said.

He was right: one had just risen and drawn a knife, while the others apparently prepared for a fight themselves.

“Cheatin’?” a tall red-headed fellow cried, reaching over the table, grabbing the collar of a pale, sallow-faced man and pulling him towards him. “Yeh accuse me o’ cheatin’, yeh little rat?”

“No, no, Master Dorgil,” the other said, winding himself to get free of Dorgil’s grip, “not ... not cheating. I just ... er ... implied that ...”

“What?” Dorgil thundered.

“That ... er ... well, the dice, they’re ... uh ... not the proper weight ...”

Dorgil stared at him. “Proper weight?” he yelled, raising his fist. “I’ll give yeh proper weight!”

At this moment Oglof the innkeeper stepped to him and whispered something in his ear. Dorgil’s fury subsided visibly, and he eyed the pale man he had still grasped firmly by the collar with a curious look.

“Ye’re sure?” he asked Oglof, who nodded vigorously. A slight grin spread about Dorgil’s face, and he let go of the collar. Then he pressed the small man down into a chair, and after taking a seat himself leaned towards him and started talking softly, but rapidly, gesticulating wildly. The pale man, after having overcome his shock, seemed rather interested in Dorgil’s talk. His eyes grew wider and wider, before finally he smiled as well.

The three young men had watched the little episode with interest and amusement. Now Túrin turned back to the other two. “Well, Maradir’s right, I guess. It’s just the three of us for the time being. But perhaps he can tell a story of his latest adventures. I haven’t seen you around much lately, I must say. And you neither, Arandur. What were you up to?”

Dellóm

Pausing outside to look that no one's watching, Dellóm stepped into the shadows of the alley. Walking deeper, he stopped and his mask gave off a sudden flash.

Come to me, he thinks.

A shadowy form appears before him and bows. *You wished for me, Master?* the shadow thought back.

Yes, there are three inside, I wish to know their actions while I am gone. Do not be seen, Dellóm thought to the shadow.

Yes, Master, the shadow replied, already fading into the darkness of the alley.

Making sure no one had seen him, Dellóm stepped from the alley and begins to make his way to the merchants quarters.

Zanir will pay for his meddling. I warned him to not pry into my business and now there will be a lesson. Hmm...I think we will begin with his beautiful wife. They had an anniversary recently and I forgot to send a gift. The plates of his mask shifting to a malevolently smiling face, he continues on, still thinking to himself. Yes, that will do nicely, and if he continues to meddle...he has a nice sized family.

Khorazir

"I was in Ithilien as well, most of the time," Arandur said in a low voice. "Perhaps you have heard of it, but during the last months, since last year's fall, actually, the number of Orcs roaming the western slopes of the Ephel Dúath has increased rapidly. And they are not the usual snuffling spies and scouts, but large Uruks, warlike and strong. And cunning. They annihilated two of our companies. From what we have learned it seems that they come from Minas Morgul, and beyond. It appears that they are making for the crossings of Anduin in Osgiliath, and we do our best to defend the eastern part of the ruined city. The steward's heir is in command now" – here the other two grinned slightly – "even though his father would rather see him out of danger, I guess. About a month ago he was wounded by an arrow, and quite a serious wound 'twas too. But he would not remain for long in the City, saying that he had to return as swiftly as possible. Maybe he – or his father – was of the opinion that his captain in charge needed some assistance" – there was only the slightest trace of sarcasm or even bitterness in his voice – "well, and after he had returned I was sent back to Minas Tirith to deal with some rather dull administrative matters here (a punishment of sorts, maybe). After tomorrow I guess 'twill be Ithilien again for me, but, to be honest, I am looking forward to it, Orcs or no. For some reason the atmosphere at home has been rather icy lately." He shrugged. "I suppose certain people think that I should have taken better care of the captain-general. The usual, you know.

"But," and now his grave face brightened a little, "I think 'tis best if I stop talking like this. I thought we were here to have fun tonight. What about you, Maradir, do you not know of something funny to tell? You usually come up with the most intriguing tales."

Canamarth

"I am honoured by your praise. But I can't really tell you of my training at the moment. Arandur, you should know that it's all top secret." He smiled broadly. "But I can tell you of two new friends I made. Their names are Annavar and Ettenar and they come from a little village somewhere not too far off from Pelargir. And they are twins. They look so much alike that hardly anyone can tell them apart. Just when I thought I had gotten a hang of it yesterday, because Annavar's beard was longer than Ettenar's, they both shaved."

Túrin and Arandur broke out laughing.

"I should like to have a doppelganger," Túrin said. "I could blame all my bad behaviour on him. And I could send him on duties which I don't particularly like to fulfill..."

The commotion which had been quenched at the table with dice, seemed to open up again in a corner where a very drunken old man tried to kiss a young lass whose boyfriend had only left to fetch another drink for the two of them. He grabbed the old man by his collar and threw him out of the Nose without further ado.

"Hey, Túrin. Seems you just missed your big chance of rescuing the damsel in distress," Maradir laughed.

Khorazir

Túrin studied the maid with an expert glance. "Hm, not bad", he admitted. "But, well, at the moment I am not interested in this kind of business."

His friends exchanged questioning glances. "You do get medical treatment, do you not?" Arandur said.

"What?"

"Well, to hear from you that you are not interested in a pretty lass made me conclude that you must be ill ..."

Túrin gave him a deadly glance. "Actually, Lord Arandur, I have never felt better," he said pointedly. "If you wish to know, there's someone I've met some time ago ... Someone special."

"Oooh," came from the other two.

"Someone special, eh?" Arandur asked with a mischievous grin. "As special as lady how was her name ... - Amarie?"

"Or Miriel?" Maradir added.

"Or the one with the red hair ... Laurendiliel?"

"Or -"

"Oh, shut up you two!" Túrin cried, his face blushed scarlet. "I tell you, it's different this time!"

"Yeah, right!" the others said, both trying hard to keep from bursting into laughter. Túrin eyed them darkly. Then he leaned back in his chair again and folded his hands over his chest.

"Well, I guess it's easy to joke about things one doesn't have the slightest clue about!" he said lightly.

Canamarth

"Hey, I'm still too young for those things," Maradir claimed. "Besides, I don't like your pale, ribbon-covered ladies whose only occupation seems to be taking care of their attire and make-up. What are you supposed to do with them? You can't have a good ride-out with them or a plain talk as we have among ourselves. I think they are quite dull. I'm sure there are some exceptions - I have heard of the wild women of the Rohirrim who even take swords and fight just like men - but I have seen nothing like them in Minas Tirith so far."

Khorazir

“Yeah, they are quite exceptional,” Arandur agreed. “And Maradir is right. Most of the ladies around here are plain boring - or worse. They soon get on one’s nerves with their endless talk about fashion and hairstyle, which appears to be the only topic of conversation they cherish.”

“Oh, our expert speaks up,” Túrin said mockingly.

Arandur only smiled. “I have no problem admitting that I do not share your wealth of experience in this field, Túrin. And honestly, where should I meet someone? In Ithilien? There I have more chances of meeting an Orc-woman.”

All shuddered slightly as they tried to picture a female Orc, then they grinned.

“Well, but you must admit that even when you’re here in the City you don’t seem to be on the lookout for a girl-friend,” Túrin took up the topic again. “Waiting for someone special, eh?”

“Yes, perhaps,” Arandur answered, and he did not grin this time.

Dellóm

Returning from his trip to the merchant’s quarters, Dellóm paused at the alley mouth. Anyone who passed by, not drunk, would swear later that they saw a shadow move from the wall and sink into the one already on the ground. Taking a deep breath as he absorbed the new knowledge of the shadow, he opened his eyes and continued to the Troll’s Nose.

Entering and moving to the side, it had taken only the one time when he was in the way of someone who had drunk to much to learn that lesson, he gave himself a moment to get accustomed to the dim view again before moving to the bar and getting another mug of his private stock and then moving back to the trio.

“Hail and well met again, friends,” taking his seat again.

“Please forgive my earlier abruptness and leaving so suddenly and rudel,” taking a drink from his mug and smiling at Maradir as he spoke. “The errand was one that I had forgotten and had risen to emergency proportions by the time I was able to get to it.”

“So tell me, have I missed anything of interest?” the light catching parts of his mask as he smiled from beneath his hood.

Khorazir

Arandur looked up as Mithas sat down at their table again. He wondered what the strange man had been up to. Studying him closely, he caught a glimpse of the mask Maradir had mentioned. Looking swiftly to his friend, he realised that Maradir’s attention was bent on this as well.

Túrin, however, seemed pleased about Mithas’ return, and did not care about his peculiar attire. “Nice to have you back, Mithas,” he said. “As for things of interest, well, there seems to have been some trouble at the dice-table, but apart from that, nothing much happened. Unusually quiet in the “Nose” tonight, if you ask me.”

Canamarth

“Oh, and you did miss a conversation about women...” Maradir added smilingly. *Better to talk about trivial matters in his presence*, he thought.

Khorazir

“Yeah,” Túrin agreed. He leaned a little closer to Mithas and added with a grin: “Not that those two could add much to it! You know, they’re real children when it comes to these matters.”

“Unlike our dear friend here,” Arandur said, giving Túrin a short piercing glance. “But” - and now he looked at Mithas - “tell us a little about yourself. Are you a resident of the City? Your attire looks somewhat ... exceptional and out of the ordinary. Even in a place like this.”

Dellóm

Smiling beneath his hood, Dellóm takes a swift drink.

“What’s to tell? Yes, I live and work in the city, although like any craftsman I may be called to journey to another if the guild should wish it. Even my small skills may be called upon when there is need.”

“For now, I work for a Lord who pays me well and keeps me busy. Which is why I dress as I do, but cannot take advantage of it in the better parts of town.” he continued.

Holding his hand to his chest as if a momentary twinge there had caused him pain. “Lords everywhere. Seems that if they want something done and they think they will get a speck of dirt on them, they send an underling. bah!”

Taking another, larger, drink, he sat for a moment lost in thought before continuing. “So I come here to try to relax. Now your turns. Tell me about yourselves.”

Khorazir

“As for me,” Arandur answered, “I am just a common ranger of Ithilien. But since my family lives in the city, I return here now and again when not on duty – also to relax (in a way). And to meet old friends, of course.” He smiled at his two companions.

Canamarth

“And I have just finished school as a matter of fact,” Maradir added. “I have joined the military for some basic training. But I am not sure if I will stay there long.” Maradir shifted his position on the chair. “May I ask which Lord you serve, Mithas?” he ventured. “Maybe I know him.”

Khorazir

Greatly interested in hearing where Mithas’ loyalties lay, Arandur watched him attentively. It seemed to him that the other hesitated very briefly, as if to think of an appropriate answer.

Dellóm

Taking a drink, he thought quickly about his answer and of how much he should reveal.

“He is a minor noble, barely noticable to those higher, except for when they might have need of something. His family bought their nobility, like many other merchant families did, a few years ago when it was the fashion.”

He eyed the trio, watching their reactions to see how much of his story they believed and how much more he would have to tell.

“Now, Lord Janik merely uses the title when he wants to appear important in his travels and trades.” he said, using the name of a lord that he had set up for just this purpose, one who was conveniently away for much of the time.

Khorazir

Arandur nodded his head slightly, still watching Mithas keenly. “I have heard about these wealthy merchants trying to aquire certain titles in the hope of increasing their influence, even among the “genuine” nobles of the realm, who were not very happy about these developments, as one can imagine. Fearing for their inherited, “natural” status, maybe.”

There was a note of irony in his voice. “But I do believe that it has certain advantages when dealing with customers. People tend to be easily impressed by a noble title.”

Canamarth

“Not that we would know anything about it,” Túrin interposed.

Maradir rose quickly and said: “I think it’s time for another drink. What can I bring you, Mithas?”

Khorazir

Arandur smiled slightly at his two companions’ attempts to prevent him from revealing too much of his knowledge of Gondorian nobility. Normally it was rather Túrin who had to be silenced. But Arandur had done this on purpose, trying to find out how much Mithas knew of these matters, and how deeply he was concerned with the nobles of Gondor. Something about this man seemed exceedingly strange to Arandur, and had roused not only his curiosity, but also his suspicion. Moreover he was convinced that Mithas knew a good deal more about the three of them and their true background than he revealed.

Thus he continued to watch him carefully as Mithas answered Maradir, wondering to what new topics the conversation would turn eventually – and what kind of drink Maradir would aquire. The last had been better than the “beer”, but somewhat strange nevertheless.

Dellóm

Nodding his head in agreement with Arandur, he turned to Maradir, “Just more of my usual, thanks.” The lights catching and revealing more of his mask.

“Heh, my master doesn’t even realize that, unlike him, many of the nobles now believe they were born to it. So elevat-

ed is their opinions of themselves.” he smiled.

A little dispute between nobles and the master merchants may do some good in the long run, he thought. And these three seem to know quite a bit more than they are allowing to they know. I think I will be able to use them afterall.

His thoughts hidden as he took another drink, he leaned to the table and said quietly, almost conspiratorially, “Many of the other master merchants in the city are becoming tired of these ‘bought’ lords and actually see them as being so. That the nobles have ‘bought’ themselves some merchants so that they may have more power in the city.”

Leaning back, he looked around as if worried that others may have heard what he said, then leaned forward to continue. “And from what I’ve overheard in passing, many nobles believe this as well.”

Sitting back, he shook his head. “Sometimes, I can not believe the idiocy of it all.”

Khorazir

“You are right, it seems idiotic to us who are not really concerned with these matters,” Arandur agreed. “And that there has always been strife among the nobles of Gondor is no secret. They will leap at anything that gives them reason to renew their old feuds. Thus they may welcome these new developments as much as anything else. But is there nothing else to talk about than politics? I find it a rather dull topic.”

“Yeah, I can only agree,” Túrin said, jokingly stifling a yawn. Turning to Mithas, he added: “Tell us, Mithas, were you born here in Minas Tirith, or do you hail from another part of Gondor.”

Canamarth

Maradir returned and put down the drinks. They were the same as last time but he had also brought shots for everyone.

Túrin smelled his one and looked at Maradir disbelievingly. “You sure we should drink that?”

“Are you afraid you’re going to pass out?”

“No, of course not.” And he drowned the shot in one gulp. He did not pass out but could not stifle a cough.

Maradir turned to Mithas. “Sorry for interrupting you. Where did you say you came from?” And he also drowned his shot. But he managed not to show any reaction.

Dellóm

Reaching across the table, he grabbed one of the shots and another mug and dropped the shot in it, before sitting back. “I’m from..” he stopped as the dicing group again became loud, arguing.

“CHEAT!” one said, pulling a dirk and swiping at the thrower. “I caught you that time! You’ve got another set of dice up your sleeve!”

His hand grabbed the bigger man’s wrist and jerks the sleeve so the other dice fall out.

Khorazir

Seeing that the commotion at the other table occupied his companions' attention for the moment, Arandur reached for a shot as well, and after sipping it carefully, drowned the rest in one gulp. It felt like pure acid, and he had trouble stifling a cough. Luckily none of the others seemed to have noticed. Then he, too, turned his attention to the dice-table, where the red-haired guy had grabbed the small pale one by the ears this time, and was shaking him violently. The other did not look too happy. Ogl of the innkeeper was just hastening to the table to try and settle the matter peacefully, although his chances looked considerably low this time, given the furious mood of Dorgil the Red, who now had drawn his dagger again, and was pressing it against the pale man's nose.

"Now, tell me, ratty, where else have yeh hidden yer false dice? Speak up, or I'll cut yeh up like mince-meat!"

Canamarth

"Well, seems we're finally in for some action," Túrin blurted out.

"Take care that you don't suddenly become the centre of the action," Maradir returned and pointed at Dorgil who now looked at Túrin. He had apparently heard what the young man had said.

gladrieltook

"cool it dorgil." came a soft but stern voice from behind them. A tall golden haired woman stepped out of the shadows. She pulled a long sword from it's sheath on her back, and leapt over the table towards dorgil. he pulled his own sword, but she was too fast. her blade tip rested neatly against his forehead. "now, you wanna make something of it?"

Khorazir

Dorgil froze and stared at the blade, and the lady wielding it so skillfully. There was the ring of weapons being drawn from sheaths all around the dice table. The pale man of whom Dorgil had let go in order to draw his sword slunk away holding his ears.

"Erm ... lady ...," Dorgil began cautiously, squinting at the blade, "I wouldn't do this if I was yeh! Really!" His men closed round. "Not if yeh want ter keep yer pretty face. This isn't yer bus'ness. It's just me an' the boy over there."

He pointed in Túrin's direction, who was staring open-mouthed at the blonde lady. His former special acquaintance seemed forgotten. "Wow!" he managed.

gladrieltook

"No more fight'n. Or cheat'n for that matter. Laeve the kid alone, he ain't done noth'n to you." she sheathed her sword and strode away calmly, completely oblivious to the mass of drawn weapons about her. she pulled a chair up to Turin's table and sat down. "Don't worry, Dorgil's all talk, that's why he's got his band of cronies."

Khorazir

"That's what I thought, too," Túrin said, unable to draw his gaze from the lady. His two friends looked at them and

grinned broadly, and Mithas, too, seemed to smile – it was hard to tell with his hood and mask.

“But ... er ... I'm forgetting my manners,” Túrin continued. “My name is Túrin.”

He scrambled from his chair and bowed, then reached out to take her hand and kiss it. His friends turned away – to hide their silent laughter, maybe. “Thank you for helping me with this Dorgil character. I'm obliged. May I ask for your name, fair lady?”

Dellóm

Swiftly downing his mug, with the shot inside, Dellóm set it down and watched Túrin and girl flirt with each other, noting in Túrin's actions toward her that he had been schooled so that he was at least one of the lower nobility. A small smile played across his mask as the plates shifted.

Ab, perhaps some more talk about discord between the nobility and the merchants will find waiting ears, after all, he thought. But first, a little drunken talk to add believability to my stories.

Feigning the beginnings of drunkenness, he called loudly to the serving girl to bring another round of mugs and shots. He would have to be careful though, for soon his antidote for the drink would begin to wear thin and he would indeed begin to get as drunk as he was now acting.

“You should hear the way some of the other servants in the merchant's quarter speak of their masters and the nobility. You would think that the merchants were better than the nobles, from what I hear.” his words slurring a little as he acted like he was trying to speak quietly, his voice actually louder.

“I'm sorry, forgive me.” he said, as if remembering himself and where he was at. “I should not speak so...and I have been rude to our newest table partner.”

The serving girl sat the mugs and shots on the table. Dodging one of the men at another table, she returned quickly to the bar for the next customer's order.

gladrieltook

“the name's Vic. I come in here every once in a while and know the more frequent characters. what are you doing in this part of town, anyway? this is a home for theifs, traitors, and others of the sort.”

her dark silvery eyes flashed as she looked around, then whispered, “i'm a bounty hunter and that's all i'll say for now.” she adjusted the dark leather belt around her waist. she looked like a hunter, wearing brown pants and a loose green shirt under a leather jerkin. her boots were of the same soft leather as her belt, with soft soles for moving silently.

Khorazir

While Túrin was busy flirting with his new acquaintance, who, as Arandur noticed, did not quite share his eagerness of getting to know the other, he shifted his attention back to Mithas. The strange man seemed to have drunk more than was good for him – or at least made it look that way. And he had returned the topic to the matters of the nobles and merchants. Arandur wondered why. When the serving-girl had set another round of drinks on the table, Arandur did not take one. Better to keep his wits together in company like this. Mithas appeared to be eager to find out more about them, and Arandur, too, desired to know more about the man.

“Yes, we have all been rude,” he said after Mithas' last remark, looking to Túrin and the lady. “Why do you not intro-

duce us to your friend, Túrin?" Túrin spun round to him and gave him a wild look which implied that he did not want to be disturbed right now, but then he calmed down, muttering: "Oh, yes, sorry."

He turned to Vic. "May I introduce you to my friends? This is Maradir, and this Arandur. And the gent over there is Mithas, who has joined us for the evening. And this, friends, is Vic" – he lowered his voice conspiratorially, and added with a mysterious smile: "the bounty hunter."

Arandur nodded towards her and smiled. "Pleased to meet you, Vic. You asked what brings us here in this disreputable place. Well, as we have explained to Mithas already, my friends thought it a good idea to drag me here to have some fun, and to celebrate my coming of age, once midnight has passed. You say you visit this place now and again. May I ask whence you come? You do not look like a resident of the City."

Canamarth

When Túrin presented Vic as the bounty hunter Maradir could not help but grin. When he saw that she had seen his grin he nodded gravely towards her as if in appreciation of her occupation.

This is getting more interested by the minute.

gladrieltook

"I am a wanderer. I have no permanent residence, but I lived in rohan when I was a child. I am not a native of that land, however.

Khorazir

"I see," Arandur said slowly. "Well, anyway," he continued with a smile, "nice of you to join us, Vic." Túrin blushed slightly.

"Would you allow me to order you a drink, lady?" he asked swiftly, perhaps to draw her attention back to him. "Well, not that the drinks here are that nice, but, well, Mithas here has put in a good word for us at the innkeeper's so that the stuff we get now is at least drinkable ...," he ended a little lamely, with a sheepish grin.

"Oh my goodness," Arandur whispered to Maradir who sat biting his lip in order to keep himself from bursting into laughter. "This is so embarrassing. I think we better go and leave the two to themselves. If he goes on like this, I tell you I shall not manage to uphold a serious face any longer."

Maradir only nodded.

gladrieltook

"no thanks. anyway," she turned her attention to turin's companion."you never answered my question. what are you three doing in this part of town? you don't look like any of the sort here."

Dellóm

Downing his mug, with the shot dropped inside it, he slammed the mug down.

“Hokay. Thash going to be the lasht of those I drink for a while.” he said, picking his words carefully. “Too many more and I’ll be shleeping under the tables tonight.”

“I don’t know about theshe three, but I’m here to unwind after a long day of my mashter’s work.”

Mithas swayed slightly, grabbing the table to steady himself. “I never wash good at...shtrong drink. I alwaysh end up talking too mush and can never sheem to walk shstraight.”

Canamarth

Maradir turned to Vic. “But we told you that we are here to celebrate Arandur’s coming of age. We thought a slight change of surroundings would be good for him, you know. To get some experience.” He smiled broadly. “The pub we usually go to is in the fourth circle of the city. Middle-class boredom, if you know what I mean. We thought we should do something different for this special occasion.”

“I have rarely seen a man who is even faster in getting really drunk than Túrin,” Maradir added whispering to Arandur.

gladrieltook

“oh did you. sorry must not have been listening. anyway, you came to the right place to do it at. just don’t get yourselves into trouble. there are people here that could turn you inside out if they got the notion to.”

Khorazir

“Right,” Arandur replied whispering to Maradir, “I wonder what he is up to. It seemed to me as if he was interested in finding out how much we know about the noble circles of Gondor. But now ... I do not really know what to make of his behaviour.

“Well, Vic,” he said aloud, turning to her, “Maradir has explained our purpose for visiting this place better than I did. I am not sure if I really need to gather new experiences – especially in this field -, but my friends think so, apparently. I do hope that they will look after me should things turn nasty – which I do not hope,” he said with a grin at Maradir and Túrin which implied that when it came to it, he could defend himself pretty well.

“Thank you for your warning, anyway. But so far, I must admit, it has been a rather interesting experience.” His eyes briefly flicked to Mithas, then he looked at Vic again. “But tell us, if you will, what brings you to a place like this? It does not seem quite appropriate for you as well, if I may say so. And by the way,” he added in a low voice, leaning a little closer to her, “if Túrin’s attempts to win your interest trouble you, just tell him so. He is known for his rather direct approach to women, which can be quite embarrassing for all witnessing his behaviour, and the lady in question, of course. And he needs a reproach now and again to diminish his overflowing self-confidence. But do not be too hard on him.”

Canamarth

Túrin came back with another round of drinks and shots. When he saw Arandur bent over the table and whispering to Vic, he turned demonstratively to Mithas. “I brought you another drink. If you still don’t want it I’ll drink it myself.”

Khorazir

Arandur sat back again and grinned when he noticed Túrin's dark glance upon him. Then he studied Mithas. Either the man was really drunk, or he was a very convincing actor. *What a fine gathering*, he thought smiling, looking at the five of them, and imagined what his father would say if he knew in what kind of company and moreover what place his son was now. Then a slight shadow passed over his face, and his smile faded. Most likely his father would not care at all.

gladrieltook

"I'm a fighter and a social outcast. all of us regulars are. society don't like me, i don't like society. this place is a haven for outcasts and loners. they come here for a drink, and the latest news. don't like nobles, these folk. specially those who look down on us." her eyes flashed again. she looked angry for some reason. vic would say no more

Dellóm

"Exzacly, nobles always looking down their noshes...es." grabbing another mug and shot, dropping the shot into the mug and then slamming it all down, Mithas shuddered a little.
"Shmooth," he said breathlessly.

Keeping his drunken act going, he watched the four others, noting the whisperings and what has been said, trying to find out more about each, from the clothes they wear, to their mannerisms, to the weapons, all would give him some further clue and with each clue a better idea of how to use them.

After sitting for some time, he stood slowly and began to walk unsteadily to the door, "Be right back...need to water some flowersh...heh. flowersh...heh heh."

Stumbling to the alley, looking for all the world like a drunkard bent on relief or passing out, he stopped inside and summoned his shadowy self.

Watch them. I will return soon.

With that, he slipped further into the alley, fading into the shadows.

gladrieltook

"okay, that was weird" vic said finally

Khorazir

"Sorry to hear that you do not like nobles, Vic," Arandur said with a slight smile, wondering briefly what exactly had made Mithas leave. That he had to follow nature's call somehow seemed not convincing. "But I agree with you. There are many who believe that they are far superior to others, and look down on the "plain folk" haughtily, abusing them for their purposes. Yet there are exceptions to this, I hope," he ended, studying her face.

The bitterness in her remark had touched him, and he wondered what she had experienced to have this dark an image

of Gondorian nobility. And she appeared to be not the only one carrying resentments against the nobles. Mithas seemed not to be on friendly terms with them either, or at least thus he pretended, and the other patrons of the "Troll's Nose" would most likely beat up any noble coming here for mere pleasure. *Great expectations*, Arandur thought with a wry smile. *Let us only hope no one here finds out who I really am, or I am in very big trouble indeed.*

gladrieltook

"I meself don't mind some of em, but most is just plain intorerable" she grinned "never pay you enough for your services on the battlefeild and only hire ya for one war. Na, we folk are better off without um. never cared much for politics meself"

Canamarth

"I know exactly what you are talking about," Túrin joined in again. "Politics can be so dull. Uh - not that I know about these things. They just seem so from afar."

Maradir smiled at Túrin. He somehow felt relieved at Mithas' disappearance. He did not trust him as far as he could throw him. He also joined in the conversation with the new arrival.

"Vic, I have just joined the military and I can say that there are a lot of insufferable poms in the higer ranks. But I have met nice nobles as well. Did you have particularly bad experiences with one them? And if so, is there anyone I would know?"

Khorazir

Arandur smiled to himself at Maradir's words, while waiting for Vic's answer. He knew quite well what his friend was talking about, having served in the military for six years now, since he was eighteen. Also he thought that Maradir's remark had been aimed at some nobles in particular.

Dellóm

Returning from the shadows of the alley, Dellóm walked slowly talking to a few seedy looking men.

Turning to the one who faintly resembled a weasel, "You know the plan, you're to pick a fight with someone and get tossed to our table, when you go to get away, 'bump' into one of them and get whatever you can from them. I'll look it over in the hall."

Motioning to the other two, he pointed to the big one, "You're to get very rowdy and drunk, I want plenty of diversions for our friend to use in picking pockets and escaping."

"Last, Jonas," he said as he turned to the last of the three. The kind of fellow who looked like he belonged in the troll's nose, but also looked like someone you could trust, he would not stand out in the crowd. "It seems that all except the girl has a fondness for nobles. I want you to enrage the crowd against nobles. Whisper your words into listening ears and move on, do not stay too long to be remembered or recognized later."

A shadowy form removed itself from the pub wall and was absorbed by Dellóm. The other three paled at the sorcery but said nothing, fearing the master of the guild.

“I will enter first and you will each wait until enough time has passed before you come in. Enter one at a time so that no one may connect you all together later.”

Turning from the three, Dellóm stumbled from the alley adjusting his pants and singing a little song about a lass from the Grey Havens as he entered the Troll’s Nose and made his way back to the table. Sitting down heavily, he motioned for another round for everyone, and watched everything unfold as he continues his drunken act.

gladrieltook

“my parents were once a duke and duchess, but they were shuned by the steward and his officers. they were sent to the gallows for a crime they did not commit. i was very young, only 7. i was smuggled out of the city by a group of my parent’s loyal friends and taken to rohan. i was raised by my cousins there. but to this day i detest those close to the steward or the officers that murdered my mother and father.” she spotted mithas and, eager to change the subject said,” oh, it would seem our drunken friend is back”

however, she could see straight through his act and was attempting do deshipher his mission.

Khorazir

Arandur had listened to Vic’s account with a grave, thoughtful face, even though, at her last remark, before Mithas had sat down at the table again, he had not been able to prevent a brief grin. “I am sorry to hear that, Vic,” he said earnestly. “’tis indeed a grievous thing that happened to your parents.”

“Yeah,” Túrin agreed, giving her a compassionate glance. “But,” he continued, and the grave note had left his voice - in fact it sounded rather merry, “I must say I don’t like the steward and his family either - and am not the only one here, I bet. Look at old Denethor. I mean, the guy’s plain creepy, isn’t he? And this son of his, Boromir, from what one hears he’s really proud and haughty. And the other ... don’t recall the name now ... - well, anyway, he doesn’t seem to be much able either. Strange bunch, the lot of them.”

Canamarth

Maradir had to get up. He turned from his companions and muttered something about going out and taking a piss. His voice sounded as if he was stifling a laugh.

Outside he almost bumped into someone who faintly resembled a weasel. The weasel apologized - something rather strange in surroundings like these and entered the pub.

Maradir relieved himself in a back alley and somehow felt like he was being watched. But he could not help laughing out loud at the recollection of the conversation that had been going on inside.

When he readjusted his clothing he suddenly felt that something was missing from his belt - the dagger his stepfather had given him. Maradir could not help picturing the friendly weasel and stepped inside eagerly. That guy was in for trouble.

Khorazir

Arandur, too, had needed all his self-control to keep himself from bursting into laughter, and for a moment considered joining Maradir, but then thought the better of it, and remained seated. “Guess you know best, Túrin, as usual,” he

said. He saw Mithas' studying the two of them with a keen glance, and Vic observing Mithas' reaction. Everybody appeared to be eager to find out more about the others without revealing too much of him- or herself. Arandur found it rather amusing.

Looking up, he saw Maradir entering the inn again. But instead of returning to their table immediately, he briefly remained standing near the doorway, studying the assembly of various folk - but not so that it appeared suspicious, or in any way remarkable. Yet Arandur knew his friend, and he wondered what had befallen outside. Maradir seemed to be searching for someone.

Canamarth

Maradir at length spotted the weasel. He had settled down not too far off from their table and was engaged in a very agitated conversation with the guys around him. It seemed as if he was trying to pick a fight. You can have that, Maradir thought and strode over to him, one hand on the hilt of his sword.

Khorazir

Túrin had followed Arandur's gaze, and spotted Maradir approaching a group surrounding a weasel-faced man. He leaned towards his friend. "What's going on there?" he asked in a low voice.

Arandur shrugged, still watching Maradir attentively, and with some anxiety. "I have no idea, Túrin," he replied. "But Maradir looks definitely angry, if you ask me."

Canamarth

Maradir interrupted the quarrel with a very quiet but strong voice. "I am sorry to interrupt you but I need to talk with this weasel here. I believe you have found something which belongs to me. Give it back now and I might forget about it. Or get to know my trusty friend here." With that he drew his longsword, very plain one but with a sharp and shining blade.

Khorazir

"You're right", Túrin said, his eyes shining, and he half-rose in excitement. "That does look like trouble. Ooh, d'you think we should go and assist him. He's still so young and all ..."

Arandur put a hand to his shoulder and gently pressed him down in his seat again. "Honestly, Túrin, it does not appear as if he needs our help. Looks to me as if he is getting along splendidly. And he is not much younger than you, actually." He spoke lightly but nevertheless he, too, looked a tiny bit concerned as he continued to watch.

"But ...," Túrin began, "I mean ... look at these guys. They're going to ..."

"I do not think so!" Arandur said, with a slight smile. The point of Maradir's sword was pressed firmly against the weasel's nose, forcing him to raise his head ever higher in order to prevent him from ending up with a third nostril. The weasel looked not too happy about this development, and his companions, even though they had all drawn various crude looking weapons, seemed unsure what to begin with them.

"Er, Arandur," Túrin whispered to him, "by the way ... do you happen to have any arms with you?"

Without drawing his gaze from Maradir, Arandur leaned closer to Túrin and returned whispering: "This may be my first visit to a place like this, Túrin, but I am interested in getting a little older than only twenty-five, you know."

"Well, you're not even that yet, as a matter of fact."

"Right."

gladrieltook

"please. this is too pathetic." vis rose and stood by maradir. she crossed her arms and looked expressionlessly at the weasel.

Canamarth

Maradir realized that the guys at the table, with whom the weasel had quarreled formerly now had drawn their weapons as if to protect him if necessary. He felt that something was not quite right here. And he somehow was relieved when Vic joined him, though he was not in imminent danger.

"Well, weasel. How is this going to end?"

Khorazir

"I don't know what ya mean, boy!" the weasel said, trying to speak in a steady, self-assured voice, which he did not manage quite convincingly. He continued to squint nervously at the point of Maradir's sword that was now resting against his cheek. The others had closed round now. It looked as if they only waited for a sign from the weasel to interfere.

Arandur had risen from his chair for a better look. He knew that normally Maradir could deal with a situation like this alone, and moreover now Vic was with him, who had already shown her skill with the sword, but for some reason anxiety had begun to creep on Arandur. There was something strange and uncanny about the whole matter, and his years as a ranger in Ithilien had made him extremely wary of this kind of situation. Moreover he had learned to trust to his instincts, and the premonition of danger was always something to be taken seriously.

"I think you are right after all, Túrin," he said softly. "We should have a look what is going on there." With that he left the table, and walked cautiously towards the group surrounding Maradir, Vic and the weasel. Túrin followed him.

gladrieltook

vic drew her sword and held it at ready. she turned to the men around her and said, "get back or i'll gut the whole lot of ya."

she to sensed something. her eyes flitted back and forth as she searched for their former companion. she spotted him in a doorway not far away, watching with amusement. her eyes narrowed as her mind read his face, and more importantly, his cold eyes. Mithas's eyes betrayed him. they spoke of deceit, thievery, and evil thoughts. she moved towards him, ready to fight. but as she reached the spot where he had been earlier, she realized that he had dissapeared. just in time, vic saw him cut around a corner. she sped after him, moving astonishingly agile and fast. she began to gain on him...

Dellóm

Ducking quickly into an alley, Dellóm was enveloped by the shadows, becoming as insubstantial and as dark as they. He waited, watching Vic round the corner and come into the alley.

So, the bounty hunters come for me finally. She did not fool me with her banter, he thought watching her pause and then move cautiously further into the alley, the darkness would give her prey a chance to hide, especially given the way Mithas was dressed. *The masters of the city have been seeking the one causing mischief and must have hired her to hunt for the culprits, too bad for her.*

Watching her advance further, he moved behind her, she tensed sensing his movement, but could not see him and when she spun, her sword low, she found nothing. Moving further into the alley, Vic spotted the street lamps at the other end and began to walk more quickly thinking that Dellóm had sped through the alley and already escaped into the night.

At that moment, Dellóm swung, his dagger and hand becoming solid just before it struck her behind the ear, dropping her unconscious to the mud of the alley. Solidifying, Dellóm reached down and grabbed her hair, jerking her head back for the killing strike when he heard more pursuit.

“We will meet again, huntress.” he spoke quietly before stepping into the shadows and traveling to his guild office to wait for his underlings to report.

<Meanwhile>

Giving a quick motion with the hand behind his back, the weasel gestured for the big man to begin his part of the plan. Which he did by throwing a stool across the bar. Striking the wall and shattering the pieces flew into the pub and struck many who in turn turned towards the trio and the weasel, drunk and quickly enraged by the act.

Jonas, who had been moving quietly through the crowd, whispering his venomous words against the nobles of the city and the three who had been ‘slumming’ in the pub, until now, quickly shouted. “The nobles are trying to kill Marcus! Stop them!”

Many of the drunks, so far gone and easily led by this time, immediately charged the three, while the weasel quickly stepped back and turning, ran into the big man who picked him up and threw him, in much the same manner as he had the stool, across the bar and out a window. With that, everything became a mad house.

gladrieltook

vic awoke to a thobbing headache. she sat up and gently touched the lump behind her ear. she stood and started back to the pub. her old limp was bothering her. shouldn't have put so much strain on it she thought as she entered the pub. All hell seemed to have esued while she was chasing her quarry. she searched the crowd for her friends. she spotted them on the other side of the room. Vic fought her way towards them. this is ridicuolas! that weasel's work'n for Mithas! i bet my sword he started this!

Khorazir

The trio had so far managed to avoid getting engaged in the fight by stepping out of the way when the brawl began. Maradir had seen the weasel fly out of a window, and was edging towards the door. Apparently the guy had robbed him of something that he wanted to recover. The others followed, winding lithely through the tangled, seething mass of bodies and furniture. Looking towards the doorway, Arandur noticed that Vic had returned, her face pale, and

drawn as if with pain. He wondered what had befallen her outside, and his suspicion leapt to Mithas. And while he was thus engaged in his thoughts, he did not realise exactly where he was walking. He bumped into a huge black-bearded brute, overtowering him - even though he was quite tall himself - by at least half a head. Looking up from the tangled beard into the man's face, he swiftly stepped back and murmured an apology - and knew instantly that this had been quite vain. Before Arandur could vanish in the boiling crowd, the brute had put an enormous hand to his shoulder and pulled him back. Looking down at the young man furiously, suddenly his eyes narrowed with hatred.

"I know you, boy!" he growled, and Arandur reeled from the smell of his breath.

"Good for you," he returned, and with a swift movement wound out of his grasp. But the brute grappled him again and forced him to turn about and face him.

"Good for me, bad for you!" he said with an evil grin, and raised his fist. But before he could deal the blow, which surely would have sent Arandur flying to the other end of the room, a small hooded guy standing on a table nearby, wielding a scimitar to keep the infuriated crowd away from him cried out: "Yeah, I know him too. He's the blasted Steward's son!"

Canamarth

On hearing this exclamation, Maradir forgot all about his dagger. He needed to help his best friend. He spun around just in time to prevent an old hag from trying to crush Faramir's skull with a stone bowl. He wrenched the weapon from her grip and threw it at the guy with the scimitar instead. But he managed to duck so that it hit a different patron. All the while the hag beat at him with her fists. It wasn't painful but quite annoying so he eventually threw her aside unceremonially.

Túrin in the meantime tried to reach them. He had been separated from them by two women who first fought amongst themselves to then turn on Túrin.

Khorazir

Faramir had narrowly escaped being beaten to death by the hag's stone bowl by leaping aside swiftly as she lounged at him. From the corner of his eye he saw Maradir launching himself at the hag, wrenching the bowl from her grasp and casting it away. But Faramir had no time to see what happened next to his friend, for he felt himself gripped around the neck by a giant hand. His leap to avoid the stone-bowl had brought him in reach of the black-bearded brute again. Yet before the huge man could throttle him, he had, with all the strength he could muster, rammed his elbow in the brute's stomach. The man groaned and let go of his throat.

Gasping for breath, Faramir dived under a flailing arm not particularly aimed at him and saw to it that he came out of the reach of the brute. Jumping backwards, he tumbled against two of the guys that had surrounded Maradir and the weasel a short while ago. One raised a dagger to stab at him, missing his shoulder by inches, while the other aimed a fist-blow at his face. That one hit. Faramir's nose started bleeding, but he hardly realised it, nor he pain, because he was still trying to evade the other's knife. With a nimble movement he ducked under a blow, and when he came up again, he had a long slender knife in his hands, which apparently he had worn concealed under his tunic.

His attacker blanched and stepped backwards, not being one of the brave sort, seemingly. But before Faramir could begin to appreciate the turn of fortune, he became aware of a movement behind him, and in the same moment felt a savage blow against his side, that sent him stumbling against a table, and made him almost lose his weapon. The brute had found him again.

Canamarth

When Maradir thought he had made enough space to get to his friend's side, Faramir was swept away in the fray. *Blast it*, Maradir thought. *If ever Denethor gets to know about this I'll probably find myself running errands in the Black Land itself.*

As soon as he had spotted Faramir some distance away and engaged with what appeared to be a giant, he tried to move towards him. This time his progress was blocked by the small guy with the scimitar. Maradir raised his sword and they started fighting.

gladrieltook

vic moved over to arandur/faramir, grabbed his wrist, pulled a hood over his head, and pulled him to the door where she had seen mithas before. she led him out into the ally and said "are you crazy? now every person in that place knows who you are! this is not good! i'm going to loose my job or worse! your father sent me to make sure no one figured out who you were! we've got to get you back to the palace! come on!" she grabbed his wrist again and dragged him in the direction of the palace.

Khorazir

"Woah, wait a moment," Faramir cried, stopped dead and shook off her hand. "If you think I am going to leave my friends in there you are mistaken. I do not know what Denethor's command was to you, but I can look after myself. Tell him that! Moreover he uses not care about me very much. That in there they found out about my true identity was not my idea, as you can guess. Someone must have stirred them into this, and I guess I have a pretty good idea who it was. Listen, I do appreciate your eagerness to save my life, but I do not think that the situation is quite that bad. If you really want to help me, then go and find this Mithas - the guy in the mask! Get hold of him, if you can, and bring him to the guards. I am sure he is at the bottom of things, and I should be interested in a word with him - and the Lord Steward as well, I deem."

With that he turned about and ran back to the Inn. But halfway he turned about again and called: "And thanks for the hood!"

Dellóm

Slowly the weasel approached Dellóm's desk, limping and obviously in a great deal of pain from not quite clearing the window jam as he went through it.

"Master, I have something." he groveled.

Staring at him, Dellóm's mask shifted slowly as if reflecting his thoughtful posture. "Thank you Meric. Leave it on the desk."

Obviously releaved at his master's casual manner, Meric layed the dagger and turned to leave. "Wait Meric, I have another task for you." Dellóm spoke again, still in the same casual way.

Turning around, Meric waited as Dellóm stood and moved from behind the desk, approaching the little weasel faced man. His mask began to change, slipping from aspect to aspect, like water over the stones of a brook, his voice adding to the effect and causing a calming feeling to steal across the weasel. By then it was too late.

Dellóm's hand struck out and grabbed the little thief by the neck, lifting him clear of the floor and pulling him close. "I am disappointed in you, Meric." his voice calm, more menacing for that fact than if he were to be raging at the little

man. "You were supposed to wait until entering the pub to begin the plans. Instead, you did your little deed too early and forced my hand. Because of that, many of my plans for those three are now no longer options. Because of that, I had to waste too much energy to escape. Because of that, you will be punished."

The little thief quaked as his master explained to him about his failing and on the mention of punishment, he lost control of his body's functions. He had seen this punishment performed on another.

"No master! Please, I can do better. I can serve you better!" he begged.

"Yes, you will." he said as he leaned his masked face closer and closer to the thieves. As the hidden plates slid down and covered Dellóm's eyes, the thief began to struggle more, whimpering. When the hidden plates began to glow a dull red, he began to scream.

Later, his body was found by the city gate, his face one massive scar and his body appeared to be drained of everything that once resembled life. The fourth in that month alone.

gladrieltook

vic dashed after him. she easily overtook him, being smaller and thinner. she grabbed his arm. "it's no use. mithas already got away! how do you think i got this?" she held back her hair, revealing a bloody lump. go to the tower and tell the gaurd to send a troop to the area around the troll's nose. tell him i sent you! don't worry about your friends! i'll get them to safety! GO!" she darted off into the pub.

she came to the common room and immediatly spotted maradir. she hurried over and knocked out the guy he was fighting with the hilt of her sword. "i've sent faramir to the tower. i also promised him i'd get you out safely. get to the ally and wait for me there." she darted off to find turin.

she spotted him and darted over. but in her hurry she knocked over a candle sitting one of the tables. it instantly set fire to the wooden table and floor. However, to obsorbed in the brawl, no one noticed. vic reached turin and gave him the same instructions she'd given maradir. by then the flames from the candle had spread and the pub goers had noticed. they forgot their brawl and made for the exits or tried to douse the flames with their beer. vic made her way to the hall door but the flames had spread there as well as behind her. she was trapped! she was overcome by the fumes and collapsed.

Khorazir

Faramir looked after Vic as she vanished in the tavern again, anger stirring slightly in him. He was not used to being commanded about, not be some strange bounty-hunter. But in this she was right. He had to get the guards. Yet running up to the Citadel would take far too long. The "Troll's Nose" was situated in the Second Circle. *The Main Gate then*, he thought, and dashed off. As he ran, his nose started bleeding again, and also he felt a stabbing pain in his side which made breathing difficult. Apparently some of his ribs were badly bruised, or even broken. Thus he arrived at the Gate fighting for breath. The guards had seen him from afar, and now approached him.

"The Gate is closed during the night, boy," the captain said sternly, giving him a keen and not too compassionate glance.

"I know that, Tirion," Faramir gasped. Tirion cocked an eyebrow, wondering perhaps whence this young man, who stood there panting, with dishevelled hair and disarrayed clothing and a bleeding nose, knew his name.

"So what is it? Speak up!"

"There is a fight going on at the "Troll's Nose"!"

Tirion laughed. "A fight, really? You know what, boy, they brawl in there every night. We choose not to care."

"Then choose to do so this time, Tirion!" Faramir said sharply, straightening up as much as his aching ribs allowed.

"This is serious. There are things going on that may endanger the whole City, aye, and even Gondor. Do you hear that? Now, get a score of men and get up there! And hurry!"

Tirion stared at him darkly and haughtily. "How dare you try and command me, boy?" he said. But then, taking a closer look, he realised who stood there in front of him. He blushed, and folded into a bow. "Lord Faramir ... I ... forgive me, but ..."

Faramir quickly put a hand to his shoulder and raised him. "Do you believe me now? Now do what I said! And have all men watch out for a dark man with a mask of shifting plates. He is the one who started it."

"Aye, lord," Tirion said, and signalled to his men. From the watchtower at the gate a trumpet rang, the signal being returned by others in the City. In a short while a company of two dozen armed and mailclad men were assembled about Faramir and Tirion. Faramir looked up towards the "Troll's Nose", and to his horror saw a thick spiral of smoke ascending, illumined by a reddish glow from below. "Curse it, they have set fire to the inn," he said, feeling a stab of anxiety and fear for his friends. "We have no time to lose!"

gladrieltook

as she had not become completely unconscious, vic did what came naturally to any one in such a situation. she mustered the last of her strength and bellowed at the top of her lungs "HELP! SOMEBODY HELP ME!" her voice broke into sobs as she realized that she was all alone in the pub. Vic knew that her life span was coming to an end. she let one last help before finally fainted.

Khorazir

Túrin made his way towards the door, while looking out for Maradir, and trying to avoid being trampled by the mass of people who now tried to squeeze through door and windows. "Me beautiful inn, what are yeh doin' to me beautiful inn, yeh buggers!" he heard the desperate voice of Oglolf over the din.

Thick black smoke rose behind him and made him choke, and his eyes water. He stumbled as someone pushed him violently from behind to get past him, and crashed against a demolished chair, feeling a stab of pain in his shoulder that made him almost pass out with pain. One of the broken legs had rent a gash in his upper left arm. Cursing, he pulled himself up again and leant against the wall to catch his breath - which was almost impossible because of the biting smoke. Looking down at him, Túrin saw that the wound was not too deep, although it was long and bleeding considerably, and it was very painful. Pressing his right hand on the wound, he started for the door again, which by now was luckily free, all patrons having left the inn. The wooden ceiling was on fire now as well, and at one point the beams began to crumble and fall down.

Túrin narrowly escaped being buried by one as he made for the door. He was almost out of it, feeling already the fresh, cool nightair from outside, when he heard a desperate scream for help. Someone was still in there, and the voice had been that of a woman.

"Blast it," Túrin muttered, straining his eyes to see whence the cry had come. But smoke and flames were too thick now. For an instant he hesitated, but then he drew the collar of his tunic up over his nose and mouth, and plunged back into the inferno.

Canamarth

Maradir had been swept out of the Nose with the other patrons and was bandaging his shoulder which had been grazed by the scimitar. Vic had fortunately knocked the hooded guy out from behind before he could have done even more harm. His fighting skills had definitely been superior to Maradir's.

The shoulder was taken care of for the moment. Now he looked out for his companions. He had seen Vic pull out Faramir earlier but he had lost sight of Túrin. At length he espied him as one of the last to exit the inferno. But just before he stepped outside he turned around and after a short hesitation put up his collar and went back inside.

Maradir dashed after him. All hell broke loose on him as soon as he stepped inside. It was almost impossible to breathe and leave your eyes open. But Maradir soon found his friend. He was moving towards him, more staggering than walking, and he held a limp figure in his arms - Vic. Túrin himself was fighting against falling unconscious and lost the fight just as he reached Maradir. The latter grabbed him by the collar and dragged him and his burden behind him. They reached safety on the street just before the roof finally collapsed. (How could it be any different)

Khorazir

Luckily Tirion had ordered that the company be horsed, so that they returned to the "Nose" fairly swiftly, and without having to run again. Nevertheless riding hurt as well, and Faramir was glad when they halted in some distance of the burning tavern. "Let the men divide and search the surroundings," Faramir commanded. "Most likely the watch has sent men as well who can deal with the situation at the inn itself. I want any person looking somehow suspicious or in any way concerned with the goings on at the "Nose" held back and questioned. In particular look out for this masked stranger. He calls himself Mithas. And there is a small weasel-faced guy in a woollen hood. He could be wounded, for he was thrown out of a window. Try and find those two, or any traces of them. And be careful. This Mithas is dangerous!"

"And what about you, lord?" Tirion asked.

"I must see if my friends are all right," Faramir said, not even attempting to hide the anxiety in his voice. "Three men come with me!" he called, and urged his horse to a gallop.

He reached the narrow alley where the "Nose" was situated in the moment when the roof finally collapsed, and a large cloud of smoke and sparks flew up. People were running around frantically calling for water, or were just standing at a safe distance enjoying the sight. The owners of nearby houses were busy getting water from a nearby well, or organising bucket-chains. The whole street was crowded, and one could hardly see the burning house. Smoke was thick in the air and made breathing difficult.

Sliding from his horse and slightly whinching with pain when his feet hit the ground, Faramir made his way towards the remains of the tavern, anxiously looking out for his friends. The three guardsmen around him saw to it that the people let them pass. Most of the onlookers fled when they saw the officials. As an alley opened in the mass of people, Faramir saw three figures huddled close to a wall. Two were lying on the ground, their clothing and faces covered in soot, their hair slightly singed, and one kneeling at their side, a strip of cloth wound about his shoulder, reaching out to feel the pulse of the smaller of the figures.

Feeling a great surge of relief, Faramir ran over to them and knelt down beside Maradir.

Canamarth

"Good to see you, my friend," Maradir said. "Túrin here went back inside to save Vic. And I went after Túrin to save him - as usual." He started laughing but the laughter soon turned into a coughing fit. Faramir slapped him on the back. "Will they be alright?"

"I think so. But we should get them to a healer. Just to be on the safe side." Just then Túrin stirred. "See, he's waking up."

"What about you, Maradir? What happened to your shoulder?"

"It's just a little scratch. Nothing to worry about. What about you? And where have you been?"

Khorazir

"Vic dragged me out of the inn when the fight started to turn nasty. She spoke about having promised Denethor to look after me, whatever that means, and then she ran off to get you out. In the meantime I went and fetched some guards. They roam the area surrounding the inn. I have commanded them to take care of any suspicious looking persons hanging about. Also I told them to search for Mithas and this weasel-faced guy – even though I have little hope that they will manage to capture them." At this his gaze fell on the ground next to them. Pieces of charred wood, soot and ash lay about, and also splinters of glass. Faramir picked up a larger one carefully. There was some blood at the tip, and a bloody fingerprint below where apparently someone had touched the splinter to pull it out of a wound.

Faramir looked at Maradir. "He went right through the window, the weasel, did he not?"

Maradir nodded, his eyes bent on the shard of glass. "He must have cut his hands while trying to cover his face."

"Right," Faramir muttered thoughtfully, and began to search the ground about them, and the wall. Suddenly he held in, studying the stone wall behind them curiously. "See," he said excitedly, and pointed upwards, "here he pulled himself up. You can see the marks of his bloody fingers. And ... wait a moment ... they have trampled all the ground, but ..." – he went a few paces, his eyes fixed on the ground, which close to the wall was slightly muddy between the rough cobblestones – "... this could be his footprint. There is another shard of glass lying here, which may have fallen from his garments as he walked. And here is another hand at the wall. He must have steadied himself while he went."

Faramir turned to Maradir, his eyes shining. "What do you think, we could try and track him down. Tomorrow it could be too late."

"Yeah, do that, go and leave me here to die," a groaning voice came from below. Maradir and Faramir turned to Túrin, who was just trying to pull himself up to a sitting position.

His friends rushed to his side. Faramir signed to the guards who were trying to get some order into the mass of people still roaming the alley. "Get a cart and get those two up to the Houses of Healing. Tell the healers that the lady in particular needs help at once. She must have inhaled lots of smoke."

Seeing that Vic and Túrin were taken care off, Faramir slapped his friend's sound shoulder lightly. "I heard you were very brave, Túrin, he said. Trying to rescue the lady and all."

"I was plain stupid," Túrin said, but then he looked down on Vic's soot-smearred face, and smiled slightly and warmly. Looking up at his two friends, he said: "I guess I know now what you meant, Maradir. About the brave women and all. She came to get me out of the brawl. Saved my life, most likely. I only hope she'll make it," he added, swallowing slightly.

"And you two," he said sternly, to hide his upwelling emotions, "whatever you're up to, take care."

"Of course," Faramir said, before Maradir and he turned to follow the trace the weasel had left.

Dellóm

“Mallos! Come here and get rid of this...” Dellóm said, pointing at the remains of the weasel. “Drop this one someplace else this time. We don’t want to leave too many bodies in the same place, do we?”

Feeling much stronger now, after his feeding, he paced the hall. They would find him, he was sure of it. The little thief had been too scared to insure they couldn’t. Still, the sewers are a warren of passages and full of shadows, many ways for me to evade capture.

But, he thought. How can I persuade them to keep from searching for me after I escape. His mask shifted to a smile as he thought of a way. Yes, that will work fine.

Turning to the desk, he picked up the dagger and examined it.

“Ah, Meric did indeed bring me something of interest. I had no idea that I had been sitting with such nobility.” he spoke quietly, realizing who the dagger belonged to and who the other two would be. “This changes things, I will have to work harder on my plans now and change a few others.”

Motioning to one of the ‘eyes’ for the hall, Dellóm gave him some orders. “Send Jonas to me as soon as he returns, and ware the entrances. I suspect we will be having some guests soon. If we do, lay low for a while and then move to the baker’s pantry, that will be the new guild hall. Let everyone know.”

The hooded figure nodded and began to spread the news and the hall quickly emptied out, except for a skeleton crew to make it look like it was important if anyone were to come knocking. *That will do for a start. he thought. Now for the next step.*

Quickly he pulled a pouch free and spread the contents across the dagger’s handle, the powder fading quickly at being absorbed into the wrappings of the hilt.

He will have a few nightmares now. he smiled as the contact halucinagenic was absorbed.

Sometime later Jonas approached his desk and Dellóm quickly relayed what he’d told the guard and that Jonas was to continue his rumor-mill about the nobles, including a new one, that the nobles had burned down the troll’s nose and that it was all part of a plan to make the lower class more dependent on them.

“That’s the general theme. Make it up as you go, but make it believable. Now go.”

Jonas nodded and quickly left, while Dellóm settled back to wait.

gladrieltook

vic awoke with a start to a fit of coughing. she raised herself weakly and lookd around. she was in a small, well lit room lightly furnished with a low table, chair and, of course, the bed she was lying on. she sighed, which was only painful, as she layed back down,which was also painful.

vic tried to recall what had happened that night at the bar. she remembered teling faramir to get help, then running in to get his friends. she’d gotton them out, but something had happened between her getting them each out. something she couldn’t remember. then it came slowly back. she’d run into a table and knocked something over. a candle she relised with a painful jolt. i started that fire and put the others in danger!

she tried to get up again but found that she didn’t have the strength. she surrendured to the calls of sleep. her eyes shut and she knew no more

Khorazir

Meanwhile, having seen to it that Vic and Túrin were taken care of, and that they were escorted up to the Houses of Healing by the guards, Maradir and Faramir set out to follow the track of the weasel. It soon proved more difficult than they had assumed when finding the first traces, and it took them all the skill they had acquired in tracking. Faramir blessed his schooling as a ranger. Without that they would have lost sight of the track after crossing the first street. After much searching of ground and surrounding walls he detected a faint fingerprint, which indicated the further direction.

“Perhaps you should have an eye on our surroundings,” Faramir said. “Most likely people have seen us when we left the site of the burning. I would like to know if someone is following us, or else watching us. This Mithas is not stupid. He will have taken precautions against unwelcome visitors. And you have very keen eyes.”

Canamarth

Maradir was on the lookout and followed Faramir closely with one hand on the hilt of his sword. *I wish I had taken my bow*, he thought but then realized that he would have looked more than conspicuous running around Minas Tirith with a bow ready.

Faramir at length stopped and searched the ground closely. They had reached a small square with a dilapidated fountain in its middle. The square was bordered by houses of which none was illuminated. Either all had gone to sleep already or they were not inhabited at all. Some definitely looked that way.

Faramir, stooping low, almost crawling on the ground, slowly moved towards one of the better looking houses. Maradir watched it closely and thought he saw movement behind one of the dark windows. But they were all shut so that he was not too concerned right now. But he was definitely on his guard.

Khorazir

At length Faramir rose – with a sharp intake of breath – and turned to Maradir. “I think he went here to the well, and then to one of the houses,” he said in a low voice, “but I am not sure. There have been others walking around here lately, and they disturbed what has been left of the traces.”

He studied the surrounding houses with their shabby facades and blank, dark windows. Suddenly his eyes narrowed. He looked briefly to the ground again, and then at Maradir. “That house over there” - he nodded towards a narrow, slightly leaning house of three storeys built against the high wall that rose to the Third Circle - “should be the one. It looks all deserted. And yet ... have you seen someone? I have the feeling that we are being watched.”

In this moment a most unexpected sound disturbed the brooding silence of the dark place, and made them both start: the clear ring of a bell. It came from somewhere in the upper circles. “Midnight,” Faramir said absentmindedly.

Khorazir

The bell was also heard by Túrin, lying in a bed in the Houses of Healing, fighting down the desire to doze off, which was strongly increased by the strange potion the healers had made him drink. He realised that he must have lost unconsciousness on the way up to the Houses, for he did not remember being undressed and the cut at his arm and his slight burns tended by the healers, and then being put to bed. Then an old lady had come, and her talk with the healers had roused him. But they could not – or would not – answer his questions, instead they had made him swallow the bitter-tasting potion.

Just as he was about to give in to the overwhelming desire to close his eyes, he heard someone entering his room. It

was the old lady. He struggled to keep awake. There was one thing he wanted to know.

“Oh, we are not sleeping yet?” the woman said friendly, but with slight reproach in her voice.

“Where’s Vic?” Túrin managed. “Is she all right?”

The woman looked down on him and smiled. “The young lady? She is here. Her hurts are worse than yours, I am afraid. The healers say that she has inhaled a lot of smoke. But luckily she has no serious burns. She is sleeping now.”

Túrin sighed and closed his eyes. He felt that the woman adjusted the sheets around him. “The Lord Húrin was very concerned when he heard what had befallen you, Master Túrin.”

Túrin opened his eyes in shock. “You have informed my parents?” he asked quickly.

“Why, yes, of course.”

“Oh no!” he said, feeling twice as ill. “I was forbidden to visit the “Nose”! Father is going to kill me when he finds out!”

Canamarth

“I think I saw movement behind one of the windows earlier,” Maradir said. Then, realizing what Faramir had just said, he added: “And a happy birthday to you my friend. Who would have thought you’d celebrate your coming-of-age like this?”

Khorazir

“Thank you, Maradir,” Faramir said smiling. “Yes, ‘tis quite an exceptional night, in many respects. But what shall we do now? We cannot just walk over to the house, knock on the door and ask for Mithas. And we cannot remain standing here either. Even a poor marksman must manage to shoot us from one of the windows, as exposed as we stand here now. But perhaps there is a way to reach the house unnoticed by any watchers ...” He looked about him searchingly.

Canamarth

“If this is where Mithas can be found I would not count on that. They have seen us anyway. Now we either knock politely or go and fetch the guards.”

gladrieltook

vic awoke, refreshed and alert. raising herself out of the bed she wandered the halls. she came to a room empty except fo a young man sitting on the bed with his head bowed. “turin” she said quietly as she walked over to him. she sat down and placed a gentle hand on his shoulder.

Khorazir

"You are right," Faramir said thoughtfully. "'tis most likely that Mithas knows we are here, and has fled already. Or else he may have set a trap. Or both. So it would be more reasonable and considerably less dangerous to fetch the watch. They can search the house more thoroughly than we anyway, and if there is only traces of him left, it should make no difference if we do it now or they in an hour or so. But on the other hand ..." - suddenly he shook his head and smiled slightly - "I think I am beginning to feel Túrin's influence. I am getting foolhardy and careless. Or else 'tis those drinks we had at the "Nose". Anyway, I would really like to see if it is indeed the right house ..."

Meanwhile: Whatever the healers had given him to send him to sleep, the prospect of having to explain the events in the "Troll's Nose" to his father had sufficed to keep Túrin awake. To get rid of the old woman, he had pretended to doze off, but as soon as she had left, he had gotten up, and walked over to the window and opened it. The cool night-air had cleared his head even more. For a while he had remained standing at the window, looking out into the garden, then he had returned to his bed and sat down, and pulled the blanket about him.

What should he tell to his father? He ran a hand through his hair, realising that it had been singed considerably.

Great, he thought gloomily, and hung his head, feeling altogether miserable - something which did not happen to him very often. Just then he heard a soft voice behind him speaking his name. Looking up in surprise, he beheld Vic, wearing a nightshirt. His face brightened. As she lowered herself beside him and put a hand to his shoulder, he could not help smiling. "How are you?" he asked.

Canamarth

Maradir looked from the house to Faramir and back again. "Well, I'm not one of the bodyguard who have sworn to protect the Steward and his kin in all situations. If I were I would drag you away from here and call the guards. But as the matter stands, I'm here as your companion. The choice of how you want to spend your birthday is yours. I'm going to accompany you wherever you go. I should add that I think that if the guys in the house were really bent on killing us, they would have done so already. I mean, there's noone here to witness our death - if that were what they are concerned about. Well?" Maradir turned back to his friend.

Khorazir

Faramir studied the dark house, then sent a glance around. "I know this is more than stupid, but you are right. If they wanted to, they could have killed us already." He took a deep breath. "Off we go then! And if anything nasty happens, you can blame it on me."

Canamarth

"If I still can," Maradir muttered and followed his friend. When they reached the door they saw that quite a lot of people must have come and gone of late. Many muddy traces lead into the house and out again. And there was a little blood on the doorknob. "Guess this is the right place. Shall we knock?"

Khorazir

"It is more polite, is it not?" Faramir said. "Not that I consider these people to be of the overly polite kind," he added in a low voice, "but nevertheless. At least they cannot charge us for trying to break into the house." With that he raised his hand, and knocked.

gladrieltook

“tired” she sighed “but otherwise, okay. sleep usually helps.” she said this with a small grin. “and you?”

Khorazir

“Well,” Túrin said, “I am all right, too. Mostly. They’ve tended my arm, and it’s hardly hurting anymore. But unfortunately they told my parents. My father forbid me explicitly to visit the “Nose”. And when he hears that I went there with Faramir and Maradir he’ll most likely kill me. Not that he’s so stern otherwise. But I know exactly what he’ll say: How can you be so stupid and drag the Steward’s son into the “Troll’s Nose”? He could have been killed there – and you too! And so on and so on. But” – he sighed – “I won’t meet him before the morning, so I have some time left to think of a good answer.”

He looked at Vic. “By the way, sorry for my behaviour at the inn, back when you came to our table. I was pretty embarrassing, I guess. I didn’t want to trouble you with my talk. It’s just ...” – he blushed – “I thought it really impressive how you dealt with this Dorgil character. Where did you learn to handle a sword like this?”

Dellóm

The knock echoed emptily as the door slowly cracked open. Pushing the door open, Faramir could see throughout the first floor. All the way back to the back of the house the walls had been cleared leaving nothing but the ceiling supports and a lone set of stairs leading to the second floor.

gladrieltook

“it’s okay.” she smiled again. “But you’re lucky to have a father that cares enough to ban you from that area of the city. my father died of pneumonia when i was 7. i was taken in by an old farmer and his wife, but they were murdered by raiding orcs. i was only 12. i then lived with elves, hobbits, dwarves, and later with the men of rohan. i was learned in all methods of battle. i can out ride, out fight, out run, and out shoot any warrior. i’ve beaten princes at their own games. all that stuff i told you in the nose was just a cover up. it helps to blend with the crowd.” she scowled. “i’m a knight of gondor and the captian of the secret gaurd.” seeing the look on turin’s face she said. “it’s an elite group of the steward’s best knights. we take on false identities and find out who’s who in the outer circle. in other words, we cover the jobs the regular gaurds won’t. my real name is Visilya, so vic is just a nick-name.”

Khorazir

Túrin had listened to Vic’s story with an eager but thoughtful face. “I guess you should really talk to Maradir,” he said at length. “He doesn’t talk much about his doings, but from what he lets slip from time to time I gather that he has more or less the same job as you. Only that he’s not so highranking. But often enough he’ll vanish on some strange errand, without informing his friends, and when he returns, and we inquire about his doings, he says he isn’t allowed to disclose the details, not even to us. But I heard rumours that old Denethor employs some group of secret spies, and, if I may add, assassins, who deal with - how did you put it - errands the regular guards and soldier cannot be entrusted with. Most likely they’re the reason that he knows so much about everything going on in Gondor.

“But be that as it may, I am pleased to meet you, Visilya. That’s a beautiful name, by the way. Is it Quenya? I was never good at old tongues, you know.” He shrugged. “Unlike my friend Faramir, I don’t enjoy spending hours in a library studying ancient scrolls too much.”

In the meantime Faramir had other things on his mind than old scrolls. The house looked totally empty, judged by what could be seen in the dim, murky light that filtered through the small windows from outside, and not a sound was to be heard. "They must have been packed already," he muttered to Maradir who stood behind him, eyeing the surroundings closely, "or else they could not have left in so short a time, and taken all their belongings. You can tell by the marks on the floor that stuff has been moved around a lot lately, and many people walked in and out. Plainly they feared pursuit." His eyes followed the stairs leading up to the next storey. "Let us have a look at the upper floors." With that he carefully stepped over the threshold.

Canamarth

"We should first make sure there's no one down here," Maradir said and opened the only door on their right sight. This room had also been emptied in a haste. It looked like a kitchen. "Ok, all clear here. Let's go upstairs." And he followed Faramir.

galadrieltook

"yes. my father was fluent in many languages. i know quenya from living with the lady galadriel and the elves of the golden woods. now i know many languages. it helps on the job." she grinned broadly "but i wouldn't call myself an assassin! i only kill at the utmost need; when my, or a fellow gaurd's, life is in danger. we have a seperate group of assassins. as for maradir, he isn't part of the secret gaurd. he maybe one day. we are chosen for speed, strength, fighting ability, and experience." her face softened as she said this. her eyes reflected long years of training and work, mixed with numerous sorrows and disapointments. "be grateful of a careing father and loving mother. you'll never know how wonderful they are until their're gone." tears began to form in her eyes, but she made no attempt to stay them.

Khorazir

"Well, you're right, actually I can't complain about -" Túrin began, then seeing the tears in her eyes he faltered. He looked at her as she sat with her head bowed, unsure what to do or say. He always felt uncomfortable in situations like these, and usually tried hard to avoid them. And this case was particularly awkward: to see this strong, selfassured woman weep so at his side. The stress, he thought. It must be the stress. So much has happened tonight, no wonder she's all nerves.

"I ... uh ... I'm sorry," he muttered. As his words achieved no reaction, he swallowed slightly, hanging his head as well. Then suddenly he looked at her again. Drawing a deep breath, he edged a little closer to her, and, after much hesitation – which astounded him, since usually he was not so shy with women – put an arm around her shoulders and drew her close to him.

"We are lucky that there is at least some little light from outside," Faramir said silently to Maradir as they crossed the deserted hall and cautiously approached the staircase. "I should not like the idea of walking around carrying a torch or candle. But as you said: if they wanted to kill us, they surely had plenty of opportunities already. I only hope you are right ..."

He studied the railing of the staircase for more bloody fingerprints of the weasel, but could not detect any. He shrugged, and began ascending the wooden stair, carefully setting his feet to avoid any creaking. "I wonder what the house was used for," he said thoughtfully, casting a look back over his shoulder towards the hall. "I mean, whither is all the furniture gone? And the internal walls on the first floor? The place does not look as if someone actually lived in here. It appears more like a storehouse, or the meeting-place of a guild."

gladrieltook

visilya felt turin's strong hand on her shoulder, drawing her close. she was glad to finally have found a friend. turning her head to look turin in the eyes, she said quietly, "thank you. you have given me the one thing i have always wanted. a friend." she sighed and laid her head on his shoulder.

Khorazir

Túrin felt like singing, his heart pounding heavily. He only hoped that she did not notice his anxiety. For an instant he wished that his friends could see him now, who always made fun of him and generally did not believe his stories, but then he realised that in fact he did not want them to be here. Nor anybody else. It was perfect as it was now, in this moment: only Visilya and him, sitting so close, her head resting on his shoulder. He could not remember when last he had felt so happy and content.

"I am glad to have been of service, lady," he said softly, and reached out to gently brush away a strand of her golden hair that had fallen across her cheek.

gladrieltook

visilya's soul was at peace for the first time in years. never had she felt such bliss. she wished that moment would never end. unfortunately, it did. one of the healers had just walked in to check on turin...

Canamarth

Túrin jumped a bit as the door opened so suddenly. After all, the healer that now entered and gave them an inquiring look could have been his father. Túrin did not know what was in store for him once he turned up but he was sure it would not be too pleasant.

Recognizing Visilya, the healer gave her a stern look. "You are supposed to be in bed."

"She is," Túrin muttered.

"In her own bed and resting!" the old man boomed but then could not help but smile on the two.

Maradir and Faramir had reached the top of the stairs on the third floor. They had checked the few rooms on the other levels but they were all empty and devoid of furniture. They had only found a large empty chest which had probably been too heavy to remove. Here they found a door which led through the wall to the adjoining house. It was locked but Maradir managed to open it with a lockpick.

"You carry that around with you?" Faramir asked astonishedly.

"Always be prepared is what my captain told me," Maradir smiled and entered. The house seemed just as empty as the one before.

I could have sworn, I have seen some movement behind a window when we were still outside, Maradir thought and was even more careful when he searched the rooms on the top floor. Nothing. "Let's go downstairs."

Khorazir

“Wait,” Faramir breathed, and held back his friend at the shoulder. “See that?” He pointed at a thin but strong wire, hardly visible, that was strung between railing and wall about two feet over the topmost step of the stair leading down. “What a nasty little greeting,” Faramir mused, and bent down to study it more closely. “Now I could do with some more light,” he muttered.

gladrieltook

“i am fine” she answered, sitting up. “turin has given me all the healing i need.”
her eyes were full of peace. the healer smiled again.

Khorazir

“Nevertheless you should return to your room now, and get some sleep, lady,” the healer said. “And the young man here must rest as well.”

Túrin gave him an exasperating glance which implied that he wanted him to go and leave them in peace. “I promise to see to it that she rests,” he said, trying to sound convincingly but friendly. “But it’s not that late yet. And there’s so much we need to talk about. And we aren’t tired, what’s more. When we are, we’ll sleep, be assured of that.”

“Well ...,” the healer said slowly, not accustomed to have his will crossed by his patients. Túrin looked at him with all the sincerity and innocence he could muster.

“All right,” the healer said at length, shaking his head slightly to demonstrate that he did not appreciate what was going on. “You may stay, lady. For an hour. Then I will check on you again, and then you really must get some sleep. I shall see to it that some tea is prepared for you.”

“Thank you,” Túrin said courteously.

The healer gave him a long glance, then turned to go. But at the door he halted, looked back at the two, and said: “But bear in mind that we have other patients here who do prefer to sleep at night. So do not talk too loudly. I want to hear no complaints in the morning.” With that he shut the door and left.

gladrieltook

visilya looked up at turin, smiled and laid her head back on his shoulder.
“what is your story?”

Canamarth

Maradir looked around carefully but he could not detect anything either. When he looked up he was not able to pierce the darkness that loomed above them. He pointed upwards. “I would not wonder if something nasty came from up there. Why don’t we try it out?”

He took a step backwards and touched the wire with the tip of his sword. He had just enough time to draw it back,

then something very heavy crashed from the ceiling. It was a wonder the whole staircase had not collapsed with the impact.

“They probably think we’re dead now,” Maradir whispered.

Khorazir

“Yes,” Faramir agreed. “And probably they will send someone to have a look at our smashed and broken bodies. Was it not in this house that you saw someone? Perhaps we should hide somewhere where we can survey the stairs, and wait for them. I should be interested in some conversation.”

Túrin shrugged slightly. “My story? Well, actually there is not much to tell about me. My father is Warden of the Keys, perhaps you have heard of him, and our family lives here in the city, although we also have a house and lands in Lebennin. I have applied for a position among the Citadel Guards two years ago, but the captain said I was still too young, and needed some basic military training first. So I went with the cavalry. I was in Rohan twice so far with a small company to acquire new horses for our host. That was quite interesting. Once I even met Theodred, King Théoden’s son. He’s a mighty warrior. Well, but apart from that life in the army is not that interesting. I really wish I could join this secret force you mentioned, or even the Rangers of Ithilien like Faramir. He and Boromir always tell exciting tales of how they hunt orcs in the woods and all. Or, well, Boromir tells these tales whenever he’s in the City. Faramir not so much.

“But,” he turned a little to look her in the eyes, “I don’t think that what I can tell is of much interest to you. You appear to have seen and experienced so much already. I ...,” and now he blushed furiously, “... honestly I feel like a little boy compared to you. I mean ...,” he looked to the ceiling searching for words, but did not find any to express what he wanted to say. “I don’t want to appear too direct and all, but I was wondering how old you are. You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, of course, but ... “

Canamarth

Maradir nodded and pointed to a door on their right. They went into the room they had searched before and left the door a little ajar and listened. For a while nothing happened and they thought that the house had indeed been wholly deserted. But then they heard quiet footsteps carefully ascending the stairs.

Khorazir

Shortly afterwards a rather short dark figure came into view, carrying a small light, and searching the landing on top of the stairs carefully. As it found no bodies it shrugged, but then peered about anxiously, until its eyes, which were shadowed by a hood, focused on the nearby door standing slightly ajar. It shifted the small oil-lamp to the left hand, and with the right drew a long, slender knife. Then cautiously it advanced.

Faramir looked to Maradir who stood to one side of the door-frame, sword in hand, ready to jump at anything that dared to pass the threshold. Faramir had positioned himself at the door itself, one hand on the handle to wrench it open as soon as the figure touched it, his knife in the other. They both tensed as light and silent footsteps approached ever further. Now they had almost reached the threshold ...

gladrieltook

“if you must know, i’ll be 25 next month. and you?” she smiled and felt rather embarrassed.

Khorazir

“Oh, well, then you’re only about two years older than me. I shall be 23 in Viresse. I could have sworn that you are older.” Túrin grinned rather sheepishly.

There was a moment of silence, then Túrin looked at her again. “I was wondering what exactly you were doing down at the “Nose”. Where you there on some errand? It almost seemed to me as if you tried to protect Faramir. I mean, you dragged him out of there and all. Did his father send you?”

Then a thought crossed his mind and he tensed. “Don’t tell me Denethor knows where we went. Curse it, of course he does! He seems to know everything. I’m sure he won’t approve of it, and Faramir will be in real trouble once he gets home (if he doesn’t get himself killed before). And it’s all my fault.”

Canamarth

When Maradir saw the tip of a knife glinting in the dim light outside he tensed. Only seconds now. A hand appeared, ready to open the door. Maradir gave Faramir a sign and the Steward’s son flung the door open. At the same time Maradir knocked the knife out of the attacker’s grasp and put his sword to his throat. His opponent was so surprised by the sudden attack that he had not had a chance. Faramir pulled the figure into the room.

Khorazir

The man dropped the lamp as Faramir flung him against the wall and pinned him there. Maradir’s sword was still resting against his throat. With a swift movement Faramir rid their captive of his hood. Underneath they beheld a mob of tousled sandy-coloured hair, and a rather young, boyish face with freckles all over, but now pale as death, and a pair of large, bulging eyes.

“Well, well, what have we here?” Faramir said, and his voice was stern and cold.

The lad shrank even more. “D ... ddont’t kill me ... I’ve done nothing. I ...”

“We do not intend to harm you ...” - relief stole over the boy’s face - “... as long as you show a bit of cooperation. You answer our questions right away, and honestly, and no harm shall come to you.”

The boy gulped and nodded fervently. But Faramir was not finished. “On the other hand, should you foolishly decide to lie to us - and be sure that we shall know if you do -, or refuse to tell us what we want to know, you will find that my friend here is very skilled with his knife. I should not like to be forced to hand you over to him. He is not really ... nice, you know.”

Canamarth

Maradir smiled inwardly. He put on his sternest face. And the boy cringed.

Khorazir

Seeing that their captive was sufficiently intimidated (in fact the poor boy was trembling all over), Faramir focused him with a keen look, and said: "Now, tell me how many people are left in this house besides you!"

"F ... five," the boy managed, without much delay.

"Where do they hide?"

"Two on the floor below this one, two in the basement. One outside the door leading to the cellar."

"Why there?"

The boy hesitated. Faramir looked to Maradir. "There ... there's a way out of the house down there ...," the boy said swiftly, as Maradir slightly raised his sword, a wicked glint in his eyes.

"You will show us this way!" Faramir said. "But later. First tell me, who owns this house, and the adjoining one?"

"I d ... dont know, really. There was a kind of guild that used them. But they're gone."

"That we know. Why did they leave so swiftly? Wither did they go? And who commanded you to stay behind and watch out for intruders?"

"We weren't ...," the boy began, but then apparently remembered what Faramir had said about lying. "I ... I mean ... they said there might be pursuers that must be intercepted. That's why we set the traps - the trap - and that's why some of us stayed behind."

"So, there is more than one trap, is there not?"

"No." At a nodd from Faramir, his friend advanced a little. "Yes, yes there is!" the boy cried. "The whole staircase is trapped, and the door to the hall and the cellar as well."

"Interesting. You will see to it that we may pass unhindered, and undamaged. But ere we go, let us discuss the most interesting part of this matter: Who are they? The people you take commands from.

Who runs this ... guild you mentioned?"

At this the boy blanched and gulped furiously. "I ... I can't tell you," he whispered hoarsely, casting down his eyes.

"They'll kill me if they find out." He shook his head. "I can't tell you," he said again, in a more steady voice. He looked up at Faramir, and it was plain to see that he feared his masters far more than the thread of Maradir's knife.

Canamarth

"He won't say more," Maradir said. "Why don't we get going? I suggest you move on ahead." He pointed to the door with his sword and ushered the boy out onto the corridor. "And not a sound," Maradir whispered. "Should you try to warn your friends, you're dead!"

Dellóm

A runner appeared and whispered to Dellóm about the trap being sprung and that someone had gone to investigate. Nodding, Dellóm motioned the runner away and sent her to watch the outside entrance to the cellar of the house from the safe house across the street. The inside entrance had been trapped and then barricaded to slow them down

and be more wary, while the outside had been given an easily disarmed trap. He wanted his pursuers to be wary, but not too slow in their pursuit.

“Mallos, bring in our pigeon.” he called to his servant who nodded and left, only to return a few minutes later with a stranger, dressed much as Dellóm, the only thing lacking was the mask.

Eyeing the stranger, Dellóm nodded and motioned to him to approach the desk.

“You know the part you’re to play now?” Dellóm asked?

The stranger nodded.

“But what about my family, sir?” he asked.

Waving his hand, Dellóm motioned to Mallos. “That’s right. I promised to take care of them for you. Mallos will see to it now.”

“Go and keep my promise to this man and then go to the sanctuary. I will meet you there.” Dellóm said.

Mallos nodded and left the room, leaving the stranger alone with Dellóm.

Pulling a silk wrapped object from his desk, he motioned for the stranger to take a seat.

“I want you to put this on. Remember, you’re not to be taken alive. Do we understand one another?” he asked and the stranger nodded. “Good.”

Unwrapping the object, revealing a replica of his own mask, down to the finest details, Dellóm helped the stranger place it upon his face.

The stranger screamed and then quickly quieted when the last clasp snapped into place and the hidden needles sprang free, the drug coated needles injecting his body with chemicals that quickly quieted his pain and then began to work to enrage the stranger.

“Good, the drugs will keep you docile long enough for me to leave and then you will quickly become enraged, attacking anyone you see. Those fools who are looking for me will find nothing but death when they find you, either theirs or yours and then I’ll be free to continue my own way.”

Dellóm quickly moved to the door, turning to speak one last time before dropping the bar, locking it from the inside. “Remember, Mithas, the ones who come through this door next will be the ones who butchered your family and left them to rot, where you found them, in your garden at home. Kill them! Make them pay!”

Dropping the bar, Dellóm quickly stepped into the shadows and traveled away, even as the drugs began to wear off and the enraged stranger’s eyes began to take on the look of anger and madness.

Appearing in another part of town, Dellóm quickly sat behind his desk in the sanctuary.

Soon, he thought. Soon as they enter the guild’s hall and attack the door to my office, the countdown will begin and then the warehouse district will face the largest fire in this city’s history.

And all will be laid at the noble’s feet, thanks to the whisperings my people have begun in other parts of town.

And that fool I left in my office will die not long after they enter. Whether they manage to kill him or the poison from the needles, he should manage to do some harm before he falls and then I will be free and dead to them.

The other’s I left along my pursuers’ path will fight them every step of the way to insure the believability of my ruse.

Another servant entered and whispered that only two of the strangers from the bar had followed the trail and escaped the first trap, and that the girl and the third had been placed in the healer’s hall.

Nodding, Dellóm motioned the servant about his business and turned to planning his revenge on this girl who had ruined his plans for the evening.

Seems the two are rather smitten. Perhaps I can take care of two birds with one stone. We shall see.
Sitting back, he prepared to wait and see how his plans turned out for the evening.

gladrieltook

“i go to the nose regularly, anyway. it’s my guard route most of the time. we each have a circle to cover. i get the second ‘cause it’s the worst of the seven. i got orders from denethor to follow faramir. he’d seen faramir heading out with two of ‘his crazy friends’. my horse easily kept up with you three. i was also on the look out for that mithas. not his face, mind you. his manner. he’s got this mask he wears. and he’s wanted or murder, theft, and arson. he’s my number one target.” she smiled and sighed. visilya was thinking back on something, 19 years ago...

a small girl and an older woman sat alone in a large room, their dinning room. they were waiting for the girl’s father. he came. tall and broad shouldered, this captian of the gaurd looked more of a bear than a man. his grizzled beard was touched with gray and white.

the young girl jumped up and ran to her father, her mother following slowly. the child jumped into her father’s waiting arms. he twirled her and set her on his shoulder.

“hello father!”

“hello, my little visilya!”

he kissed his wife and a three set down to supper.

bang

it came from the door

bang

the door flew open revealing four men dressed in black. they were led by a tall man with an odd face.

visilya edged away, unseen by her parents and the men at the door. she crawled towards the back door, which led to the kitchens. she hid and watched the scene unfold.

the four men advanced on her mother and father. her father drew his sword and her mother picked up a long knife, but they were out numbered the leader lept forward and made a swipe at her father. he ducked out of the way expertly. the other three turned on her mother.

the woman slashed at her attackers with her knife, taking one of them in the throat. his companions launched at her, running her through with their swords. she crumpled to the ground. visilya stifled a cry. the remained villians returned to her father. he took the lesser two down and began to duel with the leader. the two men’s blades clashed and sparked. finnally the villian gave a tricky move and fled out the door.

visilya’s father was unscathed. she rushed to him. the two kneeled and wept over the brave mother’s body.

Khorazir

“Yes,” Túrin said thoughtfully, “this Mithas was quite a creepy guy. I wonder what he was up to. I only hope that my friends down there don’t do anything foolish ... Usually they’re quite sensible, Faramir most of all. I’m the one responsible for getting us into silly situations. But this night is weird ... anything might happen ...” Looking at Visilya, he noticed that she seemed lost in thought. He watched her silently, smiling slightly to himself, but not daring to address and disturb her. She seemed entirely engaged in some contemplation – and quiet an exciting one, too.

In the meanwhile Maradir and Faramir had followed their scared but so far cooperative captive to the head of the staircase leading down. The boy hesitated, looking at the wooden steps doubtfully. Faramir slightly nudged him to make him move on. The lad descended a few steps, then stopped again. When he felt that the other two had followed him so far, he half-turned to them and shook his head, pointing at the next three steps, and further down. Then he

raised his hand and signed: one person only.

Faramir looked to Maradir. He did not like the idea of letting the boy go first. As soon as he had reached the end of the stairs, he would dart off and warn the others. On the other hand, if one of them went first it was most likely that they were attacked instantly. Faramir turned to the boy again and stripped him of his hooded cloak. Then he signed to Maradir: you or me?

Canamarth

Maradir took the cloak and put it on, hood up. On his way past the boy he breathed: "I'm his best friend. You can't imagine what he'll do to you if something happens to me."

Then Maradir gingerly and quietly stepped onto the next step. Nothing happened. But he felt that a more weighty person or more than one person stepping onto it might provoke some sort of reaction. The steps felt as if they were balanced on some fragile contraption, ready to collapse. But Maradir reached the end of the stairs unharmed. When he looked up he held two fingers up and pointed first left, then right, mouthing: Where are the other two? The boy pointed to a door on the right. Maradir kept an eye on it while the boy, urged on by Faramir's knife, slowly descended.

Khorazir

Faramir waited until the boy had reached the bottom where Maradir took care of him again. Then he, too, descended cautiously. Down on the first floor it was darker than upstairs. Only through a narrow window at the end of the corridor some dim light filtered. Even though he had good eyes and nightsight, Faramir could hardly descry the others. Maradir was still looking towards the door the boy had indicated, as was the lad himself. He looked extremely tense, as if about to leap. Faramir stepped close to him and held his knife to his back, slightly shaking his head. The boy relaxed again, rather dejectedly.

"Better not leave those two unaccounted for," Faramir breathed into Maradir's ear. But in this moment there was the sound of a door brushing quietly across the floor. Some more light fell onto the corridor out of the room Maradir was watching.

"Go, and have a look what Cal's doing so long up there," came a whispered command.

Canamarth

Maradir flitted towards the door, keeping close to the wall. He had his sword at the ready and waited for someone to emerge. The instant the man came out, Maradir jumped at him and wounded him heavily with a mighty thrust of his sword. The guy collapsed under him. Then Maradir threw the door completely open and was faced by an astonished woman in a tattered cloak. She raised her hands as if to submit herself to the attacker but Maradir saw that something glinted in her right hand. He had just enough time to dash forward and down to avoid the small knife she threw at him. When he got to his feet again she had drawn her sword and they engaged in close combat.

Khorazir

Faramir had stayed behind, his knife still pointing at Cal's back. The boy had given a start as Maradir had struck down the man, but refrained from crying out. Faramir pushed him towards the door to see what was going on there. A knife came flying out and buried itself in the opposite wall. Then the clash of swords was heard from within. And the sound

of hurried footsteps on the stair leading up from the basement.

“Sorry,” Faramir muttered to the boy, turned his knife, and knocked him out with the hilt. He collapsed beside his wounded companion. Then swiftly Faramir returned to the corner from where could overlook the stairs, but he himself remained hidden. He had hardly managed to do so, when he saw a dark shape rush towards the noise. The man saw him only when he had half passed him by, but by then it was too late: a well-aimed blow against his temple conveyed him to the floor, where he lay unconsciously.

The sound of combat had subsided now. Anxiously, Faramir went to see how his friend had fared in the fight.

gladrieltook

visilya looked turin in the eye and said quietly, “i’m only twenty two.” he looked at her oddly “i tell everyone that i’m twenty four because they would think that one as young as 22 shouldn’t be the captian of the secret gaurd.but the position has been in my family for 8 generations. mithas murdered my mother and i seek to destroy him for what he and his villians did to her. i was only three when i saw her slaughtered.” more tears came. she made no attempt this time to stem the flow.

Dellóm

Motioning to another servant, he whispers something in her ear and sends her on her way.

That should take care of those two, although I will hate to lose someone in the healer’s guild. The poison should take plenty of time to take effect and the nightmares are most vivid, from what I’ve been told. he thought, a mirthless smile appearing on his face as the plates of his mask shift. And thankfully the network of agents my orders will go through, this time, will keep anyone from finding their way back here.

Looking at the hourglass on his desk, he pondered how far along his pursuers are.

Should be soon. he thought, the torchlight reflecting in his eyes.

“Mallos, prepare our mercanaries. Soon there will be much rioting in the city and it will be our chance to infiltrate the city guards with more of our own agents.”

His servant bowed and left the room to prepare the message and send it out.

Khorazir

Túrin had been astounded indeed when Visilya had revealed her true age to him. According to his knowledge, no higher ranks in the the hosts were given to any person not yet come of age. But he had not been able to waste more thoughts on this, because of what Visilya had said then, and the tears that were now running down her cheeks unhindered.

Again he drew her close to him and put his arms around her. As she buried her face at his chest, he reached out to gently stroke her hair. “I am sorry,” he said silently. “I wish there was anything I could do ... I can understand now why you hate this Mithas so much.” He drew back a little to be able to look at her. Lightly raising her head, he looked her in the eyes, and said gravely: “I promise to do everything in my power to help you to take revenge on Mithas for what he did to your parents ... - if you want me to, of course” he added after a short pause.

gladrieltook

“you a kind and noble man. but i must fulfill this oath on my own. however, if you would like, you can help me find him. but i must slay him, or die trying.” she looked into his eyes and smiled. she was happy to be here with him. it felt good to finally share the truth with someone. her life had been so full of lies and distrust, it was unimaginable.

Canamarth

When Faramir carefully peered into the room where Maradir and the woman had been fighting he beheld the latter disarmed and being tied up with a piece of cord by Maradir.

“Are you alright?” Faramir asked.

Maradir nodded and took a short look at the two unconscious men outside. “I suggest we bind them as well. And then we take this fine lady here to lead us further.”

The woman glowered at him with wild eyes, seemingly ready to jump at him any minute if given a chance.

Khorazir

“I understand that you must deal the killing-blow,” Túrin said grimly. “But I shall help you to track him down.” Then his face softened. He smiled again slightly, seeing the peaceful expression in her face as she sat beside him. For a short while he resisted the desire to kiss her that had been flooding his mind for some time now, but then he cast all objections aside, leaned forward and very gently kissed her brow.

Maradir and Faramir had pulled Cal and the man Faramir had struck down into the room and bound them there. Then Faramir had a look at the man Maradir had wounded with the sword, while his friend went over to the bound woman and dragged her to her feet.

“Maradir, he is still alive,” Faramir said silently when he had turned him about and felt for his heartbeat. “But I doubt that he will survive. He has lost too much blood.” In that moment he felt the man stir. He opened his eyes and looked at Faramir. There was a light of recognition in his eyes. His pale face contorted with hatred.

“Lord Dellóm will get you for this,” he whispered hoarsely. “You ... stand no chance ... against him.”

Just when Faramir was about to inquire about the name Dellóm, the man’s body relaxed, and his eyes unfocused. Faramir reached out to close them, then he rose and went over to where Maradir was waiting with their new captive. “It seems that we know Mithas’ real name now,” he said.

Canamarth

“Time we found that rat,” Maradir said. “We’re looking for the cellar, my dear. And I suggest you go on ahead.” With that he pushed the woman out of the door and towards the stairs.

Khorazir

The woman, despite being bound securely, showed much more unwillingness and resistance than the boy had. She

walked deliberately slowly, so that Maradir was constantly forced to prod her with his sword. On the stair down to the basement she took great efforts to descend as noisily as possible, to warn her companions in the lower storey that someone was coming. The threat of Maradir's knife did not cow her as effectively as it had frightened the boy.

So while his friend was busy trying to control their tricky captive, Faramir walked behind, listening attentively to all sounds from below, while hiding the strange assortment of weapons they had confiscated from their enemies under his garments: the slender knife of the boy, a long eket with sheath from the man Faramir had knocked out, with a strange dark paste applied to the blade, and three small but wicked-looking throwing knives that had been found on the woman. The rest they had left upstairs, well out of reach of the bound captives.

When they had reached the bottom of the stairs the woman hesitated, looking around searchingly for her companions. Again Maradir made her move on with more than gentle violence, and so reluctantly she led them along a dark stone-flagged corridor to the part of the house close to the wall that rose behind it. There was a half-open door at the end from where a dim reddish light filtered out onto the corridor: apparently this was the kitchen, and there was a fire burning in the hearth. There was a faint smell of smoke and burnt wood in the air.

They halted in front of the door, Maradir and the woman standing against one wall, and Faramir against the other, on the side where the door was fastened. It opened inwards. He carefully advanced until he could look into the room. There was no one to be seen, but with the door more than half closed he could only overlook a small portion of the room. Drawing the eket, he signed to Maradir that he would open the door from where he stood, and that Maradir should push the woman into the room before he went himself.

Canamarth

It was just as well that they had taken that precaution, for the woman was smacked over the head by a heavy club. Someone had been in hiding behind the door. Maradir who had jumped in after her saw himself opposite a huge brute with a club raised for a second blow at him. From the corner of his eye he also saw somebody else standing in a corner. And that person had a bow ready. The only thing Maradir could do to avoid being shot immediately was lunge forward towards the brute. The blow he dealt him was fierce but ill-aimed so that Maradir's knees buckled for only a second and he managed to stay on his feet.

Khorazir

The guy with the bow had loosed the arrow an instant too late to hit Maradir. The dart whistled past Faramir who had entered the room only an instant after his friend, and hit the doorframe where it stuck quivering. Seeing from the corner of his eye that Maradir had just been dealt a savage blow with a club, but managed to remain on his feet, and now was engaged in fierce combat with the brute, Faramir darted across the room, leapt over the body of the woman sprawling on the floor and sprang at the bowman, who was just fitting another arrow to the string. Faramir's attack came so swiftly that he had not even time to drop the bow and draw another weapon. The young man's eket pierced his shoulder with full force and nailed him to the wall. He had to fight not to lose consciousness. Bow and arrow dropped from his hands, and his knees gave way. But the eket prevented him from sliding to the floor.

For an instant Faramir was tempted to do the same. The pain in his side which he had neglected so far had been increased immensely by his swift movements and the fierce blow with the eket. Breathing was difficult and very painful. He leaned against the wall for a moment, closing his eyes and trying to breathe calmly. Then he remembered Maradir. Pain or no, the brute his friend was put up against was at least twice his match in strength, if not more.

Drawing the slender knife, he pushed off the wall to join the fight.

Dellóm

The Bowman, barely conscious, saw the hilt of the blade in his shoulder and knew immediately whose it was and what that burning itch was that began around the wound and then ran down his arm.

He struggled weakly with the handle as the poison began to take effect, his arm already turning black and swelling like an overripe melon.

His struggles became more fierce as the pain quickly raced through his body. Dislodging himself from the wall with his thrashings, he fell to the floor, already dead, his face swollen, a black tongue protruding from mouth.

The brute, hearing his friend's screams, had seen him drop and Faramir's approach. All thoughts of continuing his duel with Maradir had fled his mind and he turned quickly, running to the doorway to the cellar, forgetting in his fear and haste the trap.

Grabbing the doorhandle, it came off in his hand, even as the door blew outward, the shrapnel of the wood and stone, catching his body before the heavy door fell on him as well. The passage beyond now cluttered with rubble, revealing little of what waited beyond.

Struggling weakly with the heavy door, trying to push it from his ruined body, as his blood quickly ran from the many wounds. "I tried Lord Dellóm," he whispered weakly, and then died.

meanwhile:

The now enraged replica of Lord Dellóm, hearing the explosion of the trap, knew that his enemies quickly approached.

"Destroy them! I must destroy them!" he screamed. His anger and insanity driving him past what little control he had had until he began tearing his office apart, trying to get to the door.

Canamarth

Maradir and Faramir looked after the brute and saw how he triggered the trap. They looked at each other with raised eyebrows.

"Good deal he went first," Maradir managed, breathing hard. He saw that Faramir was also not in his best state.

"What an exciting day!" Then Maradir turned around abruptly to face the door leading into the cellar. "Did you hear that? I think I heard somebody scream."

Khorazir

"Aye," Faramir agreed, listening attentively. "And 'tis getting louder. Someone is coming through the tunnel. And he does not sound too friendly, either. Let us hide to both sides of the cellar-entrance and await him."

Canamarth

Maradir did as he was told and awaited what was coming. What approached them almost sounded like a wild beast on the loose. Maradir braced himself and raised his sword ready for a mighty strike.

Khorazir

Faramir wished he had recovered the eket. It would have given him longer reach than the knife he held now. But then he was not sure if he wanted to touch the short-sword again, now that he knew what a nasty kind of poison was on the blade.

Now hasty footsteps could be heard from the tunnel, the thudding sound magnified by a faint echo, approaching them at a high speed. Again there was a horrible scream of rage: "I'll kill them all!"

Faramir tensed, the knife at the ready. On the other side of the broken entrance he could see Maradir looking apprehensive and highly alert. In a few moment whatever it was that was coming towards them would burst out of the tunnel into the kitchen.

Dellóm

The fake Mithas halted and raged louder at being balked at the entrance to the kitchen, the rubble had closed the cellar entrance from his side. Turning, he scanned the dim room and spotted the outside entrance and ran to it, grabbing something from the floor as he went to bust the lock.

Jumping from the entrance, he looked one way and then the other, spotting the open street at the front of the house, he ran to it and began searching for his enemies.

Forgetting the house and the commands to wait in the office, in his madness, he spotted the usual nightly stragglers and began to attack them. THE first died before he knew what was on him, but the rest had warnings from the victim's screams and from Mithas' howls of rage.

"You think I don't know it was you?!?! I will kill you! Kill you all!"

The thief hiding in the house across the street slipped quietly away to report to the next, who reported to someone else, until it arrived at Dellóm's desk.

Even when placed in such a state that to do otherwise than what I've ordered, they still do the wrong thing. I am surrounded by idiots! he thought. Ah well, what's done is done, and it will give credence to my death and to the chaos that has now begun.

Nodding to Mallos, he sends the servant away to give the orders for the warehouses and the 'volunteers' for the city guard. Soon, every warehouse in the district was on fire, as well as the granaries, which went up with a large explosion and dragged many more victims out into the night to face Mithas' rage.

Cynara

From the shadows by the side of the tunnel, a tall woman stepped out, a sword in either hand. Standing just a few feet from Faramir and Maradir, she hissed at them "What have you done with Visilya? Quick, tell me before I kill you where you stand!"

Khorazir

Both Maradir and Faramir gave a start as the woman spoke up behind them. They had concentrated entirely on the voices in the tunnel, which had now subsided again, and what should have come out of the broken entrance.

Now they spun round to behold the woman, her swords pointing at their chests, the blades glowing dimly in the reddish light of the hearthfire. Faramir raised his hands tentatively to calm her.

"Lady, we have done nothing to your friend. We do not know anyone by that name. Or do you mean that unfortunate

woman over there?" He pointed to the woman still lying unconsciously (or dead) on the floor where the brute had struck her down with the club.

Cynara

Keeping her eyes on the swords of the two Men, the strange woman backed to where the crumpled figure lay. Stepping back over the body, so as not to turn her back, she bent and took the prone woman by the back of the head and the chin, tilting her face to the small amount of fire-light. Then she suddenly dropped the still woman to the ground, and straightened up, sighing. "That is not her. This woman is evil...but dead." The tall, warrior-like woman informed Faramir and Maradir. "But I know that you have seen her. She entered the Troll's Nose before you left. She is not an easy woman to overlook."

gladrieltook

visilya looked into turin's eyes after he kissed her brow. she smiled and sighed. she was happy.

Cynara

"Speak up, or are you afraid? What news have you of Visilya? Do not lie!" the woman demanded, her swords straying up and down the men's torsos, sometimes gently prodding them in the chest of belly.

Khorazir

Faramir took a step forward, lowered his hands, took the tip of the sword pointing at him and gently drew it to the side. But immediately it flicked back against his chest. He sighed. "We do not intend to lie to you, lady," he said gravely. "We honestly know no one by that name. But there was a lady we met at the "Nose". She introduced herself as Vic. Could that be the one you are looking for? If so, then your concern can be soothed: although she was hurt in the fire when the inn burned down, her wounds were not that serious. She was brought to the Houses of Healing, up in the Sixth Circle, together with a friend of ours who rescued her from the flames. Does that answer your question? If so, would you please lower your weapons?"

Canamarth

"I suggest you do as he told you. He's the Steward's son and should be shown a little bit more respect," Maradir remarked icily. He didn't like the thought of having been stalked and surprised like that at all.

Cynara

The sword points lowered to the floor. "It does answer my question. Thank you." the woman's eyes narrowed a tad, "But you say that your friend rescued her? That means that we are friends." The woman kissed both of Faramir and Maradir's cheeks before continuing. "My name is Aliya. will you take me to the House of Healing?" Aliya sheathed her swords.

Canamarth

Maradir looked at her flabberghasted for a moment. First she prods you with a sword, next she starts kissing you...
“We are - uh - investigating something at the moment,” he managed. “Looking for a guy called Mithas. Or Dellom. Might be down here.” He pointed into the tunnel which had now gone very quiet.

Cynara

Aliya looked into Maradir’s eyes, and said: “Remember, friend, that I neither know of, or care for this ‘Steward’. Even the highest King, If he does not rule well, is lowlier than the smallest merchant. No offense, of course, sir,” she added, almost as an afterthought, to Faramir. “I will help you look for this enemy of yours, if you wish.”

Khorazir

“None taken,” Faramir muttered. “I have heard worse remarks tonight. But as for your offer, we would be pleased if you joined us. You seem quite skilled in stalking people and coming on them at unawares - which could come in handy. And I should really like to know where you learned that, and trained it to such perfection.”

Túrin and Visilya, meanwhile, were still sitting side by side, without talking, simply enjoying the company of the other. Túrin did not remember when last he had felt so peaceful and happy, and he wondered what was going on - with him, most of all. Something strange was happening here which he could not really define. But whatever it was, it felt wonderful.

Cynara

Suddenly, Aliya laughed, not a deep laugh as one might expect from a Warrior, but a silver laugh, like a small bell. “Really, you are too kind. This is not an art learned, but a natural skill. I’m Half-Elf, on my mother’s side. The skill of hiding and tracking seems to have bred true to me. And my Father was of the race that breeds Fighting Women. As you can see, I seem to have gotten the best my heritage can offer. But here I’m almost telling you my life, and I have yet to know your names!”

Khorazir

“Uh, yes indeed. Please excuse our discourtesy. ‘twas not intentional. My name is Faramir, and this is Maradir”, Faramir said, with a nod of his head (he had thought of bowing, but then remembered his bruised ribs). “You must also forgive my curiosity,” he added smiling, “but may I inquire whence you come? We rarely see Elven-folk (or Half-Elven) in Minas Tirith nowadays. Moreover the fact that you have not heard of the Steward of Gondor makes me assume that you come from abroad, and have not stayed long in the City yet.”

Cynara

“You would be correct, Faramir.” Aliya replied, “I have as of yet been here but three days, searching all the while for Visilya... my half-sister. I came from the outskirts of Lothlorien, the Golden Wood. You have heard of it?”

Khorazir

"I have indeed," Faramir said, looking at her with unveiled wonder in his eyes. "But no more than rumours, really, and tales of old. Seldom do we see one of this folk among us. And even more seldom a man or woman of Gondor will set out to seek the people of the Golden Wood - and often they do not return. And many of us deem that this is all to the best. But not I. I deem it grievous that we have so little contact to the Elves nowadays. There is so much to be learned from them. But," and now he shook himself slightly, "we should now attend to the matters at hand. No good standing here talking when there is a raving madman on the loose in the City. We must move on, or we shall lose Mithas' track completely. What do you think, Maradir, can we clear away this rubble to enter the tunnel? Whoever approached us from there must have turned and ran back the same way. We should follow him, even though it may be more dangerous, for I doubt that we should find him from outside."

Canamarth

Maradir had already descended into the tunnel and started clearing away the rubble. It did not take long to make a hole large enough for them to climb through. Maradir went first and found himself in a gloomy tunnel. There was torchlight not too far ahead, though. To his left he saw a door which had been cracked open. Judging from the crisp air that came from that direction, it had to be a way outside.

Khorazir

Faramir followed his friend into the tunnel, scanning the floor for traces of the person who had run along it screaming, while Aliya brought up the rear. Faramir soon found that the light was too poor to see much on the ground, also the floor was of stone, and, strangely, rather moist. They soon reached the broken door, where Maradir had stopped, peering cautiously into the room. Even though it was illuminated by torches still, it seemed to be empty. No sound issued from it, and no shadows could be seen moving. But there was a faint noise from the direction of the draught, from outside. It sounded like distant fighting, mingled with screams of fear or rage.

Maradir left the door and entered the room, and the others followed. What they beheld was total chaos. Every piece of furniture seemed to have been smashed and broken. But there were no traces of a fight, no bodies, no blood. "Someone seems to be really angry," Faramir said, looking around.

Cynara

"Yes," said Aliya, and stooped to the ground, touching the floor briefly. "But the footprints in the dust are small. I trust that four swords against this person's one should be enough. Let's go."

Khorazir

"I doubt that he even needs a sword when he can do this with his very hands", Faramir muttered, indicating the destroyed room. But he followed the others to the opening leading outside. There was light ahead, and it looked like far-off fire. "I only hope the fire in the "Nose" has not spread to other houses. It seemed quite under control when we left, but who knows what happened afterwards. Curse it, when Denethor finds out that I was there, he will most likely kill me, or banish me from Gondor for the rest of my life."

"Or perhaps, when he is in a forgiving mood, he will just send the two of us to Mordor," Maradir said. Faramir nodded with a slight grin, and stepped out onto the street. They were in a narrow alley leading back to the

place with the fountain. There were dark figures moving in this direction, and it was from there that the screams and clash of arms came. But the dim reddish glow seemed to be everywhere. If there was indeed a fire still, it was a large one.

“Let us have a look what is going on there,” Faramir said, pointing towards the shaddowy silhouettes ahead.

Canamarth

Maradir nodded and trotted on behind him.

Cynara

Aliya disappeared into the shadows, finding it quicker and easier to get to the fight than simply running along the streets. By the time Faramir and Maradir got to the scene of the destruction, Aliya was already facing the cause of the wreckage.

Shouting “A, Elbereth, Gilthoniel!”, Aliya crossed her blades and charged the black figure.

gladrieltook

visilya sensed turin's feelings of contentment. but she sensed something else, too. something from the outside of the houses, in the second circle. something was tugging at her mind, but she couldn't get a hold on it. she focused with all her might to grasp it. what she saw shocked her. there was a life force that was akin to her own. she sensed her father's life force somewhere in the city. but it was faint, and mingled with another lifeforce. she couldn't understand...

Khorazir

Túrin felt Visilya tense at his side. He looked at her questioningly. “What is it?” he asked silently. “Are you in pain?”

Meanwhile Maradir and Faramir had reached the fountain, and the bodies lying there in a large puddle of blood. The people, common stragglers by the look of them, had been cruelly hewn. Looking up, Faramir beheld a black-cloaked figure rounding the corner of a house and vanishing into another narrow alley. Aliya was charging the fugitive. By her speed she would be on him soon.

“We must help her,” Faramir called to Maradir, and started running after her. “She may be skilled with her swords, but this is no normal enemy.” Maradir followed immediately. But after a few steps Faramir felt as if his whole right side was punctured by knives. The pain was so intense that as soon as he had reached the corner of the house, he had to lean against it for a moment to save himself from fainting.

gladrieltook

“i'm fine. it seems that there is another lifeforce very simaler to my own. i don't even know why i can sense it. it's all very strange...” she broke off. her head jerked up and her body twiched. then she collapsed to the floor.

Canamarth

Maradir stopped next to Faramir. "What's going on? Do you need help?"

Faramir shook his head and pointed up the street. "Help her," he said through clenched teeth as he tried to straighten up again.

Maradir looked on ahead and saw that Aliya was now engaged in close combat with the hooded figure. He ran over to them and saw that the man's hood had swung back by now. But what Maradir saw was not a face - but a mask. A mask of moving metal pieces. "Mithas," he muttered and advanced further, his sword drawn, ready to step in if Aliya was in trouble.

Túrin laid Visilya on his bed and tried to wake her. But she did not show any reaction. At length he jumped up and dashed out of the room to fetch a healer.

Khorazir

Túrin ran along the deserted corridors, his footsteps echoing loudly. Having never been here before, he did not know exactly where the healers resided at night. Just when despair was beginning to seize on him, he saw a light ahead shining from underneath a door. As he approached it, the door opened, and the healer who had tended him and Visilya looked out. When he recognised Túrin, his angry gaze changed to an alarmed and anxious one. "What is the meaning of this ...", he began, but Túrin interrupted him. "You must come, swiftly," he gasped. "Visilya. She suddenly lost consciousness. A fit or something. Hurry!"

With that he turned and dashed back to his room, the healer trailing behind.

Faramir had fought down pain as best as possible and straightened up again. Breathing hard, using the wall for support, he went a few tentative steps. It was painful still, but at least not the cruel stabbing pain caused by running. Bracing himself he let go of the wall, and shifted his dagger back to his right hand. "What a birthday," he muttered to himself. Then he looked up. Owing to the dim illumination of the alley, he could not see clearly what was going on there. But he could discern a lot by listening. Aliya seemed engaged in fierce combat with the dark stranger who had forced her against a wall, while Maradir was waiting for an opportunity to join in the fight. Faramir advanced carefully until he was close to him. Then for an instant he, too, beheld the madman's masked face, and recognised him as well.

Cynara

Mithas pressed Aliya into a wall, laughing crazily, and Aliya almost lost consciousness from the man's rotted breath. Forcing her arms to move with all she had, she turned them to hold the swords the daggers, and scissored them into the man's back, causing two deep gashes in the man's back. He seemed to not be affected by them at all. Aliya dropped her left sword and withdrew her arm. She pulled out a small dagger and plunged it into the man's heart, just as he swept her a blow. Mithas's sword cut deeply into Aliya's side, causing her to double over in pain. Blood poured from both of their wounds, but just before Aliya went down, she had the strength of mind to hammer at the dagger hilt, caused it to strike deeper into Mithas's heart. As she fell, the dead Mithas fell on top of her.

Khorazir

Maradir and Faramir rushed over to them and dragged Mithas away from her and turned him over. Her dagger still stuck in his breast to the hilt. But Faramir gave no heed to the dead. He saw that Aliya was wounded seriously, the cut bleeding heavily, and that she was striving to maintain consciousness. He knelt by her side, took her own arm and pressed it to her side to stem the bleeding. Then he unbuckled his belt, pulled out the shirt he wore underneath the

tunic and cut a long strip from it which he used to bind the wound with. But he saw that it would not suffice to staunch the bleeding for long. Maradir handed him some more cloth cut from his own garments.

“We must get her up to the Houses of Healing,” Faramir said. “Swiftly. Stay here with her! There may be more of Mithas’ - Dellóm’s - henchmen about, and I fear I would not be of much use in a fight in my condition. I shall see if I can organise a horse somewhere. We cannot carry her all the way up to the Sixth Circle. Those guards I set to watch the area should not be far away.” With that he rose and ran off, as fast as the pain in his side allowed.

Cynara

“Maradir, I can walk! I’ll be fine! Come on, I’ll go to these Houses of Healing myself, I don’t know how to ride!” Aliya tried to get up, but passed out.

Khorazir

Faramir did not have to go far, for when he left the alley he beheld several people standing by the bodies at the fountain, three of them horsed guards. All were emmersed in a heated discussion. Apparently the guards did not quite believe the account of the people of what had befallen.

“This masked madman attack’d them an’ butcher’d all o’ them, I tell yeh,” an old woman cried to the guards. “I saw it too,” a man fell in. “Was lucky that he din’t get me ‘s well!”

One of the guards raised his hand to create silence. “Whence did this ... madman go?” he asked. The people began to point in several different directions at once. The guard only shook his head. Then he beheld Faramir, and recognised him.

“Lord Faramir, what are doing here? And why are you so out of breath ... again?” he asked astonishedly (at the mentioning of the name some of the bystanders edged away a little so as to avoid being noticed).

“No time for explanations,” the young man gasped. “But I can tell you that the madman has been accounted for. And there is someone wounded who needs to be brought to the Houses of Healing immediately. Over there.” As he pointed, he saw two figures emerge from the alley: Maradir carrying Aliya.

“We shall see to it that the lady is brought there with all speed,” the guardsman said, eyeing her curiously as she and Maradir advanced. Then he looked at Faramir again, and his eyes narrowed. “You should get some treatment as well, lord, if I may say so. You look rather ... shaken.”

Faramir nodded evasively. “Later. First I want to have a look at Dellóm.”

Canamarth

Maradir laid a hand on Faramir’s shoulder. “I think we should both get to the Houses of Healing as well. Mithas or Dellom or whoever he was is dead. Some of the guards can bring him for later inspection. And they can also search these houses more thoroughly.”

gladrieltook

visilya stirred. she slowly opened her eyes to see, hovering above her, turin and the healer. they both looked genuinely

relieved to see her awake.

“my lady, what happened” the old healer looked concerned.

“i... i don't know. something seemed to grab hold of my senses... it was strange.” she broke off again, realizing what had taken place. “before my father died, he took an elvin wife. she bore him a daughter, my half-sister. aliya and i were very close. and when my father and her mother died, we sealed our bond with the stongest pact in middle earth. blood. we each cut our hands and let the blood flow for a short while before pressing them together. from that moment on we were able to sense when the other was in danger. aliya is injured, i can tell. she needs me. i must go to her.”

Dellóm

Standing and moving from his office, Dellóm passed through the maze of passages, exiting into another safehouse where he could watch the warehouse district burning.

Good, he thought. Even if they can regain control of some of this, the city will still lose much and with the crops this year doing so badly there will be much more anger from the peasants and those of low blood. No matter how loved the noble, love will not fill the empty bellies of the people.

His mask flashed briefly as the room darkened momentarily, and a shadowy form appeared.

“Go to the house of healers and set things in motion. I want them both dead by morning. If they are not, then the assassin had better be, failure will not be brooked.”

Motioning, he sent the shadow on its errand.

“Let's see how long the Steward is in power when the city is in chaos.” laughing mirthlessly, Dellóm returned to his lair and waited to set the next step in motion.

Khorazir

“Lady,” the healer said gently, but also sternly, in a voice that suffered no refusal, “I understand that you want to go and seek your sister, but you really must rest now. And if she is hurt, she will most likely be brought here as well sooner or later. I will not deny that I am a little concerned about you. Even though you claim to be all right, the fit proved that you are not. I can only advise you strongly to listen to my counsel.” He looked at Túrin. “Will you stay here with her, Master Túrin, and see to it that she does rest indeed? Also I would appreciate if you told me about every change of her state.”

Túrin nodded, relieved that he was not going to be sent away. The healer rose and went to the door. “The tea will be ready soon, and I shall send someone to bring it.” With that he left.

Túrin looked at Visilya in wonder. “You have a Elven half-sister? This is fascinating.”

“I guess you are right,” Faramir said to Maradir. In a low voice he added: “I doubt I could keep on my legs much longer anyway. And the cut on your arm does not look that well either.” Turning to the guards, he said: “The man who murdered these people lies over there in the alley. See to it that his body is brought up to the citadel, to the Lord Denethor himself, and that he is not to be searched or anything taken from him. Tell the Steward what happened here - I am almost convinced that he knows of it already,” he added with a swift glance up to the White Tower, “- and that I shall explain things to him later. Should he seek me (which I doubt), tell him that I shall be in the Houses of Healing. Now we need two horses. I shall leave you in charge here. See to it that you find Tirion and tell him to investigate the houses around here. He knows what this is all about.”

The guardsman nodded. "But I doubt that Tirion has time to do that, lord," he said. "He is busy seeing to it that the huge fire in the ware-house district is quenched."

Faramir looked at him keenly. "So this is the red light we saw. What know you about it?"

"They say them nobles did it," one of the stragglers fell in.

Faramir turned to him sharply. "Be careful of what you say." Then to the guardsman he said: "Should rumours like these be spread about, quench them! Not the nobles, but someone who wants to blame it on them to stir the folk against their lords for his own purpose is responsible for this. And I guess I could put a name on this person," he added darkly, with a doubtful glance to the alley, whence the other two guards now returned, dragging the madman's body.

Maradir had already mounted one of the horses. With the help of the guard Faramir lifted Aliya and placed her before his friend. Then he mounted himself, and they rode off.

gladrieltook

"i cannot lay here when my sister and city need me most. the lord faramir is not fit to fight and mithas, whom i know as dellom, is still at large. i am well enough to go. please, turin. tell the healer that i am well." her eyes were pleading, and filled with sorrow at the thought of being caged here while the action was going on in the city below.

Khorazir

Túrin looked at her pitifully. "I don't know, Visilya. The healer's right, you should really rest. At least for a short while. You can't fight this Mithas - or Dellóm - when you're not entirely fit. Moreover you won't find him now. I'm sure he has taken precautions, and hidden himself very well. I'd trust to Faramir. He's good at tracking. If he hasn't found Mithas' trace then I doubt that you'll succeed at that, especially now, when you've been here for several hours. And as for fighting, well, Maradir's down there, too, and he's a mean swordsman. I wouldn't worry about the two. They may not look it, but they can take good care of themselves. And as for your sister, if you're right and she is indeed wounded, she will be brought here. You should await her here, and not go searching her down in the City, where you are most likely to miss her." He looked at her imploringly. "Please, be reasonable. Mithas is extremely dangerous, and as much as you wish to kill him you should only face him when you're entirely healed, and moreover your hatred has cooled. It's better to pursue him in cold blood. As my father often says: The hasty stroke goes oft astray."

On the upward road, while riding as swiftly as possible with the wounded Aliya, Faramir looked troubled. "I doubt that this madman was indeed Mithas, or Dellóm," he said at length. "Attacking people like that does not look like the man we met at the "Nose". He was much to controlled for that, and clever. And this fire ... I am sure it is his doing also."

They had reached the Fifth Circle by now, and through a space between two stately houses the White Tower was visible for a moment. High up a single window was illuminated, like a watchful eye. Faramir looked up at it curiously as they passed by the gap. Suddenly he smiled grimly. "Well, Lord Dellóm might deem himself pretty clever, but there is one thing he has left entirely out of his reckoning. Or one person rather."

Canamarth

Maradir looked up at the tower as well. "Aye, the Lord Denethor is not to be trifled with..."

They at length reached the Houses of Healing. And they were not the only new arrivals. A few people had come up from the warehouse district with minor burns. Probably merchants who had foolishly tried to save some of their belongings.

They dismounted and Maradir carried Aliya to the door. The healer sorting the injured clasped his hands together as he saw the unconscious woman. "Not another one who fainted from inhaling too much smoke. We are already running low on Theran."

Dellóm

Walking quickly to the healer's office, Srad trembled slightly. The shadow had spoken and she knew what she must do, but if caught...

she left the thoughts unfinished.

Accepting the platter with the tea on it, she went in search of her two victims, pausing in one out of the way spot to add the ingredients to the tea.

I am a healer and when necessary, a spy. Not a murderer. The tea will cause them much discomfort, but at least this way they will survive and I'll be dead and beyond my master's ire when he finds out that I have balked him in this. he thought.

More calmed now, she went on to the room and carried out the orders of her dark master and the healer.

Dellóm sat quietly, listening to the reports of his spies throughout the city.

At least half the warehouse district will be lost by morning and the other will be in much need of repair. he thought. *Well enough, at least for my plans.*

"They've recovered Mithas' body and taken it to the citadel." the young thief reported to his dark lord.

"No matter," Dellóm shrugged it aside, knowing the poisons and other things that had coated the inside of the mask would render the person beneath unrecognizable.

"What else?"

"The guards are searching the houses around where Mithas fell, as well as the office. Oh, and they are trying to break the rumors that the nobles started the fires."

Nodding his head, Dellóm sipped on his wine.

I would expect nothing less, he thought. *but it is already too late. The thoughts have already taken hold in the people and while further rumor may be quieted, what has spread will cause it's damage.*

"And those that were pursuing me?" He asked intently.

"Returning to the healer's house as well, M'Lord." The thief replied.

Nodding, Dellóm motioned him away.

They should arrive just in time to find their friends dying. Perfect. he thought.

Cynara

A slight rocking motion brought Aliya to consciousness. Relaxing her muscles, so as to appear either dead or asleep, Aliya cracked open her eyelid. She was moving along the street, being carried. Being carried? She slightly tensed her arms slowly as not to alert her carrier of her plans. She tried to shift around, but found that her left side was gripped in a numbing fire. Being wounded only made her more desperate to escape, though.

Suddenly, she rolled out of the man's arms, wrapping her arms around his neck, as she came to her feet, she flipped the man over her shoulder, onto his back. Aliya fell into a crouch, her knee quite firmly on the man's chest. Coughing, and grasping her side, Aliya peered into her carrier's face. "Maradir?"

Khorazir

Faramir had been describing Aliya's wound and how it had come to pass to the healer in brief words, and was just inquiring about Túrin and Visilya, when he heard a dull thud to his side, where Maradir had just been about to carry Aliya into the house. Turning, he beheld his friend lying on the floor with the woman kneeling on his chest. The healer and the bystanders looked completely shocked. Maradir, on the other hand, rather surprised. Swiftly Faramir stepped over to Aliya and put a hand to her shoulder. "'tis all right," he said calmly when he saw her stare at Maradir confusedly, and helped first her and then Maradir to their feet. "He is no enemy, lady."

Túrin looked up when the door opened and an old woman arrived carrying a tray with cups and a pot of steaming, aromatic-smelling tea. She placed it on the small table on the bedside and began pouring the tea. Túrin noticed that she looked troubled somehow, her face pale and grave, but set. Her hands trembled slightly, so much that quite some tea was spilled on the tray. Túrin went over to her. "Are you all right, lady?" he asked.

She nodded briefly and handed him a cup. "You must drink this all. And the lady too. Please see to it that she does so."

Túrin nodded and thanked her. The old woman gazed at him strangely for a moment, then swiftly she turned and left the room. Túrin looked after her, then slightly shook his head. "Now that was weird," he said thoughtfully. Then he shrugged, and turned to Visilya to give her the cup. "Everybody seems to behave exceedingly strange tonight."

gladrieltook

visilya sniffed her tea before deciding she did not want any. a comotion below the window caught her attention. she rose and went to see. turin followed her. below, in the street, several people were gathered about the healer. a woman had just thrown a man over her shoulder and pinned him to the ground. even from a distance, visilya recognized that move exactly. it was the fighting tactic the her father had taught her, and the move she had taught her younger sister, aliya. aliya was here.

visilya spun around and rushed past turin, her small frame propeling her forward with ease. turin's larger frame was no match. she ran until she had reached the courtyard where faramir was helping his friend maradir up. then she spotted aliya, standing by.

visilya rushed to her little sister and the two women embraced.

Cynara

Aliya, gasping heavily, looked up when Faramir placed his hand on her shoulder. Her face cleared. "Faramir, where am I?" she asked, vaguely, then apparently remembered something. "Never mind... Visilya!" Aliya stood and hugged her sister tightly.

Khorazir

Faramir smiled. After all the danger and bloodshed the night had brought so far this reunion of two sisters was heartwarming to behold. Then he looked to Maradir, who was rubbing his back. "Nasty trick she tried there, eh?" Faramir said, and his smile shifted to a grin. Maradir gave him a dark look. In this moment hasty footsteps approached from the direction of the house, and an instant later Túrin appeared, rather out of breath. When his eyes fell on the two women he stared in wonder. Then he beheld his two friends, and his face split into a broad grin. "Hey guys, you look as if the whole army of Mordor has marched over you!" he said cheerfully.

“And you as if you have been chased by it,” Faramir returned. Túrin laughed out loud. Then he seemed to remember something. Swiftly he walked over to Faramir, grabbed his hand and drew him into a tight embrace. “Congratulations to your birthday, my friend,” he cried. Faramir winced in pain. It took him great effort not to cry out, but then luckily Túrin let go of him again. Faramir swayed slightly, and leaned on Maradir to steady himself. “Thanks, Túrin,” he managed.

gladrieltook

“it should be effective” visilya laughed. “after all, she learned it from me.”

the men looked in wonder at the close resemblance of the sisters. both had small, lithe frames, their golden hair falling to their waists and their identical eyes silver in the dim light. visilya was slightly taller than her sister, and more fair, with a wise face. the younger had a fair, carefree sort of face and was less care worn than her elder. besides that, they were identical.

Cynara

But then Aliya clutched a hand to her side, and let out a little grunt of pain, and though she tried to hide it with a cough, she staggered a little, grabbing her sister's arm for support.

Canamarth

Maradir noticed that Aliya had problems staying on her feet. “Time to find ourselves a room to sleep in,” he muttered and strode past the company to the healer who was looking at a man with minor burns.

“Excuse me, Master Healer. We do have more serious injuries to attend to than this.” The man, obviously some rich merchant, made as if to protest but when he saw Maradir's dark glance and the blood that was still trickling down from his shoulder he decided against it.

“Oh, I am sorry. I thought... No matter, your wound needs seeing to immediately,” the healer said.

“It's just a scratch,” Maradir said. “But there are two others which need good care. One of them is the Steward's son.”

The healer immediatly got busy. They were all ushered in and brought into seperate rooms where they were attended to by healers.

Túrin and Visilya were left standing on the corridor.

Khorazir

“What a night,” Túrin muttered. “And what are we to do now? I don't feel tired, to be honest, and my wound doesn't hurt that badly, either. But you should get some rest. Wait, let's see if your sister's wound has been tended already. Perhaps the healers will allow you to see her, or even share a room with her. I bet you have much to talk about. How long is it that you haven't seen each other?”

gladrieltook

“since my father died.” visilya sighed. “we were seperated. i went to live with the farmer and his wife, my mother’s kin, while she was sent to live with her mother’s kin, in mirkwood.”

Cynara

Aliya, at that moment, wasn’t awake. The Healers had put her under to stitch up her side after she had knocked over one or two of the nurses who had come at her with the needle and thread.

Khorazir

“Now, what ails you, lord?” the healer asked Faramir when he and an apprentice had accompanied him to a room. Faramir gingerly stripped off tunic and shirt and pointed to his right side. He could not quite see how it looked now, but judged by the healer’s face it was not a nice sight. “Whence did you get that bruise?”

Faramir smiled grimly. “A towering brute on one side, and a massive oaken table on the other.”

The healer only shook his head and began feeling the bruise to see if some of the ribs were broken - not too gently. “You are almost as reckless as your brother. And I thought you had more sense than him. You should have come here immediately,” he said sternly. “I wonder that you managed to walk and ride so far. It must have been very painful.”

Faramir only nodded and breathed in sharply, for at that moment the healer’s hands had reached a place where it hurt extraordinarily. “Broken as well,” the healer said shortly, and his face grew graver still.

At length he was finished, which Faramir greatly welcomed, and explained to the apprentice which herbs were needed for a paste to cool the bruise. “There is not really much we can do to heal it, lord. The ribs must mend of their own, which takes long. You will be bothered by this injury for quite some time now, I fear. We can reduce the bruise, and the pain, but that is all. What you need most of all now is rest. I will see to it that some tea is brought to you which will let you sleep untroubledly.”

Faramir shook his head. “I doubt that I shall need this. I am very tired as it is. But first I should like to see if my friends are all right.”

The healer smiled slightly. “I shall concoct the paste and bind the bruise, and then you can go and see your friends – for a short while. Also there is some water where you may wash or even bathe. I daresay you need it – if I may say so, with your face still smeared with blood and all. Also there is a linen nightshirt.”

Faramir thanked him, and while the healer left to prepare the paste, he undressed to bathe, agreeing with the healer that it was definitely needed.

Canamarth

Maradir was also forced to take a bath even before his wound was attended to. They cleaned the cut and put some ill-smelling paste on it and bandaged his shoulder.

“You’ll need a little rest,” the healer said. “But you should be able to move your arm and shoulder freely in about a week’s time. The cut is not very deep and it will heal swiftly with this paste. And now I suggest you get to sleep for what is left of the night.” The healer ushered him out into the corridor where Maradir found Túrin pacing up and down.

"How are you my friend?"

"Not too bad. Just a scratch, as I said. Have the others yet come out?"

"No. Visilya went to look after Aliya. I think her wound needs stitching. And Faramir is still being examined."

"Come this way, please," the healer interrupted. "You can have a bed in the same room as Master Túrin - who should be coming along as well," he added in a stern voice.

Túrin submitted to the healer's command and the two of them went to bed. Maradir fell asleep immediately but Túrin lay wide awake, thinking of one person in particular.

Khorazir

Faramir, too, felt extremely weary after the bath, and was just thinking about lying down when the healer and his apprentice returned. The young man carried a large jar containing some white paste, as well as bandages. The paste felt nice and cool to the skin, unlike the bandages, which were rather tight. Nevertheless Faramir did not complain. He was too tired to do so. When healer noticed him stifling a yawn again he smiled, and said: "We shall leave you now, lord. I do not doubt that you will desire to leave tomorrow, but I would appreciate if you returned in the evening so that I can examine the bruise again." Faramir nodded faintly.

The healer ushered the apprentice out of the room, and prepared to leave himself, but at the door he stopped. "Oh, and one thing: The Lord Steward sent word that he wants to see you first thing in the morning. I shall see to it that you are roused in time." With that he left.

Faramir sighed. "Something to look forward to," he muttered. Then he stretched out on the bed, and at once fell into deep sleep.

gladrieltook

Visilya checked in on her little sister before heading to her own room. it was late, and she was tired. she lay down, still laughing over the healers report of her sister's attack on the healerwomen.

visilya allowed herself to slip into the calm quiet of sleep, all cares tucked carefully away. she was asleep in seconds

Cynara

When Aliya awakened, bright, but early, sunshine streamed in through her window. Briefly, she wondered where she was, but her train of thought was interrupted by a trumpet blast. Gingerly, she got up, wincing at the pain and stiffness in her side. Looking out from her window, she saw the entourage of a very important person - looking at the standard, she saw that it was the Steward of Gondor.

Wondering why he came, Aliya then remember that Faramir was the Steward's son. Putting on her armor, Aliya snuck from the room, hoping to find where the Healers had put her swords and knives. Finally, She found a closet at the end of the hall, which held all of the patients' belongings. Selecting out her own weaponry, Aliya ran back down the hall, eager to leave before she was caught. As she neared the top of the stairs, she heard voices coming up the stairs. Halting in near-panic, Aliya looked around her for a place to hide, but before she could act, she found herself face-to-face with Denethor, Steward of Gondor!

Dellóm

Rising at the sound of the trumpeted entrance, the Guildmaster of the Healers rushed to dress before rushing down to meet the Steward at the guild entrance.

What is he doing here. I was led to believe that he and his son did not get along well enough that it would warrant such a visit. And where is Srad. It is her watch, she should have given warning so that I could meet him at the door instead of rushing from bed like a layabout.

Stopping outside the doorway to the guildhall entrance, the Healer composed herself, before continuing on, coming upon the Steward and Aliya during their awkward encounter.

Dru ran to knock on Srad's door, knowing that the Healer would be sorely vexed with her, he wanted to give her warning. It had been Srad's watch, afterall, and any punishment would be merited, but he could not believe that she would have been so lax as to completely leave off from her duties without good reason.

Knocking quickly, he called her name. There was no answer. Trying the handle, he found the door locked and had to break the lock to open it, to peer inside for her. They found him babbling in the garden later, pulling at his hair, his eyes bloodshot from crying. He and Srad had been more than friends.

When the others finally found her, they were gentle with what was left. She had been nailed to the crossbeams of her room, her stomach had been opened, and her throat had been cut. The look upon her face said she had been conscious for most of it. A lone note had been left on the floor, beside a bloody handprint, "Failure!" was all it said.

The shadow had remained until the first sounds of the door being forced and it had already spied the arrival of the Steward. Rushing to it's master, it reported everything.

That will teach others to be more wary of failure in the future and the healers that they are not safe within their neutral walls. But the Steward is something I had not counted on. He will take a hand in the investigation and may even bring that damnable palantir into it. he thought quickly. My mask will protect me against his scryings, but not those who follow me and then all my planning will be for nothing. I must contact someone who may be able to cloud and distract things within its view and keep Denethor busy until it's too late.

Calming his mind, he reached into his clothing and grasped a hidden object as his mind went questing for the one who could aid him.

Khorazir

The Steward Denethor looked at her keenly. He was tall and lean, and dressed in long dark-grey robes, very plain. His face was stern and commanding, with pale skin and dark, piercing eyes, but also noble, reminding one of the statues of the Kings of Westeros of old. There was quite some resemblance to the face of his son although the hair that once had been dark was grey now. Aliya was not sure how old he was, but it seemed certain by the shadows on his features that he had not gotten much sleep tonight.

"This is the lady that arrived with your son, lord," the master of the Houses of Healing who stood next to the Steward said. Denethor nodded briefly. Apparently this was no news to him.

"I wish to talk to you, lady, later. You will be notified when to present yourself at the Citadel."

With that he went on and left Aliya standing where she was. "Do you wish to see your son first, lord? He may be sleeping still. Or do you want me to lead you to ...," the healer's voice trembled slightly.

"We go there first," came Denethor's stern voice. "And you will tell me all you know. She was one of your staff, I take it? Has she ever shown any peculiarities?"

"Nay, lord, never. I could rely on her. She was a good and hard worker. Tonight I had sent her to the son of the Lord Húrin, and the other lady, to bring them their tea. But after that she disappeared. Until we found her." He swallowed hard.

Denethor nodded. "This is important," he said softly, more to himself. "Túrin was also present at this tavern. Someone wanted to get rid of the two. Did they drink the tea?" he asked aloud.

The healer stared at him. "I ... no, no, I think not. There was quite some confusion going on, with the fire and all. But as far as I know they went to sleep without it."

"Have their rooms searched. Perhaps the tea is still there. If so, analyse it. It may be poisoned. Tell me what you found."

"Aye, lord," the healer said. He seemed quite shocked at the idea that one of his staff would try and poison patients. "Well, here we are," he said and sighed, and opened the door to Srad's room.

Canamarth

Maradir was wakened by the sound of somebody entering the room. He sat up carefully but found that his shoulder did not ache half as bad as he had expected. "What are you doing here that early?" he sleepily asked the healer who had come in. "I thought we needed rest."

The man looked at him sorrowfully. "I am looking for something. Ah, there they are." He walked over to the table underneath the window and put the two cups that were standing there carefully on a tray he had brought with him. Maradir now saw that he was wearing gloves.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Strange things have happened tonight," the man said, bending over Túrin who was still fast asleep but breathing regularly which seemed to calm the healer a little.

"Whom do you tell that," Maradir muttered.

"Srad has been killed. Here in the Houses of Healing! And I heard it was a really cruel sight."

"What? Someone was here tonight and killed a healer?" Maradir jumped out of his bed. "Bring me to the place where it happened."

"I can't. I have to bring this to the laboratories to get it analyzed." He indicated the cups he had collected. "But you won't be able to miss it. There's a commotion on the corridor. The Steward himself has come to investigate."

Maradir swallowed hard. Faramir was in for trouble. He got dressed as fast as he could, checked on Túrin who was still fast asleep and then dashed out to find the scene of crime and the Steward.

Khorazir

When Maradir reached Srad's room Denethor and the healer were just leaving. "I want this room locked and watched, until I sent someone to investigate it more closely," the Steward said sternly. "No one is to enter and pry about. Also I want you not to reveal it to any of your staff, or anyone in the City. The man who found her - send him to me when he is fit to talk. I think it is in your interest also if tidings of this event do not reach the ears of the people. It would not shed a good light upon the Houses, would it."

The healer nodded. He looked rather pale and shaken. "Yes, my lord. Shall I send someone to rouse your son now?" Denethor gave him a swift sharp glance. "No. I will go there myself."

Then his eyes fell on Maradir approaching the room, and slowing down considerably when recognising the Steward.

Denethor gave the young man a long, keen glance. Not a friendly one. It was hard to tell with his cold, controlled face, but he seemed to be extremely angry. Turning to the healer he said: "If he wants to, he may see the room. But no others."

Then he looked back at Maradir. His dark eyes flicked briefly to the bandaged wound, then back to Maradir's face. "You have a lot to explain, young man!" he said sternly. "At noon I want to see you, Túrin and the two women in the White Tower. Should you find anything of interest here, you will report this also."

Without waiting for an answer, he brushed past Maradir and strode off. The healer shrugged to the young man. "You heard him. If you want to have a look, you may. But I would advise you not to, really. And if you go, hurry. When you are finished I will lock the room."

Canamarth

Maradir went in to have a look at the mess. He had seen quite gruesome sights in his time but this was definitely one of the worst he had ever seen.

"Good that I haven't breakfasted yet," he murmured as he started inspecting the room more closely.

Khorazir

Even though he had been very tired, Faramir's sleep had been troubled by dark dreams. He had again been wandering through the nightly streets of Minas Tirith, but all the people he saw wore the strange, ominous mask of Dellóm. He knew that he was looking for someone in particular, yet the masked strangers evaded him whenever he tried to get a hold of them to uncover their features. Then the situation changed: suddenly he found himself being chased through the dark streets. Chased, cornered, surrounded by masked figures. One stepped forward, a hand outstretched to grab him, the pieces of the mask shifting into horrible patterns. And suddenly the mask vanished, and the face beneath was that of ... his father.

Faramir woke with a start, breathing hard. For a moment he looked confusedly at the carved beams of the ceiling, as bit by bit the recollections of the last night returned. He ran a hand through his hair, feeling that it was drenched with sweat, and that moreover the movement hurt. As did his entire right side. Nevertheless he tried to gingerly raise himself into a sitting position, which he managed with a sharp intake of breath and a groan.

"Serves you right!" came a sharp, stern voice from the window. Faramir spun round (and immediately wished he had not) and beheld his father standing there, arms crossed in front of his chest, looking down on him coldly and without pity. For a moment Faramir wished he was dreaming still, and that he would wake up now. This was going to be highly unpleasant. He swallowed slightly. "Good morning, father," he managed.

Denethor took a step towards him. "You call that a good morning? I have just come from an inspection of one of the healers' rooms where a horrible murder has been committed. And last night," he pointed out of the window, "a large part of the warehouse district has burned down – which may have evaded your attention, since obviously you were busy with other, more important matters."

"Father, I can ex–", Faramir began, but was interrupted by Denethor.

"The 'Troll's Nose', Faramir?" he asked, in a voice of deadly calm and uttermost contempt, which was worse than all screaming. "I guess I need not tell you that I am utterly disappointed in you. I would have expected that you had sense enough not to indulge in such a totally foolish 'adventure', as you might call it. Obviously I was mistaken. And I shall definitely reconsider giving you a command of a company in Ithilien now. Come of age or no, you have given impressive proof tonight that you are not yet mature enough to act responsibly and sensibly. I had expected more of you, Faramir!"

Faramir swallowed again while studying the folds of his blanket attentively, and was silent. What should he have replied anyway?

“Whose idea was it?” Denethor asked curtly.

Faramir hesitated for a moment, then raised his eyes to look at his father. “Mine.”

Denethor gave him a piercing glance. Faramir knew that he could tell most of the time when he was lying, and usually this prevented him from even trying. But he did not want to get Túrin and Maradir into more trouble they were in already.

“You are sure of that?”

Faramir nodded slightly. Denethor shook his head. Then he walked over to a chair and sat down. “You will tell me all that happened last night! And be careful not to miss any details!”

Cynara

Aliya turned to find her friends and sister, deep in thought. Summoned to Denethor’s Throneroom. Did she really want to stay in the city any more? all she had come to do was track down her sister, see that she was still alive and well, and that was what she had done. Now she just wanted to leave, get away from all the people. Aliya was used to the wide open land or forests, and that was how she liked it. But...was her sister really all right? Obviously not physically, but that was hardly the important thing, Visilya was hardy. In spirit though, Visilya seemed somehow dampened. Aliya sighed, returned to her room, and resolved to stay

gladrieltook

Visilya awoke with a start that morning. she looked out her window and much to her surprise, and dismay, the steward’s personal horse and gaurds were waiting out side the houses. she swallowed the lump in her throat and quickly dressed herself with out a thought except that she would have to face the wrath of the steward that morning.

she strapped on her sword and hastened to the lord faramir’s room where she knew the steward would be, giving his young son a cold chastising. she came to the room, bowed in the manner of the soldier she was, then stood erect to await her lord denethor’s dreaded reprimanding.

Khorazir

When Visilya knocked on the door of Faramir’s room, it took a moment until Denethor opened himself. Over his shoulder she could see that Faramir was sitting upon his bed, still in his nightshirt, and that he was looking rather pale. Denethor gazed down at her angrily, apparently displeased about the interruption. “Apparently my message the healer was to bring you has not reached you yet,” the Steward said, “You will come to the White Tower at noon, together with your half-sister, Túrin and Maradir. Maradir knows that already, but you can tell the others. Report to me then of what befell last night. I have other things to see to at the moment.” With that he closed the door and left her standing where she was.

Inside, Faramir looked at his father. He had given him a full account of the events of the last night, and was now awaiting the declaration of his punishment. Denethor had listened attentively to his tale, his face unmoved, only interrupting him now and again with shrewed questions. Then there had been the knock on the door, which Faramir had welcomed.

“Who was that?” Faramir asked.

Denethor gave him a brief glance. “Visilya. Reporting for duty.”

Faramir looked to the door, then back at his father. “She told me that you had commanded her to watch over me ...,” he began.

“Indeed,” Denethor replied coldly. “And well ‘twas that I did so. Otherwise you would not sit here with some broken ribs only. But let us return to that mad person you chased. His body has been examined. The inside of his mask was full of needles containing a poison which rendered his face totally shapeless, and which also must have caused the extreme rage he felt.”

“I knew that it was not the same masked man whom we met at the “Nose,”” Faramir muttered. “What do you know of this Dellóm, father?”

Canamarth

Maradir at length emerged from the room. He had copied the bloody handprint, which was rather small, onto a piece of parchment and had had a close look at the “Failure” note. Besides, he had found little traces. The wounds on the woman’s stomach had been inflicted by some small clawlike instrument, the throat had been cut with a dagger. He had also found out that the intruder had probably entered through the window which stood slightly ajar.

Maradir went into the garden to see if he could find any traces there.

Khorazir

Denethor hesitated for a moment with an answer. When he looked at Faramir his son thought that his face was even more troubled than before. “I know not much for sure, but there are many rumours in the City – and have been for quite some time now. I cannot relate it all to you here and now. The matter is rather complicated. But what seems certain is that he runs a large organisation with informants and spies everywhere. The woman who was murdered in this house last night seems to have worked for him as well, and failed him. There has been a number of extremely cruel deaths recently. Bodies have been found mutilated and with signs of torture. There seems to be some common motive behind them.” He ran a hand across his eyes. Faramir could tell that he was extremely weary, but somehow managed to conceal that from most people.

“I do not know what Dellóm has in mind, but it seems that he wants to stir up the people against their rulers. Rumours have been spread about last night that the nobles of the realm were responsible for the fire which consumed much of our stores of grain. And there have been other attempts to render the nobles in a bad light. So far I have been able to disperse these rumours. But after last night ... Unfortunately quite a number of people saw two certain young members of the noble families of the City around this unfortunate tavern. And now I cannot deny anymore that nobles were indeed present when the “Troll’s Nose” burned down. And even responsible for the fire, in a way.”

“Wait a moment,” Faramir said, feeling anger stir inside him, “I set neither fire to the “Nose” nor to the warehouse district.”

“But your foolish appearance at the inn started the trouble,” Denethor returned fiercely. “Do you not see that it was a welcome opportunity for Dellóm to launch his plan? You played into his hands last night!”

“But we also troubled him when we followed the traces. He had to flee and seek another hiding. This, certainly, slowed the progress of his plans.”

“Did it now? Yes, he fled to another hiding of his. He has many in the City. And now he can again operate from there

secretly. Nay, son, this matter is not over yet. Not for a long time!" Again he ran a hand over his eyes.

"You are weary, father," Faramir said. "You should get some rest." When his eyes met Denethor's, he immediately wished that he had said nothing.

"Yes, I should," he snorted contemptuously. "But unfortunately this is going to be a very busy day. I have ordered your friends to present themselves at noon. Then most likely the first guests for the feast tonight will have arrived: the Prince Adrahil of Dol Amroth, his son Imrahil and his family are going to come, as are the Lords of Pelargir, Lebennin and Lossarnach, and the Lord Húrin of the Keys. I must discuss the matter of the fire with them ere the feast starts. Hopefully Boromir will have returned by then as well." He looked darkly at his son. "Actually I should cancel the feast, as part of your punishment."

Faramir nodded gloomily. "Do that, if you wish. I am in no mood to celebrate anyway."

"'tis to late to inform the lords now," Denethor said sternly. "And your brother comes from Ithilien just for this occasion. I do not want to disappoint him."

Faramir was about to make a cynical remark about that, but thought the better of it. Denethor's eyes watching him grew harder for a moment, as if he guessed what thoughts passed through his son's mind. There was a moment of silence, then Faramir took a deep breath and looked at his father steadily.

"What punishment have you devised now?"

gladrieltook

visilya stood, as if struck dumb, at the door for a moment before realizing that she should be on her gaurd. and she should be thinking of a good way to report the night's insidents without getting her friends, not to mention herself, in more trouble than was nessecary. she pondered this, realizing, with a sickening dread, that she could hear every word being said inside faramir's room. her heart sunk to her feet when she heard how far the fire had spread and how much damage had been caused. she was guilty, and she knew the penelty for such a crime...

Khorazir

Denethor was silent while glaring at his son. Faramir returned his piercing glance steadily. He was prepared for anything. At length his father withdrew his eyes. He must be weary indeed, Faramir thought with a trace of pity, usually 'tis him who outstares people.

"As I have said," Denethor finally answered his question, "you shall not be entrusted with a company. Not for a long while. Not before you have proven that you are ready to bear the responsibility and burden which comes with the rank of captain. Originally I had planned to send you back to Cair Andros in two days, there to assume command of the rangers. But as things are, you will remain in the City. And I shall find things to occupy your leisure, so that you have no more time to indulge in follies like last night."

Faramir nodded. "Fine," he said evenly.

Denethor's eyes watching him grew harder when Faramir showed neither great dissatisfaction nor complained. He smiled grimly. "You are a good actor. Even though you pretend now that this bothers you not, I know that in truth it troubles you greatly. I know that you had been looking forward to being in charge of your own company, and moreover to returning to Ithilien, especially now, when spring is approaching. I know you well. You love roaming the forests as much as you despise life at court. And spring in Ithilien is beautiful indeed, is it not? Unfortunately you will miss it this year. You are hurt, and before your ribs are not entirely healed you will not leave the City."

Faramir looked at him disbelievingly. "That is going to take weeks."

"Indeed," Denethor returned smoothly. "And 'tis well that it is so."

"You cannot cage me here!"

"You shall see that I can," Denethor said menacingly. "And one more thing. During your stay here you will not meet with your friends. I shall see to it that they are going to be away from Minas Tirith most of the time – as part of their punishment."

"This is not fair, father!" Faramir fell in. "They –"

"Silence," thundered Denethor. He rose. "Get dressed, and then come to the White Tower. You will give the lords an account of what happened. And then you can say farewell to your friends."

gladrieltook

away from the city!? visilya was greatly troubled by that statement. what did denethor mean by 'away from the city'? and why did he tell faramir to say farewell to them in such a tone as to suggest something very unpleasant.

Cynara

Aliya wandered down the hall, then over to Visilya, who was standing before a door, looking rather pale and drawn. "Sister, what's the matter? Are you sick? Come on, we need to get our weapons and clothes cleaned for court. We should be on our way there, almost!"

gladrieltook

"I am on duty, and besides, my clothes have already been taken care of. Your's, I see, however, have not. Run along and get tidied up." She decided not to worry her sister with her gloomy theories. but instead took charge, acting as the elder child should, seeing to it that her younger sibling was well taken care of.

Khorazir

Denethor walked over to the door, but before he could leave, Faramir, having mastered his anger and disappointment a little, said: "Will you at least allow me to investigate further into the matter of Dellóm? I know we were on the right track, Maradir and I, and Aliya. Then I could at least do something useful while you keep me here."

Denethor looked at him angrily, surprised apparently that his son even dared to voice such a request. Again Faramir held his gaze as long as he could. But eventually the Steward's face softened, and he gave him a strange, piercing glance. "This would of course mean that Maradir had to remain here as well, would it not? And the others too, perhaps? How very clever of you. And why should I allow this, given how you failed me last night?"

"Because you know that we could succeed in tracking him down. With the help of others, of course. You must at least give me an opportunity to prove that I am not a failure entirely. And you can devise another punishment for me, if you want – if keeping me from going back to Ithilien is not enough."

Still Denethor studied him keenly, pondering, seemingly, if he could really entrust his son with a matter of this impor-

tance. At length he said. "I will meet your friends in about an hour, to hear what they can tell of the events of last night. After that the nobles, who hopefully will have arrived by then. I shall give thought to what you have said - no more and no less. But I deem that if I do not grant it to you, you will mention the matter to your brother, who then will go into great efforts to talk me into allowing it, am I not right?"

Faramir was silent, but he could not help smiling slightly at this remark, which was only too true. His father did indeed know him well.

"Now see to it that you get ready," Denethor said, and left the room. Outside he found Visilya. He stopped and gave her a stern glance. "What are you doing here still? Did you not hear my order? The White Tower, in one hour. Since doubtlessly you have heard a lot of what we spoke in there, you know how things stand. I would counsel you to devise a good explanation for your actions in the "Troll's Nose" last night. And now go and wake Túrin, and tell him to get ready!" With that he strode away.

gladrieltook

Visilya sighed, straitened up, and stode off to rouse Turin. When she came to his room she found him sleeping peacefully. She smiled to herself as she walked up to his dozing form. Bending down, she blew softly in his right ear and kissed his brow. He woke with a start.

Cynara

Slightly mad, Aliya went back to her room. Aparently, Visilya remembered how much she had hated it when the elder sister acted her part. After she was cleaned up, Aliya went to Turin's room, positive to find her sister there. After knocking, Aliya entered. Smiling at them, she asked "How are your injuries today?"

Khorazir

When Túrin recognised Visilya a warm smile spread across his face, replacing the rather confounded expression it had settled into when he had been roused so suddenly, and startled out of his dreams - which had been very pleasant, as he recalled later.

"Visilya," he muttered. "I must be dreaming still." Swiftly he sat up and looked around. "What is the time? And where's Maradir?" Then he looked at Visilya again, and after studying her for a moment he said gravely: "You look troubled. Is everything all right with you?"

In this moment there was a knock on the door, and Aliya entered, asking him how he was today.

"Oh, morning," he said, slightly annoyed by the interruption, since he had hoped to be alone with Visilya for a moment. "Nice of you to ask. But I wasn't that badly wounded. Only a scratch on the arm, which hardly hurts anymore. But what's going on here? Everybody's up already except me, it seems. Is there any kind of trouble?"

Maradir, meanwhile, was searching the garden for traces the killers might have left. What he found was not very sustaining. There were a number of footprints, but it was not discernable if they were recent or not. Apparently there had been many people walking in the gardens lately. One strange thing he encountered which made him very thoughtful and alert: there were strange marks at one point of the wall. The stones and mortar had been scratched by some sharp instrument, a grappling-hook, perhaps. There was no way to be sure, but there was a good chance that the killers had entered the gardens over the wall. As Maradir looked down from the battlements, trying to fathom the height of the wall, he could not help it but marvel at the climbing skills of the killers. Thoughtfully, he made his way back to the

Houses.

gladrieltook

"I'm fine. The Lord Denethor wishes to see us at noon, and it is already 11 in the morn. You'd best get dressed in a hurry or we'll be late." Visilya laughed gently. It was a fluid sound, surprising even herself. But her face soon was grim once more. "I am expected to go in front of the Steward to explain last night's events. I am not sure I can." she smiled again "But why am I worrying you two with my gloomy thoughts? Hurry into your clothes Turin! I'm off to find us some horses. Come on Aliya!"

The two young women hurried out to get the healer and some horses.

Cynara

As the two young women walked down the hall, Aliya said to her sister, "What's the matter, Visilya? You're never afraid of anything, much less simply telling your story. Come on, what's up with the Steward." Aliya grinned a bit. "He doesn't look like he has to much fun. Poor Faramir!"

gladrieltook

"You'll understand in time." Visilya sighed. The next moment, the healer strode around the corner ahead of them. he greeted them cheerfully. "Good Morn, Sir Healer! We come seeking a messenger to go to the stables and borrow some horses for ourselves and our friends." the healer called for a runner and went on about his duties. The runner appeared suddenly from around the corner. he was a small boy, with wirey hair and bright eyes. Visilya smiled at him before giving him his assignment. "You are to go to the stables and bring five horses. Tell the keeper of the horses that Captian Visilya of the Secret Gaurd sent you. Also, tell him send my own horse; a noble creature by the name of Rebel. And take this" she pressed a small coin into his hand, a small bit of her weeks salary. The young boy's eyes sparkled before he ran off to fetch the horses, excited to be entrusted with such an important errand.

Khorazir

"Oh, there's no need to ride," Túrin called after them. "It's not far to the Citadel, and horses are not allowed in there anyway. We'd have to walk anyway." But he doubted that they had heard him still.

As he dressed he thought about what Visilya had said. A meeting with the Steward! No wonder she looked so troubled, he mused. When Denethor's in a bad mood - as is likely - this isn't going to be pleasant. He looked down at him: his clothes were stained with soot and slightly singed. But there was no time to run home and get decent ones. He shrugged, and left the room, and went in search of the two sisters.

Maradir had thought of rousing Túrin, but on the way to his room he saw Faramir, who had just left his own. He looked rather pale and drawn, and for some reason angry.

"Morning," he said when his eyes fell on Maradir.

"Morning," his friend replied, giving him a keen glance. "Are you all right? You look troubled."

"So do you."

“You first!”

Faramir took a deep breath. “I had a visit from the Lord Steward,” he said gloomily. “As you can guess, lordship is not pleased.”

Maradir studied him. “So bad?”

Faramir only nodded. “Confined to the City until I am entirely healed. Perhaps longer. And no command for a long time.”

“What of Ithilien?”

“Not this spring.”

“He can’t do that!”

Faramir smiled grimly. “Oh yes, he can. And he does. I only hope that he will not be too hard with you. Come, we must go to the White Tower. By the way, have you heard of the murder that has been committed in the Houses last night?”

Now it was Maradir who nodded gloomily. “I had a look at the body.” While they headed towards the entrance hall, he told his friend what he had seen and found.

gladrieltook

When Turin came up behind them and inquired why they wanted horses, the sisters jumped a foot. Visilya turned and looked at him with exasperated annoyance. “I don’t want to walk. Even a short a distance as here to the Citidel is a pain in my knee. Literally. I fell out of a tree when I was 12. Saved me from the orcs, but left me slightly crippled. If I strain it, it hurts to high heaven. Besides, I doubt if any of us truly wish to walk with our various injuries.”

Khorazir

“Yeah, sounds reasonable,” Túrin agreed. “Sorry to hear that about your injury. I feel off a wall when I was about sixteen, into a tree. Gave me a nice scar on my arm. But that’s not important now. Hey, look, there come Faramir and Maradir.” He nodded towards the two who were descending the stairs and coming towards the others, still emmersed in conversation.

“With some luck father will change his mind about sending you all away on errands to make my time in the City as boring as possible,” Faramir said to Maradir. “I told him that we could be useful in trying to track down Dellóm. Denethor tried to conceal his concern from me, but I could see that he is very troubled about this whole business. But we shall see.”

Looking up, he beheld Túrin and the women. “Good morning,” he said. “I am sorry that because of me you will have to face a most bad-tempered Steward now. I told him that it was my fault, the matter with he “Nose”. He knows of course that things are more complicated. But stick to that, and hopefully he will not be to hard with you. And by the way, to speak of more cheerful things: there is going to be a feast in the evening, and I would be glad if you all attend - the ladies also. If you think you can endure a bunch of nobles,” he added, with a smile at Visilya.

gladrieltook

Visilya laughed. "As I've told Turin, my parents were nobles. My father was the Captain of the Secret Gaurd, the position that I now hold. I've sent for some horses, for I highly doubt that we wish to walk and look common." She laughed again. "Come on, I'm sure that our steeds have arrived by now." With that she turned and led the way out of the Houses. Indeed, the horses were waiting outside for them. She sent the runner to tell the healer where they were going, then mounted a noble looking black horse. Patting its neck she beckoned for the others to mount up.

Khorazir

Taking a deep breath, Faramir mounted also. The pain was not as bad as he had expected. Apparently the paste the healers had applied to his side was helping. "Let us ride, then."

They left the courtyard in front of the main entrance of the Houses of Healing, and following a broad street, they arrived in front of the tunnel leading up to the Seventh Gate, and the Citadel. There they they dismounted again, leaving their horses in the charge of grooms.

Faramir addressed the guards who stood there, clad in black and silver, the White Tree embroidered on the curcoats they wore over their black mail. The sun glistened on their mithril-wrought winged helmets. "We are expected by the Lord Denethor," Faramir said.

"Aye lord, we have already been informed," a young guardsman answered. "He awaits you in the White Tower." He gave Faramir a curious glance. "Is it true that you went to the "Troll's Nose" last night, lord?"

Faramir smiled. "Aye, it is, Beregond. I bet the whole City knows of it by now."

"Quite so," Beregond answered, and smiled as well.

"Has the Prince of Dol Amroth arrived yet?" Faramir asked of him.

"And the Lord Húrin?" Túrin added.

"Aye, they are here. Also the Lord Falastur of Pelargir, and Calmacil of Lebennin with his son Carandil, and the Lord Forlong of Lossarnach."

"Why Falastur," Faramir asked, "and not his father?"

"He is ill, 'tis said," Beregond answered, and lowering his voice he added: "They say he will not see the spring. But he is not that old, is he?"

"In his late nineties, I would reckon," Faramir said thoughtfully. "Not that old, no. But be that as it may, we must be going now. Thank you, Beregond."

With that they left the guards, and ascended the tunnel that would bring them up to the Citadel. During the upward walk, Faramir turned to Aliya. "I take it you have not been to the City before? Well, where we are going now not many people are allowed to enter. Most likely the Citadel and the White Tower cannot rival the Golden Woods of Lothlorien in beauty, but I hope you will enjoy the sight nevertheless. I only wish you could have seen it under different circumstances."

Cynara

"I've always wished to see the White Tower," replied Aliya, "And I never expected to see it in otherwise than troubled times. I'm just not the type to go on sight-seeing trips. Treks or wars more likely, will do for my wandering foot." Then she smiled, and unexpected, slightly girlish dimples appeared on her cheeks. "At least I'm in good company...for once in my life!" Aliya smiled slyly at Visilya. "I'm afraid my childhood companions were of a dubious nature."

Khorazir

“Really?” Túrin said, grinning. “That sounds interesting. But perhaps we should not talk about it now. There’s the court of the fountain already. But perhaps we’ll find time to talk and exchange tales in the evening. I hope you two are going come to the feast.” He looked pleadingly at Visilya.

They had passed through another gate, and now found themselves on a wide courtyard. In its middle a fountain was tinkling merrily, and glinting in the sun. It was surrounded by lawns. But in at its side stood a dead tree. It looked strangely out of place in the otherwise well tended court. On the other side of it they could see a slender White Tower of great height, rising before the gleaming snows of Mount Mindolluin. High up in the blue skies, the standard of the Stewards of Gondor, white argent like the snow on Mindolluin, bearing no token or device, streamed in a stiff westerly breeze. Swiftly crossing the courtyard, they approached a gate in the base of the tower. There, too, guards in black and silver stood, and seeing their approach, one came forward to greet them.

Faramir took a deep breath. “I shall accompany you to Denethor, but I think I am not requested there, as I have told my tale already. I will meet you afterwards, if you wish, and see to it that you get a decent meal. Most likely you will need it when he is finished with you.”

“If you see my father, tell him I’ll explain things later,” Túrin said.

In this moment a bell sounded. “Noon,” said Maradir. “We better hurry.”

“Aye,” Faramir said. He nodded to the guard, who let them pass, and accompanied his friends along the corridor that led to the Great Hall. At the doors he halted. “Good luck, my friends. I shall meet you later.” He gave them a brief smile, and then left them.

Cynara

Aliya and the others followed Tuirn to the throneroom. High on his throne sat Denethor, and around him swarmed the assorted nobles of the land. Denethor’s face was sternly cold, and the looked deepened when he saw the friends standing at the door. He nodded for them to enter in futher, and they wlked forward, coming to a halt in front of the lordly Steward.

Khorazir

“Faramir, you stay, too!” Denethor called when he saw that his son did not enter with the others. Even though he had not spoken loudly, the voice echoed through the hall.

Faramir stopped short, sighed dejectedly, turned and followed the others. In the hall he found the nobles Beregond had mentioned. Lord Húrin, Warden of the City’s keys, was just giving his son a deadly glance, while Túrin stood staring to the ground, swallowing hard. The others studied the five newcomers attentively. Apparently they had heard various rumours of what had befallen last night, and were now eager to witness how the Steward dealt with them. There was cheerful Forlong of Lossarnach, called the Fat, for apparent reason; Calmacil of Lebennin and his haughty son Carandil, who, as was well known, had been speculating on his father’s death for several years now, in the hope to assume the lordship of the rich realm of south of Minas Tirith, whereas Calmacil obviously took his time with passing away; there were Adrahil and his son and heir Imrahil, the Princes of Dol Amroth and Belfalas.

Imrahil, Faramir’s uncle and beloved by him, flashed him a broad encouraging smile when he saw him entering the hall. Faramir smiled back briefly. But his smile faded when his glance met the clear grey eyes of proud Falastur of

Pelargir. Faramir had not seen him often, but recently he had replaced his father Sorondil in council. Even during those few encounters Faramir had come under the impression that Falastur disliked him greatly – as he did the Steward, and Boromir. Faramir wondered why. The Lords of the Great Haven had never been friendly with the Stewards, as was well known, but the matter with Falastur seemed to be something different, on a more personal level.

Denethor looked at each of them in turn. Then he addressed the nobles. “I have already given you a short account of what befell last night. Here now we have assembled those who were partly responsible for these most unfortunate events. I have ordered them to present themselves here before us, so that they may tell us in their own words how they were involved. You know Faramir, of course, and the son of Lord Húrin. The others best introduce themselves.” He looked at Maradir and the two women.

gladrieltook

Visilya turned to the various nobles sitting about the table. “Some of you may remember the late Captain Anvalond of the Secret Gaurd.” Several of the men nodded their acknowledgment. “Still fewer may remember that the late Captian had two daughters by two wives. The elder daughter by a woman of Rohan, and the younger, later, by an Elvin woman. I am Visilya, the older daughter and Captian of the Secret Gaurd by birthright.” nodding to her sister, she continued. “This is my younger half sister, Aliya, born by the Elvin second wife of my Father.”

She stood proud and tall, the cloak of shadow and hidden truths thrown back, revealing a young woman of proud bearings and wisdom. Her face grim from the memory of long years of her noble parents, her kind step mother, and the thoughtless deaths that she had witnessed in her twenty one years of life, she looked into the eyes of each noble in the hall one at a time, ending with Denethor. The eyes of the proud Captian and the aged Steward locked for a moment, testing each other, neither willing to turn their peircing gaze.

Khorazir

Faramir watched the silent interchange of glances, marvelling that Visilya managed to endure his fathers’ piercing gaze so long. Usually Denethor could outstare a statue. At length they both broke the connection at the same time, as Maradir stood forth to introduce himself.

Canamarth

Maradir did not feel comfortable at all among all these nobles. Why did Denethor make him introduce himself? The Steward well knew that he did not have any lineage to cite, no ancestors to speak for him. Thus he stepped forward and fell to his knee, presenting his sword to Denethor. “I am Maradir. At your service.”

Two or three of the nobles actually sniggered at Maradir’s strange introduction. Falastur even stage-whispered to Carandil: “This is not the proper way of introducing oneself. Somebody should teach this brute how to behave in front of his betters.”

But Denethor acknowledged Maradir’s gesture with a grave nod. “You may rise.”

Cynara

Aliya, now that she had been introduced by her sister, took the liberty of glancing around at the nobles, idly noting the bright clothes and conceited expressions that seemed to run rampant among the court. Leaning almost imperceptably over to Visilya, Aliya whisper, nearly silently, “Do any of the nobles know how to wield a sword?”

Khorazir

“You better believe they do,” Faramir whispered to them, having overheard her remark. “Imrahil is an excellent warrior, and Carandil is not too bad with horse and spear either, neither is Forlong with the battle-axe. And Falastur is a skilled swordsman, and moreover brilliant in tactics and military strategy, or so ‘tis said. And that is what counts most in battle. Do not underestimate them. Many have made this mistake, and often ‘twas their last.”

“Faramir,” Denethor’s sharp voice interrupted him, “tell us what befell last night! The others may add their bit as they see fit.”

Faramir straightened and stepped forward. He felt the eyes of the assembled nobles upon him. Again Falastur whispered something to Carandil, but it was too soft for Faramir to catch. He cleared his throat, and began to narrate the events of the last night. Emphasis he laid on the part Dellóm had played in the events leading to the fire in the “Troll’s Nose”, and he described the pursuit of the weasel in great detail. Now and again the others would add things he had left out. Túrin described how he had saved Visilya from the fire, which earned him an appreciative glance from his father.

When Faramir had ended his account there was silence. Everybody sat deep in thought. At length Denethor stirred and said: “This weasel-faced man who obviously has worked for Dellóm - he was found near the Great Gate about an hour ago. Not in a nice state. He, too, appears to have been punished for failure.” Denethor looked at Maradir. “Tell us about what you have found at the Houses of Healing!”

gladrieltook

Visilya gave Maradir’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze, and nodded to him, saying that they were right behind him.

Cynara

Aliya stood silently, not bothering to add her two cents. She didn’t have much to tell, and Faramir had rather accurately described her fight with the madman, and she had little else to tell.

Dellóm

Sitting in his study, Dellóm listened intently to the shadowy whispers coming from the darkened room, revealing that a council had been called and of who had joined in it.

This is not good. They are showing too much strength too soon for my plans. he thought. Hmm...how might I use this to my best interests. Ah yes...that could do quite nicely.

The plates of his mask shifted into a evil smile as he summoned his shadowy minion forth, again, and gave it it’s orders.

Motioning to it, Dellóm sent it forth to do his bidding.

Cynara

Aliya shivered suddenly, and glanced at a bodiless shadow running along the wall at the back. She nearly gasped, but

claimed her mouth shut, inhaling sharply through her nose. Fixing her stare on Denethor, Aliya listened hard for anything amiss.

Khorazir

While Maradir described what he had found at the Houses of Healing and in the gardens, a strange feeling had begun to creep on Faramir. He suddenly knew that they were being watched, and not by the nobles looking on, or the guards at the door, or the servants standing descreetly in their dark corners, hidden from view - no, this was something darker and more ominous. And apparently he was not the only one noticing it. He saw Aliya, who stood next to him, tense for an instant, and then force herself to look calm and even as if nothing had happened. When his eyes screened the walls and the tall statues between the marble pillars carefully, he could not see anything strange or unusual there. And yet ... he could not shake off the feeling that something was not right. When Maradir described how he had found the traces of the grappling-hook on the garden-walls, and all attention was bent on him and his account, Faramir leaned slightly towards Aliya, and breathed: "What have you seen?" into her ear.

Canamarth

Maradir stepped forward. He had not spoken since his introduction, finding nothing to add heretofore. Now he used his chance. "Lord Denethor, I examined the scene of the most heinous crime against Srad, the healer. Apparently she worked for Déllom and failed him in some regard. It is assumed that she was supposed to poison Túrin and Visilya. The healers are currently examining two cups of tea found in Túrin's room."

"Just before you entered a messenger arrived, sending word that the tea inside actually was poisoned. But it was no lethal dosis," Adrahil interrupted.

Túrin's eyes grew wide in shock at their close escape from being poisoned and his father bestowed him an almost pitying glance.

Maradir resumed his narrative. "Srad's body had been mutilated horribly. I found her tied to the crossbeams of her room, her stomach opened and worked on with some sort of small clawlike instrument. She must have been conscious during most of the process."

Here faces contorted in disgust and eyes were cast down in sadness.

"Finally her throat was cut with a dagger. I found very little traces. There was a note on the floor saying "Failure" and a bloody handprint beside it. The print was exceptionally small, maybe left by a youth or a woman. The window to Srad's room was open and on the wall not far away from it I found markings which could have been made by a grappling hook. That was all I found, my Lord."

"Thank you, Maradir," Denethor said and was about to dismiss him when Maradir interrupted.

"There is another thing I wish to state, Lord Denethor. Concerning the events that happened last night. It was my idea and noone else's to go into The Troll's Nose. Faramir and Túrin would never have found their way there without me. It is a tavern for commoners after all and thus it must be obvious that only I can have lured them there. And I take full responsibility for it. If punishment is called for bestow it on me."

Khorazir

Denethor looked at Maradir gravely, his expression impassive and hard to read - yet Faramir, who had shifted his attention back to his father - thought he could detect a faint smile in the eyes of the Steward - a rare sight.

“Well, ‘tis very noble of you to take the full responsibility of this most unfortunate event, Maradir,” he said sternly, but with slight mockery. “I have received another offer to bear the blame already this morning” – he glanced briefly to Faramir – “and I am sure that if I asked young Túrin here he would say that visiting the tavern had been his idea, and no one else’s. “ Túrin jumped slightly when Denethor mentioned his name, and cast down his eyes, swallowing hard. Denethor looked at the nobles. “Whom shall I blame now? And whom shall I punish?”

“Since they all went down there, and all three were involved in what befell afterwards, they must all be punished!” Falastur said. There were agreeing nods from Calmacil, his son, and even Adrahil and Húrin.

“I care not who of them had this stupid idea,” Calmacil said, “but there must be an example stated. We cannot suffer our young nobles to mix with commoners of the meanest sort.” – a brief, contemptuous glance at Maradir – “Whoever proposed to visit this ... establishment, ‘tis obvious that the others did not object, which makes them guilty as well.” He looked first at Húrin, then at Denethor. “I should have thought that certain parents had more influence on their offspring and his doings ...”

Denethor’s eyes flashed dangerously. “Be careful of what you say, Calmacil,” he said very softly, with a long glance at Carandil, who suddenly looked rather uncomfortable. “You are right, they are all guilty, in a way. I have already devised a punishment for Faramir. I shall leave it to you, Húrin, to deal with your son. As for Maradir and the ladies ... I shall give thought to that.”

Canamarth

“I am sure my stepfather would find the right sort of punishment,” Maradir whispered to Túrin when Denethor and the nobles were talking among themselves. “There’s always the whip hanging next to the door. I haven’t made contact with it for years. But I guess that is not appropriate here. Denethor going to talk to my captain is more likely.”

Maradir turned around to look at the two women. Visilya seemed to be prepared to receive Denethor’s judgement while Aaliya seemed somehow distracted.

Maradir nudged Túrin. “She isn’t really involved in the whole thing.” He indicated Aliya. “Why should Denethor talk about punishing her?”

Khorazir

“I do not think he will,” Faramir said softly while watching the nobles closely, especially Calmacil and Falastur. “You can say about him what you like, but he is not unjust – usually. But I am not so sure about some of the gentry over there. Calmacil seems to be in a bad mood today. But now that they are busy” – he turned again to Aliya – “what was it you saw a while ago? You were quite agitated, even though you tried to hide it.”

Cynara

Aliya started at little, for she was in deep thought. “I’ve never seen the like of it. I don’t believe I ever want to again. I may only assume it was a spy of Dellom’s...A shadow, a wraith, and nothing more.” Aliya shuddered, almost imperceptibly. She felt very cold, suddenly.

Khorazir

Faramir briefly put a hand to her shoulder to comfort her. He studied the walls apprehensively, but there was nothing

unusual to be seen. Yet the ominous feeling did not leave him. “‘t would be evil indeed if he managed to get a spy in here - unnoticed by the guards. But this would explain his success so far,” he said thoughtfully. “And what kind of man can summon wraiths and shadows to serve him, if wraith it was? Only a mighty sorcerer.” He looked up at the tall statue of Earnur, the last King of Gondor, who, as tales went, had perished in duel with the Witch-king, the Lord of Minas Morgul. “Or someone allied to the Dark Lord himself,” he added silently.

gladrieltook

Denethor turned to Visilya. “Well Captian of the Secret Gaurd,” he said this almost mockingly. “what do you have to report?”

“I can only add to what Faramir has already said. I followed him and his companions for long enough to establish that they were indeed intended to pay the ‘Troll’s Nose’ a visit. I took a backway that I new of and arrived shortly before Faramir, Maradir, and Turin.” She went on to tell of her ‘meeting’ with the youth, the beginings of the brawl and her chase after Dellom through the ally. “I located the suspect and began pursuit. I tracked him to the ally on the north side of the building. At that point I lost visual contact. I was attacked from behind and rendured unconcious for several minutes. When I recovered, I re-entered the inn, only to find the entire bar engaged in a multisided brawl. Fearing for his safety, I immediatly located Lord Faramir. I placed a hood over his head and led him out, hopfully saving him from more serious injuries than he had already sustained. I persuaded him to run and fetch some gaurds in order to continue the search for Dellom. As I learned later, they had not turned up anything, not surprisingly. I was able to get Maradir out relitvly safely, but on my way to help Turin, I ran into a table, knocking a candle off. It quickly set alight to the beer drenched floor and wooden tables. The flame went unnoticed for several seconds. By that time, it was too late to stop the blaze. I was seperated from Turin and became trapped in a ring of fire. I lost conciousness after several minutes, but not before calling for help sveral times. All I remember after that was waking up at the Houses Of Healing.” She ended with a sigh. The truth was out, and all eyes were on her.

Dellóm

Dellóm’s orders passed through the poorer section of the city like a grassfire.

The soldiers had tried to dispell the rumors and such that he had begun planting, but with the fires and the additional rumor being spread that the council had met to find a way that the nobles would not starve and no mention of the poor, they failed miserably.

The quiet rumblings became roars which quickly moved into the merchants quarters, where many were now as poor and destitute from the fires that had ravished the warehouses.

As the city was thrown into chaos, the nobles continued their council as to the cause of the city’s misfortunes, unaware until the guards quietly entered the council chamber itself and took up their positions, following their orders of what to do during times of extreme duress. The movement was not lost on the steward or those close to him.

Dellóm sat quietly in his hidden study, listening to the shadows, a smile, with nothing good behind it, crossing his masked face. Now he waited for his shadowy minion to complete the next set of orders, which the council would be hearing of soon, as well.

This time, with all the chaos in the city and of the morning, it would be guaranteed to not be traced back to him until it was too late.

Falastur’s personal manservant quickly rushed into the hall behind the guards and whispered of what was happening in the city, to his master, who in turn turned to Calmacil and explained quickly of the happenings. Shared a dark look before turning toward Denethor.

Khorazir

Faramir looked at the nobles questioningly. Falastur gave a brief order to his servant and dismissed him again. Just as he left the hall Tirion, captain of the City Watch entered. He walked up to Denethor, where he knelt, and reported of the trouble down in the City. Denethor listened to his account with a cold, impassive face. All eyes rested upon him expectantly.

“Send out the soldiers to quench the uprising,” he said at length. “But let them have a care not to use extreme violence. There is not to be any bloodshed, or things will get worse. Also appeal to the people to keep their heads. I myself will speak to them in about an hour. There is no need to lose hope: we have enough stores to last for what remains of the winter, and throughout spring until the new grain is taken in. More supplies will soon come from our southern fiefs.” He looked briefly at the nobles. “Tell the people all lords have offered their unfailing assistance and support” – here Falastur’s and Calmacil’s glances darkened a little – “as they must in a time like this. There is no need to despair. And now go, Tirion! Inform the other captains, and relate my orders to them!”

Tirion rose, bowed, and departed swiftly. Denethor turned to the five young people still standing before him. “You are dismissed. We have important matters to discuss now. As for Maradir and Visilya, you will be informed of your punishment when I have had time to consider it. Until then you will remain here in the City! And now have a care” – he bent his eyes on Faramir in particular – “I know that you want to go down and see what is going on, and whatever I say now, most likely it will not prevent you from doing so. Be careful at least! Do what you can to calm the people, but do not endanger yourselves again!” With that he turned back to the nobles, who now closed in, discussing the new turn of events avidly. Faramir signed to the others, and together they left the hall.

Canamarth

Outside on the courtyard, Maradir stopped next to the fountain. He had been lost in thoughts on his way out of the hall. Now he turned to his friends. “I ... I can’t believe it. The city in chaos? I’ve never heard of anything like it. The confusion can’t have spread to the upper circles, can it?”

Dellóm

Dellóm listened to his spies reports of the growing chaos in the city and of the Steward’s orders for the guards.

Good, he’s called out the city guard. That plays well with the next step. he thought.

He began giving orders that were carried to his servants within the guards, as well as those keeping the riot alive with their rumors and movements.

“It’s time for some examples to be made. Have a few of our people dress in uniforms and choose random victims. I want blood in the streets and fire in the rioter’s minds. Make sure there are witnesses who will let it be known that it was the guards who did these deeds.” he ordered. “Also, have a guard or two removed and the remains left where the crowds can be blamed. Have it done where those that do this can not be seen by those loyal to the Steward or others within the keep, I may have need of their services later and their anonymity will keep them alive for my uses.”

Turning, he strode to a table and poured himself some wine as he studied a map of the city. “The Steward will wish to create calm and since I can not stop the truth of there being enough food, I will use it. Have our spies sniff out where these stores are held and then lead some of the rioters there. Have our rumormongers claim that the food is being hoarded by the nobles.”

“Perhaps in their rage at being balked from getting to that food now, they will do more harm than good and the Steward may then find that his food stores will run out much sooner than he expected.” he mused aloud.

Soon. He thought. *Soon, my shadowy minion will return and it will be again time to move, but my movements will be better hid this time by the news he will bring.*

Khorazir

"I hope not," Faramir replied, his face troubled as he listened to the dim clamour sounding up from the lower circles. "We must indeed get down there and see what is going on. It would not surprise me if Dellóm knew of father's orders already, and has shaped his plans accordingly. No bloodshed ... – come on, we must hurry. If our soldiers do not kill anyone by accident, then Dellóm's henchmen will certainly slay people!"

With that he turned and walked swiftly towards the gate of the Citadel – as swift as his side allowed. The others followed. Túrin ran a few paces to keep up with him. "But what can we do? You can't stop a mob by just raising your hand."

"We must talk to them," Faramir said.

"Talk? They'll most likely club you to death as soon as they see you. Don't forget, Dellóm has told them that all was our fault."

Faramir stopped short and looked at him. "Listen, 'tis worth a try. They cannot all have been blinded by Dellóm's lies. Most are just concerned about their daily bread, and there is no reason at all for this concern. We simply have to convince them."

Túrin shook his head fiercely. "But they won't even listen to you, understand?"

"Oh yes, they will," Faramir said grimly. "And if not to me, then to someone else. They always have, so far." With that he walked on, past the astonished guards, down the long tunnel to where their horses were waiting in the care of grooms. To himself he thought: What am I doing here? What if he does not come so early? He chased away the thought. But as he mounted, he could not avoid looking hopefully towards the east. The fields of the Pelennor were quiet, and there was not much traffic on the road from Osgiliath. And certainly not the traffic he was yearning for. He swallowed slightly. *Surely this is a birthday I will not forget so easily*, he thought.

Then snatching a horn from one of the guards, and beckoning to the others, he rode off, down towards the clamour and the tumult.

gladrieltook

Visilya quickly took the lead, proving her skill as a horsewoman. Her horse ran smoothly, her long strides even and swift. She reached the tumult far before the others, and what she saw was shocking, and even frightening. She rear her Rebel in front of a peasant she had befriended, an old woman by the name of Laralir. "Laralir, what in heavens name is going on here?"

"Haven't you heard? The nobles started the fire that destroyed many of the food stores! Yet they will not starve, but they will leave us to fend for ourselves."

Visilya snatched the horn from the newly arrived Faramir and blew a single, clear note. All heads turned towards her. "Listen to me good people! Have you all gone mad? Is this how the citizens of Minas Tirith act in a crisis? Not by my knowledge! You must think!" Weapons dropped slightly, then clattered to the ground. But some remained stubborn and held on to their desperate attempts to break the ranks of the Gaurds. "NO! You mustened go on like this! Have you not always had the protection of these gaurds! They have always been there, even if you didn't know it! I myself was there at the Troll's Nose! I am a Gaurd! A captian even! And no matter what you've heard, we are here to help! The fire in the warehouse district was not intentional! It was pure accident, caused by one person not watching where they were going while trying to save a friend from being killed by brawling bar goers."

Cynara

Seeing with relief that Visilya had everything, Aliya slipped quietly off her horse, and walked into the crowd. Slipping through them easily, she walked between a house and a shop, moved down a couple of alleyways and came to a much larger and rowdier crowd. Aliya walked through the crowd with slightly more difficulty, and, reaching the approximate middle, she walked outward in spirals, collecting as many stories and rumours as she could. Then, her work done, Aliya went back through the alleys.

Khorazir

“Captain Visilya is right,” Faramir said, riding forward so that everybody could see him. People stared at him, and there was much whispering in the ranks. “The fire in the warehouse-district was not set by the nobles. Why indeed should they do such a thing, I ask you? Why should anybody in Gondor, commoner or noble, be interested in causing strife and tumult in a time like this – with the Shadow looming in the East. If we now start fighting each other, we shall be doing the will of the Dark Lord. He will look upon what is going on here and rejoice. Is that what you want?” At this many people began to look thoughtful. Hands holding various crude weapons were lowered.

“We must not forget the great danger of our times,” Faramir went on. “I will acknowledge that sometimes you may have had reason to be dissatisfied with your rulers. But so far there was no need to revolt against them –”

“But the stores!” some people cried. “We’re going to starve. It’s only february, and harvest is a long time off still.”

Faramir waved a hand to calm them. “There are enough stores to last till Yavannie at least. They will be better protected now. Moreover support will come from our southern fiefs. Some of the lords are here in the City, and the Steward is at the moment discussing this very matter with them. Nobody is going to starve!”

“You can say that, lord. You ain’t poor.”

“If there be a shortage of grain in Gondor, then, believe me, we nobles will have as little as everyone else. But we have stores enough.”

“It’s my shop, sir,” a merchant fell in. “It has burned down as well. Who’s going to refund it? I’ve lost everything.”

“The whole quarter will be rebuilt,” Faramir said, “and help will come to you, be assured of it. But this will of course take time. In the meanwhile I can only appeal to you people to help each other. And to take care that something like this does not happen again. Visilya said it was an accident – well, this is only part of the truth. There are people in the City who want to cause strife and tumult for their own good, or the good of their evil master – who perhaps is even the Dark Lord himself. Do you not see that what you are doing now is but part of their plan? Do you really want to indirectly serve the Shadow by working his will? Go home, good people! Calm down! There is naught to fear as long as we stand united. Do not listen to the dark whisperings of those who want to achieve the fall of Gondor from within! And do not endanger other innocent people because of your ill luck. We must not succumb to this barbarism. This is what orcs do: they fight and slay their own kin. You are no orcs! You are citizens of Minas Tirith, last remaining city of mighty and venerable Númenor in Middle-Earth. Behave as such! Go home!”

There was much grumbling among the people, and dark glances at the horsemen, but after a while, slowly, the mob dispersed. Faramir took a deep breath and ran a hand through his hair. “And that was only the first,” he muttered.

Then he saw that Aliya had returned. “Where have you been?” he asked.

Canamarth

Maradir had listened to Faramir's speech, one hand on the hilt of his sword and eyeing the crowd attentively. Now that they had dispersed he relaxed a bit.

Khorazir

"You would make an excellent bodyguard, you know that?" Túrin muttered to Maradir, and grinned slightly. "If ever lordship here needs someone to protect him," he added, pointing at Faramir's back, "he should see to it that you're at his side."

"I heard this, Túrin," Faramir said, but then bent his attention on Aliya and her account.

Cynara

"I was listening to rumours, Faramir. Sadly, there was nothing much that was not already known to us. Among the crowds, there were a few mongerers...likely hired by Dellom. It was just the usual rumours, the nobles setting fires, and the like. One minute..." Aliya reported, then spied something creeping through the shadows. She disappeared into the shadows, then minutes later, a scream was heard. Aliya emerged, holding a small little weaslish man by the scruff of the neck. He had the beginnings of a beautiful pair of black eyes. "I think we have ourselves one of the rumour-spreaders, here." She smiled in grim satisfaction.

Khorazir

The man wriggled in her grip, trying to free himself. When he saw the small company, and moreover recognised Faramir, he stopped, and suddenly went limp, hanging his head. Faramir dismounted, and signed to Maradir and Túrin to do also. Then he approached the captive.

"Well, what have we here?" he said, his voice very cold and stern, sounding almost like his father's. He stopped before the man. "Look at me!" he commanded sharply. The man raised his eyes.

"I ain't done nothin', lord! I swear! Don't know why this lady attacked me!"

"Oh, really?" Faramir returned coldly. "You do not sound very convincing, I must say. When the lady attacks somebody, I know she has good reason to do so. Tell me, what were you telling the people about the nobles, and the fire?"

"Nobles, lord? I didn't say anything about nobles. I -" his voice faltered when his eyes met Faramir's. "Well, there's these rumours ...," he conceded.

"Which you spread!"

"Oh no, lord, I -" again he faltered, when at a sign from Faramir Maradir and Túrin advanced a little, both looking very unfriendly.

"Listen," Faramir said evenly, "you can have it the easy way or the hard. You either answer all my questions truthfully before I turn you over to the guard, and no harm will come to you. Or I will leave you to my friends here - and the lady - and when they are finished with you you will also make acquaintance with the guards. But I cannot guarantee for your health in that case, you understand?"

The man looked at him doubtfully, then at the two young men and Aliya. Their grim expressions obviously made him change his mind.

"I'll take the first option," he muttered dejectedly.

Faramir smiled. "Splendid. We shall make this swift." Turning to Visilya, he said. "You are a swift rider. Please fetch some guards to take care of him! And try to find out if there are more uprisings to quench, and where they are. We have no time to lose."

gladrieltook

"My pleasure..." Visilya smirked at the small man. With that, she reared her horse and rode off down the street. She rode for several blocks before meeting up with a hooded and cloaked man. "Darneon. Report."

The man pulled off his hood revealing a weather beaten face. "We've heard the various rumours, and tracked them back to a single source."

"Where would that be?"

"The second circle. It would seem they started at the same time as the fire. Which means our old friend Dellom's been up to his old tricks again."

Visilya sighed, then answered "Round up the best of the Secret Gaurd and tell them to meet me in the third circle in ten minutes. Be swift." Darneon nodded, then ran off. Visilya continued her search for rumuors and their sources.

Khorazir

When Visilya rode off, Faramir turned to the man again. "What is your name?"

"Arangil."

"Your real name?"

"Targon."

"Where do you live?"

"Lampwright's Street, First Circle."

"Your profession?"

"Mason. Er ... no, wait, wait! No need to draw knives! I'm a thief, all right? And I ... I do ... jobs around the place."

"What kind of jobs?"

"Ach, you know, lord ... odd jobs ..."

"Like spreading rumours to stir up people against their rulers?"

"For example ..."

"Who payed you for this?"

"No one."

“Who promised to pay you, then?”

“I can’t tell you, lord. They’ll ... they’ll kill me.”

“No, they will not! For if you do not tell me instantly, I shall leave you to my friends. And when they are finished with you your masters will find little that they can kill still. But if you talk, the guards will protect you.”

The man’s eyes scanned the surroundings nervously. “Well, there’s this lady over in the Second Circle, not far from the “Nose,” he said at length in a low voice. Faramir leaned closer to him. “Usually we get our information and errands from her. She knows the bosses. We never meet the guys on top. Her name’s Zibûn. She comes from the South.”

Faramir studied him for some time. “You know what will happen to you if I find out you lied to us?”

The man nodded quickly.

“One more thing,” Faramir said. “Have you ever heard the name of Dellóm? You need not answer. I take from your reaction that you have. What can you tell me about him?”

“Nothing, lord. There’s many rumours in the City, but no more. He’s an evil man, this Dellóm.”

“Yes, indeed,” Faramir said, while studying the man thoughtfully. At length he stirred. “Very well,” he said. “I see guards approach. Take care of him!” he commanded the soldiers. “Arrest him, but do not harm him! And protect him! Perhaps his own people will try to get him out of the way. Let him tell you everything he knows about Dellóm, rumour or no! Write it down! I shall come for it later.”

The guardsmen saluted, and left with the man.

Faramir turned to the others. “Perhaps we should pay a visit to this lady,” he said in a low voice, since there were still many people about. “Has anybody heard of her before?”

gladrieltook

“I have” Visilya rode up, followed by a dozen or so cloaked figures. “She’s on our most wanted list. Seems she’s in the same line of work as Dellom. There’s been a bit of rivalry between the two, but they tend to use the other to their own advantage. As for Dellom, I can tell you plenty, along with the rest of my command here.” She gestured to the riders behind her. Then turning to them, she spoke several soft words in an odd language. The men rode off in various directions.

Khorazir

“Good,” Faramir said thoughtfully. “This may help a lot. But we must be careful not to lose our heads now. Are there any direct charges against this lady? We must be able to prove that she is guilty of something, otherwise we cannot arrest her.”

“Well, there might be something,” Túrin said. “I’m not quite sure if it’s the same woman, but a guy from my company told me of a fiery Southron lady in the Second Circle who does certain ... er ... services.” He blushed slightly. “He went there once with some fellows of the guard, and said that things were mighty strange that night. None of them remembered clearly what happened, but they woke up in a dark alley devoid of all their money. He assumed that they must have been drugged somehow, and moreover he dimly recalled that they had been questioned closely about all they knew of Denethor’s political decisions, and the strength of our forces and the campaign in Ithilien and the like.”

“Why did they not assail the lady on these charges?” Faramir asked. Túrin shrugged. “Because they wanted to hush it

up, I guess. I mean, it was really embarrassing what befell them, wasn't it? Moreover most of them are married, and I guess their wives wouldn't deal too friendly with them if they knew where they went that night."

"Do you know their names?"

"Most of them. One was captain Halbarad who trains the recruits."

"Can you try and find him, and bring him to me?" Faramir asked. "He may be about in the City."

"I'll try, sir" Túrin said grinning, leaped onto his horse, and saluting jestfully, rode off.

Faramir turned to Maradir and Aliya. "Perhaps you should try and get a look at the house of this Zibûn ere we all arrive there. You are more inconspicuous than Visilya or me. We must make sure that the lady and her accomplices do not vanish ere we can lay hold of them. While we wait for Túrin to return, you can tell me what you have found out about Dellóm, Visilya."

Cynara

"All right, Faramir." Aliya glanced at Maradir. "We will walk. Feet make less noise than hooves do, and something tells me we'll need all our stealth. "

She took Maradir's hand, and led him into the shadows. "So you don't get lost," she explained to him quietly. They went up several flights of stairs before they finally reached a rather rotten housetop. "I believe that this is the house we're looking for." Aliya whispered, before letting Maradir go, stooping, and quietly taking off some rotted shingles.

Canamarth

Maradir watched Aliya as she stooped down to remove some loose shingles. He had never met a woman who had taken him by the hand to lead him about the city he had grown up in. And definitely none who had tracked him without him noticing and moreover thrown him on his back. He thought that he should be angry with her somehow. But strangely enough he wasn't.

He walked to the edge of the roof, without being seen from the street below. The door to the house Aliya had pointed out just opened. Someone was standing on the threshold, talking to somebody else behind him in the house. Maradir beckoned to Aliya to have a look.

gladrieltook

Visilya sighed. She was not overly willing to tell her tale again. But she began, this time, leaving out the details. "My mother was murdered by Delloms henchmen, and later, my father and stepmother were murdered by him. My father was Captian of the Secret Gaurd. You know what the secret gaurd is and what they do?" Faramir nodded. "Good. That saves me time. Any way, Dellom has been opposing the Secret Gaurd as their prime target since my father came into the position of Captian. I believe that this promotion sparked some hidden malice in Dellom. He never liked my family, and when my mother died, he swore vengeance. These rumors are most likely his cowardly way of getting back at me and my family. By hurting me and those around me, not physically, but psychologically. A very simple plan. The dwellers of the lower circles hate nobles and he uses that to his advantage."

Dellóm

Dellóm quickly stood when he heard what the thief had told him.

"Targon? This will not do. He doesn't know enough to hurt me, but he knows enough to hurt others that I am using."

He paced back and forth in front of his desk, his mask shifting slowly as he thought about how to remedy the situation.

Turning he called to one of his spies. "Let it be known by everyone that Zibûn is to blame for the rumors and started the fires. And then send for Jak. I have a job for him."

The thief bowed and moved quickly from the room.

Dellóm waited patiently, his fingers lightly tracing the edges of his mask plates.

A guard came into the room and bowed to Dellóm, "You sent for me, M'Lord?"

"Yes, I think I've found a way for you to have your sister released from my services in the cells." Dellóm said, reaching into folds of his cloak and pulling free a wine skin and handing it to the guard.

"Take this and go to the dungeons and give it to the guards who are with Targon. It will put them to cause them to be very sick and to pass out, make sure you drink it as well so that no one will know you were involved. I will handle Targon."

Nodding his head, the guard paused at the door. "And this will free my sister and myself from our debt to you?"

"Yes, it will be a debt paid in full." Dellóm said, sitting behind his desk again and watching as the guard left.

A shadowy form detached itself from the wall and moved quickly to it's master and relayed it's information to him.

The plates of Dellóm's mask shifted until he was smiling, a meeting had be agreed upon.

Good, he thought to his shadowy minion. Now, here's what you're to do next. Go to the dungeons and make an example of Targon. Let Denethor, and those who would loosen their tongues about me, know that if I wish it, no where is safe. Then report to my master and inform him that things are going accordingly and I will be ready to move soon.

The shadow nodded it's formless head and returned to the darkness, appearing beneath the dungeons, just in time to watch Jak appear with the wineskin and start up a conversation with the guards and offer them a drought or two. All shared equally and soon the skin was empty, not long after they began to clutch their stomach and fall over. Dellóm had lied, they would not be waking up, and Jak's sister had left his service long ago.

Moving quickly the shadow darted across the hall and under the door, sliding to the side and hiding itself in the shadows of the room. It moved quickly then, dousing the lights of the room and rendering the guard inside the room unconscious, then it followed it's orders and made an example of Targon, who's screams began when the light disappeared and ended long before the shadow slipped back into the night.

When found, they would find the same handprint and the word 'traitor' written in blood beside it, by what was left of his body.

MEANWHILE:

Dellóm stepped quietly out of the shadows and sat in front of the desk as his host offered him a glass of wine.

"Well Met, M'Lord. It is a pleasure to finally meet you face to face." he said, sipping his wine slowly. "Before we begin getting down to costs, I must make sure that you are sure of the path you will be following, if we come to an agreement."

His host paused in the process of sitting down his glass, "Getting cold feet, Lord Dellóm? No, I am quite sure. It is past time for me to come into my own. Are you sure it will be painless? I still love him and would not wish him pain." The plates of Dellóm's mask shifted until a smiling face showed.

"Of course, M'Lord. I am well versed in poisons and such things. This extract, applied slowly, will take the individual a number of years to die, and he will never feel more than a little more tired everyday, until he takes to his bed and goes to sleep more and more often. One day, he simply will not awake. Will this suit you?"

Nodding quickly, Dellóm's host downed his wine. "That will do nicely. Now, what of payment?"

"It's simple, M'Lord." Dellóm said, setting his glass down. "The council must be dismissed by the end of the day. I wish you to create the necessary reason and see to it that it happens."

Leaning back, with a thoughtful look on his face, Dellóm's host nodded finally. "It can be done. There is no love lost between my family and the Steward's."

Standing, Dellóm shook hands with the Lord, "I'm glad we could come to an accomidation, M'Lord."

Reaching into his cloak, he handed the Lord a vial and moved back into the shadows, turning before he disappeared and reminding the Lord, "Remember, M'Lord, one dose a day and very small doses."

Cynara

Aliya slowly walked over to stand by Maradir's side, her hand straying toward her dagger hilt, nearly unconsciously, it seemed. Stooping to see more, she smiled to herself. It was the woman they were after, all right, Aliya knew her face fairly well. Then the talker turned around, and Aliya's breath hissed out through her teeth. Slowly, she backed up, testing the strength of the rooftop. Then she ran fast, and leapt over the edge, and landed on the man that their quarry was talking to. In the same movement, she drew her dagger and slew the man. Then she swept the woman's feet out from under her, and held the dagger to her throat.

Dellóm

Dellóm's shadowy minion slipped free of the other shadows found within the darkened study of his master's Lord. Moving slowly, it approached the Lord and bowed low before repeating what Dellóm had said to it and then waited, watching the figure in the chair as firelight from the fireplace danced and revealed glimpses of the Lord without revealing him completely, leaving his true identity still a mystery.

Black_Elf

Visilya rocked back and forth on her heels in an idle fashion. "I wonder what Aliya's found. Perhaps something useful." turning to Faramir in the eyes she continued. "I'm off to find out. The crowds seem to be dispersing, so you shouldn't have a problem with them." She remounted and rode off in search of her companions. Before long she came upon Turin. His back was to her and he seemed to be deep in thought. Visilya sat back and observed him. He was handsome, she had to admit, and had a certain noble bearing about him. She was attracted to him, which was strange considering she'd never felt this way about any man.

Khorazir

Túrin had asked several guardsmen and soldiers who were roaming the city trying to quench the uprisings if they knew of Captain Halbarad's whereabouts, but no one had been able to tell him anything precise. Some had said he was still up at the Citadel, others had guessed that he was not on duty at all, but on leave, visiting relatives in Dor-en-Ennil. Somewhat confused and a little frustrated, Túrin had stopped his horse at a small well to let it drink, while he thought of what to do next. Surely Halbarad was important, but if he could not find him, he would have to report this to Faramir. As he sat so deep in thought, suddenly he felt that someone was watching him. Carefully he turned to have a look, and his eyes fell on Visilya. His face brightened considerably, and he smiled.

"Oh, I didn't know you were here as well. Were are the others? Did they go to that house?" Turning his horse, he rode over to her.

In the meanwhile Faramir had also dismounted, and left his horse and the ones of Maradir and Aliya in the care of trustworthy grooms. While waiting for Túrin or one of the others to return, he spoke to several people around, questioning them about how they had experienced the fire, and what they thought the reasons were for it. He soon found out that not everybody, even among the poor of the City, shared the opinion that it was all the nobles' fault. Indeed many thought that the evil came not from within Gondor, but from without. When questioned about their assumptions as to the potential miscreants, often Faramir would see people lower their voices, and pointing eastwards, yet saying no name. "The shadow is rising, they say," was a quote he heard often. And even more than before he began to

wonder if there was a link between Dellóm and this shadow.

As for Maradir, he had been amazed by Aliya's leap. He had followed swiftly, but found that there was little more to be done, for she already had the woman at her mercy. The lady in question was not very old, and her brownish skin and dark hair braided with gold marked her as a citizen of the Harad. She was quite beautiful, and he could understand why she was visited often by members of the guard. She was dressed in exotic robes of transparent silk, embroidered with many colours, and her neck, wrist and ankles were hung with thin gold-threads. Somehow the rich clothes did not fit the half-ruined house she dwelled in.

The woman had been extremely surprised by Aliya's attack. Now she lay beneath her panting, Aliya's knife pointing at her throat. She looked at her furiously from dark eyes. When Maradir stepped closer to get a better view at her and the man Aliya had slain, he suddenly saw that Zibûn's right hand was moving towards her skirts, drawing a small needle-like dagger in the flash of a second. He instantly stooped and caught her hand, before she could stab Aliya with the weapon. Zibûn relaxed again.

"You will be very sorry for this," she hissed, talking with a strong Southron accent.

Black_Elf

"No. Maradir and Aliya have gone to search for Zibun. Faramir is back where the crowds were. I've got nothing to do, to tell you the truth. My troops are searching for evidence, information, ect. and all I can do is wait for them to report tonight." Visilya's gaze turned to the West, where the sun would be in a few hours. "You think we'll actually find Dellom? I've been tracking him for years and never once have we caught him. I can't I was stupid enough to just let him get away like that. If only I'd been on my gaurd, so many lives would have been saved..."

Dellóm

Dellóm listened quietly as the messenger relayed his message and then waved him off.

Staring at the lamp flames, Dellóm's mask slowly shifted as he thought and tried to work the new information into his plans.

So, the Steward will soon have aid to quell the riots. It matters not, with the granaries and half the warehouses gone, and some of the cities food reserves now pillaged, it will take him some time to recover. he thought, sipping his wine. And thanks to the bargain I have struck this evening, I have got my foot in the door of the council and soon I will break it.

A momentary victory, I'm sure, but it will last long enough and the ill will and mistrust when they rebuild, will last much longer.

Turning, he called to his servant, "Mallos, we are moving again. Inform the runners that all are to stay out and that the witch is to be blamed for this night's work with the rioting and raiding of the cities reserves. Any who let slip otherwise will become worse than an example. She has tried to take what is mine in the past. Now I give it to her! Let her have the blame."

Nodding his head, an evil smile on his lips, Dellóm's servant left the office.

Moving to the shadows, Dellóm traveled to his new base of operations.

Khorazir

Túrin leaned forward and reaching out placed a hand on Visilya's shoulder. "Hey, don't blame yourself," he said soothingly. "From what I have learned so far, Dellóm is a very dangerous and cunning fellow. Even the nobles have difficulties in fighting him. I'm sure you have done your best. And now we'll help you. Come on, we should return to Faramir, and then have a look at this lady Aliya and Maradir went to find." He gently ran his hand along her cheek,

then he drew back, and urged on his horse.

Cynara

Aliya smiled sweetly at the woman trapped beneath her, then knocked her out with a glancing blow to the neck. Standing, she brushed herself off, and smiled more sincerely at Maradir. "Thanks," she said simply, and she was more relaxed than he had ever seen her. Her glance strayed towards the corpse of the man that she had landed on. Aliya grinned, and explained. "He was an old...friend. I've always wondered how good he was. Now the burden of an old oath is off me, well, I'm a good deal happier. Quite a few people will be, I'd imagine. He should have been more careful. Now, do you want to carry Zibun, or shall I?"

Maeglin_Lomion

Far north of the city, in the cold bleak mountains of the Ered Mithrin a tower stands. In a dark corner of an expansive library sits a solitary person, hunched over an ancient scroll. Behind him, in the darkest recess of the shadows, a shape begins forming. Silently the shape grows in size until a humanoid form is complete.

Without turning, the solitary scholar speaks in a deep, slow voice.

You have a report for me shadow?

The shadow-creature bends slightly as if mimicing a bow.

Yes my Lord. Your loyal servant Dellóm sends word that all has been according to plan. He says his departure shall be eminent.

The scholar seemed to take awhile digesting these words. After a moment he placed the scroll down and turned to the shadow-creature. After sipping from a goblet by his side he spoke once more.

Tell him this news pleases me. Also tell him I do not wish for him to tarry over long, I have need of him here as my plans continue. It is far too early for me to reveal my true self just yet. I shall require his delicate touch again before I may apply my heavy hand.

Now go shadow. Tell your Master my words and do not delay.

As the shadow-creature dissolved into the darkness of the massive room, the scholar leaned back in his chair, sighing from weariness. As the light from the room's sole lantern cast odd shadows across his face, the scholar's features could just barely be discerned.

The fine elven features of his face were soon distorted by an evil malicious grin.

Khorazir

"I will carry her," Maradir said, kneeling down, and binding Zibûn's hands with a length of string. Then he lifted her and laid her over his shoulder. His eyes fell on the corpse. "We should at least get him out of sight. It doesn't look nice if people stumble about bodies in the streets. Just drag him inside the house and close the door. That should do for now. I'm sure Faramir wants the house searched anyway."

On their way back to where Faramir was waiting, Maradir studied Aliya. "You said you knew the fellow you slew, and had reasons to kill him? I don't want to seem curious, but why? What did he do?"

Meanwhile Túrin and Visilya had returned to Faramir, and Túrin had told him that he had not been able to find Captain Halbarad. Faramir shrugged, hiding his disappointment. "Well, I hope the others were more successful," he said. "What about the uprisings?" he continued after a while. "Have they subsided by now? Around here the people are quite reasonable again. I think they begin to understand that not the nobles are their enemies, but others." He lowered his voice a little. "Honestly I begin to doubt that Dellóm is the chief begetter of this plot. It seems to me that he is working for someone else."

He looked at Visilya. "You said you have been hunting him for a long time now. Perhaps you know some things that have escaped our knowledge. During your pursuit, have you ever encountered rumours about a possible master of his? Whence did he come? And what kind of creature is he? He does look human, aye, but with this mask and all ... I do not know. There is somethings very strange and ominous about him."

Cynara

"Ah, him," Aliya smiled sadly. "Come on, let's start walking back. I imagine we'll want Zibun safely under lock and key before she awakes. Anyway, this man, Daren, was a petty thief who went wrong. A society can bear a thief, but not a murderer. We actually grew up together, for the most part. Orcs murdered his parents, and stole him. We assumed it was the last of him, of course. However, before long, he showed up again, but although he looked the same, he was completely corrupted. He started theiving, just small things, but then he began inciting quarrels among the people of neighboring towns. We finally ran him off when he killed a man. Believe me, he's better off dead. I swore an oath to kill him, for his own sake, and now I have." Aliya smiled sadly again, then started walking towards the shadows, before remembering that she would easily lose Maradir. Once again, she took his hand and led him through the sidestreets and alleys.

Black_Elf

"It has been many years since I last looked upon his foul face bare of its mask. For he did not begin to wear it until after my father died, to hide his identity. As for his race, or as you put it species, he his a human, a man of Gondor gane bad. Not uncommon. Yet unlike many of his pretisesors, he was wise, and cunning. But cowardly. Before, his crimes were minor; instigating brawls, theft, the like. For now, that's all I can reallt tell you." Visilya spoke with confidence, yet her voice seemed to waver when she spoke of her father.

Khorazir

Maradir smiled slightly to himself as he walked hand in hand with Aliya through the narrow alleys, the still form of Zibûn over his shoulder. He knew his way around here very well, but somehow he felt that telling her would insult her. So he said nothing, and suffered to be led like a dog on a leash. I only hope Túrin doesn't see me like this, he thought, because if he does, he'll tease me with it for the rest of the day.

After Visilya had finished her tale, Faramir and Túrin looked at her pitifully. "So, he is just a man, then," Faramir said at length thoughtfully. Then he smiled grimly. "Perhaps we'll soon meet him again, and shall have an opportunity to look behind this mask of his."

"I don't really know if I want to see that," Túrin said gloomily, with a swift glance at Visilya. Then he looked up. "Hey, there are the others," he called. "And look, they've brought a guest."

Cynara

Aliya looked over at Maradir, who's face she could still faintly see in the light. She could see that he was slightly embarrassed by being led around his own city. Looking away, Aliya smiled and tightened her grip.

Khorazir

Upon seeing Maradir and Aliya issuing from an alley, together with their captive, the other three walked over to them. Túrin's face slid into a broad grin when he saw that Aliya was still holding Maradir's hand. "I hope we're not interrupting your little –" his voice trailed out when he met Maradir's eyes.

Faramir had had a look at Zibûn. "Luckily you did not kill her," he said after having felt for her heartbeat at her neck. "Was there any problem? And, most importantly, were you spotted? I am sure Dellóm had sent spies to her house to see what we were up to." He helped Maradir lay Zibûn down on the stairs of a doorway, quite out of the way of the crowds.

"Well, when we assailed her there was a man talking to her," Maradir replied. "But Aliya took care of him. She said she knew him. There were some people about, but no one seemed to take notice. At least I didn't realise anyone." Faramir looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, then he shrugged. "I am sure we will know soon if he had spies there. And now we must bring this lady to a place where she is safe, and where we can question her. I do not want to find her cut into pieces with a bloody note saying "failure" at her side. She could be very important – and most likely Dellóm knows this."

Cynara

Aliya grinned broadly and let go of Maradir's hand when Turin made his smart remark. Then she listened closely to Faramir and Maradir, as they discussed the possibility of spies and where to put Zibun. Scanning back through her memory, she had not seen any spies, but if the enemy used shadows...well, who could tell?

"I'll stay with Zibun, after she is questioned. I'm sure that I can keep her safe." Aliya stated simply.

Khorazir

Faramir gave her a long glance, and there was unveiled concern in his eyes. "I appreciate your offer," he said at length. "But I fear that this task may prove very dangerous. You heard Maradir's account of what he found at the Houses of Healing. If they can get in there unnoticed ..." He looked down at the unconscious woman. Then he sighed. "Well, first we must bring her to the guards. They can lock her in a cell. At least she cannot escape that way. And I shall send a message to the Steward. Perhaps he wants to question her as well."

Just as he spoke, Zibûn stirred and opened her eyes. She looked around confusedly, then her eyes fell on Faramir, and narrowed in hatred. "Bloody tark," she hissed in Adûnaic, and spat.

"Be careful with your insults," Faramir returned evenly, and in the same tongue. Zibûn looked surprised. Apparently she had not reckoned with anyone understanding the language.

Faramir knelt down at her side. "Well, lady, now that you are awake again, perhaps you would agree to a little chat." "You have no right to hold me prisoner like this," she spat.

"Perhaps not. But that remains to be seen. You will accompany us to a place where our conversation will be undisturbed, and then you can try and defend yourself. If we find that you have done nothing illegal, we shall let you go, of course."

She studied him contemptuously. "You lie!"

"I do not!" He turned to Aliya and Visilya. "Can you two take care of her? Make sure that she does not run away while we walk to the guardhouse. Túrin, Maradir, when you have finished your little chat you can follow us."

As soon as Faramir had knelt at Zibûn's side, Túrin had drawn Maradir aside. He was still grinning. "So, tell me, my friend, what's going on between Aliya and you? Holding hands in public, eh?"

Maradir gave him a deadly glance. "Perhaps she thought I'd go lost otherwise," he said. "Oh really. How thoughtful of her."

"It's nothing, Túrin, honestly."

"Yeah, sure, if you say so," Túrin replied, and his grin broadened.

"I won't discuss these things with you," Maradir returned. "Better see to it that you get your thing with her sister sorted out."

At the mentioning of Visilya Túrin blushed visibly. Now Maradir could not hide a broad grin.

"Hey," Túrin called, to put an end to their conversation, "the others are already leaving. We should try and keep up." And he walked off.

Cynara

Aliya and Visilya each took a hold of one of Zibun's shoulders, and began walking to the Inner Circles. "I think I'll stay with Zibun, anyway." Aliya decided thoughtfully, "Remember that other fellow that was taken from his cell. Poor fellow. Anyway, I'm going to make it my business that that not happen a second time." Aliya sighed, strangely at peace with the world, then glanced over at her sister. "Visilya, I caught up to Daren tonight. He's dead."

Khorazir

"Very well then," Faramir said to Aliya. But he still looked troubled. Túrin and Maradir had reached them again by now. Faramir grinned slightly when he saw that Túrin's face was still blushed, and that he tried to avoid looking at Visilya.

"Well, have you settled your thing?" Faramir asked cheerfully. Túrin only grunted, and Maradir laughed. Then his face turned grave as he cast a look over his shoulder. Quickly he stepped over to Faramir and whispered: "Someone is following us."

Dellóm

Dellóm watched as his shadow slipped free of the wall and came to him, absorbed by him.

Ab, so he is ready for me to return. This is good, my plans are done. Soon the steward's reinforcements will arrive and the rioting will be quelled. he thought, slowly sipping his wine.

The prince has taken my poison to kill his father and that will give me the connection I need to use him later. When the time comes, I will be able to play him against the other council members and create the openings I will need to move.

"But for now, it is enough to know it has begun." he said aloud before turning and slipping into the shadows and returning to the far north.

Cynara

Looking back discreetly, Aliya caught of a shadow, flitting from wall to wall. Giving Zibun over to Visilya, she dropped back to talk with the men. "I think it's time to see if shadows can be killed, don't you?" she said, "I've got a particular spell, it may come in handy here. It's a little hard to keep up while fighting, but it should be fine if someone else comes." She looked at the three, mentally discounting Faramir, he may be needed in the Citadel, and in the prison.

Khorazir

"I shall accompany you," Maradir said, upon which Túrin's face split into a broad grin. Maradir did not heed it. "Be careful, you two," Faramir said. "We shall bring her up to the Citadel, right to the Steward. May he question her! He is much better at that than I." The prospect of being interrogated by the Lord Denethor did not add to Zibûn's mood, it seemed. She hissed, and wound in Visilya's grip, but Visilya held her tightly. "See you at the Citadel, then," Maradir said, and he and Aliya were off.

Cynara

As soon as she and Maradir had separated from the group, she stopped in the shadows and started muttering under her breath, making motions as if weaving in the air. "What are you doing?" Maradir asked her quietly. Slightly annoyed, Aliya shot an irritable glance at him, and stared over. After a few minutes, Aliya's voice grew louder and louder, until at last, she was shouting. With a long hissing noise, a ball of light appeared in her hand. Slowly, with sweat streaming down her forehead, Aliya expanded the light until her entire body was glowing. Looking around, she noted that there were no shadows left in the street, or any of the surrounding alleys. Save one. "There it is!" Aliya cried to Maradir, "Get it!!!" Although she looked normal, Maradir realized that she was talking through clenched teeth. The spell must be harder on her than she made it look. Not glancing at Maradir, though, Aliya ran after the shadow, only a little less swiftly than usual.

Khorazir

"What does she mean by spell?" Túrin asked Faramir as he looked after Aliya and Maradir. "Do you think she can do real magic?"

"I do not know," Faramir muttered thoughtfully. The last night and the beginning of this day had been so strange and extraordinary, that by now he was prepared to believe almost anything. He stood for a moment lost in thought, then he shook himself slightly. "Come on, let us get her up to the Citadel. I know not how you feel, but I could do with some food. I have not had a decent meal since yesterday."

Black_Elf

"Well I just want a good cup o' ale and a good, long nap." Visilya grinned as she twisted Zibun's hand painfully in order to get a better grip. "However, this pitiful excuse for a woman won't be getting any thing till she's been interviewed by the steward and..." she let her words hang for a moment before she continued. "your's truly" Visilya forced her prisoner to walk faster before her, she whispered a low warning to the woman. "Make any move to escape and I will personally carry out whatever punishment Denethor has in store for you and then some."

Cynara

As Aliya ran after the shadow, she could feel the spell beginning to take its toll on her. Trying not to gasp visibly, she felt the stitches in her side, burning like fire. Ahead of her, the shadow dodged into an alley. Slightly smiling at the shadow's stupid move, Aliya turned in to the alley, first making sure that Maradir was behind her. He was. Much as Aliya hated to admit it, she wasn't sure that she could keep a sword in her hand for any length of time. Ah, well, she decided, she could try, anyhow. Unsheathing it, Aliya tried a few weak feints at the shadow, before a stream of light

ran down the blade. At the added weight of the blade, Aliya's fingers loosened, against her will. With a last spurt of strength, Aliya cast her sword at the shadow. Well-thrown, the blade of fire caught the shadow where the chest would be. With a screaming sound, the shadow burst into shards of darkness, which then melted away.

Aliya stood, gazing bemusedly at the spot where the shadow had stood. The light surrounding her grew dimmer, and she appeared to stumble. The light flickered, and went out, leaving Aliya and Maradir in total darkness. In that darkness, Maradir heard the thump of Aliya's body hitting the ground.

Khorazir

Zibûn's face remained unmoved at Visilya's thread. But she muttered something in Adûnaic. Faramir who walked behind the two slightly shook his head. "This was not very nice, you know," he said evenly. Even though his Adûnaic was rather sketchy because he had had little opportunity to use it so far (and moreover he liked the Elven-tongues better, and had devoted more time to their study), he had found that he could understand most of what was said. Zibûn spat on the ground, and spoke no more.

By now they had reached the gate of the Fifth Circle. Just as they passed (the guards knowing who they were, and not questioning them), they heard a trumpet from below. Faramir stopped short and listened intently, and suddenly his face brightened, and he smiled.

"There's someone at the Great Gate, it seems," Túrin said.

"Aye," Faramir agreed. "And I know who. Did you not recognise the horncall?"

Túrin glanced at him, and recognition dawned on him. But unlike Faramir, he suddenly looked rather glum. Faramir's smile broadened.

"You do not look very happy at the prospect of meeting him soon, do you?" he said cheerfully. "Tell me, how high was the bet?"

"Which bet?" Túrin asked quickly – a little too much so.

"Oh, come on, Túrin. I know that you had one going with my brother concerning last night."

"I have no idea what you are talking about," Túrin said stiffly.

Faramir's smile broadened even more. "Right. Well, I shall only say then that apparently the bad quality of beer and the unforeseeable events in the "Nose" spoiled your efforts to get me drunk. I hope you will not lose too much money ..."

Túrin kicked away a stone. "You could have drunk more of that shot, you know ..."

gladrieltook

Visilya chuckled slightly at this little banter, replacing the enraged expression that had come from Zibun's uncouth comment. She understood most languages of Middle Earth and Andunaic was no exception. That comment also caused her to give Zibun a good kick in the back of the calf. "I hope we reach that Citadel soon. I'm getting a bit fed up with Zibun here's antics. But I'm not overly excited at the idea of meeting that brother of yours Faramir. Never been fond of him."

Khorazir

"Then you are one of the few who don't," Túrin said. "From what I've heard most people admire him for his valour in battle and all. Isn't that so?" He looked at Faramir.

"Aye," he said shortly, without glancing at his friend. There was a strange note to his voice. No cynism or bitterness, and certainly no jealousy, only slight dejection, perhaps. He shrugged, and looked at Visilya, and smiled slightly again.

"Well, he does have his mistakes, as everybody, but all in all he is a decent fellow. If he comes up to the Citadel, as is likely, he should pass us soon. I wonder what he will say to find me here, and in this state." He glanced down at his tunic (he had not had an opportunity to change his clothes from last night) with its frayed hem, and at Zibûn glowering at him.

Maradir had been extremely amazed by Aliya's action. He had never seen anyone doing magic or whatever it was what she had done before. At the same time he felt a little stupid that he had not been able to aid her in any way. But when suddenly the light faded, and they were left in utter (and unnatural) darkness, and moreover he heard the thud of something hitting the ground, his amazement was gone. He rushed forward, to Aliya's side. As the darkness seemed to slowly dissolve again, and the light of day filtered down into the alley, he knelt at her side, feeling for her heartbeat. He was greatly relieved to realise that she only seemed to have lost consciousness. He patted her cheeks and called her name in the hope to rouse her.

Cynara

Aliya's eyes fluttered open, and she saw what looked like a triple-Maradir. she tried to lift her hand to rub her eyes, but found that she couldn't, much to her frustration. She found that it was as much as she could handle, just to talk. "I'm sorry, Maradir," she said quietly, "I'm afraid it's been a while since I last used that spell, and I forgot about the side-effects. I don't believe that I'll be to much use for a while. Did I get the shadow?" Aliya asked, as the three Maradirs coalesced into one.

gladrieltook

Faramir was all to right. Boromir came striding around the corner looking, frankly, no better than Faramir. He greeted her jovially. Visilya gave an exasperated(sp) sigh and signaled to a passing pair of gaurds. She handed Zibun over to their custody, telling them to take her striaght to Denethor. He would know what to do with her. She then turned to Boromir, her face impassive.

Khorazir

Boromir gave Visilya a brief nod, flashed a broad grin at Túrin who looked rather uncomfortable now, and then he walked over to Faramir, his grin broadening. Faramir smiled as well, but his smile soon faded as his brother grabbed him and drew him into a tight embrace. "Congratulations to your birthday, little brother," Boromir said. Faramir breathed in sharply, and then groaned, and struggled to get free. Boromir gave him a questioning glance. "Hey, what is wrong with you? You look rather ... shaken," he said, giving Faramir a keen glance. "Had an adventurous night yesterday, eh?"

"One could put it that way, yeah," Faramir agreed.

Boromir looked to Túrin, then back at his brother. "So you really went to the "Troll's Nose"? I heard it burned down last night." Here Visilya blushed a little. "I hope it was not you who set it on fire."

Faramir grinned. " 'tis a long tale. I guess you want to see father first. We are also on our way to the Citadel. I can tell you on the way."

"And I shall tell you what befell in Ithilien. Things are getting worse there. And Túrin, I guess we have to talk about a certain matter, right?" he added cheerfully.

"Yeah, right," Túrin agreed glumly as they walked on.

Maradir looked around. There was no trace of the strange shadowy creature to be seen anymore. "It seems you got him," he said. Holding out his hand to help Aliya up, he looked at her keenly, still awe in his eyes. "That was an impressive bit of magic you've done there. Where did you learn to cast these spells?"

Cynara

Aliya groaned a little as she was hoisted up off the ground, then she smiled. "THAT wasn't impressive magic...or at least, not to those who do magic. I learned a little when I was a child. Unfortunately, I can do very little, simple spells, as disappearing for a while, or movin faster than most people, jumping space. and the Light, I just did, that's the hardest of all, because, unless you are used to the spell, it requires life-energy to hold it up. and it drains life energy. I believe that I ma have taken quite a few years off my life, just now. But no matter." Aliya smiled again. "Are we returning to the Citadel? I may have to lean on you, quite a bit, unless we ride. Do you mind?"

Khorazir

"Er, no, I don't mind at all," Maradir said, wondering in the same moment what Túrin would say now. "Faramir had the horses given to grooms. Perhaps we could get them. It's a long way up to the Citadel." He studied her concernedly as she leaned on him. She looked very tired indeed. "You shouldn't do this too often, you know. If it drains you life-energy like this."

During the upwards walk, Faramir told his brother briefly what had befallen last night, and during the morning. Boromir seemed rather disturbed by the fire, and what Faramir could tell about Dellóm.

"We saw the fire and smoke from Osgiliath," Boromir said at length. "But we did not know what was going on. Only when we came to the gate in the morning we learned from the guards what had happened. I take it father is rather ... displeased."

"One could say so," Faramir said shortly. "There was a council-meeting this morning, with some important people present, and after that he wanted to go down to the people and speak to them. Fortunately by now most of the uprisings are quenched." He looked at his brother. "You know, I do not feel like celebrating today, honestly. I had been looking forward to this day, but after all what happened ..."

Boromir smiled and clapped his shoulder. "Come on, I am sure you will regain your spirit at the feast tonight."

Faramir looked at him doubtfully, but then he smiled slightly as well. Suddenly Boromir gazed around searchingly. "By the way," he said, "where is Maradir? I would have expected him to be with you."

Cynara

Smiling at Maradir's remark, "I don't plan to make a habit of it. Let's start out, I'll be fine in a minute or two." The two started the walk back to the Citadel, with Aliya's arm over Maradir's shoulder, and his arm around her waist.

Neither said anything. After a while, they, at last, entered the Inner Circle.

Khorazir

They had reached the Citadel by now. The guards at the seventh gate had been astounded to see Boromir, who had been expected to arrive later during the day, and had hailed him cheerfully. He was greatly admired for his achievements in the defence of Ithilien in all of Gondor.

“Oh, worry not, Maradir is with us. He just stayed behind to see to it that we are not followed by unwelcome people,” Faramir said while they crossed the square of the fountain. At this Túrin grinned. “And he’s not alone, mind you,” he said.

Boromir raised an eyebrow. “Not alone?”

“Yeah, her sister is with him,” Túrin explained, nodding towards Visilya, who had been rather silent. Boromir studied her. Apparently he knew her from seeing her. “Is your sister also of the Secret Guard, lady?” he asked.

gladrieltook

“No” Visilya replied shortly. “She is only visiting me, and the city of her birth. Aliya is her name. And besides, only one youth from each immediate family is allowed to join the ranks of the Secret Gaurd. Besides, they must have trained under the best of the best and literally be the best of the best. But of course, you would know that well...” She said this in a slightly snide, aloof way.

Khorazir

Boromir slightly raised an eyebrow at the tone of her words. Apparently he was not used to being addressed like this. “Yeah, I guess so,” he replied a little haughtily. Faramir noticed the slight tension between Visilya and his brother, and said: “I know not if you have heard, but Imrahil and his father are here, and Imrahil’s sons too, although they were not present at council. I am sure they would like to meet you, and hear what you can tell of Ithilien.”

Boromir’s face brightened visibly. Elphir and Erchirion, Imrahil’s two eldest sons, greatly admired their cousin, and displayed that openly.

“And father, when he is still here, and has not gone down to speak to the people as was his intention, will be delighted to greet you as well,” Faramir continued.

Boromir nodded. “I shall seek him presently. But first ...,” he said, turning to Túrin.

Túrin nodded a little dejectedly, pulled out his purse and handed a large goldpiece to Boromir. “I should have known better,” he muttered with a dark glance at Faramir who could not help it but grin broadly.

“Aye, you should,” he said.

“Well, I shall meet you later,” Boromir said while putting away the money, and with a brief nod to Visilya he walked off towards the White Tower. Faramir looked after him, then he turned again to his companions. “I hope Maradir and Aliya will return soon. Shall we wait for them here at the fountain? ‘tis fair weather. Let me just find a servant to bring us some food. I am starving.”

Canamarth

When Maradir and Aliya reached the fountain they found their friends starting on a meal of bread, cheese and some fruit. "That's exactly what I had imagined. We are doing all the hard work and you indulge in feasting in the sunshine," Maradir smiled.

Túrin looked up and grinned broadly at the sight of Maradir's arm around Aliya's waist and her's around his shoulder. But then he realized that she held on to his friend not out of sympathy but rather because she was too weak to walk on her own.

"What happend?"

"You should ask Aliya," Maradir answered. "I can't really explain these things. I only know that the shadow that followed us is gone. Thanks to her."

Khorazir

Faramir looked concerned as he studied Aliya's weary features. "You are not wounded, are you?" he asked as she sat down at the rim of the fountain.

gladrieltook

(taking it back a bit) "Boromir never did get along as kids. He was the bully that took joy in pulling my braids when we were very young. Later, when I was eighteen, we both took the challenge to become members of the Secret Gaurd, a very high honor. I, of course, beat him. I'm surprised he didn't recognize me on the spot. If he had, there may have more than a little 'eye daggers', as my father called it."

(back in the present)

Visilya hurried to her sister's side. "Are you all right Aliya? Here, have a drink. It always makes telling a tale easier." Aliya slowly revealed to them what had happened. Visilya listened, her face taunt, grimly. Once Aliya had finished, Visilya rose. "Come sister, I think you could use a rest." She helped her sister to her feet, and together, the young women limped off to the nearest barracks for a good mug of ale and a nap.

Khorazir

The three friends looked after the women as they left. "Well, it's just us guys for the present, then," Túrin said, with a slightly whistful glance at Visilya's back. "Did you know that she and your brother vied for the same post once?" he asked Faramir then.

Faramir shook his head. "Boromir never mentioned it to me – which is not to be wondered at if she indeed beat him. You know how he is when he loses a competition." He winked at Maradir, who had recently beat his brother in an archery contest, causing Boromir to sulk for the rest of the day. Maradir grinned broadly in return. "Must have been before his coming of age," Faramir continued. "After that he was appointed captain general (as the Steward's heir), and I guess he is quite content with the rank, and the admiration it brings. I only wonder what Visilya means by not getting along as kids. Boromir must be almost ten years older than her – or else she is much older than she looks. Anyway, what plans have you for the day? I had hoped to meet with Imrahil and his family, but as things stand ... Everybody seems to be extremely busy ...," he ended, and sighed slightly as he cast a swift glance at the White Tower.

Canamarth

"I don't know," Maradir said. "I could do with a little more sleep, though. If I am not needed anymore I think I'll also take a nap. We've got a long evening among high society awaiting us..."

Túrin rolled his eyes. "High society, indeed. I can already see my father trying to introduce me to very important men and their dull and ugly daughters."

Cynara

"Vis, who was that other man, out at the fountain? It didn't appear that you were too fond of each other!" Aliya grinned, as soon as they were out of ear-shot. "And what's happening around here? Any earth-shattering decision occur while I was out?"

gladrieltook

"That" Visilya replied with a chuckle, "was his high and mightyness Boromir, soreset loser in all Middle Earth. No decisions as of yet, except perhaps Turin surrendering his money to Boromir over a bet on getting Faramir drunk." She grinned. "Speaking of getting drunk, let's go do so. The barracks up ahead have some of the best ale east of the Misty Mountains. And the warmest beds." And so the two sisters came to the Secret Gaurd HQ.

Khorazir

"Sleep is not a bad idea," Faramir said. "Moreover the afternoon is quite advanced already. As far as I know, the feast will begin at about seven. Barely time for you to get dressed up, eh, Túrin. I am sure you want to look your best in front of those ladies."

"Very funny," Túrin returned, but then he grinned. "As long as my father doesn't make any serious plans for my future I am content. For you I am concerned, though. Now that you have come of age ... And you're not that bad a match, either, Steward's son and all ..."

"As long as Boromir is not married," Faramir said evenly, "I do not think father will waste a single thought on my wedding."

"Oh dear, then I fear you will go without a wife for the rest of your days," Túrin said and rose. "Anyway, I'm off now. I don't know what father has told mother about what I did last night, but I have certain fears concerning that. Also I'd like to see what my brother's doing. He's in Boromir's company, and should have returned from Ithilien with him. See you at the feast then!"

He walked off, but after a few paces he stopped and turned. "You did invite the two ladies, didn't you, Faramir?"

Faramir smiled broadly. "Yes, I did. I hope they have not forgotten."

Canamarth

"I shall be off as well then," Maradir said. "See if my stepfather is home as well." He did not sound too happy about the prospect of meeting him again.

“See you tonight!”

Khorazir

“Right, see you,” Faramir said, and walked towards the White Tower.

Cynara

Aliya, now ‘watered’ and bedded down, suddenly sat bolt upright. “What in Eru’s name will I wear to the dance?” She wondered out loud.

Canamarth

Maradir was woken as somebody opened the door. His stepfather had returned. Before Maradir got the chance to say a word his stepfather grumpily blurted: “I know what happened. And I don’t want any explanations. I am sure the Steward or your captain will devise appropriate punishment. Now leave me alone. I’m tired.” With that he flung his boots into a corner and went to bed.

Maradir got dressed in his best garments quickly and quietly. He knew that some of the noble attendants at Faramir’s party would probably not wear these when they were travelling but he didn’t really care. He snatched a small parcel from underneath his bed and went outside to walk up to the citadel.

Cynara

When Aliya finally woke up, she found that a blue and silver dress had been laid out for her, probably Visilya’s doing. Smiling to herself, Aliya dressed in it, and sat down in front of a mirror to brush her hair. Finally, she got all the tangles out. It felt so good to be in a dress again, even if she had no clue when the last time was. Probably in her teen years sometime. Finally satisfied with her appearance, Aliya left her room to find Vis.

gladrieltook

Visilya was in her private chambers, pulling on the well made silver gown that she only wore for special occasions such as this. She peered into the mirror. The soot and ashes had been cleared from her face, and the huge welt behind her ear subsided. All in all, she looked rather nice. Picking up the wooden brush from the desk, she combed her hair until it shone like newly wrought gold. Visilya, Captain of the Secret Guard was ready when her sister came strolling in the door. The sisters exchanged greetings, then hastened to the stables to see about some horses. Visilya’s horse, Rebel was there, and a blue roan for Aliya named Bluebell. The horses had been properly adorned with the emblem of the women’s family, a silver wolf on a navy blue backing.

They mounted, and rode slowly out of the stables. The guard house was set in the fifth circle, and neither sisters felt like walking the distance in their soft little shoes. “Besides, it would be unbecoming and would cause the lords and ladies to look down upon our family. So they were escorted by three armed guardsmen under Visilya’s command. Each bore a different flag. One for the flag of Gondor; one for the flag of the Secret Guard, a hawk on red; and the family flag of Visilya and Aliya.

People hurried away from the procession as soon as they saw it, but many followed at a distance out of sheer curiosity.

Cynara

When they had dismounted again, Aliya turned to Visilya. "Who else will be there to laugh at me?" she asked, knowing that she would probably make a fool of herself.

Khorazir

"Well, I for one," a voice came from their right. Turning, the sisters beheld Túrin, who together with his father, mother and a young man who looked to be his brother had also just arrived at the Citadel. Beneath his cloak he wore a burgundy tunic with golden and red embroidery at collar and sleeves, and dark trowsers. He also wore a broad grin on his face as he studied the ladies. "Nay, I'm jesting. You look beautiful," he said. His eyes strayed to Visilya, but when she returned his glance he quickly looked away, and blessed the dim light (for the sun had gone down already) in which she could not see him blushing.

"Shall we go then, ladies?" he asked, offering his arm to Visilya.

Canamarth

Maradir made his way up on foot. He wanted to catch a bit of fresh air. He kept to the shadows where he was almost invisible, due to his black attire. He listened in on a few conversations mainly concerned with the events of last night. It seemed that most people had calmed down again. Most were surprised at the uprisings there had been in the city. Something like that hadn't happened before.

At length, Maradir arrived at the citadel. He knew one of the men who stood on guard. "Good even, Maradir. Túrin has just arrived. If you hurry you might catch him before he enters the great hall."

Maradir thanked him but walked into the courtyard slowly. He stopped by the fountain and looked at the guests arriving. He wanted to make a silent entrance. Something rather difficult in the company of Túrin.

Khorazir

Faramir had not had much opportunity to rest. He had hardly arrived at his quarters when Boromir together with Elphir and Erchirion, the sons of Imrahil of Dol Amroth appeared. "Time for your present, little brother," Boromir called jovially.

At Faramir's questioning glance, Boromir grabbed him at the shoulder and dragged him out of the room. "It's a bit of a walk, unfortunately. We wanted to bring it up here, but the guards objected."

"Shhh," Elphir made. "Don't blurt it all out. It's supposed to be a surprise." His younger brother giggled.

They led him out of the building and across the courtyard towards the gate. "Are we leaving the citadel?" Faramir asked.

"Yep," Erchirion said, and giggled even more. His brother gave him a stern glance, at which the boy clapped a hand over his mouth, and tried to avoid looking at Faramir. When they had left the tunnel leading up the the Seventh Gate they stopped. Boromir pulled out a scarf. "I am sorry, but we have to blindfold you now."

“Oh, come on,” Faramir objected. “I can close my eyes if you want, but walking around here blindfolded would look extremely stupid, would it not.”

“Never you mind,” Boromir said grinning, and while the other two held Faramir he covered his eyes with the scarf.

“On we go,” Boromir said, leading his brother by the hand. Faramir tried to make out where they were heading by listening to the sound their footsteps made on the ground, but soon he got confused. Yet at length a familiar smell made him regain his orientation. “The stables?” he asked.

“Good,” Boromir said, leading him on. Then he stopped. “Put out your hand,” he said. Faramir did so, and slightly shrank back when his fingers touched something soft and warm – and alive. “Let him see,” Boromir commanded. Elphir pulled away the scarf, and in the dim light Faramir could see a slender dark-grey horse, perhaps a year old, that was eyeing him curiously.

“Narothal is his name,” Boromir said with a broad smile. “We thought ‘twas time that you had your own horse now.”

“Father had him brought from Rohan,” Erchirion fell in.

“He’s still too young to be ridden,” Elphir said, “but given your skill with horses we are sure that you will train him well. Here, saddle and bridle and all go with him.”

Faramir stared at the horse, then at his brother and his cousins. “I know not what to say,” he began, then he went over to them and embraced them.

“He seems to like the present,” Erchirion whispered to his brother as Faramir turned back to the horse, and caressed its head.

“And the present seems to like its new master as well,” Elphir said with a smile.

They spent about an hour in the stables, before they finally returned to the Citadel to get ready for the feast. Shortly before seven Faramir walked down to Merethrond, the great feasting hall, dressed in a long dark-blue tunic embroidered with white and silver at hem and collar. He was eager to meet his friends, and tell them of Narothal.

Cynara

After the grandiose entrance was made (at Turin’s insistence, of course, he had a flair for the dramatic.), Aliya looked around, feeling quite out of place. Visilya and Turin seemed to be busy with each other, and Aliya knew no one else there. Finding an exit, she wandered out into the already-shadowed court yard. It seemed that the sun was setting already. Seeing that it was the same court yard that she and the others had been in before, Aliya made to go over to the fountain. Then she paused and drew in a silent gasp: there was a man dressed in black, standing there already. Aliya felt almost naked without her swords, and considered leaving, before she recognized that the man was Maradir. Smiling to herself, Aliya went over to a bench, and seated herself with her back facing to the fountain, she waited. As she waited, she reflected that she had never seen Maradir look so fine.

gladrieltook

“Well Turin, I must say you look rather handsome this evening.” Visilya smiled mischevously. “Especially without all that soot and ash the covered your face yestreve.”

Khorazir

“Well, I guess I could say the same about you,” Túrin returned with a grin. “Although I must admit that you looked beautiful even when covered in soot.”

“Am I interrupting?” a voice came from the side. Turning, they beheld Faramir stepping forward. He was smiling. “I am glad that you came, Visilya. I was wondering if you remembered my invitation. Is Aliya not with you?”

Canamarth

Maradir finally decided to go inside. As he walked past a bench where he saw a lady sitting, that lady suddenly spoke to him.

“Don’t you want to say hello to me?”

Maradir turned around in surprise. It took him a few seconds to recognize Aliya. All he managed was: “Wow!”

Khorazir

Túrin looked around, as if realising only now that Aliya was not with them anymore. “She came with us to the Citadel,” he said. “I thought she was right behind us. Well, I guess went off to await a certain friend of ours. He hasn’t arrived yet, has he?”

“No,” Faramir replied. “We should wait for him here. And for Aliya.”

gladrieltook

“I believe I saw her go out to the garden. She isn’t fond of nobles and feasts and the sort. She was raised in a simple home, like me. But unlike me, she doesn’t remember her life as the daughter of one of the most important nobles in the city of gaurd.” Visilya sighed. “I’ll go to her. But if I know anything, Maradir is probably with and they don’t wish to be... disturbed

Khorazir

Both Túrin and Faramir smiled at this. “Perhaps you should remain here, then, Visilya,” Faramir said, “so as not to disturb them. I am sure they will come presently.”

Canamarth

When Aliya only smiled at Maradir’s exclamation he took a step forward and took her hand to gingerly breathe a kiss on it.

Cynara

When Maradir had kissed her hand, Aliya Grinned in the most un-ladylike way possible. “Eru! Simply put on a dress, and already men are kissing my hand, and thinking of me as a lady! Maybe I should do this more often.”

Khorazir

While Visilya, Túrin and Faramir waited at the entrance to Merethrond, the great feasting hall in the White Tower for the Aliya and Maradir to come, more guests arrived and entered the hall. Mostly they were members of the noble families of Minas Tirith. All were richly dressed in elaborate robes and gowns of precious silks or velvet, embroidered with silver and gold, and decorated with pearls and jewels. Jewels also glinted in the bracelets the ladies wore around their necks, on rings on hands, and fillets on brows. On such occasions the gentry of Gondor were wont to display their riches openly, so that, and if it was for the evening only, a memory of the splendour and glory of Westergond was reawakened in Middle-Earth.

Most nobles stopped when they noticed Faramir and greeted him, and some congratulated him also. He was soon tired of smiling constantly and shaking hands and replying the same words over and over again, and he hoped that Maradir and Aliya would appear soon. Túrin was watching Visilya with a smile and a strange absent expression on his face – at least he did when he thought that she was not looking –, and Visilya was watching the nobles.

There was a slight gap in the stream of guests, and Faramir was just about to turn to Túrin to ask something, when another couple arrived. Faramir sighed almost inaudibly, put up the smile again, and faced the newcomers. His smile froze slightly, and it cost him some effort to maintain it at all, for his eyes had locked with the cold grey ones of Falastur of Pelargir.

Canamarth

“Maybe you should,” Maradir answered and smiled. “Shall we then?” He offered her his arm.

Aliya nodded and took it and the two of them made their way in.

Khorazir

Falastur studied him haughtily. He was dressed in long crimson robes adorned with golden embroidery. His wife at his side wore red also, and a precious bracelet set with rubies which certainly was worth a fortune. She gave Faramir – or rather his, in comparison very plain garments a short glance, then her attention was caught by Visilya and her silver dress.

Faramir gave no heed to this. He and Falastur were locked in a duel of glances. The Lord of Pelargir was of about the same height as Faramir, which must have annoyed him in this situation, since thus he could not look down on the young man. But the cold glance from his eyes was hard enough to endure. Faramir returned it steadily. Years of conflict with his father had hardened his will, and trained him well when it came to trying to outstare people. But Falastur was a hard case.

At length, when the situation started to turn silly, Faramir cleared his throat, and without lowering his gaze, he said: “Welcome to the feast, Lord Falastur. Although I am slightly surprised to see you attend.”

Falastur’s eyes blazed. Obviously he was about to make a fierce remark, but then thought the better of it. “You are as courteous as your father, Steward’s son,” he said coldly, and a faint, mocking smile played about his lips. “You would not have invited me, would you, had it been up to you? We do not have to pretend anything here. But when you are older, and concerned with more important matters than hunting a few orcs in Ithilien, you will soon learn that personal likes and dislikes are best put aside in politics. Or why do you think I attend this feast? Not out of friendship with

the Steward and his family, surely.”

With that he turned away, and together with his wife strode off into the hall. Túrin looked after him and snorted contemptuously. “Stupid git,” he muttered. “And have you seen his wife? She looked at our garments as if we were clad in rags.”

“To her eyes we are, I guess,” Faramir said with a shrug. “Come on, this is supposed to be a merry feast. Do not let people like them spoil it. Hey, there come Aliya and Maradir.”

gladrieltook

Visilya stared coldly after the Lady. “She is jealous. I am three times the woman she is. And the only reason that old bat is higher in society than me is because she married that dung heap Falastur. I could be a fine lady, with gaudy gold jewelry covering every inch of my body, but I choose not to be an ornament for some stuffy lord to parade around. The Captian of the Secret Gaurd will not be looked down upon by a snobby, self glorified, fork tongued, two faced, orc butt.” With that she stormed out of the hall.

She marched all the way back to the Secret Gaurd HQ and her chambers, where she ripped off the dress. She pulled on the traditional Captian’s Uniform, which had been worn by her Father. It consisted of a shimmering coat of Mithril mail, a black leather jerkin, long black pants, and a pair of polished black boots. She clasped the thick belt around her waist and rubbed the dust off the buckle, which was shaped like a red hawk. The red cloak was flung over her shoulders, and her long sword hung on her belt. No longer would Visilya, Captian of the Secret Gaurd be a Lady. She would be what she was.

Visilya ran the whole way back. She was perfectly dry when she arrived, however. In fact she looked as if she hadn’t even run at all when she walked in to join her friends. “Let them look down on me when they see my true rank.”

Cynara

A slight smile played about Aliya’s lips. “Long have I wanted to see that uniform, Vis,” she said, finally giving in to a grin. Her unexpected dimples sprang back into place as she watched Turin stare at Visilya. “As for me, I guess I’m happy to play the part of a Lady, at least for one night. Then, it’s back on with my swords, and the fun begins again.” Aliya shot a smile at Maradir.

Khorazir

“The uniform suits you well, Visilya,” Faramir said with a smile. They had waited at the entrance of the hall for her to return when she had dashed off so suddenly. “I guess ‘tis best if you do not heed the likes of Falastur and Arúthiel his wife too much. It would only spoil the evening. When she sees that you have changed she will even believe that she gained a victory, thinking that you were ashamed of your dress. But never mind. You all look splendid. Shall we go in? Perhaps the Steward will say a few words (if he is in the mood to do so), and then most likely the dance will begin.”

Canamarth

Maradir glanced after Visilya as she left the hall. “She’s quite rash sometimes, isn’t she?” When she returned he saw that the uniform suited her mood better, though.

He again offered Aliya his arm when Faramir made ready to go inside proper. And he shot a smile back at her.

Cynara

Aliya laughed again, when Maradir made his remark. "Vis has always been rather spur-of-the-moment. Do you remember the time that an orc made the joke about me being an illegitimate child, Vis?" A look of disgust mixed with humour crossed Aliya's face for a moment. "Visilya jumped out of the tree we were hiding in, and slew the orc, so I had no choice but to jump out, and kill the other one." she explained to Maradir, noticing the questioning look on his face.

gladrieltook

"Oh shut up, Aliya." Visilya gave her little sister a gentle punch on the arm. "You know as well as I do that that never happened." She turned to Faramir. "And the Lady Arthuriel will not be so cocky when I parade into that hall wearing this mail coat. One link on it is worth more than that hideously gaudy bracelet shes wearing. More over, I should be wearing the Uniform anyway. It is only appropriate for the Captain of the Secret Gaurd to done the correct attire and colors." She grinned, turned, and one hand on her sword, entered the Hall.

Cynara

Aliya grinned back. "Okay, so it was a very small orc. Whatever." Aliya grinned again at Visilya's sniffy remark about the other Lady's jewellery. "Vis, shut up and behave. It would be fun, but I'm not sure that either Faramir or Denethor would appreciate staining the night with having the poor husbands entrails spread about the hall." Aliya looked mischievous. "Besides, I'm almost positive that most of the Ladies here would faint!"

Khorazir

"You can bet on that," Faramir said and grinned. "I found it best to try and ignore these people. Unfortunately there are situations where you cannot always do so. I do pity Denethor that he has to endure Falastur and the likes of him in council. Of course he does not speak much of it – not to me, at least – but one look at his face after a council-meeting tells you more than words could. I really do not envy him (nor Boromir who will one day succeed to the Stewardship if the King returns not). Sometimes it does have advantages when you are second-born."

Canamarth

"Or just one of the plain folk and have no reonsibility but for yourself," Maradir joined in and grinned. "By the way, your security personnel is not particularly on their guard tonight. See what I managed to smuggle in." Maradir unwrapped the parcel he had brought with him. It contained a dagger with intricate drawings on its blade which looked quite exotic and presented it to Faramir. "It's not much, I know, not as good as a new horse. But it might come in handy one day. It is from some far eastern country and I found it in a shop where they sell the most peculiar sort of weaponry. We should really go there together one day."

gladrieltook

Visilya laughed at her little sister's comment. "The men will leave me alone, they know and appreciate who I am. If

worst comes to worse, I will be forced to use my fists. I wouldn't waste my energy on them." She grinned, then turned to Maradir. "I believe I may have been to that store. By what name was it known?"

Khorazir

Faramir stared at the dagger, barely listening to Visilya's words. "This is really scandalous. I should punish those guards at once. They are responsible for our security, and what do they do?" Then he looked at Maradir, and his face split into a broad smile. "Thank you, my friend," he said and embraced him. "'tis a wonderful present." He held it up and had a closer look at the ornaments on the blade. "This almost looks like writing," he said, "although I cannot read it."

"Perhaps it's better this way," Túrin fell in. "You know, it might be a curse," he added in an ominous voice. "I've been to that shop you mentioned, Maradir. I don't remember how it's called," he added, turning to Visilya, "but I do recall that its owner is that strange fellow who calls himself Ancalagon the Black, and has a large tattoo of a black dragon on his back. That's why he's barely wearing a shirt, even in winter, so that everybody may see it. To call that guy weird would be a great understatement. But he claims that the shop has been there for ages. Hey, perhaps we should all go there one day. They have the most peculiar kinds of weapons there."

"Yeah, perhaps we should," Faramir said. "It might be as adventurous as the 'Troll's Nose'."

"Aye, it might," Túrin said and grinned. "I've heard that they have ... er ... interesting parties there at times. And by the way," he rummaged in his tunic, and pulled out a flat parcel, "I, too, managed to get this past the guards. Not that it's as dangerous as the dagger, but, well, it might come in handy if you have to deal with the likes of Falastur more often." Faramir took it curiously, and unwrapped it. It contained a small book with a plain, dark-red cover, written in Sindarin. The title said *I Ernil*.

"*The Prince*," Faramir translated, and again he smiled. "And you say that this is not dangerous? As far as I know this book was found highly destructive when it was first published. Moreover 'tis said that there are no more copies available."

"Well, I have my sources," Túrin said smugly.

Faramir embraced him too. "Thank you, you two," he said to Maradir and Túrin. "These are really wonderful presents. But you know that you were under no obligation to give anything. Your presence here tonight is gift enough. And the same goes for you, of course," he added, turning to the ladies.

Canamarth

"I don't think it has a name, really," Maradir said to Visilya. When Túrin mentioned interesting parties Maradir smiled knowingly. "You know what frightens me most? That this party is probably more dangerous than the ones they have in the other cellar. Yep, we definitely should go there one day. And we shouldn't have that many problems when we get dressed up properly as well. Nobody will recognize us."

"You speak as if you know exactly what you are talking about," Turin said. "You don't want to tell me you've actually been, do you?"

"No comment. But I do have other acquaintances, you know. Not such noble folk as you are..."

Cynara

A liya grinned a rather bloodthirsty grin. "I, for one, would love to go. That more dangerous, the more fun." she added.

gladrieltook

“Hmmm” Visilya remembered that name from somewhere. “Ancalangon the Black” Her eyes fixed themselves on the dagger, then they lit up suddenly. “Of course! Ancalangon! That is the store where father always got those beautiful daggers! You wouldn’t remember Aliya, you were too young. But I can remember my father taking me there and letting me look at all the wonderful swords and daggers.” Her face fell slightly, as if remembering something sad, but happy. “He... he promised to let me choose a dagger when I got old enough. No matter how strange, he said he would buy it for me, for my very own.”

Cynara

Aliya smiled, a bit sadly. “It would be the kind of thing our Father would promise. My mother, at least, wouldn’t have been too pleased, though.”

Khorazir

“It must have been wonderful to have a father who cared about his children like this,” Faramir said, a little whistfully. He briefly looked to Maradir, and knew that he was thinking the same. “Well, but now we should really –”

“There you are,” Boromir’s voice interrupted him. “We have been looking for you. Father is getting impatient. I think he wants to announce a few things ere the feast begins. Come on. We cannot start without you, you know!” With that he dragged Faramir into the hall.

Canamarth

“Ok, let’s follow inconspicuously,” Maradir said and once again offered his arm to Aliya.

gladrieltook

“HA! With him around,” Visilya jerked a thumb towards Turin, “remaining unnoticed is practically impossible!” The three laughed jovially. Turin mocked a frown, then laughed to.

Khorazir

“Am I the only one under this impression, or are most jokes here at my expense?” Túrin asked

But he could not wait for an answer, for by now they had entered the great hall, and tried to wriggle their way through the ranks of people lining the walls, looking towards the dais at the far end. The vast, impressive hall with its double row of huge, marble pillars inlaid with ornaments of precious stone, the darkblue-ceiling studded with white gems like living stars, and the intricate patterns on the smooth marble floor was brightly illumined by many candles which made the colourful garments of the numerous guests shine brightly, and the jewels on their necks, hands and brows glitter. All eyes were bent now on a dark figure that stood forward on the dais, and had raised his hands to create silence. The murmur died down. Denethor was dressed all in black, which made him stand out from the rest of the guests and

from his two sons which stood behind him to his sides, Boromir wearing bright red to his right, and Faramir in his dark blue tunic to his left. Denethor looked at the guests, who stared at him in anticipation, then he cleared his throat, and said: "Welcome all, lords and ladies, especially those who travelled a long way to be here tonight. I fear that this feast has been overshadowed by recent events, which we should not forget, but which we also should not allow to spoil the evening and darken our hearts. As you all know, this is the coming of age of my son Faramir, who thus now rises to the rank of roquen, and who will – in time – assume a command over the rangers of Ithilien, thus occupying a crucial post in the defence of Gondor against the Shadow of the East. May he prove worthy of the task, as worthy as his brother." He looked to Boromir, and there was unmistakable pride in his eyes. Then he turned to Faramir. "Step forward, Faramir." Faramir did so. At a sign from Denethor, the Lord Húrin came forward bearing a sheathed sword together with a belt on which it was hung, and presented it to the Steward. Denethor took it and held it so that all could see it. "This sword is an heirloom of our House for many generations. Keep it well." With that he gave it to Faramir, who took it carefully. There was some whispering in the ranks of people, before Denethor indicated silence again. A servant came forward and brought him and Boromir cups with wine. "Let us now raise our cups to Faramir," Denethor said. "To Faramir," it echoed through the hall.

"And now, let the feast begin," Denethor said, and with a nod of his head caused the musicians to begin. Soon sweet music filled the hall. People now either began to dance or to walk off to the sides to talk in groups, or get something to eat.

"Hey, let's try to get through to Faramir," Túrin said.

Canamarth

Trying to get through to Faramir proved a difficult task. Many people were trying to talk to him and congratulate him. The ones that took longest were mainly young women and girls, Maradir noticed.

"Maybe he doesn't want to be interrupted by us," he said.

Túrin took a closer look at the women around Faramir. "Nah, they are all boring little girls. And they're not even counted among either the wealthy or the beautiful. I think he'd be grateful to us if we rescued him."

Cynara

"I think, gentlemen, that I could be of some help here." Aliya shook out her hair, turned around a second, and ruffled her dress. Turning back to Maradir and Turin, she put on a wide-eyed, almost panicked expression. "Right, then. I'll be right back." Aliya took a faltering sort of run at the crowd, and bumped her way right to the centre. Most of the crowd would turn to her, scowling, but melt out of her way when they sensed her important errand. When she reached the centre of the group, she very nearly fell into Faramir's arms. "My Lord Faramir!" Aliya gasped out, "You are sorely needed in the garden!" Looking into his face, she clearly winked at him.

gladrieltook

Visilya had to try very hard not to burst out laughing. She clasped her hand quickly against her mouth to muffle a snort. Several ladies around them watched the scene distainfully, as Aliya, Maradir, and Turin seized Faramir and led him out of the crowd. The whole act was quite well performed. But as soon as they reached the safety of the garden, Visilya doubled over with laughter. "Aliya," she said, finally catching her breath, "Next time you decide to rescue the lord Faramir, please make sure I'm not around. I may just laugh myself to death. That is, laughing at your acting!" The sister exchanged playful shoves, then fell to the ground, giggling, their faces red.

Khorazir

Faramir put out a hand and helped them up when they had calmed down again. He slightly bowed to Aliya, jestfully. "Thank you, lady," he said with a broad grin. "I am obliged. You rescued me just in time before these girls could talk me to death."

"Well," Túrin said, "now you know what's going to happen at more or less every feast you'll attend in future -- until they succeed in marrying you off to someone."

"In that case I shall volunteer for every errand that allows me to leave the City and stay away from it for some time," Faramir said, "so that I may miss these events."

"Hah," Túrin said. He studied his friend. "Nevertheless I'd say that you'll be the first of us to marry. I'd even bet on that."

"I thought you were cured of betting," Faramir said.

"Not quite," Túrin replied and grinned "What do you say, Maradir? Interested in risking some money?"

Canamarth

"You know that I'm not," Maradir answered with a side-glance at the two sisters.

"So, what do we do now? We can't just drag Faramir away from his duties all night, can we?"

Khorazir

"I wish you could," Faramir said. "But we should return to the hall. The dance has started already. Usually 'tis good fun. And if those girls molest me again and want me to drag me off to the dancefloor, I can always claim that I was injured last night, and thus cannot move too vigorously. But you should dance, really," he said looking at the others, and smiling. "Especially you, Visilya, with Túrin -- if he does not object (which I doubt). He is an excellent dancer." Túrin blushed slightly at this, but gave Faramir a swift grateful glance.

Cynara

Aliya's grin only faded a bit. "I'm not really a very good dancer. At all." She admitted cheerfully. "But I wouldn't mind a try or two."

gladrieltook

Visilya grinned and grabbed Turin's arm. "Shall we?"

Khorazir

"Aye, lady," Túrin said, smiling broadly. He seemed to be in excellent mood as he walked off with Visilya. Faramir and Maradir exchanged a swift glance, and grinned. "Let us hope that his former interest, the lady he mentioned last

evening, does not cross his ways tonight,” Faramir said in a low voice as they followed behind. “On the other hand, he most likely has deleted her from his mind already.”

Canamarth

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Maradir smiled. Then he turned to Aliya. “I hope you don’t mind a try with me.” He offered Aliya his arm, which she took, and they followed Túrin and Visilya leaving Faramir on his own. “Isn’t it strange that of all people Faramir is the last to find a woman to accompany him to the dance? Even Boromir has found himself some bonny lass.”

Faramir’s brother was indeed dancing with some stout country girl, blushed with the excitement of being seen in the company of Boromir.

“Isn’t that Walrufa of Erech’s daughter?” Túrin inquired.

“She might be. I thought you were the expert for the daughters of gentry-folk...”

“Oh, shut up, you villain. Time to join the fray!”

And they joined the dancers when a new tune began.

Khorazir

Faramir trailed after the two couples as they returned to the hall. He could not avoid grinning broadly when he saw his brother dancing with Walrufa. There would be much talk in the City in the following days. As the Steward’s heir, Boromir was the most coveted bachelor of Gondor at the moment.

Faramir walked over to one side of the hall and watched his friends dance. Túrin, apparently eager to impress Visilya with his dancing skills, almost outdid himself with his performance. Soon several couples around them stopped dancing just to look at them. Faramir glanced to Boromir, who had realised what was going on. Faramir’s grin broadened when he saw that his brother seemed not too happy about the people’s attention shifting to Túrin (and above all to Visilya), and was increasing his efforts to draw level with him. *Forget it, Faramir thought cheerfully. You may be a great warrior, dear brother, but you will never beat Túrin when it comes to dancing.*

“Impressive competition going on there, eh?” A voice next to Faramir startled him out of his musings. Turning his head, he beheld Imrahil approaching him. He was also grinning broadly as he watched the two couples. Then he studied Faramir. “I would have thought that you would dance also – rather than Boromir, to be honest. You are all right, are you not?” he added in a much more serious tone.

Faramir was slightly surprised at that. “Yes, I am fine,” he said earnestly. “Why do you ask?”

Imrahil looked at him strangely for a moment, but did not reply. At length he nodded to himself, and shifted his gaze to the dancers again. Faramir looked at him confusedly. Imrahil must have felt his gaze upon him, and understood that his nephew required some explanation, for he turned to him again, and said. “You know, I was just wondering. You were standing here all by yourself, while your friends are having fun dancing and all. Why do you not join them? I am sure the ladies here are more than eager to accompany you. Look at them,” he said, indicating a group of girls nearby that started giggling when Faramir glanced at them briefly.

He raised an eyebrow at Imrahil. “Seriously, uncle! You really want me to have to endure their giggling all night? Have mercy.”

Imrahil laughed heartily. “So, they are too childish for your taste, are they not? Well, perhaps one of the older, more

seriously-minded ladies would care about a dance? Or” – he lowered his voice and added conspirationally – “are you waiting for someone special who has not arrived yet?”

“No,” Faramir said promptly. Too promptly, perhaps, for Imrahil’s smile broadened knowingly. In that moment someone called for him. “You excuse me?” he said, and added in a low voice: “I will not tell anyone.” With that he clapped his nephew’s shoulder, and was off.

Faramir looked after him. *If he knew ...*, he thought.

gladrieltook

“You’re a wonderful dancer, Turin. I do believe you’ve earned yourself a prize for the best dance partner I’ve ever had.” Visilya grinned and kissed Turin’s cheek.

Cynara

After watching Visilya and Turin dance for a moment, Aliya turned her attention back to her own dance partner. “So,” she smiled, “Tell me a bit about yourself. I hardly even know you!”

Khorazir

Túrin beamed at Visilya’s kiss. When the music ended, they left the middle of the hall to get some rest – the dance had been rather fast and vigorous. “Would you care about a drink?” Túrin asked. “I’m terribly thirsty.”

Faramir was just about to fetch himself some drink as well when a servant approached him. “Some more guests have arrived, Lord Faramir, and asked to see you. They are waiting over there.” He pointed at a small group of people who apparently had just entered, because they were shedding their cloaks and heavy mantles and handing them to servants to put them away. Faramir recognised Duinhir the Tall, the Lord of Morthond Vale, his two sons Duilin and Derufin and his wife. The other newcomers were still blocked from view.

Amazed that Duinhir and his family had journeyed the long way from Morthond, only to attend the feast, Faramir hurried to greet them. As he came closer, he could see that they all looked somewhat weary. Derufin even wore his left arm in a sling, and appeared the most shaken of the lot.

After welcoming them, and assuring them that their delayed arrival was no problem at all, Faramir inquired what had befallen them. Duinhir looked around darkly until his eyes fell on Forlong of Lossarnarch who stood some distance away chatting merrily with Imrahil. “Some people should definitely improve the safety on their roads,” the Lord of Morthond said. “We were attacked by outlaws on our way to the City, and although we managed to thwart their attempt to rob us, the whole matter caused an unplanned delay. My son was wounded by an arrow, so was one of our guards.”

“Well, you should have accepted my offer to meet you on the way and escort you to the City,” a man behind Duinhir said. When he stepped forward, Faramir recognised Tarannon of Lebennin, Carandil’s brother, and captain of the Gondorian Cavalry. Faramir was surprised to see him here. Tarannon was known to hate festivities of this kind, spending most of his time on errands abroad. It was said that he could hardly wait for the war that was brewing constantly to finally break out, so that he could prove his valour on the battle-field at last. Faramir did not like this attitude at all, but that was not the only thing about Tarannon he despised.

Glancing briefly over the captain’s shoulder, he could see that he had not come alone. Faramir’s heart leapt at this

sight. He prayed that he had managed to keep his face controlled and impassive when his eyes had fallen on the tall slender figure in the plain, darkgreen dress that stood behind Tarannon.

Duinhir had only nodded curtly at Tarannon's words, then smiled briefly at Faramir, who thanked him and the others again for coming – despite the obvious difficulties –, and together with his family he walked over to Forlong, most likely to complain about the safety of his roads. Faramir was left alone with Tarannon – and the lady.

Canamarth

“There actually is not a lot to tell. I grew up as an orphan in this city and am now in the Steward's service. There's nothing particularly interesting to say about me. No boasting of my great descent or my dangerous occupation, I'm afraid. How about you?”

Khorazir

“Well, my lad – or should I say lord now? –,” Tarannon said with faked joviality while also slapping Faramir's shoulder, “now that you are come of age and will soon assume your place among the captains of Gondor, I hope we can expect great things from you. May you prove as worthy, brave and resourceful as your brother. Which reminds me – is he here? I need to talk to him.”

“He is over there,” the lady who had remained silent so far said swiftly, pointing to where Boromir stood talking to Walrufa and some of her friends whose faces glowed scarlet in the light of the many candles in the hall.

“Hm, he does look busy, does he not?” Tarannon mused, and smirked mischievously. “On the other hand he might welcome an interruption.” Turning to the lady, he said: “You will give the young man his present, I trust?”

And to Faramir he said. “She chose it. Ask me not what made her think that you would like it. I wanted to give you something decent, you know, something that befits a warrior, but she ... books is all she can think of, it seems.” With that he turned and strode off.

Faramir glowered after him, and wished for something in his reach to cast. Something hard. His anger must have shown in his face, for the lady stepped closer to him and said in a low voice: “He is not worth your wrath, and you know that well. Try not to think about him. It would only spoil the evening.”

“He has no right to talk about you so,” Faramir said fiercely without taking his eyes off Tarannon's back.

“No, he has not,” the lady replied calmly while lightly putting a hand to his shoulder and turning him around so that he had to look at her. “But you will not change him. So just try and forget him.”

“How can I?” Faramir muttered while looking into her eyes.

Cynara

“Well, I'm not so interesting, myself. I grew up, with Visilya and my parents, in a small cottage on the edges of the Golden Wood. My father taught me my sword and fighting skills, and my mother taught me magic. She was very good at it, much better than I. I'm afraid that it's a waning art, magic is. Well, we lived with our parents until they...died, and Visilya and I went our separate ways. I gained battle experience after that. Well, that's really all. Not very interesting, I'm afraid, but that's it!” Aliya smiled trustingly up at Maradir.

Khorazir

After Faramir's last words a moment of awkward silence had developed as the two looked at each other. At length the lady stirred, and raised a parcel she had brought with her.

"Perhaps you would indeed have preferred "something decent", she said with a smile, mocking Tarannon's voice as she quoted him, "but I deem I know you better than he does." She handed him the parcel. "Congratulations to your birthday, Faramir," she said gently as their hands very briefly met.

Faramir smiled also. "Thank you, Lindórië." He started to unwrap the parcel. It contained a large newly-bound book. On the black cover was a device of three white jewels. He looked at the lady surprisedly. "The whole *Quenta Silmarillion*?" he asked.

"Some stories are not in their long version, but it gives you a good overview over the First Age. Moreover it will help you to improve your Quenya," she added with a slight grin.

Faramir opened the book, and saw that it was indeed all written in this tongue, and moreover in a very ancient mode of Tengwar. "Oh dear," he muttered, and then grinned also as his eyes met Lindórië's. "I fear I shall need help reading this one," he said.

"Well, you know where you can find me," she said lightly, but there was a strange, grave sub-tone to her voice. Again they exchanged a long glance, but this time it was Faramir who broke the silence. "Actually I had not reckoned with you attending the feast. It was quite a surprise seeing you – and him," he added with a dark glance in Tarannon's direction.

"To be honest, I had not wanted to come – not alone, anyway. It might have looked ... strange. But then Tarannon returned earlier than expected, and for some reason he was more than eager to attend the feast. Well, and thus I changed my mind and decided to accompany him."

"I am glad you did," Faramir said softly.

"So am I," she said. "We see each other so seldom, now that you are busy in Ithilien and elsewhere. But on the other hand ... perhaps 'tis better this way."

Faramir cast a glance around the hall, realising that some people were watching them more or less intently. He nodded reluctantly. "Aye, perhaps it is indeed."

Canamarth

"Well, I guess we then will have to make this evening more interesting," Maradir replied with a smile on his lips. "We shouldn't always have a boring life." With that he drew Aliya a little closer.

Khorazir

Having fetched two goblets of wine, Túrin returned to Visilya, and handed one to her. Then he looked around for his friends. He noticed Maradir and Aliya not far off – and at a second glance realised that Maradir had put his arm around Aliya's waist. Túrin grinned to himself, and offered his arm to Visilya again, which she took. "Shall we go over to them? I guess we both need a little rest before we start another dance – if you still like to, of course. But there doesn't seem much else to do, unless we start observing the people and listening to their talk. You learn many interesting things by doing so, I can tell you – not that I'm that keen on gossip. But from time to time it's really fun to pick up a few things that are not talked about so openly."

gladrieltook

Visilya chuckled. "The Captian of the Secret Gaurd knows every trick in the book about eves-dropping and spying. It's the only way to stay ready. Plus, it comes in handy during times like these." She nodded towards Falastur and his wife, with a strange look on her face.

Khorazir

"Well," Túrin said with a grin, "perhaps you can teach me one day how to eavesdrop properly. And as for those," he said, giving the Pelargir gentry a contemptuous glance, "I wouldn't worry about them. They're not worth wasting any thought on them."

They had reached Maradir and Aliya by now. Túrin's grin broadened. "Hope we're not interrupting," he said mischievously.

Meanwhile Faramir was experiencing an unwelcome interruption indeed. For as he and Lindórie were just exchanging a few words about how they had fared since they had last seen each other, he suddenly felt that they were being watched. Looking around furtively, he noticed that Denethor was watching them keenly. Lindórië, apparently, had realised it too.

"He is a very observant man, your father," she said.

"Too much so, I fear," Faramir said gloomily.

She only smiled, then nodded to Denethor to come over. So he did. His eyes mostly resting on his son, he slowly approached them.

"Hail, Lord Steward," Lindórië said as he had reached them. "'tis long since we last met."

"Aye," Denethor said, with a last keen glance at Faramir, "it is indeed, Lady Lindórië. And I am surprised to see you here – and your husband. I trust you are well?"

"I cannot complain," she answered, "although times are dark."

"They are indeed. Most likely you heard about what befell in the City yesterday?"

She nodded. "But we should not speak of that now. Faramir has just told me that the campaign in Ithilien is going rather well so far."

Denethor gave him a sharp glance. "He should not disclose these things to outsiders, as he knows well."

Lindórie laughed. "Outsiders? You do not really consider me an outsider, do you, Denethor?"

The Steward looked at her, and suddenly he lowered his gaze, and even smiled slightly – which astounded Faramir, as it had been long since he had last seen his father smile. "Nay, of course not."

gladrieltook

"I hope you're having fun..." Visilya nudged her sister with her elbow and grinned mischievously.

Canamarth

"I can only speak for myself and I can say that I do feel particularly entertained tonight. Say, Túrin, who's that woman Faramir and his father are talking to?"

Cynara

"I'm having a good time," said Aliya to Visilya. Let's hope it goes on for a while!"

Khorazir

Túrin looked around until his eyes found Faramir, Denethor and the lady, who was wearing a plain darkgreen dress, and had her auburn hair arranged in a long braid. A slender fillet of silver was set on her brow, but apart from that she did not wear any jewellery. He studied her for a brief time before answering Maradir's question: "If I'm not completely mistaken that's Lindórië of Lebennin. From what one hears she's one of Gondor's leading loremasters – or mistresses, or however you call that –, specialising in Elvenlore and Elvish languages. It's said that she speaks better Quenya than even Denethor. My mother knows her better. She's been to our house a few times. If I remember correctly she used to teach languages and history and stuff like that before she got married to Tarannon of Lebennin and left the City some years ago. Could be that she was Faramir's teacher also. After all, it looks as if they know each other – and quite well, too, if you ask me," he added with a slight grin.

Canamarth

"It definitely doesn't look as if he needed rescuing this time," Maradir remarked. "Can I get you something to drink, Aliya? And Visilya, of course?"

Cynara

"Sure, I'd love it if you would!" said Aliya, then directed a wink at Maradir. "Then maybe we could go out to the garden?"

gladrieltook

"Oh no you don't!" Visilya gave her sister a stern glare. "If I have to attend this little social party you do too."

"You could leave." Aliya suggested.

"Don't I wish! But mine is not a good position to be in. I'd much rather be trailing Dellow, and you know it. But I am required to attend this, and every other little party, without complaint. Plus, I've already made a fool of myself. How will it look if my baby sister goes wandering off with such a naive?" She grinned teasingly.

Khorazir

“Whoa, ladies,” Túrin said, raising his hands in a soothing gesture, “don’t start quarrelling, please. I thought you were having fun. Well, I for one don’t have a problem with the garden ... if Aliya wants to go there, that’s fine with me.” He did not even try to suppress the smirk that was spreading across his face. “And as for you, Visilya, I don’t think that it’ll be a problem if we also go and catch some fresh air – if you still care for my company, of course. Faramir looks very busy anyway –” the smirk spread even further “– I’m sure he’ll forgive us.”

Faramir, in the meantime, was not as busy as Túrin thought. He was standing a little forlornly next to Lindórië and his father, half listening to their conversation, which dwelled on recent events both in the City and in Lebennin, half lost in thought. Now and again he stole a glance at Lindórie when he thought his father did not notice.

At length Denethor turned to him, and with a question startled him out of his contemplations: “I trust you will see to it that the lady is entertained tonight – since her husband appears to be busy trying to convince the others that open war is the only possible way against the Shadow of the East,” he added a little mockingly, looking briefly in Tarannon’s direction, who was still talking agitatedly to Boromir. Moreover his brother Carandil and their father Calmacil had joined them. “You excuse me now?” With that he nodded at Lindórië, and giving his son a quick, piercing glance, he left.

Faramir looked after him, wondering slightly why his father should convey Lindórië to his care this evening. If anybody could notice what was going on between them, than it was Denethor. But either he did not mind indeed, or else he had plans of his own. Faramir suspected the latter.

“Well,” he said after a while in which they both had been silent, “would you care about a drink?”

She nodded. “I shall accompany you.”

Faramir was tempted to offer her his arm, but decided against it. Apparently she had noticed his internal struggle, for she smiled slightly. “Better not push our luck,” she said in a low voice.

Canamarth

Maradir had gone off to get drinks for the ladies when he saw Faramir and Lindórie approaching. He inclined his head towards his friend and bowed to the lady.

“Maradir at your service.”

Cynara

Aliya smirked back at Turin. “Come off it, arguing is fun! I don’t know, Faramir appears a little, well, forlorn over there. owever, I’m not rescuing him this time, even if he did want it.”

Khorazir

“Lindórië at yours,” she replied and did him a courtesy. “I have heard a lot about you already,” she continued. “’tis nice to finally meet you in person.”

Canamarth

“Delighted to meet you, too. But I can’t boast of having heard of you before...”

Khorazir

“Well,” Túrin said to Aliya without taking his eyes off the scene, “I think Maradir’s right. It really doesn’t look as if he needs rescuing this time. And now that Denethor has left them in peace ...” He fell silent, observing Maradir, Faramir and the lady attentively. He did not even try to suppress or hide his curiosity. At length he stirred and slightly shook his head, and said thoughtfully: “He has never mentioned her before, not even during our little conversation in the “Nose” last night, when he could have saved himself some mockery had he done so. I wonder why. And moreover I wonder what’s going on between them.” Suddenly he turned and looked at the two ladies. “Or am I imagining something here? I mean, on the other hand it’s not that obvious that there is indeed something, is it?”

Lindórië had smiled slightly at Maradir’s remark. “I guess this is not to be wondered at,” she said with a swift glance at Faramir, whose eyes seemed to try and avoid Maradir’s as his friend’s gaze followed Lindórië’s to him.

“I come very rarely to the City nowadays, despite the fact that I used to live here for many years,” she continued. “But if one is not seen in Minas Tirith’s noble society very often, people tend to delete one from their memories.” At this Faramir stirred almost imperceptibly, but enough for her to notice it, and smile. “Luckily there are exceptions to this rule.”

Cynara

Aliya gave out a small, polite smile, and considered the possible Faramir/Lindórië relationship.

gladrieltook

“And there are some, my lady, that serve the city with their lives, and are often forgotten, even presumed dead by the populus.” Visilya bowed. “Visilya, Captian of the Secret Gaurd of Minas Tirith, at your service. Tis an honor to finally meet you. I have heard of you even in the dark alleys and pathways of the city that few now about.”

Khorazir

“I would not have thought that I was that well known,” Lindórië said while smiling at Visilya. She studied her face, and then added: “I remember your father. He was a very valiant man, and his untimely death was a great loss to the Secret Guard. But I am sure that you are a worthy successor.”

Túrin and Aliya had also joined them. When Lindórië recognised him her smile broadened. “Well, young Túrin, I guess you remember me too, do you not? I, certainly, recall what happened the last time I visited your mother – which, alas, is already years ago.”

Túrin blushed at this and swiftly cast down his eyes. Everybody was looking at him curiously now .
“Come on now, Túrin,” Maradir said. “Out with it. What did you do?”

“Erm ...,” Túrin began uncomfortably, with a swift glance at Lindórië. “Well, if you must know ... my brother, he had this idea ... he said that it’s really funny if you put ink in people’s tea, because their teeth get all black – for days. And he said that I didn’t have the guts to try it on mother’s guests. I was thirteen then, and of course I had to try and prove that I wasn’t afraid”

“And did it work?” Faramir asked.

“It did indeed,” Lindórië said and laughed. “Have you never wondered why I wore this veil for days, even during lessons? ‘twas no sunburn. I could not open my mouth without people staring at me in horror.”

Túrin’s face reddened some more. “I know this comes rather late, but I’m really sorry for it.”

Lindórië smiled and clapped his shoulder. “Never mind. I am sure your mother saw to it that you were punished properly” – Túrin nodded fervently – “and moreover it was a really good tea. The ink must have added to its flavour.”

gladrieltook

Visilya grinned. “Turin, you rouge! And to think you’ve never told us!” She mockingly shook a finger at him, then turned to Lindórië. “Thank you, Lady, though I doubt I will ever become as great as my father was.” Her eyes widened. “OH! Faramir! I almost forgot! This is for you.” From her cloak she produced a fine coat of chain mail. “One of the best the Dwarves have to offer.” She handed the mail to Faramir. “Happy birthday my Lord.”

Khorazir

Faramir stared at the hauberk in utter surprise. Although it was so long that it would reach almost to his knees, it was marvellously light, and when he moved it slightly, the polished steel-rings caught the light of the many candles in the halls and glinted golden. He looked at Visilya.

“I know not what to say, Visilya,” he said at length. “This is a very precious gift – and moreover you were under no obligation to give me anything. But I thank you.” A smile spread across his face, and he leaned forward to embrace her (at which Túrin slightly frowned). “You know, as a matter of fact I did not have a decent mail-shirt of my own so far,” he said as he drew back again. “We rangers hardly wear them, and luckily there has not been a greater battle which I have been involved in where one needed real armour. But well, as things stand ... your gift might come in handy much sooner than we think.”

“Yes, it might,” Lindórië agreed softly, with a swift glance in the direction of her husband, who still stood talking eagerly to Boromir and a number of other nobles.

Cynara

Aliya shot a “look” at Turin and his frown, and smirked at him.

Canamarth

Maradir felt it was time to break the uncomfortable silence that ensued Lindórië’s remark. “Well, Aliya, here’s your drink. I think it’s time for a toast.”

gladrieltook

“Aye.” Visilya grinned. She hurried over to Denethor, whispered something to him and winked at the group. Denethor gave a rare smile, then nodded. Visilya stood up straight and cleared her throat. “Ladies and Gentlemen,” The pleasant

hum of voices silenced. "I would like to raise a toast to Lord Denethor, his two valiant sons, Boromir and especially Faramir, and to Minas Tirith and all of Gondor!" She raised her glass with the crowd as a rumble of "To Faramir" and "To Gondor" rolled through the hall.

Cynara

As the toast rumbled through the hall, and Aliya raised her glass with the rest, she gave a sideways glance at Maradir. Aliya had thought that to have a husband would be to have a chain-and-ball manacled to her ankle for the rest of her life. However, Maradir didn't seem to be that kind of man...there might be a possibility here in him. Then Aliya shook her head, clearing away those thoughts, and remembered that he would probably rather live among people, instead of trees. It wouldn't work. There could be no possibility.

Canamarth

Maradir felt Aliya giving him a thoughtful sideways glance. "A silver-piece for your thoughts, my lady."

Cynara

Aliya turned to Maradir, and a sad expression flashed through her eyes. But then it was so quickly replaced with a grin, that Maradir had trouble discerning whether he had really seen it. "My thoughts are my own, thanks!" she declared, and stuck out her tongue.

Khorazir

Faramir had felt quite touched by the toast. Usually it was not him who received much attention from the public, but Boromir only – a fact which most of the time he did not mourn. His whole life he had stood in Boromir's and his achievements' shadow, and could hardly imagine things to be different. Nevertheless he now enjoyed the praise of the people. Wondering at the same time, though, how much of that was really heartfelt and genuine. He cast a swift glance at Falastur and his supporters, who had raised their glasses only as much as not to appear opposed to the broad mass of people. Their expressions, although well guarded as usual, were plain to read for someone who knew a little about them and their policies, and moreover looked closely.

Faramir shook himself slightly to get rid of these thoughts. Looking about him, he noticed that Aliya was just teasing Maradir, and that Túrin had walked over to Visilya.

"Your friends are very nice," Lindórië said.

Faramir observed them a moment longer, then he nodded and smiled. "The best one could possibly wish for."

Canamarth

Maradir flashed a brilliant smile back at Aliya. He definitely liked her spirit.

Cynara

Aliya grinned in response, and whispered, “How much longer does this go on? I would love to retire somewhere, soon!”

Canamarth

Maradir raised an eyebrow questioningly. “Retire somewhere – with whom?”

The moment he had uttered the question that had immediately sprung to his mind, he wished he hadn’t said it. That was the kind of conversation Túrin might lead with the girls that he usually met at such parties. But there was no taking it back now.

Khorazir

Túrin had walked over to Visilya. “Well,” he said after watching her for a moment, “you look a little ... I wouldn’t call it bored, but it seems to me that you’re not really enjoying the feast. And I guess I know why,” he added with a dark glance in the direction of Falastur and his wife. Then he turned to her again. “Anyway, I was wondering if there’s somewhere else you’d like to go. I’m sure Faramir will forgive us when we leave – he looks rather busy to me,” he said with a grin as he briefly looked to Faramir and Lindórië who were deep in conversation, “and your sister looks as if she’s getting along splendidly with Maradir, and would take any interruption ill” – now his grin turned unmistakably mischievous. “So whatever you want, I’m at your service, lady,” he ended, with a gallant bow.

gladrieltook

Visilya grinned in return. “Anywhere but here!” She laughed, taking his arm and allowing herself to be swept from the hall.

Cynara

Aliya smiled coyly, and answered Maradir, “I can think of an especially handsome man...” she replied, while a corner of her mind scolded her. Aliya wondered what she was doing, she obviously hadn’t any intentions at all with this man!

Canamarth

“Me, too,” Maradir countered. “He’s called Faramir and is the Steward’s son.”

Khorazir

“Well, it seems Túrin got bored by the feast at last,” Faramir said with a smile when he saw his friend leave the hall, together with Visilya. “I only hope he will not get himself into trouble tonight. He is very good at it, believe me.”

“I believe you,” Lindórië said. “He can count himself fortunate that he has someone like you to look after him, someone who is always sensible and controlled.”

Faramir turned to her. “Do I detect a trace of mockery in your voice?”

“A trace, perhaps,” she answered, and smiled also. Then her face turned grave again as she studied him with a strange, long glance. “Honestly, Faramir, what are you doing here?” she said at length, in a low voice. “You could have much more fun tonight.” She nodded in the direction of the dancing couples, and a group of girls who were obviously discussing who of the young men present was the most handsome. “Instead you are wasting your time and your affections on an old woman like me,” Lindórië ended.

“You are not old,” Faramir returned. “And we have had this discussion before, remember?”

She cast down her eyes and slightly shook her head. “I had hoped you had come to your senses by now.”

“Perhaps I do not want to do so.”

“I feared this would be the case,” she said. Then she raised her eyes, and suddenly she smiled warmly. Glancing around furtively, she waited until no one looked in their direction, reached out and gently ran a hand down his cheek and throat. Then she withdrew her hand swiftly, and stepped back a little.

“We must both be out of our minds,” she murmured.

Cynara

Aliya glanced at Faramir, then back at Maradir, and laughed warmly at him. “I think that Faramir may have a problem or two of his own, right now,” she chuckled, then finished, “and I’d simply die before interfering.” Taking a step closer to Maradir, she smiled again. “Besides, you’re much more handsome than some old Steward’s son!”

Canamarth

Maradir almost blushed. He definitely wasn’t used to situations like these.

“Uh, well, shall we be off then?” he asked with a shy smile, offering Aliya his arm and nodding towards the door.

Khorazir

Faramir had relished her touch, but was also aware of the danger a situation like this bore. „Yes, indeed,” he replied to her last words, and also looked around furtively. Two things he noticed: firstly that Maradir and Aliya were making for the doors, and secondly that Tarannon was approaching them. Lindórië beheld him, too, and her smile faded somewhat.

„Well, this seems to be the end of our little ... conversation,” she said quietly.

Faramir cast down his eyes and nodded slightly. Then he looked at her again. „How long are you going to stay in the City?” he asked.

„Only until tomorrow, I am afraid.” Catching his rather dejected look, she added: „But hopefully I shall manage to spend some time here in Lotesse. I have to do research in the library, and then Tarannon will most likely be gone on one of those military missions he enjoys so much.”

„In Lotessë I will be back in Ithilien,” Faramir said.

There was a moment of silence. „’tis back to letters, then,” she said at length.

„So it seems,” he agreed, and then fell silent, for Tarannon had drawn close enough to overhear their conversation.

„Well, well, it proved really a good decision to come here tonight, do you not think so, dear?” he said jovially as he joined them.

Lindórië gave Faramir a swift glance. „Definitely,” she said.

Tarannon looked at him, too. „Why do you not join us, Faramir? I am sure you are also interested in the plans I have been discussing with your brother and others? And Lindórië, Falastur’s wife asked me to tell you that she wants to talk to you. She is over there.” He pointed.

„I shall go and meet her,” Lindórië said, looking not very pleased about it to Faramir’s eyes. He himself let Tarannon escort him to the group of men who were making daring plans concerning the future of the realm. But he hardly listened to their talk, being lost in thought. Now and again he stole a glance at Lindórië, her words echoing in his mind: „You are wasting your time and your affections on an old woman like me.” But he came to the decision that neither was wasted. Things were just a little more difficult for them than for others. His thoughts turned to his friends, and instantly he had to smile. Most likely they were having a good time this evening, and he was glad for them.

gladrieltook

Visilya was very much glad to be rid of the crowd, and relished this time. Never had she felt such bliss.

“Where do you propose we go from here?” Visilya smiled up at Turin, her eyes full of happiness that had been absent for so many long years.

Khorazir

“Well,” Túrin said and shrugged, “wherever you wish to go, really. I’m open for anything.” To himself he thought that if he had been here with some other girl he would have offered a much clearer proposition. But for some reason he felt that this was not appropriate with Visilya. He looked at her, waiting for her to say something, because he himself was at a loss – at which he wondered. Usually he was far from shy when it came to courting ladies.

gladrieltook

“Let’s just walk.” Visilya smiled, and leaned against Turin playfully.

Khorazir

“As you wish, mylady!” Túrin said with a smile, and putting an arm around her shoulders, drew her close to him.

Cynara

As Aliya headed up some stairs with Maradir, she wondered how to gracefully get out of this relationship with the minimum pain. Even as she snuggled up to MARadir, she thought of the best way to exit.

Early the next morning, before the sun, she would saddle up and get out of the city, and not look back.

gladrieltook

Visilya smiled to herself. She put her arm around Turin and allowed him to steer her through the lanes.

Khorazir

Together they left the Citadel and walked down into the City. There were not many people around, which perhaps was due to a rather chill wind that was whipping around the corners, and sighing in the alley between the houses. All the while they walked, Túrin wondered whither to go. For some reason their idea of joining a group of revellers in some tavern did not tickle his fancy. His thoughts turned to last night – which now seemed ages ago already – and the quiet moments he had spent with Visilya as they had simply sat side by side, and relished the other's company.

When they had almost reached the Great Gate, Túrin felt that he should say something. "Well ...," he began, "I guess it's rather too cold to go on walking around like this. But the night isn't very old yet. So if you know of a place to go ..."

gladrieltook

Turin and Visilya walk late into the night, finally retiring to a room in a quiet inn. They aren't seen til the next morning when they stumble unto the street, quite hung-over.

Cynara

Aliya crept out of bed before sunrise the next morning, and got dressed, as she listened closely to Maradir's breathing. It sounded quiet, so she figured him to be still asleep. Silently, she crept out the door, and continued to tiptoe down the hallway. When she got to the stairs, she began to run, and didn't stop until she reached the stable where her horse was held. Swiftly tacking up, Aliya led her beast to the yard, and mounted. She tried not to look back, but she couldn't help herself, and twisted in the saddle to see the building that held her love, the love that was impossible. She bit her lip, and turned away, allowing one crystal tear to trace its path down her face. But it was as though that one tear had opened a floodgate, and though she tried, she couldn't stop the tears that glided down. Spurring her horse into a slow trot, she made her way through the circles, to the final gate.

Khorazir

When Túrin left the inn with Visilya, he was in excellent mood (despite feeling somewhat hung-over). He had been quite surprised when she had agreed to accompany him to a room, but then things had taken a strange turn, and for some reason he was not sorry for it, not even disappointed – a fact which quite startled him, when he thought about it now. He grinned to himself when he thought of the marks their knives had left in the wooden wall when Visilya and he had tried to determine who was better at throwing them (she had won), and his grin became a half-suppressed chuckle when he recalled the three extremely stupid burglars whom they had watched from their window as they tried to secretly enter the neighbouring house, and failed about four times in the most spectacular ways, which involved two cats, a dog, and unstable roof and an infuriated old lady in her nightdress, and armed with pot of boiling water, until they were finally caught by the guard at about sunrise.

The fact that during watching the spectacle they had emptied about three bottles of strong red wine had surely added to the fun Túrin and Visilya had had that night. He was not sure yet if he should tell his friends about it – after all, he had a reputation to lose –, but on the other hand he knew that this night would remain stored in his memory as one of

the most funny and extraordinary in his life. And surely he would never forget Visilya, her laugh, and her hilarious comments on the burglars' illfated climbing attempts. He watched her as she walked beside him, and smiled warmly, knowing that here he had indeed met someone special.

Faramir, too, had not slept much that night. He had been more or less forced to remain long at the feast, and only when most of the guests had left he had been allowed to retire. But even then he had not found rest. His mind had been occupied with all that had happened during the last two days, and the night inbetween, and of course with contemplations on Lindórië, and their impossible relationship.

The sun had not yet risen when he got up, dressed in warm garments and a thick cloak, and walked down to the stables, feeling that he needed some fresh air to free his mind of all that troubled him. His new horse, Narothal, greeted him with a soft snort when he entered the warm darkness. Faramir unfasted the rope and let him out of the stables. The horse was too young yet to be ridden, but Faramir thought it a good idea to move him, and make him accustomed to his company. Moreover he believed that a long walk in the cold nightair would do them both good. Thus he led him down the long street that ended at the Great Gate, the steed's hoofs echoing loudly on the flagstones. The guards let him pass after a short discussion about the necessity of the undertaking, and Faramir left the city. In a fenced meadow studded with apple-trees but now in winter devoid of cattle he let Narothal run freely for a while, until he caught him again. Just when the sun sent her first golden beams over the mountains of the Ephel Duath beyond Anduin, he returned to the City. When he approached the Gate, he saw that a horseman had just passed it. The rider looked familiar.

Cynara

Aliya saw a figure coming towards her, and, squinting a little, she recognized it as Faramir. Quickly, she turned her tear-stained face away, trying to hide her identity, ineffectively, she knew.

Khorazir

As Faramir came closer, he recognised her as well. He also noticed that her horse was equipped for a longer journey, and that as soon as she had seen him, she had drawn a hood over her head as if to hide her face. He slowed his pace, unsure if to approach her, and what to say. She must have her reasons for leaving so approply. But then he made up his mind, and went over to her. She was definitely trying to conceal her face from him, he realised, but nevertheless he had seen the marks of tears on her face, and perceived that she was deeply troubled.

For a moment he was tempted to inquire about the reason for her sadness, but then he thought he knew. He felt sorry for Maradir, who most likely was sleeping peacefully still, and would wake to a sad surprise this morning, and sorry for Aliya as well, for although she obviously had deemed this step necessary, the decision to make it had been far from easy for her. Faramir felt that he should say something. Just to stand here and gaze at her seemed stupid somehow. But he could not think of anything appropriate. Moreover he sensed that they understood each other without words.

gladrieltook

Visilya gently leaned against Turin as they walked. She, too, was feeling that last-night had been the best of her life. She almost didn't notice where they were walking. They nearly ran into Faramir, who was watching someone ride out through the gates. She recognized the long hair, the noble manner the rider held herself. "So she's leaving? I knew she wouldn't stay long. Never liked the city..." Visilya commented quietly. Then she added ominously, "I have a feeling that I will not see my young sister again."

Turin and Faramir were startled by the grim expression that had just emerged from the mirth-filled one. But it soon

disappeared, a small smile moving into place.

She would keep the past two nights' event close to her heart, and she'd never forget the way Turin laughed, how he had stroked her hair so lovingly, and held her close. It was strange; to be loved so, and to be able to return that love so willingly. She smiled again and was lost into the warmth of the new sunlight.

Khorazir

Faramir had been quite startled by the sudden appearance of Visilya and Túrin -- both of whom looked thoroughly happy. His whole attention had been bent on Aliya, and the tortured expression in her eyes. He had just made up his mind to address her, when he heard Visilya's quiet comment. For some reason he, too, had the feeling that he would not see Aliya again.

"Where's Maradir?" he heard Túrin whisper to him. "Shouldn't he be here to wave her farewell instead of us?"

"It looks as if she prefers him not to," Faramir replied quietly. "But nevertheless someone should fetch him. For now it may make parting more painful and difficult if they see each other once more, but perhaps one day they will be grateful that they did. At least he should know that she is leaving."

"I'll run like the wind!" Túrin said, and dashed off.

Cynara

Aliya, although she didn't want to be seen crying, turned around, just outside the gates. She racked her mind for something, anything, to say to her sister and Faramir, but she couldn't. The streams of tears broadened slowly, unbroken, and the look in her eyes suggested that it was her tortured soul coming through those tears. Aliya cleared her throat hoarsely, and whispered, "Goodbye." to the two who were silently watching.

Khorazir

Faramir gave the rope on which he had been leading Narothal to Visilya, and stepped forward. For a moment he hesitated again, searching for words, then he said quietly: "Aliya, do you not think that 'twould be better to wait for Maradir? It may not be a wise decision at the moment, and seeing him again might increase the pain, but ..." again he searched for words "... it ... might be better in the long run."

Cynara

Aliya closed her eyes and bit her lip. It was not twenty minutes since she had left his side, and already she desperately ached for Maradir. But what she would do if she saw Maradir, Aliya could not tell. It would likely weaken her resolve to leave. She called up the iron in the deep of her soul. Opening her eyes, she snapped her face into a look of ice-cold impassivity. "No!" she said harshly "I do not wish to see Maradir.". But her screaming eyes belied her words.

Khorazir

Faramir held her gaze, looking at her keenly. "You must ride fast, then," he said gravely after a moment of silence. "For Maradir will most likely try what lies in his power to catch up with you."

Canamarth

Maradir woke with a start just before someone knocked on the door. He had had a most singular dream... Then the remembrance of last night came to him and a smile spread over his face. He realized he was alone in his bed in the alcove and got up to greet Aliya in the other room – as he was sure she would be waiting there for him, maybe with a nice breakfast. The knock was repeated, this time rather loud and impatient.

“I’m coming,” Maradir muttered as he got into his trousers. He ruffled his long blonde hair and stifled a yawn when he opened the door to admit a concerned looking Turin.

“What is it?” Maradir asked.

“I think you should come with me, Maradir.”

“Where... What... Why? I haven’t even properly woken up yet.”

“If you want to see Aliya again, you must hurry!”

“But she’s...” Maradir turned around and took a look around. He ran back into the small back chamber and looked there as well but he could neither find Aliya nor any of her belongings. Concern and fear for her suddenly welled up in him. He was suddenly wide awake and started dressing in a hurry.

“What happened? Is she all right?”

Turin was a little at a loss. “No, she’s all right – I mean, she’s not injured or anything but...”

“What?” Maradir imperiously snapped while fastening his sword belt.

“I think you should just follow me.” Turin went out into the street and waited for Maradir who grabbed his mantle and closed the door behind him.

Cynara

Aliya chewed her lip, then rode over to Visilya. Leaning down in the saddle, she hugged her hard, and whispered, “Take care of yourself, sister!” through her tears. Then, she wheeled her horse around, and made off at a slow canter.

Khorazir

Faramir looked after her for a moment, then he took Narothal’s rope from Visilya again and hurried over to the guards at the Gate. Tirion was on duty, and recognised the Steward’s son.

“Take this horse in custody for a short while, please,” Faramir said. “And I need another immediately, saddled.”

Tirion bowed and commanded one of his men to saddle one of the horses that were stabled close to the gate for the use of errand-riders. When the steed was ready Faramir swiftly set the stirrups to the right length for Maradir (who was roughly as tall as himself) and then returned to the Gate.

Canamarth

Maradir could not get a word more out of Turin till they reached the gate. There he found Visilya looking somehow sad and Faramir who just seemed to have arrived with a horse.

Maradir frowned at their sombre looks. "Now what's going on here? And where's Aliya?"

Khorazir

"She left," Faramir said, throwing the horses' reins to Maradir. "She would not wait for you, claiming that she did not want to see you. But her eyes plainly betrayed her words. She rode off northwards," he ended, and stepped back a little.

Canamarth

Maradir took the reins and frowned back at Faramir. Then he mounted slowly.

"But what if she really doesn't want to see me again?" he muttered while gazing northward.

"Oh, will you go now?" Turin sighed and gave the horse a slap so that it reared and then galloped off through the gate.

Khorazir

Túrin turned to Visilya and Faramir. "He'll probably hate me for this, and Aliya too, but I couldn't bear this anymore. Hope they get things sorted out."

Faramir looked after his friend as he vanished in the distance. "So do I," he said quietly.

Cynara

Aliya slowed her horse and turned, to have a last look at the White Tower. But through her tears, she thought she saw something else...

She dashed her tears with the back of her hand, and saw Maradir, cantering after her like the wind. Wheeling her horse, she tried to put it to a burst of speed, but her hands weren't cooperating with her brain. Finally, when Maradir was nearly up with her, she booted the horse so hard that it couldn't ignore the clear signal, and took off with a surprised snort.

Canamarth

Maradir soon saw Aliya in the distance. She travelled at a slow canter but soon stopped and turned around as if to throw a last glance on Minas Tirith. When she realized that someone was galloping towards her and who it was she seemed to hesitate for a moment, then spurred her horse and dashed off.

Maradir was now in shouting distance and still gaining on her.

“Aliya, you better rein in now or I’ll follow you to wherever you’re bound. Just tell me why you had to leave so suddenly and I will let you go.”

Cynara

Aliya heard, and reined in. “I leave because...because I cannot stay!” she shouted back.

Canamarth

“If that is the only reason you can give, I shall be satisfied,” Maradir answered coldly. A grave look had come over his face. He tried to stay calm and distant but his eyes betrayed how difficult this was for him. He wanted to embrace Aliya, give her a farewell kiss if she really had to go. “I want you to take this,” he said and unsheathed a plain dagger he wore on his belt. “It’s the only thing my stepfather ever gave me. It carries both fond and dark memories for me. I think it would be fitting as a remembrance of me.”

Cynara

Aliya choked a little over her tears, and gently tucked the dagger into her belt. “I’ll...I’ll miss you, Maradir,” She said softly, so soft that he nearly didn’t hear it. “I...I would like to stay here, but...I just can’t. I belong out where there’s trees, and grass, and silence. I can’t stand the City.” She looked up at him, begging with tear-filled eyes to understand.

Canamarth

“You must go where your heart leads you,” Maradir replied. “But I want you to remember: I love you with my life and strength.” With that he positioned his horse alongside hers and wiped her tears away with a caress. “Farewell, my love.”

Cynara

Aliya smiled tremulously and pulled Maradir into a long kiss. When the horses began to fidget too much to continue the embrace, Aliya pulled away, and smiled, much more this time. “I know I’ll never love another, Maradir, my love.” she said, and something in her eyes said that this was no idle promise. “And now, goodbye.”

With that, Aliya rode away, forever.

gladrieltook

Visilya could take it no longer. She turned away and strode slowly back to the Gaurd Barracks, where she let flow the tide of tears that she had held back for so long.

Canamarth

Maradir remained where he was till he could not see Aliya anymore. Then he slowly turned his horse and came trotting back in through the gate where Faramir and Túrin were still milling about. He rode past them without halting and without bestowing a glance on them. He rode up to the Citadel to see his captain. He needed some work to occupy his mind.

The next day he was sent away on an errand into the South but that is a different story and will be told some other time.

The End