Flower of Ice and Steel
by AnnaFan

Summary

"When I first looked on her and perceived her unhappiness, it seemed to me that I saw a white flower standing straight and proud, shapely as a lily, and yet knew that it was hard, as if wrought by elf-wrights out of steel. Or was it, maybe, a frost that had turned its sap to ice, and so it stood, bitter-sweet, still fair to see, but stricken, soon to fall and die? " (Return of the King : The Houses of Healing).

Éowyn and Faramir's meeting and courtship in the Houses of Healing, and their relationship up to their marriage and arrival in Ithilien. Starts mainly bookverse, with occasional movie-verse references, then goes off into the post-war world. Now complete.

Notes
See the end of the work for notes.
To sleep, per chance to dream.

Béma, my shield arm aches. It is still splinted. To be honest, I do not mind the physical pain. It keeps me anchored, distracts me from the waking nightmare of my memories. It is the mental pain that I cannot bear.

It is two days since I woke from fevered dreams, dreams in which my whole body was consumed with agony, and my mind tortured to the depths of my soul. I was dragged back from a living death by the voice of my brother, Éomer, calling to me, grief stricken. And by the hands of Aragorn, the heir of Isildur.

What can I say of these two men? My brother, childhood companion and friend, who shared my grief and offered me comfort on the death of our parents, when we were but children. My ally through the darkest days when Grìma Wormtongue, Saruman's spy, held sway over Edoras and poisoned our Uncle's mind. And Aragorn, the Ranger from the North, such a recent part of my life, but so dear to me in such a short time. Aragorn, who brought me back from the brink of death. Aragorn, who offered me kindness and friendship. Yet to my shame, I spurned his kindness and friendship, for I wanted only his love. And the knowledge that I could not have his love drove me to embrace death in battle, but death eluded me. I came close, and would have rode on to further battles, except that now I am rendered helpless by my injuries.

Éomer and Aragorn have gone to war once more, and this time I have not been able to follow them. They have gone to certain death, and I cannot join them. I do not expect to see them again. We who are left can only count the days until their defeat, and the destruction of our world, crushed beneath the tide of the oncoming hordes of the Dark Lord.

All I can do is to lie and think on the events that led me here. There was a time in Edoras when I found release at last from the defiling attentions of Wormtongue, and the constant fear that one day he would take me by force. I found release in the restoration of my beloved Uncle, Théoden Cyning, to his right mind. And I found relief in the brief respite from the worries of my life, the agony of losing Théodred, my kinsman, cousin, almost as dear to me as my brother.

As we gathered arms and armour for the journey to Helm's Deep, Aragorn had come upon me practising with my sword, and had parried my strokes with his dagger. In the moment we stood, blades locked, I looked into his eyes, and I teetered on the brink, just in balance, but ready to fall at any moment. And on the journey, as we travelled side by side, deep in conversation, his ready wit brought laughter to my lips for the first time I could remember in months, perhaps even years. Then I fell over the brink, lost in a tide of feelings for him that I could not control.

For two days I had his company. His eyes were kind and full of humour, even in those dark times. His conversation fascinated me, comforted me, lightened my burden. He told me tales of chivalry, of high renown won in battle, of brave deeds, tales from the Riddermark in earlier times, from Gondor, dark tales from the ancient North, from long-forgotten Westermesse. He told marvellous, magical tales of elves, and tales of the courage and stalwartness of dwarves. For two evenings I had gentle memories of him. I would replay our conversations, remembering his words and the expressions that had passed his face as he talked. I allowed myself daydreams of what might be to come to lull me to sleep. Daydreams of conversation which turned from easy friendship to something more. Daydreams of gentle embraces, and imagined kisses, soft and innocent, of protestations of love.

And in the two nights, I dreamed dreams that were anything but innocent. Dreams of longing and desire. Kisses which were not soft, but hard and hot and needy, of tongues slipping inside mouths, of the taste of each other. Dreams of the feel of his hands, roughened from years of wielding a sword,
hands which tangled in my hair, sought out my skin under my clothes. Dreams where his lips followed his hands, leaving a silken trail of heat and desire over my skin. Dreams of naked, tangled limbs and bodies, covered in a sheen of sweat, melting into one and fracturing, shattering into millions of fragments of pure rapture. In the mornings I would wake, and struggle to keep the blush from my cheeks as I walked beside him, talked to him. And after these dreams, as I talked, I fought to keep control of myself, fought to damp down the feelings of desire which coiled deep inside me. Desire which no maiden should feel, no daughter of the line of kings should allow.

But though young and a maiden, I was not naïve. No woman of the Riddermark, no matter how young, could be ignorant of the mechanics of begetting children, surrounded as we were by the horses we bred. I was four and twenty, and most women my age would already have been married and borne their first child. At seventeen I had fancied myself in love with one of Théoden Cyning's guard, a rider in his Royal Eored. But I had done nothing more than exchange kisses with him. Éomer and Théodred had seen to that. The irony of the situation did not escape me, even at seventeen. They guarded my honour with unceasing vigilance, while they themselves wenched their way round both East and West Fold.

By twenty, my Uncle the King should have been looking for suitors for me from among the young sons of his Lords and Marshals. It is not the way of the Riddermark to arrange women's marriages, so I would have been allowed to choose a man I found kind and comely from among them. But then Gríma Wormtongue rose to power within Théoden Cyning's council, by the simple expedient of ensuring his rivals met with unfortunate accidents or were subject to orc ambushes. He cast his evil spell over the King, and turned his evil, lustful eyes towards me. Seeking me for himself, he got Théoden to veto any suitor who might have been considered appropriate. As his attentions became more marked, he allowed himself more and more liberties with my person, his wandering hands marauding, grabbing parts of my body in passing. I found myself without allies or protectors at court. As Théoden's mind disintegrated, I spiralled further and further into utter despair. There seemed nothing I could do to stem the inevitable. Wormtongue would get his way, and the fact that it was against my will, that everything about him disgusted me, that his pawing hands turned my stomach, all this would only add spice to the eventual rape as far as he was concerned.

At my wits' end, I pleaded with Théodred to bed me. If I had to be defiled by Saruman's worm, at least I could lose my maidenhood in a manner of my choosing. But Théodred would not. He said it would debase me and him, a coupling without desire or passion, born of desperation. And furthermore, he was adamant that such a coupling would border on incestuous, because we had been brought up together and he thought me as much his sister as his cousin. A mere week later, Théodred was dead, slain in an orc raid, a raid almost certainly orchestrated by Gríma. The Worm even tried to corner me as I laid out my cousin's body ready for his burial. Only Éomer's timely arrival saved me. And then Grima contrived to persuade Théoden Cyning to banish Éomer from Meduseld, accusing him of warmongering. My fate seemed sealed.

But the fates had not ceased toying with me. They gave me brief respite, only to dash my brief happiness on new shoals. First, Aragorn and his comrades arrived in the company of the Grey Pilgrim. Gandalf restored Theod to his right mind and cast Wormtongue from Edoras. If I am honest, my thoughts turned to Aragorn almost from the minute I first saw him, seeing him as my rescuer in my darkest hour. Small wonder then that I fell in love with him. And I had my two days of happiness on the journey to Helm's Deep. But then in one fateful instant, I asked him about the jewel he wore round his neck, and all my hopes crumbled to dust. His face lit from within by love, his eyes reflecting the memory of her beauty and wisdom, he told me of Arwen Undomiel. How could I, a mere mortal, compete with an Elf Maiden said to be the image of her foremother, Luthien Tinuviel, the fairest child of Eru Illuvitar ever to walk the paths of Middle Earth? Aragorn took the paths of the dead, and I, with no hope left to me, took the path I hoped would lead to my death.
But I live, still. And so I lie in this narrow bed, in a small, cell, staring at the ceiling. A single candle guttersthe shelf beside the bed, but I cannot bring myself to blow it out. I am of the proud line of the kings of the Riddermark, but I fear the shadows of night. Aragorn drew me back from the brink, but the black breath still lingers over me like an evil miasma. Yet at the same time, I am tired, so very tired. I crave sleep with every fibre, every sinew in my body. But my mind resists what my body desires. To sleep is to dream, and my dreams cause more pain than my physical injuries, more pain than my memories of terror and lost kin, more pain even than the knowledge that Aragorn does not love me. And more than pain, they terrify me. I, who slew the Witch King in my waking life, cannot slay him in my dreams. My dreams are a place of terror beyond imagining.

I cannot sleep, nor can I bear to lie in darkness. But whether I will it or not, sleep claims me, and my thoughts slip from the grasp of my conscious mind.

I find myself back in Edoras. I have found my sword, wrapped in oiled silk within a carved chest. With a shimmering, musical sound, it sings to me as I draw it from its sheath. It feels heavy in my hands, but my wrists remember the strength they had when I used to spar with Théodred on the practice grounds. I swing the sword, bringing it through the patterns the swordsmaster used to make us execute, day after day, week after week. A figure of eight, controlling the blade with both wrists, a parry, swivel on the ball of my foot, maintain my guard as I turn, another pass as I step forward onto my left foot, tracing out an arc with the point as I return the blade to its position guarding my body, before raising it to parry an imaginary enemy. But the percussive sound of metal on metal is all too real. I am drawn from my trance like state to find Aragorn's dagger blocking the movement of my blade, his grey eyes fixed intently on mine.

In the dream we are not in the public space of the Golden Hall, surrounded by others gathering their weapons and preparing their armour. We are sparring in private, in my chamber. And Aragorn does not drop his blade after our eyes have met. Instead he keeps it in place, then forces me onto the back foot. With another wordless song of steel, the blades slide past one another until the hilts lock together, our knuckles grazing against one another. I take another step backwards. Aragorn is taller and stronger, and forces me to retreat until my back is against the wall. All the time, his eyes never leave mine. They are intent, unblinking, yet strangely without emotion. I breathe heavily, as though the fight has been a vigorous one, but I know that it is his proximity that makes my breath labour. He brings his other hand up to mine, and closes it round my sword hand. He lets the dagger fall to the flag stones, then uses his right hand to uncurl my fingers from round the hilt. With a sound like a clanging cymbal, my blade falls to the stone floor. He laces his fingers through mine and presses my hands to the wall at either side of us.

Still his gaze holds mine. He releases my left hand, and his fingers ghost over the surface of my dress, moving upwards to my face. They trace slowly over my cheek, then along the line of my jaw. I can feel the callouses from years of battle and hardship. His fingertips trail down the side of my neck, along my shoulder, then back along my collar bone. It is strange, but in this dream I feel no desire. There is a stark contrast to my earlier dreams of passion, which somehow linger as memories in the background. Even within the dream, this contrast puzzles me. I am oddly detached from my body. My mind seems to float free from emotion, somewhere above the scene, a dispassionate observer even as his fingers reach the laces on my bodice and start to unlace it. This dream has nothing of the heat and desire of those earlier ones. Yet its very coldness seems somehow more sinful, more sordid than any of the naked wanton ecstasy of those earlier products of my fevered subconscious.

His hand caresses my skin along the top of my loosened bodice, then eases the fabric down to release my breast, fingers teasing my nipple till it hardens. But even as I gasp with the sensation, his features start to dissolve, like molten wax, or like smoke and flames dancing in a fire. They melt, then reform, and I am staring into the narrow, slit-like eyes of Grima Wormtongue. His hot, fetid breath wafts
across my face, strands of his greasy hair stick to my cheek, his sweating, filthy hands are everywhere, running across my body. I push at his chest, but worm that he is, he is still too strong. I cannot force him away. Bile rises in my throat and I retch uncontrollably.

And suddenly I am in the middle of Pelennor Fields. But I am not wearing my armour. I am wearing the same dress, laces undone, bodice slipping from my shoulders. I stand my ground, weapon raised, all the time aware of the skirts restricting my movement. The Witch King stands tall on a slight rise in the ground. His black robes flutter around his form, the hood cast forward, no sign of a face within. His dead steed lies crumpled behind him, leathery wings battered and torn.

My hair blows in the wind, strands whipping across my face. As I hold my sword, it shakes in my hand. My concentration is broken by the realisation that my breasts are still exposed. I try to pull my bodice back into place, but as soon as I let go to draw my sword, my sleeves slide back round my biceps, impeding my arm movements. The Wraith swings his morning star, bringing it crashing down towards me. I try to move, but the heavy folds of fabric encumbering my legs get in the way. I throw up my left arm to deflect the blow, but in the dream I have no shield. My arm is smashed beneath the weight of the iron ball and its viscious points, blood spurting bright and crimson from its shattered form. In a last desperate effort, as I feel my life blood ebb from my veins, I jab the sword towards the black void where the wraith's head should be.

As my sword point makes contact, the black hood falls back, the dark mists obscuring the face evaporate, and the features of the creature I have killed become visible. A straight nose, a well defined jaw, covered in a short beard, blue-grey eyes, dark hair curling to touch his collar. It takes me moments to make sense of what I am seeing, then I realise that I have driven my sword into Aragorn's throat.
The Steward of the City

“And she looked at him and saw the grave tenderness in his eyes, and yet knew, for she was bred among men of war, that here was one whom no Rider of the Mark would outmatch in battle.”
(Return of the King: The Steward and the King).

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“Aragorn.” I try to cry out, but no sound comes.

I cannot move. I know I am awake, but it feels as if a heavy weight is forcing me down onto the bed. I try to move my legs, but they are lifeless, inert. The candle has gone out, and I cannot see. It feels as though the darkness is a thick, suffocating blanket, pressing over my face. I struggle to breathe, my breath coming in rapid, shallow gasps.

Gradually, the panic subsides, though not the chill fear that invades me. My legs are tangled in the sheets. My shift is soaked with sweat, and I shiver, despite the stuffiness of the room. I toss and turn, it seems for hours, until the first weak grey light, the harbinger of dawn, filters through the window. At last, comforted by the return of day, I manage to sleep once more, without dreams.

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“My lady.” I wake to feel a hand shaking my good shoulder gently. “I have brought your breakfast. It is the tenth hour of the day.” The maid has opened the curtains. I blink against the light streaming through the window. My eyes feel as though they are full of grit, the aftermath of my interrupted sleep. Reluctantly, I push myself into a sitting position, and swing my legs over the side of the bed.

“I have also brought hot water and a washing basin,” the maid says. “The healers have said you may rise, if you wish. I shall give you a few minutes, then come back to help you dress.” She places a towel over the chair. There is a bowl and jug of hot water on the small table beneath the high window, next to a tray with a simple breakfast. She bobs her head respectfully, then retreats through the door.

I stand, for the first time, and am taken aback at how weak my legs have become. I feel as thought they might give way underneath me at any moment. My head swims, and for a moment I think I may sink back onto the bed. Then the dizziness passes and I manage to take a few steps over to the table. The water makes a familiar splashing noise as I pour it into the bowl. I bend forward and rinse my face, then, very carefully, I ease my shift off. Even so, I gasp as it tugs at my left shoulder. I take the wash cloth and sponge as much of my body as my restricted range of movements allow. There is a tap at the door. I draw the towel round me.

“I have brought your dress.” It is the maid's voice, and I bid her enter. She has brought a clean shift, fine linen blouse, and a plain blue dress. She helps me to put the clothes on, then laces the dress up for me. Finally, she takes a square of cloth which she folds diagonally, then fixes my shield arm in a sling fastened about my neck.

“Please could you return after I have eaten? I need to visit the healers, but I am not sure of my way around,” I say. Then, as an afterthought, I add, “Also, could you find my riding clothes for me?”

“I will take you to the healers as soon as you have broken your fast, my lady. But I am not sure that I will be able to find your riding clothes. I fear they had to be cut from your body when you were brought here from the battle field.”
I try to hide my disappointment, and give the maid my thanks before she withdraws once more. Béma, how am I to ride to war in a skirt? Still, the first task is to persuade the healers that I am well enough to go. Time enough after that to track down some leggings and a tunic, and find my armour. Surely that will be intact. Then I must find the stables and Windfola. I hope he has been well looked after. Suddenly I feel a wave of sadness take me. A homesickness, a yearning for my lost kinsmen, for Théoden and Théodred. I long to find Windfola, and wrap my arms round his neck and bury my face in his mane. Horses are simple creatures; they make no demands, but they sense their rider's thoughts and feelings. He would comfort me, I know.

I sit at the table. Suddenly I realise how thirsty I am, and gulp down most of the cup of water. Then I tackle the bread and cheese. The bread is dry. The apple I save for last. It is wrinkled, the end of last Autumn's crop, carefully stored over the winter, but still sweet. A bit more water, and I am ready to stand once more. This time, I do not feel as dizzy, and walk to the door with reasonable steadiness. The maid is just outside.

She leads me down narrow stone corridors, winding their way through a maze of passages, until we pass through a doorway into a large hall. The hall is filled with camp beds, as far as the eye can see. There is a background hum of noise, of men moaning softly. No of agony as in the first hours after a battle. This is the constant hurt that sets in later, the days of steady, unrelenting pain that make the hours drag by. Here and there women in plain dresses, their hair tied up out of the way in scarves, flit from one bed to another. They offer water, sponge brows, change dressings. I see men who have lost limbs, men with bandages round their torsos, men with heads swathed in linen strips. Some have the dark hair typical of Gondor, others the blond hair that marks them out as my countrymen.

“We have stitched their wounds, but, alas, we have no more tincture to dress their wounds or poppy syrup to soothe their pain,” says a voice beside me. I turn to see a tall woman in a brown dress. She is in her middle years. Her eyes fix on me, a steady, thoughtful, intelligent look. “There is little we can do beyond making them comfortable, and praying that inflammation and fever does not take them.”

“I thank you, madam, for all you and the other ladies of this house have done for my countrymen, and those of your country who fought along side them,” I say. “You have undoubtedly saved many who would else be in the halls of our fathers.

“We have merely done our part as best we might,” she replied. “May I be of any service to you?”

“Madam, I must also thank you for your efforts in healing my wounds. But I am much improved, and wish now to be of service to my country once more. I would have you release me from your care, that I may follow my brother the King to the last battle against the darkness.”

“My lady,” she says, bowing her head slightly, “I have no doubt of your valour, nor of determination. But your shield arm is broken. Whatever the strength of your mind to embark upon this venture, it is not matched by the strength of your body.”

“I thank you for speaking so frankly. But nonetheless, I would still ride out, if I might be allowed.”

“It is not in my power to release you before your arm is healed. However, I will take you to the Warden of these houses. You may plead your case before him, though, in truth, I hope for the sake of your unhealed wounds that he will not be swayed.” Shaking her head almost imperceptibly, she leads me into a side room, where an elderly man stands at a bench, mixing potions. I try my best to put the same case to him that I have put to the woman, but he too is not to be swayed. In desperation, I plead instead for news.

“Are there no tidings of war? The women can tell me nothing.”
“There are no tidings, save that the Lords have ridden to Morgul Vale; and men say that the new captain out of the North is their chief,” the Warden says. He launches into a homily about the strange paradox offered by the existence of a warrior who can also heal wounds, and the evils of war in general. Béma, he is long-winded. Eventually in exasperation, I interrupt him.

“It needs but one foe to breed a war, not two, Master Warden. And those who have not swords can still die upon them. I should sooner choose to die in battle.”

The Warden looks at me. His face shows pity, which annoys me, but also I think a hint of admiration. I feel frustration welling up inside me. I cannot stand by and do nothing.

“Is there no deed to do? Who commands in this City?” I blurt out.

The warden mutters a few disconnected sentences, before saying “The Lord Faramir is by right the Steward of the City.”

“Where can I find him?” I demand. The Warden's answer takes me by surprise. Apparently, this Lord Faramir is also recovering from his wounds in the house of healing, and the Warden offers to take me to him.

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The Warden leads me through a low archway, shaded by bougainvillaea whose purple flowers make vivid splashes of colour against the grey stone walls. We walk into a courtyard garden. After two days in the featureless room, with only memories of death on the battlefield to occupy my mind, I am almost overcome by the sensations that assault me. The gentle splash of water in the fountain, the vivid green of the plants, the scents of the flowers, all seem preternaturally intense. The heat of the sun burns my face. My mind is caught in a whirl of impressions, and I feel a desperate urge to run back to the tiny cell, even though I have hated every moment of my confinement there. I take deep breaths and try to school my mind to focus on one thing at a time.

At the end of the gravel path in front of me is a tall man, with dark hair in loose curls touching his collar. He stands in front of the low wall at the end of the garden. Below the wall, the city falls in steps down to the outer walls. Beyond lie the flat grasslands stretching towards the river, the grasslands where Théoden fell. I catch glimpses of the Pelennor fields in my mind's eye, and I feel my body tense. I grit my teeth and force back the memories of the battlefield, of the stench of blood and death, the reek of fear and loosened bowels. I turn my attention instead to the man before me.

“My Lord,” the Warden says. The man turns. I am aware of grey eyes, assessing me. His gaze is shrewd; the sort of captain who can take the measure of a man under his command within moments. But it also holds something I do not want. I can see the pity written across his face, and I despise it. I want no man's pity. But his gaze continues, uninterrupted by my thoughts. I am seized with a strange feeling that he sees instantly my sadness, as if he knows of the tangled sheets and night terrors. And it frightens me that he can see so much. I am so wrong-footed by his keen gaze that I almost miss the Warden's words, introducing me. I hear him say that I am not content, and that I wish to speak to the Steward. Somehow, his tone manages to make me sound like some sort of petulant, demanding court beauty, stamping her foot when she feels not enough attention is being paid to her. To my surprise, I feel an urgent need to correct that impression. Somehow I do not want this grave and shrewd man standing in front of me to think badly of me.

“Do not misunderstand him, lord. It is not lack of care that grieves me. No houses could be fairer, for
those who desire to be healed. But I cannot lie in sloth, idle, caged. I looked for death in battle. But I have not died, and battle still goes on.”

The Lord Faramir gives me another disturbingly appraising look, then signals for the Warden to go. He leaves, with a bow. The Lord's next words surprise me.

“What would you have me do, lady? I am also a prisoner of the healers.” Again, I see that look in his eyes. But now I realise it is not pity. It is a sort of tenderness, a sort of compassion. He too wishes to stand beside his comrades, to venture all on the last desperate throw of the die, even if, when the die is cast, both the wager and the world are lost. And I can see his strength too. He would not back down from any challenge, I realise, and he is forged of that tempered steel that makes the sort of leader that men will follow even when all is lost.

“What is it you wish of me,” he asks.

“That you persuade the Warden to release me from my confinement in these houses,” I say. My voice sounds cold and detached even to my own ears, but I am suddenly hit with a wave of doubt. Perhaps he will just think me childish and petulant. Instead he is patient as he tells me that he himself is still subject to the Warden's commands and is not prepared to over-rule the man in matters of healing.

“But I do not desire healing.” I find myself blurting out. My words come out in a rush, ill thought out, revealing far too much of myself to the man in front of me. I tell him, even as my mind tells me I should not, that I wish to follow Éomer to war, or better still, to follow Théoden's path to death in battle.

For the first time, his calm, thoughtful countenance is troubled. He appears shocked by the way I have openly stated I am willing to embrace death, but rapidly schools his features. His voice level, he appeals to my rationality. He tells me it is too late for me to follow them, even if I were strong enough. But then his expression slips again, allowing me to see a glimpse of pain to match my own.

He adds, not as an afterthought, but as if this is something he has been reflecting on for some time, “But death in battle may come to all of us yet. You will be better prepared to face it in your own manner, if while there is still time you do as the Healer commanded.”

He tells me that we must be patient. There is something about the way he phrases it, his words “You and I,” which tell me he too rails against his captivity.

The offer of pity which I thought I saw earlier moved me only to anger. But the offer of companionship in my suffering reaches me, undoes me. I struggle to hold back tears, hot and stinging. I manage to murmur only that my room does not face east. For the first time, Faramir smiles at me, a smile of gentleness and understanding, those shrewd eyes filled now with compassion. He offers to find me a room that faces east, and says that I will find him here in the garden, also looking out to the east. His next words surprise me, however.

“It would ease my care, if you would speak to me, or walk at whiles with me.”

I can feel myself blushing, but I manage to look him in the eyes, and, slightly surprised that I can be so bold, ask him why my presence would ease his cares.

He starts to say something, then appears to think better of it. He pauses for a while, as if deciding how, or indeed whether to put his thoughts into words.

“In such a dark hour, your fair company would comfort me and take my mind off the interminable
waiting we both must face,” he says, simply. “For you and I have both passed under the wings of the Shadow, and the same hand drew us back.”

“Alas, not me, lord. Shadow lies on me still.” I feel embarrassed by his words. I am not fair, I am soiled, rough, unmaidenly. I try to demur: “I am a shieldmaiden and my hand is ungentle.” Then, realising I must sound an ill-mannered ingrate, I manage to thank him for his invitation. I curtsey awkwardly, then take my leave.

It is only when I return to my room I realise how tired I am, tired to the bone. I lie on my bed and start to drift off to sleep. My last thoughts before I lose consciousness are to wonder what I could possibly have in common with the shrewd, sad man of Gondor, to wonder what topics we could possibly find to talk about. And then, for once, no dreams assail me.


“And he called to her, and she came down, and they walked on the grass or sat under a green tree together, now in silence, now in speech. And each day after they did likewise.” (Return of the King: The Steward and the King).

I sit in the garden, a book of poetry on my lap. I have never really been one for poetry. And I must have read the stanza in front of me at least three times, without actually taking in any of it. My eyes simply slide over the text, sightlessly. I sigh, then look around the garden instead. Down a narrow path between the low hedges of hornbeam which edge beds of herbs, I see the tall figure of the Steward approaching. He walks slowly, as one who has still not quite shaken off the injuries that have confined him to these houses. Under his arm, he carries a book. He halts beside my resting place.

“May I join you, my Lady?”

“By all means, my Lord,” I reply, and move up the stone bench to make room for him. He sits at the other end, half turned towards me.

“What are you reading?” he asks, with a polite smile.

“The Pastorals of Atanatar Alcarin. In translation, obviously. Though I must admit, it is more a case of what I am not reading. I am finding it hard to concentrate.”

His smile broadens. “Alcarin is not the most exciting of reads at the best of times, and these are far from being the best of times. I remember struggling through them with my tutor as a young boy. As an adult, it always struck me as ironic that one of the most decadent of Gondor's rulers should choose to write poetry celebrating the lives of simple country folk. Or at least, his imagined version of the lives of simple country folk. Later chroniclers wrote of the excesses of his reign: 'precious stones are pebbles in Gondor for children to play with.'”

I am not quite sure how to respond to this. Coming from another man this speech would sound like that of a pompous windbag showing off his knowledge. But the open, friendly look on Lord Faramir's face suggests that he is simply interested in my opinion on the matter, assuming me to be as well versed in the subject as he is. A slightly awkward silence ensues. Although King Théoden saw to it that my brother and I were well educated by the standards of our people, I feel neither able nor particularly inclined to converse about the minutiae of Gondorian history. I take a sidelong glance at the book he holds.

“Ecthelion's Art of War,” I say. “Now there is a book that is appropriate to times like these. Have you found any helpful strategies in there? I seem to remember him discussing the relative sizes of one's own and the opposing force, saying 'If equally matched, we can offer battle; if slightly inferior in numbers, we can avoid the enemy; if quite unequal in every way, we can flee from him.' Not an encouraging thought: without doubt the hordes of Mordor outnumber our forces many tens if not hundreds to one. And yet Lord Aragorn has led our armies into a direct engagement with them.”

“An apposite quotation, my Lady, and, sadly, one which does not offer much hope. However, I have been considering this passage.” He begins to read, pausing at each sentence while he construes a translation, for the text is in the original Sindarin. “All warfare is based on deception. Hence, when
able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must seem inactive; when we are
near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe
we are near. Hold out baits to entice the enemy. Feign disorder, and crush him.'

“This, in a nutshell, is Lord Aragorn's strategy. He hopes to lead attention away from the quest,
conducted by stealth, which enters the borders of Morder unnoticed, by leading a desperate and
doomed frontal attack on the Black Gates.”

His words take me by surprise. I know of the quest he refers to, from conversations with Merry. But
I had no idea that he would know of it. My amazement must show on my face, for he continues,
rather contritely.

“Your pardon, Madam, I see your surprise that I should talk of this openly, and indeed you are right
to be cautious. Suffice it to say that it is not common knowledge, nor would I discuss it were it not
for the fact that Master Meriadoc told me you already knew of this quest. I encountered his
comrades, two Periannath travelling through Ithilien with the intent of climbing the stairs of Cirith
Ungol. Frodo himself told me of their goal.”

“If you have met Frodo, then you probably know more of this matter than I.”

“Possibly. I know of the immense burden he bears, a burden which led to the death of my brother,
Boromir,” Faramir says, his face grave.

“I am sorry to hear that you lost your brother,” I say, unsure what comfort I can offer.

“This war takes that which is best and most noble from both our countries, and, if what Merry has
told me, from both our lives. I have lost my brother and my father, you, your uncle and cousin.”

“Alas for Théoden and Théodred,” I say. “They were as a father and a brother to me.”

“And we have also both been subject to the black breath,” says Faramir.

“You have, I think, been told my story,” I say, “But how did you come to find yourself in tourney
against a Nazgûl?”

Faramir is silent. I fear that I have asked about something the memory of which pains him deeply. “I
am sorry,” I continue, “For I know, only too well, how fearsome they are. I relive the horror every
night in my dreams. I should not ask you to relive it in the telling.”

“No, the real pain is elsewhere, in the circumstances of our doomed attempt to re-take Osgiliath. But
I will not talk of it here.”

“Then let us walk for a while in the gardens, and talk of things other than war and loss,” I suggest.
And so we walk in the winter sunshine. I am amazed at how many things grow here, even flowering,
at this time of year, and we discuss the difference that a few hundred leagues makes to the ferocity
of the winter. North of the mountains, in my home, the thick snows of winter still will not have melted
on the higher pastures.

~o~O~o~

In the afternoon, I meet Merry. It is good to see him. Finally, I feel as though I can completely relax.
The Steward, while clearly well-meaning and a thoughtful, humane man, is not exactly easy to talk
to. Merry walks towards me, and I stoop and throw my good arm around him. He hugs me back, as
best he can, for he too can only use one arm properly.
“How are you feeling?” I ask.

“A lot better, though still assaulted by waves of extreme tiredness. And my sword arm, well, as you see, it is still out of commission,” he says. We sit down by the fountain in the middle of the gardens, on a stone bench. Merry’s feet do not touch the ground, and he swings them idly as he talks. “So, you have met the new Steward. What do you think of him? Pippin seemed to think very highly of him. I think he would have followed him into the wastes of Mordor and back. In fact, Pippin saved his life, I gather.”

“Saved his life? You must tell me the tale. As for what I think, I suppose it is neither here nor there. He seems a kindly man, but noble and grave and beyond my sphere. I am but a rough shieldmaiden of the north; my company must seem strange and crude to him, I think.”

“Speak not thus of yourself, my Lady. You are the bravest, most noble person I know,” says Merry. He watches as I blush, and, seeing me open my mouth to protest, continues with a chuckle, “But I suppose, lest I make your head swell with compliments, perhaps I had best answer your questions. It is indeed a sad tale. As far as I can piece together, Lord Faramir's father, the Lord Denethor, always favoured his elder brother, Boromir, and was utterly cast down by news of Boromir's death. Nothing Faramir could do was ever good enough by comparison. When Faramir came back and reported his meeting with Frodo, Denethor was incensed that he had not brought the ring back to Minas Tirith as a trophy of war. He sent Faramir on what was effectively a suicide mission. Somehow, against all odds, Faramir held the river at Osgiliath for just long enough to buy much needed time before the start of the battle. His efforts meant that the Rohirrim were able to come to Gondor's aid before Minas Tirith fell. It was a close call, though: the enemy had already broken through the main gate when we arrived. Faramir also protected his troops to the best of his ability on the retreat. It is not for nothing his men follow him into battle even when it seems a lost cause. Eventually, as they galloped across the plains, he was hit by a dart fired by a Southron warrior, and assailed from the air by one of the Nazgûl, and was brought into the city near death.

“Denethor seems to have lost his grip on sanity at this point. Unknown even to Gandalf, he had a Palantir, one of the seeing stones of ancient Numenor. The Dark Lord was able to send him visions of the death of those he held dear and the destruction of the entire world, and Denethor thought they were truly what the future held. He fell into despair and went completely mad. He had his soldiers carry Faramir, unconscious and fevered, to the catacombs, where he had a funeral pyre built for both of them, although they yet lived. It was only through the intervention of Pippin and a soldier loyal to Faramir that Gandalf was able to save him. He came too late to help Denethor, though. He burnt to death upon the pyre, clutching the Palantir in his hands.”

I feel bile rising in my throat. The thought of the old Steward burning himself to death in his madness makes me shiver with fear, not least because it so nearly parallels my own experience. I thank the Valar that Gandalf was able to return Théoden to his rightful mind. This could so easily have been Théoden's fate. And the thought that Faramir so nearly died too makes my stomach churn. I realise why Faramir was reluctant to talk of it earlier, and I am suddenly hit with a wave of guilt that I have become privy to something so private, so horrific. Somehow, simply by listening to Merry's tale, I feel I have intruded.

“Merry...” I begin, my voice cracking, then can continue no longer. I take his hand in mine, and we sit there in silence for a long while.

~o~O~o~

I sleep fitfully again. For once, my dreams have not involved either groping hands or the horrors of battle. But they have not been any the more pleasant. Instead, I have dreamed of flames licking round
the body of the young Steward, as he tosses in his fever. In my dreams, it is his dying screams I have heard. I wake, soaked in sweat and sick to the pit of my stomach.

The maid brings me the usual meagre breakfast, and helps me to dress. I make my way to the same woman who talked to me a couple of days earlier.

“Madam, I have a boon to ask of you,” I say. “I cannot lie idle. Enforced rest is giving me too much time to fret, and lack of a useful occupation means that I go to bed insufficiently tired to sleep. Please give me something to do. I may not be a healer, but there must be some chores that can be done one-handed.”

The woman smiles at me, and says, “Many of your countrymen lie wounded, some recovering from amputations. It would help them to have someone who could talk to them in their own language, fetch them water, bathe their foreheads.” She pauses, as if assessing what sort of woman I am. “And, if it does not offend your dignity, bring them bedpans.”

I smile back at her. “It does not offend my dignity. I am a shieldmaiden, not a shrinking violet.” The healer introduces me to a young woman of about the same age as me, Lady Lothíriel, who is similarly employed in bearing water and bedpans. She is able to show me where the tools of our new menial trade are kept, and I set to work. It comforts me to speak my own language, and makes me ashamed of my self pity, when I see the wounds and hurts of so many of my brave countrymen.

Thus, I spend the morning gainfully employed, before sharing Merry's company as we both eat a bowl of unappetising stew for lunch. Having eaten, I make enquiries as to the location of the stables.

Chapter End Notes

The quotations from The Art of War are taken from the real work of the same name, by Sun Tzu. I've followed one of my favourite authors, Lialathuveril, in attributing it to Ecthelion, one of the early Stewards of Gondor. I had already intended to use The Art of War in one of the initial conversations in this story when I discovered she had used a similar idea in “Black Eyes”. The quotation about precious stones being like pebbles is taken from Appendix A of the Lord of the Rings.
At last I have managed to find the stables. It took me a while to find someone who could tell me where Windfola was likely to be, and even longer to make my way past the well-meaning Healers, coming up with a succession of excuses for my escape. I find I feel slightly unsteady on my feet; perhaps their caution was well placed. But however weak I feel physically, there is no doubt that the familiar surroundings are comforting. Horses peer at me over the half-doors of their stalls, their gentle, placid gazes passing no judgement, offering no pity. I find my spirits rising.

I run the brush in smooth, even strokes over Windfola's coat. The motions are soothing, hypnotic almost. I breathe in the warm scent of horse and leather and hay. I feel calmer than I have felt since I recovered consciousness several days ago. Windfola nickers softly and turns his head to nuzzle me. He is hoping for a treat, but the city's food stocks are run down after the siege, and there are not enough apples and carrots for people, much less for horses. I know it is something that the Lord Faramir has been fretting about; Merry mentioned this fact. Apparently he has had to devote many hours to organising distribution of what supplies there are, ensuring that everyone gets a fair share, and avoiding civil unrest (no easy task with every man of arms having marched on the Black Gate).

"Should you be doing that with your arm in a sling?" I turn to see the Steward. Béma, think of the banan and he shall appear! He leans casually against the door jamb, brows drawn together in a slight frown.

"I'm fine," I say, perhaps a little more sharply than I should. "Grooming Windfola only takes one hand, and it takes my mind off things."

The frown disappears. "I'm sorry, you know better than I what you are capable of."

I manage a slight smile, then turn back towards Windfola. My skirts catch on the bucket. Curse having to wear a dress in a stable! Some of the contents splash over my feet which are shod only in light shoes instead of the boots I normally wear and I feel the mucky water seep through them.

"Fuck!" I mutter in Rohirric. Lord Faramir's eyebrows shoot upwards, and I see his lips twitch in an effort not to smile. I feel heat rise in my cheeks, and rush to make amends.

"I am most sorry, my Lord. I did not realise you spoke my language."

"I don't, my Lady," he says, no longer bothering to suppress the smile, his eyes crinkling with amusement. "But I collect that the Common Tongue borrows some of its more vigorous swearwords from your language."

Still feeling embarrassed, I add, "Please do not think that most of the women of my country would speak thus. I have perhaps forgotten my manners on the ride to the Pelennor Fields." I blush once again at the thought of the diplomatic falsehood I have just uttered. I can think of many women of my country who would speak exactly thus. Fortunately, Lord Faramir decides to take my attempts at diplomacy at face value.

"Men of arms are typically forthright in their mode of expression," says the Steward, trying (and failing, I might add) to adopt a more dignified mien. "My Ithilien Rangers can be foul mouthed in the extreme when they think I am not within earshot. And the ditties they compose about their officers..."
He smiles once more. A nice smile, I think to myself.

“Oh, the songs!” I say, “How could I forget? I learned things I could happily have lived a lifetime without thinking about. Béma's balls, the songs...”

What have I said? Horrified, I clap my hand over my mouth. I can feel my face burning.

Then, looking me straight in the eye, the Steward starts to laugh. Suddenly struck by the ridiculousness of our encounter, I join in, and before long, we are both clutching at the supports of the stable, helpless, with tears running down our cheeks. Eventually I manage to speak, between great, gulping gasps of air.

“My Lord, I fear I must needs study etiquette before I can take my place among the ladies of the court here in Gondor.”

This sets us both off again, and it is several more moments before the Steward manages to speak.

“Please, call me 'Faramir’”, he says, giving me a broad grin. “I think we have progressed beyond the stage in this conversation where we need use titles. Unless you would feel more comfortable being addressed as 'My Lady’?”

“Éowyn' will be fine,” I say with a laugh. “After all, I hardly think anyone could mistake me for a lady after my choice of words just now.”

“Nay, Éowyn,” he says with an answering laugh, “When I judge a man's character, I consider his honour, valour and honesty. And I have no doubts as to you possessing all those virtues, so I shall continue to think of you as 'my Lady', but will, if you are content, call you 'Éowyn' for friendship's sake.”

I smile at this, then feel unaccountably embarrassed, so turn my attention back to brushing Windfola.

“When you have finished grooming your horse, would you care to join me for another walk in the garden?,” Faramir asks.

“Yes, though first I must wash my hands... and find some dry hose.”

Faramir laughs again. “Perhaps an hour from now,” he says.

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I find Faramir standing by the fountain. At first the conversation seems more forced than the easy laughter in the stables, but gradually we both find ourselves more at ease.

“In Rohan, is it very unusual for a woman to ride to war?” Faramir asks me.

“Unusual, but not unprecedented. In my country, some women choose to become shieldmaidens, and train in the arts of war. Not many, though most know how to wield a sword to some extent, especially in the Westfold, where we have been subject to constant attacks from marauding bands of orcs. And I can think of at least one woman, the wife of one of my brother's marshalls, who wields a mean frying pan.” I grin.

“She sounds terrifying,” Faramir replies, a smile on his lips.

“She is. And her tongue is even more deadly than her skillet. I lied earlier, by the way. Women in my country are often, how can I say, rather outspoken.” At this, Faramir's smile becomes a ready laugh.
But I find my thoughts becoming more serious.

“Éomer was furious with me, once he'd recovered from the fright and shock of seeing me lying dead, as he thought. He thought I was safely back in the Riddermark, though 'safely' is only a matter of degree in the current circumstances. I suppose he would have felt differently had I been his brother.”

“Maybe, maybe not. I pleaded with my father to let me ride to Rivendell instead of Boromir, and I still feel guilt that he was on the quest in my place when he met his death, and anger towards my father.”

“But had he been your sister?”

“Then certainly, my father would not have countenanced a daughter learning to wield a sword, or indeed any sort of martial art, much less riding out to war or errantry. But we fight an enemy who does not distinguish between men, women or children when it comes to deciding who should die upon the points of their swords. Maybe the men of our realms have been wrong therefore in deciding who should learn to defend themselves.”

It strikes me that he is being slightly evasive. I press the point, quite why I do not know. “But I did not ask what your father would have thought had he had a daughter, I asked what you would have thought had it been your sister.”

Faramir smiles. “An expert swordsman. I should have known you would know exactly when to press your point. Yes, I concede, had I had a sister, I would probably have reacted as Éomer did. But it would have been out of emotion, out of love and fear. Knowing what you did, the rational part of me admits that you fought valiantly and well.”

“You don't think I was unmaidenly, then?”

“Why should what I think be of any import? You have proved yourself brave beyond measure, and turned the fate of the battle single-handed. I think you have placed yourself rather beyond the judgement of formal court conventions.”

I feel I have won the point, but I am not sure what tactical gain if any has been made in doing so. Perhaps all I have done is to establish myself as mulish in the face of Faramir's reasonableness. Then I realise I have been questioning him about my actions, while ignoring what he said of his brother. From what he said, perhaps the only person he judges too harshly is himself, and unjustly so.

“You should not feel guilt about your brother's fate. It makes no sense, for these things are oft the arbitrary motions of the fates and luck.”

“Maybe 'guilt' is the wrong word. But my brother, like my father before him, was brought up to rule, and saw the world in terms primarily of possessing the power to ensure Gondor's safety. He would have desired any weapon he thought could help this aim, regardless of the cost. I, with lesser ambitions, might have been better placed to resist its lure, not through any great virtue on my part, but simply because I had not been brought up to think myself strong enough to control such a weapon were I to take it for my own.”

“Yet Merry told me your brother died honourably and bravely at the last, protecting the two hobbits.”

“Do not mistake me, my brother was an honourable man, simply not perfect, for none of us is. But I also loved him dearly. He was my childhood companion, my friend...” He pauses for a moment. “My mother died when I was young, and my father was ... not always easy. My brother, who was ten years older, looked after me, was my champion, often stood between me and my father's anger.
He was a good man, but warmth and affection did not come naturally to him.”

“I was luckier than you, then. For though my parents also died when I was a child, my Uncle Théoden was ever kind and loving, as a father to me. And Éomer, I idolised him when I was a child. He could run faster, climb higher, swim like a fish. I wanted to do everything he did, and he was so patient in helping me to try to copy him. He taught me to wield a sword, spent hours helping me to school my first horse.”

We talk long into the afternoon, mostly of our childhoods and our older brothers, both of whom looked after us and taught us much. And I talk of Théodred, whom I thought of as an additional brother, and of his death. But there are gaps in our conversation. I do not speak of the Worm, or the hold he had over Théoden, and Faramir does not tell me anything of the events Merry reported to me yesterday. He paints Denethor as stern and distant, but says nothing of his descent into madness, nor of the manner of his death.

Eventually, Faramir takes his leave. I watch as he walks away down the path. He moves a little more easily than yesterday. He and I are both starting to recover, in body at any rate. I am not sure how he fares in mind; I still suffer from nightmares. Worse, though, it seems to me, are the unwanted memories during daylight hours, visions which blot out the scene in front of me, and seem more vivid than the solid world which should be my reality.

At the end of the path, Faramir is hailed by a tall woman. I recognise the Lady Lothíriel, and to my surprise, he greets her with a familiar kiss upon her cheek. I realise how little I know of the people I find myself keeping company with in this realm. In Edoras, I would know who everyone was, their familial relationships, their friendships, their betrothals... I suppose that to show that degree of familiarity in this city of reserved, restrained people, Lady Lothíriel must surely be Faramir's betrothed, or perhaps even his wife.

I settle on the bench in the sun, and wonder how Éomer fares. How close to the Black Gates are the army now? My gut clenches at the thought of their inexorable march towards doom and destruction. Tears start to prick at my eyes, then roll down my cheeks. I cry, messily, gulping sobs, wiping snot away with my sleeve, behaving like a small child. I feel like a small child too, tossed around by emotions too strong to bring under any kind of rational control. Eventually, as these outbursts tend to, my tears run their course, and I sit, with dry, sore eyes, staring into the east.

It occurs to me that my thoughts have been tied up entirely with my brother, and the Rohirrim who ride with him: Elfhelm, Eothain, Gamling. Strangely, for all my obsession of a week ago, I have barely given a thought to Aragorn. I feel strangely, stupidly guilty. Partly because his was the hand that drew me back from death, so surely he deserves more of my thoughts and goodwill. But mostly out of a sense of embarrassment. Am I so flighty, so fickle, that one week I can dream of tangled sheets and ecstasy, and the next forget to cry for him? I shake my head. Where has this fit of the megrims come from? What does it matter what I waste my time fretting over? I get to my feet, resolving to find some sort of useful employment to stop myself from flights of overindulgent melancholy.

Chapter End Notes

* bana, banan: Old English - devil. 
I wake with a cry, then sit up. Drawing my knees up against my chest and wrapping my arms about them, I curl into a ball. I try to blot out the memory of the dream. Foetid breath, sweaty hands, grasping, groping, probing. Even here I cannot escape from the Worm. There is a slight glow from the embers of the fire, and I take the stump of candle beside the bed, rise and make my way to the hearth. Crouching, I hold it out into the hottest place in the grate, where the wick catches. Now that I can see better, I look for the cup of water on the table, only to find it empty.

I will not sleep again tonight, I know this from experience. So I wrap the deep blue cloak around me and let myself out of the door. The last few days have left me familiar with the layout of the building, and I follow the passages to the kitchen, where I know there will be water, warmth, and possibly even company. I am not sure exactly what the hour is, but I know that the cooks and scullery maids start their work well before dawn.

Quietly, I lift the latch, open the heavy oak door, and enter. It must be earlier than I had thought, for to my surprise, there is only one person in the kitchen. Faramir sits on a bench to one side of the fire. A candle set upon the mantelpiece lights his face, throwing his aquiline nose and the line of his jaw into sharp relief.

“Can you not sleep either, my Lady?” he asks, his voice quiet. He looks at me, a gentle smile on his face.

“I slept at first, but then...” My words trail away as I struggle to suppress the memory of the dream that woke me.

“Night terrors?” he says, more of a statement than a question. “Come sit and bear me company, should it please you to do so,” he adds, gesturing to the bench opposite. I sit down, still absent-mindedly holding the empty cup I have brought from my room. Faramir wordlessly holds out a wineskin, and I take it and fill the cup, nodding my thanks to him as I return it. We sit in silence for a long while. The wine is rough, but warms me, and gradually I start to relax. Opposite me, Faramir leans back against the wooden panels behind him, and stretches out his long legs, crossing his ankles. He wears plain, dark brown leggings, and a linen shirt, pleats falling loosely from the shoulders, cuffs open to reveal his wrists, hewn through years of wielding a sword. His fingers hold his own wine cup in a light grasp, and he turns it slowly, staring absently at its contents. Eventually, he breaks the silence.

“Would it help to lay the ghosts to rest if you were to tell me of your dream?” he asks.

My first instinct is to prevaricate. I am ashamed to have such dreams, even though they spring into my mind unbidden, and leave me so troubled. But there is some need in me, a need to throw open the windows of my soul and let a fresh wind or a shaft of sunlight into the darkest corners of my mind, even if it means revealing my shame.

“I dreamt of the Worm,” I say. My voice sounds hesitant, and in my ears seems to come from far away, as if it is not part of me.

“Saruman’s spy?”
“Yes,” I reply. “I dreamt about the way he used to corner me in quiet places in the Golden Hall. He would try to...” For a moment I cannot voice out loud what used to happen. Then all of a sudden, as if a flood gate has burst, it all comes tumbling out, in a confused, confusing mass of words. “His hands were everywhere, his breath, oh gods of my fathers, his breath. It stank. And he smelled too. And he wouldn't let go. And he was going to, going to... He wanted to force me. He liked the fact that I was afraid. It excited him. I tried to push him off, but I couldn't.” Out the words come, and I feel as though I am being sick. I cannot bring myself to look at the man opposite. Eventually, the torrent stops, and I sit, eyes shut to hold back the pricking of tears, breathing hard. My stomach has that ache that follows a bout of retching, even though it is only words that I have vomited, words that seem to have taken on corporeal form and now hang in the space between us.

I hear movement, then sense my hands being taken in his. I open my eyes to find him kneeling on the floor at my feet, arms outstretched. He looks at me out of those dark grey eyes, his gaze steady, and his thumbs gently stroke the backs of my hands. He says nothing, just waits to see what I will say next.

“Very little happened in my waking hours,” I say. I drop my gaze. I can't look him in the face. Even though the Worm never managed to use anything more than his hands on my body, I still burn with shame. I feel an unaccountable need to tell Faramir that I escaped from the worst of it. I blurt out, “He never succeeded in forcing himself on me. Not in the way he wanted. Sometimes his hands...” I pause, feeling sick. “His hands... on my body... I did not want them there. But no more than that. But in my dreams... Oh, I should not have such dreams. I should not have such things in my mind. You must think that I...”

“It is not your fault, Éowyn. None of us holds responsibility for the fevered imaginings of our slumbering minds,” he says. “And it would not be your fault, not even had such things been forced upon you in your waking moments.” He continues to stroke my hands for a moment, then rises to sit on the bench beside me, leaving a gap of a few hand spans between us. I feel comforted that he is close by, but the gap is such that I am not threatened by his presence. A bit of me wonders whether he has sensed this in choosing to sit thus.

“It would not have been my fault, I grant you. But I would still have been soiled, would still...” again I pause. “I would no longer have been a maiden.” I blush furiously. Why, by all that is sacred, did I say that to him?

“The hurts and scars of war are many and varied. Why should a woman who has suffered thus be thought any less of than a man who carries the wounds of battle?” Faramir asks. I take a sidelong glance at his face, and to my surprise see from his expression that he is sincere when he phrases the issue thus. I realise I am used to men thinking of a high-born woman's virtue as a piece of treasure, beautiful, but brittle, to be guarded, protected, passed from the ownership of her family to her husband, with immense care lest it should be dropped and broken on the way from one safe resting place to another. But Faramir, I sense, sees the matter in a different, less possessive light. He seems to see it simply as an issue of the hurt done to the woman herself, and the need to heal that hurt. Perhaps it is this that makes me feel safe enough to continue.

“I was so afraid, afraid of him taking me. I couldn't bear the thought of that being... my first time. I know it was wrong, but when I thought it inevitable the Worm would get his way, I... I begged my cousin to lie with me. Somehow it seemed to me better to lose my maidenhood in a manner of my choosing, if it had to be so, if I could not wait to join with a man as his lawful wife.”

Faramir nods slowly, not looking at me. “I can understand that,” he says.

“But Théodred refused,” I say. “He said that it would be wrong to lie with each other without
“And that too makes sense to me,” says Faramir. “To lie with someone simply as the lesser of two evils. No, I would not want a part of that. It should be a joyful thing, not an act of desperation. But I suppose at the time you must have felt there was no escape.” Now he turns to look at me, his grey eyes gentle.

“A week later, Théodred was dead. Killed by orcs. Orcs almost certainly primed to ambush him by the Worm,” I say, my voice breaking. I look down at the floor. “It makes no sense, but I felt so guilty. Almost as if in asking him to do something he thought was dishonourable, I had somehow contributed to his death.”

“Éowyn, look at me.” Faramir’s voice is quiet but commanding. I look back at him, and his gaze meets mine. “It does make no sense. You played no part in his death. But I do understand the guilt that goes with such things. I played no part in my father’s death. In fact I was not even conscious. But I still feel guilt. All we can do, you and I, is to keep telling ourselves that it makes no sense to feel this way.”

I nod. If only I could actually feel that way. But I suspect Faramir may find it easier to give such advice than to act on it himself. Not that this matters. On some level I know he is right. And the fact that he probably cannot control his feelings either serves only to make me feel I have someone who understands, at least in part. Faramir offers me the wineskin once more, and I pour some into my cup, only half a cup this time. We sit in silence for several minutes. Eventually I ask something, and it is not till the words are out of my mouth that I wonder why I have asked, or indeed, why the question has crossed my mind at all.

“Lady Lothíriel. Is she your betrothed?” Feeling that the question sounds rude, I add, “She seems both beautiful and kind.”

“She is both beautiful and kind,” says Faramir, adding with just a hint of a smile “She is also my cousin. And it is hard to entertain romantic feelings towards someone one has known since childhood, especially where one knows of her youthful predilection for dropping plum stones out of upstairs windows onto the heads of passers-by. Besides which, if the teasing I have heard her subject to from the other women who help here is any indication, it seems she has grown rather close to someone you know.”

I realise he is teasing me for my inquisitiveness, but I cannot stop myself asking. “Who?”

“Your brother, I believe. I should not be surprised if he asks my Uncle for permission to court her.” My jaw drops at this piece of information. My brother, who enthusiastically beds any willing young woman he encounters (and whom, if rumour is true, is equally enthusiastically bedded by the women concerned), considering marriage? I see that Faramir has noted my dumbfounded expression. It seems to encourage him to tease me still further. “And you? Merry may have mentioned that you perhaps favoured someone.” But suddenly he turns away, staring straight ahead, avoiding my gaze, and I hear the teasing note disappear from his voice, to be replaced by something I am not sure I can place. “You are beautiful, brave, virtuous, honourable, kind, the sister of the king of our nearest neighbour. You would surely be a good queen.”

“If you are talking about the Lord Aragorn, he is already affianced to someone else.” I don't control my voice well. Does it sound whining, or petulant, or self-pitying, or simply sharp? I am not sure, but it is not how I meant to address him, not so harshly. After all, I started this line of conversation.

“I am sorry, my Lady. It was impertinent of me to ask,” says Faramir. I cannot fail to notice the formal address.
“The fault is mine. I should not have asked you about such private matters in the first place.” The silence returns, this time stretching out uncomfortably, a far cry from our earlier camaraderie. Eventually I speak.

“Merry was right. I did fancy myself in love with Aragorn. For he and his companions appeared out of nowhere, and returned my uncle to his right mind, and cast the Worm from Edoras. I suppose he was ready to be cast into a role of my rescuer and champion.”

“Surely he was more than just someone to fill a convenient role?” Faramir asks.

“Yes. No. I don’t quite know. He is handsome, brave, noble, funny.”

“Funny? That seems a strange thing to add after your list of his other virtues.”

“He made me laugh with his wit, and it was so long since I had laughed,” I explain.

Faramir gives me a sidelong glance, then stares contemplatively at his cup of wine. “You have a beautiful laugh.” I see just the hint of a smile, but he does not look at me. “Though sadly I cannot claim to have caused it through any great display of wit.”

“No, if I remember aright, it was my own coarse language that set us both to laughing.” The silence returns, but closer to its former friendliness. This makes me hesitate before asking my next question. But the nagging curiosity will not go away. Eventually I say, “You must be ten years or more my senior. It surprises me that you are not married. Has there been no lady you have found worthy of courting?”

Faramir smiles. “I suppose in my twenties I indulged in the usual youthful indiscretions of most young men. But I was never particularly content with such encounters.” He pauses, then sighs. “I did once love a woman dearly, but my father would not countenance the match. She was the widow of one of my Rangers, with three children. When her husband fell, the youngest was but a babe-in-arms. At first I visited to offer condolences, and to bring the pension for her and her children that our regimental coffers allowed for. Gradually, over the course of a year or more, I came to realise I was visiting for her sake, for she was kind, gentle, beautiful. She was also strong, holding her household together and caring for her children though her own grief was still sharp. I could not woo her at first, because she grieved deeply for my fallen comrade, a good, brave man. But gradually over the years our friendship turned to love on both our parts. Eventually I went to my father and asked for his permission to marry, but he had his heart set on a political marriage, the more so since my brother Boromir seemed to show no inclination to marry. He refused.”

“What happened?” I ask.

He colours slightly, and looks again at his wine cup. Was there ever such a fascinating cup in the history of the wood-turner’s art? “We loved one another very dearly. One thing led to another. In the end, though my father forbade permission for us to wed lawfully, we lived as husband and wife, in all but name, and I came to feel as though I were father to her children. We tried to be careful to avoid scandal, both in terms of not flaunting our living arrangements, and in other... more private matters. But I fear I was not careful enough. While in Minas Tirith, taking council from my father on how best to pursue our campaign against the Southrons, I received a letter from her. She was with child.

“I had a huge row with my father, and left, swearing that I would be wed without his permission. But when I returned to Ithilien, I found that I was too late. She had been taken by a winter sickness, along with our unborn child, and the oldest of her children.” Faramir meets my gaze at last, and his face is distraught.
“How long ago?” I ask.

“It is just over four years since Linneth died. I still support her surviving children. They live with one of my retired soldiers and his wife, a couple who were unable to have children of their own. I visit them as often as this damned war allows. They are nine and twelve now, a girl and a boy.” He takes another sip of his wine, and pauses for what seems like a long time. “I fear you must think me a man of no honour for behaving thus towards Linneth,” he says, his face devoid of expression.

“Nay, for I know not what I would have done in similar circumstances. And your father was not an easy man. Besides, I think perhaps we women of the Riddermark are not as sheltered from the realities of life as women in Gondor. Such arrangements are not so uncommon. Perhaps not when a woman is widowed, for I cannot imagine the sort of political pressures that drove your father to deny consent for your marriage holding much sway in our less complicated realm. But sometimes, marriages do not work, and couples go their separate ways. If then they meet new lovers, it is not unusual for them to set up a household which is a marriage in all but name. In truth, no-one thinks much of it, so long as the children and old folk of the household are well cared for.”

Faramir looks at me. “Such pragmatism seems much more humane than the moral code of Gondor. But still I feel that Linneth deserved better than I was able to offer her.”

“If she had known what the fates had in store for her, what do you think she would have chosen? A few years of lonely widowhood before her death, or the comfort of a man who loved her and the knowledge that he would care for her children as best he could after she was gone? ‘No-one could cast aspersions on her virtue’ is but a poor epitaph. I know which course I would have chosen.”

“Lady, I give you thanks for your compassion,” Faramir says, very quietly. “I am still not sure I deserve it.”

Suddenly I feel the urge to shake him out of his fit of melancholy. It is not right that he should torture himself thus. I burst out, “Thus says the man who but half an hour ago lectured me on the futility of feeling guilt about things which it was beyond our power to change.” I fix him with a stare, and he looks first sheepish, then gives a very small smile. I feel as though I have won some sort of small victory, though I am not sure what sort of battlefield we have fought on, or what the stakes are.

“Very well, Éowyn, I will indulge in self-pity no longer.”

“Please do not mistake me. I do not mean to suggest for a moment that you should not grieve for Linneth. She sounds a lovely woman, and it is right to mourn her memory. All I ask is that you think on your time together with joy, not guilt,” I reply, worried that I have gone too far.

But Faramir only smiles at me and raises his cup. “Let us drink, then, to the memory of those loved ones we have lost, and the joy they brought to us.”

I raise my cup and drink.

“And now, my Lord, I feel that perhaps I should return to my chamber and see if I can manage a few hours sleep before the morning.”

“Sleep well, my Lady of Rohan,” he says.
Faramir is wrong about the plum stones ruling out the possibility of romantic thoughts. As teenagers, this was a favourite pastime of one John Ronald Reuel Tolkien and his friend Edith (albeit using sugar lumps rather than plum stones, which they tried to drop unnoticed onto the hats of passers-by). Reader, she married him.
The hardest thing about my water and bedpan duties is not the physical effort. After all, it is not as if I am in any fit state myself to do any of the heavy work. No, it is finding the words to talk to men who have lost legs and will never be able to ride again, or who have lost arms, and will never be able to wield a sword or guide a ploughshare. Sometimes they want to rage against their fate, sometimes they are silent and have lost hope, a small number seem able to find some sort of peace with their injuries. The ones who rage worry me less than the ones who are without hope; the latter, the other helpers tell me, are the ones who do not struggle against fevers and infections, who slip quietly from their mortal chains in the middle of the night. I am not the most patient of women, and the thing I find hardest is to listen, without question, or comment, or advice, to whatever they have to say. If they rage, it is best to try to let it wash over me like the waves of the sea. If they are in despair, there is little I can say to change this (how well I know this lesson; I have studied it all too closely myself). It is only really the odd two or three who seem accepting of their fate with whom I can converse, discussing their plans to make themselves useful despite their injuries; they will be able to sow seeds, or thresh the ears of barley one-handed, they tell me, or weave the wool of the Westfold into fine cloth while seated, one legged, at a loom. But even with these men I fear that in fact what I am listening to is simply the postponement of their anger, grief or despair. They chatter with seeming good cheer because their minds hide the enormity of their situation from them.

So it is with relief that I sit here in the garden with the Lady Lothíriel, snatching a few minutes from our labours. We have a waterskin, yet more coarse bread and a hunk of slightly mouldy cheese. The Lady tells me she has sent letters to Dol Amroth, requesting supplies for Minas Tirith, but that it may be a while before they arrive to replenish the stocks left here after the siege. I find myself liking Lothíriel. So far, we have mostly exchanged polite pleasantries, but once or twice I think I have caught a wicked twinkle in her eye, a twinkle which promises the beginnings of a more entertaining friendship. Certainly, she does not fit my prejudiced picture of a spoilt court beauty, although she is undeniably very beautiful indeed. Her next words make me wonder if she has quietly been assessing me in the same way, with a view to deciding how open she can be. If I have been subject to some sort of test, it would appear that I have passed.


“I think black humour is the only response to such circumstances. Well, other than madness, and that would not serve our patients so well,” I reply. “What moment did you have in mind?”

“I have a maiden aunt, who is very strong on the level of decorum to be expected from an unwed noblewoman. She could win prizes for discoursing at length on the subject. Well, an hour or so ago, I found myself tending to a young man, one of your Riders, who is in a very bad way. He has lost his left arm just below the shoulder, and the right was shattered into pieces. The healers tell me that had it not been for the fact that they’d already had to amputate one arm, they would have made no effort to save the other, such was the damage to bone and tendons. Even now, it is by no means clear that he will regain any use in it.”

I shudder. The thought of such an outcome tears at my heart. Were I in his situation, I would indeed despair and turn my face to the wall.

“I did not know what to do. For once I felt that I would run, weeping from the room, and almost did.
But then he uttered one of the words of Rohirric I have come to recognise: he asked for a bedpan. And suddenly I switched from being on the verge of weeping hysteria to an entirely different sort, for it came to me all of a sudden to wonder what my maiden aunt would make of me having to hold a strange soldier's manhood while he pissed into a pot. Of course, it was not really funny, more the sort of thing that has you laughing because laughter and fear and despair can seem so close together at times like these.”

“War certainly has strange effects on one's behaviour,” I respond. It comes to me that perhaps I can make her laugh. “I swore in front of your cousin yesterday. I didn't mean to, but I tripped over a bucket in the stables, and out it came. Language one of our Riders would have been proud of.”

Lothíriel looks at me, then breaks into a smile. “Oh my. What did he make of that? I love my cousin dearly, but he is a quiet, reserved, scholarly man. I am not sure I have ever heard him swear, which is more, I might add, than I can say for my dear brothers.”

“Actually, he laughed most heartily. It helped to set us at ease with one another.” And I tell her of the horribly stilted conversation we had in the garden about Alcarin’s poetry. Lothíriel laughs at this. “That sounds just like Fara. I swear, books are as real to him as people. Thank heavens you could talk to him about Ecthelion. He would have been at a complete loss, else, for I am not sure he is particularly practised in the art of winning a lady's favour with light hearted chatter. Again, unlike my dear brothers.”

“Ah, your brothers are perhaps like mine, who shows an exceptionally keen interest in our sex.” Oh no, I should not have said that. If she is keen on Éomer, she will hardly wish to hear of his tendencies to wench his way from East to Westfold. Fortunately, Lothíriel does not seem in the slightest bit fazed.

“Precisely. Well, the younger two at any rate. Elphir is respectably married. But Amrothos and Erchirion have quite an eye for the ladies. Fara, on the other hand, seems really quite shy.” She gives me a sidelong look, and I reflect that, perhaps because of her young age, it is simply that Faramir has not thought it appropriate to talk to her about such things. Then it strikes me all of a sudden that it is perhaps odd that he should talk to me. But then, I suppose, in the dark hours of the night, sharing what might be considered the camaraderie of fellow warriors, it is easier to talk of such things than it would be had I been presented to him at a court ball, both of us dressed in the ridiculous finery demanded at such occasions. It also strikes me that perhaps it might prove a little complicated trying to explain the circumstances of my late night conversation to Lothíriel, that, in fact, the situation might be open to misinterpretation. No sooner have I framed this thought than Lothíriel confirms my suspicions.

“Fara seems quite taken with you,” she says, with a tone of faux-innocence which does not fool me for a minute. “No, it is simply friendship,” I say, quickly. “He and I were both wounded in the same battle. I think we view each other more as brothers-in-arms than anything else.” For a moment I wonder if attack is the best form of defence, and whether I should tease her about my brother, but then I decide it is safest to move the conversation away from romance entirely.

“Tell me about Dol Amroth,” I say. “I have never seen the sea.”

So Lothíriel tells me about her home, about sweeping golden beaches and towering granite cliffs, water stretching to the horizon, azure under the sun and steely grey beneath the clouds of winter, close cropped green turf set with tiny flowers, seals so fat and placid on the shore and so sleek and graceful in the waters, swooping gulls and diving black cormorants, dolphins frolicking through the
wakes of boats out of the sheer joy of being alive. In return I tell her of the galloping horses of my homeland, of sweeping plains, waves not of water but of green grass swaying in the wind, distant white-capped mountains, rushing mountain streams shaded by rowan trees with their bright red berries.

I am hit by a wave of homesickness as I talk of my homeland.

“You miss it,” says Lothíriel: it is a statement, not a question.

“Very much. I feel rooted in the earth there, in the horses, the fields of barley, the flocks which graze on the foothills of the mountains. Even in the wooden carvings of our halls, which are to us more than just pretty ornaments. They connect us to the harvest and the souls of our animals, the cycle of the seasons and the protection of the Valar.”

“For my part, I cannot imagine what it would be to live far from the sea,” Lothíriel replies. Then her expression turns sad. “But I suppose at some stage that may well be my fate. My father is a reasonable man; he will not arrange my marriage without consulting me. But at some point I suppose it will be my lot to enter into a political union, and who knows where that may take me.”

I look across at Lothíriel, shocked at what she has just said. “Surely that does not happen any longer. I can see that happening hundreds of years ago, but now?” I am at a loss for words.

“I am probably the most politically well-connected woman of marriageable age in Gondor. Yes, I think that is precisely what will happen. But I have been brought up to that idea, and am adjusted to it. And it is not as bad now as it was a few weeks ago; my uncle might well have sought to overrule my feelings, whatever petitions my father might have made on my behalf. But Fara would not do that to me,” she says with a smile. But then her face becomes grave. “But, oh, to be able to marry as one wanted. A year ago, even six months, that would have seemed of no importance. But now...”

“But now?” I ask, thinking back to what Faramir told me.

“Maybe I have had a glimpse of what it might be to marry a man of one's own choosing.” She falls silent. I wonder whether to quiz her further, but feel that I do not know her well enough. Even as I think this, it seems foolish not to be able to talk to her of my own brother. But I do not know whether she would welcome the invitation to such confidences. Instead, I let the silence between us stretch out, to see what will come of it. Eventually, she talks again.

“What of you? What are the marriage customs in your land?”

“Very uncomplicated,” I say with a smile. “Though most of our population now live in fixed settlements, it is not so long since we were a nomadic people, following our horse herds and flocks of sheep where the grazing took them. We have no great time for ceremony. Traditionally, a man married a woman by wrapping her in his cloak; if their families and friends witnessed them together the next morning, they became husband and wife. It is perhaps a bit more complicated for me, as a close kinswoman of the king. I would be expected to have a formal betrothal in front of the people of Edoras, then a simple wedding ceremony. But my husband would still wrap me in his cloak.”

“How marvellous it would be to be free of the weight of ancient ceremony. I dread my marriage night. It is the thought of the expectation of hanging the bloodied sheets out of the window the next morning. I have heard tell of young women who went to their marriage bed pure and untouched, yet for some unknown reason, left no mark on lying with a man for the first time, and were ostracised and cast into dishonour as a result.”

It is probably as well that Lothíriel knows no Rohirric (and has not as acute an ear for languages as
her cousin), for this moves me to a string of obscenities. Eventually I manage to return to the common tongue. “Béma, and you call us barbarians!”

Lothíriel seems surprised by the force of my outburst. “So, coming to one's marriage bed a maiden is of no importance in your land?” she asks, sounding puzzled.

“Certainly, a woman of high standing would be expected to be a maiden. But, in times of war, a young woman may lie with her sweetheart in good faith, expecting to be married, then lose him to an orc raid. Or worse, she may be despoiled in an enemy raid. Who in all conscience could hold such a thing against her?” As I say this, I realise that I am echoing the words Faramir uttered last night. I comfort myself with the fact that there is at least one high-born Lord of Gondor who is not a barbarian, and smile inwardly. I add, “I hope too that if a young girl made a fool of herself over a boy who did not then marry her, she would not be judged too harshly. I cannot imagine any man worth the having would complain about her past. Though perhaps the rules are looser when there are no rights of property inheritance riding on the issue.”

“I think you are right. I cannot but help think of your herds of horses. You and I are fine blood mares, and must only be covered by the right stallions.”

My eyes open wide at this. It is by far the most outspoken thing Lothíriel has said, and frighteningly cynical.

“I think my lot is not as bad as yours. I will get to choose my husband. And no bloody sheets will ever fly from my window. That is, if we live through the current darkness. Time enough to turn our thoughts to fripperies should the outcome prove so fortunate.” I do not add the thought that it seems to me unlikely. Perhaps I am even more cynical than my companion.

Our conversation is ended by the arrival of Ioreth, one of the healer's assistants, an elderly, bustling, but highly competent woman. She shoos Lothíriel back to work, and equally peremptorily dismisses me to my chamber for an afternoon nap.

“You are far from healed, my Lady. You must rest.” Suitably chastened, and feeling like a small child, I do as I am bid. It turns out to be a welcome relief, for I am very tired from repeated nights of disturbed sleep. I lie on my bed, and it is not long before I drift off.

~o~O~o~

Sainted Lady of the Harvest, what tricks and vapours of the mind am I now subjected to? At least this dream has involved no horrors, no bloodied corpses on the battlefield, no groping hands. But it is still strange beyond measure. My conversation with Lothíriel has been woven into the oddest of fancies. I trace through the details, wondering whether there is any lesson to be drawn.

In this dream, I woke from the deepest of slumbers, dreamless and safe, to the crashing of the door being kicked in. Éomer burst through it, followed closely by Éothain and Aragorn. I watched in astonishment as my brother tried to draw his sword. Éothain gripped his right arm and prevented him, Aragorn held his shoulder and restrained him from advancing further into the room. It seemed to take their combined strength to hold him back, such was the strength of his fury.

“Béma, I'll have his balls on a platter,” my brother roared.

I shifted in the bed, and realised there was an arm round my waist. A naked arm, round my naked waist. And pressed against my back, a warm solid chest. The realisation hit me – I was with a man, and we were covered with a cloak. Not the dark green cloak of a rider, but a dark grey cloak, bearing the moon and stars of Ithilien. Twisting my head, I came face-to-face with Faramir, who looked
equally startled and confused by the situation.

By this time Éothain had Êomer in a tight embrace, holding his arms against his side. Êomer still struggled, and uttered fearsome oaths, calling down the vengeance of the gods on the vile despoiler before him. Aragorn looked over at the bed, his face a picture of quiet amusement. Then he uttered the Rohirric words he must have learned while serving my grandfather.

“I see you, Êowyn, daughter of Êomund, wrapped in Lord Faramir's cloak. I wish you every joy.”

I try to shake the sleep from my head, and rub my eyes. What has got into me? I think of evenings with the women of the Golden hall, sewing and weaving, while the old crones discussed the meanings of dreams. Some held that we dream of our greatest desire, others that we dream of that which we fear. Neither seems to me a likely explanation. I feel more inclined to put the whole thing down to the lingering confusion of mind which accompanies my weakened physical state. At least, that is the only explanation I will countenance.

~o~O~o~

To clear my head, I go out to the city walls. A chill wind blows from the east, and I pull the blue cloak around me. It is one that Ioreth gave to me when I first ventured out of bed. But the fabric is thin and worn, and the piercing east wind cuts through it. I shiver.

“My Lady, you are cold.” I turn, and there is Faramir behind me. He signals to the servant attending to him, and after a short conversation, the latter turns and descends the stairs. Faramir unfastens his own cloak and passes it to me, draping it around my shoulders. He has no idea why this gesture should cause my cheeks to burn, and I cannot meet his eye. There is a long silence.

“I have asked my servant to fetch a warmer cloak for you, so you need not wear mine if it makes you feel uncomfortable. I am sorry, Êowyn, I did not mean to offend you.”

“You have not offended me. I am just tired, and your kind gesture overwhelms me.” This sounds unconvincing to my ear, and I am not in the least sure Faramir accepts it as an explanation for the stiffness of my manner. The awkwardness is assuaged only slightly by the return of the servant, bearing a bundle of cloth. Faramir shakes it loose. It is a beautiful cloak, the colour of the evening sky, set with gems about the collar and hem in the shape of stars. I am struck dumb. Faramir takes in my expression, seeming to realise that I am trying to frame the words to refuse this gift. He tries to lighten the mood.

“Will you not swap cloaks with me, my Lady? For I fear that this one will not suit me.”

“It is too generous a gift. I cannot...”

“Nay, please my Lady... Êowyn. It will lie unused in a chest else. It seems pointless for it to grace a dark wooden box while you shiver in that flimsy garment.” He gestures to the thin cloak I have left draped over the wall. I nod reluctantly, and unclasp his cloak, and silently, we swap the cloaks.

Wrapped up against the chill east wind, we stand side-by-side in silence, looking out over the Pelennor fields towards the Ephel Duath and the dark lands beyond. Eventually, I shift uncomfortably, tired by standing for so long. Faramir suggests we go back into the garden and sit for a while.

The sun has started to dip in the west, and we sit once more on the stone bench near the fountain. It turns out both of us have brought books with us, so we sit in companionable silence in what remains of the daylight, reading. He has, yet again, got the better choice: a treatise on statesmanship. I have a
book Lothíriel handed to me earlier, one of her favourites. It is a volume of Sindarin poetry (annotated with a translation into Westron, thank heavens, for though my tutor made me tackle Sindarin, I always struggled with it). I snort in disgust at the sentiments expressed in the particular verse I am reading.

“Listen to this bit: ‘When you are very old, sitting in the candlelight by the fire, spinning and sewing, say to yourself, in a voice full of wonder, Mardil of Lossarnach sang of me when I was young and beautiful.’ Pah, fancy reducing a woman’s whole life to her having been pretty enough to engage the passing fancy of some empty-headed fop at some point in her youth.”

Faramir gives me a broad grin, then says, “But it’s the language. One can forgive Mardil for being an empty-headed fop for the beauty of his language.” And, looking at the fountain rather than at me, he starts to recite. Until I met Legolas, I had never met a native speaker of Sindarin. But I quickly realise that Faramir's grasp of the language must be very good indeed, way beyond the limited knowledge I gained years ago. Then I remember that the high-born in Gondor do speak a form of Elvish as their native tongue. The words flow from his lips with a lilting melody to them, like music. I find that these words do indeed have the power to melt hearts. I shut my eyes and let the music of his voice flow over me, saddened when Faramir reaches the end of the poem. I take a sidelong look at him; he is still staring ahead, but I sense that he knows I am watching him.

Again, I am intrigued by his love of learning. I honestly believe that he does not say these things to impress the listener. He says them simply because he is fascinated. Sometimes his intelligence is set to the task of making lightning quick leaps between different subjects, connecting them in ways no one else has seen before. At other times, he seems just to exult in playing with ideas, like the dolphins Lothíriel described to me, playing in the waves, or like horses, running free across the open grasslands of my home. But he never displays his learning like a trophy, seeking admiration. It is simply part of him. I am drawn back from my musings by his voice.

“You're still right about the content,” he says. “Lothí always says it makes her want to kick him, or would if he hadn't died centuries ago. But there are some poems where the language and sentiment seem perfectly in tune.” He begins to recite again, and at first I cannot place the sounds at all. Sonorous syllables, varying in tone and length, somehow filling the space with a beauty all of their own. I realise it is Quenya, a language even the Elves themselves now think of as ancient. He stops, and I look at him quizzically. This time, he meets my gaze.

“It's a poem about Beren and Luthien, less well known than the Lay of Leithian, but I think I prefer it. The poet imagines the mortal Beren trying to explain to Luthien, the immortal, what love means to a Man, tied to a fleeting existence upon the earth. 'Suns may rise and set: We, having shone with a brief light must sleep one endless night. Give me a thousand kisses, then a hundred, then another thousand, then a second hundred...’” His grey eyes fix on mine, a faint, unreadable smile playing across his lips.

Suddenly I realise that in his quiet, scholarly, bookish way, Faramir is trying to flirt with me. Trying and succeeding, for just as suddenly I realise that I am enjoying this. The thought both startles and amuses me. Who would have thought a barbarian shieldmaiden from the far north could be wooed with ancient poetry whispered to her amid the flowers of a courtly garden? I feel myself smile back at him, and sense a blush rising in my cheeks. Do I encourage him, or do I fall back on our easy comradeship? If we let ourselves take this new path, will it be the end of the friendship that has come to mean so much to me? I am saved from the decision by a familiar voice, cutting through the tension that has sprung up between us.

“Cousin, my father's factor in Dol Amroth has sent the ledgers detailing the provisions and stores we have laid by.” Lothíriel interrupts us. “Can you spare some time in your study? We can assess how
much can safely be spared from the Princedom and sent to Minas Tirith. We need to feed the people here, but not at the expense of starving those back in my home.”

“Of course, Lothíriel.” Faramir stands up, then turns to me. “Fare you well, my Lady Éowyn. I shall see you again soon, if you will.” And, catching me completely by surprise, he takes my hand and raises it to his lips, pressing a gentle kiss to my skin.

I watch as he and Lothíriel walk down the path, side-by-side. The skin on the back of my hand still seems to tingle, as if he has left the imprint of his lips there. And I can feel his hands on my shoulders as he placed the cloak around me, and hear his voice in my head, murmuring poetry. I sit on the bench, remembering and wondering, until the garden becomes quite dark and the chill night air drives me back inside to my chamber.

Chapter End Notes

The custom of marriage by cloak-wrapping is Zees Muse’s wonderful creation, and first appears in her story Rider of the Mark.

I have stolen the poetry (of course). Here are the originals.

Quand vous serez bien vielle, au soir, à la chandelle,
Assise auprès du feu, dévidant et filant,
Direz, chantant mes vers, en vous émerveillant,
Ronsard me célébrait du temps que j’étais belle.
Ronsard, Sonnets pour Hélène

soles occidere et redire possunt;
nobis, cum semel occidit breuis lux,
nox est perpetua una dormienda.
da mi basia mille, dein deinde centum,
dein mille altera, dein secunda centum...
Catullus, poem V.
I have yet another nightmare, once again about Faramir. This time I am fighting my way past a host of Nazgûl, not one, not even nine, but countless numbers. As I hack each one down, another leaps up to take its place. And I get no closer to my destination, the pyre on which Faramir lies, soaked in oil, the charred and twisted ghost of Denethor standing beside him with a flaming torch ready to plunge into the heart of the heap of wood. The ghost looks at me out of empty eye sockets, mocking me as I fight, unable to reach his son.

I wake to find my face wet with tears. Without even thinking about what I am doing, I draw the blue cloak around me and set off along the corridors. I try the kitchen first, but it is dark and empty. I continue wandering until my feet bring me to a door. Almost of its own volition, my hand knocks, and it is only when I hear his voice, filled with sleep, asking who is at the door, that the enormity of what I am doing hits me.

"I am sorry, I should not have disturbed your rest, I needed to make sure that my dreams were not true, I see it was only night terrors again, but it was so real, I shouldn't be here, I will go..." Somewhere in the middle of this ridiculous outburst, it seems that Faramir has caught sight of my tears.

"Éowyn, do not cry. Please." His tone is pleading. "Come in for a moment and dry your tears, at least, before you return to your chamber."

I enter hesitantly, and place my candle upon the mantle piece. The grate beneath is empty, and the room is cold as ice. All I can see of Faramir is his head poking out from beneath blankets. His hair sticks up in an unruly mess, even untidier than its daytime state. I shift awkwardly from one foot to the other, then blurt out the content of my dream.

Then I feel guilty at having shifted my burden onto him, especially one so intimately connected with his dead father. He runs his hand through his hair, then rubs his eyes.

"Sit down for a moment," he says. He sounds so tired, and I feel guiltier still. I perch on the edge of the bed. Suddenly I am struck by the memory of the touch of his lips on my hand, and the realisation that I am in his bed chamber, sitting on his bed. It seems foolish not to have thought of it before, but the impropriety of what I have done has only just occurred to me. Then, cloak or no, I am hit by a fit of shivering. I am bone tired, tired of the unrelenting exhaustion of war, the hunger of short rations, the pain, both my own and that of the wounded men I tend to, and above all, tired of the ever-present fear of the Shadow in the East. We stand on the brink of the world's ruin. All at once, it seems to me that what is important and what is not is thrown into stark contrast. Let the hounds of Morgoth take propriety and carry it to damnation. Summoning every last reserve of courage before I run from the room, I speak.

"For Béma's sake, move over and let me into the warmth." And I lift the corner of the covers.

"Wait," Faramir cries, voice cracking with panic. He looks at me wide eyed. Oh Valar, I have just made a complete fool of myself. He will throw me from the room like the brazen hussy I am, and never speak to me again. I want to apologise, to explain, but I am struck dumb. But instead of the stark dismissal I have feared, Faramir holds the blankets to his body with one hand, then reaches out to the chair on the other side of the bed with his other arm. The blanket falls away from his shoulder, and I realise he is naked. Oh Lady of the Stars, he is naked, and I have just tried to get into bed with him! I am frozen to the spot. My conscious mind honestly believed I had asked wanting only comfort and warmth. But I fear my body may know more truths than my mind. I feel a tug of desire hit me,
setting my pulse racing. I cannot take my eyes off him: his face, half turned from me, the stubble on his jawline, the muscles in his shoulder, the sinews in his arm. I have not realised until this moment that it is possible simultaneously to be frozen to the bone and aflame with desire.

He grabs a pair of linen braies from the chair, and pulls them under the blankets, wriggling around beneath the covers as he puts them on. He sounds a little calmer when he speaks next.

“You can get in now.” He lifts the blankets on my side of the bed, and slipping out of the cloak, I slide into the warmth beside him.

“You are shaking,” he says. “Is it cold, or fear or both?”

“Both,” I reply. I think it best not to tell him of the third reason why I am trembling like a leaf. He slides his arms around me, being careful not to jostle my damaged arm, and pulls me close. I find myself pressed against the hard planes of his body. He is as warm as a furnace. To my surprise, it is not just his arm he wraps around me. He casts his leg over mine, and we lie, limbs tangled together. My cheek rests against his chest, and I can feel the dusting of hair there, hear the quiet, steady beat of his heart. How can the feeling be comforting and arousing at the same time? I let my hand nestle there, next to my face, and breathe in the scent of him. He smells of soap, and a masculine scent all of his own. His lips brush my forehead with a very gentle kiss.

“All is well, Éowyn. You are safe here.” More light kisses fall on my brow, and his hand gently strokes my hair. I shut my eyes and feel as if I am floating in a soft cocoon of warmth, safe from the world, blessed, cared for. Time stands still. I could spend eternity here in his arms, both of us protected from the world outside, safe in our own little kingdom under the covers. I murmur his name, and let my fingers drift across his chest, matching my touch to his. I turn my head slightly and, breath catching at my boldness, drop a tiny kiss on his skin, the hair on his chest a strange sensation against my lips.

His touch on my hair, on my cheek is so soft. But the grasp that holds me against his body, in contrast, is not gentle; he grips me with a possessive strength. I tilt my head to look up at him. In the flickering candlelight, his eyes are dark. They look into mine with an almost unfathomable expression. Almost, but not wholly so; I see a mixture of desire, and something so gentle that I am afraid to put a name to it. His hand moves from my hair to my cheek, then softly cups my chin. His mouth moves slowly down to meet mine, a sweet, soft kiss to start with. He pulls away slightly, only to look at me once more, and his thumb traces my lower lip, dragging across the sensitive skin. I stare back into his eyes. I feel as if I am lost, completely lost. He murmurs my name, so quietly I can hardly hear him, then he kisses me again, his lips nipping and sucking gently at mine. I find myself moaning quietly, my lips parting to let out the sound, and his tongue darts into my mouth, teasing, tantalising me with its touch.

I can feel desire licking through my body like the flames of a forest fire. I tangle my fingers in his hair, and hold his head as I kiss him back as though my life depends on it. My tongue explores his, and I moan again as he holds me to him. Oh, Béma, I can feel his cock, hard and urgent, pressing against me. My mind, with its ever traitorous need to find humour at the most inappropriate of times, murmurs So much for Lothíriel’s assessment of her scholarly, reserved cousin. Then my body decides to over-rule my mind, and I shift my hips, rubbing my groin against his hard length. His hand slides down my back, grasping my arse and pulling me still more firmly against him. I find myself smiling even as I kiss him; it’s not as if I need any encouragement. I try to part my legs, feeling suddenly as though there is an aching void between them. I need him, need him there.

But my efforts are thwarted by my shift, which seems to have got tangled. I wriggle awkwardly, and he takes the opportunity to roll part way on top of me. I revel in the sensation of his weight pressing
into me, and take my turn to run my hand over his buttocks, feeling the muscles tense through the thin fabric. I can feel his hand tugging at the fabric of my shift, pulling it up. Our lips have parted. He kisses my jawline. I lick at his neck, then find myself nibbling at the skin there, with gentle brushes of my teeth. He gives a deep groan. Finally, my legs are free. I hook one behind his thigh and gasp as his cock nudges my entrance. Only the layers of fabric prevent him from burying himself within me. And I want him to, want him so badly it hurts. I feel hot blood coursing and pulsing through my groin, feel the welcoming moisture pooling there, ready for him. I undo the ties on his braies and start to slide them over his hips, thwarted as they snag on his erection. Then, as he tries to shift his body to allow me to free his cock, suddenly I jolt my bad arm. I give a scream of pain.

Instantly, Faramir rolls to the side, and looks at me, face filled with concern.

“Your arm. Éowyn,” he murmurs. Then a look of complete shock spreads across his face. “Oh sainted Valar, Éowyn, what was I thinking? To seek to take advantage of you in this way.” He sits up, and buries his face in his hands.

Oh heavens and stars, this is not what I intended. How did we get so carried away? And now here is Faramir, taking the blame upon himself for my wantonness. I sit up, cradling my injured arm, and settle into a kneeling position. Hesitantly, I reach out and brush a lock of hair from his cheek, so that I can see his face.

“Faramir, it is my fault. I should not have... I was the one who chose to get into your bed, after all. You did not invite me. I am sorry...” I cannot find the words.

“No, you came to me, frightened and cold and in need of comfort. I took advantage of your innocence. I seduced you, like some sort of ...” Clearly I am not the only one finding difficulty with words.

“Tried, only.” I almost smile at the thought of Faramir the great seducer of innocent maidens. The picture is so far from the truth as to be laughable. But he looks so woebegone there is no real humour to be found in the situation I have brought crashing into our lives.

“You might as well say I was as much the seducer as you,” I murmur. “Say rather that both of us were carried away by something we did not expect, or did not expect to be so strong. And, in truth, I think I knew from the start that I was looking for more than warmth and comfort. I am sorry, so sorry. But do not think that because I am inexperienced, I am without desire.” Then somehow, I feel moved to add, “Or without knowledge of how improper my behaviour is.”

“No, not without desire. But you have been through so much. You have been hurt so much. Is it any wonder that you cling to the first crumbs of comfort anyone offers you? I knew this, I should have known to treat you as if you were a dear sister, and instead...” Again his voice trails off. His next words are so quiet that I hardly hear them. “Though in truth, I have never thought of you as a sister. Always, from the moment I saw you, I have thought you the most beautiful woman I have ever met. And now, I have acted like some kind of base monster and tried to injure that beauty.”

At this point, quite unexpectedly, I get cross. The Rohirrim in me has far too much knowledge of the relations between men and women, even if only at second hand, to let this outburst of self-pity go unchallenged.

“Pshaw. You put me on a pedestal, as if I were some sort of marble statue, or ethereal figment of the imagination of some moralising prude's book of 'appropriate etiquette for Gondorian maidens.' I am but a woman, a woman made of flesh and blood, a woman of the Riddermark to boot, brought up watching the breeding of horses. I feel desire, I can be moved by such things. And if there is no shame in the taking of honest pleasure when a man acts on his desire, why should there be when a
woman does the same? By all means be relieved we stopped when we did, if you honestly believe you would have regretted lying with me. But do not engage in this... this maudlin fit.”

Finally he looks at me, wide-eyed at my tirade. His face is the oddest mixture of emotions I have ever seen. Shock, perhaps a trace of admiration, a bit of anger at the dressing-down he has just been subjected to, and still that undercurrent of desire. And a grave sadness in his eyes. I realise I have hurt him, and my anger evaporates. It takes me a moment to realise what I have said.

“I did not mean to make it sound as though I would lie with anyone,” I say. I cannot look him in the eye. “Yours is the only bed I have ever asked to get into.” Then I recall telling him about Théodred, and honesty compels me to add, “Well, the only one I have asked to get into and meant it. I mean, wanting joy, not just from desperation. Oh, Elbereth, I am making a sorry job of trying to explain this...” I risk a glance upwards, and see him looking at me, just the tiniest of smiles on his lips. Tentatively, I reach out. I place my hand on his cheek, feeling the roughness of his beard beneath my palm, lean forward and kiss him quickly.

“I think I should return to my own chamber, my Lord. Perchance we should forget about this, and try as best we can to pick up the strands of our friendship on the morrow.” I get out of bed with as much dignity as I can muster (which, truthfully, is not much) and pick up the cloak. It strikes me that I had left it spread on top of the blankets when I got into the bed, and I realise the irony of the situation, the curious reversal, that I have covered him with my cloak. Of course, he does not realise the symbolism within my culture, which is just as well.

As I slip from the door, I whisper, “Good night Faramir. I am truly sorry.”

~o~O~o

Of course, I cannot forget. I lie in my own cold, narrow bed and stare at the ceiling and remember every moment of our encounter in exact detail. I alternate between burning desire and burning shame. In the past, in happier hours when I was first come to adulthood, but not yet terrified by the Worm's threats, I explored myself. Beneath the covers of my bed, in the quiet hours of the night, I learned how to give myself pleasure. But anything I felt in doing that is as nothing to the promise that Faramir's body held for me. And I reflect on the difference between my dreams of rapture and the real thing. The dreams were strangely unspecific. The reality is messy, untidy, with tangled shifts in the wrong place, limbs not quite fitting together, but oh, so much better for it. There is a rawness, a feeling that this is rooted in the earth, in the real world.

But I should not have done it. I have put our friendship at risk, maybe even destroyed it, and it is only now that its future is in doubt that I realise how precious it is to me. I start to try to tease out what has gone so dreadfully wrong. It is not so much that I have been a brazen hussy. But more that Faramir worries, I think, about my motives. I recall his comment about me latching onto the first man who shows me a crumb of kindness. He is worried that I could have done that to anyone. I suppose it is not very flattering to think that it was not him I wanted; anyone equally kind would have done. But do I really think that? He has reason to think so. It is only a week or so since I fancied myself in love with Aragorn.

Why have I chosen to phrase it thus to myself, “fancied myself in love”, I wonder? I think back to my angry words, accusing Faramir of putting me on a pedestal. But of course, I am the one who is actually guilty of that. I put Aragorn on a pedestal – handsome, virtuous, brave, unattainable... and for that very reason, unthreatening. I would never have invited myself into Aragorn's bed, could not have done. Perhaps, if I am really honest, would not have wanted to.

So why Faramir? Simply because he showed me kindness? No, for when I thought he only pitied me, I despised him, or rather, despised his attention. It was only when I realised he offered me
compassion, that he had suffered as I had, that I warmed to him. And he laughed with me, not because I was witty, or he was witty (though he can be, very much when he chooses), but because I was imperfect, down to earth, and that made me human. And I could laugh with him because he is human. I will never put him on a pedestal, which is not to say I do not admire him. He is brave, noble, kind, gentle, intelligent. But he also lets me see his hurts, his weaknesses. He is honest with me.

So, there is the crux of how bad a mess I have made. Faramir now thinks that I would have lain with any man who showed me kindness, when in fact I wanted to lie with him, and him only, because of who he was. Oh Béma, what a tangle. How do I find my way through this?

I think of the look he gave me when we first kissed, those grey eyes full of desire, and that unfathomable look of gentleness. Then I realise I am completely wrong. The crux of my problem lies in a quite different place. The situation is even worse than I have imagined. The look was not unfathomable at all. It was clear as the midday sun. Faramir loves me. And thinks that I only feel friendship, and that any man would have done, had he been in the right place at the right time. And he is devastated by that belief.

And as for me, what do I feel? Confusion, utter confusion. All I know is that I have hurt him and that I would give anything to undo that. That I want our friendship back, and I want the promise of what more there might have been had I not rushed into things before we understood each other's feelings. But that it may well be too late, for how can I hope to heal the hurt I have inflicted?
Dawn finds me, gritty eyed and exhausted. I am no closer to untangling my feelings. But my reverie is interrupted by the maid, who brings a bowl of porridge and a clean dress in a drab brown colour. The porridge makes for a miserable breakfast, but there is nothing else. Unless Lothíriel's supplies arrive soon, the city will be in desperate straits. The maid laces up the back of the dress, then I slip a pinafore over the top to keep it clean during my labours and set off for the hall where the desperately injured lie. Lothíriel greets me there. We fetch and carry for a couple of hours before Ioreth allows us to take some respite. We retire to the walls, away from the stench of the sick room, and stand looking over the plains, with a waterskin. My mind skips back to the afternoon before, standing here beside Faramir. And I recall the innocent moments of flirtation in the garden which followed. The moments which may as well have been ages earlier, before I made such a mess of everything. How can I restore our friendship?

“Why so silent, Éowyn?” Lothíriel asks.

How I wish I could confide in her, ask her for advice. But I cannot do that, not without opening myself and Faramir to censure. And, much as I may deserve censure, he does not.

“Nightmares again,” I say, “I could not sleep.” This at least is the truth, if only part of it.

Then, across the scarred plain, in far the distance I make out the form of a galloping horse. From the blond hair, it looks to be one of our riders. He seems only to be able to use one arm, but that isn't enough to hinder him. Our vantage point gives us a view down to the main gate of the city. The rider gets closer and closer, finally reaching the gate, still at full pelt, then wheeling his horse in the narrow space beneath the gatehouse. We hear voices, too far away to make out what is being said, then see several runners scatter in different directions, presumably carrying messages. One seems to be making his way towards the Houses of Healing.

“We had better go back inside and see what is happening,” Lothíriel says. We arrive back in the hall just in time to find a breathless lad of about fourteen summers delivering his message.

“There was a skirmish, on the way to the Black Gates. The rider who just came... he gave advance warning...” The lad pauses for breath. “They are bringing wagons with the most badly wounded. You will need to be ready. Two, maybe three score or more. They are mostly in a bad way, having been on wagons for three days now.”

The warden immediately starts to issue orders. I am sent to fetch bars of carbolic soap, Lothíriel does the heavy work of carrying buckets of hot water. Maids are given the task of scrubbing down three wooden tables with the soap and hot water, while the kitchen is co-opted to clean the various medical instruments. I wince to see large saws among these. Having got the soap, I am sent to collect bottles of brandy and vinegar.

I ask Lothíriel about the brandy. “Do the healers get the men drunk before operating, to ease their pain?”

“No, for although it would dull their pain, it also makes them bleed more. They may get some to help them sleep once the bleeding has ceased,” Lothíriel explains. “Mostly, though, it is used to cleanse wounds. The warden believes that pus should not be left in wounds, but that instead pus-filled
abscesses should be drained and cleaned with vinegar and wine spirits. It is a theory that not many agree with, but so far, my impression is that fewer of the injured have died from fever in the days that have followed the battle than is usually the case.”

Apparently, the practice is mostly to give the men a leather gag to bite on, then get someone strong to hold them down while the healers operate. She tells me also that in extreme cases, where nothing seems to staunch the bleeding, the warden’s tactic of dipping the stumps of amputated limbs into hot pitch, brutal as it sounds, also helps. At this point in her explanation, I feel half tempted to take a healthy swig of the brandy myself. The next few hours will be hell on earth.

The first stretcher bearers start to appear while the maids are still scrubbing the tables. One of the older women of the house assesses each man as he is brought in. Some she deems can wait, others are urgent and are carried to the tables, yet others are beyond help and are taken to beds where they are given a tot of brandy to ease their passing. The small supplies of poppy syrup we have are kept back for those who might survive.

Some bear huge gashes and long open wounds. On arms and legs, the head, even on the chest, these are stitched, rapidly and efficiently. Only the abdominal wounds are left. These are a death sentence. As the stitching is done, many of the men pass out, a merciful release. The thing that staggers me is the speed with which the surgeons perform amputations, easing the skin back, excising the flesh, tying off blood vessels and cauterizing them with hot tongs, sawing through the bone, then drawing the flaps of skin which they secure with stitches, all in a matter of minutes. One healer alone manages six in the time I am there. I fear I shall live the rest of my life able to recall the harsh grating sound of the bone saw and the smell of men’s flesh burning.

Because I have only one arm to use, I am mostly set to dealing with the men who are dying and beyond help. One in particular claims my attention. One of the assistants arrives at the bed just as I do. She is not skilled in surgery or stitching wounds, but has experience of dressing them, and has come to replace his bandages to make his passing hours more comfortable. As she draws back the blood-soaked cloth across his abdomen, it is all I can do to stop myself gasping with horror. How he has survived this long is beyond anyone’s ken. He has a long sword slash, low across his stomach. The edges are ragged and bloody, the skin an angry red where infection has taken hold. Beneath the skin I can see a thin layer of yellow fat, then the pink flesh of his muscles, cut in twain by the blade. His flesh is mottled with greyish patches where gangrene has set in, and a putrid smell rises from the wound. I dig my nails into my hands to take my mind off the bile rising in my throat. Bulging out through the severed muscles are loops of his bowel, glistening greenish-grey. Even the nurse looks shocked, as she rapidly binds a clean bandage in place. She is meant to give only one tot of brandy, for our stocks are low, but she splashes an extra measure into the cup. “Ivorwen,” he murmurs. I kneel beside the bed. “I would like to see her, I have hung on this long.”

I call over the young lad, the messenger who first brought us news of the wounded, and ask the dying man where she is to be found. He gives directions which mean nothing to me, but the lad nods, and runs off, fleet of foot. I sit by the bedside, helping the man to take tiny sips of water, just enough to keep his mouth wet, for clearly more than this would only hasten his death. And while for most of the men in this corner, the corner set aside for the dying, a rapid death would be a mercy, this man clearly seeks above all to cling to life long enough to bid farewell to his beloved.

After long minutes, the lad returns, accompanied by a young woman with her hair swathed in a scarf. I clench my fists beneath my apron again; she is heavy with child, and tears threaten to overwhelm me. But I fight them back. I am only an onlooker in this tragedy, and must control my feelings. I move over to the water barrel to allow them some privacy. For the next hour or so, she sits, holding his hand. All the while I go about my business with the other patients, but I cannot help but watch
the couple out the corner of my eye.

At first they talk in low voices, but then the effort becomes too much for him, and his head sags back on the pillow. He looks at her for several minutes, his eyes never leaving her face, until eventually his eyelids flutter shut. I watch, out of the corner of my eye, as his breathing becomes shallower and shallower. I do not observe the moment his chest ceases to rise and fall, only learning of his death from her reaction. She gives a single, muffled cry, then, still holding his hand in hers, bows her head onto his chest and weeps silently.

I dip the water stoop into the barrel and refill my jug, gritting my teeth. Oh, to love like that and be loved. What a thing, both beautiful and terrible beyond measure. Beautiful because the strength of it allowed him to defy death for three long, agonising days. And terrible because of the pain of Ivorwen's grief.

For the first time in hours, I think of Faramir. He must have grieved thus for Linneth. And suddenly, all my confused thoughts are resolved into one simple, crystal clear realisation. I would grieve for him. He has become dear to me beyond measure. I feel an ache of need in my chest, a need for his presence. Whatever it takes, I will make things right between us.

This is the only moment I have for reverie in the rest of the long morning. I fetch water, mop brows, take away baskets of soiled dressings. The pinafore I wear over my drab brown dress is now smeared with blood and worse. Gradually, the chaos abates. The baskets of severed limbs are carried away, the most acutely injured men have been treated and only the Valar can now decide their fate, there is time to attend to the lesser wounds. I pause for a moment, and grasp the back of a chair for support. My head swims, and I feel as though my knees may fold under me. I blink a couple of times and shut my weary eyes for a moment. I wish I had not, for my mind fills with images of Éomer, Éothain, Gamling, Aragorn even, bearing the same wounds as I have just seen. But they lie on the battlefield in their agony, for all hope is gone. There are no wagons to bear them home, no home for them to return to. The whole world is ruin and destruction.

“Éowyn,” a voice says. I open my eyes and look round and see Faramir's grey eyes looking at me intently. At first I am not sure what to make of his expression, which is calm, and gives nothing away. But he must see me sway slightly, for he steps forward and takes my arm, supporting me with a strong grasp. “Éowyn, come into the garden with me and rest. You are not yet in full health, and you have exhausted yourself. Come.”

Wordlessly, he helps me out of the stained pinafore, and wraps the warm cloak he gave to me around my body. His hands brush my shoulders for a moment. Then he takes my arm once more and gently leads me to the door, down the narrow hallway and out into the garden.

We sit on the bench for a long time, in silence. At first, he holds my hand and strokes it gently. Then, seeing my head droop with tiredness, he wraps his arm around me and pulls my head close onto his shoulder. All he does is hold me, with a tenderness that takes my breath away. I rest my head, and let the sound of his heartbeat and breathing wash away the horrors of the morning.

My mind circles round how to broach the subject of last night's encounter. I cannot seem to find the right words, or indeed any words. Mardil of Lossarnach would have been able to deal with this moment better than I. Eventually, I speak, and it seems to me that meaningless babble falls from my lips.

“Last night, I did not want just anyone, you know. It was not just a response to the first man who had shown me any kindness. I wanted you, for who you are...” I curse my fumbling words.

Faramir rests his cheek against my head. “I know,” he whispers into my hair.
In the hours before dawn, as I lay in my bed, I imagined all the different responses he might make to my stumbled words of apology and explanation. But this one I could not have imagined.

“You know?”

“Well, you did say as much to me last night. And you would never make a diplomat.”

I cannot help myself: this makes me chuckle. “I suppose I have shown myself to lack all sense of decorum and propriety.”

“Well, there is that,” he says, and I feel his lips turn upwards in a smile, and hear the warmth in his voice. “But I was not thinking of your tendency to swear, and say things that most people would think were outrageous. I mean that you cannot hide your thoughts. Your face always lets me see what you are thinking.”

“Then you have the advantage of me. I am not sure that I know what I am thinking,” I say, which is, I realise, quite true. I know that I want Faramir, but quite what sort of feelings go with that want are still confused in my mind.

Again, he says simply: “I know.” And he strokes my hair once more. Then he says, “I will wait while you work out what your feelings are. Though I would be lying if I did not admit that I hope they will settle in my favour.”

“I thought... When you said that the first man who had shown me kindness... I worried that you might think me flighty, fickle, that you maybe still do, because I fancied myself in love with Aragorn. But that was some sort of girlish fancy. I think I was more attached to some sort of figment of my imagination than to a real man.”

“And I am real?” Again, I can hear the smile in Faramir's voice as he says this.

“Yes, for you laugh when I am foolish, and you are honest with me, and you let me see your weaknesses, and sometimes you make me frustrated by falling prey to needless melancholy, or by trying to be more noble than any human being with imperfections has any right to be, and then I want to shake you out of your fit of melancholy, or your fit of nobility.” Oh Béma, I am still not very good at expressing myself in words.

This time Faramir definitely laughs. “So you like me better than other men because sometimes I laugh at you, and sometimes I make you cross, and you think me too noble for my own good?”

“No, that's not what I am trying to say. Now you are teasing me. Though probably I deserve it. I am trying to explain why I think what I feel for you is real rather than some fancy, not why I feel it.”

“And what is it you feel?” Faramir asks.

I blush, then go on the offensive. “You have not told me what you feel, and I believe it is customary for a gentleman to reveal his thoughts on the matter first.”

Faramir lifts his head from its resting place against mine, and looks down at me. His look is teasing and knowing and seductive all at once. “I think we abandoned custom completely last night when you climbed into my bed a mere four days after we met,” he whispers. “And I think I told you then, that from the moment I first saw you, I thought you the most beautiful woman I have ever met. But since I suspect that you are not one to be swayed by a man praising your beauty, I will say instead that I love your bravery, your honesty, your humour, your headstrong nature.” His fingers run along my jaw. “And your passion,” he says, then leans forward. His lips brush against mine, just for a moment. Then he leans back against the stonework, and cradles my head against his shoulder, taking
hold of my hand as it lies on my lap and lacing his fingers with mine.

I suppose that this is the moment at which I should say something deeply felt about the change in my emotions, but instead my body takes control of the situation once more, this time to unleash an almighty yawn. I feel Faramir’s chest shake with silent laughter.

“Come, my lady, you are exhausted after this morning. I saw enough of the aftermath of the scene in the houses of healing to know that you have worked hard through scenes of carnage. And I suspect you have not slept well. Rest now.” And he draws my cloak close across my body, and strokes my hair with long, slow, soothing movements. I shut my eyes, and slide into a comfortable doze, recapturing the feeling of being cocooned in our own little world. I lose track of how long we sit thus.

Eventually, Lothíriel appears bearing a basket. She seems completely unperturbed by finding us in a close embrace, and, perhaps equally strangely, I feel no embarrassment. It seems that Faramir is similarly comfortable with this strange tableau, for he drops a gentle kiss on my forehead before disentangling his arm, only to take hold of my hand once more. We shift up the bench to make room for Lothíriel and her basket. She lifts the muslin cloth to reveal a hunk of bread and three wizened, precious apples. The three of us nibble at the dried bread in silence.

“This morning was as close to hell as I ever want to get,” says Lothíriel, finally breaking the silence.

“I saw enough when I arrived to see what you had dealt with,” says Faramir. “War is ever thus: bloody, horrible, desperate.”

“To listen to my brothers talk of errantry when we were children, you would have thought it mere sport,” says Lothíriel.

“Aye, but that was before they saw a real battle. I'll wager they think differently of it now,” Faramir replies.

We finish the meal, such as it is, then Lothíriel takes her leave of us and returns to the sick room. Faramir and I sit on the bench for several long minutes, then I find myself growing restless.

“Let us go up onto the walls. I want to see what the day has in store for us.” We stand and he offers me his arm. Together, we walk down the path to the flight of stone steps that lead up to the wall, and halt side-by-side on the battlements, looking East.

“What do you look for, Éowyn?”, Faramir asks me. He follows my gaze out over the plains, across the river, to the dark, lowering mountains beyond.

“The Black Gates lie yonder. It is seven days since they rode away,” I say.

“Seven days... which have brought me both a joy and a pain that I never thought to know.” Faramir half turns towards me. He stares down at me. “Joy to see you, but pain because now the fear and doubt of this evil time are grown dark indeed. Éowyn, I would not have this world end now, or lose so soon what I have found.”

“Lose what you have found?” My heart leaps at this. I look at him, and find his grey eyes fixed intently on me. I find myself filled with a need to comfort him, to make the world right for him, to be comforted in return, and I sense that he can see this in my face. But I find I cannot talk of this, not now, not with the dark clouds stretching across the sky from the eastern mountains towards the city. I try to explain this sense of impending disaster. “I stand on some dreadful brink, and it is utterly dark in the abyss before my feet, but whether there is any light behind me I cannot tell. I wait for some
stroke of doom.” Faramir holds my gaze, steady eyed, stern of face, and nods. I think he too feels this sense of doom.

We look out across the plain once more. The chill east wind which has haunted us for the last days suddenly drops, leaving an eerie calm in its place. The sun seems to fade, blotted by high cloud which leaves its light grey and wan, its warmth sucked out of the world leaving us cold and shivering. Even the birds seem to fall silent.

Our hands brush against each other, and without looking, or thinking, we clasp them together, clinging to one another for warmth and comfort. Far off, immeasurable leagues hence, behind the distant black mountains we see a sudden red flame leap into the sky, and a dark cloud reaching up to the heavens, blotting out the sky, billowing, roiling, menacing. Then a wave of sound, a distant roaring, seems to flow over the land like a wave breaking upon the shore. And the ground trembles under our feet.

“It reminds me of Númenor,” Faramir says. I find the sound of his voice an anchor in a world of chaos, and grip his hand with mine, our fingers interlacing. “The land of Westernesse that foundered beneath the sea, and of the great dark wave climbing over the green lands and above the hills, and coming on, darkness unescapable.”

I shut my eyes. “Do you think that the Darkness is coming? Darkness unescapable?” Instinctively, I move closer to him, and press against his shoulder, then open my eyes once more. He looks down at me, his eyes calm, gentle. His hand reaches up to rest on my shoulder. I rest my cheek against his chest. Suddenly it comes to me that whatever our fate, I feel completely safe. Whether we live or die, whether our world survives or tumbles into destruction, I am not alone. I will face what comes with Faramir by my side.

I feel his breath on my hair as he answers my question.

“No,” he says, “It was but a picture in the mind. I do not know what is happening. The reason of my waking mind tells me that great evil has befallen and we stand at the end of days. But my heart says nay; and a hope and joy are come to me that no reason can deny. Éowyn, Éowyn, White Lady of Rohan, in this hour I do not believe that any darkness will endure.” And I feel his lips brush my forehead.

We wrap our arms around one another, and turn to face the east. A fierce wind suddenly engulfs us, whipping at our cloaks and hair. The clouds blow from the face of the sun, torn away like streamers, and the water of the distant river gleams silver in the sunlight. Suddenly our hearts are light, and we hear people across the city cry out in relief. Through the shreds of high cloud, we see a single Eagle, huge and proud, soaring high above the plain.

He cries to us, bringing glorious tidings of the fall of Sauron and the victory or our King. “Sing now, sing and rejoice,” his voice commands us, “Sing and be glad, all ye children of the West.”

And from the streets in the city below us, we hear the voices of people singing joyous songs.

Faramir draws me close to him, and I rest my head on his shoulder.

“The darkness could not endure; and now the world is made anew, full of hope,” he says.
The ancient Greek physician Galen held that pus was important for the healing of wounds; this view was not challenged until Medieval times by Hugo of Lucca among others (a challenge seen as dangerously radical at the time).

The use of brandy (or rum) post-operatively, rather than during the operations, is taken from descriptions of the Battle of Trafalgar. Hot pitch was also used there, but only sparingly, in the most extreme cases. The surgeons and their assistants prided themselves on the speed with which they could perform amputations. William Beatty, the surgeon on the Trafalgar, performed ten amputations after the battle. It was common practise to tie off the arteries and other blood vessels then leave them dangling, which often led to post-operative infections. I've made my surgeons take a bit more care.
Faramir and I stood together on the walls for a long time, hand in hand, struck dumb by feelings of relief. But eventually he had to leave to return to his duties, organising the distribution of the scarce food and the much-needed supplies, with the additional problem of finding food to send to the armies at the field of Cormallen. Now I am sitting alone in my chamber, curiously numb. A flat feeling of listlessness has overcome me, and I feel guilty too, because surely I should be overcome with joy. It is still quite cold in the small stone room, and I am wearing the blue jewelled cloak. Perhaps it is my fancy, but it seems to me that on its collar I can smell the faint scent of Faramir, his soap, his hair, everything that is him, from when we stood embracing each other. If it is just a fancy, it is a tender one, and cheers me slightly.

Suddenly there is a knock at the door, and my heart soars for a moment, hoping it is Faramir, though I know that in all probability it is not. I bid my visitor enter. It is Lothíriel, with a package under her arm. She takes several swift strides across the room as I rise to greet her, then, dropping the package on the bed, wraps her arms round me in a hug.

“I cannot believe we have won,” she says, releasing me.

“Nor I. It all seems unreal,” I reply. Lothíriel gives me an appraising glance, and for a moment, she looks uncannily like her cousin.

“It is too much to take in at once, isn't it?” she asks.

“Yes, I should be feeling joy but instead... it is almost as if I feel nothing. Perhaps it would be easier if I had been in the battle and was now physically exhausted, but filled with the exhilaration of having survived. Or if I had something of importance to do, like Faramir.”

“It will come,” she says. “I know exactly what you mean. We have lived under this dread for so long, and though it is not so long since our city was besieged, we are so far removed from the final battle, that the ending of it seems unreal.” She pauses, then smiles. “You like Fara, don't you?”

“Yes,” I say. It seems pointless to deny it. I feel slightly ridiculous, though, for I feel the heat rise in my skin, and know I am blushing, like some slip of a girl.

“He loves you, you know,” Lothíriel continues. I nod. “Good, then I can trust you not to be awkward about accepting what I have brought for you. There is to be a court dinner of sorts tonight to celebrate. Fara is to preside over it, as Lord Steward, and there will be lots of elderly noblemen who were too infirm to go to war. So I suppose it will not be the most thrilling of celebrations, and in any case, there is not much food for a feast, but we shall make shift somehow. And you cannot go in one of these drab hospital dresses. I have brought you a gown of mine – it will be a bit tight across the bosom, but if Fara is anything like my brothers, he will only like it the better for that. Then again, he isn't really like them, so it may be a mistake to think he will notice such things – he is a bit shy.”

Béma, now I am scarlet with embarrassment. I have a sudden, unbidden, extremely vivid recollection of Faramir's cock pressed hard against me, coupled with the awkward knowledge that were it not for a couple of thin layers of cloth and my broken arm, I would no longer be a maid. Just the thought of it sends blood surging round my body – not just to my cheeks, either. I comfort myself with the thought that Lothíriel will almost certainly mistakenly attribute my blush to innocence rather than
experience. She busies herself opening the package, and shakes out a fine silk dress, of a rich dark red.

“Oh, this is too much.” I cannot imagine myself in such a gown. Sometimes, pieces of silk brought by traders from the far South make their way to Rohan, and are sewn in as panels to decorate dresses, but a whole dress? But not only is it of silk, the colour is unlike anything I have seen. Wool and linen take green and blue dyes well, even shades of rusty red, but not this incredible deep ruby shade.

“Nonsense,” Lothíriel responds, her tone brisk and business-like. She holds it up against me. “You are a bit taller than I, but it will do very nicely, I think.” And equally briskly, she unlaces the back of my drab woollen dress, then helps me into the silk dress, lacing the back as if she were my maid. She is right about the bosom; the fabric is rather tight. My traitorous imagination unhelpfully supplies me with a vision of Faramir holding me close, his height giving him the perfect vantage point. And surely the texture of this silk, shot through with iridescent threads, was meant for a man's hands to roam across. Then I wonder what it would feel like to have him unlace the back of the gown. I swallow, and hope that none of my thoughts show on my face.

“Éowyn?” I give a slight start. Lothíriel laughs. “You were wool-gathering! And I'd wager that I could tell the direction of your musings.” Oh Béma, my thoughts do show on my face.

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The Palace of the Stewards is huge and grand, more impressive than any building I have ever seen. But the stone is cold and impersonal, and it serves only to make me long for the warm wood and living carvings of Meduseld. I follow Lothíriel into the great hall. Faramir stands at the far end of the room, talking to a group of elderly men in formal clothes. There are a few other people in the room, including a handful of older women who have chosen to stay in Minas Tirith even though most of the women and children left before the siege.

He turns, first noticing Lothíriel's approach and giving her a warm smile, his face suddenly lit with happiness. Then he sees me. Faramir said earlier today that he could always see my thoughts written on my face. But this time I can see his. His normally guarded, diplomatic expression has vanished. In its place is a look of infinite tenderness. The look lasts only a moment, then he seems to remember his surroundings, and schools his features into an expression of polite friendliness. He seems to make his excuses to the noblemen he has been talking to, then makes his way over to us and greets us with the sort of formality to be expected in these surroundings.

“Dear cousin,” he says, kissing Lothíriel's hand. “And my Lady Eowyn of Rohan.” And he kisses my hand. The gesture is polite, but my skin seems to come alive beneath his lips. Then his hand rests on my sleeve, and he whispers in a very low voice, “You are beautiful.” His tone of voice, and the smile which accompanies his words, make me forget to breathe. But the moment is only fleeting.

“My Lord Steward, the tables have been set and all is ready,” a voice says from behind his shoulder. Again, Faramir adopts a more neutral expression, and turns and thanks the man. He offers an arm to both of us, and escorts the two of us to the group of men at the other end of the hall. He introduces us, and an elderly lord, the Lord Turgon of Lamedon, is given the task of escorting me to dinner.

I find myself seated at the high table between Turgon and another equally elderly councilman of the citadel, Lord Castamir. Opposite us sits Castamir's wife, a thin, pinched woman. Turgon strikes me as gentlemanly enough, but Castamir and his wife, with their aloof manner, are the embodiment of my prejudices about Gondorian nobility. To my disappointment, Faramir is too far away to converse with, several seats away on the other side of the table. Beside him sits Lothíriel, as befits her station as Princess of Dol Amroth.
I try to make polite conversation. Some comes easily enough – we are all of us in a state of exhausted relief at the ending of the war and our unlikely victory. Lord Turgon praises the Rohirrim in suitably sincere tones, and even Castamir and his wife utter some polite thanks.

But the jostling for position and the court politics is a game I cannot join. I am not sure of the rules of the game, nor the undercurrents in the discussion. And I am certainly in ignorance of the power structures and hidden alliances and rivalries around the table.

One recurring theme is the fact that an unknown Ranger of the North has come to Gondor and led the armies to victory, and now claims the Kingship. It becomes abundantly clear to me that some of these old men do not like the upset this poses to their familiar hierarchy, and doubt the validity of his claim. I am not sure whether to mention the fact that I have met Aragorn, and that my Uncle, my brother and Mithrandir are all convinced that he is indeed Elendil's heir.

I decide that this is most definitely an issue where I might do more harm than good were I to get involved in the conversation. This proves to be a wise decision, for I soon discover that opinion is sharply divided on the issue of the value of Mithrandir's counsel. It becomes clear that Castamir was a close ally of Faramir's father.

“Lord Turgon, while I do not doubt the part that Mithrandir played in holding back the enemy's hordes from our gates, you must surely remember that Lord Denethor, may his soul rest with Mandos, felt that the wizard was too ready to meddle in sovereign affairs of state.”

“One does not wish to speak ill of the dead, but perchance such meddling was needed,” Turgon responds. “These last few months, his judgement on occasion lacked the acuity of earlier times.” Béma, what a long-winded way of saying Denethor wasted his troops and almost his only remaining son in a vainglorious piece of insanity.

“Denethor was a brilliant man, and shrewd tactician,” Castamir answers, “And husbanded the resources of the city most ably.”

“No one is denying that, at least not until the very last days of his life. But in his final months, his decisions did not always lie with the best of the options available,” Turgon says, “His decision to attempt to retake Osgiliath, when we clearly did not have the forces to do the job, was not well conceived.”

The man to the left of Castamir's wife glances down the table, and adds his voice in support of the late Denethor. “On the contrary, the fault lay not with Lord Denethor. For Denethor was not on the field of combat, and a general may come up with the best of strategies, only to have it fail because of the tactical inadequacies of his junior officers.”

I find myself clenching my hand round a non-existent sword hilt at this comment. Merry has told me the details, gleaned from Pippin and Mithrandir, of the retreat from Osgiliath. If I recall Merry's words aright, he described it as a suicide mission, and made it clear that were it not for Faramir's captaincy, none of the troops would have returned alive. I am so incensed I almost miss Castamir's next comment. He returns, with veiled hints, to his earlier theme that the short supplies in the city are not merely due to having been besieged but in some way due to a miscalculation in organising what scarce resources are left. Obviously Castamir and his ally are guarded in what they say explicitly, for the object of their subtly implied censure is but a few seats away. I find that I must read their views more from what they leave unsaid than from what they say, but it is clear that they do not approve of Faramir coming to the Stewardship of the City. And Turgon, while clearly of the opinion that Faramir's performance on the field of combat was beyond reproach, adopts a studied neutrality when it comes to assessing Faramir's abilities as Steward. I sense that he is reserving judgement, but could be swayed to join Castamir's faction if more damning evidence could be given of Faramir's alleged mismanagement.
To add to the discomfort of the whole affair, there is the insane contrast between the elderly lords' political manoeuvrings and the sidelong glances Faramir keeps sending my way, which make my insides turn to liquid fire. And the fact that I am sure that I have seen Lothíriel intercept some of these glances, and she is struggling to maintain her countenance. Several times I see the corners of her lips twitch, and she reaches for her napkin to hide her expression. Would that I found the situation so amusing. But I am all too aware that any of those glances, if intercepted by the wrong eyes, would only add grist to the mill as far as Castamir's machinations are concerned. For I am an unknown quantity, a stranger from a wild Northern realm, and no doubt if they do not seek to depose Faramir outright, they will have in mind some alliance with some part of their power block, presumably to be cemented in the way Lothíriel described to me, by a suitable marriage to one of their daughters. I can only hope that the coming of Aragorn to take up his rightful kingship will put a stop to this impending power struggle.

Then, just as I think the evening can become no more awkward than it is already, suddenly there is one of those lulls in conversation which occasionally take place even in large gatherings. And into the near-silence, Castamir's wife says something in a deliberate stage-whisper to the man next to her, the man who is clearly her husband's ally. The words are in that form of Elvish which the Gondorian court uses, for seemingly this woman has abandoned even the pretence of including me in their conversation. I feel everyone stiffen with shock, so she must have said something truly outrageous. But the really unsettling thing is Faramir's reaction; his face has gone pale with fury.

Lothíriel reacts quickly, with the polished ease of someone who has seen these political games played out from her earliest years. “But of course the Lady Éowyn is a shieldmaiden. She was among the Rohirrim host who rode to our aid in our darkest hour. I for one shall be eternally grateful to her and her countrymen.” I suspect that she has left out a crucial adjective in front of 'shieldmaiden'.

The woman's conversational partner tries to poison Lothíriel's attempts at diplomacy. “A woman, in a battle? With the best will in the world, madam, surely you were more of a hindrance than a help. How many of your comrades fell defending you? I see you took a serious hurt to your arm, which must have incommode both you and your bodyguards considerably.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Faramir about to explode. I decide both that he needs me to prevent him making a complete fool of himself, and also that I can fight my own damned battles.

“My shield arm was broken by the morning star wielded by the Witch King of Angmar. But although it incommode me, as you put it,” I say, carefully and deliberately adopting the tone of voice one uses towards a small child, “You must understand that, being my shield arm, it was my left arm. Broken or no, it did not stop me taking his head off with the sword I held in my right.” I say this in a crystal clear voice that rings round the hall. And I look at the worm of a man opposite with the same look of ice and steel that I gave the Wraith as I told him that I, Éowyn daughter of Éomund, was no man. He shrivels visibly. I smile. There will be no need for decapitation, this time at any rate.

There is a stunned silence in the hall. All eyes are on me, but the ones I feel most keenly are Faramir's. He is looking at me, quite openly, with an unabashed look of desire, the same look I saw on his face last night as we clung to each other, half naked, in the candlelight. Thank heavens that Lothíriel, ever the diplomat, interjects again.

“You must be looking forward to seeing your brother again. Will you ride to Cormallen?”

“Your brother?” asks Lord Turgon, who is clearly more than happy to lend aid to Lothíriel's diplomatic mission. “Would I be right in thinking he is one of the lords of Rohan?”

At this, Faramir speaks. “The Lady Éowyn is sister to the King of Rohan.” Again, he gives me a
look of undisguised admiration, which surely must be noticed by everyone. I try to speak rapidly to
defuse the situation and distract attention.

“Though my brother would be the first to say how he would rather, a thousand times over, that
Théoden King were still alive. But these times have taken much that is best from both our realms.”
My words seem to get through to Faramir; he gathers his wits, and stands. He delivers a brief but
moving eulogy for the fallen, talking respectfully of his father and with great fondness and warmth of
his brother. Then he proposes a toast to the dead, and we stand to bid our farewells to those we have
loved.

After this incident, the rest of the dinner passes in relative, if dull, calm. At the end of the evening,
Lothíriel very pointedly takes my arm, curseys to Faramir and makes our farewells. She links arms
with me and steers me out of the room.

“Making sure I don't decapitate any Gondorian nobility?” I whisper to her.

“No, making sure you are visibly chaperoned. Sainted Valar, some of the looks you and Fara were
exchanging. It might have been acceptable had he been gazing at you with the sort of pure, courtly
love my aunt's dreadful books speak of. And if you were returning shy, chaste glances. But I think I
now understand at first hand the meaning of the phrase 'undressing someone with one's eyes.'”

“Nay, at second hand, only.” I say. I find that I have got past the stage of being embarrassed. “Do
you think anyone else noticed?”

“Everyone noticed. Why else do you think that dreadful woman made her dreadful comment?”

“Out of interest, I collect that there was a word attached to 'shieldmaiden' which you did not
translate. What was it?”

“Barbarian,” says Lothíriel, grimly.

I laugh. “I suppose I should be grateful it wasn't 'wanton'. And there are various lords of Gondor
who should be grateful that I was not carrying my sword.”

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It is an hour or so later, and still I cannot sleep. I have been tossing and turning ever since I got into
my narrow bed. I feel utterly drained and miserable. Today the shadow in the East has been defeated
and I should be filled with joy and happiness. And yet I have had no great celebration, only that
hideous travesty in the Palace of the Steward. Nor have I felt like celebrating. Had Éomer been here,
how different things would have been. He would have swept me into a bear-hug, and the Rohirrim
would have thrown themselves whole heartedly into celebration. There would have been singing,
drinking, dancing. Not the staid, formal dances of Gondor, where solemn and proper young maidens
are held daintily by the fingertips, but the cheery reels and rounds of my country, where the girls are
grasped by the waist, and once grasped, flung merrily around the dance floor until they are breathless
and giggling. And in circumstances like these, Éomer would not have cared if his sister had partaken
of too much mead. Who knows, maybe I would have even joined in the soldiers' bawdy songs: I
know the words now.

And maybe Faramir would have escaped from the horrible formal feast to dance with me amid the
tents of our Éoreds. I imagine his hands at my waist, his face smiling down at me as we swirl round
and round to the wild fiddles and fifes. And I imagine him pulling me out of the circle of light made
by the bonfires, and into the shadows, where he kisses me, and makes free with his hands, and I am
happy to let him make free, I encourage him to further exploration, I let my own hands rove over his
hard muscles. I imagine us finding our way to where the horses are stabled, and tumbling into the hay together, to finish what we started last night. The very thought of it makes moisture pool between my legs – I have pleasured myself often enough to recognise that feeling. For a moment I wonder whether to run my fingers there, imagining them to be Faramir's. But instead I content myself with imagining the smell and scent of the hay, the feel of Faramir's lips and beard on my skin.

Then I wonder whether Éomer would come looking for me, and whether he would react as he had in my dream. Éomer! Suddenly I am hit by heart-wrenching grief. I do not even know whether he is alive. The Eagle brought only the news of victory, no list of the dead or wounded. I find myself whispering the prayers to the Mother of the Earth from my childhood, she whom the Elves call Yavanna, and to the Mother of the Stars, Elbereth. I feel tears trickle onto my pillow.

Then my mind starts to run once more through the horrible dinner. My head spins at the thought of the spiteful murmurings aimed at Faramir and (in his absence) at Aragorn. And at the same time, my head spins in quite a different way when I think of the way Faramir looked at me, as though he wanted to possess me and take me for his own. For, gentle as he is, and much as I know that he would only take me if I was full willing and wanted him every bit as much as he wants me, there is no doubt of the fierceness of his desire for me. And so my mind spirals round: bleak feelings of anti-climax; worry about my brother; hatred of the old men of the court; desire for Faramir. Round and round, pointlessly, endlessly.

It is during this futile circling that I hear a soft knock at the door to my chamber.

“Who is there?” I ask, though the feelings of molten quicksilver low in my stomach tell me the answer I want, and that answer comes.

“Faramir,” he says softly, then lifts the latch and slips into my room, dropping the bar across the door behind him. It is his turn to shift awkwardly from foot to foot. “I had to come to you. I had to tell you that I was sorry. Sorry for forcing you to endure that mad simulacrum of a real celebration. Sorry for the evil words of Castamir and his allies. I could not leave you alone at night with the memories of that, not on this night, of all nights, when we should be filled with hope, not poisoned by bitter strife. And throughout that torture, all I wanted was to be with you. We have finally, against all chance and reason, come victorious to the end of a war that has lasted centuries before our birth, and I want to be alive, not half-dead, to be with someone alive, not to be surrounded by those more dead than alive.”

“I know. I have felt strangely listless and sad all day, and I need to let go, to come back to life. I want the sort of celebration my countrymen would have had, with singing, and dances, and mead flowing freely.”

“Gladly would I have danced with you, and sung songs to your beauty,” Faramir says.

Then, in an echo of last night, I lift the corner of the covers. “Get into the warmth.”

He looks at me, eyes dark and stormy. “Éowyn,” he says, hesitantly, his breath catching, his voice filled with want. “Is this wise? You know what will happen if I get into your bed.”

“Yes,” I say, simply. “Now get into the damnèd bed.”

I see his throat move as he swallows, then he starts to take off his clothes. First his cloak is cast over the chair, then he pulls off his boots. The way he hops from foot to foot would amuse me in any other circumstances, but all I can think about is how much I desire him. In the last day, I have been consumed with burning need. But now I feel more than just need: there is an aching void in the centre of me. My need is a physical pain, and I shake and tremble with want.
Faramir unfastens his tunic and pulls it over his head. I watch in the flickering candlelight, taking in the shape of his shoulders, the hair across the muscles of his chest, the way his waist tapers down to his hips. He slips off his breeches, and, clad only in his braies, steps towards the bed.

“You might as well take those off,” I say, stunned at my boldness. “After all, we know what a sorry muddle I made of trying to take them off one-handed.” Faramir smiles, a wild, feral smile full of desire, and again I feel as though my insides are melting. He unfastens the braies and steps out of them. Oh Béma! I take in the sight of his cock, standing proud, amid the dark hair at the top of his thighs. Of their own volition, the muscles inside me clench and contract. My stomach feels as if it is tied into a knot. I rise up onto my knees, holding the covers back. He climbs onto the bed, kneeling and facing me. I swallow hard.

“Can you help me with my shift?” Gazing at me, he reaches out and takes the hem of the garment, pulling it gently up, easing it carefully over my injured arm. Once more my insides are filled with fire at the look he gives me, his eyes travelling slowly, hungrily, possessively over my naked body.

“Éowyn,” he whispers, and reaches out to run his hand across my shoulder, then down over my breast, brushing the nipple, then down over my belly. I reach out with my good arm, and touch his chest. Gently, he takes hold of me and lowers me back down on the mattress, then his mouth meets mine, in a kiss that is first soft, then becomes hot and wanton as his tongue explores mine. I grab at his hair, and push my tongue back against his. We both moan, our kiss becoming wild and uncontrollable.

He runs his hand over my hip then up the inside of my thigh. I cannot control myself: my hips jerk as his hand dips into the moisture between my legs and slides forward across the sensitive folds.

“Faramir... Please...” These are all the words I can find, and I move my hips to meet him. This time, I feel his cock at my entrance and this time there is no fabric to hinder him. I raise my hips, trying to push against his hardness, while clinging to his back with my right arm. He whispers my name, then pushes himself inside. The noise I make is like an animal, hungry, primal. It hurts, yes, but at the same time it takes away the empty ache. I am full, stretched by the hard length of him, his body pressing down on me, and the glory of it fills my mind as he fills my body.

He lies still for a moment and covers my mouth with a gentle kiss, and I lie, taking the measure of this new feeling. Then he eases himself back, and I whimper at the loss of him. But this is only the precursor to him pushing back into me, a firmer thrust this time, and now I groan with the pleasure of it. He has left his fingers nestling in the triangle of hair at the top of my legs, and, slick with moisture from me, they stroke in time with his thrusts. I can hear my own breath coming in gasps and moans, hear the answering sounds of his desire, and I move my hips against him as I try to push back against his length with each thrust, encouraging him to bury himself within me. Somewhere beneath his fingers, a hot fire starts to spread outwards, engulfing me, and my mind loses all sense of reality, breaking into myriad pieces. I think I scream out as I am overcome by the sensation. Then I lie, trembling, no coherent thought possible. But now my body senses a sudden emptiness, and all at once I feel his cock pressed against my belly as he shudders convulsively, hot liquid spilling between us, wet and slick over our skin. His body becomes limp, and I lie beneath his weight, both our breathing coming in ragged gasps.

I am not sure how long we lie like this, utterly spent. Eventually, Faramir eases himself up and raises his head.

“Éowyn, my beautiful Éowyn, my love,” he whispers, and his smile is like the sun rising. He strokes his fingers across my cheek. Then a look of concern crosses his face. “I must find a cloth, lest my seed...” I realise all of a sudden why he left me empty and spilled himself across my belly. For some reason, utterly unaccountable given what we have just shared, this makes me blush, though I doubt...
he can see this in the candlelight. He leans over the side of the bed and grabs his braies, using them to wipe up. Then, dropping them onto the floor, he draws the covers back over us, and pulls me against his chest.

We lie like this, with him stroking my hair, for an age or more, before either of us feels ready to put our thoughts into words. For the first time I can remember for many years, I feel at peace.

“We may not have been able to dance and sing,” Faramir whispers into the near-darkness, “But I feel joy at last.”

I turn my face upwards, and kiss the stubble on his jaw. “Joy. Yes, that seems right.”

“You have no regrets?”

“None. We have escaped the world’s ruin. What could be more fitting than this?” I murmur.

I roll onto my back to ease my arm into a more comfortable position. Faramir raises himself on one elbow and gazes at me. His fingers trace gently over my skin.

“You are beautiful, my love,” he says. In response, I let my right hand drift over his chest, up to his shoulder, then over the muscles of his arm. He gives a soft hum of contentment as I do this, then smiles, and I feel a bubble of happiness grow in my chest, swelling so large I feel it will stop me from breathing. Suddenly he gives a broad grin, and reaches across me, to the chair beside the bed. I wonder for a moment what he is doing. He grabs the cloak he dropped earlier, and pulls it over to the bed, spreading it on top of both of us. Then he kisses me very gently.

“I spoke to Lothi of your embarrassment when I gave you a cloak. She told me what it means.” And again, he kisses me. Then, wrapped in his cloak and in his arms, I drift off to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

"Marriage by cloak" borrowed, with permission, from Zees Muse's headcanon.
I open my eyes to find the grey half-light before dawn filtering through the high, narrow window. Beside me, Faramir stirs, rolling onto his side, then raising his head slightly to look at me. His dark curls are wild and unruly, his eyes filled with sleep still. But his smile, oh, his smile. That smile could warm me through a whole hard winter in my native land. Without even pausing for thought, I reach out with my good hand and slide my fingers through his hair, pulling his head down, pressing my mouth to his. The kiss is hot and demanding, and I give a tiny whimper as he finally pulls his lips away from mine.

“Éowyn, you know that I want to stay here, stay and love you, but I must go. People will start to stir soon, and I must return to my own chamber before I am missed, or worse, seen leaving yours.” His eyes, stormy grey, look into mine, and he dips his head towards me to steal another kiss.

I run my hand across his cheek. “I know you must go. But I too wish you could stay, wish we could lie here for all eternity.” Then I giggle. “Or at least till noon, for I am sure we would eventually need to eat.” Then I wonder at myself. How many years has it been since I giggled at something?

Faramir laughs, and strokes my hair, then kisses me once more. Then his brows knit together in a frown, and he becomes serious.

“I may not see much of you for a few days. I must see to the food supplies: if Lothí’s ships do not arrive soon, the population will start to go hungry. And they have suffered so much, I would do anything to avoid adding to their burdens. Also, when people get hungry, strife and unrest are not far behind. As well as that, I need to send supplies to Cormallen. Lord Aragorn, realising how short of food Minas Tirith was, and, knowing the odds and ever the pragmatist, took only supplies for the outward journey.” His eyes are filled with concern. As with his troops, he cares deeply for the people of his native city. I reach out and stroke his cheek, brushing his dark hair back, and he turns his head slightly to kiss my fingertips.

Then a more cynical expression crosses his face. “Not only that, you were there at that hideous dinner last night – and you are shrewd, intelligent and versed in the ways of court life. You know that Castamir seeks to find reason to remove me from my office and set himself up as Regent. And his eye is on the longer game: challenging the validity of Aragorn’s claim to the throne. I must tread carefully, and must not only do my job well, but be seen to be doing it well. I would hate us to have survived the war against Sauron’s evil, only for the lesser evil of men to undo us.” He pauses, and a troubled look crosses his face. I sense that he wants to say something but fears to hurt me.

“And you fear that if you are seen instead to be dallying with a barbarian shieldmaiden from the wilds of the North, Castamir and his allies will claim you to be in dereliction of your duties,” I say.

“Oh, so Lothí told you what his shrew of a wife said. Yes, there is that.” He strokes my cheek in return and looks at me tenderly. Then his face takes on a grave sadness. “You will think me a wretch, an unprincipled wretch. I want to claim you as mine, proclaim my love for you. But there is more at stake here than just the two of us. Castamir will use you to tear my country apart, if he finds out about us.”

“Hush, my love, my foolish love. No-one could think you unprincipled.” I run my fingers through his hair, then smile. “Though if it appeals to your tendency to be overly harsh with yourself, I will call you ‘wretch’ if you want, but only if I am allowed to kiss you at the same time.”

Faramir laughs softly at this. “Will you wait for a happier hour, when I can give to you all the time
that is yours by right? For I promise that I will love you so well, so much, that I will make up for the next few days a thousand fold.”

Suddenly I am pierced through and through by a feeling of love for him. I look at his face, so serious and sad now, and say, “I know that you love me. And I know that you have never made a promise which you did not keep, so I trust you with all faith.”

Faramir gives me a gentle kiss, then gets out of bed. I take in the line of his back, his muscles outlined as he moves, his buttocks and hamstrings, those long legs. And I am filled with a sense of possessiveness. This is my man, and no other woman shall ever have him. Then he half turns to reach for his breeches, cast carelessly over the chair, and I see a glimpse of his stomach muscles, carved taut. My eyes drift inexorably lower, and I see his cock twitch, already half erect. I look up at his face, to find him looking back at me, an enigmatic look on his face.

“I thought to feel arousal watching your beauty. But this is a new and curious thing. I find myself aroused seeing you watching me.” The enigmatic look becomes a smile, and I can see his quicksilver mind considering this new idea, examining it from every angle. It seems to please him very much. I am not sure what to say, so I draw back the covers, wordlessly inviting him to join me. He steps towards me, then stops abruptly.

“Éowyn! The sheets. There is blood on your sheets.” I look down to see a smear of blood across the white linen. “I have brought disgrace upon you,” he says, brow furrowed, an anguished look on his face. I find myself both shaking my head at his foolishness and at the same time rejoicing in his concern for me.

“Nay, I have but to tell the maid that my monthly courses started a little earlier than normal. It will require a degree of artifice to maintain the lie, but I am sure all can be managed.” I pause for a moment, then add, with a grin, “It is fortunate that we did not lie together the other night, for I cannot think of any plausible explanation why you could have come to have blood on your sheets.”

Faramir smiles too, then his face grows serious again. How quickly his moods seem to change. It is not just his reasoning, but also his emotions that move like quicksilver. Beneath the calm surface he presents to the world, his whole being is mercurial.

“Éowyn, did I hurt you?” he asks, sitting on the edge of the bed and running his hand over my shoulder. “I should have held myself in check better.”

“It was nothing to signify, and replaced so soon with pleasure that it was forgotten almost the instant it had happened,” I answer, placing my hand on top of his. “And I did not want you to hold yourself in check. I wanted to feel your passion.” I feel a tremor run through him as I say this and for a moment I wonder whether he will get back into the bed with me. Then, through the window, muffled by the panes of glass, comes the sound of footsteps in the courtyard below.

“I should go,” says Faramir. The moment of desire has passed, spoiled by the thought that other people are beginning to stir. He pulls on his clothes (except for the soiled braies), and bends to give me another kiss, his lips soft upon mine.

“Help me back into my shift – I do not think I could explain easily how I came to be sleeping naked,” I say, and Faramir obliges, his fingertips brushing my skin as he helps me get the garment over my head and more importantly, over my arm. One final kiss, and he is gone, closing the door softly behind him. I pull the covers about me, the bed feeling chill and empty without him beside me. His scent lingers on the pillow, and I roll over and bury my face in it.

~o~O~o~
When I enter the hall in the houses of healing, Lothíriel greets me with a quizzical look.

“‘You seem very happy,’” she says, in the bland diplomatic tone I have learned she uses when she is trying to get a reaction from me. I try very hard not to give anything away.

“This time yesterday morning, we thought we were on the brink of the end of the world, and today the war is over and we have won. Of course I am happy,” I reply. Lothíriel gives a muffled snort and returns to her task of folding bandages.

Lothíriel is not the only one to notice my mood. Ioreth has given me the job of tending to our Riders, and as I move among them, bringing water, changing the simpler dressings, fetching and emptying bed pans, several of them comment on my smile. Two in particular, Aldwulf and Cynefrid, hit pretty near the mark.

“So, my lady, was there dancing and mead to celebrate last night?” Cynefrid asks.

“Do these strange folk even know how to dance?” Aldwulf adds.

“Of course they do, dullard. Can you not see from the lady's face that she did not want for a dancing partner last night?” Cynefrid says.

“They had a celebration of sorts, but it was very stiff and formal,” I say, but I cannot quite keep the laughter out of my eyes.

“Very slow witted, these Gondorians must be, not to want to dance when there is a lady as beautiful as you present,” Aldwulf says.

His friend chips in with an aside to his companion, but an aside I am clearly meant to hear, “From the blush on her cheeks, I'd wager there was at least one who wanted to.” And I realise that he is right: I am blushing. Béma, am I walking round in such a state that everyone can read my mind?

“Hah, you've changed your tune. Bunch of pansies, you said. Only half an hour ago, you claimed they only cared for buggery, and only lay with women to get an heir,” Aldwulf snorts, then, remembering I am present, claps his hand over his mouth. A muffled murmur comes from behind his hand “Your pardon, my lady.”

“I cannot help myself. I laugh out loud, partly at his embarrassment, and partly at the recollection of how far from the mark he is in this assessment, at least where one Gondorian is concerned. Then I remember Castamir's wife.

“Well, if the Lady of Gondor I met last night is anything to go by, some of the men at least would have every excuse to take refuge in buggery. Though I also met her husband, and I doubt any man would be willing to oblige him.”

Aldwulf and Cynefrid look at me wide eyed, mouths agape, then all of a sudden burst into raucous laughter. Ioreth comes bustling over.

“What are you thinking of, to be making this dreadful din. The two of you, hush, for mercy's sake.” She shoots me a look, clearly suspecting that I am in some way to blame for the commotion. Suitably chastened I bid the two farewell and continue my rounds with the water pitcher. From behind my back, I hear Cynefrid's voice.

“Well, whoever he is, he's a lucky sod, that particular Gondorian pansy.”

“Aye,” adds his friend, and I'm pretty sure I'm not meant to hear the next remarks, for their voices drop to whispers. “For if the look on her face is owt to go by, he may be a pansy, but he's no poofter. Not if he can make her smile like that.”
“You keep it clean, lad. She’s a lady. And the King’s sister. And she killed a fucking wraith, so you don’t want to piss her off.”

“That’s as maybe, but she’s a healthy young woman too.”

I blush scarlet, once again, and, torn between mortification and hysteria, feel laughter bubbling up inside me, threatening to burst out. I find I have to raise my hand to cover my face. Thank Béma Ioreth does not speak Rohirric.

~o~O~o~

I have lunch with Merry. He rises to his feet as I approach, and flings his arms round my waist, giving me a heartfelt hug. Then he apologises for being over familiar.

“Nonsense, my friend,” I say, taking his arm and leading him back to the sunlit corner of the garden where he has been sitting.

“I am still reeling from the news,” he says. “I don’t think my mind can take it in. Frodo completed the quest. I think truthfully that until I saw the Eagle yesterday, part of me had thought it impossible that he could succeed. But he has – and has saved us all.” Then his usually cheerful face clouds over.

“But I do not yet know if he survived, or Sam... or Pippin.”

“And likewise I await news of Éomer,” I reply. “‘Reeling from the news’ exactly describes how I felt most of yesterday.” We talk for some time of our absent friends, and try to work out how long it will take messengers to come from Cormallen to Minas Tirith with more detailed news. As Merry talks of the maps he has studied, my mind drifts. How I wish Faramir were here. He knows Ithilien like his own hand. He could tell us. Then I realise with a sense of amusement that my mind is playing tricks, finding any excuse to think of him. But Merry’s voice draws my attention back, and I look to see he has drawn a sketch of a map in the dust with a stick. We argue for a while over the accuracy with which he has represented the distances involved, then come to the conclusion that late on the morrow is the soonest we can hope to hear of the fate of those we love so dearly. As we talk, we eat the meagre supply of food at our disposal.

Lunch eaten, I retire to my chamber for a rest. The maid has changed the bottom sheet (how I wonder whether she believed my explanation). But to my senses the pillow and coverlet still smell of Faramir, and I burrow beneath the covers, and, imagining that his arms still enfold me, I sink into a deep sleep. I wake a couple of hours later, with a slight headache. Fresh air will help, I decide. I draw my cloak about me and make my way into the garden.

At first I wander through the garden alone. And, without any obligation to talk to other people, I am free to think of Faramir. I look at the bench where we have spent so much time, and at the fountain before it, and I miss him. Béma, it has only been a matter of hours since I last saw him and I miss him with a pain that is almost physical. My mind is full of the memories of last night, memories which send the blood coursing round my body. I want him so desperately. But I do not just want to lie with him once more (though I want that very much indeed; I have only to shut my eyes and I can feel him inside me). I want to be with him, to have his company, to hear him recite poetry, or tease me, or comfort me. I sit on the bench, alone. It feels so strange not to have him next to me, not to be able to take sidelong glances at his profile when he is not looking. I shut my eyes and give myself to the dizzying, feverish feelings of want that seem to have taken my mind by storm.

I wonder what Faramir is thinking. The memory of his smile after our love making is burned into my memory. I imagine his arms around me. There is no doubt, no uncertainty in my mind; I know that he loves me. Then I remember him drawing his cloak over us, explaining that he knows what it means. I am seized with a mad, giddy desire to get up and dance around the garden. But at the same
time I feel a sadness. I do not know when I will next see him. He warned me that he would be busy, that there was much to do to ensure the safety of his people. And once again I fall to thinking of how much I miss his presence.

Eventually, I open my eyes. I need to find something useful to do, or I will run mad. I get up and brush the creases out of my skirt, then set off back to the main body of the house. Just outside, seated on benches, I come upon a group of Rohirrim, those who are in better health. Amongst them is Cynefrid. Aldwulf I think must still be inside; he lost his leg in the battle and is still too weak to be moved. I see them take note of my approach.

“Hail, Eowyn, King’s sister,” says the nearest of them. I return the greeting.

“Will you not join us, lady?” says Cynefrid. I nod and sit down on one of the stone benches. At first their conversation is a bit stilted, hampered by my presence, but I sit quietly and listen, and gradually they relax. They talk of their homes, their wives and sweethearts, the harvests to be sewn and reaped in the coming year, the rebuilding to be done. And then more hesitantly, they talk of the war, of the horrors of battle, of the dreams and nightmares they suffer. Worst of all, the nightmares which come, not during the dark hours of night, but during broad daylight, forcing their way into bright sunlit thoughts with dark vividness. Cynefrid suddenly seems to remember I am there.

“Lady, you must think us cowards to be so beset by terrors, like small children,” he says.

“Nay, grown men and brave ones, all of proven mettle in battle,” I reply. “Or if you are cowards then so too am I, for I have both nightmares and daytime visions.”

“I see the foes I slew, then the bodies of my brothers lying dead. And sometimes it seems to me that the two things get confused in my mind, and I start by slaying my foes, only to find that it is I who have killed my brothers,” says one of the other riders.

“Aye, that too,” I say. “In my dreams the other night I thought I killed the Wraith, then, as I withdrew my sword, it seemed to my mind that his face became that of the Lord Aragorn.”

Several of the riders nod at this; it seems they are only too familiar with this sort of dream, and also with the waking nightmares which beset me. An older man, Aelfred, joins in.

“Sometimes I am in the middle of doing something – perhaps trying to eat – and my hand begins to shake so much I cannot continue.”

A young rider, perhaps seventeen or eighteen, nods, then says, his voice hardly above a whisper, “I worry sometimes that I will... will lose control of myself.”

Suddenly a memory comes to me. When I was but twelve or so summers, I was hiding from my tutor one day, in the hay loft of the stables in the garrison beside Edoras. I heard Éomer, Éothain and Elfhelm come back from exercising their horses, and they set to the task of grooming them. And as they worked, they began to talk. My brother Éomer had been on his first sortie against a band of orcs only a week before, and was worried he had not acquitted himself well, and Éothain and Elfhelm set to reassuring him.

Éothain spoke first. He told of an occasion in the tavern when his Éored had all been in their cups, and thus more open with one another thanks to the ale than they would perhaps have been at other times. He said that of the men there, some ten or so, nine of them admitted to having pissed or soiled themselves at some point in battle. And he asked Éomer what this told him. Éomer replied that he supposed that it told him that even the bravest felt fear, and that bravery lay in fighting on even when you felt fear.
Then I remember Elfhelm's words, delivered with the black humour typical of hardened warriors: 'Only in part lad, only in part. The more important lesson is that one of Éothain's men is a bloody liar!'

“My lady?” Cynefrid interrupts my train of thought.

“Sorry, I was wool-gathering,” I say. “I suddenly remembered Lord Elfhelm talking about fear in battle, and saying that there were two types of soldier: those who had at some time pissed themselves with fright and those who lied about it.”

A chuckle runs round the group as they acknowledge the truth of this story.

“Aye, that's about the measure of it,” says Aelfred. We talk long into the afternoon, then eventually Ioreth comes with some of the healers and their assistants to help the men back indoors.

~o~O~o~

I wake some time in the early hours. I have been dreaming again of the Pelennor fields. This time the Nazgûl wins, but he does not kill me, not straight away. He maims me; I know that I have taken a mortal wound, and I feel the life blood ebbing in agony from me. He forces me to watch as his steed despoils the body of Théoden. Then he throws back his head in laughter, harsh and chilling, like some hellish carrion bird, as the Rohirrim ride across the plain. Finally Eomer comes towards me. This time he sees me alive, but knows I am dying, and it is the last thing he sees, the last piece of knowledge, knowledge of failure and despair, for the Wraith cuts him down.

I lie, shaking, with tears running down my cheeks. Éomer, my Éomer. My mind knows he survived the Pelennor fields, but my feelings do not. And part of me is terrified, completely terrified, that this dream is a portent – that although he survived that battle, he has fallen at the Black Gates, alone, leagues and leagues from me. And I am not there to weep over his body, to hold it and sing his soul to the halls of our fathers, to see to his burial.

And the bed feels so cold and so empty. I want to get up and seek Faramir's company, the comfort he could bring. But something stops me – perhaps the knowledge that he is stretched near to breaking by the burdens of state and the political tensions surrounding him, perhaps the fear that we might be found out. Suddenly our own little world, captured within the narrow confines of the garden and our bed chambers, so precious and dear, blissfully separate from the real world, seems threatened by discovery. I flinch almost physically at the thought of Castamir holding our love up for inspection, like a blood-soiled sheet, and presenting it to the world at large as something sordid and dishonourable.

I am not sure how long I lie awake, mind churning uselessly. Eventually though my thoughts turn to the men I talked to in the afternoon. I wonder how many of them have been woken by nightmares tonight? Somehow the realisation that I am not alone in this finally calms my fevered mind, and I drift back off to sleep.

~o~O~o~

The next morning I find myself struck down by melancholy. My happy delirium of the day before has gone, like morning sunlight chased away by dark rain clouds. Looking for something to fill my mind I go once more to the houses of the healing, but my mood is not improved to find Castamir's lady and her retinue moving among the soldiers of Gondor. Lothíriel follows in polite attendance. I head into the garden and find my small group of compatriots. But even there I am not safe, for like some Haradrim potentate deigning to pay attention to his bonded slaves, she condescends to join us.
“Lady Éowyn, what a pleasant surprise,” she says, with a smile which does not reach her eyes.

“My lady,” I reply, inclining my head just enough to do the right degree of honour to her station.

“I take it these brave men are Riders from your cavalry, wounded in battle,” she says. At least she is going through the motions of giving them their due.

“Yes, my lady, those who are well enough to rise from their beds.”

“I thought it would do well to come to visit the houses of healing, both to express the thanks of the City Council, and to raise morale. For my husband and the other Councillors have been working tirelessly to ensure that our dwindling supplies are replenished soon. Within the next day or so, fresh meat and vegetables should arrive in the citadel.”

Once Cynefrid, who speaks some Westron, has translated, this announcement brings a hearty cheer from the assembled Riders.

“Yes, the Lord Steward and I were glad we could arrange these shipments from my home province,” says Lothíriel, her voice a study in bland affability. Her usual diplomatic mask is in place, but I sense her underlying anger at the unsubtle attempt to appropriate credit to Castamir.

“Ah yes, the Lord Steward,” says Castamir's lady. For the life of me I cannot remember the woman's name; in fact I cannot even remember if anyone told me it in the first place. She continues, “A pleasant enough young man. Well meaning too. When he is more versed in the running of the city, I am sure that he will, if he learns to take suitable guidance from those older and wiser heads on the council, fulfil his office admirably.”

I stiffen at this, but fortunately, before I can interrupt with any ill-judged attempt to come to Faramir's defence, Lothíriel intervenes.

“I think you will find my cousin has more of a grasp on the responsibilities of his office than perhaps you realise, given his age. For he paid close attention to his father's work, and his military background has given him a keen understanding of the need for clear leadership.” Lothíriel somehow manages to convey by her tone of voice the idea that Faramir is perfectly capable of running the city himself, while not actually saying so explicitly.

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The Lady of Minas Tirith is not daunted by this. She tries a new tack, and I realise that she is not aiming her darts at Lothíriel. I am the target.

“Naturally, a gifted military leader can turn his hand to many things. But peacetime is a very different situation. Diplomacy is foremost, the cohesion of the nation must be cemented, external alliances forged. It is fortunate, is it not, that the young lord is a bachelor? For instance, there are the provinces of South Gondor, which have long been contested territory between ourselves and the Haradrim. Some sort of alliance, the forging of a close link with one of the noble families there, would seal their loyalty to Minas Tirith, as well as helping to subdue the Corsair attacks along the coast which have so bedevilled your province, do you not agree, Princess Lothíriel, Lady Éowyn? So fortunate he has not been so foolish as to publicly announce any prior entanglement.”

Béma, the bicce is trying to get a rise out of me. And, with my mood of this morning and lack of sleep, I can feel my control slipping. Help comes from an unexpected quarter. Out of sight of Castamir's wife's shrewish gaze, Cynefrid places a hand on my elbow, as if gentling a horse. I get a grip on myself, and with what I hope is an air of disinterestedness Lothíriel herself would be proud of, manage a response.
“I am sure Lord Faramir will ever place the needs of his country and its people first.”

The loathsome woman tries a few more half-hearted attempts to needle me, but eventually gives up, and she and her attendants sweep from the garden, Lothíriel casting a sympathetic glance over her shoulder as she tags along, presumably to be on hand should the woman's venom threaten to poison anyone unfortunate enough to get in her way. The Riders who do not speak the common tongue look at me with quizzical expressions. Cynefrid gives a broad grin, then speaks in Westron, presumably to spare me any more embarrassment.

“So that's your dancing partner, my lady? I've talked to some of the soldiers of Gondor and know of him by repute. You've chosen well.” And for the first time this morning, I find myself smiling, smiling and blushing. He chuckles, then switches to Rohirric, “And that lady would indeed drive any sane man to buggery if her bed were the only alternative.”
After lunch I snatch a couple of hours rest. I can no longer smell Faramir on the bed, and feel lost without his scent on the pillows. Rising, I go out to the garden where I come upon Merry, and we go up to the walls to walk together.

“You seem rather subdued today, my lady,” Merry says.

“Yes, I think the euphoria of yesterday, the feeling that I had finally come to accept that we had won, has rather passed, and now I just feel very tired.” I cannot explain about Faramir, about the heady feelings of yesterday, and the melancholy that has set in today. Béma, I miss him. If Castamir's wife can wreak such havoc in my mind just by visiting the sick, what evil is her husband engaged in within the much more exalted realms of the council chamber?

“I hope that we will both feel better when news arrives from Cormallen.”

“That is, if it is good news,” I say.

Merry takes hold of my hand and clasps it between his. “We must hope that it is.”

We walk for a while along the wall, glancing out over the Pelennor fields from time to time. Eventually, as the sun begins to set behind the citadel, and the shadows of Mount Mindolluin lengthen across the plain, our patience is rewarded. Three horsemen gallop towards the city. From our lofty vantage point, we watch as the messengers ride. In the distance they seem so small, and the plain so vast that their progress seems agonisingly slow, but eventually they reach the city gates. We hurry from the walls down to the houses of healing, where we seek out the Warden.

He shows us into his study, where we try to wait as best we can. Merry sits by the table, with a scrap of parchment which he alternately crumples, then smooths out on the desk. I pace up and down. The Warden simply looks awkward. Eventually one of the city guard, in his surplice bearing the emblem of the white tree and stars, arrives. He bows, and hands us folded and sealed sheets of velum.

Hands trembling, I break the seal on the one addressed to me. For a moment, my eyes will not focus, then I almost collapse with relief when I manage to make out Éomer's familiar, untidy hand.

Éowyn, my dearest sister, you will already have heard of our victory...

The words blur as my eyes fill with tears, and I sink to my knees.

“My Lady, I am sorry. Have you lost close kin?” the Warden says, his voice full of worry.

“Nay,” I say, smiling through my tears. “My brother lives. It is he who has sent this letter. I am just overcome by relief.”

The Warden crouches down beside me and offers a linen cloth, and I wipe my eyes.

“Should I send for a calming tisane?” he asks.

“No,” I say, managing to stem the flow of tears. “I think I will be fine.” I get to my feet and make my way to a chair, where I sit, heavily, then read the rest of the letter. “Éothain, Elfhelm, they are alive.” My heart though, is saddened by the long list of the dead, good men, too many to mention. Then I remember Merry, sitting by the table, and glance at him. He gives me a dazzling smile.
“They're all alive – Frodo, Sam and Pippin. And Strider, Legolas and Gimli too. Though Frodo has lost his ring finger.”

The Warden looks at us kindly. “I shall arrange for food to be sent here, if the two of you would join me in taking your evening meal with me.” And so the three of us end up dining modestly on bread and meat, with a flagon of wine. I help myself to a second draught, hoping it will send me to sleep, and sure enough, when I return to my chamber, I fall into bed and sleep like one who has not seen rest for weeks.

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The next morning I sleep late, my body and mind finally giving way with the release of tension. I find my melancholy has if anything increased. With the passing days, the memory of my night with Faramir is increasingly coming to feel like some sort of flight of fancy, some unreal dream. I miss him terribly. And, at the back of my mind, I feel the first stirrings of doubt. What if he now regrets our liaison, but is too principled to know how to extricate himself? I shake myself. No, I cannot be mistaken, I know that he loves me. And I know only too well the complexities of the political situation he is trying to handle. Small wonder he has no time to find me. Not to mention the fact that his enemies probably watch him like a hawk; he cannot afford to be seen with me.

I take the copy of Ecthelion's Art of War which I borrowed from him, and go to the stone bench by the fountain. But I cannot concentrate. My eyes slide sightlessly over the sentences, and I take nothing in. Realising the futility of the task, I take Éomer's letter from my pocket, and read it yet again. He asks me to go to Cormallen, to join in the celebrations, and it occurs to me that I should pen a reply to thank him for the invitation, but let him know that I do not yet feel up to the journey. I stare into the distance, my cloak – his gift – pulled tight round me. I feel warm, and the spot is pleasantly sheltered. The spring sun has just enough warmth in it, and I begin to doze off.

“Eowyn?” Faramir's voice is quiet, but still sufficient to rouse me from my sleep. “You will catch cold, sleeping out here in the garden.” My eyes fly open, and for the first time in what seems an age, I look on his face. My heart feels like it has leapt from my breast and taken flight, soaring high above. He sits down beside me, his eyes looking at me with a soft expression, a smile full of light and love on his lips, his expression a mirror of my feelings. He puts his arm around my shoulders and pulls me close, dipping his head and kissing me. Our kisses are tender and undemanding to start with, for I am still disoriented from waking. Eventually, Faramir lifts his head and looks into my eyes.

“I love you, my White Lady of Rohan,” he whispers.

“And I love you, my Lord of Gondor,” I say. I reach up and stroke the short beard on his cheek, and in return, he runs his hand through my hair.

“I have missed you these last days, more than you can imagine.” His voice catches, husky with emotion.

“I know full well how much, for I have missed you,” I answer.

With a smile on his face, he gets to his feet, and holds out his hand. I take it, and he helps me to my feet. Together, we walk along the path hand-in-hand, before he leads me up to the walls.

He looks at me with a teasing expression in his eyes, then asks the question to which he already
knows the answer. “Why do you tarry here, and not go to the rejoicing in Cormallen where your brother awaits you?”

I smile back at him, and say “Do you not know?”

“Two reasons there may be, but which is true...” He is teasing me, and I tell him off for playing at riddles. He gives me a grin, and raises his eyebrows. “Well, as a scholar, I must consider all possibilities. It could be of course that only your brother called for you, and to look on the Lord Aragorn in his triumph would bring you no joy.”

“Do not tease,” I say, becoming serious. “Yes, once, I did wish for his love, but not for any man’s pity. But no longer.”

Faramir looks at me with his grey eyes, full of understanding. “That I know. You desired his love, because he was high and puissant, and you wished to have renown and glory. As a great captain may to a young soldier he seemed to you admirable. For so he is, a lord among men, the greatest that now is.”

I look into his eyes, a steady gaze, waiting for him to continue.

“I do not offer you pity,” he says. “For you are a lady high and valiant and have yourself won renown that shall not be forgotten, and you are beautiful, beyond even the words of the Elven-tongue to tell. Once I pitied your sorrow. But now, were you the blissful Queen of Gondor, still would I love you. Éowyn, do you not love me?”

I smile at him. “You know that I love you, love you more than I thought it possible to love anyone.”

Even if I had not already realised the depth of my love for him, I think I would do so at this instant. I feel the sun shining on me.

“Behold, the shadow has departed,” I say, taking his hands. Then I glance up at him, and I can see that he knows that I am teasing, and add “I will become a healer, and be a shieldmaiden no longer. I will not vie with the great Riders.”

Faramir smiles. “And will you also stay away from your horse? No longer join in sword play when your arm has healed? For I was looking forward to sparring with you, to racing across the fields on horseback with you. Must I learn instead to look forward to you bringing me garlands of flowers and embroidering my shirts?” He puts on a look of mock disappointment.

I laugh at this. How well he knows me. But then I turn serious once more, and gaze into his grey eyes.

“No longer do I desire to be a queen.”

Now it is Faramir's turn to laughs merrily at my words, and at my sudden solemnity. “That is well, for I am not a king. Yet I will wed with the White Lady of Rohan, if it be her will. And we will dwell together and make a garden in fair Ithilien.”

I move a little closer to him, and look up at him, smiling and whispering, “Would you have your proud folk say of you: There goes a lord who tamed a wild shieldmaiden of the North! Was there no woman of Gondor to choose?” He looks back at me, his face a mixture of love and desire.

“I would.” And suddenly his arms are round me, and his mouth is on mine, hot with need, his tongue probing and tangling with my own, his body hard against mine. Part of me knows that we stand on the walls where half the city can see us, but Faramir seems not to care. With one hand he pulls me
close, with the other he runs his fingers through my hair. We cling to one another, our kiss hot with
the memory of our shared passion and the promise of what is to come. Eventually we part, and he
traces the shape of my face with his hand, then takes my hand and leads me down the stairs.

At the foot of the stairs, we meet the Warden, who looks somewhat stunned. Faramir informs him
with his most serious look (and with the muscles at the corners of his mouth twitching with the effort
not to laugh) that I am now healed, and the warden stumbles out some words to the effect that he
releases me from his care. I smile with joy, and tell him that I would like to remain, for of all
dwellings, this now seems to me the most blessed.

The Warden sketches a bow and makes a rather hasty retreat. As soon as he has gone, Faramir pulls
me into another embrace, his hands sliding from my waist to my arse, pressing my hips against him,
kissing me as though we were alone behind locked doors. Suddenly, a rather theatrical cough comes
from behind us, and Faramir jumps back almost as though he has been stung. I turn to see Lothíriel
laughing heartily.

“Well, cousin, you have certainly made your intentions known to the whole city. A kiss like that: I
would wager few of the lords of the city share such kisses with their wives even within the privacy
of their own chambers. And the two of you as yet unwed. You had best be prepared for the King of
Rohan to come after your head! And worse still, the strong possibility of raised eyebrows in the next
meeting of the Council.”

“I will have Éowyn as my wife, and may Morgoth take any who disapprove, starting with that
bastard Castamir,” Faramir says, with force, almost growling at Lothíriel in his annoyance. I realise
with surprise that this is the first time I have heard him swear.

“Peace, Fara,” Lothíriel laughs once more. “No harm has been done. Quite the contrary in fact. You
always were naïve about politics. For you think it is about doing the right thing, when it is about
doing the expedient thing; that it is about carrying the will of the people by the rationality of your
arguments, when it is about swaying their passions with the strength of your rhetoric. And yet, and
yet... that is the very thing about you which makes you quite unwittingly better at this game than
Castamir.

“For every man and woman in the city has at least one soldier in their family, more usually, so they
know of your reputation as a skilled, fair, brave and honourable captain. And they know that in your
civil leadership, you are scrupulously honest and just, and that your justice is tempered by mercy.
And as for you, White Lady of Rohan,” she says, sketching a slight bow towards me, “the
wandering minstrels and ballad singers already sing of you and your fight with the Wraith in their
songs, in the market places and taverns. So to see the two of you embrace is to them like the right
and proper ending of some ancient song. And to see you embrace with such... such enthusiasm.
Well, they will like you all the more, coz, for the knowledge that the blood runs hot in your veins.
Had you continued to meet Éowyn clandestinely as though there was something to be ashamed of,
then Castamir would have had his ammunition. But to declare yourself so publicly – you have well
and truly sunk him.”

Faramir looks more than a little stunned by this encomium. I laugh, then, thinking of her comment
about ‘hot blood’ being an admirable trait, tell them of my conversation with Cynefric and Aldwulf.
Lothíriel joins me in laughing.

“That smile of yours was something to behold. I will not enquire what, precisely, my cousin did to
put it on your face.” It strikes me that Lothíriel, at least in matters of theory if not in practical matters,
is no where near as innocent as her aunt might hope.

Faramir looks extremely sheepish, then says wryly, “So that is the Rohirric summation of my
character: a pansy but not a poof.” At this I cannot help myself – I stand on tiptoe and brush a fond but relatively chaste kiss across his lips.

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Lothiriel, Faramir and I share supper. To my delight, the first of Lothíriel’s shipments has arrived, and it seems to me we have a veritable feast spread before us. It is more food than any of us has seen in weeks: meat, fresh vegetables, goat’s cheese, fruit. As we eat, Faramir tells us of the affairs of state that have kept him occupied from dawn till late into the night for the last two days. He has had to struggle at every turn. Each plan he has advanced for sending provisions to the army, for husbanding the resources of the city, has been met by a counter suggestion of Castamir’s. Not that Castamir’s have been better. In fact, most have not even been practicable in the slightest; the man has suggested them simply to undermine Faramir's efforts. And all the while he has been diverting discussions into the minutiae of constitutional law at every opportunity. Faramir says wearily that he now thinks he has read every single line of every single law pertaining to the restoration of the line of kings and the procedures for ensuring the legitimacy of claims to the throne.

“You are weary, coz,” says Lothíriel. “You should go to your bed. Surely, now the first of the supply ships have arrived and provisions have been sent to Cormallen, you are allowed a night’s rest. And I too am tired. I think, by your leave, that I will retire.” She smiles at both of us, and rises, kissing Faramir on the cheek before she leaves.

Once she is gone, Faramir looks at me, and raises his eyebrows.. “Lothíriel is usually more subtle than that. Though I suppose it is possible that perhaps she genuinely is tired.” He stands, and holds out his hand to me, smiling.

“Come, Éowyn, let us follow Lothíriel’s example.” Sudden fire floods through me as I take his meaning. I take his hand and let him draw me to him. He slides his hands round my hips, pulling my body close against his, and kisses me, a slow, deliberate kiss that builds in heat. Eventually our lips part. “I think, my love, that my chamber is nearer,” he whispers. Hand in hand we make our way along the narrow corridor to his room. It seems to me that I can feel the heat of his body across the narrow gap between us. He pauses at the door.

“Éowyn, you need not come in if you do not wish. If you feel that the other night was precipitate, that we were carried away by the moment, I will wait for our wedding night,” he whispers.

I lean close to him and murmur in his ear, “Hush, my foolish, my oh too noble, far too principled wretch. Hush and take me to bed.”

At that, Faramir wraps one arm round me while he lifts the latch with the other, and we stumble through the door into his chamber. He can barely let go of me long enough to drop the bar on the door, and somehow, bodies melded together, we make it across the room to the bed. The strangest thing is that I feel curiously embarrassed.

Where is my bold woman of the north, whose eyes ranged so freely over me the other morning?” he whispers, his voice at one and the same time warm with amusement, yet rough with desire. And somehow this reminder is enough – my mind floods with the image of his lean body, slender yet muscular, and with the memory of his arousal, and I raise my face and press my lips against his. I feel
his hands at the back of my dress, unlacing it, and only moments later he loosens his grip on me for a moment, allowing space for his hands to slide it over my body until it drops to the ground. Then I busy myself with the clasps on his tunic, but one-handed I don't seem to make much progress.

“Damn this arm,” I say. “Much as I want to return the favour and undo your clothes, I don't think I can.”

“In good time,” Faramir whispers, then trails kisses down the side of my neck. His hands slide down my sides and over my hips. He reaches down to the bottom of my shift, and drops to his knees before me. Gradually he eases it up, trailing kisses over each inch of exposed skin in turn as he gets back to his feet, up my leg, over my hips, up my belly, easing the thin fabric over my breasts and taking my nipple into his mouth. I tremble, partly with desire, partly with cold, and Faramir looks up at me, a possessive smile on his face.

“Get into the bed before you freeze,” he says. As I slip beneath the coverlet, he starts to take his own clothes off, looking me in the eyes as he does so. Unlike the other morning, when he was half way through gathering his clothes before he noticed my scrutiny, this time he is aware from the outset that I am drinking in every inch of his body as he undresses, and he gazes back with a single-minded intensity, a knowing assurance of his power over me, that takes my breath away. Then he lifts the covers and climbs into the bed beside me, his skin hot and silken as it makes contact with mine. And I moan as I slip my arm around his back, and wrap my legs around him, welcoming him.

I have spent hours while we spun and sewed listening to the older women talk of their husbands, and of the arts and tricks of lovemaking – Rohir women are not shrinking violets. So I know that some women have a marked preference for a lot of wooing. But this, I am rapidly coming to realise, is not my way. I want Faramir with a desperation born of nearly three days of re-running our previous encounter in my head. He starts by kissing me gently and stroking my shoulder. I respond by running my hand down his back, cupping his buttocks, and pulling his hard length against me. Faramir makes a noise half way between a gasp of surprise and a groan of desire, then raises his head to look at me, eyes dark with lust.

“I want you?” he says, his breath hot against my cheek.

“I want you,” I answer, then bring my hand back to tangle in his hair and pull his head down to mine for a kiss. And that seems invitation enough, thank Béma. Hand cradling my arse, he pushes inside me. This time there is no pain, only the most incredible feeling of fullness. Then he begins to move to and fro, slowly, marvellously. He raises himself up, and his grey eyes, filled with so much love, look into mine as he moves, burying his cock within me with each thrust. I reach up and stroke his cheek with my fingers. The physical pleasure is almost beyond bearing, but more than that, the look on his face and the sense of being one that seems to flow through both of us threatens to undo me completely. Overcome with the intensity, I shut my eyes, then feel his mouth on mine, his tongue slipping inside as I moan. Together we move, our rhythm building until everything around me is lost in an explosion of heat and pleasure.

As I gradually come back to my senses, I realise that once more Faramir has spent himself outside me, and as he reaches for a cloth, I find myself saying the words before I have thought things out fully.

“I wish you would spill your seed inside me.”

“You know that I cannot. I do not know how long it will be before we can marry, and I do not wish to dishonour you,” he says. Then he looks at me, his eyes filled with a strange yearning. “Why do you wish it?”
“Because I want to feel you lose yourself completely within me. Because I want all of you.”

I feel him tremble against me. “Do not tempt me, my love. You have no idea how much I want to...”

“Want to lose yourself within me?”

“Yes, that, and...” He ducks his head against my shoulder, and I feel his lips trace their way along my collar bone.

“And?” I ask. He lifts his head and looks at me, with those grey eyes that say so much. I thought I had already seen them filled to the brim with desire and want. But now I see depths that I had not even imagined.

“I want to spill my seed but also... I would plant my seed. To know that you will bear my child. To feel your belly swell beneath my hand.” Heart feeling as though it will burst with joy, I reach up and tangle my fingers in his hair, drawing him in for a kiss. And then with a smile, he slides down my body, and traces the curve of my belly with his lips, then kisses and nibbles his way back over my skin until he can bring his mouth down on mine. And this time I find that now my initial hunger has been sated, there is indeed much to be said for a long, languid, slow wooing, building our passion before we come together for a second time.

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“No, no...” I wake to hear Faramir's voice beside me, full of pain. I move against him in the dark, and stroke his cheek, realising that he is crying out in his sleep. Gradually he wakes, gasping for breath and trembling against my body.

“Hush, love, you are safe,” I whisper, and draw his head close against me, cradling him against my breast. I stroke the soft curls beneath my hand, and feel a dampness against my skin. I realise he is weeping, silently. I make shushing noises and throw my leg over his, trying to wrap him up and keep him safe. Gradually, the trembling begins to subside.

“Do you want to tell me about your dream?” I whisper again.

“No.” His voice is very quiet, little more than a breath against my breast. I kiss the top of his head, tiny, gentle kisses, and cradle his head, then move my hand down to stroke his back, hand moving across his back between his shoulder blades.

“I love you,” I murmur. I feel Faramir's hands move up to my shoulders, and he clings to me. And then I just hold him close to me, and we lie in silence until gradually I feel his body relax and his breathing slow as he slips back into sleep. What was his dream, I wonder, that he could not tell me? I knew, that night when we sat in the kitchen and talked through the dark hours, the lonely hours which fill the soul with the darkest melancholy, that he too suffered from nightmares. But to hear him cry out, to feel him weep upon my breast – I am pierced with an aching need to comfort him, to make all well.

Gradually, as I lie with him against me, the ache subsides. I realise that it is enough to know that I am here to hold him when he has night terrors, just as he is here to hold me when it is my turn to suffer. Perhaps he will tell me in the morning, perhaps he will not. It matters not. All that really matters is that I can comfort him as he comforts me. And in time we will both heal. Not without scars, for no mortal heals without scars. But the scars will be part of us, and we will love each other despite them.

I hold him still as he sleeps, and feel as though I am washed away by waves of love for him, washed away across a wide ocean to some distant shore. Maybe that distant shore is Valinor. Perhaps my
love is so great that it carries the echo of the undying lands. I want to keep him safe, to make the world a gentle place for him, my gentle love. He is a man of such paradox, such complexity. A warrior whose courage is unmatched, a soldier others would follow to the death, a man whose strength will always be mine, who would protect me to his dying breath, and yet so gentle, so compassionate. And I wonder how there could ever have been a time when I did not love him. And I marvel at the good fortune that he should love me in return. Truly I am the luckiest woman ever to have lived.
Cynefrid greets me with a friendly smile as I approach the group of Riders sunning themselves on the benches in the garden.

“How are you this morning, my lady? And how is your dancing partner?” he says with a twinkle.

“I am well, thank you,” I say, deciding to pretend I have not noticed the second question.

I look at the group before me. One sits cross-legged on the ground, sketching shapes in the dust with a stick, while three or four others look on with interest.

“I’d normally stand up to reach that bit,” says one. I notice he sits on a bench, with the bandaged stump of his left leg sticking out, a cushion by his side to keep him upright.

“Perhaps some sort of pulley and cord could be used,” says one of the others. The draughtsman brushes away part of the sketch and adjusts it.

“That might just work,” says the man with the missing leg. “But I think you’d need to move that piece so it doesn’t foul the pulley.” And again, pieces of the drawing are rubbed out and replaced. I watch in fascination, realising that they are adjusting the design of a loom. Eventually they have got the design to their liking.

“Perhaps I could get you some parchment to copy this,” I suggest, hesitantly, for I do not wish to interrupt their labours.

“Parchment, my lady? That would be grand. But where would you get that?” says the draughtsman. In Rohan, parchment is a rare and expensive commodity.

“Oh, I’m sure she’ll find some somewhere,” says Cynefrid with a broad grin.

Gradually the men’s conversation turns to more general things: families back home, horses, whether the Eastfold or Westfold grows the best hops to use for brewing. I settle in the spring sunshine, and let their conversation wash over me, feeling relaxed and happy. How strange it is to feel happy. It has been so long. Suddenly a fear grips me. Perhaps this tenuous state is only temporary. Perhaps it will elude my grasp just as I try to tighten my fingers on it. After so long dwelling beneath the shadows of darkness, I worry that my luck cannot have changed so completely. Or, worse, if I am indeed offered a genuine chance of a new life, that perhaps my own demons will trample the vulnerable shoots of hope.

“My lady,” says Cynefrid, quietly. “Don’t let yourself fall into the megrims.” How has he read my mind, I wonder. Then it hits me; I know he suffers from the same demons.

Cynefrid and I fall into conversation together. I ask him of his family.

“I have a wife, Hereswið, and a son and daughter, Swidhelm and Torctgyd. They’re eight and six years old,” he tells me. It occurs to me that they are not much different in age from... I wonder what words to use. Faramir's wards? His step children?
“I'm glad Swidhelm was not old enough to be expected to fight,” Cynefrid continues. “I hope one day he'll be a Rider like me, but not as a child. Some of the lads that fought and fell at Helm's Deep, they were only eleven, twelve. That's not right.”

I shake my head. “And yet I wanted to fight and they made me cower in a cave with the women.”

“Mind you, if Hereswið had wanted to fight, I think we'd have had words. I'd have wanted her safe in the cave with the children,” Cynefrid responds. He gives me a side-long look to see how I take this. At first I feel annoyed. Yet another man who wants to keep his womenfolk in a cage.

“Are women less brave than men, then?” I ask bitterly, fist clenching by my side.

“Nay, lady. I would never say that to you of all women. I value my neck far too much,” Cynefrid chuckles. “And I could never doubt Hereswið's bravery. She has been brought to bed with child thrice – sadly our youngest was still born – and she is as likely to die then as I am riding into battle. But it is not right for both of us to risk our lives in battle when the children need to be looked after.”

“Yet chance might still leave them orphans,” I reply.

Cynefrid looks at me. He is from near Aldburg and must surely know that my parents died when I was not much older than his children are now. “I'm sorry, my lady. I spoke out of turn.”

“No, it was a long time ago now. But chance can leave children orphaned. Why should a woman not wish to fight for her family's future the way a man can?”

Cynefrid sighs. “I think, my lady, you may feel differently when you have your own children.”

I snort with annoyance. Perhaps fortunately our conversation is interrupted by the bell for the midday meal. One of the Riders asks if I would care to join them, and I happily agree.

Over lunch we start to talk of the state Rohan will be in when we return. We tally up the losses in the battle on the Pelennor Fields, and I add what I know of the losses from the Field of Cormallen. Many villages will be hard pressed to find enough men for the heavy work of farming in the coming summer, and without that, those who are left will starve in the winter. Add to that the fact that many villages in the West were razed to the ground by Saruman's Uruk Hai, and the prospects look bleak.

I find myself thinking of Faramir and Lothíriel's conversation last night. They spent a lot of time discussing how best to use the food and supplies as they arrived, which consignments should be forwarded to the army at Cormallen, and which districts of the city here had been hardest hit (mainly the two outermost circles which had borne the brunt of the attack when the gates were breached). They discussed not just food for the short term, but the need for timber to mend houses, how best to organise carpenters and stonemasons, what work needed skilled guildsmen and what could be delegated to casual labourers. And it strikes me that their organisational skills would have been for naught had it not been for detailed information as to the state of the city, and the dispatches Faramir received from the front telling him of troop numbers, numbers of casualties and the sad tally of the fallen. I mull over these thoughts for a few moments before I speak.

“We need to find out exactly what state the various settlements are in. Then we can organise repairs, send people to help with the villages which have been hardest hit,” I say.

“How would we do that, my lady? Can Éomer King spare the troops to make a tour of the country?” asks Cynefrid. “After all, there's still trouble with the Dunlanders, and bands of orcs from the mountains.” At this point, a young man, Edric, who was Cynefrid's second-in-command in battle, adds his thoughts.
“I've been talking, well as much as I can, for my Westron isn't good, to some of the lads from Gondor. They say they have this, damn, I can't remember the name,” says Edric, brows knitting in frustration, before continuing, “Anyway, every few years the scribes collect details of how many folk there are in each village, how much livestock, how much land is under pasture or set for crops, who owns it, who rents it, that sort of thing. And they write it all down. Seemed to me like a load of bothersome busy-bodies sticking their noses where they weren't wanted, leastways, that's what I thought when they told me. But I suppose it could be useful if you want to know where to start with repairs.”

“You are right, Edric,” I reply. “And although I'm sure my brother would not want to spare a whole Éored, he could spare a smaller group, to accompany a scribe. I would be happy to oversee such a group – I have no intention of shutting myself up in my solar with an embroidery frame while the country goes to rack and ruin.”

We start a discussion about the broad outlines of what such a task would involve – the high moorland areas in the north where sheep are pastured, the more fertile regions of the south where barley grows, the timber resources, and how to take what is needed for rebuilding without destroying the coppices. It is several hours into this discussion when we are interrupted by Lothíriel.

“Have you seen my cousin, Éowyn? I am worried that he has missed luncheon, and he is overworking when his body should still be given time to recover from its injuries.”

“Nay,” I reply, “He has not been here. You are right, though, he needs to eat.”

“My guess is that he is in his study. Perhaps you can persuade him – here's a jar of fruit I got from the latest shipment. Really he needs something more substantial, but this might be a start.” She holds out an earthenware jar to me, and I take it, rising to my feet.

“You go and see to your dancing partner, my lady,” says Cynefrid with a grin.

~o~O~o~

Clutching the earthenware pot, I knock on the door to Faramir's study. From within, he calls out to enter, and I open the door. The room is spacious, with a desk and bookcases, a couple of chairs, and (I am relieved to see) a fire burning warmly in the grate, with a sheepskin rug before it. A wide window looks out to the west, and the walls are hung with tapestries of woodland scenes.

“Éowyn,” Faramir says, with a smile. He is seated at a desk which is spread with papers and parchments, higgledy piggledy. Some are clearly sheets of accounts and ledgers, others appear to be catalogues and ships' manifests. He rises from the chair and crosses the room, wrapping his arms around me, claiming my mouth with his own. I manage to put down my burden on a corner of a nearby table, then wrap my arm round his neck, and kiss him back, hard.

“Lothíriel gave me these to bring to you. She was worried you had missed your evening meal again. I think it's a jar of peaches in syrup.” I look warily at the cluttered desk. “We had best not open it near your desk. Not unless you want all your papers covered with syrup.” The rest of the room seems no better. Every surface – the tops of the bookcases, the low table by the window, even the seats of the chairs – is covered with papers and stacks of books leaning at dangerous angles. Faramir follows my gaze and grins cheerfully.

“I am not a tidy person. But, even if it does not look that way, I know where everything is, even amid the chaos. I fear, though, that we will have to picnic upon the floor.” And he sits down cross-
legged on the edge of the sheepskin. I join him there, tucking my legs under me, and place the jar on the floor between us. Faramir gets out his dagger and neatly cuts open the wax seal round the cork stopper. He uses the point to fish a peach-half from the sticky liquid, and offers it to me. I take it, almost dropping the slippery morsel, and take a bite. Even after our feast of the other night, when the first of the supply ships arrived, weeks of fatty stew, dry bread, mouldy cheese and shrivelled apples have left me craving food. This seems to me the most amazing, delicious, decadent thing I have ever tasted. Too late I realise that it is also an extremely messy thing; I now have syrup dripping down my chin in a most unladylike manner. I also find I have no handkerchief, and wipe my chin on the back of my hand. Still, I have a reputation as a barbarian shieldmaiden to defend. Faramir smiles, then offers me his own handkerchief, before spearing a chunk of peach for himself.

In almost complete silence, we devour half the jar. Almost: the quiet is punctuated by little murmurs of contentment from both of us. It makes me feel as though we are a couple of naughty children who have stolen some honey cakes from the cooling rack in the kitchen while the cook's back was turned. Inevitably, one of the pieces slides from my grasp to land on my skirt. Faramir sets his dagger to one side and reaches out. I feel the brush of his hand against my leg as he picks the peach up, then slowly and deliberately, he raises it to my lips.

I open my mouth, and he pops the peach inside, his long fingers touching my lips as he does so. I cannot help myself; I lick the syrup from his fingers with my tongue. And all the while, we look straight into one another's eyes. His lips part slightly, and I see him run the tip of his tongue across his lower lip as if to mirror the motions of mine against his fingers. His pupils are wide, making his grey eyes as dark as a stormy sea. I feel my breath catch, as though there is not enough air in the room. Placing his hand on the rug beside me, Faramir leans towards me, gradually bringing his face closer, never breaking his gaze. His fingers trail across my lips, then he places them lightly against my cheek. Then, very gently, his mouth meets mine. Almost tentatively, he gives me the softest of kisses, then a second, then a third. I lift my hand to touch the stubble on his cheek, pressing my lips against the softness of his.

“Éowyn,” he murmurs against my lips, and I murmur his name in return. He slips his tongue gently against mine, caressing me. He tastes of peaches and syrup. My hand slides along his jaw, feeling the roughness of his beard, then the softness of his hair as I tangle my fingers in the loose, dark curls. His hand in turn cradles the back of my head, and we are lost in the sensuality of lips, tongues, mouths, hot breath mingling with hot breath. There is passion, and languor too. But there is no desperate clash of mouths, at least not to start with. We take our time, exploring, nipping, tugging at each other's lips, tongues exploring one another.

Somewhere in the course of this exploration, I find he has lifted me astride his lap. And in an instant, our mood changes from languid to frenetic. His hands start to tug at my skirts, lifting them up round my waist, my hand starts to unlace his breeches, shoving the fabric down his legs. Within moments I sink onto his hard length, and we move together, hot skin against hot skin, his hands holding my hips, my hand clutching his shoulder. His lips are on mine, his tongue against mine, and all I can hear is the way we gasp for breath. I am swept away by the urgency, the need, the heat filling me completely. I taste the salt, metallic tang of blood – our kisses are so desperate one of us has bitten the other's lip, but whose lip it is I cannot tell. Then exquisite, excruciating pleasure breaks over me. I feel as if I am enveloped in a velvet darkness, stars before my eyes, and I sag against him, limp, unable to hold my body up. We sink together down onto the floor, aware of nothing beyond our ragged breathing and the pounding of our hearts. Eventually I manage to roll off him, to lie by his side, head against his shoulder.

“I didn't even think to bar the door,” says Faramir. He sounds as stunned as I feel.

“I never knew that desire could be so strong,” I say.
Faramir rolls onto his side to look into my face, his eyes fixed on mine. “Nor I.”

“But you have loved other women,” I say, in wonder.

“Not like this. Not as I feel for you.” He threads his fingers through my hair and kisses me, a kiss that feels like we are melting into one another and becoming one. He strokes my cheek with his fingertips. Then he smiles. “And I have never before even thought to make love on the floor of my study,” he says, his smile broadening into a grin.

This turn of phrase makes me giggle. “‘Making love’ sounds like something Mardil of Lossarnach would say. And he would use it for a gentler activity which took place in some flower-strewn bower. I think we Rohirrim would probably use cruder words for what we've just done.”

Slowly, Faramir lets his hand drift from my cheek, down my neck, along my collar bone to my shoulder. Then he traces the neckline of my dress, just touching the skin, before sliding his hand down over my breast, ducking his head to follow his hand.

“Mmm, what would you call it?” he says, his voice muffled as his mouth nuzzles between my breasts. Then he lifts his face to mine, brushing his lips against my cheek, his breath warm against my skin.

“Well, the Rohir in me wants to describe it as a hard, fast, utterly glorious...” I pause, looking at his face, wondering whether to say the word.

“Utterly glorious... what?”

I put my lips against his ear, kissing the skin there, and whisper, “Fuck.” I feel Faramir tense as I say the word, hear his sharp intake of breath, sense the desire this word unleashes in him. In response, his hand cups my breast, and his thumb and fingers tease my nipple through the fabric of my bodice. I give a little moan, before managing to continue. “But since I am in Gondor, I must express myself more properly. Perhaps in the language of scholarship, since my lover is a renowned scholar.” I pause as Faramir's fingers continue their delicious labours. “Oh... That's not fair... How am I supposed to frame a finely poised turn of phrase while you do that to me...” His lips nuzzle against the angle where my neck meets my shoulder. I throw back my head, and groan. How can he arouse me again, so soon? But I am not going to be beaten so easily. I try my best to imitate the pompous language I have heard the old men of the court use.

“For, my lord, it is unworthy of your scholarship to take refuge in softening euphemisms. You fall short of your usual linguistic precision... Oh sweet Elbereth...” For his tongue has now traced a hot liquid trail down my skin and his lips leave hot kisses along the edge of my bodice. Then abruptly, he lifts his head, and I give a little whimper at the loss of the sensation.

Faramir's grey eyes sparkle with amusement, and his voice is like honey as he whispers, “My lady, tonight in bed, I promise I shall show you just what levels of linguistic precision a scholar like myself can attain.”

“What, all talk and no action?” I tease. “Will it be poetry in Sindarin or Quenya? Or a discourse on the finer points of Ecthelion?” Though in truth, for all I care, he can recite whatever he wants, so long as his fingers and lips continue with their task.

“Ah, your enthusiasm makes me forget your inexperience,” he says with a grin, knowing, mischievous, desirous. “For, my sweet love, you mistake my meaning completely.”

“And your meaning is?” I ask.
“Patience, my lady, patience. All will become clear. There will indeed be action, and my actions will make my words clear.” His eyes glitter with dangerous promise.

“And now you are teasing me,” I say, my words catching in my throat as I look at the naked want on his face.

“I know,” he answers. Then he cuts off further conversation by kissing me once more.

We are interrupted by a knock on the door.

“My Lord?” It is the voice of his lieutenant. “The Lord Turgon awaits you.”

In a low voice, Faramir says something which I take to be an oath in his own tongue, words which, unaccountably, my tutor did not teach me.

“Just one moment, Beregond.” He kisses me, then stands up, hastily lacing his breeches and tucking his shirt back in, before pulling on a formal robe. He reaches down and helps me to my feet, then whispers, “Let yourself out when you think we are out of sight.”

I brush the unruly strands of hair back from his face, and he kisses me quickly. “Until tonight, my lady of Rohan,” he whispers, before grabbing a large bundle of papers and leaving.

~o~O~o~

I manage to return to my room without seeing anyone, and with a bit of a struggle, unlace the dress (fortunately the dress the maid brought me this morning laces down the sides). With a growing sense of embarrassment, I realise how creased it is, and also that it bears quite a few stains which probably do not bear close inspection. I fear I may set the laundry women's tongues wagging. Suddenly I am overcome by a wave of tiredness, and slip into bed, where I drift off into a deep sleep.

I wake to a hand gently shaking my shoulder.

“Eowyn,” says Lothiriel. “It’s nearly time for supper. You've slept away most of the afternoon.”

I look up at her blearily and rub the sleep from my eyes.

“Did you find Fara?” she asks, then laughs out loud. “I see from your face you found him, and found him in good spirits. Or at least, even if you didn't find him that way, you certainly left him in good spirits.” It would seem that, half-asleep, I exercise no control over my facial expressions whatsoever. “I hope you found some time to get him to eat some of the peaches. Anyway, I have organised a treat for you – we've found a bath tub, and I've arranged lots of hot water.”

Almost as if on cue (in fact, probably precisely as arranged by Lothíriel) there is a knock at the door, then a couple of maids appear, carrying a wooden tub between them. They set it down in the corner of the room, then return with buckets of hot water. Lothíriel helps me off with my shift and I sink into the water. She perches on the edge of the bed and chatters to me as I bathe, occasionally passing soap or scented oils when I ask.

“What is that mark on your neck?” she asks innocently.

My hand flies up to feel the skin there. “Béma, he didn't, did he?” I yelp.

Lothíriel dissolves into giggles. “Nay, there is no mark, I am only jesting. Still, interesting that you think there might be!” Morgoth's breath, she has been reading Ecthelion! Warfare by deception.
Once I am dried and dressed, we make our way to the small parlour where the healers eat their supper. We dine on bread, cheese and cold meats, but all the fare is fresh, and there is fruit to follow. Then we settle by the fire and play draughts, occasionally engaging in conversation, but for the most part in companionable silence. Eventually, as the hour draws late, I retire to bed.

~o~O~o~

I guess correctly; Faramir waits an hour until most people have gone to bed and the corridors are quiet. I hear him lift the latch on the door and slip into my room. His smile, as he walks towards his bed, is bright enough to light the room without my candle. He undresses quickly, then lifts the covers, and climbs in beside me.

“Éowyn,” he whispers, then he pulls me close and covers my face with kisses, so many, not all of them aimed quite right, that I burst out laughing. My merriment is infectious, and before we know it, we are both giggling beneath the covers, a joyous moment together.

“I love you, my Barbarian Shieldmaiden,” he says, stroking my cheek. Then, laughing once more, a sound of sheer happiness, he tickles my ribs.

“Tickling is not fair, I can't fight back at the moment,” I complain.

“I'll stop when you tell me you love me,” says Faramir with a grin.

“I love you, you... you... Gondorian pansy!” I struggle to get the words out between giggles. Faramir stops my mouth with a kiss, his tongue hot and sensuous.

“When I have the use of both arms, you are going to be sorry,” I mutter.

“You have no idea how much I am looking forward to that,” Faramir whispers, running his hand down my side. “I have this idea that you might turn out to be very good at wrestling,” he continues, hand making its way down my leg towards my knee. “We could have it that whoever manages to pin the other one down gets to do whatever they want.”

“Not fair,” I murmur. “You're heavier.” Then I have a vivid flash of him on top of me, his weight pressing into me, and my insides melt at the thought.

“Yes, but it's a matter of speed, and skill, and determination,” he whispers, hand catching the hem of my shift. “And I think I could prove quite determined to end up with you on top...” He pulls my shift up. “I wonder, what would you choose to do with me if you won?” he asks, the thin material now round my waist. My mouth goes dry. What would I want to do? A flurry of images flood my mind, mostly involving me sitting astride him, riding him as I did earlier. I swallow hard, feeling the heat surging between my legs.

Faramir lifts me gently so that he can ease my shift over my breasts, and with a smooth movement, he pulls it over my head. He pulls me close, and I feel his warm skin against my own. The feel of the hair on his chest against my nipples makes me feel as though the breath has been stolen from my lungs. My stomach twists at the closeness, the way his hard, lithe body sets me aflame with desire, the promise of what is to come. He gently lowers me onto the mattress and pulls the covers back over us, then kisses me again, fingers gently stroking along my jaw and down my neck, the other hand running from my waist, up over my ribs to cup my breast. He draws his lips back from mine, then runs his tongue down my neck, slowly, gently, making low murmuring noises as he goes.

“My beautiful wild woman of the North,” he whispers. “I recall making you a promise earlier.” His lips ghost over my collar bone and down, his stubble brushing my skin. “And I would not be...
forsworn.” I think at first he is going to kiss my breasts, but he continues his exploration down the valley between them, heading down over my ribs and the skin of my stomach, down to my navel. I tangle my fingers in his hair. The feeling of his lips and beard both tickle and inflame me all at once. Part of me wants to giggle again, part wants... I don't know what I want. His lips move lower, over the gentle curve of my belly.

“Oh,” is the most coherent noise I can make. Surely he is not going to go any lower? What if he does? He can't want to kiss me there? Suddenly his mouth envelops me, hot, wet, so very hot. All rational thought flees. I am caught up in the moment. His lips move against me. His tongue licks and slips inside the folds between my legs. I clutch at his hair, holding him close. I think there are words coming from my mouth, his name, that I love him, then words cease too. His tongue circles slowly and deliberately, the warmth of his mouth flowing over me like liquid silk. The world has contracted to the point where his tongue meets me. Then, just as I feel the pleasure has become almost unbearable, he starts to suck at the most sensitive part of me. No words come, just noises, inarticulate noises. I lose all sense of where I end and he begins. My hips move wildly, my breath comes in helpless gasps, waves of heat seem to spread out from where his mouth meets my body. I convulse beneath his hot, hot mouth, screaming something, I know not what, then I sink back against the pillows, tremors still running through my body. I lie, panting, shattered, as if I have dissolved and reformed.

Faramir lifts his head then slides slowly up my body. I look at his face. He has the broadest smile imaginable, satisfied, smug, possessive. He wipes the back of his hand across his mouth, then kisses me, laughing as I wrinkle my nose at the taste. He tastes salty, brackish.

“So that is what I taste like!”

“It's a wonderful taste,” Faramir whispers, running his hands over my skin. He moves his hips so that he rubs against me. I can feel his cock hard against my leg.

“You can't mean that,” I say.

“Oh but I do. The taste of you is sweeter even than peaches,” he laughs. “For the taste of you is indivisible from your pleasure, and giving you pleasure makes me feel like I am king of the whole world.”

And suddenly, belatedly, I realise what he meant earlier when he talked of 'linguistic precision.' I take a fit of the giggles and tell him, and he kisses me.

“I have spent all evening looking forward to showing you what I meant,” he says with a laugh. “It has distracted me from matters of state in a most improper way.” Again, I feel his hips move.

“Should I... Do you want me... How do I do the same to you?”

“You don't need to. No-one is keeping score,” he says with a gentle smile. “Maybe one day you will want to, because of what you know it will do to me. But don't do it out of some misplaced feeling of turn and turn about.” He gives me a soft kiss, then adds, “But I would very much like to feel your hand there.”

I slip my hand round the hard length of him, and begin to stroke, kissing his mouth as I do so. I can feel his hips move, and hear low moans of pleasure. I experiment, alternating between long strokes along his shaft and stroking him between his legs. I marvel at the different sensations under my fingers – the strange firm territory between his legs, so different from me, the incredible velvety softness of the skin on his cock contrasting with the hardness beneath. I take my cue from his movements, the gasps he makes, speeding up my strokes, gripping him harder. I lift my head for a
moment, and look at his face, his eyes tight shut, his brows drawn together as if frowning with tension aching to be released. I feel a sudden swell of power within me at the thought of what I am able to do to him. Dipping my head once more I brush my lips against his. My kisses become more urgent, and I slip my tongue within his mouth. I move my hand faster, then suddenly his own hand wraps around mine, gripping, speeding the strokes up. His hips move in time with our hands, rocking against me. With a deep groan, he starts to tremble, and his movements become erratic. I feel his seed spill over my hand, hot and sticky. It is his turn to lie, utterly limp, his breath coming in ragged gasps. I have never seen such beauty: his dark hair spread across the pillow, eyes closed, his expression now soft and full of ease. I let my head settle on his shoulder and breath in the smell of him.

We lie like this for some minutes, until our breathing settles, and the tremors cease. Eventually Faramir reaches out to the chair beside the bed, and grabs the shirt he was wearing earlier. He uses it to mop up the mess. I start to giggle at this.

“You realise the laundry maid will know exactly what you've been up to,” I snort. Faramir begins to laugh too. He rolls onto his back and lies with his hands behind his head, and I snuggle up against him.

“You look like a cat that has got into the dairy,” I say, tracing my fingers over the dusting of hair on his chest.

“I wonder why that could be?” he says, with a low laugh. “I have a brave, bold, beautiful barbarian shieldmaiden, who is lying naked in my bed, and I have just given her such pleasure that she has screamed my name to the rafters. And then she has woven such magic with her fingers that I too am spent.”

I stretch out, and mould my body to the lines of his, and he wraps his arms around me. Now that we are both completely sated, I find that our nakedness takes on a different meaning for me. No longer does it make me burn with desire. Instead I feel so very close to him, at one with him, with nothing there to come between us, warm skin against warm skin. I am home, safe, in the place above all others where I belong. I sigh with contentment. Faramir tightens his arms round me and kisses my forehead.

“Will your brother kill me?” he asks, after a long silence.

“Quite probably. Will it have been worth it?” I tease.

“Most definitely,” he says with a smile, kissing me once again. Then, typically, he becomes serious for a moment. “Sometimes, it feels as though my thoughts and feelings are at war with themselves. Part of me fears I have wronged you by taking you to bed before we are wedded. But part of me feels this is so right that I can have no regrets.”

“My overly-noble Gondorian. Which part is winning?” I ask.

“Well, since I am here in your bed, I think that question is superfluous.”

“But you still wonder whether you are thinking with your head, and not with...”

Faramir laughs. “Precisely.”

“My lord, allow me to assure you that whatever part of you is doing the thinking, I am more than happy with the outcome. And also, perhaps it would be politic at this point to remind you who did the seducing. For I climbed into your bed.”

“Only the first night, when we managed to exercise some restraint. The second night, when our
restraint crumbled entirely, it was I who came to your chamber.”

“If I recall, our initial restraint was not down to any display of virtue on either of our parts, but merely occasioned by the pain in my confounded arm. And in any case, did you not just say this was not the sort of game where one keeps score?” I reach out and stroke his face, and he kisses my fingertips tenderly.

And then we lie in each other’s arms and talk long into the night, of many things. Our love is foremost in our minds, but I also ask him about the political struggles, and tell him of the plans for surveying the Riddermark that I have made with my Riders (I now think of them as ‘mine’—whether I will be able to persuade Éomer of this is another issue entirely). It feels so comfortable to be able to talk about anything that comes into our minds, and given the circumstances, unsurprisingly much of what comes into our minds concerns the task of rebuilding our countries. We can ask and offer comfort, compare ideas, seek advice. It strikes me that this is not exactly the sort of pillow-talk I might have expected as a romantic young girl, but it seems so natural and so comforting that I hope that the whole of our lives may follow this pattern. Eventually as the candle gutter and dies, we lapse into silence, and then into a deep sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks once more to Lady Peter for betaing.
**Coronation Anthem**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Faramir slips from my chamber in the grey light before dawn. I wonder briefly if I will be able to sleep without him beside me, before rolling into the warm patch he has left, breathing in the scent of his body lingering on the linen, and sinking back into a deep slumber. I sleep late into the morning. Having dressed and eaten, I go to join the riders once more, and sit listening to their conversation. Once more, Cynefrid invites me to join them for lunch. We have just sat down at the table when, to my surprise, Faramir arrives. Much to my irritation, I feel my cheeks begin to heat, the more so when I realise Cynefrid has spotted my blush, and is now glancing down at his plate with a faint smile just discernible beneath his beard.

“May I join you and your compatriots, my lady?” Faramir asks. His face is a mask of bland, diplomatic affability but I think I can see his eyes twinkling with amusement at my reaction.

“Most certainly,” I reply, trying to sound as calm as he appears. I introduce the Riders to him, one by one, and they bob their heads politely; the more mobile try to get to their feet, but he hastily motions them to sit down, saying that there is no need for ceremony.

At first, not surprisingly, the conversation is stilted. No-one can quite think what to say in front of the Steward. I find myself at a loss. Although Cynefrid has a very shrewd idea of how I feel towards Faramir, and I assume that the gossip has spread far and wide of our passionate kiss on the walls, still I feel shy talking to him in front of so many people. It feels strange to try to exchange polite pleasantries as if we are keeping a respectful distance from one another, when I recall only too clearly his naked body in my bed this morning. I find that this recollection does nothing to help my control over my countenance. Once more, however, Cynefrid comes to the rescue, by engaging Faramir in discussion about military tactics.

“My lord, I am used to fighting in open country, suited to cavalry,” he says, politely. “Yet I understand Ithilien to be heavily forested, and steep, mountainous terrain.”

“Yes, it is a country best suited to attacks by stealth and ambushes. We rely heavily on archery and knife work, trying to pick off the enemy singly and in small groups. Occasionally we engage in larger skirmishes, but only if forced to.” He gazes into the distance for a moment, as if recalling some incident in his mind's eye, then smiles. “Though some recent skirmishes have indeed been memorable – we encountered a group of Southrons with a Mûmak. That was definitely not an encounter where silence or stealth were involved.”

“Mûmakil,” says Cynefrid. “I thought they were the stuff of nursery tales until the Pelennor fields. They are horrific beasts. Schooled as our horses are to the noise and clamour of battle, it was all we could do to stop them running in terror whenever one of those beasts came anywhere near. How the hell did you bring one down just with foot soldiers?”

“We didn't,” Faramir replies with a grim laugh. “As far as I could work out after the battle, it seemed the beast had happened upon one of the traps we lay for unwary bands of enemy soliders – a pit filled with sharpened stakes. It bore down on them with its full weight. Where no man could have pierced its armoured skin, its own strength proved sufficient. Enraged, it ran amok through the trees. Alas, I lost several good men to its rampage, though in truth it probably killed more of its own side. We never did find out what became of it. My guess is that it continued all the way to the river and was eventually swept out to sea.”
Cynefrid nods, an equally grim smile on his face, then says “But you do use horses, do you not? I am sure I have seen messengers arrive on horseback.”

“Yes, we use them for messengers, for scouting, for occasional forays into enemy territory where speed is of the essence, and we need to be assured a speedy retreat if things do not go to plan,” Faramir replies. “When I first became a Ranger, my father had me study the treatise on cavalry tactics written by Ecthelion I. So I am aware that what we use in Gondor might best be described as light cavalry; we have nothing to compare with the heavy cavalry of Rohan.”

“I'm not sure I understand what the difference is,” says Cynefrid. I suspect that 'book learning' is not something that impresses him much.

“As Ecthelion uses the terms, light cavalry is as I have described – small groups of lightly armoured horsemen, aiming for rapid movement and strategic advantage. Heavy cavalry are massed troops, heavily armoured, with a view to gaining a tactical advantage on the battlefield. But I merely report what I have read; I should be interested to know your more informed opinion on the distinction.”

“Hmm, still not sure I see his point,” Cynefrid replies. “Seems to me he’s looking for a difference when there is none, just to show how clever he is.” He is obviously trying to be polite, both because of what he has heard of Faramir's reputation, and out of consideration towards me. Edric, seated to one side, appears to feel no such compunction and gives a muffled grunt of dissent.

“Difference? Plain daft if you ask me. Any Rider worth his salt can do all of that – battle, scouting, rapid advances and retreats in small numbers…” His voice tails off as his command of Westron deserts him, then he switches to Rohirric and I translate.

“Edric says that our Riders are also trained to keep discipline in battlefield charges, riding knee-to-knee in close formation,” I say. Then I add my own thoughts, “Though in truth it's almost impossible for a really long line of horse to maintain that sort of close order – inevitably the formation tends to develop waves, which break and split into a number of wedges.”

“But is there not a difference between the sort of destrier bred for speed, for scouting and skirmishing, and the heavy warhorse that can bear a fully armoured man?” Faramir asks.

“We have bred horses for generations to combine speed and endurance. Yes, it is a compromise: they will never be as fast as the light boned horses of the Haradwaith. But they are more than a match for most horses, and I would back our cavalry over that of the Southrons,” I say.

Faramir nods. “Fortunately, we are comrades-in-arms, so I hope never to face your cavalry in anger. But I've always wondered, as a commander of infantry, what would be the best thing to do against well-drilled regiment of horse.”

“Well, we had the advantage that we were effectively attacking from behind the enemy's lines,” said Cynefrid. “Their formations were all arranged to face towards this city so they could lay siege to it, and we were able to over-run them from behind. You take out the first line with your lance, then drive the body into his comrades behind. The weight of you plus your horse and armour should be enough to skewer several of their soldiers with each attack. But always, the key is to outflank or break through their lines.”

Edric, who understands more Westron than he speaks, adds his piece, which again I translate. “Edric reckons if the enemy had had a line of really well placed pikemen, with the discipline to hold ranks, and archers behind, we would have been...” I grin as I see Cynefrid, eyebrows raised at Edric's words, a faint smile on his face as if to say 'Explain that one to your Gondorian dancing partner.' Then I finish the sentence. “I think the phrase Edric used is best translated as 'completely fucked.'”
I catch Cynefrid mid mouthful, and he splutters small-beer over the table. A hint of a smile flits across Faramir's face.

“Indeed,” he says, straight-faced once more, the corner of his mouth twitching slightly. “Should I ever have to organise a defence against cavalry, I will bear that in mind. Though such a defence would need enormous amounts of self discipline and trust in one’s comrades not to break ranks.”

We finish our meal, comparing notes about battles and skirmishes we have been involved in, Faramir reflecting on how different these tend to be from how the chroniclers and theoretical strategists would have one believe.

“I’ve always been amused at how, in the hands of chroniclers writing a few decades after the events, skirmishes involving fifty men on each side turn into battles of a thousand or more,” he says.

“I’m sure this is a naïve question, but how do you know that the chroniclers are exaggerating?” I ask.

“We Gondorians have a passion for paperwork – we keep all the army pay rolls,” Faramir says, with a self-deprecating laugh. “If those battles really did involve thousands, most of them were fighting for the love of their country alone, and not for the Steward’s coin!” He rises to his feet. “If you will excuse me, I shall take my leave. And if I may, I should like to invite the Lady Éowyn to join me for a walk on the walls before I must needs return to my duties.” He offers me his hand, and helps me to my feet, tucking my hand in his arm.

As we walk out of the door, I think I hear a muffled wolf-whistle, then Cynefrid swearing at the culprit. Faramir chuckles quietly. He leads me through the gardens and up the narrow stone stair onto the walls.

“I wanted to spend some time with you without being distracted,” he says, with a gentle smile.

“Distracted?” I ask, starting to laugh. “I cannot imagine what I could possibly do to distract such a single-minded, noble captain of Gondor.”

Faramir laughs as well. “I think you can imagine many things that would distract me very much, as can I. But I thought it would be nice simply to talk to one another, and talk to other people too. I like your Riders – and they would go to the ends of the earth for you.” He smiles down at me, holding my hand against his chest as we stand close by one another, looking out over the plains.

“It feels as though it will be many seasons before grass grows over the scars battle left on this land,” I say, finding myself suddenly melancholy. Faramir gently reaches out and places his arm round my shoulder, and I rest my head against his chest for a moment.

“It will take much work this summer to bring in a harvest come autumn, sufficient to see our peoples through the next winter,” he replies. We talk for a while of my plan to carry out a census in Rohan, to try to determine which settlements are most in need of help, and how the scarce resources of our land can best be used. The land that once was Erkenbrand’s, in the Westfold, was hit particularly hard by the forces of Saruman. In their assault on Helm's deep, they burned most of the small holdings in the Deeping Coombe, a valley which in peacetime was one of the most fertile in the Riddermark. Faramir tells me that Ithilien was once the garden of his country, but most of its people now live as refugees on this side of the Anduin, having been driven from their farms and towns by Sauron's forces, or by marauding bands of Southrons from the Haradwaith.

We climb back down the staircase and sit once more upon the stone bench near the fountain. For a while we sit in silence, then Faramir seems to decide my spirits need to be raised, and teases me that he must fill in some of the gaps in our courtship.
“For we seem to have missed several stages of courtship in between my first, tentative attempts at wooing you in the garden and taking you to bed,” he says with a laugh.

“Which stages would those have been?” I ask with an answering smile.

“Poetry in Sindarin,” he says.

“Not so – you recited Mardil to me.”

“Stolen kisses,” he adds.

“You kissed my hand.”

“Yes, but it should have been several days before I dared to kiss your cheek, then several more before I brushed a chaste kiss upon your lips... And there things should have stopped until our wedding night.”

“And so it might have been had you been wooing a chaste maiden of Gondor. But you chose instead to woo a wild shieldmaiden, who proved to be capable of deciding for herself at what pace her wooing should proceed.”

Faramir grins at me. “I shall fill in the gaps with plenty more poetry, and songs too if you wish.”

“I would like that,” I say. “I love to listen to your voice as you recite poetry. However, I think I might complain if you suggested we stop at chaste kisses, now that I know what I would be missing.”

Faramir holds me to him, drawing my head onto his shoulder, and we sit thus for half an hour or so. We talk of everything and nothing, and Faramir holds good to his promise, reciting poetry to me, until Beregond comes to tell him he is needed once more in the Council chambers.

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It seems to me that the next few days pass all too quickly. My physical strength continues to return, and the pattern of my days seems much alike. I rest, I talk to the Riders, I walk in the gardens, and most precious of all, I spend time with Faramir. And always in the nights, he comes to me. We reach for one another in passion, then lie in each others' arms, content in our love for one another. Most nights one or other of us will have nightmares, but sometimes there will be a blessed night's peace where we sleep deeply until the dawn.

Thus it seems but a short time before I find myself standing in the spring sunshine before the broken remains of the outer city gate, Elfhelm by my side. Around us are various nobles of the realms of the free world, and behind us a crowd of ordinary people of the city. Slightly in front of us, standing apart from the main crowd, is my beloved, and also the Warden of the Keys of the citadel. A chill wind tugs at our clothes, hinting that winter has not yet departed completely. We watch as the sunlight glitters on the armour of the approaching host. Soldiers on foot, rank upon rank, and cavalry, spears held up in salutation, draw nearer and nearer as they cross the plain before us. The massed armies halt, a few hundred paces away, and a smaller group comes forward, advancing to where Faramir stands.

As they approach, I recognise Aragorn, his cloak cast back, a jewel upon his breast. He has changed;
gone is the ranger, and in its place is a kingly man, loftier than I could have imagined. Beside him rides Gandalf, behind him I recognise my brother, his armour and helm distinctive, together with Legolas the Elf and Gimli the Dwarf. By their side rides a tall, dark-haired man, who reminds me somewhat of Faramir, albeit older, and four small figures, one of whom I recognise to be Merry. I realise that the older man must be Imrahil of Dol Amroth, Lothíriel's father.

As they draw close, Faramir and the Warden set forth to meet them, followed by four soldiers of the City Guard, bearing an ancient carved casket of polished black wood. I watch as Faramir stops before Aragorn and kneels at his feet, offering up his rod of office.

“The last Steward of Gondor begs leave to surrender his office,” he says, in a clear, steady voice.

“That office is not ended, and it shall be thine and thy heirs' as long as my line shall last. Do now thy office!” Aragorn answers, his voice echoing off the stone walls behind me.

“Men of Gondor, hear now the Steward of this Realm,” Faramir cries out in a firm voice. “Behold! One has come to claim the kingship again at last.” I look at Faramir, willing him to remain steadfast. He recites Aragorn's lineage and the list of his great deeds, both in battle and as a healer, “Captain of the Host of the West, wielder of the Sword Reforged, victorious in battle, whose hands bring healing.” My heart feels as though it will leap out of my chest. For now comes the moment when all of Faramir's efforts in persuading the men of the Council of the legitimacy of Aragorn's claim will either bear fruit or fail. I hear Faramir's voice, strong, without a hint of doubt, asking, “Shall he be king and enter into the City and dwell there?”

Hardly daring to breathe, I wait. Then as one, all of the assembled host of soldiers and people of the city cry “Yea!”. I feel the pent up tension within me release like a spring unwinding, and my shoulders relax. So much so that I can hardly take in Faramir's next words, as he explains the coronation ritual, before holding aloft the winged crown of Gondor, more like to a battle helm than crown. In a daze I hear Aragorn utter the words in Elvish which I know from Faramir to be those of Elendil on first coming from the Sea to Middle Earth, then watch as Aragorn returns the crown.

Aragorn kneels, and Faramir hands the crown to one of the Halflings, who bears it to Gandalf. It is Gandalf, in dazzling white raiment, who puts the crown upon Aragorn's head. Then the King rises to his feet, and it seems to me that he is as one of the Numenorean kings reborn. And it also strikes me that he is to me as a figure from a fairy-tale, and that my eyes rest more comfortably on the man by his side, his Steward.

I hear Faramir cry: “Behold the King.” And the air is filled with the sound of trumpets and music. Aragorn leads the assembled hosts into his city. As the armies pass by, Éomer pauses for a moment in front of the dais where I stand, and, stooping from his saddle, reaches down his hand which I take and grip.

“Éowyn, dearest sister,” he says, with a huge smile. “I shall find you as soon as I may.” And then he rides on, carried along by the press of the crowd.

~o~O~o~

In fact it it is late afternoon before Éomer manages to come and find me. I see him at the end of the path. He runs towards me and grabs me round my waist, lifting me up and swinging me round.

“Éowyn!” I'd forgotten how loud Éomer can be; it sounds strange in this quiet garden. He gives me a hug.
“My arm,” I squeak. Éomer instantly releases me.

“How could I forget! I'm sorry...”

“No harm done, my brother. Just be gentle, you big troll,” I say with a laugh, giving him a playful punch with my good arm. He rests his hands on my shoulders, holding me at arms' length, examining my face.

“You look well,” he says, an enormous grin splitting his face.

“I am well. The healers have taken excellent care of me. The bones in my arm will take a few more weeks to knit together, but other than that I am almost completely recovered.”

“It's more than that, though. You look... content. No longer in the depths of despair.”

I smile back. “I think I have found peace at last. The shadow has departed from the world, not just for me, but for all of us.” Éomer links his arm with my good arm, and leads me down the path. As we walk, I ask him about the Black Gates. He becomes subdued, but gradually I draw out of him the story of that last desperate battle, the point at which all seemed lost, and the arrival of the Eagles. We talk about the good men who died, and our relief that so many survived against the odds. Éomer tells me of Frodo's quest, and I marvel once more at the strength and endurance of the Halflings.

Éomer asks me about my time in the halls of the healing, and I tell him of Cynefrid, Aldwulf and the others, and my plans to try to help the permanently injured find occupations. Éomer nods as I tell him of the sketches we have made of ways to adapt looms so they can be used by men whose ability to move is limited, of tools for farming which can be used one-handed. I talk of riding round Rohan to visit their villages, and Éomer expresses his worries about my safety; there will be marauding bands of orcs, still, he says, and Dunlanders who break their oath of peace. Hesitantly, I mention Cynefrid's idea that he could act as my sergeant at arms, with a small band of Riders. Éomer looks annoyed; surely I cannot still want to ride to war, he asks. I explain that I seek rather to build peace.

“Sister, let me speak honestly. It is not so long since you threw yourself into battle. And what drove you seemed to me to be a wish for death. Yet now I think you have rediscovered a desire for life. I do not wish to see you put yourself in harm's way.”

“Nay, brother. I shall be safe enough. And you know that I am not good at idleness,” I say. “But we should not disagree thus on our first meeting after such desperate times. Let us put off this discussion until another time. Tell me of the celebrations at Cormallen.” At first he frowns, never one to leave business unfinished, but then relents. I sense that he does not want to mar our first meeting after so long.

So Éomer tells me of the feasting and merriment, of dancing round the fire, of a midnight dare to swim in an icy river. Most amusing is his tale of one of his sergeants evading payment for his evening’s entertainment by somehow managing to convince not one but three camp followers that he would make an honest woman of each of them. There was chaos the next morning when they discovered his perfidy. Between them (making common cause for the time being on the basis that my enemy's enemy is my friend) they managed to catch him. For his part, he was so hung-over he was near wanting to die anyway, and in no fit state to fight back. The three women threw him in the midden, much to the amusement of all.

“And you, dear heart – did you find some pretty girls to dally with?” I ask, with a knowing smile.

“Ah, you wrong me most grievously. Now I am become a king I am a reformed character,” he answers with a laugh.
“Become a king, or become enamoured of one woman in particular?” I respond.

“Has my sister started listening to women's gossip? My, what a turn up,” Éomer chuckles.

“What makes you think women have a monopoly on gossip?” I say, remembering that it was Faramir who told me of his cousin's dalliance. And instantly I realise I have made the most elementary of tactical mistakes, for Eomer's eyes narrow at once.

“Hmm, so you’ve been gossiping with a man, and you have found peace and a renewed desire for life... and a desire for what else, I wonder? How could I have missed that glow about you? Were it not for your freckles, I'd think you'd turned into an elf.” Béma, curse big brothers and their uncanny ability to read one's mind. I can feel myself blushing. He raises his eyebrows, and continues, while I squirm like a beetle skewered on a pin.

“Now, who was there left in this fair but cold city? I think we can rule out boys too young to fight, for that glow does not come from anything a young boy could do. Nor, for that matter, anything an old man in his dotage, too feeble to go to fight, could accomplish. So I suppose you have met an injured soldier in these very houses – though not, I think, too badly injured...” He gives me a knowing look. Melkor's balls, anyone would think he'd actually caught me wrapped in someone's cloak. He appears to have leaped rather quickly to the conclusion that his sister has not been defending her virtue as valiantly as she should have been, and I am hardly able to contradict him with any degree of conviction. The only surprising thing is that he seems amused rather than annoyed. And as if the situation can get no worse, suddenly, who should appear at the end of the path but Faramir, walking towards us.

“Oh, damn it,” says Éomer “Just as I was about to worm the truth out of you. Here comes the worthy Steward, no doubt wanting to discuss the weregild on our dead and wounded. A most honourable subject, and I have no doubt that he and Aragorn will do right by the Riddermark, but I was about to mither you until you told me who you'd got yourself entangled with, and now I must be bored to death by matters of state instead.” Then he glances across at me, takes one look at my face, and his mouth drops open in stunned amazement.

At this precise moment, Faramir reaches us and bows solemnly. Having not been privy to our conversation, he seems completely unaware of the atmosphere between my brother and me. “My lady Éowyn, my lord king,” he says politely, then continues, “King Elessar would have audience with you, my lord. There is, as I am sure you realise, much to be discussed. Your pardon, my lady, for taking your kinsman from you so soon after you have been reunited.” Béma, the man has the most amazing control over his countenance. Had I not already given the game away, my brother would have not the slightest grounds for suspicion.

Éomer lifts an eyebrow, then smiles. I know that smile. It is dangerous; my love and I are in for a difficult encounter.

“I fear King Elessar may have to wait for a moment,” Éomer says. “For I think that you and I have other, more personal matters to discuss.”

And then I realise I have underestimated my love, for he allows only the very faintest of smiles to cross his face, before bowing slightly and saying, “My lord, my apologies. I had not realised Éowyn had intended to speak to you immediately. I am indeed the happiest of men, for I have asked your sister to marry me, and she has accepted my suit.”

There is a long silence. Éomer looks first puzzled, then angry, then puzzled again, and eventually manages to speak.
“Is it not customary that you should ask my permission, as her closest relative? And yet you do not. You seem to think that you can simply present me with accomplished fact. Are you so sure of Gondor's superiority that you would behave thus towards me?” Éomer does indeed sound on the brink of exploding with rage.

“My lord, I can assure you that my words are not driven by any imagined feelings of superiority, for that would clearly be ridiculous given how much my country owes to yours. Nor do I intend any disrespect towards you. But your sister is four and twenty, and is a warrior of renown in her own right, and to ask for your permission would be to treat her with disrespect, for she is a lady worthy of all honour and respect, who can be trusted to know her own mind and decide for herself what her future should be.” Béma, if I did not already love this man with all my heart, I would do so now.

Éomer, for his part, is stunned into silence. I realise that my hot-headed brother would have found a response to aggression, or to Faramir's backing down and apologising. The first he would have met with aggression of his own, probably with some to spare, the second with ice-cold contempt. But this calm, reasoned response has stopped him in his tracks. At first I think he will get angry, but then, to my surprise, he begins to laugh.

“Béma's balls, you took a chance there... I was this damn close to drawing my sword on you. But you're right, my sister would never have forgiven you if you'd asked my permission.”

Faramir smiles in response, and says, “Yes, I took a chance – I did not know how you would react. But, I weighed the possibility of you coming for me with your sword against the certainty of your sister doing so, and played the odds accordingly.” He smiles at me, reaching out his hand and I take it, and we stand before Éomer, hand-in-hand. Éomer still looks slightly stunned by the sudden revelation, but manages to give a slight smile, a smile which grows as the ridiculous nature of the situation begins to dawn on him. Eventually he gives me a look, then speaks to my love.

“And besides which, assuming you survived the encounter, in the long run, I suppose my goodwill would be nice, but not essential, but you need Éowyn's if you're going to have a chance of her warming your bed hereafter.” At this I punch Éomer on the arm, though in truth I am relieved he has said 'hereafter' rather than 'again'.

~o~O~o~

The contrast between this ball and the formal dinner a week or so ago could not be greater. The room is filled with a host of people. It sparkles with light and music, and the noise of animated conversation. I stand at the edge of the hall next to a pillar. Beside me are Éomer, Éothain, Gimli and the two younger hobbits. Somehow, despite the copious quantities of fine Dol Amroth wine, my companions have managed to find some ale. They cannot agree what ale it is they like best, but they all agree that this brew the Gondorians produce limps home in last place, firmly behind the ales of the Riddermark, the dark bitter brews produced in Laketown, and the malty beers of the Green Dragon in Bywater. I am half-listening to this discussion, while watching Faramir's discomfiture. At first, the poor man does not even realise what the endless succession of young women fluttering round him are up to. However, gradually their attentions become so pronounced and unmistakable that the poor man begins to glance round the room in desperation, seeking some escape route.

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“Are you not going to rescue your beloved Steward, dear sister?” Éomer asks, then belches loudly. “He looks frankly terrified of all those harpies, but is much too gentle a man to know how to rid himself of them.”

I recognise the latest young woman to latch onto his arm as Castamir's niece and decide the time has come to act. “Only if Gimli will accompany me,” I say, seizing the dwarf by the arm and practically towing him across the dance floor in my wake. Behind me I hear Éothain's voice.
“Béma, she has the light of battle in her eyes.”

Éomer, who has heard my (admittedly highly edited) account of my time in Minas Tirith, sets him right. “Yes, but I don't think she doubts her man's faithfulness for an instant. More that she hates the woman's family with a passion and hopes to deliver a set-down to them.”

We arrive at Faramir's side just in time to hear the simpering tones of the young woman. “Oh, this is one of my favourite dances.”

“What a stroke of luck,” I say. “For although Faramir has promised me this dance, Gimli has just told me how much he would like to join in a stately measure, if I could but intercede to gain him a suitably beautiful partner. And I am sure you would be only too pleased to dance with a warrior of such renown.” I am not sure who is more horrified, Gimli or the woman, but Gimli collects himself first and bows deeply, before taking her hand. On the other side of the room, I notice that my brother's party has been joined by the Elf, Legolas, who now has his elegant, shapely hand over his eyes, his shoulders shaking with mirth. For his part, Faramir gives me a dazzling smile and takes my hand in his, leading me to the middle of the floor.

“Thank you,” Faramir says with a heartfelt sigh. “Had you come charging across the room on Windfola, dressed in shining armour, you could not have effected a better rescue.”

It turns out to be one of those annoyingly ponderous Gondorian dances where one takes one's partner's hand decorously and chastely for a few steps, parts to circle round the room, then joins them again. As dances go, it is neither fish nor fowl. If it must be a stately dance at least give me one where the conversation can flow instead of being continually interrupted. Or give me a wild reel or polka where I end up so out-of-breath I cannot talk. But then my scholarly lover comes up with a ploy to exploit the situation.

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“Of course, if you cannot ride Windfola...” he begins, before we retreat to circle to opposite sides of the room. I wonder where he is going with this line of thought.

“I am sure I could find you another steed to ride...” he continues, with just the faintest twitch at the corner of his mouth and a stormy look in his eyes that I recognise all too well, then we are swept away by new partners for a few measures.

“Does Gondor have stallions I would be interested in mounting?” I ask as we join hands again and progress up the centre of the hall together. I raise my eyebrows and glance up at him. He looks back at me with an expression I have come to know so well, the one that speaks to me of naked desire and a promise of pleasure to come. But once more the dance pulls us apart. Faramir crosses the floor behind me as I circle with three other women in an intricate pattern. At long last, the pattern allows us to join hands once more.

“I believe one might be found which would offer enough of a challenge. Though I have heard tell that he can prove rather lively, and is inclined to buck beneath his rider...” My breath catches, and I feel the heat low down in my body. Yet again, however, we are once again led to opposite ends of the room by new partners, our eyes fixed on one another across the space between us. The circle complete, I find myself back at his side.

“And think you, my lord, that I can be unseated that easily? I have never found a horse in the stables of Edoras that could escape from between my thighs; I do not expect to be thrown by one in Gondor...” Once more we are swept apart, and circle round with appropriate stateliness. But though my movements are stately, my thoughts are not. And in this way, the pattern of snatches of speech and circling continues.
“My lady is rightly confident of her abilities, but still I would like to see them tested to the full…”

“I think I can assure you that I will ride this wild stallion until he is exhausted and tame beneath my handling…”

“I can assure you he will give his wild shieldmaiden a ride she will remember, one that perchance will leave her as tired as he…”

“I look forward to testing my mettle... and his.”

“Perhaps we could discuss some of the finer points of horsemanship outside in the garden once this dance is over…”

The music comes to an end and Faramir bows deeply to me. I return the courtesy. I think I can say I have never enjoyed a stately dance so much. Though I fully expect to enjoy an interlude in the garden yet more. I look into his grey eyes, now dark with desire, and I find myself as breathless as if we had danced an altogether wilder dance. How far, I wonder, will he be prepared to take things in the garden, with the threat of discovery hanging over us? Bema, why does this train of thought excite me so much?

But our assignation is not to be. I am quite taken by surprise as Éomer appears at my elbow.

“I pray you, could you spare my sister for a moment? For we have had but little time to talk since my return. And Legolas was wondering if he could ask you about some of the Sindarin manuscripts in the archives here…”

A brief look of annoyance flits across Faramir's face, before he schools his countenance and says, “Of course, my lord.” He gives a bow, then makes his way across the floor to the Elf. A quick glance at the latter's slightly surprised face suggests to me that Legolas has in fact expressed no interest whatsoever in the state of the archives. However, Éomer takes my elbow and guides me through the throng, and thus I find myself rather disappointingly in the garden with my brother rather than my lover.

“Béma knows what the two of you were saying to each other, but the looks on your faces must surely be enough to let every other woman in the room know that you have staked your claim to their Steward,” says Éomer, with a chuckle.

“Both our faces?” I ask. “I am used to the fact that I have no great skill when it comes to diplomacy, but Faramir is usually harder to read.”

“Not when he is talking to you,” says Éomer. Then he pauses. “I'm not sure how to bring this up... in fact, I'm not even sure I want to…”

“But?”

“Well, first off, does he know his business?” Éomer asks.

“What do you mean?” I respond.

“Is he careful? He'll not embarrass you, will he?”

“I like the way you put that: 'not embarrass me', rather than 'not dishonour me'.”

“Éowyn, we're from the Riddermark. We both know a saying about bolting horses and stable doors. So answer the question,” Éomer says, testily.
He is right: he really does not want to have this conversation with me. But then I do not want him to have it either. Béma, this is my brother, and he is asking me if my lover is controlled enough to pull out in time. If ever a situation could make me wish once more for a swift death upon the field of battle! Glad that the darkness in the garden covers my blushes, I nod my head. “He knows his business, as you so delicately put it.”

“Thank Béma for small mercies,” my brother says.

I take a deep breath. “You are not angry?”

“No… I thought I would be, but… well, it doesn’t seem to matter any more.” He pauses for a long moment. “I thought you were dead on the battlefield. Then I found that you lived, but I had to ride to the Black Gates fearing that you cared so little for your life that you would throw it away at the first opportunity, and that even if that fey mood passed, you would probably still die when we lost the war. I think I’d be a bloody fool not to welcome anything that lifted that damn fey mood of yours.”

I stand in silence for a moment. Then Éomer manages to lift the the mood.

“Besides which, as your man said, you’re four-and-twenty.”

“Dare I ask what the second thing is?” I say.

“Well, there's a phrase that soldiers sometimes use when one of their number has got... got the itch badly.”

“I think I may have heard the expression on the ride to Gondor,” I say, drily. “If I remember aright, the phrase you're looking for is 'cunt-struck'. Are you suggesting that Faramir is...?” I find that my embarrassment is passing, and the conversation now seems so ridiculous as to be more like something from a dream.

“Well, not so much on his part. I mean, he is, obviously, from that last dance. Oh Valar, Êowyn, I really don't want to have to talk to you about this... But he's also clearly very much in love with you. No, it's more... Well... You.” Êomer's voice trails off; clearly he has not got over his embarrassment.

“Well, what would be the female equivalent, I wonder?” Éomer fidgets awkwardly, and I decide to put him out of his misery. “Are you asking me if I'm 'cock-struck'?” I ask with a chuckle. “You're worried I'm thinking with my fanny instead of my head,” I add, piling on the torture. Éomer looks as though he wants the ground to swallow him up.

“Well, it's hard to believe you've fallen for him reciting Sindarin poetry or some such nonsense.”

“The Sindarin poetry was nice, I'll admit,” I say. Éomer gives a strangled snort of disbelief. I can't remember when I've last had so much fun teasing my brother. “But in truth, I think it was the poetry in Quenya that really did the damage.” He looks at me sharply, and I see from the look of near-horror on his face that he realises I am actually telling him the truth.

“Bugger me to the Black Gates and back. My sister listening to poetry in Quenya. It really must be love.” We both dissolve into helpless laughter. Eventually Éomer gets control of himself.

“Êowyn, I just worry that the two of you seem so different. How can it work between you, once the initial enthusiasm has worn off?” he asks, suddenly serious.

I launch into an impassioned defence of Faramir, listing the many things I love about him: his bravery, his honesty, his intelligence, his gentleness, his humour, his fairness. Poor Éomer. If asking me whether I am likely to find myself unexpectedly with child has embarrassed him, my encomium
to Faramir's many virtues which this second question unleashes appears in danger of unmanning him completely.

“Peace, sister. I see that you do indeed love your noble and scholarly Steward. In fact, I think the sooner I return you to his company, the better.” And my brother takes my arm and escorts me back into the ballroom. He cannot resist one final dig.

“Though if your Steward is such a noble, honourable man, I am a bit bemused by his haste. He certainly seized the moment.”

“What makes you think it was he who seized the moment?” I ask. “I think you might rather say I seized him.”

“Ah, that makes more sense,” Eomer concedes. “The poor man never stood a chance.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Lady Peter as always!

Cavalry tactics. I found a couple of interesting blogs on this. The issue of formation is covered in LiveJournal entries by “I-Clausewitz” (great nom-de-plume!), and (in more detail on the topic of “how close was close order?”) in a quite well-referenced post by Gavin Robinson on the “Investigations of a dog (failing better at history)” website (I love the subtitle). The bottom line is that contemporary sources vary, but knee-to-knee may literally have meant this – in fact Robinson finds one source which suggests knee of one horseman tucked behind hamstring of horseman to his flank. However, as I-Clausewitz (IC hereafter) notes, it would be almost impossible to maintain this in a cavalry charge in a line, as noted by 18th and 19th century observers. Long lines of cavalry tend to break up into smaller wedge-shaped formations. IC notes that Tolkien’s own description of the Rohirric charge in the battle of Pelennor fields follows this pattern.

The other interesting thing IC touches on is the distinction between heavy and light cavalry. Heavy cavalry (as the name suggests, heavily armoured on heavy horses) play a tactical role on the battle field; light cavalry in smaller groups or singly allow for strategic roles – bearing messages, skirmishing deep behind enemy lines, cutting enemy supply lines, etc. However he argues that the distinction is a somewhat artificial one – ideally you’d want both (and possibly even horsemen who could fulfil both roles – a view I’ve attributed to Cynefrid in this chapter). For the notion that one could have a horse that would combine reasonable speed, ability to bear men in armour, and endurance, I had as a model the horses bred for the Polish-Lithuanian Hussars in the early 17th century.

Finally, there's the issue of what cavalry bring to the battlefield in terms of tactical advantage. Steven Morillo (“The 'Age of Cavalry' Revisited” - yay, genuine properly referenced academic article) discusses the standard theory of the rise of cavalry: namely that technology in the form of the invention and dissemination of the stirrup and high-back saddle gave a decisive edge to mounted troops (Lynn White Medieval Technology and Social Change, Charles Oman, A History of the Art of War in the Middle Ages). Stirrups and saddles turned the horse into a stable platform from which a man could
fight, and where the combined mass of rider plus horse together with reach put the mounted warrior at a decisive advantage over infantry. However, Morillo argues that this neglects the occasional battles where infantry won, together with the sudden resurgence of infantry warfare from the 17th century onwards. He believes that analysis of battles where infantry won out shows that the crucial thing was training and cohesion. The cavalry charge is primarily a psychological form of warfare: it relies on the infantry line breaking ranks so it can be outflanked. If the line holds and is sufficiently deep, the cavalry horses will refuse, even if the line is only one of pikesmen (longbows, which the English used decisively against the French at Crecy and Agincourt, bring a whole new threat to advancing cavalry – these were armour piercing at ranges of 150 yards). Instead, Morillo puts the dominance of cavalry down to social factors. In the decentralised power structures of Medieval Europe, there was neither the political will nor economic clout (a few notable exceptions aside – Florence, parts of Flanders) to maintain well trained, well drilled infantry, because cohesion and the knowledge that the man next to you was not going to do a runner was crucial to maintaining formation in the face of a cavalry charge. With the fall of feudalism and the rise of more centralised governments, and more professional armies, infantry came back to the fore in the 17th century.

And finally, thanks to the friend who mentioned of the issue of the discrepancy between contemporary chroniclers’ accounts of the numbers involved in battles and the actual numbers as indicated by army pay rolls.
We ride up the narrow trail in single file. The path is rocky, and carves its way in zig-zags up the fearsome slope. Pine woods and boulders cover the slopes, but the soil is so poor that the trees are sparse, and we get frequent views down a thousand or more feet to the meadows at the foot of the mountain side. The air smells of pine and dust, and in the midday sun, the air is warm despite the altitude. The grass by the track has been cropped short by grazing animals, and small alpine flowers cling to the earth, giving sparks of colour amid the dull green of the grass, the brown of the earth and the grey of the lichen-covered boulders. Occasionally we see the spoor of animals – traces of dung, tufts of hair caught in brambles. Even more rarely, we see a quick glimpse of a marmot venturing from its burrow, and once on a high outcrop above us, a fleeting sighting of a chamois.

In the broad valley way below us, there were once well tended fields, but most have been laid waste by Saruman's troops. Here, on the high pastures, it has always been hard to scrape a living. As we crest the brow of the steep slope onto gentler ground, we see a cluster of huts, thatched roofs sagging, an air of decay clinging to them. The small hamlet clings to the slopes on Alpine meadows in a hanging valley. Above it, the rocky cliffs and boulder-strewn moraines give way to the snow fields of the White mountains. Life here has always been tenuous; a winter which comes early, or a spring thaw which comes late can mean life or death to the flocks of sheep, and that in turn can mean life or death to the people who herd them. But now, torn by the war and its aftermath, survival has become a desperate struggle against the odds.

I have become used to the pinched, drawn faces of women and children who are making do on short rations, their clothes hanging from their thin frames. But this hamlet shocks me beyond anything I have encountered thus far; the children's eyes are too large, their bellies swollen from hunger. The women are gaunt, faces lined with the pain of loss and fear for their future. The old folk sit listlessly in doorways as if lacking the strength to move. There seem to be no young or middle-aged men. I crouch beside the old man who now leads the people. He explains that all the men in the strength of their days having fallen at Pelennor or Cormallen. He adds that the villages in the main valley below have spared as much as they could from their grain stocks, and any more would leave them starving. Marauding Uruk Hai burned the barns with the winter fodder and the stores of grain for the spring planting. Barely any of the spring lambs survived the tail end of the winter without any hay to compensate for the grass which lay hidden beneath the last snows. And the fields now lie barren because there was not the seed to plant them.

I do what little I can. A rider is immediately dispatched back to Edoras, with a request for pack animals with flour and salted meat. I also request help for the villages below, in the form of men to help with tilling the fields and getting a winter barley crop sown. That is, if any men can be spared. We leave a proportion of our own provisions behind, hoping to replenish them when we get to settlements on lower ground, further removed from the swath of desolation left by Saruman's army. I and the scribe make detailed notes of the number of people, houses and livestock. Then with heavy hearts we mount up and follow the winding path back down to the foot of the main valley.

We visit one more village that day, some ten miles away and lower. It is not in such a bad way, but still I fear that without help, the population will be decimated by winter. We ride till dusk, by which stage we have found our way back out onto the edge of the broad plains. There we make camp, lighting a fire to keep the chill spring night at bay. We make a meagre meal out of the provisions we have left.
“Bloody hell, what a day,” says Cynefrid, shaking his head sadly.

“That village, high up in the hanging valley,” adds Edric. “Never mind next winter, I'll be surprised if all of them make it to midsummer.”

“I keep thinking that could have been Hereswið and my wee ones, if things had gone a bit differently.” He gives a shiver.

“We'll have to hope that Éomer can spare some men with supplies on pack horses,” I say. “With a bit of luck, Osred should get there with my message by noon tomorrow.”

“Talking of tomorrow, where are we heading, my lady?” Cynefrid asks.

“Out East, across the plains.” I realised early on in our trip that I could not make an exhaustive survey on my own. My current plan is to visit each part of the country, looking at a handful of settlements in the mountains, on the plains, by the Entwash, East towards Anduin, to try to get some sense of the overall picture. Then once back at Meduseld, I can organise several teams to cover the country properly.

Edric looks up at the darkening sky above us, stars scattered across the deep blue. “It'll be a cold night,” he says.

We are travelling light and have no tents. I settle down in my bivouac, wrapped in my cloak and a blanket. After the sights I have seen today, I feel almost guilty that my stomach is filled, if only with waybread and salted pork. I toss and turn in my bed roll. Sleep does not come easily.

Éomer only agreed with great reluctance to let me ride out to carry out my survey of the villages and towns. I know he felt that I was playing at soldiers. But the more time I spend on this enterprise, the more I feel I was right to follow up Edric's idea. The country has been hard hit and only through knowing what stocks of food, livestock and seed we have, and how best to distribute them, will we be able to survive. The regions far from the depredations of the orcs and Dunlanders, where the local Lord survived the war, or where his wife was a strong chatelaine – these regions are secure and will make it through the winter. But the regions left without leadership, without any means of supporting the settlements like the hamlet we visited earlier, are in the direst of need.

I take some comfort from the fact that my brother has now come round to my way of thinking. The letters I have sent him, reporting on how I find things, have been answered thoughtfully and at length, and he has responded as quickly as he can to requests for urgent help of the sort I have sent him today. I think he also feels comforted by the fact that, three weeks into this task, I still have not encountered any danger. The remnants of the Uruk Hai seem to have taken shelter in the Misty Mountains to the north, and so far, the Dunlanders seem to be holding to their oath.

As I lie on the hard ground, my hand closes on the jewel that hangs round my neck. The jewel was a parting gift from Faramir, and I touch it as if it could bring him to me. I draw the blanket close around me, trying not to shiver, and pull the collar of my cloak tight round my neck. For this journey I wear a plain wool cloak suitable for hard riding and nights lying on equally hard ground. Running my fingertips over the facets of the jewel and gazing at the dull orange glow of our fire, I think of Faramir. And the coarse wool against my cheek makes me think of the beautiful cloak he gave me, which lies safely in a cedar-wood chest in Meduseld. My mind drifts back to the conversation we had, when he finally told me of its significance.

We stood on the walls of the city, a few days before I was due to leave to return to the Riddermark. Our imminent separation hung over us, and the hours we snatched together seemed bittersweet. I had been talking of what little I remembered of my parents, for I was only seven years old the year they
died. I told Faramir of my father, Éomund, chief Marshal of the Mark and Lord of the Eastfold, a
great bear of a man, full of life. Great was the warmth of his laughter, but great also was the heat of
his wrath. As a father, he was gentle and loving. I recalled the times he would bear me on his back,
pretending to be my trusty steed and carrying me into imaginary battles, for even then I copied my
elder brother in everything, and my young head was filled with childish dreams of chivalry and bold
quests. But as a warrior, my father was fell and dangerous. It was only much later, as I grew older,
that I pieced together a more complete picture from the fragments of conversation I overheard: he
was fell and dangerous, but at times his blood-lust bordered on, nay, tipped over into foolhardiness,
often driving him to ride out in haste with but a handful of men. And thus he met his doom, taking
his chances against the odds one time too many, fighting a raiding party of orcs, hopelessly
outnumbered.

Faramir had taken me in his arms and comforted me as I told him of that dreadful year. My grief on
losing my father was keen and piercing, all the worse because at such a young age I had no means to
make sense of the events which had torn away the foundations of my world. But great as my grief
was, it was small compared to that of my mother. Hers knew no bounds, and so deep was her woe
that when a sickness came upon her some months later, it was as if she had no strength to fight it.
Weakened already, she sickened and died. My brother and I were sent to Meduseld, where Théoden
King brought us up as his own children. In Théodred, we had a cousin who was half way between
elder brother and father figure, and so I grew up, a wild scrap of a girl, forever trailing after my
brother, learning to fight and ride, with no mother to teach me a woman's role in life. My cousin and
uncle were kind and loving, and my brother loving and fiercely protective. But still I missed my
mother deeply.

“To me, the bitterest thing seems that I cannot remember the happy times with her that surely must
have been been before my father's death. My brother was twelve when she died, and he could recall
her kindness and laughter. But all I remember is her sadness, the way she seemed lost to us, unable to
think of anything but the loss of our father;” I whispered, my face buried in Faramir's tunic. He held
me close, and the warmth of his body seemed to flow round me, comforting me. For a long time he
was silent. Then at last he spoke.

“I was only five when my mother died.” I looked up in surprise and found that his grey eyes were
filled with sadness and yearning, but also with gentleness. “I have but dim memories of her. Just a
sense of being safe and loved, and an image of her, wearing the cloak you now wear.”

“This was your mother's cloak,” I said, thunderstruck. “But you gave it to me before... before
anything had passed between us. When I was but a passing acquaintance.”

Faramir smiled, a strange smile where all at once a piercing sadness and a gentle happiness seemed
somehow mixed, and stroked my cheek softly. “I loved you from the moment I first saw you,” he
said. I looked up at him, words failing me for a moment, and raised my hand to his cheek, stroking
the soft stubble of his beard. Then I found my voice.

“You loved me then?” I said, in a tone of wonder, and of puzzlement.

“It was all I could do not to tell you all that I felt that first moment. But I sensed that to do so would
be to add an intolerable extra burden to your grief. For you seemed so closed off from the world, so
desperate. You told me you had rode to war seeking death, and I felt as though my heart would
break for you.”

My breath caught in my throat at this, but I managed to speak. “I feared at first that you were yet
another person come to offer pity I did not want. But then I realised you offered me compassion. But
at that moment, I did not for an instant think you loved me.”
Faramir smiled again, grey eyes gazing on me. “I remember vividly what I thought. I thought that you were beautiful. It seemed to me that in the valleys of our hills there were flowers fair and bright, and maidens fairer still; but neither flower nor lady had I seen till then in Gondor so lovely and so sorrowful. And I wanted to tell you that though it might be that only a few days were left ere darkness fell upon our world, that nonetheless it would ease my heart if while the Sun yet shone, I could see you.”

“You wanted to say that? And yet you did not.”

“I feared to tell you. It seemed to me that you were like a wild animal, frighted by my approach, who would have run from me in fear were I to approach too incautiously.” He gave me a wry smile.

“You were right. You would have scared me half to death.” Then I found myself smiling back at him. “So like anyone who knows animals, you kept still, made soft and gentle noises, and waited for me to come to you.”

“You make it sound as if I clicked my tongue as I would to a horse,” Faramir said, his voice filled with amusement.

“For all I know of Quenya, you might as well have done,” I replied. Then Faramir tightened his arms around me and kissed me with a gentle passion.

“My shieldmaiden,” he murmured.

“Yours always, my lord. The shieldmaiden you tamed,” I replied, and returned his kiss.

The sound of a bough on the fire crackling as the flames catch the resin in its wood brings me back to the present, but only for a moment, before I think back once more to the Houses of Healing. At the time, I thought myself guilty of throwing myself at Faramir in a most unmaidenly manner. And indeed I did throw myself at him. The thought makes me smile. But it was not one-sided. In his quiet way, Faramir pursued me, though I was in such a state of confusion I failed to notice. I feel a warmth deep inside me at the memory of him reciting poetry to me. I think it was then that I realised his feelings went beyond friendship. Then I chuckle quietly at the thought of my behaviour later that night, when, the same sudden impulsive streak that made me ride to battle moved me to invite myself into his bed. Béma, that was near disaster. And I remember realising he was in love with me, and thinking I had ruined everything by my precipitate haste. Thank the Hunter and the Mother of the Earth that Faramir was of a calmer, more even temperament than I, and could see past my confusion.

And then, watching the sparks drift up in the sky, orange specks of fire among the blue pinpricks of starlight, my thoughts skip forward, nearer to the present, to the journey back to Edoras.

For the first few days after we parted, I felt Faramir's absence like a physical pain. Éomer and I rode side by side for much of the way. My brother, I think, sensed my sadness and was unusually gentle, seemingly knowing when to talk and when to remain silent. War, I think, has changed us. War, and in Éomer's case, the responsibilities of kingship, thrust upon him unexpectedly, unasked for, unwanted. He seemed to have grown into maturity, no longer the rash young man. The change elicited all sorts of conflicting feelings in me. I was saddened at the thought of the burdens he now bore. But he bore them without complaint, with a calm sense of duty. I realised that his youthful resemblance to my father in temperament was only skin-deep. It was true that he had inherited our father's capacity for fury; Eothain had painted a terrifying picture of him, thinking both Théoden and I lay dead upon the battlefield, crying out in a fell voice to the Rohirrim to follow him to death and the world's ruin. But somewhere in the course of Imrahil finding me to be alive, Éomer's anxious
wait beside my bed, his ride to Cormallen, and the last desperate battle in which he had expected to
die, my brother had learned patience, and the ability to control that fury.

It made me wonder how much I too had changed in the intervening months. Certainly, I had at last
escaped the shadow that drove me to seek death. I had been filled with happiness beyond imagining
by Faramir’s love. But underneath it, how much had I changed? Try as I might, I still could not
imagine myself living the life of a pampered court beauty in Minas Tirith, nor even sitting in my solar
in a country house in Emyn Arnen, gossiping with the women folk as I embroidered. Faramir had
tried to reassure me. Ithilien had suffered much, and its people would need strong leadership to guide
them in rebuilding their country. And Faramir felt they would look to me as much as to him for that
leadership. And yet I felt uncertain; I would be an unknown quantity, the sister of a King of a far-off
realm, a mere woman. How I hated that phrase, “a mere woman.”

About a week into the journey, my monthly courses started. I was taken aback by the wave of
desolation which washed over me. I should have felt only relief, for my betrothal was yet to be
announced and the wedding many months off. But truth, I felt a deep sadness. I realised that some
part of me hoped to be with child, if nothing else, as a corporeal reminder of my love. And no matter
how much I told myself it was for the best, I felt a deep sadness within me.

With no-one on hand to share my sadness, I poured all my feelings into a letter to Faramir when I
returned. No sooner had the messenger ridden off than I felt foolish for having written such
nonsense. I fretted and fussed through the next few days, on edge. But Faramir's reply was full of
understanding.

“Éowyn, my dearest love,

“I am not sure I can find the words to express how much it soothed my heart to receive your letter
this morning. I took it at once to my study and barred the door so that I could read it without
interruption. I too have missed you every moment of every day. Yes, I am busy, and my tasks fill the
hours and distract me, but ever I find that my thoughts will return to you, my beloved, when I should
be reading dispatches, or listening to yet another speech in the council chamber.

“You write that part of you is saddened to find that you are not with child, though you say that
considered rationally you know it is for the best. But our feelings are not rational, are they, my
sweetest love? The rational part of me knows this was the likeliest outcome by far, for we have tried
our best to avoid that course. And that part of me also tells the rest of me very firmly that it is for the
best. Furthermore, considered rationally, since we are not to be married for many months, it would
be disastrous had you conceived. But what is rationality? For the larger part of me, well, I fear it is
not listening too carefully to counsels of common sense. For I too would have rejoiced at the thought
of our child growing within you as a testament to our love. And I am torn by the thought of your
unhappiness. How I wish I was near you, to hold you close and comfort you, to soothe your sadness.
I would hold your head against my shoulder and stroke your wondrous golden hair. And we could
shed tears together, and love one another.

“I miss you in the evenings, when our passion would have been hot together. And I miss you in the
dead of night when I awake with horrifying memories and long for your warmth to chase away the
terrors. And I miss your beautiful face on wakc. And most of all, I miss your company and
conversation as I walk in the gardens. I keep your letter close to me at all times, as if it is a piece of
you, as if it could somehow make up for your absence. But it is not you, and I long for you.

“I know that the months will pass – they must pass – and just after midsummer we will be betrothed.
Then a few months after that, we will be married. Ah! how it fills me with joy just to write those
words. But those months will feel like an eternity. I shall write to you as often as I can, and await
your letters. If I cannot tell you to your face that I love you, I shall write the words a hundred, a thousand times.

“With all my love, your Faramir.”

I have read this letter so many times I know its contents by heart. I shift uncomfortably, trying to find the best way of arranging myself between the tussocks that dig into my body. The embers are dying down now, and the cold penetrates my cloak. To distract myself, I think of all the letters that have passed. Since my return to the Golden Hall, we have written to one another as often as the speed of the messengers between Edoras and Minas Tirith allow. Our letters are an odd mixture: in part they are full of our love for one another, but they also discuss the politics of our two nations, the state of disarray after the war, our hopes for the future. His letters are a constant source of comfort. When I read them, I can see his grey eyes, full of love for me, feel him close to me, smell him. They are also full of details which mean that I must keep them private, keep them close to me, for he writes to me of our shared passion, of memories of our time together, of desire and heat and need.

But the other thing that makes his letters to me precious is his requests for my opinion. He asks me for advice, for reassurance that he has handled political situations in the best way, that he has thought of all the possible repercussions in opting for one course of action over another. When he writes of the problems he faces, so similar to those of our smaller realm – the need to feed the population, to rebuild towns and roads, to deal with orc bands or bands of disloyal, traitorous men (whom I sense he despises even more than the orcs) – it is not to tell me of his decisions, but to ask whether I feel he has thought of everything, whether I would have done things differently, whether there might be a better way of dealing with these problems. And in a similar vein I write to him, seeking advice, a wiser head than mine, his clear sighted sense of justice and his compassion.

Eventually, Cynefrid, noticing I am still awake, brings me an extra blanket (which smells strongly of horse) and I drift off to sleep.

~o~O~o~

I wake before the dawn, the chill of that last hour of the night biting into my bones. Gradually, a thin grey streak forms across the eastern horizon, and the vault of the sky lightens. The first rays of the sun strike our camp at a shallow angle, bringing no warmth as yet. The breath of men and horses mists in the air.

“What plans for today?” asks Edric.

“There is a settlement just down the valley, and then the Manor House of Askburn. I thought we could check the state of the settlement, then see what state the Manor is in,” I say.

“Askburn,” says Cynefrid, sounding as though he is musing aloud. “That rings a bell. Something I should remember. Can't quite put my finger on it, though.”

“I don't,” says Edric. “I don't remember coming across anyone from there on the ride to Gondor.”

“That's it,” says Cynefrid. “I overheard Éothain and Elfhelm checking through the list of weregild for the fallen, and remarking how fortunate it was that none from Askburn and its surroundings had fallen.”

“Lucky bastards,” mutters Edric. The poor lad lost two of his brothers, one on the Pelennor fields, one at Cormallen. We ride on up the narrow valley. The base of the valley is a flat marshy plain, with a shallow river meandering over shale and boulders between close-cropped turf banks. Sheep graze on the patches of grass. After an hour or so, we come to the settlement, a handful of long-houses
with low thatched roofs. Alerted by the sound of our hoofs on the stony path, the inhabitants appear, some from the houses, others from byres or the small strips of fields nearby.

They look better fed than most of the villages we have visited so far. But they seem strangely cagey and reluctant to talk as I ask them about the numbers of men, women and children, the old folk, the size of their flocks, how much seed they have in reserve for next season's planting. There is something about the atmosphere of the place that leaves me uneasy, and it is with some relief that the scribe and I finish our notes and we can continue up the valley to the Manor House.

It takes us another twenty minutes or so to reach the Manor, coming upon it round the shoulder of a low hill covered in gorse. It is a modest house, stone to mid-height, timber and plaster above, thatched as all buildings in my country are. There is a collection of barns and outbuildings adjacent to it, and a small number of houses close by. It would appear that someone has ridden ahead to bring news of our arrival, for the lord and lady of the Manor stand with a group of attendants on the terrace before the entrance. At my signal, the Riders form a close formation, lances held aloft. We will do this properly. We sweep up to the base of the terrace. I swing myself from Windfola's back, and hail the figures on the terrace.

“Westu hal, my lord and lady. I am Éowyn daughter of Éomund, King's Sister.” The two bow to me, and invite me to join them. I nod to Cynefrid, who dismounts and accompanies me through the door.

The hall has a high ceiling with carved bosses and tapestries hang from its wooden walls. The floor is covered with clean rushes, and the room smells fresh. Clearly the lady is an efficient chatelaine. They bid me sit at the head of the table, and I tell them not to stand on ceremony, but to sit also. I explain about the survey I am carrying out, and the need to help areas which have been hit hardest by the war. It could be my imagination, but I think they stiffen at the mention of help; do they fear that I will confiscate their seed stocks and flocks? I mention how fortunate their estate is to still have so many healthy men in their prime. And now they seem even more ill at ease. The lord haltingly explains that the messenger calling troops to the muster of Rohan must have suffered a misfortune, for they never received the call, and so none of their menfolk rode. As he says this, he looks at me, but it seems to me that it takes enormous effort for him to meet my gaze. His wife sits by his side, gazing down at her hands.

They invite Cynefrid and me to break bread with them, and provide a meal for the men outside, as well as allowing them to feed and water our horses. Details of the manor and its resources having been noted, we ride back down the valley.

“What did you make of them?” I ask Cynefrid.

“Exactly the same as you, my lady,” says Cynefrid with a shrewd look. “You didn't think they were on the level, and nor do I. They got the call alright, they just didn't answer it. But proving it would be nigh on impossible.”

“But why?” I ask.

“My guess is that if we asked around enough, we'd find they've feathered their nests nicely by preying like carrion birds on other peoples' misfortune, all while keeping enough menfolk on their land to defend their own property and make sure it was well husbanded.”

~o~O~o~

We spend the afternoon riding away from the mountains back onto the plains, visiting several more hamlets. We manage to find one quite sizeable village, and the farm land around seems in good shape, so there is enough surplus food that we are able to buy some and restock our supplies.
Eventually, as the sun begins to sink, we make camp. Edric and one of the other Riders set about cooking our newly acquired meat. The resulting stew is hot and spicy – considerably better than I would be capable of producing. And Cynefrid produces several skins of ale which he seemingly acquired at the inn in the village. We sit round the fire, in the red glow, watching the sparks rise to the dark velvet sky, and eat and drink our fill. In fact, we drink more than our fill.

“Go on then, Edric, give us one of your songs,” the Riders shout in chorus, and with a grin, Edric begins to sing:

“For Erwald swore a solemn oath,
By her fine hairy twat,
That he would win the battle there,
And stick the lass and all that.

His hairy bollocks side and wide,
Hung like a beggar's wallet;
His prick stood like a rollin' pin.
She sniggered when she saw that.

For all that, and all that,
And twice as much as all that,
The lassie got a well spanked arse
But won the day for all that!

Then she turned up her hairy c...

“EDRIC,” bellows Cynefrid at the top of his voice. “Have a thought for the lady here.”

I bury my head in my hands to stop them seeing my most unmaidenly laughter. Quite what Cynefrid is thinking I don't know. He knows that I have heard these songs before. More than that, from his barbs about my “dancing partner”, I fear he suspects, nay, knows that I am no maid. Watching the men out of the corner of my eye, I begin to hum quietly.

“Oh, you fancy joining the singing, my lady?” asks Cynefrid, with a twinkle, taking the bait I dangle. “Does your song have words, then?”

“Oh, it’s just a song the women sing at their spinning and weaving. I'm sure bold men of war wouldn't be interested,” I say, with a smile.

“No, I think we need a nice ladies' song to raise the tone of things,” says Cynefrid. He winks at me; he has heard me swear like a trooper. I take a hearty swig of the ale, and then start to sing.

“Helm Olafsson my man, Helm,
When first that you began
You had as good a tail tree
As any other man.
But now it dangles down, Helm,
For it has waxen wan.
I've two get ups for each go down,
Helm Olafsson my man.

For oh it is a fine thing
To see you hard at work.
But it's a muckle finer thing
To see your buttocks jerk.
For when I see your buttocks jerk
And feel you thrusting home,
'Tis then I like your chanter-pipe,
Helm Olafsson my man.

So when you want to swyve, Helm,
See that you do your best.
When you begin to fuck me,
See that you grip me fast.
See that you grip me fast, Helm,
Till I shout all I can!
Your back shall crack, e'er I cry slack,
Helm Olafsson my man.

Helm Olafsson my man, Helm,
You can fuck where'er you please,
Either in our warm bed,
Or else out on the lees;
Or you shall find the horns, Helm,
Upon your head to land;
And that's the cuckold's serenade,
Helm Olafsson my man.

By this stage the men are all helpless with laughter, clapping with the beat of the song, Cynefrid most of all. Eventually, brushing away tears of laughter, he manages to speak, quietly, just for my ears.

"Now surely you're not going to tell me that's a song about your young man? I'd have thought there'd be lots of going down, and no getting up and out of bed at all, if he's any sense."

I can't help myself: I look Cynefrid straight in the eye and answer him. "You said it yourself back in Minas Tirith: he may be a Gondorian pansy, but he's no poof!"

Cynefrid looks at me, serious for a moment. "I hope he's done right by you."

"Aye, there'll be no accidents, and we'll announce my betrothal after my Uncle's funeral."

"I never will understand the ways of the gentry," Cynefrid chuckles. "Why he couldn't just wrap you in his cloak and have done with it beats me."

"Oh, he did that, there just wasn't anyone around to witness it," I reply

"You should have said, my lady. Me 'n' Edric would've done the job – we'd have carried Aldwulf in there an' all if it would've helped." It is clear from Cynefrid's wink that this is not meant as a serious suggestion.

Chapter End Notes

The dirty songs are my "Rohirrised" versions of some of The Merry Muses of
Caledonia (there is a creative commons edition of these on Wikisource). You may well recognise them from Robert Burns' bowdlerised re-writes (the wiki attributes the dirty versions to Burns too, but according to my Penguin Book of Scottish Poetry, the dirty versions are more likely to be pre-existing folk songs). Helm Olafsson is my re-write of the original folk song which Burns turned into John Anderson my Jo. But unlike Burns' version, which is a paen to male friendship, the folk song is as I've written it, about a woman taking her husband to task for not doing his marital duty.

Written with fond memories of my mother, who bequeathed me her edition of Scots Poetry which includes these (and also her copy of Catullus). I think she also bequeathed me her love of bawdy humour. I can still remember her unbridled glee on discovering that the Romans had a diminutive term for “penis” (mentulla, in case you're interested; she was much better at Latin than I ever was).
Chapter 15: Battle Songs

It still seems strange to see my brother upon the throne where once Théoden sat. We did not intend to return to Edoras, but I decided that I needed to talk to Éomer in person about the struggles of the hardest-hit parts of the Westfold before we continued our survey. It is also becoming apparent to me, as I try to think how best to approach the subject, that the matter of Askburn needs to be brought to his attention. Béma, I hope I am right that his temper is more controlled now than it was a few years ago. Fortunately, I have a few hours before the evening meal in which to consider things within the privacy of my own chamber. Having greeted my brother, I now have leave to retire. I also find myself with the chance to wash properly for the first time in weeks.

To my delight, someone has watched our group of Riders approach across the plain and has had the foresight to heat bath water. A steaming tub is waiting in my room. I sink with enormous relief into the hot water, letting it lap around my tired muscles. I cannot help a sigh as I scrub the grime away, relishing the scented oils that clean away the smell of horse and sweat. As I lie back in the water, soaking my hair, I hear a soft tap at the door. There is a screen round the tub, so I call out a greeting. It is the housekeeper's assistant, Hildegard.

“I have brought you some tea and honey cakes, and a letter,” she says politely. Filled with sudden excitement, I sit up, splashing water onto the flagstones in my haste.

“Could you fetch me towels,” I call back to her. The towels have been warming in front of the fire, and wrapped in them, I settle on the bench beside the fire with my letter, food and drink forgotten in my urgent need to read. Heart singing, I recognise Faramir's familiar hand, and break the seal.

Eowyn, my beloved,

I have just received your letter, and have read it twice. It brings me so much joy to know that you think of me, as I think of you. I miss you, my love, so much. But the weeks pass and each one brings our betrothal closer. And with each passing week my mood lifts as I think how much closer I am to seeing you once more.

You asked how things fare in Gondor. As you have probably guessed, that faction on the city council which proved such a thorn in my side continues to manoeuvre for position (I apologise for being so circumspect in my wording, but I fear lest messages get intercepted). King Elessar and I have discussed this at great length, and have decided that giving me duties which take me away from Minas Tirith for a while would serve several useful purposes. First, and most important, it would give the King a chance to establish his rule free from any whispering gossip that I am manipulating him and taking advantage of his lack of knowledge of the ways of the court; he will clearly be seen to be his own man. (How ridiculous it seems to me that any could doubt his strength of will, or be foolish enough as to think that I would have the slightest interest in playing puppet-master – but it seems that there are some to whom such flights of fancy seem anything but ridiculous).

Second, there is important work to be carried out in establishing where the loyalties of some of the fiefdoms of Gondor lie. In the last few days before the Enemy laid siege to Minas Tirith, a summons was sent to the Outlands for troops to defend the Citadel. Scarse three thousand men came: from Ringlo Vale, Lossarnach, Morthond, Anfalas, Pinnath Gelin, Dol Amroth -my Uncle's fiefdom, and (most nobly of all, for they came leaderless, but answered the summons nonetheless) some of the hillmen of Lamedon and fishermen of the Ethir. A quick glance at a map should reveal to you the...
source of our worries – once you have crossed these places off, there remain numerous dependencies which did not send any troops. I am therefore setting out with a troop of my Rangers (who, being from Ithilien, owe no allegiance to lands either side of the White Mountains) to discover why the summons was not answered. In some places, it may have been that they were too hard put in defending their own holdings – some places had great problems with hillmen from Dunland. In others, the messengers may have met with misfortune. But I fear that there may be some lords who ignored the summons for their own reasons. And it seems to me that these particular lords are unlikely to be loyal to the King.

My mind starts to race as I read these words. The similarities to the situation in Askburn are obvious, immediate. I resolve to go to Éomer's study as soon as I can to look at the maps he keeps there. If my hazy memory of the geography of Gondor serves me, one notable blank spot lies in Anorien, on our southern border. Putting this thought to one side, I continue.

My love, you have no idea how much I long for you, especially at night. Alas, that reads as though I think only of making love to you (if you will excuse me for sounding like a Mardil – you may substitute the Rohirric word of your choice if you wish). And of course I do long for that, very much. But even more I miss your comforting warmth, especially when I awake in the early hours from evil dreams. For last night I dreamt once more of Osgiliath. Admittedly that is not the worst of my dreams, but I do not think I am ready to tell you of those others, even now. (I think you remember how I used to wake unable to talk of my terrors to you, even lying safe in your arms). But the dream of Osgiliath unsettled me greatly, and continues to haunt me even now, beneath the bright light of day.

You know already the bare bones of the story: my father, caring not whether I lived or died, sent me on a pointless, doomed mission to defend the river crossing at Osgiliath. I had argued against it, since the Enemy could throw as large a force as he wished into battle, while we could scarce afford to lose so much as a company. But my father commanded it nonetheless. It was Gandalf who tried to talk sense into me as I left, telling me not to throw away my life in a fit of bitterness.

The very first time we met, you mentioned riding into battle seeking death. And I was shocked – partly because I could not see how a woman so young, so beautiful and so valiant could be so desperately sad. Your sadness seemed to go against everything that should be accounted right in this world. But I was also shocked because I knew what it was to feel that way. For my father threw in my face the earlier successes of Boromir in winning back that part of Osgiliath that lay on the near bank, and made it clear that nothing less than victory would make me welcome home again – and that even in the unlikely event of my returning victorious, I was not assured of his welcome.

So I led my troops, not precisely wishing for death, but perhaps more accurately, not caring whether I lived or died. And then I found myself suddenly filled with fury towards my father. Angry for preferring Boromir to me, for setting my life at naught, but most of all for throwing me into this fey mood. For how could I lead my troops with the single minded attention that they needed while I myself cared for nothing, not even my own life? Out of my anger came the determination to survive this trial, and to prove my father wrong. I honestly believe I led my men as well as I could, yet full one-third of my company died that day, for naught but my father's foolish pride and vainglory. My troops fought bravely and retreated in good order, holding out until Imrahil's troops provided much-needed reinforcements. Had it not been for the fell riders of the air, we would have made it back to Minas Tirith. Instead, we lost more brave men, and I was nearly killed myself. Still when I dream, I remember the faces of my fallen warriors, men well-known to me, men who had placed their trust in me. And when I wake, I am torn by guilt and sadness and loss.
How I wish I had you to comfort me. And I fear that your dreams may not be any better, and I worry
that I am not there to comfort you. I wish we could lie in each others' arms, safe from all the terrors
that the darkness of night brings.

I am sorry, my love. This letter has turned so maudlin. I am tempted to tear it into pieces. But I
remember you saying to me in Minas Tirith that love was worth nothing if one could not be honest, if
one could not share the hardships of life along with its joys. So I shall send this, in the hope that
honesty may pave the way for future joy. And I can assure you that such maudlin turns do not
occupy all my waking moments. Often I am too busy to find time to indulge such thoughts. I also
hope that setting out on patrol with my Rangers will make me tired in body and thus give rest to my
mind. And most of all, I have my memories of our time together, and my hopes for the future, both of
which bring me comfort beyond measure. And I know that it is now only a month at most before I
see you once more.

Always your Faramir.

I fold the letter and place it in my lap. Within me, I feel a dull ache, somewhere in the centre of my
body – chest, stomach, I know not where exactly. I had thought I missed Faramir as much as was
possible, but I find I was wrong. How I wish I was there to hold him to my breast and comfort him.
He has obviously added the sentences at the end in an effort to reassure me, and somehow they are
so typical of him, clutching at rational knowledge to see him safely through the emotional whirlwind.
I know he is right: it will not be long now.

It puzzles me greatly, and angers me that his father held him in such low esteem. For as far as I can
see, all who served under him hold him in the highest regard, and the citizens of Minas Tirith
likewise believe him fair and just. How could his father have been so blind to his son's qualities?
And how did Faramir survive his father's disdain to become the man he is? How could any father
behave thus to his own child? I know one thing with absolute certainty: our children, mine and
Faramir's, will have the upbringing denied him. They will have love and affection aplenty, and their
father's admirable example to follow and grow into.

I turn my reflections to the earlier part of the letter. A cold, icy finger of fear creeps upon me at the
thought of him riding out with his Rangers, for their instructions are to seek out traitors, and such
men are apt to be devious, brutal and ruthless. I think once more of the Manor at Askburn, and
wonder yet again whether I should have done more to tease out the truth of the situation there. As we
rode back to Edoras, I mentioned this failure on my part to Cynefrid. Should we perhaps have stayed
longer? Had I stayed in the Manor itself for a few days, could I perhaps have picked up some gossip
or hints, clues as to whether the messengers from Théoden had got there in time, only to be ignored
or worse?

Cynefrid's answer, as ever, was pithy and to the point. “No doubt you'd have ended with a feather
bolster held close across your face for your troubles, and I would have been bearing your dead body
back to your brother. And my end would have been considerably more drawn out and bloodier than
yours, for dereliction of duty.”

I wonder what Faramir would have done. My mind drifts back to a night in Minas Tirith when we
lay in each other's arms. As was so often the case, our pillow talk was, I suppose, unconventional. I
admit that I have no yardstick against which to judge it, though I have always imagined the normal
way of such things to consist in the whispering of sweet words of love. We, however, were talking
not of love but of military tactics. I had mentioned the fact that while I had sparred often with my
brother and with other men of the palace guard, and had ridden often in the lists, both training with
quintain and rings, and more occasionally, jousting against other riders, military tactics had not
formed part of my education. For my skills with weaponry had been gleaned mostly from Riders my
brother's age, who found it amusing to encourage Éomer's wild little scrap of a sister in her hoydenish ways. My brother, in contrast, had learned military tactics from his tutor, from Théoden King, from Théodred. To my fury, the older men had made it clear that they did not feel such things formed a proper part of a maiden's education. And no matter how vehemently I railed against this injustice, I had not been able to sway them from this opinion.

As I told him this tale, fired with irritation even after so many years, Faramir lay with his arms about me, stroking my hair and dropping gentle kisses on my skin.

“But were you not a shieldmaiden? Surely this should have been part of your education,” Faramir said, sounding puzzled.

“Alas, shieldmaidens are more the stuff of ancient myth than a living tradition. Women have more freedom in the Riddermark than in Gondor, but it is still not normal for them to be trained in all the arts of war,” I answered.

“I can picture you, not long out of childhood, all gangly legs and wild blonde hair, in a fury with them,” he said. And he smiled gently, but it was a smile of understanding as well as amusement. And then he and I talked of skirmish tactics, of how to conduct warfare in open country, in woodland, and amidst buildings (though he tensed in my arms as he described this, no doubt remembering his desperate and doomed fight in the ruins of Osgiliath). Thinking back to the conversation, I recall three main lessons. He told me never to rush precipitately into a situation if it was possible to hang back and assess the lie of the land and how best to position my troops. He spoke of the importance of commanding the high ground if at all possible. And of the importance of outflanking the enemy, possibly attacking from two sides simultaneously (while avoiding being outflanked or caught in a pincer movement oneself – part of the key to this was to have a rearguard in hand if one had enough resources, to enable any counter attack to be met with reinforcements from behind).

Then I remember with a smile his afterthought: new, unblooded junior officers are neither use nor ornament. The bad ones are full of their own self importance, and cause ruin and destruction and the loss of good troops and battles through thinking their textbook knowledge makes them wise. The more promising ones, in contrast, know that they are useless, and seek to learn as much as they can from the veterans under their command, standing not on rank or an overweening sense of their own importance, but listening to advice no matter how lowly the source.

We talked long into the night. I asked endless earnest and sometimes naïve questions; he replied with patience. One of the things I love about him is the sharpness of his mind, for although often he takes delight in abstract ideas, equally he can turn his mind to practical things. He has a knack for describing ideas clearly, and if at first his listener does not follow, he usually guesses from the questions how to reframe the problem in a way that does make sense. I learned more of military tactics in one night than in the whole of my life before, though not surprisingly, eventually sleep claimed us. I think it was the next morning when we slept well past dawn and the maid almost caught him in my bed. I smile at the thought of it, that we should nearly be found out not because we stayed up too late making love, but rather simply talking to one another.

My memories are interrupted by a soft knock at the door. Hildegard has returned, to bid me join my brother.

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Thus it is that I sit once more in the Golden Hall, to the side of the Throne. It is at one and the same time familiar yet alien, comforting yet fraught with memories. To some extent the passage of time has dissipated the fell atmosphere from the days when Wormtongue held sway. But in my mind the taint lingers on. It is as if in addition to the reality in front of me, two more scenes are laid one on top of
one another, painted on sheets of thin, transparent gauze. The real world consists of a new and untried king, and his advisers, some from the days before the war, some as new and untested as he himself, all pitched into doing the best they can for a kingdom ripped apart by war, many of its best men taken by the sword before their time, its countryside laid waste. But my mind sees also the court as it was in all its glory, ten or more years earlier, when Théoden was strong and sound of mind, confident, regal, the embodiment of a country proud and valorous. And it also sees the years of terror that followed, when no man could speak freely and all went in fear of a knife in the ribs in the dark, or a fall from the battlements, or banishment at the fevered whim of a king weakened by poison dropped into his failing mind one whisper at a time.

The confusion of these three images makes my heart race fit to break from within my ribs, and my breathing comes fast and shallow. I am seized by an urge to leap from the chair and run, run out through the doors into the sunshine, never to sit within this hall again. I force myself to breathe slowly and deeply, concentrating on the rise and fall of my chest. Gradually my mood steadies, and I manage to pay attention once more to the conversation. Éothain and Elfhelm are discussing the best way to ensure the security of the Riddermark, and how best to deploy troops through the various regions.

“Any troops to be stationed in the Westfold must take with them enough provisions to be self-sufficient,” I say. “The people there are so hard-pressed that they will scarce be able to feed themselves, and cannot support even a small troop of horse, never mind a full Éored.”

“Aye, that goes without saying,” Elfhelm replies. “Though I'm hard put to it to see where their provisions will come from. And they have to be stationed on the edges of the White Mountains, there's no way round that, for there are still orcs aplenty. Also it's not only our own folk who are starving. Come winter, I expect some of the Dunlanders to renge on their truce as hunger drives them down from the hills to prey on our farmland.”

Éomer frowns, then speaks. “We may have more hopeful news once my sister has done a preliminary survey of the East Emnet. I am hopeful that the farmland and small holdings there may be in a better state, despite some skirmishes. For the main force from the East fell upon Minas Tirith and Gondor; we were sufficiently far North to be of little strategic interest to the Enemy. When do you ride, Éowyn?”

I feel my heart swell with pride, for Éomer seems finally to have accepted my survey of our country as a useful one, and even more, to have accepted me as worthy of conducting it. I answer him, “Tomorrow after we have broken our fast. In truth I meant to send only a written report of our findings regarding the Westfold, and had intended to ride straight towards Aldburg. But I encountered a matter that I felt needed brought to your attention in person.” And I sketch the situation at Askburn for the benefit of my brother and his two Marshals.

“So you see that I have no proof that they received Théoden King's message and deliberately failed to act on it. But I sense treachery – I feel it in my guts. And Cynefrid feels the same.”

I see a flash of the old Éomer, the man whose hot-headed inability to control his fury at Wormtongue's machinations led to his banishment. But to my surprise, the look of rage passes quickly, to be replaced by a more controlled yet steely anger in his eyes. “Béma, if we had but proof, I'd execute them all, Lord, Lady and factor, and hang their bodies from a gibbet with their innards spilling out for the crows to peck. But our realm will only hold together if the rule of law, rather than vengeance on a whim, is seen to be the controlling factor. If I act rashly, armed only with whispers and my sister's 'gut feelings', I'll be seen as a tyrant giving free rein to his blood-lust, and any chance I have of keeping the nobles from fighting one another for scarce resources will be gone.”
Éothain nods vigorously. The three of them remain silent for some moments, then suddenly and incongruously, Elfhelm laughs.

“I have it! Éowyn cautions us against placing too great a burden on a starving populace, yet as I pointed out, we need to billet soldiers in the West to guard against the Dunlanders and orcs. But Askburn is a fat manor, its barns well stocked, its game larders full, its pigs fattened and ready for slaughter. What better place to station an Éored, without having to worry about how we might provision them?”

“I think you have hit upon it!” says Éothain. “And surely, embarrassed as they must be at having not taken part in the muster, they will 'wish' to prove their loyalty by contributing to the stability of the country after the war.”

“It won’t be as immediately satisfying as hanging them from a gibbet,” Éomer says with a grim smile, “but it will serve the purpose almost as well in the long run.”

The conversation turns to other matters concerning the military security of the Mark. I listen with interest as the three men methodically consider how best to use the resources they have, and which areas of our borders are most in need of defence. Eventually, the shadows in the hall start to draw round us as the light fades outside, and we turn our attention to dinner. It is a comfortable occasion, eoldermen, thanes and their wives at the high table, ceorls and their womenfolk beneath the salt, but with plenty of food and drink for all, and an atmosphere of good cheer. I seem at last to have escaped my earlier strange sensation of seeing the hall through gauze imprinted with images of less happy times, and finally I can sit, content in the moment, enjoying my brother's company. Eventually, tired but content, I return to my chamber. I manage to stay awake long enough to pen a reply to Faramir, then fall into bed and into a deep slumber. As promised, the next morning we set off not long after dawn.

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I draw the oiled cloth close around me. At its edges, water has begun to penetrate. I feel the damp seeping through my cloak and blanket. Any part of me that sticks out is wet: toes, knees, elbows. The noise of the rain landing on the cloth, together with the stuffiness of the air beneath it, makes sleep hard to come by. It is five days since we rode from Edoras, and the weather has been vile ever since the afternoon of the third day. Today we have reached the furthest point of our journey, the rocky outcrops on the fringes of Sarn Gebir. I think back to my warm bed, and wonder whether a life of weaving and embroidery might not have been a better choice. To take my mind off the discomfort, I trace out the route of our return journey, silently listing the major settlements and the lie of the land. Gradually as I try to remember the details of the terrain, sleep begins to take me, despite the discomfort of damp cloth swathed round me.

I wake early, before dawn. The rain has finally stopped, and a cloud of tiny midges has penetrated beneath the oil cloth and is crawling over me. The bites are annoying, but the itchy sensation of the tiny insects in my eyes, up my nose, in my hair is a hundred-fold worse. I poke my head out to find a thin grey line along the eastern horizon, signalling the end of night. Stiff to my very bones, I stand up and stretch, then roll up the blanket and oil cloth ready to stow behind my saddle. Around me the riders are stirring, and Edric manages to rekindle the fire, how I do not know given how sodden our surroundings are. Perhaps he has some sort of fire-drake as a distant ancestor. He gets a pan of porridge started, and soon we are able to eat our fill of oats and cold sausage. We ride at first light.

By late afternoon we have covered the rough ground on the edges of Sarn Gebir, skirting the stone outcrops and low cliffs that break through the moorland, and have reached the marshy plain by the mouth of the Entwash. The land here is so flat that the river breaks into a myriad of small brown
channels, wending their way sluggishly to the Anduin, a complex maze of water, mud flats and vegetation.

The branch of the river we are following is bordered by high reeds and willow trees, so we hear the disturbance before we see it. The clash of metal on metal, the twang of bowstrings, the cries of men are unmistakable. But unlike Pelennor, mixed in with these noises I hear the screams of women and children. I feel my stomach heave and my bowels loosen. For a moment, I am back in line on the edge of the battlefield, horses starting to trot forward towards the enemy. A hundred images flash through my mind in an instant: my blond haired comrades and orcs, both hewn down, red blood mingling with black, limbs severed, guts slashed open and spilling; Théoden trapped beneath his horse, the Nazgûl rising above him. And not just sights – I can smell the blood, the sharp tang of death, the mingled smells of shit and piss where men and beasts in their death throes have voided themselves. I feel once more the agony in my shield arm as if it were newly broken, feel the overwhelming despair as the Wraith turns his glance upon me.

“My Lady?” Cynefrid's questioning tone brings me to myself again, and I give my head a shake to clear it. I'm no bloody use to anyone frozen to the spot with fear. He looks at me, and I remember Faramir's advice: if in doubt, defer to your sergeant.

“What tactics do you suggest?” I ask.

“Half of us ride to see what's going on, half follow on at a slower pace to protect the rear. I think Edric and Osred should take charge of the rearguard – they're both good archers and can give us covering fire if we need to retreat.”

Cynefrid and I lead a group of six down the track, two abreast, at a steady canter, the remaining five following on at a brisk trot. I force myself to breathe steadily, bearing my weight down into the saddle in the hope that my fear does not communicate itself to Windfola. Every instinct still screams to wheel my horse and flee, but events are unfolding too fast to dwell on this. We round a small stand of trees, slowing to a walk to try to assess the situation before throwing ourselves headlong into the fight. Low bushes offer us some cover, and between the tree trunks we catch our first sight of the hamlet. There are eight or so houses; two are aflame already. Four bodies lie bloodied and torn on the ground. I realise, bile rising in my throat, that one is a small child. A small group of men armed mostly with pitchforks, a couple with axes and one with a sword, have formed a makeshift line in front of the women and children. One of the women has a bow in her hands, several more hold kitchen knives. Their eyes show desperation. Advancing on them are a group of orcs, less in number, but armoured and carrying swords and spears. At first I wonder why the villagers have not run into the surrounding woods. Then I notice a group of three orcs, bows in hand, positioned to the other side between the hamlet and the woods. The villagers have taken shelter in the one position that offers them cover from arrows, but in doing so, they have left themselves cornered. Quickly I gesture to Cynefrid.

“What do you think? Send Godrid back to tell Osred to try to outflank them and pick off their archers?” I whisper.

“Osred and Edric both, I'd say,” Cynefrid replies. I nod silently, and on Cynefrid's command, Godrid rides back to the rearguard.

“Five of us, nine orcs in the main group, three archers,” Cynefrid says. “If our boys can take out their archers from the flank, we might have a chance.” We watch as the orcs move forward. They seem in no rush; it appears they are enjoying taunting the villagers. Or maybe they simply want to avoid the pitchforks and are holding back, perhaps to allow their archers to move to a better position. Either way, their hesitation buys us valuable time.
The beat of hooves signals Godrid's return. “The boys are in position,” he says. We look over to where they have placed themselves, in a thicket of reeds, thirty paces or so behind the orc archers. “They're ready to fire when we start the charge.”

Cynefrid looks at me, and I nod. Couching our lances, we set out once more at a canter, clearing the cover of the bushes in moments. I can feel my left hand shake on the reins; my right feels sweaty and I worry the lance will slip. Sickness rises in my gorge and I try to force it down. I feel an overwhelming sense of impending doom. What if I die here, never to see Faramir again? Somehow that thought is worse than the thought of death itself. I feel strangely detached from the movements of Windfola, the sight of my companions, as if everything is taking place in some sort of haze, and I am watching rather than taking part.

The cry of one of the orc archers brings me to myself, and alerts the main body of the orcs. In answer, Cynefrid screams a war cry which the other Riders pick up: “Death, death and ruin.” The orcs wheel round to face us, now finding themselves caught in a pincer movement between our charge and the villagers at their backs.

One of the villagers launches a pitchfork, catching an orc low on the legs. Maybe it was not his intention, but it hamstrings the orc, who pitches forward. A cry goes up from the ceorls: “Kill the fuckers.”

A black fletched arrow skitters off my pauldron. An inch or so higher and it might have penetrated the collar of my armour. But now we are at a full gallop, our formation having closed up as we reach full speed. My knee brushes Godrid's. My mind finally focusses on the orcs and the points of their swords, other thoughts banished. The gap between us and our enemy is down to a few strides. I bring the point of my lance down. Braced, there is time for one more stride, a second, then the crunching impact as the point makes contact with the orc nearest to me. I have not caught him under the armpit as I intended. Instead I hit him in his chest. But his armour is poor, and the momentum of rider and horse together drive the lance through the iron plate. The shaft of my lance shatters, but as it does so, black blood spurts from the gaping wound in the orc's chest.

I drop the remains of my lance and draw my sword. I am only just in time, for Godrid has his lance stuck within an orc's body, and as he struggles to free it, another fell beast swings his sword at Godrid's neck. My blade sings as it meets the orc's, parrying the blow. The blades slide past one another until the hilts crash together; for a moment, our weapons locked, we look into each others' faces. I see blind hatred in the red eyes before me, hot anger which drives the orc to draw back his sword for a second strike. But the heat of his anger leaves his flank exposed; my anger is cold and deadly and I plunge my blade into the gap where cuirass and backplate meet, feeling the ripping sensation as flesh is torn from bone.

The rest of the battle passes in a few moments of chaos and confusion. I wheel Windfola about, intending to turn on the rest of the orcs, only to find that Cynefrid is between me and the nearest. With a deft swing of his sword, he sends the orc's head rolling from its shoulders. Almost as suddenly as it started, the noise and clamour dies away, and we are left assessing the end results.

All of our foes are slain. Two more of the villagers lie dead. Osred and Edric have shot the orc archers, though Edric has paid for this with an arrow in his shoulder. One of our Riders has a nasty slash along his calf, muscle severed and in need of stitching. I swing myself down from Windfola's back, then stagger as I try to put weight on my legs. They feel as if they are about to fold under me.

“Steady, my lady,” says Cynefrid, catching my elbow. I lean against Windfola's flank, shaking all over.

“Don't let the others see me making a fool of myself,” I murmur to him.
“Nay, ma'am. It's the way of it after a man's first battle.”

“But I've been in battle before.”

“Aye, but carried unconscious off the battlefield. You didn't get a chance to get the shakes. You've just been postponing it for a later date,” he says. I swallow a couple of times in an effort not to throw up. Cynefrid offers me his water skin, then hands me the reins of his horse while he goes to help the Rider with the injured leg off his horse. The water helps, but I cannot prevent a bleak feeling of fear seizing my heart. At Pelennor, I had nothing to lose but my life, and could think of no better end than to throw that life away. Now I have everything to live for, and the thought of losing what I have nearly undoes me.

With thanks, as ever, to Lady Peter for a heroic job reading and making great suggestions.
I sit in the warm kitchen, elbows on the sturdy wooden table in front of me, nursing a mug of small beer as I watch Hereswið chopping mutton with practised strokes. I have offered to help, but she will not countenance the idea of the King’s sister rolling up her sleeves and helping to prepare the evening meal. Instead, I bask in the comfortable heat after so many days in the cold and rain, and chat companionably. Cynefrid sits on a settle by the fire, whittling a doll out of a piece of wood while his daughter looks on, eyes like saucers. Before the fire, their son lies on the rug trying to tempt a black and white cat to play with a ball of twine. The cat, in the manner of such beasts, will not play on demand. It sits, tail neatly curled round it, licking a paw and cleaning behind its ears. We are now only a day's ride from Edoras, and have stopped for the night at Cynefrid's home village of Elmdene.

“How do you find Aldwulf?” I ask Cynefrid. We called in to see his old comrade earlier in the evening, and I had been delighted to see the Rider in apparently good spirits, hopping nimbly round the cottage on a carefully fashioned wooden leg. But appearances can be deceptive, and I do not know the man well. Perhaps Cynefrid has sensed something I have not.

“He seems in fine form to me, my Lady. And it is good to see him with someone to look after him. His sister is a capable housewife, and fusses over him in a way that would drive me to distraction,” my sergeant replies with a grin.

“Liar,” says Hereswið. “You've never turned your nose up at being fussed over, not in your life. I just don't like to indulge you too often. You might get a taste for it.” Cynefrid's grin turns into a chuckle. But Hereswið's smile fades. “Poor lass, to be back with her brother like that.”

I raise a questioning eyebrow. Hereswið catches the look on my face. “Before the war, she married, and settled in the next village, over the hill yonder.” She gestures with the point of the knife in the direction of the small window at the back of the cottage. “Her husband came back from Pelennor and Cormallen a changed man. He went away as gentle and mild a man as you could hope, but now he flies into these black rages with no warning. He raised his hand to her once too often, and she upped and left and went back to her brother.”

Cyenfrid shakes his head sadly. “The stuff you see, the scars, even the missing legs, they're the least of it. Do you still have nightmares and daytime visions.”

“Nightmares, yes,” I say. I am about to say that the daytime visions have at least left, but then I remember the fey feeling of seeing scenes on gauze painted over the reality of the great hall. “Visions too, though not as often.”

“And your lord? I could see the haunted look in his eyes sometimes.”

“Aye, he writes to me sometimes that he still has nightmares.”

“Cynefrid tells me that he's a gentle soul, though, for all he's a warrior and a great lord,” says Hereswið.

“The kindest man I can imagine,” I say. Then I fall silent for a while, thinking. Torctgyd, obviously feeling her parents have been talking about the strange, grown-up world for long enough, starts to ask questions about her doll: does her mother have some wool she can use to make hair? Is there any
scrap of fabric to dress her in? While she chatters, my mind drifts.

What must it be like for Aldwulf's sister? The woman fell in love with a kindly man, only to have him return from battle scarred in mind, unrecognisable as her husband. Or perhaps only too recognisable in some respects, such that she still clung to the broken shards of her love for him, while in other respects he was changed utterly. And those broken shards, the tiny morsels of hope, must have kept her there through one beating after another, each followed by tears and bitter remorse and promises of reform, promises which were broken all too soon. Until one day, she could no longer hide from the knowledge that the promises would always be broken. So she left to return and keep house for her crippled brother. And how wounded must she be, now, in spirit? How could she trust a man again, having suffered such pain? How could she trust herself to know a good man from a bad? But what would it be to cut herself off from the chance of comfort with a man who would cherish her? And to cut herself off from the chance of having children?

My train of thought is interrupted by the sound of Cynefrid getting to his feet. He takes the lamp, its wick trimmed and the reservoir beneath filled with vegetable oil, and sheltering it against draughts with his hand, calls to Torctgyd and Swidhelm to come with him.

“Help me shut the hens in for the night. Your mother told me a fox got two of our neighbour's best layers yestere'en.” He goes out into the twilight with the two children.

Hereswið gives me a thoughtful look. “Wool gathering, my Lady? You looked to be miles away.”

“Just thinking about Aldwulf's poor sister. How sad it must be for her to have had her husband so changed by war. And how hard it would be for her to trust any man again.”

“I've seen it happen before,” says Hereswið. “You're right, some women do clam up, shut themselves off and never let another man near them. But I've seen some go the other way – reach out in desperation to the first man who shows them kindness. Their judgement is clouded you see...”

Suddenly words echo in my mind, words from another night when I sought warmth and comfort, a night in Minas Tirith: You have been hurt so much. Is it any wonder that you cling to the first crumbs of comfort anyone offers you? I knew this, I should have known to treat you as if you were a dear sister, and instead... Was Faramir right when he said this to me? Is Hereswið? Suddenly I wonder if my feelings for Faramir are founded not on a solid foundation of love for him, but on the shifting sands of desperation. Is everything but a chimera? I feel hot tears prick my eyes, and wipe them away angrily with the back of my hand.

“My Lady?” says Hereswið anxiously. “Have I said something to offend?”

“Nay,” I say hastily. “It is nothing...” Then something inside me breaks. “It is everything.” And I tell her of Faramir's words. And I tell her about Grima, and the events which occasioned Faramir's comments. And then of my sudden fear that I have done exactly what he feared, thrown myself without thought or restraint or judgement at a man who showed me kindness.

Hereswið is silent for a moment, her face thoughtful. “Is he a good man? I mean, not just in his treatment of you, but of others?”

“Yes,” I reply. “All his dealings with others, those I have witnessed – he is kind and considerate, not just to those within his own sphere but to his soldiers, to the Riders of the Mark who were in the houses of the healing, to the Healers and the servants. By what I have heard tell, he is well thought of by all the men under his command. They would have followed him to the Black Gates and beyond, if rumour is true. And he is well thought of as a leader within his city.”
Again Heresið pauses, then says, “In that case, my Lady, if you'll pardon me saying so, you've been lucky. Bloody lucky, if I might make so bold. Because it sounds to me like you did snatch at the first crumbs of comfort you were offered, but you've had better fortune than most, in that they were offered by a good and honourable man.”

I sit upon the chair to the right of the throne, my sword across my knee. The sword is a symbol of my office as the King's regent in his absence. For my brother, with Elfhelm and a full Éored, have ridden to Gondor. They will bring the body of Théoden, Liege-Lord, King that was, my beloved uncle, back to the Mark.

Today I sit in judgement over various cases which have been brought before the court at Edoras. Many arise out of disputes over inheritance resulting from the death of Eoldermen and Thanes in the war. In one instance, two cousins argue over who is most closely related to the dead man; in another, the brother-in-law and nephew of the fallen lord both claim the manor and its lands; and so the litany of petty disputes continues. And I must judge both fairly as regards the particulars of each case, and yet with an eye to the stability of the kingdom and the maintaining of loyalty towards the King. I am very glad of Éothain's steady presence as he stands behind my shoulder, ever present and able to tell me of background details or hidden connections and alliances.

To my enormous satisfaction, among the last of the plaintiffs to bring their suit before me is a representative of the Lord of Askburn. Why, he asks, has the crown seen fit to billet a whole Éored on his lands? Is it not disproportionate relative to what is being asked of his neighbours? Can I not see how parlous a state his lands are in? He has enough to feed his own people, but nothing to spare. I hear Éothain clear his throat in readiness to speak, but I wave my hand to silence him. I am quite pleased with the imperious tone I manage to command; clearly I have learned something of use from Castamir's dreadful wife.

“As to why an Éored has been billeted, the West Emnet must be protected from raids by orcs and Dunlanders, and your Lord's manor is the most appropriate place, considered strategically. And I can assure you that what is asked of you is in no way disproportionate, for all your neighbours answered the call to the muster of the Rohirrim.” I place a certain stress on the word answered, then continue, “And have lost the most noble and brave of their menfolk, men in the prime of their life, in the service of their King. A call, which I might remind you, your Lord did not answer. Undoubtedly what you are being asked is but a tiny thing in comparison with the sacrifices made by your neighbours. As for how parlous the state of your land, you forget that I have seen both your manor with my own eyes, and that of the villages, settlements and manors for many leagues on either side. There are villages where the children's bellies are swollen with hunger and their skin stretched tight on their faces, their eyes too big for their heads through starvation. You may consider yourselves lucky that the demands placed upon you have not been much, much greater.

“I hereby find your Lord's suit to be entirely without ground and therefore reject it in its entirety. Of course, should he choose to appeal, he has the right to attend Edoras in person and demand trial by combat. Undoubtedly a champion on behalf of the Crown, one who has served well in the battles of Pelennor Fields and Cormallen, would meet him in the lists. And should he lose, his life would be forfeit and his lands confiscated. I bid you relay this judgement to him.”

There are few tasks in the weeks I spend as Éomer's regent which bring me such pleasure. Many tasks fall to my lot. Having now formed a first view of which parts of the country are in the most parlous state, I am able to direct trusted Riders to continue my work of surveying the country and its resources. With the information we have gleaned, we are able to send trains of wagons and pack animals with provisions to the areas hardest hit. But there is no doubt in my mind; we will have to
look to Gondor for help to provision the country through next winter. I have to hope that I can talk sense into my brother and persuade him to swallow his pride.

The weekly round of settling petty disputes continues. While Théoden had not considered military strategy to form an appropriate part of my education, he had in contrast felt that the study of history was a quite proper part of the education of any child of the house of Eorl. What he did not realise was quite how much time Éomer’s tutor devoted to the origins and nature of the laws of our country as part of these history lessons. Thus I find myself quite well versed in law, and even when my knowledge falls short, still sufficiently grounded in the underlying principles to follow the arguments of my advisers.

One practice which I will have no part in is the disposition of women in marriage to solve or cement the solutions to land disputes. But here I find myself presented with a rare opportunity. Unlike Gondor, where laws are written down in great detail, our laws are a more nebulous structure. The Gondorians, like their forefathers the Numenoreans before them, write laws intending to cover every possible eventuality. Ours on the other hand, set only broad principles. In Gondor (as I learned from Faramir while he wrestled with all the legislation pertaining to the kingship), when a situation not covered by the strict letter of the law arises, the Steward and the Judges presiding beneath him sit in counsel, and spend long hours studying texts to see if they may divine what the original intentions of the law maker were, and what he (for it is always he) would have done in this situation. In contrast, in the Riddermark when (as happens with rather greater frequency in our looser legal system) a new situation arises, the King or his regents try to decide on the basis of over-arching principle and previous precedent simply what would be the most reasonable course of action. In short, rather than try to second guess all possible situations in advance by framing laws of labyrinthine complexity, we wait instead for awkward situations to arise, then settle them in a way that seems sensible and just to the majority of people at the time.

Thus I find myself with considerable flexibility. As cases come before me as to whether a woman may divorce a man who has shirked his duty to his family, or where a woman seeks to retain control of land she has inherited due to the death of her kinsmen in the war, I have the freedom to decide according to one simple principle: how would this case be decided if she were a man? And on that simple basis, I allow to the women much greater freedom: to own and control property; to control their own destiny. It pleases me to think that in my weeks as regent, I am setting some useful precedents of my own regarding the ability of women to run households and maintain manors and estates by themselves, without a male protector being forced upon them. And such is the role of precedent in our law that it will be exceedingly difficult for anyone to reverse the changes I have set in motion.

To my amusement, Éothain seems to watch this with quiet interest, but makes no move to interfere. Perhaps this is because he has three daughters of his own. The only point on which he intervenes is to insist that the rights of women to run estates be framed with a clause ensuring that this be done “without detraction from the obligations of the estate to the King.” In other words, should the Riddermark go to war and the woman not be equipped or trained to fight herself, she must supply a mercenary knight in her place. In one last piece of quiet defiance, I amend this to read that a Rider must be supplied, thus leaving it open to the Lady whether to hire a mercenary or to ride herself if she is able.

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I wake in a muck sweat. The sheets are tangled around me. Gradually the pieces of the dream coalesce into a picture which makes some sense. I have been on the Pelennor fields once more, but this time held powerless by the Nazgûl, his arms like steel bands around me. There I watched, helpless, as his mount, the foul carrion beast, feasted upon the still-living body of my Uncle.
Théoden's screams rent the air, his blood pulsed to spread upon the churned mud beneath his fallen horse.

I stare up at the window in the wall opposite, focusing on the dust motes dancing in the shaft of sunlight, willing the sickness in my throat to subside. Gradually, my breathing comes back under control. And I realise why I have had this dream now: today Théoden's funeral cortège is to arrive at Edoras. His body will lie in state for three days, then we will lay it to rest in a green mound before the city, but for now his unquiet shade stalks my dreams, reminding me of what I have lost.

I hear footsteps in the corridor outside my room. There is a soft knock at the door, then one of the maidservants enters, bearing an earthenware jug of hot water. I swing my legs over the side of the bed, and get up.

“Shall I help you to dress, my Lady,” she asks.

“No, just lay my clothes ready. I am sure you will have more than enough to occupy you this morning, preparing for the King's return.”

She bobs her head, a grateful look on her face, and does as I bid. In truth, I have always preferred to dress myself, and after so long with one arm out of action, being able to do so again is still a source of quiet but deeply-felt pleasure. After the maid has left, I make my toilet with the hot water, then put on my shift and kirtle, lacing the sides of the over-dress.

The morning passes in a whirl of activity such that I barely have time to dwell on the terrors of my dream. The housekeeper and her staff have made excellent preparations over the previous few weeks, but there are last minute chores: the readying of food to welcome the guests when they arrive; the preparation of a grand feast for the evening; ensuring sheets and bedding are aired. It is shortly after noon that an outrider arrives to announce the coming of Théoden's funeral procession. Together with Lord Elfhelm and a group of the Lords and Ladies of the court, I make my way to the terrace to await the arrival of my brother and the mourners.

The procession makes its way through the gates below as I stand on the terrace, welcome cup in hand. I grit my teeth in an effort not to let the cup shake in my hand. I feel as I did when first I returned to the Golden Hall: that strange feeling of viewing the world through gauze, a rising sense of panic and an almost overwhelming urge to turn and run from the Hall, from the city around it, and out into the plains. The Knights of the Riddermark come at the head of the procession, among them my brother. Then comes the great wain, draped in cloth, with Théoden's coffin upon it. Master Meriadoc, as the late King's page, sits guarding his armour and arms. Behind the wain are those who have come to mourn his passing: King Elessar and his queen, with two halflings riding at their side; then an Elven woman whose blonde hair seems lit from within, even on a bright sunlit day, and a tall Elven Lord beside her; two familiar figures, tall and elegant, small and powerful, Legolas and Gimli; then three tall and lordly Elves with dark hair; and at the last Imrahil and his sons, and with them a man whose bearing is unmistakable, even at this distance. My heart seems to race as I recognise my beloved.

I feel confused. Surely I should feel unalloyed joy. But I listen to my heart: not singing, as the poets would have us believe, but simply pounding as if I have run far and fast. His mere presence should comfort me, yet instead it is an unknown quantity. We have spent two months apart, a longer time than we spent together. What if our feelings are as a burst of fireworks, or a shooting star, a brief and spectacular explosion of beauty and colour which then fades back into darkness? What if one of us continues to love and the other does not? My stomach twists into knots at the thought.

Then my eyes are drawn back to the slow-moving wain: beneath the green and white banner lie Théoden King's mortal remains. At this thought panic grips my chest even more strongly, like an iron
band tightening round my rib cage. Here lies the man who took me in to his household when I was a tiny child, who offered me his love and guidance, to whom I owe everything. Yet I could not protect him on the battlefield. All I could do was to prevent the fell dwimmerlaik from despoiling his body; I could not save his life.

All these thoughts roil within me as the procession makes its way across the plain. It seems to me that its progress is agonisingly slow. All I can do is to stand and wait. It seems to me as if I have turned to stone, or perhaps ice, frozen in place in front of the hall, the welcome cup a travesty within my grasp.

Then, finally, they make their way within the outer palisade. For a few moments all becomes chaos: a tangled mass of horses and men dismounting. I can no longer track individuals within the mêlée. Eventually, a group detaches itself from the rest of the mass of people. I recognise my brother from his plumed helmet and the fact that he is taller than the others. But as they make their way closer, taking their helms off as they climb the steps, I manage to catch sight of Faramir once more, his dark hair blowing in the wind. Again, I feel the knot of apprehension in my belly. But then he glances up, searching for me among the crowd on the terrace, and finally our eyes meet. He smiles, the same smile he gave after we lay together for the first time, as if he were looking upon the earth in the first days after its creation. And suddenly I know that all will be well, and at last happiness wells up within me.

He keeps his eyes on mine as he climbs to the terrace. Then, one by one, I offer the welcome cup to the Men and Elves: Éomer, Aragorn, the Hobbits, Lord Elrond and Lord Celeborn, Elfhelm, Imrahil and finally Faramir. We stand before one another. Our hands brush as I pass the cup to him, and it is as if lightning courses through me. He takes the cup and drinks, still gazing at me. All I want to do is to kiss him, hold him to me, be held by him, but we cannot, not before such company. So all that we wish for we pour into the glance that we share.

“Sister.” My brother's voice, filled with amusement, breaks the spell. Éomer puts his arms around me and lifts me off the ground. In the background I see Aragorn smiling kindly. As befits my station as the King's sister, I take Éomer's arm and we lead our guests into the Golden hall. Once they are seated at the high table, I bid the housekeeper bring food to revive Éomer and our guests after their journey, and direct the servants to take the their possessions to their various chambers. Aragorn is seated at Éomer's right hand, Elrond at his left. This done, to my relief my brother bids us sit as we will and wait not on the order of ceremony. Thus I am able to sit next to Faramir and talk to him for the first time in nearly two months.

Faramir looks at me intently. “My love,” he says in a low voice, “I have missed you so much.”

“And I you,” I reply. Then I find, as if nothing between us has changed, that I am still able to tell him of my deepest fears and confusions. “For a few moments, as I stood waiting for you, I wondered whether everything would have changed. And I was so afraid. But then you smiled and I knew all would be well.” Then I feel my face heat in the knowledge that as usual I have blurted out the first thing that came to my mind.

But Faramir simply smiles at me, a gentle, understanding smile. “I think perhaps it is not surprising to feel trepidation. I felt it too. I worried that this was all so new to you, and we had taken things at such a rush, that you might have changed your mind with time alone. So I too felt soothed beyond measure when I saw your smile.” And for the first time since I left Minas Tirith, he reaches out and takes my hand in his. His fingers are soft, caressing, as he raises it to his lips and kisses my knuckles gently. Then he lets go, and I let it drop to the table top, where it rests, a few fingers' width from his own. I look down at his hand, strong and shapely, resting upon the wooden table. Then I raise my eyes to his once more. His face is at one and the same time so familiar and so new. I take in his grey eyes, the arch of his brows, the dark lashes, his high cheekbones, the line of his jaw. He is so very
beautiful, so dear to me. And I see reflected in his eyes his love for me.

And thus we sit in silence, simply looking at one another. Food and drink forgotten, we each let the nearness of the other flow over us, finding peace and rest at last from the pain of our separation. Eventually, Faramir breaks the silence.

“You told me in your last letter, the one you sent by way of your brother, that you had been involved in a skirmish.” His face serious, he asks for details. “How did it come about? I thought you were meant only to be conducting a census of the country.”

I tell him of how, having spent our time in the Westfold fearing that we might come upon bands of orcs or Uruk Hai, or starving groups of Dunlanders, desperate through hunger, that instead we happened upon a village which was under attack in what we had assumed would be the relative safety of the Eastfold. I sketch the bare bones of the fight, telling him of how Cynefrid deployed our forces.

“Ah, so you remembered my advice about listening to your sergeant,” Faramir says with a smile. I feel myself blush.

“How could I forget? The circumstances in which you gave me the advice were nothing if not memorable.” I say this very quietly. Faramir's smile broadens into a grin, and I find myself smiling back. But as is Faramir's way, just as suddenly his expression becomes serious once more.

“You have told me the outlines of the skirmish, but I sense it has shaken you more than you are telling me,” he says.

Ah, how could I have forgotten how shrewdly Faramir reads the faces of his fellow Men, and how easily he sees into their hearts. Haltingly I try to tell him how I felt, my fear, my uncertainty, my realisation that fighting when one had something to lose was so completely different to my attempt to ride to death in war.

Faramir lays his hand on mine. “Do you remember talking to Lothíriel of this? She said her brothers thought of war as a game. I and my cousins talked for many hours on our ride here. After Cormallen, they no longer think of it thus: it has become a thing of utmost seriousness, to be entered into only when all other options have fallen by the wayside.”

“I do not think I ever thought of it as a game,” I say. “I cannot think of any games which involve seeking one's own death.”

“No, not as a game,” says Faramir, looking immeasurably sad at the reminder of the depths of my sorrow. “But still as something unreal. You were detached from the consequences, not by boyish bravado, but by pain and sorrow.” He pauses, stroking my hand. “I would do anything to have been able to take that pain and sorrow from you.”

“You have,” I say, laying my other hand on top of his, so that it is enfolded between mine. “But you have given me fear in its place, for now I fear to lose my life because to do so would be to lose you.”

“If it is a fear that encourages you to take care, to think, to halt before rushing headlong into danger, then I will consider it a worthy gift,” Faramir answers, voice filled with a solemn emotion. He turns my left hand over and raises it to press his lips to my palm. Then he suddenly looks down at my hand as if seeing it for the first time. “Your hand... your left hand. How is your arm?”

“Much improved. Still not quite back to its original strength. I am not sure if it ever will be. But I can ride, and, it would appear, fight reasonably well.”
Faramir smiles at me. I look back at him. “But what of you?” I ask. “You have not yet told me how your forays with your Rangers have gone. What news of the fiefdoms of Gondor, and the situation in Anorien?”

“A mixed story,” says Faramir with a sigh. “No doubt not too dissimilar to what you have found in the Westfold on the flanks of the White Mountains. In some cases, the message simply did not arrive. In others, the local populations were too hard pressed fending off Dunlanders and orcs from the mountains. But as with that manor you mentioned in your letter, some places I have the most profound suspicions of. There is one set of holdings, belonging to the Lord of Halifirien, where my scouts have heard rumours of the Lord's militia running wild and seeking to plunder neighbouring estates while their menfolk were at war. It is the next task for my Rangers, when I return to Gondor after we have laid your Uncle to rest.”

“Halifirien?” I say, thinking aloud. “Is that not just over the border from the Riddermark, on the far bank of the Mering Stream? It borders on the lands of Dunhere, Lord of Firien.”

“That's right,” Faramir answers me. “Heavily wooded territory. The Firien Wood lies across the border, equally spread between our two countries. It should be ideal terrain for my Rangers to find a tactical advantage. We passed through the southern edges of the wood on our journey here along the Great West Road. Fortunately, we were far enough away from the danger area and faced no real threat from the militias, but it gave me a chance to get a feel for the lie of the land.”

I grip his hand. “You will be careful?” I ask him anxiously, feeling foolish even as the words leave my mouth.

He looks at me with a sombre expression. “And you also, my love. By all means seek to protect your people, but do not look for errantry for the sake of it.” Then he smiles, and reaches up, brushing my hair back from my face. I feel myself blushing at this gesture of affection before so many people.

The meal finished, the guests go their separate ways. I must spend the afternoon with my brother to tell him of what has happened in his absence. But first I am able to use the excuse of showing Faramir to his room to snatch a moment alone with him. No sooner are we out of sight of the hall than he takes both my hands in his. For a long moment, we do nothing more than stare at one another. The look on his face makes me feel as though my heart is swelling within me, fit to burst. His grey eyes are full of a soft gentleness. Then he pulls me gently to him, and kisses me, very tenderly to begin with. With one hand, he strokes my cheek, then kisses it, then puts his arms around me, and I wrap mine round his shoulders.

When I daydreamed of him, I thought I remembered how it felt to be in his arms. Yet I find that I had lost my sense of the sheer physicality of his presence. I am overwhelmed by the reality: how could I have forgotten what this feels like? The warmth of his body, radiating through his clothes, hot against me. His beard, somehow soft and rough at the same time, his smell, of soap and the outdoors. The wiriness of his torso, his back muscles beneath my hands. The sound of his breathing and heartbeat. The feel of his arms, strong around my body. The feeling that I have come home, that I am safe.

His lips brush mine once more, this time more forcefully. My mood changes to match his, and I kiss him back, two months of pent-up desire poured into one moment, the length of our bodies pressed hard against each other. I tremble in his grasp, stomach knotting itself with desire. Somehow we turn and end hard against the wall, his weight pressing me into the wood behind, my hands round his body pulling him even closer. I slide my hand up into his hair, pulling his head close. Giddy with his kisses, I part my lips and let his tongue slide into my mouth. Oh Béma, I want him. Through the folds of my dress I can feel his leg between my thighs. Then suddenly we hear approaching footsteps and jump apart. His uncle appears through the doorway at the end of the corridor. Faramir,
controlling his breathing with what to me seems a conscious effort, bows deeply.

“Until this evening, my Lady,” he says. “I shall look forward to your company at the feast.”

Imrahil also bows. “My Lady,” he says in acknowledgement. I curtsey, trying not to notice the knowing glance he gives me, then retrace my steps to the hall to find Éomer.

Evening comes, and the lights are lit within the Golden Hall. The banquet is as lavish as I and the household staff could contrive, and the occasion is a merry one. Once more, Faramir and I sit beside one another, and although we try to converse with others, all too often we fall back on each other's company. And beneath the table, I feel his leg brush against mine, his foot touch my foot. But it is not just his touch that inflames my senses, though. There are all the little things I had forgotten – the shape of the bones in his wrist as he reaches for a goblet of wine, the absent-minded way he brushes his hair back from his face, the way his brow furrows as he tries to remember the precise date of an ancient battle. I want to reach out and touch his wrist, run my fingers through his hair, smooth his brow. I want to kiss him. I want to lie naked in his bed.

As Legolas quizzes Faramir on some piece of Numenorean lore, I wonder whether those around us can read my mind. I catch a glint in Faramir's eye which makes me think that he knows exactly what I am thinking. I bite my lip, and Faramir looks away, blushing slightly, then runs his foot up my calf.

“But I don't think that quite fits with the other dates,” Erchirion interjects, sounding slightly puzzled. “I know my grasp of history is rather rough and ready compared to yours, cousin, but was not the reign of Ar Pharazon the Golden much later than that?”

To my amusement, Faramir looks flustered. Imrahil smoothly picks up the tangled threads of the conversation and gently teases them apart, giving another of his knowing glances towards his nephew.

And thus the conversation continues, Faramir alternating between offering his customary scholarly insights and suffering from momentary lapses in concentration. Having realised how easy it is to distract him, I am unable to resist. I find that it is not just by brushing his leg that I can make him lose his concentration. A smile or a hand gesture can often achieve the same. Of course it does not take him long to realise that I am teasing him deliberately, at which point he decides to exact his revenge. Casually and very subtly, he drops his hand beneath the table and runs it along my thigh, fingers coming to rest a hair's breadth from my lap. I almost utter an audible squeak.

I take advantage of Erchirion's loud guffaws at one of Gimli's jokes to whisper in desperation. “A truce, my lord, a truce. Or we will both disgrace ourselves.”

Towards the end of the evening, out of the corner of my eye, I catch sight of Aragorn watching me, with a smile on his face. Try as I might to accept his smile as simply an expression of kindly regard, somehow it annoys me. Then I overhear a snippet of his conversation with my brother: Éomer tells him that my betrothal to Faramir will be announced after Théoden's burial. And my joyous mood at having Faramir beside me, and my quiet peace and contentment is rent asunder as I hear Aragorn's reply.

“No niggard are you, Éomer, to give thus to Gondor the finest thing in your realm.”

Lothíriel's words come flooding back to me: You and I are naught but fine brood mares, to be covered only by the right stallions. I clench my fists in fury. I have ridden to war and killed the Witch King. I have ridden the length and breadth of this realm seeing how best to bring succour to my
people. I have fought against orcs. I have sat as Regent in my brother's stead and presided in judgement in the court of the King. Yet still I am nothing more than a chattel.

Chapter End Notes

As you can see, I have taken the liberty of moving one piece of dialogue from the original, for my own purposes! I hope you will excuse this.

My source for the role of women in controlling property and running estates is in part Helen Castor's She Wolves: The women who ruled England before Elizabeth, though there was of course a huge gap between the de facto situation where women did in fact do these things, and the de jure situation where their right to do so was enshrined in law (the right of married women to own property in their own right, or to divorce their husbands was not written into English law until the latter half of the 19th Century: G.M. Young, Victorian England). Thanks are due to my father and to Borys for long discussions about this.

I'm also grateful for Lady Peter for drawing my attention to this wonderful extract from one of Abigail Adams' letters to John Adams: “I long to hear that you have declared an independency. And, by the way, in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation."

The difference between Gondorian and Rohirric law that I've imagined is, loosely speaking, the difference between Roman/Napoleonic law and Anglo Saxon/English law – and goes a long way towards explaining much of the modern clash between European Union laws and British law ;). It is not easy to glue the two systems together.
Tilting at Windmills

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

I wake in the grey light before the dawn, to an empty bed. I remember how, surrounded by people, neither Faramir nor I could find the opportunity to go to the other's bed. I fell asleep eventually, but not after a long time of missing him with an intensity like a physical pain, interrupted only by the roiling anger in the pit of my stomach at the thought of Aragorn's words. And I find that my head is still filled with the memory of his phrase, reducing me to a golden trinket, or highly bred mare, to be passed from one owner to another. I find I am wound like a tightly coiled spring, my anger still hot. Béma, I need to do something to get this out of my system. I slide from the bed, and pull on a woollen tunic, leather breeches and my riding boots, and head to the stable yard.

Before I go to the horses' stalls, I stop at the armoury. If I am to tilt at the quintain, I should at least wear a helmet and cuirass, else if I mistime my passes with the lance, I shall rue my carelessness. I fiddle with the buckles, cursing my cold fingers in the grey half light before the sun rises above the horizon. Then I walk back into the yard and across the hard-packed earth to the doors of the stables.

Windfola nickers gently as I approach. I stroke his head, then rub him down, before going to the store and getting his tack. Methodically, I place the blanket and saddle on him, tightening his girth as much as he will allow for the moment. Wily beast that he is, I know that he will have sucked in a belly-full of air, and I will have to bide my time and tighten the girth a few notches once he has relaxed before I can mount safely. Humming softly to him, I take off the simple halter he has worn in the stable and replace it with his bridle. I lead him round the yard a couple of times, then hitch him to the rail while I fetch a lance from the store. Finally tightening his girth to my satisfaction, I lift my foot to the stirrup and swing into the saddle. I walk him out to the yard, then urge him into a slow canter down to the tilt yard. I dismount, and hitch Windfola to the fence round the edge of the long, narrow field, throwing a blanket over him to keep him warm.

This done, I walk to the far side of the enclosure and retrieve the quintain. Béma, it's heavy. I had forgotten how heavy. And my left arm, though the bones have knitted together, is still weak, and aches as I heave the cross bar upright. I manage to prop it over my right shoulder and make my way back slowly to the tilt rail. By the time I get there, beads of sweat are collecting on my upper lip. Mother of the Earth, I have got soft during my enforced rest. I prop the cross bar against the rail, then carry a mounting block over, to get the height I need to fit the cross bar onto the pin at the top of the vertical wooden post. It is a struggle, and I can feel the muscles in my arms trembling with the strain as I reach up awkwardly. Finally I fit the heavy metal ball and chain onto the end of the cross bar, opposite the target. For a moment I shiver, the arrangement reminding me of the Wraith's morning star. A cold hand seems to grip my heart, and a freezing sensation creeps up my right arm. In that instant, I am back on the Pelennor fields, surrounded by blood and destruction, the sounds of battle echoing, the smell of death in my nostrils. By an effort of will, I force myself back into the present, body shaking with the effort. I steel myself and tell myself to get on with it.

I circle my arms a few times to loosen my shoulders again after the fetching and carrying. Then, still on my own two feet, I pick up the lance. I couch it in the familiar way, under my armpit, resting across my upturned palm, so that it, and not my fingers, bears most of the strain. My fingers and thumb hold it in place but do not exert too much pressure. Happy with my grip, I go through the motions of practising on foot. The exercise reminds me of being a young girl again, begging the Marshall of the Lists to let me practise with my brother. I remember the excitement, the feeling of achievement, not to mention the thrill of having transgressed some sort of boundary, of having done
what the menfolk say a girl should not. But memories are a distraction, and once again I force myself
to concentrate. Lance vertical, I walk for ten paces. Four paces while I drop it smoothly to the
horizontal, then four paces to return it to the vertical. That motion is fine. I am not so happy about my
lateral control. I am not getting the angle quite right, lance from right to left across my body. I walk
through the exercise another handful of times until I am confident that my motions are smooth and
even.

I set the lance to one side, propping it against the fence. Then I remount Windfola. We follow the
familiar pattern of years of practice. I make several passes of the target without my lance, to get
Windfola into the rhythm of the thing. Stand by the near mark, wait, forward into a controlled canter,
pass the target without breaking stride, pull up at the mark at the far end. As we do this, I make
mental notes on his stride pattern, memorising the point four strides before the target. It is good to feel
his familiar motion, regaining the intuitive link we have, where he seems to move not because of
commands from me with hands and legs, but through sensing the shifts in my weight, changing
direction seemingly instinctively in the very moment I think of issuing the command. Once we have
achieved several passes with what I judge to be sufficient fluidity, I trot to the edge of the enclosure
to fetch the lance.

Thus armed, I wheel Windfola round towards the tilt rail. With a gentle squeeze of my calves, he
walks on to the starting point. Our first pass is a disaster. I don't get my grip right, hit the target
clumsily, so that the shock rattles my wrist. I flinch at the stinging feeling. Windfola, of course, picks
up on my lack of confidence and behaves skittishly, skipping sideways with dancing strides. It is a
miracle that the heavy metal ball doesn't catch me from behind as we careen past. At the end of the
course, I turn Windfola in a couple of tight circles to regain control. Gradually I manage to ease his
fright. Then I walk him back up the course, stroking his neck and humming softly to calm him. And
my clumsiness only serves to make me angrier, angry at myself now as well as Aragorn.

The second pass goes a bit better. I feel myself settle into the task, and I can sense Windfola picking
up on my improved mood. On the third I somehow manage to find the right combination of
calmness, concentration and focussed anger, and hit the target with a venomous strike which leaves it
spinning. My strike is firm, my wrist and arm braced so the impact does not affect me, and I raise the
lance back to the vertical in a fluid motion, continuing the canter to the end of the course, and
wheeling Windfola round to face back down the tilt.

And there, leaning against the fence at the side of the yard, is a familiar tall figure, his black curls
blowing in the breeze. He raises his hands and applauds, with a smile. I ease Windfola into a trot and
make my way over to him.

“Nearly seven rotations. You are still cross, I think?” Faramir says. I lean down and, without
speaking, place the lance against the fence. I don't quite trust myself to say anything, still wound tight
with the mood of combat, even if only a pretence of combat. Then I dismount and throw Windfola's
reins over the fence, before loosening his girth, rubbing the worst of the sweat off him with a handful
of hay and tossing the blanket over his back. Finally I duck under the rail, and walk up to Faramir,
sliding my hands up his arms until they come to rest on his shoulders. It comes to me that, for this
moment at any rate, actions are an easier way to communicate than words, and so I stretch up and
kiss him.

Faramir responds to my mood, tangling his fingers in my hair and pressing his lips against mine. I
suppose it is a combination of my mood and the strangeness of the circumstances, my armour coming
between us, but there is no gentleness in this kiss: it is rough and hot, and I feel desire rising in me.
Eventually, we part. His eyes are dark and I know that he wants me every bit as much as I want him.
For a moment, I toy with the idea of letting him take me, here and now, on the muddy turf of the tilt
yard. I find myself smiling at the thought of the scandal should we then be discovered.
“My lady?” says Faramir, raising his eyebrows quizzically at my smile.

“I was simply wondering what my brother's reaction would be, were he to come upon us rutting like animals in the dirt...”

“Am I to suppose,” Faramir replies, a wolfish grin appearing, “That, aside from your brother's reaction, such a scenario would otherwise hold a certain appeal?” His lips parted, he runs his tongue along the lower one, looking me up and down with an appraising glance. His desire is written plain to see upon his face, and my insides feel as if they are flooded with molten metal. He reaches out his hand, and brushes a stray strand of hair which has escaped from my braid, tucking it behind my ear before running his fingers along my jaw, then raising my chin. He kisses me once more, with as much desire as before, but with a good humoured tenderness too.

“Come, I must get Windfola's tack off, and return my gear to the amoury.” I unloop Windfola's reins from the rail. Faramir shoulders my lance, and together we make our way back up the slight rise to the stableyard. After a lifetime's practise, it is the work of but a few minutes to tidy away my mount's saddle and bridle, and see him safely tethered in his stall, with fresh water and hay. Then Faramir follows me to the armoury as I go to return my gear.

The far end of the armoury is dark, far from the narrow windows set into the thick stone walls. There is a rack for lances, and beside it a heap of tanned hides, waiting to be cut and stitched into hauberks to wear beneath armour and mail.

I turn from placing the lance in its rack and nearly collide with Faramir, who has come up behind me. He tugs me to him, armour and all, and kisses me, his tongue hot and sinuous within my mouth. Then his fingers start to work on the buckles of my armour, all the time letting his lips and tongue work on any part of my bare skin he can find, mouth, cheek, jaw, ears. In silence, he lifts the pauldrons from my shoulders, then takes off my vambraces, lifting my hands and trailing hot kisses up the inside of each of my forearms in turn. Then he unfastens the cuirass and peels away the breastplate and backplate.

“Why do poets only think to write of slipping garments of silk from their lovers' bodies? What a failure of imagination,” he murmurs, unlacing the leather hauberk I wear beneath, sliding it off my shoulders and down my body. His lips close on my nipple through the thin linen camisole which is all I wear beneath, his tongue wetting the fabric as he sets to work. And his hands slide lower, unlacing my breeches and pushing them down, as I do the same for his. He lifts his head and I am able to tug his tunic over it. His hands tear at my camisole in his haste, his teeth nipping at the angle between my shoulder and neck as I rake my fingers down the muscles of his back. He lifts me and I wrap my thighs round his hips, then he seems to lose his balance and we both tumble onto the stack of hides.

I tangle my fingers in his hair as he kisses me. His hands run over my body, and I feel as though flames lick across my skin where he touches me. His fingers run down my sides as he moves his head to kiss my breasts once more, and I tremble beneath his touch. He strokes down the backs of my legs, then back up my thighs.

“So soft, your skin... I had forgotten just how soft. My memories did not do you justice,” he murmurs in between kisses as his lips move up my neck and along my jaw line. “You are so beautiful...” His thigh brushes between my legs, against the moisture that has formed there, and we both moan. I know he must be able to feel my need. I move against him, running my hands down his back to his firm arse. Béma, it feels good to have both hands, to be able to do this without having to worry about my injured arm. The freedom to touch him as I wish is like strong wine rushing to my head. I run my hands over his body, then slide them over his shoulders, down his arms, feeling muscle and sinew
beneath my fingertips.

There is no need for words. We both know how much we need each other. He reaches and takes my hands. Fingers interlaced with mine, he presses them into the leather above our heads. I shift beneath him, parting my legs, and he pushes himself inside me. I move my hips up to meet him, trying to take him inside as far as I can. Together we seem to lose all sense of restraint, of holding back. Weeks of pent-up need unravel. He starts to drive into me, and I match him, thrust for desperate thrust. Then I wrap my legs around his hips, locking my ankles tight, gripping him with my thighs, digging my heels into his buttocks as if he were a stallion and I was urging him on.

For a moment he looks up and meets my eyes. “Éowyn... I will not be able to... I need to be able to pull out in time...” His breath comes in ragged gasps, his eyes pools of darkness in the dimness.

“Then don’t,” I whisper, clenching my fingers into the backs of his hands and gripping with my thighs as hard as I can. I feel a shudder run through him, and he groans wordlessly. His eyes meet mine in a wordless exchange: need, desire, want, desperation. He drops his head onto my shoulder, and with a harsh, muffled cry, fills me completely. Freeing my hands from his grasp, I dig my fingers into his buttocks: I want every last bit of him inside me, and I buck my hips wildly, like a horse struggling against attempts to break it to the saddle. Only I want to feel my rider's weight, not throw him. I want him to ride me to exhaustion. As if he can read my thoughts, Faramir increases his rhythm. I writhe beneath him, until both of us scream aloud, and I feel him burst within me as my mind explodes like a flash of lightning.

His whole weight presses down on me. I am his completely. And still I feel him inside me, gradually becoming soft. Eventually he slides away, and I feel his seed trickle down the inside of my thigh. I hold his head against my breast, almost as I have done those countless nights when he has had nightmares. I sense that he is too overcome to speak; I cannot put my feelings into words. Instead, I let my hands stroke over his body, damp with sweat, shivering as the cool air drives away the heat our bodies have made together.

Finally Faramir raises his head. His eyes meet mine, his gaze intense. “Éowyn,” he whispers, “My dearest love.”

“And you are mine,” I answer. He moves up to rest his head beside mine.

“What if I have got you with child?” he asks hesitantly. “I should have been more controlled. I am sorry.” His grey eyes are dark with emotion.

“Are you?” I ask. “For I had as much a part to play as you. And I am not sorry.”

Faramir smiles, then pulls my head against his shoulder, and murmurs softly into my ear, his lips brushing against my skin. “No, you are right, I am not sorry. I love you, and should you carry our child, I will love him too. But I would not wish you to be dishonoured.”

“We will be married in two months. Should anything come of this, I shall simply be brought to bed of child a couple of months early.” I pause, wrapping a strand of his hair round my fingers, then smile. “But Eru be praised, the child will be large and healthy.” Faramir laughs softly, and I feel his chest move beneath my arm. Then he slips his hand down my side, then with a slow deliberation, brings it to rest over my belly, spreading his fingers, the heat of his palm seeping across my skin. He leans towards me and gives me the gentlest of kisses, his lips brushing mine.

He helps me to dress, and hand-in-hand we walk back towards Meduseld. As we approach, we see
two figures standing on the terrace, watching us thoughtfully.

“Westu, Éowyn, hal,” Éomer calls in greeting. “You are up early.”

“I have been to the tiltyard, brother,” I call back.

“Will you join me to break your fast?” he asks.

“Most certainly, but first I must wash and find a more appropriate dress,” I reply. Behind him, I see Imrahil, looking, as ever, quietly amused by the sight before him. As I turn to go into the Hall, the Prince moves from my brother’s side towards Faramir. The last thing I hear as I go through the doorway is his voice, whispering quietly to my love.

“Faramir, might I suggest that you too might benefit from a return to your room. Your tunic appears to be somewhat askew.”

~o~O~o~

“Enter.” My brother’s voice comes from within his study.

I let myself in, and am surprised to see Imrahil and Faramir seated beside a table on which breakfast is laid.

“There is plenty of food,” says Éomer with a grin. “After all, I think you’ve worked up an appetite... jousting, and so on.”

I feel my face heat, and note that Faramir is staring down at his feet looking extremely sheepish.

“So, my sister,” Éomer says as I sit down. “As you know, I am a remarkably understanding and indulgent brother.” Imrahil laughs aloud at this comment. My brother, in contrast, keeps his face admirably straight. I think revenge is being served cold, for my teasing of him back in Minas Tirith. He continues, “But there are limits to how far you can push your behaviour, and I think we are rather close to those limits...”

Faramir moves as if to stand up, looking angered. Imrahil rests a calming hand on his arm.

“Peace, both of you. The most noble Prince and I have been discussing how best to proceed such that no dishonour comes upon either of our houses, and I think we have come up with a strategy which should satisfy all of us. The day after tomorrow you are to be betrothed. Now, formal betrothals are much more a part of Gondor’s culture than of ours, and to be honest, almost every one from the Riddermark present in the Golden Hall will assume that your hand-fasting is a marriage, as it would be in our culture. So we see no harm in treating it as such, and witnessing your marriage the next morning according to the customs of the Mark. You will still be married according to the customs of Gondor, in two months time, in Minas Tirith. But as far as concerns my country, and the succession to its throne, you will be married from the time of your betrothal.”

I am lost for words. Faramir looks similarly stunned, then as my brother’s words sink in, a broad smile spreads across his face.

Imrahil speaks in his calm but commanding way. “For, although I most sincerely hope that such a thing will not come to pass, should Faramir meet with any misadventure between now and your
marriage, it would be well for any child to be legitimate.”

“Not least,” continues my brother, “Since until such time as I marry and have heirs, your children will be heirs to the house of Eorl. What say you?”

“I must say, you seem to have thought this out very thoroughly,” I say. I feel anger rising within me once more at the thought that I am to be tidily disposed of, a convenient solution to a potential diplomatic embarrassment and the means to secure the succession, all rolled up into one neat package. I start to open my mouth, but Faramir intervenes.

“For my part, I sincerely hope that the rumours of my impending demise turn out to be unfounded,” he says, dryly. He looks at me, and I can see in his gaze that he has found the confirmation of his suspicions: he can tell that I am about to explode, and that if he cannot calm me quickly, it will take not inconsiderable amounts of tilting at a quintain to quell my rage. “A moment, my lords.” He rises, and draws me to the far side of the room.

“I think it should come as no surprise to you, my lady,” he says in a low voice, “To know that I would be more than happy to wed you this instant. In fact, in the tradition of the Eldar of ancient times, I have considered myself bound to you since first we met, never to love another.” To my surprise, despite the presence of my brother and Imrahil, he reaches out and places his hands upon my waist. “But I know your tendency to kick against the traces if you feel anything has been decided without your say-so.” Then he smiles at me, with that look that tells me he would, if we were alone, pull me into his arms and kiss me. “However, I hope that in this instance you will allow yourself to be out-manoeuvred by your brother and my uncle, since the plan they have contrived together is actually what we would both wish for anyway.”

There is something about Faramir that has always had the power to calm me, to defuse my wrath and soften it, and this is no exception. My anger evaporates and I find myself deflating, soothed by Faramir's touch and smile as much as by his indefatigable appeal to logic. I find myself giving him a wry smile, nodding my head in acquiescence, and in response Faramir gives me one of those smiles which make my world tilt on its axis. He turns to our kinsmen.

“My lords, my lady and I are more than content.”

“Excellent,” says Éomer. “Now all that has to be decided upon are appropriate witnesses. Clearly I should be one, and I think Prince Imrahil as your nearest kinsman, my brother to be. And Marshal Elfhelm.”

“Not my liege-lord?” says Imrahil. For a moment the tension returns to my body. After his words last night, and given my girlish infatuation, Aragorn is the last person I wish to witness my marriage.

“No, I think not. This marriage is of state importance to the Mark, and of personal, familial importance to you, Imrahil, but the ceremony in Minas Tirith is the one which will matter from the perspective of the laws and customs of Gondor,” my brother says, and I heave a sigh of relief. “I will of course inform your king, but I do not think he need actually witness the cloak-wrapping. And now, I think perhaps we should actually turn our attention to breakfast,” he says, with a grin which reminds me of how young he is.

~o~O~o~
After breakfast, Imrahil invites me to walk in the gardens with him, saying he would like to get to know his new kinswoman better. As we walk side-by-side in the warm summer sunshine, he offers me his arm. “You must not think too harshly of King Elessar for his ill-considered comment last night,” he says.

I shrug non-committally. I still do not trust myself to say anything diplomatic. Imrahil gives me a sidelong glance, then, seemingly, changes the subject completely. Perhaps he feels it safer to do so.

“In Dol Amroth we have some exotic birds in the palace grounds, imported originally from the Harad. In the mating season, the males grow exceptionally long tail feathers, which they spread out in a fan, bigger than the span of a man’s arms. The feathers are of an iridescent green and blue, with patterns like eyes upon them. The Haradrim believe that their equivalent of the Valar created them as eternally wakeful watchers on the world of mortals.”

I raise my eyebrows quizzically at Imrahil. I cannot see in the slightest where he is going with this anecdote. Imrahil catches my look, which he returns with a thoughtful expression, before continuing.

“These birds, peacocks, spread their tails and circle slowly, shaking the feathers to show off to the females. And it has always seemed to me that we men are not unlike peacocks.” He smiles at me, a self-deprecating smile. “We too like to flaunt our tail feathers, especially, paradoxical as it may seem, in the company of other men. Sometimes this tendency leads us to say things without too much thought in an effort to seem witty, or worldly-wise. And it would appear that not even kings among men are immune to this tendency.”

And suddenly, I find my anger finally abates, and I start to chuckle. The idea of Aragorn puffing up his feathers to impress my brother is such a ridiculous image that I can no longer find it in me to feel irritated. I say, “In truth, I cannot quite see that his words were meant to flatter my brother in any way. But perhaps you are right: they were meant as an off-hand remark to ease the flow of conversation rather than as a considered opinion on my worth.”

We walk along the gravel path for a while in companionable silence, then Imrahil speaks once more.

“Your brother told me of your time as regent. It seems you have made some interesting and useful legal decisions.”

Again, I raise my eyebrows, not quite sure whether he is being disingenuous. “I am glad you think them useful.”

“I have, as you know, for you have met her, a very intelligent daughter. Natural justice would seem to me to dictate that her interests in life be accorded as much importance as those of a man,” Imrahil says, giving me an open smile, free of any hint that he is dissembling.

“I am glad you see the matter in that light. I fear that not all men would.”

“No, not all would. Fortunately, my nephew is one who would agree with you. I am pleased that he will be marrying a woman who can offer sound and intelligent advice and rule competently beside him, rather than some simpering maiden who takes to her solar with her coterie of friends to surround herself with court gossip.”

Something inside me prompts me to be utterly blunt. “You do not fear, then, that he is marrying a barbarian from the North who will attempt to sway him from the laws and customs of Gondor?”

At this, Imrahil laughs aloud. “It is a mistake, you know, to mistake the differences of other cultures for inferiority. A grave mistake to make with respect to one’s enemies; an even graver one when it
comes to one's friends. And as for the laws and customs of Gondor, well, you and my nephew are in the position of having to remake Ithilien in its entirety. An admirable chance, I would have thought, to take that which is best in both cultures and quietly dispose of that which is less than ideal.”

Silence descends once more, then as we round a corner in the path, Imrahil adds, “Of course, I am not pleased simply because of your political acumen, my Lady. You and Faramir seem to make one another extremely happy...” At this, I feel my face flush, wondering quite what he is alluding to, but Imrahil continues as if he has not noticed any reaction on my part. “You seem very well suited temperamentally. I shall be delighted to welcome you as my niece.” He pauses for a moment, then asks, “Am I correct in thinking you have a more nuanced description than 'niece' in your own tongue?”

“Well, Faramir would be your sister-son, so I suppose by marriage I could be argued to be your sister-daughter.” And all of a sudden as I utter those words, the world tilts beneath my feet and I can hear the roaring of blood in my ears and the thud of my heart.

“My lady?” says Imrahil, holding my arm to support me – suddenly I realise I am swaying, on the verge of losing my balance.

“Théoden... I was his sister-daughter,” I manage to say, my voice sounding choked and hoarse to my own ears. Then I find myself crying. Imrahil helps me to a nearby bench, and holds my hands in his while I weep. Eventually, my tears subside.

“By all report, your Uncle was a remarkable man, a most noble King. Would that I had had the good fortune to meet him,” Imrahil says softly.

“But he was so much more than that to me... he was as a father and a mother...” My voice tails off.

“If it would ease your sorrow to talk about him, I would be honoured to listen,” says Imrahil.

“My own father was killed when I was but five years old, and my mother died soon after. When first we came to Meduseld, I used to wake crying for her. My nurse soon found that nothing she could do would comfort me while I remained in my bed. So she would bring me down to the hall, and Théoden would let me climb onto his knee. He used to tell me stories... Of Eorl the Young, of dangerous quests, and glorious charges, and dragons, and noble horses. And eventually I would fall asleep, and he or Théodred would carry me back to my bed. That became a pattern for many years, and Théoden showed endless patience towards me.”

Imrahil smiles at me, and with his encouragement I find myself telling him of Théoden's gift of a pony when I outgrew the one my parents had given me. And I tell him of Théodred making me a wooden sword and shield, and how I would race round and round the hall, slaying imaginary monsters, of Théoden's indulgent smile as I tried to copy everything my brother did. And I also find myself telling him of the times when Théoden and I did not agree, of the tale I told Faramir about my uncle's refusal to let me study military strategy.

“I was furious at the time,” I say. “And I still think he was mistaken. But it has suddenly come to me that perhaps I understand a little of why he acted thus. It must have seemed a huge burden to him, to take on the raising of a motherless girl-child. For he had been widowed for many years by that point. Perhaps he feared that he was bringing me up as another son.”

As I utter these words, I think I understand at last perhaps a little of Théoden's thinking. I will never agree with it, but I finally see that it was kindly meant, at any rate, with what he took to be my best
interests at heart. And yet, it comes to me, that this is the very nub of the problem: my interests, certainly on reaching a woman's estate, should be mine and mine to decide, even if I do so erroneously. Haltingly, I try to explain this to Imrahil, hoping I will not make myself sound foolish through a lack of a grasp on the scholarly language he and Faramir use to frame their arguments.

To my relief, Imrahil nods. “It is, I have found, hard to bring up a daughter. For one wishes to make her as independent, as well educated and as capable as possible, and yet all along, one knows she will eventually marry into a world controlled by men, where few men view women as anything other than ornaments, and where, legally, she has little or no right to be considered as anything other than an ornament.”

“Then the law is wrong,” I reply, bluntly. Instantly I fear that I may have made myself look a complete idiot. Now is the point at which I will receive a long lecture on the complexities of Gondorian law and the philosophical positions underpinning it, one which I am ill-equipped to counter. But to my relief, Imrahil smiles at me.

“You are in a unique position to do something about that, at least in a limited geographical sphere within Ithilien. And your husband-to-be is Steward of Gondor. If the two of you can convince the King that your experiment is working well, who knows what laws of the realm as a whole you may be able to re-draft. It seems to me that in your brief time as Regent here, you have instinctively hit upon the essence of the issue. Allow women economic control over their own assets – whether it be a noblewoman's control of her estate, or her maid's control of her own wages; and couple that to the right to self determination – for instance, the right to leave a marriage that is oppressive, or to decide for herself what trade she wishes to be apprenticed to, without the say-so of any man: do this, and you have set the foundations from which all else will follow.”

“I wish I had your eloquence, to argue this point,” I say.

“Honest words will often achieve more than eloquence – for many a plain man suspects that eloquence is simply a mask the rich and educated use to disguise their own self-interest,” Imrahil replies with a laugh. “And the plain man is probably right. Show people the real world they can have – as much by the example of your marriage as by descriptions of the laws you wish to change – and you will be much more effective than I would be with my prosing! And now, madam, I fear we have spent almost the whole morning in the garden. It must be time for lunch, and my nephew will be beginning to fear I have decamped to Dol Amroth with his betrothed.”

~o~O~o~

After lunch, Faramir and I seize a rare opportunity to ride out into the countryside together. No doubt my brother would have sent half an Eored with us, had he known what we were up to. But he does not know, and so we lie in the long grass beside a small stream, a few rowan trees here and there casting a dappled shade which keeps the heat of the sun from troubling us. Faramir runs his fingers through my hair.

“I like your uncle,” I say to him.

“As a youth and a young man, in many ways, I was closer to him than to my father,” Faramir replies. “I am glad the two of you have taken a liking to one another – and glad you have forgiven him for conspiring with Éomer.”

“You were right – they were only suggesting what we want to do anyway, and to have been stubborn for the sake of it would have been to cut off my nose to spite my face,” I say, then add,
“Are you going to spend our whole marriage being annoyingly right and reasonable about everything?”

“Probably,” he says, only the tiniest of twitches at the corner of his lips giving away his mood. “I'm sure I will prove to be exceptionally annoying in my perfection. Will I have to make sure we have a quintain in the grounds of Emyn Arnen to stop you getting frustrated with my being right all the time?”

In answer, I launch myself at him, and start to tickle his ribs. He gives a yelp of surprise, then starts to fight back, and within moments I find myself pinned to the ground with him on top of me, both of us laughing. Then he kisses me.

In a low, seductive voice, he murmurs in my ear. “Until such time as your brother weds, I believe that we are being held responsible for ensuring the continuation of the House of Eorl. Should we attempt to honour that responsibility, my lady?”

Chapter End Notes

Would a woman in Éowyn's society have held the views or asked the sort of questions about women's position that Éowyn is asking here? Christine de Pizan (1364-1430) certainly posed questions about women's ability to reason, their right to education and their place in the world, in The Book of the City of Ladies and The Treasury of the City of Ladies.
Epithalamion

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Somehow the chill east wind, presaging the autumn to come, seems a fitting accompaniment to the day. Silently, the Marshals of the Mark have borne Théoden's body to its place within the burial mound, Éomer standing stern and commanding. The bards have sung his soul to its long rest in the halls of our fathers, ever to ride the golden fields of the afterlife until the ending of the world. I feel the tension in my jaw from holding myself in check. My father I barely remember, but Théoden was always there, always a presence in my life. As his sister-daughter, I join Éomer in scattering a handful of earth upon the tomb, earth from which he came and to which he returns, and then a handful of wheat, fruit of Yavanna's soil, sign of the life that was and of the life of the generations before him and the generations yet to come. Finally we each sprinkle a cup of water upon the soil, water that nourishes the grain, that tells of the tears of the earth that mourn the passing of his soul, that tells of the tears that we who loved him shed. One by one, Théoden's liege-men come and kneel in his memory, then return to their stations, Master Meriadoc among them. Eventually, the rituals finished, we turn and make our way back inside the walls of Meduseld, back to the Golden Hall.

It falls to me, as the King's sister and highest ranking woman in the realm, to pour the cup of wine and carry it, first to my brother, then to Elessar, then round the assembled nobles and lords both of the Riddermark and of the neighbouring realms. Thus the circle is complete: death has been laid beneath the earth and renewed life and the new King welcomed into the land.

Finally, all ritual finished, as the sun goes down, I go to stand upon the terrace. The wind catches my skirts and whips loose strands of my hair about my face. I look out over the plains towards the mountains beyond, and at last a tear escapes and runs down my cheek, leaving an icy trail as the breeze blows across my skin. Suddenly, I become aware that I am no longer alone. I do not need to turn; somehow I know that it is Faramir. He comes up behind me and stands, not quite touching. After a moment or two, I turn my head slightly.

"Such comfort as I can, I offer you, my lady," he says. "I do not know whether you wish for my companionship, or whether you would rather have the silence of the plains in which to think on your kinsman."

I do not answer, merely stepping towards him by way of reply, and he slips his arm about my shoulders, letting me rest my head on his shoulder. I feel my tears flow freely, and the cloth of his tunic become damp beneath my cheek. We stand together as the sky reddens and the disc of the sun drops behind the mountains, a chill seeping across the plain once its rays have gone. Faramir says nothing, and I stand within the circle of his arms, remembering the man who took me into his home when my parents died, who brought me through childhood. I mourn for the lost years when Wormtongue poisoned his mind, and the years that never will be, the remaining years of health and vigour restored. Somehow it seems doubly cruel for his life to have been snatched away when it had only just become his own again.

Eventually, I find there are no more tears left for me to shed. I turn my face up towards Faramir, and he runs his fingertips over my cheeks, drying the moisture there, then kisses me gently on the forehead.

"Come, my love, let us go into the warmth. Let me accompany you to your chamber, for I know your maid will be waiting to help you to dress for this evening's feast."


“It seems strange to feast on such a night,” I say.

“And yet your customs and ours are the same in this instance: we lay our loved ones in the earth, mourn their passing, then raise a cup to remember them in the strength and fullness of their lives. Drink to your uncle, eat and be of good cheer, and remember him with fondness and love.”

It comes to me suddenly that Faramir offers me succour which no-one else close to me could. For Éomer, much as he loves me, is also torn by grief; Faramir loves only me. He believes Théoden to have been a good man, for I have told him so, but he does not feel his loss himself, and so his care is for me, and me alone. And I find that I, who have prided myself so much in my strength and self-sufficiency, can let go and find comfort and strength in his arms without being afraid that to do so is an act of surrender. He offers me his arm and I take it, making my way back through the great carven doors.

~o~O~o~

Faramir is right, I find. It is as if I have mourned all that I can, cried all the tears that my body has, and now there is a calm after the storm, and it seems natural to take comfort in breaking bread with those around me. It feels as if we all seek companionship, desiring to find comfort in the celebration of the living. The hall is convivial, jovial at times. And it strikes me that Théoden would not have minded; in fact he would have encouraged us to embrace the world and each other.

The harpist plays and sings of Théoden's muster and ride to Gondor. Already the harshness of war is being woven into the fabric of legend: blood and guts expunged, tales of valour and heroism polished clean of both dirt and realism, a gilded vision detached from either experience or the horrors of living memory suffered by those of us who were there. Part of me feels angered by this alteration, this purging of the real pain and sacrifice. But part of me realises that it has always been done this way. How many times have I sat within this very hall, listening to tales of valour from ages past? And did I, before this moment, ever stop to wonder at what cost the famous victories had been won? I thought I honoured the fallen heroes by listening to tales of glory, but I realise now that they had been turned into figments of fancy. Their deaths were paid for with pain and agony, however courageous their actions may have been.

“Éowyn?” Faramir's voice stirs me out of this maudlin train of thought.

“I was just thinking how different war is from the poets' imagined versions.” Faramir covers my hands with his, stroking them gently.

“Let us hope then for lasting peace, that none may fall in battle in our lifetime,” he says.

“Do you think that will come to pass?” I ask. He shakes his head sadly.

“Alas, no, my love. For I fear that both the Easterlings and Haradrim may seek to test Gondor's strength not many years from now, not to mention the threat of civil war fomented within the provinces to the south of Anduin. But let us not dwell on it before it happens, save insofar as it helps us to prepare and thus to husband our troops wisely.”

The harpists and bards sing their songs, Éomer gives a Eulogy to Théoden, and praises all the Rohirrim who fell in battle. And then, mourning rites completed, he invites Faramir and me to step forward. He proclaims to the assembled hosts that Faramir has asked for my hand in marriage, and I have granted it full willing. Once more, I find that the world within the Golden Hall has taken on a gauzy, dream-like quality. But this time it is freed from the air of menace it once held for me. The world contracts to a point somewhere between the two of us, with all our consciousness focussed there. I know, rather than feel, the presence of the gathered host. As our union is blessed, all I can see
are Faramir's eyes gazing at me.

Faramir plights his troth to me, his voice ringing round the hall. He has devoted much effort to practising the Rohirric words, and they are clear, but carry an exotic, foreign accent, its uniqueness both charming and thrilling, a sound which belongs to me alone. I feel as though I am wrapped in his arms as I listen to his deep, rich voice speaking the words that our people have used for years beyond counting. “Eowyn, I plight my troth to you. I shall be yours to the end of the world. I offer you succour, my strength, my protection. I shall share all that I have with you, and my love shall be for you and you only. May our union be blessed with children, a warm hearth and faithful friendship.” Then he looks at me as if he can see into my soul. His next words take me completely by surprise. “You are my shield sister, my comrade in arms. I shall place my life in your hands, and I shall defend your life with all my strength, to the death if needs be.” He has added to the familiar marriage vows an extra promise: the promise that one soldier makes to another on taking him as his blood brother.

My breath catches, and for a moment I cannot speak. Then, taking a deep breath, and looking into his face, more dear to me than any other, I repeat the words back to him. My voice almost falters as I get to the warrior's vow, but I find strength in his trust for me, and in the knowledge that I too would lay down my life for him.

Then the Bard wraps a thin ribbon round our joined hands, and proclaims:

“See, oh children of the Riddermark, the union of Faramir, son of Denethor, and Éowyn, daughter of Éomund. Let their union be long and fruitful, as the fields of the Mark bear fruit for their people, let them offer one another strength and succour in times of darkness, as the house of Eorl protects its people, and let them offer one another joy and companionship in times of light.”

As he utters the blessing, I realise we have already warmed each other in the dark of the night, kept each other safe from danger. But it seems a deeper thing to know that we will do this until death sunders us. Listening to him speak of the fruits of our fields, I think of the gardens we will establish in Ithilien, clearing it of the darkness that haunted those woods and bringing new life to them. And as my thoughts also turn to the fruits of our bodies, I feel a fluttering low within my stomach and wonder if we have already sewn seeds to bear fruit. Above all, I know without doubt that we will love each other to the end of our life together, love each other until death sunders us, and that the echoes of our love will linger to the end of all things.

~o~O~o~

I stretch my limbs out languorously. The angle of the bright shaft of sunlight coming through the window tells me it is already late morning. The bed is warm, and Faramir's body beside me warmer still. He too stirs, rolling onto his side to follow me across the bed, wrapping his arm around my waist, giving a soft, contented murmur as he does so. It is several hours since my brother, Imrahil and Elfhelm appeared briefly to bear witness to our marriage. Once they had retired, Faramir dropped the bar across the door and returned to bed. I smile at the memory – his weight on top of me, our motions slow, deliberate, heat building gradually, freedom from fear of discovery giving us time for a passion which gathered with an intensity I had not known possible. The act was at one time deeply familiar and yet changed utterly, for now we belonged to each other, not just in the sight of each other, but in the sight of our kin. I am brought back to the present by the touch of Faramir's lips on my shoulder. I turn within his grasp so that I can face him, raising my hand to brush his cheek and jaw. He moves closer and kisses me.

“What hour do you think it is?” he asks.
“I have lost track of time. But I think it is late, for the sun is high in the sky,” I reply.

“Do you suppose anyone will miss our presence?”

“They may well miss our presence, but they will not be surprised, I think.” I kiss him, then add, “But I am starting to feel hungry.”

Faramir laughs. “My Lady, that will not do. We must find food so that you can keep your strength up. I should hate you to faint from hunger, especially after such great exertions.” I find myself smiling at his words, then roll on top of him, framing his face between my hands. He turns his head first to kiss my fingertips, then to take them into his mouth, one arm sliding round my waist and the other round my shoulder. I raise my eyebrows in surprise.

“Again, my Lord? Surely not?”

I am rewarded with another chuckle. “Nay, I think not... At least not until I too have had some sustenance...”

I kiss his cheek. “So you sought to cover your own need for sustenance under a veil of concern for my weakness. A knavish ploy.” To emphasise my point I shift my hips against him.

“Oh, but you hit hard, my Lady. I can promise, however, that by this evening, I shall return to the field reinvigorated.” His hands slide down to my buttocks, but it is an affectionate, teasing gesture rather than an invitation to renewed passion. I lay my face in the hollow between his shoulder and neck. If I could purr, I would.

~o~O~o~

The next few days settle into a very pleasant pattern. We ride out together in the day, and dine with my brother and our comrades in the evening. And there is an enormous delight in being able to share a bed openly, and wake at our leisure in the mornings. Somehow the companionship of Faramir's presence as we sleep, and the simple pleasure of lying together undisturbed as the morning light filters through the window means even more to me than the physical act of love. Ah, but perhaps I do not tell the whole truth: I would be lying were I not to admit that I take great pleasure in the physical act.

One of the destinations for our excursions during the day is the village where Cynefrid lives, for I have come to trust and rely on him enormously, and Faramir formed a very favourable impression of him during their conversations in Gondor. But I have also discussed another reason for calling on the Rider, and I have a motive beyond the merely sociable for our visit. We come to a halt outside his cottage and dismount. Both Cynefrid and Hereswið seem pleased to see us, and invite us in. Hereswið has just baked a tray of bread cakes, and offers them to us along with some sausage. We exchange pleasantries. Cynefrid, having met Faramir before in Minas Tirith, is comfortable, but Hereswið seems a little overawed. I suspect that the situation is not helped by the fact that she speaks only the most basic Westron. However, as always, Faramir's way with people seems to take effect, and she soon seems to relax. Eventually I find the courage to broach the subject which is the reason for my visit.

“Cynefrid, you and I have ridden the length and breadth of the Mark together, and I have the utmost trust in your abilities and good judgement. I was wondering whether you would consider coming to Ithilien with me as my sergeant at arms? And whether you, Hereswið, would consider becoming our housekeeper?”

Cynefrid beams from ear to ear. “I would be delighted, my lady,” he says immediately.
Hereswið, on the other hand, does not speak, and as the silence stretches out, it becomes apparent that she is not as taken with the idea as her husband.

“Hereswið?” I say eventually. “What say you? I do not need an answer immediately, you can think about it for a day or two if needs be. But please ask me about anything that is troubling you.”

Faramir and Cynefrid exchange a glance. “My lord, could I interest you in looking round our small holding while the women talk about the running of households?” the Rohir says, with a wry smile. The two of them excuse themselves, then head out through the door, leaving me to talk to Hereswið.

“I'm sorry, I feel as though I have sprung this on you without warning. But I couldn't think of any way to broach the subject other than by coming straight out with the request,” I say.

Hereswið is obviously relieved to be able to speak Rohirric once more. She looks at me, and says sadly, “Cynefrid's pleased as punch by your offer, I can see that. But I'm not sure I'd manage. I don't really speak much Common, and I'm not sure in any case it's what folk speak in the south. And I'm not a housekeeper, not for a great house at any rate. I run my own household well enough, but a big house... No, I don't think I could do that. Not order the other servants around. And I'm not lettered – how could I keep the household accounts without knowing my letters?” She shakes her head. “But Cynefrid... well, he's right chuffed at the thought. And it would break my heart to deny him an opportunity like this.”

I pause for a moment or two to think. “I'm sorry, Hereswið. Maybe I shouldn't have asked. I simply assumed that because I was offering Cynefrid a position as sergeant at arms, I should offer you something too.”

“I could come and do what I've always done, keep his house for him, work the small holding while he's gone and look after our children.”

I find myself smiling. “That sounds to me as though it's enough work for anyone.”

“What you should do, my lady, is ask the chief housekeeper in the Golden Hall who she'd recommend. I'd bet she has at least one woman working under her who she'd trust, but who isn't likely to get much chance of advancement if she stays in Edoras.”

“You know, you're a shrewd woman, Hereswið. I'll respect your decision, but I still think you'd make a good job of any task you put your mind to,” I reply. “But I'll leave you and Cynefrid to have a couple of days to talk about what you want to do. I know that my brother will always have his eye on a good Rider like your husband should you stay here, and I'll understand if you don't want to uproot yourselves and move to a foreign land.”

With that we turn to more general topics of conversation. After chatting about the children, Hereswið says, “Cynefrid told me that it was a good send-off for the old King. And he said your wedding went off as nice as anything. I thought you were going to wait till you went to the Southland before you wed, though.”

“Ah, it's a funny business, dealing with two countries and two traditions at once,” I laugh. “As far as any of the Rohirrim are concerned, our handfasting the other night was our wedding. But to most of the Gondorians, it's a betrothal and we won't be married till two months time, in Minas Tirith.”

Hereswið starts to gather the dishes together ready to clean them while she contemplates this strange mismatch of cultures. Then she raises an eyebrow and says with a twinkle, “So long as you're getting your fairin', my lady.”
I giggle at the familiar country euphemism, then deciding that if Cynefrid is as open with his wife as I suspect, I have no reputation left to preserve anyway, I say, “I've been getting that for a long time, and plenty of it.” Hereswið roars with laughter.

“Aye, well, I've eyes in my head,” she chuckles. “You've got yourself a very handsome man, and those court clothes don't cover the fact that he's well put together too. If I were you, well, I wouldn't kick him out of bed for farting.” She takes the dishes over to the bucket by the door, then turns back to me. “More to the point, have the pair of you rowed yet?”

This seems to me like a very puzzling non-sequitur, and I say as much.

“Nay, my lady, for a couple who're young and healthy, getting your fairin's the easy part. But have you learned yet how to fall out and make up? And I don't just mean shout, then cry, then...” She pauses for a heartbeat, as if not sure how I'll react to her next words, “Fuck till you forget what it was you were upset about in the first place. I mean what you have to learn how to do is shout, then cure whatever it was upset you. Because that's the knack to a happy marriage.”

I feel strangely embarrassed to admit that we have not actually fallen out with each other as yet, then feel oddly unsettled to be feeling embarrassed (doubly so given that I was not in the least taken aback by Hereswið's earlier bawdy comments). Somehow, it is that last comment which gives me food for thought on our return ride, though when I tell Faramir the gist of our conversation, he seems simply amused by it all.

~o~O~o~

It is drawing close to the day of Faramir's departure, and we have spent the day riding together, before returning to Edoras to find the servants had readied hot water for us. Somehow, what was meant to be a merely utilitarian opportunity to scrub away the day's grime and sweat turned into rather more. I do not regret for one moment the sensations: bare, wet skin against wet skin, scented oils making our bodies slippery to the touch, hot water lapping round us, tangled, entwined limbs, breath ghosting across damp skin bringing a shiver to contrast with the heat, fingers exploring, the feel of lips, of teeth. But now Faramir and I survey the results. The only word that comes close in my mind is “chaos”. The floor looks as though the great wave of Numenor has inundated the bedchamber. I have a bruise on my elbow, and Faramir a scraped knee.

“When we build a house in Emyn Arnen, we must make sure it has a bigger bath tub,” Faramir says thoughtfully. I burst out laughing, and he captures me, wrapping me in a towel and carrying me across the indoor lake in miniature, before setting me down on the rug in front of the fire. He sits behind me, cradling me between his legs, and I rest my arms on his knees. With his long, deft fingers, he starts to tease out the tangles in my hair. There is something so incredibly comforting, to sit here enfolded in his warmth, cared for. I would never have thought to have a man attend to my hair, and his ministrations are as far from those of a lady's maid as I can imagine. But I find that it is the loveliest feeling imaginable. Idly, I run my fingers up his shin, stroking the dark hair on his skin. I feel a wave of companionship, of deep affection. I love him so much. It is an constant, ever-present feeling of fullness within me. And I feel it returned, and bask in it as I would in the rays of the sun on a hot summer's afternoon. Gently he works his fingers through my hair, spreading the strands out, helping them to dry in the warmth from the fire. Suddenly I think back to our troth plighting.

“You sound so different when you speak Rohirric,” I say.

“Different?” he asks, sounding curious. “How so?”
“Your accent. I don't notice it when we speak the Common Tongue, but in my language your voice sounds...” I struggle to find the right words.

“Ridiculous?” Faramir says with a laugh.

“Quite the reverse. Soft. Less guttural than a native. Like the south, somehow, full of the sun.” I give him a sidelong glance. “Seductive.”

He bends his neck and trails his lips across my bare shoulder, his stubble brushing my skin. “My beloved,” he murmurs in Rohirric. “My heart, my only love.”

I shut my eyes and let my head fall back against him. Before I lose myself completely, I manage to speak. “You have been working on your vocabulary, my lord. Who have you though to ask for such phrases?”

Faramir eyes me with a speculative look, as if weighing up my likely reaction, then says, “Well, at first Cynefrid and I talked about the recent farrowing of his rather fine sow – but then when that topic of conversation flagged, I thought I would ask him about more practical matters...”

“You, you, you...” I splutter with indignation, turning within his grasp so that I am facing him. I switch to my own language: “You dung splattered, three-legged donkey.”

Faramir raises his eyebrows. “Should I ask Cynefrid for a translation of that?” Then I start to laugh, and Faramir catches me in his arms. His lips meet mine in a lingering kiss, one hand running down my spine, the other enfolding my breast as the towel slips away.

“Ic lufie ðē, Éowyn, min heorte.” His words are as soft, as warm, as seductive as his hands, and I sink into their embrace.

Chapter End Notes

“Fairin” - Old Scots for “proper food”, and used (again in the Merry Muses) as a euphemism for sex: “Oh gie the lass her fairin lad/ Oh gie the lass her fairin,/ An' something else she'll gie to you/ That's waly worth the wearin./ Syne coup her o'er amang the creels/ When ye hae taen your brandy./ The mair she bangs the less she squeels,/ An' hey for houghmagandie.” (Waly – well, coup – tumble, creels – lobster pots, houghmagandie – copulation).

Ic lufie ðē, Éowyn, min heorte – Old English: “I love you, Éowyn, my heart.”
With Faramir's departure, my life returns to the familiar pattern of alternating forays around the Mark interspersed with time at Edoras. However, it seems to me that I feel Faramir's absence even more keenly than before. We settled so quickly into a shared life and his leaving feels like an open wound. The only salve is provided by his letters. I open the latest one with almost indecent haste, and its first line makes me smile with happiness, even as at the same time I feel my eyes become wet with tears from the pain of missing him.

Éowyn, my dearest wife,

I cannot convey with words how much I miss you. I fall asleep every night imagining the scent of your hair, the feel of it against my cheek, the warmth of your body against mine. And I wake up each morning feeling an aching emptiness – I want to wrap my arms around your waist and pull you close, but you are not there.

I spent the first week after my return in Emyn Arnen. The rebuilding of our house continues apace. I hope that you will like it – I think you will. I found myself walking round imagining you by my side, trying to picture your reaction, asking you questions in my mind as to how things should be done (and not just in my mind: I am sure that more than one stonemason or carpenter now doubts my sanity, having overheard me apparently talking to myself). As well as seeing to the state of the house, I also followed up on your suggestion. When I went to see Borlas and Nimwen and their foster parents, I made arrangements for them to come to Minas Tirith for our wedding (should that be our second wedding?) But I also told them of your invitation to arrive a few days early so that I could introduce them to you, and you could get to know them. I hope that you are right, and that if the children take to you (as I am sure they will) that they may come to visit our household from time to time.

But now I and my Rangers are heading for Anorien. I am taking advantage of our passage through the White City to send this letter to you by messenger. It seems so frustrating to think that I will be but a handful of leagues from the border of Rohan, yet unable to see you. However, if the intelligence we have about the situation there is correct, I dare say I will be too busy to dwell much on that when we arrive. It is probably as well that I have to go and make myself useful. I might otherwise fall into a decline, sitting uselessly in the garden and quoting poetry. (I am trying to picture your smile as you read this sentence: were I within reach, I am sure I would be subject to an assault of some kind, most likely involving you tickling my ribs, which seems rather a favourite of yours. Thank the stars I have the advantage in both reach and weight.)

I spend a great deal of time thinking of you. You teased me one day in Edoras, asking me what I thought the first night you came to my room, and when you asked, I demurred and hedged around the subject, feeling strangely embarrassed. But I have been spending a lot of time of late thinking of that night (and of the others that followed) and perhaps I should give you my account. When you arrived, I was deep in slumber, and to be honest, for several moments after you appeared, I was fuddled by sleep, but mostly struck by how upset you were, and by an enormous desire to comfort you and ease your pain and cares away. But when you asked to get into the warmth, I nearly panicked, for suddenly I realised that much as I wanted to comfort you, I now had the prospect of a very beautiful, very desirable woman whom I had come to love dearly, in my bed and in my arms, clad only in her shift. And immediately a battle commenced between my head, which kept telling me to take pity on your grief and fear, and offer you nothing more than the most chaste of embraces, and my groin, which told quite another tale. For a while, my head seemed to be winning. So long as I tried to think only of how soft and gentle you felt within my arms, I could just about ignore the fires
elsewhere. But then you ran your hand across my chest, and kissed me there, and all of a sudden the battle was recommenced, vainly fought and lost utterly, all in the space of a single heartbeat.

Even so, as I kissed you for the first time, I tried to hold back. But then I realised you must feel my arousal against you – how could you not? And I was mortified. Surely you would leap out of bed at my base advances and spurn me forever more. So I was astonished when you seemed not only to welcome my advances, but to return them with interest, pushing yourself against me. And beyond that point I became incapable of thought – all my senses were aflame, and I desired you more than anything that Ilúvatar created since the first days of Arda. I remember the taste of your mouth as our tongues met, the heat of your body, the soft fullness of your breasts, the silk of your skin as I lifted your shift. And then feeling the swell of your mound with its curls of hair soft against my hand as I moved the fabric up to your waist. Sweet Elbereth – just the memory undoes me. And I remember the urgency with which you tried to undo my braies, your breath hot against my neck, and the feeling that I might explode at any moment,... and then your scream when somehow, one or other of us moved wrongly and jolted your injured arm. And suddenly I came to my senses, and started to think once more of the dishonour (as I still construed it) that I had been on the verge of inflicting upon you. And then your marvellous dressing down – never has a captain left a young recruit so firmly put in his place. You have since told me that you spent half the night awake feeling guilt at having so taken advantage of my love for you. I on the other hand spent that half night kicking myself for an opportunity lost, and vowing that should the opportunity ever present itself again, I would not be such a bloody fool. At least I had the sense simply to create another opportunity the next night, and to my dying day I shall remember your beauty as you knelt on the bed before me and I lifted your shift over your head, and the glory of being enveloped within you for the first time. Min leof, min heorte.

And having written this, I now long to hold you in my arms once more, to take you to the warmth of our bed. I wish never to be separated from you again.

With all my love,
Your husband, Faramir.

For a long time I sit holding the letter, staring into the fire as the yellow flames die down and the logs glow red. How well I remember both those nights. But the memory I cherish most is the memory of Faramir's smile after we lay together. He writes that he desired me more than anything else Ilúvatar had ever created, but I knew this already – his smile told me that. I ache with the need to draw his head against my breast and hold him there.

~o~O~o~

It is now three weeks after he left, and a mere five weeks before I set off on my journey to Minas Tirith, and once more I set out with Cynefrid and my small group of Riders, this time to look to the lands where the West Emnet borders Anorien.

It feels like a repeat of our experience in the Eastfold, except that this time we are too late. The hamlet contains about 4 houses. In the space between them two men and a woman lie dead. A third man lies with a wound across his belly – past experience makes me think he will not last much beyond tomorrow nightfall. An old woman tends to him. A small group of children hide in the doorway of one of the houses. Behind the outhouse of one of the cottages, I come across another woman clutching her ripped dress across her. She blenches when she sees me approach, but stands her ground, back to the wall, sheltering a slighter figure behind her. At first she seems terrified; it is only when I take off my helm and she realises I too am a woman that she slumps to the ground and starts to shake, tears coursing down her face. The figure behind her is revealed as a girl of about twelve or thirteen, her dress also ripped. I turn my gaze away quickly, in part for the sake of their
dignity: there is no need for me to add to their humiliation. But I also wish to avoid the details: I have nightmares aplenty already. Even so I don't look away quite quickly enough to avoid registering the streak of blood down the young girl's thigh. I shut my eyes tight, screwing them against the sight, willing the details away.

I feel bile rise in my throat. But the nausea is quickly overtaken by rage, burning, pulsing, overwhelming bloodlust. From the fact that there are any survivors at all, I guess that this is the work of men, not of orcs. And I am filled with a desire to meet with them in battle, to ride them down into the ground, to rend their flesh with my sword, watch as their guts spill upon the ground and their blood courses into the earth. Hot blood runs in my family. My brother has run berserk in the past; in this moment I realise, as if through a haze, that I too am my father's daughter. But the forefront of my mind is filled simply with fury. I shall find the men who did this, and I will strike their heads from their shoulders. I stride back to the space in front of the houses, and yell for Cynefrid.

“This was done bandits, not orcs. Have a tracker see where their trail leads.”

“My lady, we don't know the size of their force, but talking to the villagers who are left, it was quite considerable.” It seems that Cynefrid has not wasted any time piecing the story together. “And they've headed into the woods: no country for cavalry. We should send a message to Edoras, get your brother to send a full Eored to flush the woods properly and find out where the bandits are hiding.”

“We follow them while the trail is fresh,” I snap back at him.

“While your anger is hot, you mean,” Cynefrid replies, his voice tight but controlled. “You're not thinking straight, Ma'am. My advice is to wait for reinforcements and some decent foot soldiers.”

I stare at him, feeling the anger roiling in my stomach, my fists balled, shaking. “And my advice is for you to follow orders, Sergeant.”

I stare him in the face, and his gaze meets mine, unflinching. His blue eyes are flinty, narrowing, his jaw set, lips a thin line. The tension between us stretches like a steel band until eventually Cynefrid speaks. “As you wish, my lady.” His tone makes it sound as though he has spat on the floor at my feet. I am about to say something when he turns on his heel, shoulders rigid, and starts to bark orders to the troops.

Redwald, a man nearing his forties, is the best tracker among the troops. He isn't as fast or as strong in combat as he once was, but he has half a lifetime's experience behind him. He goes on foot at the front of the column, Edric leading his horse along side his own. The track is narrow and overgrown. Low branches whip at our faces, and the horses have to pick their way through brambles.

“Ma'am, if one of the horses gets a bad thorn, they'll be lasting lame for a week or more,” says Cynefrid. I glare at him. The deeper we penetrate into the mirk of the woods, the more my sense of foreboding grows. But my anger has not cooled. A faint suspicion flits across my mind: perhaps I may be wrong and Cynefrid right. I batter this suspicion down – its presence only adds to fuel to the heat of my wrath. Try as I might, I cannot shake the image of the woman and the teenage girl. And in the shadows between the trees, my waking nightmares supply another figure: the half-formed image of Wormtongue stalks us, mocking me, as if to say “I would have had you... and you could have done nothing... and those like me have had those women in the village.” My mind starts to supply a litany of the Worm's words, hideous, unrepeatable words, filled with vile filth... “Whore... bitch... take my fill of your snatch... fuck you till you bleed... take you up the arse...” He used to whisper these things, only just loud enough for me to half-hear, knowing I couldn't say anything, wouldn't be believed, for who would believe the King's counsellor would say such things about the King's niece? He whispered so quietly I could not even be sure of what he had said; part of his
malice was to make me doubt the evidence of my own ears. And worst of all, his words did not even speak of desire, only of hatred, hatred of me, of all women.

I am drawn out of my waking nightmare when Redwald stops, holding his hand in the air. I edge Windfola past the other horses and make my way to the head of the column.

“Looks like the group split into two here,” Redwald says. “One party went down hill, the other continued to contour round.”

I gesture to Cynefrid to join me. “Take Osred and your half of the troop and follow the level path. I'll take Redwald, Edric and the others and head down hill.”

“My Lady, please reconsider,” Cynefrid says. He seems more accepting now, though the set of his jaw seems at odds with his calmer tone of voice, and I wonder if the acceptance is only a thin veneer. He takes a deep breath, then says, his voice artificially level, “We are already at risk: this is no terrain for horsemen, and if we split our force we only increase the risk.”

“If we wait, we will never catch up with them. They will disappear like morning mist into the trees and those people back in the village will never see justice.” With a few hand signals, I take my half of the Riders off and we follow Redwald down the narrow path. This time, Edric follows close behind me. I suspect Cynefrid may have told him to keep an eye on me. The thought makes me grit my teeth: another man who thinks I need a nursemaid.

The ground is rocky and uneven beneath the horses' hooves. Worse, the brambles and ferns obscure all manner of obstacles – small stones, fallen logs, rabbit holes. Our progress is tortuous. After a furlong or so, the path opens out into a clearing with scrub and bushes. The path curves round a low outcrop of rocks, wending its way out of sight. I nudge my heels gently against Windfola's flanks and he starts to move forward, but Redwald reaches a hand to stay our progress, holding the bridle.

“Lady Eowyn, have a care. I fear an ambush,” he whispers.

By Windfola's flank, Edric's mount stirs as he brings it closer to me. “Then it makes sense for one Rider to flush them out rather than putting the whole column at risk,” Edric says. I see a glitter in his eyes, and all at once I realise he means to ride past me. His face shines with youthful folly and the desire for glory.

“No, Edric,” I say. My rage suddenly evaporates as I realise my stupidity has infected my troops. Only the older, steadier Riders, Cynefrid and Redwald, have shown any sense. But, anger draining from me, my voice lacks the force it had moments earlier.

“You said yourself, Ma'lam, it's the only way of getting justice for the villagers,” Edric says. Then he spurs his horse and sets off at a canter down the path. He hasn't gone more than a dozen or so strides when I hear the twang of a bow. The first arrow goes wide, but I watch, rooted to the spot, as the second finds its mark, finding the gap in his armour between the pauldron and side of the backplate, lodging between his ribs. Edric tumbles from his horse into the bracken. He lies completely motionless, a thin trickle of blood running from the corner of his mouth, eyes wide open, staring sightlessly at the sky. For the space of several heartbeats, I am frozen. But then the world collapses around us. A volley of arrows rains down from one side.

“Take cover behind the rocks and regroup.” We canter down the path, shields held high to try to block the fusillade. My mind races, but without purpose. A hundred thoughts assail me. How many foes do we face? Where are they hidden? Are there only the archers, or is there a main force, seeking to outflank us? Do the rocks offer safety or are we being driven into a trap? I feel helpless, totally out of my depth. My heart races, my mouth is dry with fear. How many more men will I lose through my stupidity? Then I curse myself for losing my focus by wasting thoughts
on what is already done. Arrows sing through the air, one passing near to my head. I see others skitter off the armour of the Riders around me. Against the odds we make it to the rocks with nothing worse than an arrow in one Rider's thigh and another in the haunch of one of the horses.

But now one of my fears seems about to be realised – from between the trees above us, on the other side from the archers, I see men with spears heading down towards us. They have the advantage of the higher ground. They are obviously not completely without discipline or tactical nous. They do not throw themselves pell-mell down the hill. Instead, they approach cautiously, making use of the ground cover. There are far too many boulders amid the gorse bushes on the steep slope for our horses to give us any advantage. Instead, I give the order to dismount, realising as I do so that this cuts our numbers by a third, for five of my force have to be left to hold the horses. I wonder what has become of Cynefrid. In his absence I gesture to Redwald to come close, then whisper to him.

“What do you think – wait for them to come to us, or go up the slope to meet them?”

“If we can use the scrub to cover us, I say go up the hill a bit. Too easy to be forced back against the rocks here, with no room for manoeuvre. But send Osred up into the rocks with his bow – we could do with some covering fire.”

I signal to Osred, and he starts to scramble up a narrow gully, making for a platform where a prow of rock makes a natural battlement from which he can fire on the enemy from behind cover. Then the eight of us who are left start to crawl through the bushes, swords drawn and ready. The day is hot and humid, thunder clouds building in the hills above us, and within moments I start to sweat and my heart pounds. Beads of sweat trickle from under my helmet and into my eyes, stinging. I try to make out movement or sound higher up the hill, but the sounds are covered by our own advance, and try as I might, I can see nothing in the trees above from my place deep amidst the bracken and gorse. The thorns of the gorse catch on my mail, making forward progress even more of an effort. And at the back of my mind (and causing prickles on the back of my neck) is a constant worry: where are their archers now?

Suddenly an arrow sings over my head. Without conscious thought, I know from its direction that it is one of Osred’s. There is a low groan up and to my left. Realising they have lost the element of surprise, the spearmen break cover. One rises from a gorse bush only feet away from me, and lunges down hill, unleashing his spear as his momentum carries him down on me. At the last moment, I roll sideways, pushing myself up with one hand. As I do so, his spear pierces the air where I lay only a heartbeat earlier. It slams into the ground. I use the moment while the man struggles to pull the shaft back to jab with my sword. A short jab, not a swing: I don’t want to expose my flank with the follow through – not when his reach combined with the length of the spear puts me at a disadvantage. He manages to shimmy to one side and I only graze his left arm. Now he has the spear back in his grip, ready to strike if I offer an opening. He can attack from further back, but is limited to thrusts with the spear. I can only work from much closer quarters if I can get under his guard. But I can cut and slash as well as jab. We circle slowly, trying to take the measure of each other, probing for weaknesses, waiting for lapse in concentration.

He jabs towards me once more, and I twist sideways to avoid the point. As I do so, I thrust with my sword. I manage a slice across his hip, drawing first blood, and pull my sword back just in time to block a second jab from his spear, swiping the shaft to the side. He shifts his grip on the spear, wielding it like a quarterstaff, and tries to swing the end into my jaw. He is fast, almost too fast, and I duck just in time. My movement unsights me for a moment, and he takes advantage to elbow me in the gut. I stagger back, gasping for breath, only just managing to keep my guard up. He uses the slope to bear down on me once more, jagged point making contact with my breastplate. As the spear slides off, I grasp the shaft and pull him in close, slicing at him and catching his arm. This time I inflict more serious damage, for though he manages to wrench the spear back, I see him wince as he
tries to shift his grip again. We circle round once more, and this time I slash at his feet. He tries to
dance back out of range, but turns his ankle. As he falls, I stab at his gut, feeling the point of my
sword drive home. But this leaves me unguarded, and I feel a sharp stinging pain as the serrated edge
of his spear point catches me between the vambrace and mail shirt. I leap back, holding my blade in
front of me to parry any further assault. But he lies prone on the ground, and I back away cautiously,
trying to watch him, yet alive to the possibility of his comrades coming at me from my flank. Once
out of range, I glance at my arm. It stings like burning fire, but the cut is superficial. Watching him
out the corner of my eye, I scan the rest of the slope for further attackers.

All of my eight Riders are beset by bandits, and we are clearly outnumbered. I can see a breakaway
group of the outlaws trying to creep round our flank to attack the troops I have left in the shelter of
the rocks with the horses. Although Osred is doing his best to hold them off with arrows, they are
making good use of the boulders and cover, and moving inexorably closer. A mere ten paces or so
up slope from me, Aelfred, one of my more experienced Riders, is in close combat with two at once,
and I start to struggle towards him, in the hope of tipping the odds in his favour. But as I get almost
within range, one of them forces him to parry a spear thrust, and the other shoves a knife into his
exposed side. With a roar of pain, Aelfred swings the blade back, catching the knife man across the
stomach. It is a fatal stroke, but too late; the other thrusts home his spear, catching my Rider in the
neck, his blood surging through the wound in pulses as he drops to the ground. The spear wielder
sees me, and starts down the slope. From the bushes to his left, a second enemy comes towards me,
and now I find myself where Aelfred was moments earlier, facing two enemies at once.

“Fuck.” The word comes unbidden, hissed under my breath. I am tactically out of my depth,
watching my men get killed through my stupidity. How did I let it come to this? We are going to die
here in this blasted wood. No terrain for cavalry. Why the fuck didn't I listen to Cynefrid? The spear
man and his friend with the knife come at me slowly, one from either side. They are lining
themselves up, planning for one of them to draw a rash stroke from me, giving space for the other to
strike. I try to watch both at once, aware that within another step, they will have me positioned such
that as I look at one, the other is in my blind spot. I try to retreat backwards, aware of how
treachorous the steep ground is. There are tangled thorn bushes and gorse, with rocks and rabbit
holes hidden beneath. Then, to my astonishment, the man with the knife suddenly pitches forward,
landing at my feet, a green-fletched arrow in his back. It is not Osred's; it has come from the opposite
direction, up hill, somewhere between the trees.

In my surprise, I almost miss the movement Aelfred's killer makes. His spear held at neck height
once more, he thrusts forward. I move just in time for the blow to hit the pauldron on my right
shoulder. The force almost spins me round; I twist painfully, wrenching my back, but manage to
bring my sword up in a block. A chaotic exchange of jabs and blows, parries and counter strokes
ensues, all carried out under a rain of arrows. Somehow, in the midst of it, I land a blow sufficient to
disable my attacker and send him to the ground. For a moment he manages to bring the shaft of his
spear up to block the slice of my blade, but I pull my sword back then jab the point into his exposed
throat. He makes a rattling, rasping noise as blood gurgles and spurts from the wound, his life ebbing
from him.

The rest of the bandits, realising that the arrival of the mystery archers has tipped the balance in our
favour, melt back into the woods, and almost as suddenly as it began, the skirmish is over. From the
trees above me, a loud voice calls out in the Common Tongue.

“What business have the Riders of Rohan got, carrying battle across the border and into the territories
of Gondor?” The tone is challenging, angry even. “Under whose command do you ride?”

As a gesture of good faith, I lower my sword, but do not yet sheath it. “I am in command. I am
Éowyn, daughter of Éomund, sister of the King. These bandits attacked and killed unarmed villagers.
We pursued them, not realising we had crossed into Anorien.”

I hear the sound of voices speaking Sindarin. These are Dunedain, not ordinary footsoldiers of Gondor. A man, cloaked and hooded in dark green, steps forward into the clearing.

“Hail, White Lady of Rohan. I am Damrod of Gondor, soldier in the service of Elessar Telcontar, the King. I must ask you to accompany us. Our captain will decide what is to be done. You may take the time to see to the bodies of your dead. But we do not have time for them to be buried where they have fallen – you must transport them.”

I gather the remainder of my troops. We lift the bodies of Aelfred and Edric, and lash them over the saddles of their horses. There are a couple of serious injuries, which we tend as best we can before setting off. Damrod sends two scouts ahead, presumably to warn comrades elsewhere in the woods of our discovery. The remaining Gondorians split themselves, half leading the way along the path, the other half following behind our horses which walk in file along the narrow path. In the rearguard, I notice soldiers taking it in turns to carry a rough bier fashioned from branches on which lies one of their comrades, the wound in his leg bound tight. The man who addressed me walks beside my bridle. As we make our way through the wood, the shadows around us become darker as the sky above turns the colour of slate. The clouds which had been forming high in the mountains now fill the lower valley, and the air around us is heavy and seems to crackle with tension. A few heavy drops of rain splatter my armour, presaging the downpour to come. For a few minutes all is quiet, then the rain begins to fall in earnest, hissing and rattling upon the leaves above, penetrating the canopy in rivulets.

We ride on through the streaming rain. The pattering noise of the droplets gives an even more claustrophobic edge to the woods, the trees crowding in around us. I feel trickles of water penetrate every joint in my armour. My hauberk and the linen garments beneath become first damp, then sodden through. Somehow the physical discomfort, the cramped feeling within my armour, the lowering trees, all this matches my mood. A litany of curses runs through my mind, mostly directed at my own self. I was rash and stupid, I had no thought for tactics or caution in approaching the situation, and I have got two of my men killed, and in all likelihood am responsible for drawing the Gondorians into the fray and causing serious injuries to some of their troops. I damn near got myself killed too. I rail at my own stupidity. I wish I could undo the last couple of hours, start again, make the right decisions. I am furious with myself now. And the rain continues to fall in torrents.

Finally the path opens into a clearing. At one side are a group of horses, their riders standing beside them. I recognise Cynefrid with an enormous sense of relief. Then I think to count them... three here, another two, another, the last pair... all of Cynefrid's men are present and appear unharmed. I scan the rest of the clearing. A group of green clad men stand in the centre, and in the midst of them a tall figure whose stance is familiar to me. I ride forward a few paces then dismount. The tall figure casts back his hood. Faramir stares straight at me, face set in stone, his expression impassive, only his eyes giving away the fury that lies controlled beneath the surface.
Am I yourself, but as it were, in sort or limitation?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Damrod strides towards him and they start to talk rapidly in Sindarin, far too rapidly for me to follow. Every so often Faramir looks at me, then at the bodies tied to the horses and the body of his own injured Ranger. Eventually he walks across the clearing to where I stand.

“Lady Éowyn, this misadventure was ill-conceived.” Faramir's tone is harsh and detached. “Your tactics have cost the lives of two men, incapacitated several others, and scattered the bandits we were tracking to the far-flung reaches of the forest. And had you encountered any captain of Gondor other than myself, your incursion across our borders might not have been so easily overlooked.” Before I can answer, he turns heel and returns to Damrod. I watch as Faramir discusses the next move. Eventually, Damrod comes across to us.

“It is late. It will soon be nightfall. The Captain says you had best accompany us to the town nearby, where we can tend to the wounded and rest your horses overnight.” Damrod's tone of voice indicates that Faramir's instructions are not to be construed as mere suggestion.

We mount our horses. As we cross the clearing, I try to draw my horse level with Cynefrid's. He gives me a stony stare.

“Young Edric... He made it through the Pelennor, he recovered from his wounds, and for what? For fucking what?” Cynefrid spurs his horse and draws ahead of me, and I find myself left alone with my own thoughts.

The rain is not as heavy now, but it falls as a constant drizzle which allows no respite. I think back to the two bandits, moving round me. I came so close to death myself, all for a fit of rage. Was that how my father felt, on that last hot-headed assault? Did he have a moment of lucidity, where the red mist faded and he realised the desperate situation he had got into? I am as hot-headed as he was: I am truly my father's daughter. And the bandits still roam free. We killed a handful of them, but not enough, not nearly enough. The villagers are unavenged, and to their deaths I have added Edric and Aelfred. In the pit of my stomach, anger and shame churn round, feeding off one another. I look through the gathering gloom to the front of the column, where Faramir walks beside Cynefrid and Redwald, deep in conversation. Since his abrupt words to me, he has not so much as glanced back at me.

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We make our way under the low arch into the courtyard of the inn. Stiff in limb and sore of heart, my countrymen and I dismount from our horses. The storm has picked up again, and rain continues to fall in sheets, its grey bleakness matching my mood, turning the packed earth floor of the courtyard to mud. I glance back at the bodies tied to the horses: Edric's unmoving face, too young, far too young for this fate, splattered with blood and dirt, his hair now wet and plastered to his brow. The Rangers stand to the other side of the courtyard, the two groups of men not quite trustful of one another. Where there should be hubbub and noise, there is relative quiet, the sound of horses' hoofs and jingle of harness louder than of men's voices.

The innkeeper indicates a storeroom at the end of the stable block in which we can lay out the dead
until tomorrow morning when we can see enough to raise a decent burial cairn over them. Cynefrid dispatches a couple of men to see to the laying out of the bodies. The rest of the Rohirrim go to stable our horses.

“I have a large room that your men can share, if that is acceptable,” the innkeeper says. He addresses Faramir, partly because he is nearer, and partly (I suspect) because my helmet, visor partially obscuring my face, makes me the more forbidding looking of us at a first glance. “The inn is fairly full. There is only one room for you, Captain. Perhaps you and the Rohir Captain could share?”

“My comrade can have the room,” says Faramir, shortly. The cold anger that seemed to radiate from him on the journey has not abated. “I will bunk down with my men.”

I feel as though he has turned a blade in my guts. Without a word, I turn and duck into the stable to see to Windfola. I am aware, dimly, that he follows me, accompanied by our sergeants, but I cannot face him. His anger is adding to my own. I can feel myself submerging beneath the combination of rage and shame. My rage is ill controlled, directed willy-nilly – at him, at the bandits, at myself for losing men under my command. And though I try not to acknowledge it, nagging away at me is shame at the knowledge that I bear responsibility for making the wrong decision. Between the rage and shame, I feel as though I will explode. Part of me does not care; it just wants to unleash those feelings, without care for anyone in their path. For the time being I struggle to keep my emotions contained, but at a cost. I can feel the tension in my jaw, my teeth grinding. I take my helmet off and lay it to one side, then rapidly take off Windfola's saddle and bridle before rubbing him down. Cynefrid does the same for his mount, but does at least manage to keep up a semblance of polite conversation with Damrod. Having seen to Windfola, I take off my armour and place it carefully next to the horse's stall. Beneath, my leather hauberk and clothes are soaked through, and I shiver.

Faramir finally breaks the silence. “Damrod, see to it that my men are fed.” I am shocked by his lack of acknowledgement of the Rohirrim.

Cynefrid pulls himself together and tries to defuse the situation, or at least ensure that the impending explosion is not witnessed by our troops, and barks a few orders in Rohirric to my men, sending them to the inn for food with the Rangers. Then he and Damrod look from me to Faramir and back. They exchange a wordless glance and make a rapid exit. I try to order my mind, but my thought process is shattered as Faramir slams his hand into the wooden pillar beside him.

“Fuck!” The vehemence and the oath take me by surprise, even though I have been braced for some sort of outburst. Then I find my fists clenching by my sides in reaction at his thunderous expression, but I get no time to say anything. “Morgoth's teeth, Éowyn, what were you thinking? That's no terrain for cavalry. And why the hell didn't you ask Cynefrid for advice?”

“We got separated in the melée. Everything went to shit so fast...” Initially I find myself on the defensive. Possibly this is some last effort to keep my feelings under control, but more likely it is my sense of failure coming to the fore, trying to explain how things had gone so wrong, so badly wrong. But Faramir will not let me finish.

“You should have stayed by his side. You know you don't have the experience...” And now I lose my temper, my rage rising to meet Faramir's.

“What, stay by his side and be nurse-maided? The way Castamir's arse-licking catamite thought I had to be on the Pelennor? Is that what you really think of me?”

“That's not what I'm saying, and you know it,” Faramir answers, his voice sharp as a whip.

“I can handle a sword, in case you hadn't noticed.” Damn him to hell. Why does he always have to
be so rational? I can’t, don’t want to be reasonable. I just want to lash out. But I am not alone in this. For his part, Faramir's anger shows, not just in his face, but in every line of his body, his torso tight as a strung bow.

“Are you wilfully trying to misunderstand me? Of course you can handle a bloody sword. But can you handle not using it, using your head instead? Thinking about how to use your troops instead of rushing headlong into battle?” he snaps back at me.

“So what are you saying? That I got the tactics wrong? That I fucked up?”

Faramir starts to tick off my failings on his fingers. “You knew the Firien wood was no terrain for cavalry, but you went anyway. Cynefrid, who has years of experience, told you not to, but you ignored him. You split your troops in two despite not knowing the numbers of the enemy. You saw that the terrain was perfect for an ambush, but you rode straight into it anyway.”

“So what should I have done? Nothing? Just let the bandits get away? You didn't see the state of that village. You didn't see the bodies, the injured who would die within days, the women raped as if orcs had run amok. There was a girl, hardly more than a child. They'd fucked her till she bled...” By now I am screaming.

“And where, precisely, is your precious revenge? I don't see bandits in chains, their ring-leaders' heads on pikes. All I see is two of your men dead, and several more of your men and my rangers injured, one so badly he will take weeks to recover, assuming infection doesn't set in to his wound.”

He brushes his hair back from his face, in a gesture that is so familiar my guts clench to see it in these circumstances. Then he closes his eyes, turns from me and leans against the stable partition, hand against the wood, resting his forehead against his forearm.

“Do you want me to say it? I got Edric and Aelfred killed. Do you think I don't know that?”

“Yes... ” Faramir seems to lose some of the tension in his shoulders, and his voice no longer sounds so full of fury, only tired. “Yes you got the tactics wrong. Yes, you made the wrong decisions and it led to their deaths. But it wasn't only your doing. Redwald told me Edric broke ranks...”

“But Edric was young and full of the lust for battle. I got him wound up, then he wouldn't listen to me. But it was my cock-up that got them into the situation at all.” I feel some of my anger seep away, replaced by burning shame and an overwhelming sense of exhaustion. Now I turn my back on Faramir and stand, almost in the mirror image of his pose, hands pressed against the wooden wall of the barn, letting my head droop. I try not to let my voice crack. “I let them get killed... I killed them.”

“No.” Faramir's voice is brusque, sharp, but no longer filled with rage. “You weren't the one that drew the bow. You didn't wield the spear.”

“It's true, though. My bad decisions put them on the other end of the arrow, the spear...”

“It is true, but it won't help you. And it's self-indulgent to dwell on it. Listen. Every single officer since the start of warfare has fucked up from time to time. We all of us carry the blood of some of our comrades on our hands. The best you can hope for is to get it right more times than you get it wrong, to save more men than you lead into the wrong situations. You can either sink into self pity, or you can learn from this.”

I rest my forehead against the rough wooden planks, still with my back to him. “But I deserved you being angry: I think it must have been a pretty spectacular fuck-up, more of a mess than most. We both know that I've had no training in tactics. You were right when you said I didn't know what I
was doing, that I should have listened to Cynefrid.” Suddenly I feel his hands on my shoulders. He
speaks again, and now his voice is the one which sounds shaky.

“You think I was angry because you made a tactical error? No. I was angry because when I looked
at the bodies, I saw yours among them. It could so easily have been you. I was nearly beside myself
with fear.” His arms slide round my waist and his bearded cheek comes to rest against my face. “It
wasn't some sort of fit of righteous anger, it was anger because I was scared to death.”

His words transport me back to my childhood memories of the news of the death of my father, after
an ill-considered campaign borne of exactly the sort of rage I have just succumbed to. I remember
that when the messenger came, my mother sank to the ground. Children in the Riddermark encounter
death early on, through war, pestilence, famine. I was young enough that I did not understand the full
enormity, but I knew that my father had gone, and that he would not be coming back. I can see my
childhood self, standing alone, clutching a doll which dangled forgotten by my side as I watched my
mother's tears fall. And I remember Éomer's face, jaw working as he tried not to cry, rubbing his
hand across his eyes and leaving a muddy, dirty streak over his cheek. Then it hits me: in my mind's
eye, I see an adult Éomer, being brought the news of my death. And I imagine the horses being led
into the clearing, with my body tied across the back of Windfola, and Faramir realising what burden
the horse carries.

I lean my weight back against him, and suddenly feel the hot tears well up and slide down my cheek.
I realise we are both shaking. I half turn my head, and his mouth comes hard against mine, almost
hard enough to bruise, our lips parting, hot tongues in each others mouth. I can feel his hands
clutching my body against his, fingers digging into me, his chest against my back. Then, before I
even realise what I am saying, the words are out of my mouth. “Fuck me. Fuck me till I forget...”
And then his hands are on the lacings of my leggings, grasping at the knots, and somehow he forces
them down. Then one of his hands is between my legs, and I feel the knuckles of his other hand
between my arse and his body as he struggles with the laces of his own clothes, then his cock is
there, pressing up against me, and his hands spread my legs apart. I reach behind my head with one
hand and pull his head back, turning my face and kissing him again, open mouthed, hot with need. I
feel him enter me, then I have to put both hands back on the wall to steady myself as he thrusts into
me, burying himself. I press my arse back against him, and he reaches round, hand nesting in the
triangle of hair, fingers searching for the most sensitive part of me. His fingers press against me,
rubbing in time with his thrusts, pulling me onto him, while his other hand grasps my wrist, holding
my hand high above my head. His rhythm is hard and fast and desperate, until we both come
undone, then sink to our knees on the straw. I don't forget, but I find it has taken some of the edge
off.

Finally, as my breathing returns to normal, I slide round till I am cross-ways on his knee, and look
into his face. His eyes are still stormy and dark. “Éowyn, I... Just don't do that again. Ever... Please.”
He pulls me close and kisses me again. I find we are still shaking.

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Later, after we have both dressed, we make our way into the inn. There is a roaring fire in the
common room and the inn keeper brings us each a bowl of mutton stew and a beer. I take mine and
sit next to Cynefrid and Redwald.

“Cynefrid, I'm sorry. I wish I could undo the last few hours. You were right.”

Cynefrid looks at the table. There is a long silence. Eventually he says, “Of course I bloody was. But
that's not going to bring them back, is it?”
I don't know what to say, and prod at my mutton stew with my spoon. Suddenly I remember Edric making stew, spicy and much tastier than this. I find I have lost my appetite, and push the bowl to one side. The silence between us stretches on, thrown into sharp contrast by the casual chatter of the men of Ithilien at the next table.

Finally, Redwald says, “She changed her mind, you know. Realised it was an ambush and told us to pull back. Edric broke ranks saying he was going to try to flush them out.”

“Yeah, well, he shouldn't have bloody been there in the first place. Now, if you'll excuse me, my Lady, I'm off to get some kip.” Cynefrid swings his legs over the bench, picks up his hunk of bread, and stalks out through the door into the yard beyond. I let my head drop onto my hands.

“He'll come round eventually, my Lady,” Redwald says. “That's how it goes. We all know we could lose friends any time... have lost friends... It hurts like hell, but...”

We are interrupted by someone climbing over the bench to take the space vacated by Cynefrid. I turn my head to find Faramir beside me. He nods to Redwald, gives me a small smile, then lifts his tankard to his lips.

“You should eat,” he says. I give him a faint smile in reply, and pick up my spoon once more. He moves his leg against mine, and I find myself relishing the warmth of his body. The contrast between where his skin presses against mine and the rest of my body makes me shiver. “Are you drying out at all?” he asks.

“Not much...”

“Finish your stew and we'll see if we can find a place closer to the fire.” I shovel down the last few mouthfuls, trying not to dwell too much on the texture of the elderly mutton. Then we both climb over the bench. Faramir gets a couple of his rangers to shuffle up the settle beside the fire, and we squeeze in. As I thaw out, I realise how cold and light-headed I felt before. To my surprise, Faramir puts his arm around my shoulders. I half expect ribald comments from the men, but mine are too subdued, and I suspect Faramir's are both too disciplined and hold him in sufficient esteem that they will not comment... at least, not while he is there to hear.

I drop my voice to a whisper. “Are you really going to sleep in the bunkhouse with your men?”

Faramir smiles at me, and murmurs quietly into my ear. “No.”

Between the heat from the fire and the heat from his body, I finally begin to warm up a bit. Not that this makes matters entirely comfortable: I am aware of the itchiness of my woollen garments as they start to dry, and worse than that, an unmistakable sharp smell of sweat that has been left too long. I wrinkle my nose, and Faramir notices.

“No fear, my lady, I doubt that any of us smell too sweet at the moment,” he says, quietly. Then he turns to Damrod, and says in a louder voice, “How big was the group that assailed the Rohirrim?”

“I thought about a dozen archers, placed on a slight ridge on the downhill side of the crags, and another score or so of pikemen coming at them from above.”

“A big group for bandits, and surprisingly well organised,” Faramir responds.

Suddenly, the thought that has been niggling at the back of my mind, forced under the surface by my grief and anger, makes its way back to the foreground of my attention. “I don't understand why they attacked us at all. Why not just fade into the trees? We did not know the terrain, the wood is huge, we would have had no chance of finding them. Even if they outnumbered us, why attack a group of
“Armoured soldiers?”

“A pertinent question, my lady, and one I have been asking myself,” says Faramir.

I continue thinking aloud. “And we are from the Riddermark, not from Gondor. So it would be unlikely we would stay in the area if we did not track and catch them immediately.” Faramir nods. I continue, “Could they have had an encampment hidden nearby which they did not wish us to come upon?”

“A plausible line of thought, but my Rangers have been scouting the area for nigh on a week, and I think we would have found it by now. No, I think that the truth is more complicated. This is one of the areas that did not send troops either to the defence of Minas Tirith or to the march on the Black Gates, and seems to have become quite lawless. I need to get a better feel for the allegiances and rivalries between the local fiefdoms, and assess whether any are turning a blind eye to the banditry, or perhaps even profiting from it.”

Faramir and his seconds-in-command, Anborn and Damrod, fall to discussing the lie of the land and the various fiefdoms and their lords. They piece together an outline of the situation, and I listen fascinated as they work out between them the extent of the knowledge they already possess and the gaps in it, and come up with strategies to fill those gaps. Eventually the conversation reaches a point where they can go no further without more information.

“We need to talk to the local people, and perhaps pay a few visits to some of the lords. Unannounced,” Faramir says.

Damrod smiles and says, “I think I may go and do a little intelligence work right now. I think the landlord may be worth talking to.”

As he stands and stretches, preparatory to going to the other side of the room where the landlord presides over the beer barrel, Anborn chips in. “The landlord or his daughter?”

“Well, whichever one of them can tell us most,” says Damrod. Anborn gives him a lascivious wink.

I lean against Faramir, feeling myself beginning to nod, then give a great yawn.

“Go up to our chamber, my lady, and I will join you in a few moments,” Faramir says. He stands and offers me his hand to help me to my feet.

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I sit heavily on the edge of the bed, a sagging, lumpy mattress of horsehair on a rickety frame. I find I have reached that stage of tiredness where although bed is what I desire most, I cannot make the move to prepare myself. I stare blankly at the dingy wall opposite for some long time, until I hear the latch of the door. Faramir enters, carrying a large jug of steaming water and an earthenware bowl with a wash cloth and a cake of coarse soap.

“You seemed quite uncomfortable earlier... I'm sorry it's not as nice as your bath, nor does the soap compare to the scented oils, but at least you will be able to have a wash. And I too, for I doubt that you wish to share your bed with a smelly Ranger, yet I have no great desire to be held to my rash words earlier and to be sent to sleep with my men.” He gives me a rueful smile. We undress and take turns with the bowl of hot water, scrubbing ourselves as best we can (and as rapidly, for the room is cold) before diving under the covers of the bed.

“Mmm, no bath, no scented oils, no down mattress... Still, at least the company is as good as it was in Edoras. I have missed you, Éowyn.”
I turn my face against his chest and wrap my arms around him, clinging to him.

“How do you feel, Éowyn?” he whispers, softly.

“Tired. And numb. I should feel more... I felt so many things earlier, angry, frightened, torn with sadness when I looked at Edric and Aelfred. But now I just feel numb. Is that strange? Am I some kind of unfeeling monster?”

Faramir strokes my hair. “I do not think that strange at all. There is only so much pain a person can bear before their sensibility can take no more. It is... like a horse refusing a jump, perhaps. Your mind cannot encompass anything more tonight. It was like that for me when I first discovered the full tale of my father's death. The pain was enormous, unbearable at first, then... nothing. Then after a few days, the pain came back, but a drop at a time, in more bearable amounts.”

“It's still there, isn't it?”

“It will be there for a long time. But it is balanced by the good things in life. By you.”

“And yet today, I have brought you enormous pain. And killed two of my men.” I find hot tears pricking my eyes, starting to flow once more.

Faramir makes soft shushing noises into my hair. “Pain and fear, yes, because I love you. You didn't kill them, though. Your decisions were wrong, but their deaths were brought by the outlaws, outlaws whom I intend to track and bring to justice.”

“Am I a complete fool?” A train of thought has started, and I cannot stop it. I swallow hard. I know how some of the men looked at me earlier in the evening as we sat in the common room of the inn. I blurt out the next words, realising as I say them that they are possibly the thing I fear most. “Am I a foolish little girl, playing at soldiers? Should I have stayed in my solar with my embroidery?”

Faramir is silent, silent for so long that eventually I say, my voice cracking as I do so, “The answer is 'yes', isn't it? But you can't bring yourself to say it.”

“No,” he says, “No, I'm silent because I'm thinking.” He takes a deep breath. “You were a fool, but I think I already said, no more so than any new officer. Or for that matter, experienced officers when they're pushed beyond breaking point. My father sent me on a suicide mission – he knew it, I knew it. But I was lucky – Mithrandir caught up with me just before I rode out with my men, and talked sense into me, else I would have gone to Osgiliath in the same frame of mind you were in earlier today, and I would have lost all of my men and my own life in my rage over my father's treatment of me.”

I shut my eyes for a moment, wanting to undo the images of Faramir's past. But then I reiterate my earlier question. “I saw some of the men's faces. They think I'm a liability because I'm a woman. Am I?”

“I don't think that things went so badly wrong because you were a woman.” His hand traces circles on my shoulder. “But there are some who will see it so. For women in war are such an unusual thing that there is no-one like you for your performance to be judged against. And men seek ever to generalise, to make patterns. Only sufficient experience can make us understand variety. Thus when a man makes a mistake, it is that man who makes the mistake, not all men. But you are the only woman they have been led by, and you have made a mistake; and there will be some who will erroneously turn that on its head and assume that you have made the mistake because you are a woman.”
I run my hand over his chest, then let it come to rest on his shoulder. Faramir strokes my cheek, then cups my chin with his hand, tilting my face gently so that he can look at me. I brush the last of the tears from my eyes with the back of my hand.

“What drives you, Éowyn? I think I understand why you wanted to learn swordsmanship in the first place, for all children love stories of knights errant slaying dragons. I think I understand why you rode to battle on the Pelennor. I think I understand your desire to survey the Mark, and find what the state of your country is, and what your people need. But why the urge to ride into skirmishes, to engage in battle?” I look up into his face. His expression is serious, but at the same time open, not accusatory. Yet in my mind there is still the unspoken line of thought that my behaviour is outside of the norm and thus needs an explanation. It seems so unfair, for he is risking his life leading his troops into danger.

“I might as well ask you the same question,” I say. He starts to say something, but I interrupt. “I don't say that by way of evasion. It simply seems to me that your engaging in these activities is taken as the state of nature, yet my engagement is seen as needing explanation.”

Faramir lets his head drop back onto the pillow and stares at the ceiling for a moment, obviously deep in thought. “Not the state of nature, perhaps. For war among mortals is such a complex thing, and so far removed from fights between animals which are driven only by instinct, that to designate it as 'the state of nature' is far too simple, certainly to describe the elaborately codified activity Ecthelion describes.” He lifts his head slightly to look at me, and I find myself giving him a faint smile, remembering our early days together in the gardens. “But it is something I have been trained to from my earliest years, the idea of serving my country in this way, and it is something expected of me. It is also something I am heartily weary of, and if I could, believe me I would turn my back on it in an instant, knowing someone else could stand in my stead, or better still, that there was no need for it. But you have a choice – it is not expected of you. So why seek out that which I would gladly avoid?”

“But what choice is it? What would I do instead? Accept a woman's lot in life?”

“It frightens you, doesn't it? More than Nazgûl, more than death in a skirmish against bandits... Why? What is it about a woman's lot that is so terrible?”

“That it is so narrow, so circumscribed, and not of our choosing. While a man is able to carve his own way in life.”

“Only some. Not most. A man of intellect, but from a poor background, has precious few opportunities to use that intellect. A man of natural physical skill and brave beyond the measure of his fellows, born on a farmstead with no training in bearing arms, may fall in his first battle where, had he been a nobleman's son, trained from his earliest years, he might instead have won renown.”

I feel wrong-footed, unfairly so. I roll onto my back and stare at the ceiling for a while, trying to order my thoughts. Eventually I manage to frame the thoughts I have been mulling over, and turn them into words. “But that is still to judge men against their peers, that is to say, other men. Women are ever adjuncts of men. A nobleman has freedoms, his wife and daughters hardly any. Materially they lack for nothing, but their lives... They live in a gilded cage. A farmer may lack freedoms relative to the nobleman, but he owns the farm, makes the decisions, and his wife must abide by those decisions. Rarely does a woman own land or control her own destiny. Men's choices may be circumscribed depending on their circumstances, but they still have choices.”

Faramir rolls onto his side, propping himself up on his elbow. He looks down at me. “I think I see.” He reaches out with his hand and strokes my cheek. “What do you want to achieve? If there were no obstacles in the way? I understand your survey of the Mark. It seems to me most valuable and
honourable undertaking. But why get involved in skirmishes? What do you seek to prove or accomplish by doing that? Are you trying to do something that makes you feel that the part you play is of value, or are you doing it simply because in the past it has been denied to you simply because of your sex?”

“You do think I am simply being wilful, playing soldiers...” I say, and I hear the sadness in my voice.

“No,” says Faramir. “I don’t mean it to seem like that. No, it is more that I think you have lost your way.”

I look at him, torn between anger and hurt. Tears prick at my eyes once more, but this time I do not want to shed them in front of him. He would comfort me, I know, but I do not want comfort if it comes at the cost of being treated like a wilful child. I blink, then roll over, my back to him.

“Éowyn?” He rests his hand on my shoulder. I lie silent, not trusting myself to speak, not even sure what I want to say. At another hour, on another day, I might have an answer, but today I feel so raw, so pained by the loss of good men, the knowledge of my own shortcomings so fresh in my mind, I do not know what to say. I feel but cannot articulate that there are two issues at play here: the particular and the general. There is my mistake, for which I must make redress, and the general question of my fitness to command, which is something admitting of a different type of proof. But I do not know how to explain this. My feelings are too tangled. I will either cry, or lose my temper, neither of which will further my cause.

Faramir speaks again. “I do not doubt your intelligence for a moment, and nor your willingness and ability play your part in rebuilding our countries. But I am not sure that this is the way to go about that... Today's events were, I think, driven by your tendency to react adversely to being told not to do something because you are a woman, rather than by the thought that you could usefully help to re-establish peace in this region through your actions. Is trying, belatedly, to learn how to command troops in the field the best use you could put your intelligence to? I have no doubt you could do it, given the time and experience, though I should spend the whole time while you acquired that experience with my heart in my mouth, lest you be wounded or killed.” As he says this, his voice sounds choked with emotion. He shuts his eyes for a moment, as if to try to compose himself, then continues. “But would it be the right thing for you to do?”

“So what would you have me do?” I ask, my face buried in the pillow. “I cannot act the role of the court butterfly, swapping gossip and intrigue with the other ladies over my embroidery.”

I feel Faramir lean forward. His hand brushes my hair to one side, then his lips touch the nape of my neck. “No indeed, that I cannot see. But Lord Elfhelm told me of your time as regent. It seems you have a keen instinct for the application of law, and the bending of law in constructive ways to make it more suitable and just. And you have a feel for the needs of the population at large and the ordering of resources to ensure that all are adequately supplied. And these are both things that I shall need help with in Ithilien.”

Finally, I roll over and look at his face, so serious, but with such a soft expression in his eyes. I know he is not trying to circumscribe my life. But I am not sure whether the effect, however unintentional, is the same in the end. Or perhaps he is right, and I am simply reacting mulishly to being told I cannot do something. In the end, I can make him no promises, not now. “I will think about it.” Then I make a last effort to try to explain why this matters. “But it seems to me that you are demanding restrictions of me which you would not place on...” I try to think of an apt comparison, someone Faramir would wish to nurture, to protect. “If I was your younger brother, you would understand why I wanted to protect my people, to lead them, to fight for them. You would still be frightened for me, but you would want to help me.”
Faramir strokes my cheek. “But you are not my younger brother,” he says, with a smile, then becomes serious once more. “Éowyn, my love, it is not just, but I cannot think of you that way, with detachment. I want to protect you, to keep you safe, to know that you are safe.”

“But if, in doing so, you put me in a cage, however beautifully gilded, then…” And now I can no longer hold back the tears. “It would be like a wild hawk, taken as an adult… As a chick, it could be trained for falconry, but captured as an adult, it would pine and die. Our love for one another has to be freely given, not constrained, not held captive. Else it will die…”

Faramir looks at me, and it seems he too is on the verge of tears. He puts his arms round me and draws me close.

I bury my face against his chest. I manage a whisper. “Just do not tell me you love me, then try to turn me into something other than what I am.”

“But if I lose you?” Faramir’s voice almost breaks.

“Then you will have loved, and lived with the woman I am, not some faint copy of her.” I remember Cynefrid’s words, back in Minas Tirith, and the irony of pressing them to my own use does not escape me. “I could die bearing our child, after all, the most womanly occupation of all.” I feel Faramir’s body shake in my arms, and draw my head back to look at him. We are both of us on the verge of falling into small pieces, I realise.

“Oh my love, my dearest love… I think we should not have talked of this when we were both so over-wrought. I am sorry.” He presses his lips to my forehead, and his words are whispered into my hair.

“And I.” I reach out to run my hand through his hair, then kiss his lips. It would be easy to take refuge in the passion which seems to come so easily to our bodies, but somehow we seem to know instinctively that on this occasion, we would simply be running from the battlefield rather than facing our deepest fears. Instead, we cling to one another, and eventually, I slide into an uneasy sleep.

Chapter End Notes

The chapter title is taken from the scene in *Julius Caesar* where Portia comes upon her husband Brutus and his co-conspirators, and tries to persuade him to take her into his confidence.
Éomer has seated himself at a table within his chambers, leaving me to stand in front of him like a naughty child. He is every bit as angry as I anticipated. There seems little I can do other than to let the storm run its course. He has chosen to let me know the folly of my ways partially in public, with Elfhelm and Éothain in attendance. For the most part their faces are impassive, but occasionally I think I see a slight twitch in the facial muscles of one or the other when my brother lets rip with a particularly inventive strain of invective. Eventually I sense a slight calming: at any rate, he is no longer swearing with quite the fluency he started with.

“Béma's balls, Éowyn, what possessed you? I have, reluctantly, come round to your survey of the Mark, and I'll admit that we've learned much from it, and that it will save lives that would otherwise be lost to starvation. But the idea was for you to ride around with a small band of soldiers for safety, with Cynefrid there to make the military decisions. Not for you to decide to play soldiers yourself with your own miniature Éored.”

At last someone has said it to my face: playing at soldiers. I almost feel relief that the issue is out in the open.

“I wasn't playing soldiers, I was trying to do the best for the villagers we came upon,” I answer. This response sounds lame even to my ears. Not surprisingly it does not meet with a good reaction.

“As a skilled military tactician, then,” Éomer says, his voice laden with sarcasm, “Perhaps you would care to tell me the salient differences between your activities in the Firien wood and those a month or so earlier in the Eastfold.” I think I preferred it when he was raging.

“So you heard about the melée in the Eastfold. Why are we are having this conversation now, rather than then?”

“Of course I bloody heard about the melée in the Eastfold. I'd be a pretty poor excuse for a ruler if I did not know of the military adventures and misadventures of my own sister within my own realm. So I repeat, as a tactician, what are the salient differences between your activities in the Eastfold, and the more recent ones in the Firien wood?”

“None that are relevant, barring details,” I say.

“Really? Really, my sister? Are you quite sure about that?” Éomer looks at me with a gaze that would wither a whole orchard in bloom.

“Since you are so clearly of the opinion that there was a relevant difference, perhaps you would care to enlighten me,” I say.

“Well, the most important one is that you came upon the fight in progress in the East Emnet and your engagement thus made a difference in reducing the casualties. And you had little to no choice but to engage – you did not know whether there were more forces behind you should you have chosen to retreat. So there was nothing to be lost that might not be lost in any case, and much to be gained. In the more recent case, the attack had already taken place – your involvement saved no lives or property, only put your own men at risk needlessly. Then, you did not listen to your sergeant. You led your men without thought for assessing the situation, the enemy numbers, the lie of the land.
When what you should have done – even if you had been an experienced officer formally in charge of the group – was to send word to the Marshal of the Westfold reporting the attack and asking for supporting troops. And finally, you trespassed over the borders of my Realm into a neighbouring country.”

“You sound like Faramir,” I say, dryly.

“So he's already given you an earful? Good for him. The man's a very sound judge of military matters. Not sure he's shown as much wisdom in his choice of wife, sister of mine.”

This last jab is a move too far. I feel my temper slip. “Éomer, Éomund's son, are you telling me you would never have reacted in such a way to such a situation? For I know that you have, and that we both have our father's temper…”

“Whether I have ever made the same mistake is beside the point, Éowyn.” He interrupts me mid-sentence. “The point is that it is a mistake, and one for which you have not apologised. You seem more interested in defending your continued would-be military exploits than in making amends for your mistakes.”

“You have not stopped ranting, or questioning me on military tactics for long enough for me to do so. Of course I'm bloody sorry. Do you think I haven't apologised? To Cynefrid, to Redwald, to Faramir. I lie awake every night re-running that day, wanting to do things differently, wanting to do things right. But I cannot undo what is done. I must live with it.” I take slow, deep breaths, trying to stop myself from crying.

“Well, there is one thing that needs to be done, that we haven't yet discussed.” Éomer pauses for a moment. “Weregild. It will be coming from your personal estates and holdings. To each family, I think, a mare and three ewes with lambs, plus a sword to be held as heirloom for the eldest son of the family – assuming, with Edric, that he had a younger brother who is now heir. And, in Aelfred’s case, some sort of provision to be made for the children if there are any.”

Somehow, the shame of thinking of the families of the soldiers I have lost hits me even harder than anything to date. I dig my nails into my thighs to try to keep the tears at bay. Eventually, Éomer lets me escape to the solitude of my chamber, and I throw myself on my bed and weep until the tears will come no longer. When the storm has passed, I find my way onto the terrace, and spend the rest of the afternoon looking out over the plains towards the mountains. Eventually, as the shadows of the Autumn dusk lengthen, I make my way back inside, and call for candles, that I may write to Faramir. The words do not come easily. I find myself pausing between each sentence, trying to weigh up what I want to say to him, how best to answer the questions which he put to me the night after the raid and its disastrous aftermath.

Faramir, my beloved husband,

Since I left you I have not stopped thinking of that ambush, and my stupidity. And our harsh words – I regret so much. (It will not surprise you that Éomer was similarly furious). I wish I could re-live that whole day, do everything differently. But it is done, and we need to find our way through the aftermath.

You asked me what drove me. And the more I have thought the matter over, the more I come up with the same answer (though I am not sure you will like it): it is who I am.

I stop for a few moments and stare into space. Is this the truth? Part of it? It looks too blunt put in black and white like that. I try to soften the blow.
By that I do not mean to say that I desire to become a great Captain General, or Marshal. I shall not offer my sword to King Elessar, volunteering to lead an expeditionary force to the near Harad.

I hope that this thought will amuse Faramir. Oh, how I hate having to write, for I cannot judge his reaction. How am I to know if he will read into it the humour I intend, or whether I run the risk of misjudging his reaction. At the same time, writing does at least give me time to sift through my thoughts, and perhaps even to force them into the ordered pattern that they have so far resisted, the pattern which I deem Faramir needs to match the order and keen intellect of his own mind. Perhaps he will understand if I try to explain my worries on this score. I lift the quill once more and dip it into the ink.

I wish I didn't have to say this in a letter, for it seems impersonal, and I cannot gauge your reaction, or answer your questions. But at the same time I am relieved, for it seems easier to explain this without having to do so beneath your keen gaze which, I fear, would make me question myself too much. Why have I involved myself in fighting, when I could (and according to Éomer, should) have stayed on the sidelines? I am struggling to work out the answer in my own head, but I think the answer has several parts.

To start with, I think of the world we find ourselves in. My love, when first I came to you in Minas Tirith, we both thought we stood on the brink of the world's ending. That has not come to pass, and for that I give thanks every day. But none of us, I think, is so naïve as to believe the world now is without danger. The most acute has passed, but there is evil still abroad, and the task of dealing with it will last for many years to come.

You face danger and treason in carrying out your current duties in Anórien. And I, by a similar token, remember only too well the villages I have seen attacked, the one in the Eastfold where we arrived half way through the attack, the one on the border of the Firien wood where we found it only after it had been sacked. The first fight I engaged in, I think from necessity, the second from reacting wrongly to the circumstances. I am not sure I'm making myself clear. By necessity I mean a fight where one has no choice – one must fight or die. By circumstance, I mean a fight where I could have turned away, but judged that I was likelier than not to win. (Though that I suppose is trying to make my actions seem better after the event. At the time, I think my judgement was simply clouded by rage).

And I suppose it is that issue of my judgement being clouded by rage which made it so hard to see the rights and wrongs of the general issue. For in that particular case there is no doubt that I was in the wrong. But more generally, can I, should I, give up fighting entirely? You want to rebuild Ithilien, and I am sure you will prove a noble and just prince. But I doubt that it can be done without struggle. Emyn Arnen itself is close to the dread tower, and though the King Elessar intends it to be torn down to its foundations, evil things still lurk in that vale. And further North in Ithilien, near to the field of Morannon, orcs and men of ill intent still roam abroad. Perhaps I can learn the wisdom and patience not to involve myself in debacles like the one in the Firien wood. But I am not sure I can entirely avoid the sort of fight I encountered in the Eastfold.

You cannot always be by my side in Emyn Arnen. There will be times aplenty when your duties take you to Minas Tirith. And what would happen should our house be attacked while you are not there? Think you, my Lord, that I would shelter, cowering, within a closed chamber, leaving others to fight for me?

I pause for a moment and lay down the quill. Is this what I really mean to say? Do I simply wish to fight when Faramir is not there to protect me? Or do I rather see myself fighting by his side, both of us facing down enemies together? I am not sure I know the answer. For a moment I shut my eyes, then I look once more at the page... crossing it out will leave a blotted, illegible mess, and it is too far
down to copy out the whole of what precedes it again. Perhaps in any case, it is as well to leave it for the time being. It is perhaps a gentler opening gambit than saying point blank that I will fight. But I add another couple of sentences.

Nay, I should wish to order the defence of our estate and your principedom. And to this end, I wish to learn from my mistakes, not hide from them by eschewing combat in favour of womanly activities.

But there is another part to my answer. I mentioned how my judgement was clouded by rage. This makes me think of the matter of my own temperament. Do you remember when we sat beside the fountain, and I talked of my cousin Théodred and you of your brother Boromir? You told me how different you and Boromir were. You told me how the arts of war fascinated your brother from an early age. He saw valour and the doing of deeds of renown as worthy pastimes as ends in themselves. For your part, I know that though you are a warrior brave and tested beyond the endurance of most men, you excel at the arts of war from necessity, not from desire. I mentioned that my brother was like yours, a warrior by nature. My cousin was somewhere between the two of you, more circumspect than Éomer but nonetheless finding joy in battle.

Were I a man, where would I place my own character? I do not know. It is beyond doubt that I have some of my father's hot-headedness, and that I am far quicker to anger than you. But then again, you are older and more experienced than I. Even so, I think your temper is more controlled, more considered than mine. If I could choose, I would choose a temperament like yours, slow to anger, quick to show mercy, able to consider the rights and wrongs of a situation even in the heat of battle. And I can promise you I shall try to make my decisions more measured and less hot headed. I desperately wish to make amends for the wrongs I committed in the Firien wood, and will strive to learn from my mistakes. If I could model myself on anyone, I should wish for the level-headed nature of Cynefrid (who, incidentally, is still barely speaking to me). But I am my father's daughter – I fear I may on occasion still fall short of the mark.

I do not know what you will make of this message, and this frightens me. For I thought we had come to know each other all too well. But now I am afraid lest you have come to realise that, novel as it was to love a wild shieldmaiden from the north, we are not so easily tamed. Alas, we have a saying in the Riddermark: marry in haste, repent at leisure. I find myself torn into pieces lest this be how you feel. But at the same time I have asked myself whether I could become a more womanly wife to you, and the more I think on it, the more I think I could do so only by ceasing to exist, by erasing my very self, one tiny piece, one day at a time. And this then is my dilemma – you will find yourself either with a rough, ungentle wife whom no man would wish for, or one who, though looking outwardly like the embodiment of womanly virtue, is dead inside. But if you can live with your rough, ungentle wife, I will in my turn promise do my utmost to keep my temper in check and to fight only when circumstances render it necessary, not out of some sort of vainglorious pursuit of fame. For you, my dearest love, are the thing most important to me in this whole world, and I shall love you with all my heart.

Your shieldmaiden,
Éowyn.

By the time I think better of sending this letter, the messenger has already left. It will, I fear, take some time to reach Faramir, for it will no doubt go to Minas Tirith, then (if I am lucky) get forwarded to Anórien. Or perhaps not: I do not know what veil of secrecy surrounds Faramir’s presence there. However, I do not have long to dwell on the matter. I find myself summoned back to Éomer's chambers.

Éomer stands by the window, Elfhelm beside him.
“Ah, welcome, Sister,” he says. I recognise that tone only too well. He is up to something.

“Brother, Marshal,” I say, inclining my head to each of them in turn.

“Éowyn, sit down, for I have something to tell you. I have finally come up with a fitting punishment for your military misadventure. You want to play at soldiers? Well, I propose that you learn to do it properly. I am going to attach you to Elfhelm's Éored. You will be relieved to know you have got off lightly – I thought you should join the rank and file, but Elfhelm here has persuaded me that that would not be fitting for the King’s sister. Therefore you join at the rank of Cornet... but under the strict understanding that if you step so much as a hairsbreadth out of line, Elfhelm is to break you to the ranks and make you dig latrines for a week.”

Elfhelm glances at me, raising a sardonic brow. To say I am staggered by this is an understatement. Never could I have imagined my brother doing this. Part of me is delighted, part of me deeply suspicious. Why do I suspect him of intending to see if, given enough rope, I will hang myself.

And so begins several weeks of hell, but I cannot say I did not ask for it. We wake early to tend to the horses, muck out the stables, train... and train... and train. We practise riding in formation. We spar on the ground. We tilt at the quintain, at each other. Elfhelm has us lug heavy gear around the place, as much for the exertion of doing so as from any obvious gain to be made from moving it from its previous location to its new one – there seems no rhyme or reason to this activity. We practise scouting – he makes us crawl upon our bellies beneath bushes and through mud, seeking to approach outposts without detection. If we are detected – that should be, when we are (inevitably) detected, for the Marshal has keen ears indeed – he finds yet more activities to punish us for our laxity – more heavy goods to be moved, more shit to be shovelled, running at a brisk pace along side our horses to prepare for what would happen should we be unseated.

By the end of each day I am exhausted. But Elfhelm has other plans for me than the rest I desire.

“You want to learn tactics and strategy – well, away with you to the library of Queen Morwen. There are battle plans there. We'll look at one a day. First thing each morning, we'll break our fast together and you can sketch me the battle lines from memory and talk me through events as they unfolded. Start with the Field of Celebrant – that should at least be reasonably familiar to you.”

Thus every night by the light of candles I find myself puzzling out the near-indecipherable writing on ancient parchment. Then I draw rough sketches in the earth each morning as Elfhelm shovels porridge into himself, occasionally wiping his lips on the back of his hand and asking me what at first hearing sound like disarmingly simple questions, but generally serve only to open the way to a devastating follow-up. I find myself as mentally tired as I am physically.

A couple of weeks into my time with the Éored, Elfhelm has moved onto wider aspects of strategy.

“So, the Wainriders?” he says in a questioning tone.

“Mid 1800s,” I say. “A series of battles.” I list them, one by one, with brief details of the sizes of the forces on each side, the battle lines, the outcomes. “In 1856 Narmacil II fell in battle, and Gondor lost all of its eastern territories.”

“And what tipped the balance?” Elfhelm asks. “At first consideration, the forces look fairly equally matched.”

“Well, the main thing seems to have been the superior design of the Wainriders' chariots – hence their name. A shift in position of the axle from the mid-point of the chariot body to the back made them much more stable, and meant that they could place a third man in the chariot, massively
increasing the fire-power of the archers on the chariots. Infantry didn't stand a chance.”

“You're still thinking tactically, at the level of individual battlefields. What information did the Captain-General of Narmacil's army ignore? Remember, it's as important, if not more important, to learn from the cock-ups of the past as it is to learn from the successes. You of all people should realise that one.”

I wince, and try not to lose my thread of thought as the memory of Edric's sightless eyes staring up at the lowering grey skies comes back to me once more. But it's too late. I am floundering, all the details I tried to cram into my mind last night flitting away in the bright morning light. For once Elfhelm takes pity.

“The year before – what intelligence did Ciryandil the Captain-General receive from Bracor of the Wainriders when he changed sides on the promise of the hand of the widow Firwen and her estates by the banks of Anduin?”

I rack my mind... “That the King of the Wainriders had raised a levy on all estates in his empire that they supply one able-bodied adult man in every twelve as infantry soldiers?”

“And what did Ciryandil and Narmacil do with this information?” Elfhelm prompts.

“Nothing...” I founder once more.

“That's right. Sweet fuck all. And what do the letters of Narmacil's son Calimehtar and Lord Eldacar of Pelargir show us?”

I admit defeat. “I don't think I got that far.” Elfhelm gives a grunt of exasperation.

“They show us that the year before, Narmacil's own son and his closest advisor told the King that there was a strong possibility that not only would the Wainriders send a force direct to the eastern banks of Anduin, cutting a swathe straight through here...” Elfhelm gestures to the map of Ancient Gondor spread out on the ground. “They warned him that chances were that the Wainriders would use this extra infantry force to open a second front here.” Elfhelm points to a second stretch of land, the far side of some low hills. “Narmacil and Ciryandil ignored this possibility because they were so fixed on the idea that the Wainriders wouldn't use infantry, because they wouldn't actually take men off the land so close to harvest, So, underestimating the enemy's strength, they concentrated all their troops defending this plateau which controls the first route down to the river... but by using the infantry, the Wainriders were able to come at them from behind, cutting off their retreat. Narmacil fell in battle.”

“You read through all the letters?” This does not sound like the Elfhelm I know.

“Nay, do I look that daft? Eldacar's scribe summarised them in dispatches sent to the council in Minas Tirith. Poncey Gondorians and their passion for paperwork... occasionally it can be quite handy. Anyway, the point of all this is that not only were Narmacil's decisions fucking stupid with the benefit of hindsight, they were fucking stupid at the time. Enough of that, though, let's get onto safer ground for you – I think you're picking up more about battle tactics than overall strategy so far, so a tactical question for you: what swung things in favour of Calimehtar at the Battle of Dagorlad nearly fifty years later? What was his advantage over the Wainriders?”

I heave a sigh of relief. This one I do know the answer to. “Well, like I said, the Wainriders had an advantage earlier in the century because the change in chariot design provided a really stable base for archers to decimate the infantry. But by the end of the century, the Gondorians had imported a new idea from their skirmishes in the south against the Haradrim – they'd stolen the idea of the stirrup.
Meant they could stand up in the saddle to keep themselves stable while they used bows from horseback. People had been firing from horseback for centuries, but the stirrup really improved accuracy. And cut down the training period, Gondor not being exactly renowned for its tradition of horsemanship. In fact, if they were anything like they are now, they always put me in mind of a toddler on a donkey, but don't tell Faramir I said that. Oh, and in close combat with pikes, they meant the rider was much less likely to be unseated. It was just enough to even up the balance of power on the battlefield, and the fact that Calimehtar's second in command then got control of the slightly higher ground to the east meant that they carried the day."

Elfhelm heaves a theatrical sigh. “Finally the wean learns something. Glad to see there's some trace of brains between your ears. Now, a few centuries earlier, the Siege of Pelargir...”

My torture is interrupted, but my mental turmoil remains, for riding furiously across the plain is a messenger – not in the livery of Minas Tirith, but in the dark green of Faramir's rangers. Hastily we get to our feet, brushing the dust of the training ground from our breeches, and Elfhelm leads the way to my brother's study.

We fill the time each according to their own nature. Elfhelm stands impassive, like a statue. I sit, hands clenched, nails digging into my skin. Éomer paces. Finally, the messenger is shown in. He goes down on one knee before my brother and holds out two scrolls. I am almost overwhelmed by a premonition that something terrible has happened to Faramir.

Chapter End Notes

Wean – Scots for child.

“Cornet” was a cavalry rank equivalent to second lieutenant.

And so to... stirrups. The “Boys own book of history” type version would have one believe that as the Avars swept west from central Asia in the 8th Century, the only reason Charlemagne was able to stop them was... stirrups. And (see author's note way back in chapter 13) there is a widely held belief that it was the invention of the stirrup that led to the predominance of mounted cavalry over infantry, but as I noted back then, it was probably more complicated, and had as much to do with the fact that using infantry successfully against cavalry requires the discipline to hold ranks – something you're unlikely to get with an irregular army of peasants co-opted in from the fields for the occasion, but can get with a well-drilled standing army. Do you need stirrups for archery? No. The Parthians did without. The Assyrians did without. The idea that they might level things up if your horsemen weren't that good is Borys' invention!

I've taken the line that “wain” cannot have its usual meaning of wagon (who'd go to battle in a wagon?) but instead means chariot. The change in chariot design I describe was introduced by the Hittites of central Turkey and was one of the reasons they defeated the army of Ramsses II at the battle of Kadesh (1274 BC – as you have probably realised by now, I have a decidedly pick-and-mix attitude to using real history as inspiration – Tolkien is probably turning in his grave, but since Middle Earth is fictional, I am happy to pluck stuff from quite, in fact spectacularly, diverse periods). Which brings me to the third thing...

My idea which I attribute to Elfhelm, that Narmacil was stupid because he ignored...
intelligence reports suggesting that his enemy would use infantry and attack along a second front, believing that there was no way the Wainriders would take men away from the harvest and press them into military service, is loosely inspired by much more recent history. It is taken from Barbara Tuchman's example of the French General staff at the beginning of World War I and their belief that the Germans would not use reservists, and hence could not extend their supply lines through Belgium. The French therefore concentrated all their resources on the Rhine, leaving themselves wide open, despite having intelligence information dating from as early as 1913 to the contrary, which they wilfully ignored.

Elfhelm's claim that this should have been obviously stupid even at the time, not just with the benefit of hindsight, is the central idea behind Tuchman's book, The March of Folly. “To qualify as folly for this inquiry, the policy adopted must meet three criteria: it must have been perceived as counter-productive in its own time, not merely by hindsight. This is important, because all policy is determined by the mores of its age. ... Secondly a feasible alternative course of action must have been available. To remove the problem from personality, a third criterion must be that the policy in question should be that of a group, not an individual ruler, and should persist beyond any one political lifetime. Misgovernance by a single sovereign or tyrant is too frequent and too individual to be worth a general inquiry.”

Finally – women on the battlefield in the Middle Ages. Well, there was of course Joan of Arc, but I think we can safely say that from a modern day perspective (hey, what's wrong with Whig history?) things did not end well for her. But Matilde of Tuscany, Countess of Canossa, did successfully lead her troops into battle (and lived to die of old age at nearly seventy). “From her impregnable fortress at Canossa, perched high on a spur of the north face of the Apennines overlooking the plain to her nearby cities of Reggio and Modena, she rode with her troops against the Emperor Heinrich IV, standing in her stirrups with her father's sword in her hand, the war-cry “For St Peter and Matilde!” ringing around her.” (Helen Castor: She Wolves: The women who ruled England before Elizabeth).
Éomer's brow knits together in a frown. Then he turns to me and asks, “What do you know of the situation in Anórien, Éowyn? Why the hell is Faramir there?”

“Faramir... he is safe?” I say, ignoring his question.

“Well of course he is, seeing as how he has sent both of us letters.” My brother tosses the second of the letters to me, then repeats his question. I am burning to open mine, but realise that there is no way I can read it in front of Éomer and Elfhelm, so I take a deep breath and try to concentrate on providing a sensible answer. As best I can, I explain to both of them the lack of troops from Anórien in answer to the call to defend Minas Tirith, the bandit attacks (including the one that led to my stupidity) and the suspicion that some of the local towns or even minor lords may be harbouring the bandits for their own purposes.

“That makes sense of his request, then. He has asked me to send an Éored, to be stationed on this bank of the Mering stream, beside the fords just south of Sarn Esgar, with a view to cutting off any escape that way. I think he plans to try to drive the outlaw troops to the stream and corner them there.”

Elfhelm nods. “It's a fairly sensible plan – flush them out of the Firien wood and drive them north-east down stream. Sarn Esgar itself is protected by walls, so there's not much risk of the battle spilling over into the town.”

“How soon can your Éored ride, Marshal?” My brother's use of Elfhelm's title tells me he wants to underline to us that he is thinking of this situation in his role as king.

“Within two hours. We were already mustered for the morning's training. I can give orders for provisions to be organised, and we will be ready.”

“Éowyn,” says my brother, “Two hours to sort out your own gear, read your letter – yes, I know how much of an effort it's taking you to try to pretend it isn't burning a hole in your hand – and then ride with Elfhelm. And what he says goes. He will ride to Sarn Esgar. If he does not feel the need to take you with him, I don't care how much you want to see Faramir, you will obey your commanding officer.”

I am torn between laughing, smiling with delight at being given his blessing to go with the other Riders, and the desire to box his ears for that last comment. I settle on a quick peck on his cheek, then hasten to my room where, as Éomer predicted, I tear open the seal of the letter. It is immediately obvious to me that he has not received my letter before sending this.

My beloved wife,

Forgive me, my dearest heart, for I have wronged you grievously. I have broken our marriage vows. I offered you the vows of a shield brother, a warrior's vows, and now I have behaved as though those vows meant nothing to me.

How vividly I remember our first meeting. Although I have told you how I was stricken to the heart by your beauty at the instant I first laid eyes upon you, what I have not told you, but should have done, is that I was as moved by the sense of your strength of will, your courage, your valour as I was by your beauty. For of course I had heard of your deeds from the warden and others before I met
you, but even had I not been told, I think I would have known you to be a woman unlike any other I had ever met. You seemed to me at that moment to be wrought from steel, finely tempered steel, as strong and true and supple as the finest blade ever wrought by the Elves of ancient Gondolin.

And as I talked to you, first in the garden, so awkwardly to start with, of Ecthelion, and then in the stables (at least, unhappy as I feel at the moment, I can still smile when I think of that), I became aware of your mind – keen and sharp, though of a more practical bent, I think, than mine – and your ready wit. What I think I did not realise then, in fact am only just starting to realise now, is how different that makes my feelings for you than anything I have known before. For I love you, and have loved you from almost the first moment I saw you, I desire you, and definitely desired you from the first moment I saw you. But there was more, I now realise, and I am not sure how to explain it.

In you, it was as if I met both the woman I desired above all others and a fellow soldier I could stand beside. And it was strange and wonderful to me to have both together. But what I reckoned without was how much that would undo me when I saw the fellow soldier, whom I loved, not just as a brother, but as the woman I had bound my heart to, place herself in danger. And the fact that the danger (by your own admission as well as my judgement of the situation) was courted not only wilfully but also avoidably, and, furthermore, with predictably disastrous consequences – all this added to my confusion. I knew not how to react – and reacted through pain and fear. Now I have had time to reflect. Was what you did ill-judged? Yes. I think we both agree on that. Was that ill-judgement down to inexperience? Yes.

For the question I should have asked myself was this: do you have the right to try to judge situations, even when your judgement goes awry? I want to answer “yes”, for it was a privilege accorded to me as a young soldier, and why should you not be allowed to make and learn from your own mistakes. But, oh my love, how I struggle to give this answer. My head tells me that these choices are yours to make, for better or worse, not mine to make on your behalf. But my heart rebels against this notion. For to think of you in danger completely unmans me. My blood runs weak at the thought that I might lose you, whom I love above all things. And I would be a damnable liar if I did not admit to male pride that drives me to want to protect and cherish you, even though I know you do not ask for this protection from any man.

In my naivety I wished to be bound not just to a woman beautiful above all others, but to a soldier, courageous and strong. I dreamed of having you fight beside me. But only now do I realise the price that is asked of me in having this wish granted. I do not wish to cage you, but I do wish you to be safe. I can only pray that should you fight, you will fight wisely, and judge when not to enter the fray. I have lost so much that was precious to me in this life: I am not sure I could bear to lose you.

Yours to the ending of the world,
Faramir.

For several heartbeats, all I can do is to stare at his hastily scribbled signature. There is a lump in my throat, and my eyes prick with tears. For I realise he has indeed lost so much – mother, father, brother, his first love, their unborn child. Is there any wonder he reacted so to my wilful choice to court danger? Again, I feel my emotions whirl, my mind no longer certain as it was two weeks earlier when I penned my letter to him. If only there was an easy answer. Suddenly I am hit as if by a physical force with the knowledge of how much he must yearn to keep me safe, and how much it must cost him to give me the freedom to make my own choices. And yet within me is this small voice, this tiny spark, which says that I must be the one to make these choices, for good or ill, or I will no longer be myself. But fighting against it, growing in strength is a second voice which simply says, “Do not cause him to be hurt again.”
But the tide of events has a habit of sweeping us along whether we will or nay, and as I stand clutching the parchment, lost in confusion and uncertainty, Elfhelm bursts into the room.

“Come on lass, you need to saddle up Windfola. We ride in less than the time it takes the candle to burn to the next mark.”

Grabbing my bedroll, I follow him out of the room.

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The Mering stream is but a day and a half from Edoras. We set a brisk pace across the rolling green plains at the foot of the White Mountains. Mile upon mile they stretch out before us. To our right, the foothills of the mountains rise sharply out of the plain, no gentle change in angle, instead, brownish-grey slopes rising abruptly, with higher hills behind, fading into blue ranges beyond, and furthest away, the sparkling snow covered heights. By midday we mostly keep our eyes focussed on the grass. The icy peaks are too bright to look at.

After riding until dusk, we set up camp near a stream, swollen by the recent rain. We are close to the rocky slopes of the foothills, and the water rushes down a narrow defile. The horses are tethered on a flat patch of grass near our fire, with a rocky outcrop beyond. We do not bother with a proper meal – strips of cured meat and waybread suffice. Afterwards, we settle into our bed rolls for the night, a couple of men on watch. I draw my cloak and the blanket up to my nose and drift off to sleep, tired by the long day, and the weeks of hard physical exercise which have preceded it.

Men shouting... howls... snorting horses... snarling noises... the crackle of firebrands... more shouts... Groggy with sleep, I realise at last that these noises are not in my dream, they are real. I sit up, grasping for my sword which lies, as ever, beside me, hilt placed ready for my hand. Clambering to my feet, I try to make sense of events. The men on watch are calling, swords drawn, and running towards the horses. The snarls are coming from the far side of the pickets to which the horses are tethered. Wargs, down from the mountains, crouched on the rocky outcrop, readying themselves for the attack. They must be desperate with hunger to attack a camp of men with fire. Desperate, or in huge numbers. Through the crowd of men rising from their beds, I see Elfhelm, and jog across to him.

“Éowyn, you and Cynefrid take a couple of Riders each and see to the horses. Try to fend the wargs off as best you can while the rest of us chase them down with flaming brands and pick them off from the flanks. If you can't keep them at bay, untie the horses and let them take their chances on the plains – but that's a last resort, and hang on to your own mounts so we can try to chase down the wargs.”

I run across the grass to the pickets, Cynefrid at my side. In the dark, I can't quite make out how large the pack is. Swords drawn, we get ourselves between our mounts and the wargs. The horses are half mad with fear. I can hear them behind us, neighing, struggling, bumping into one another, pulling at their tethers. With an effort, I try to block out the noise they make. The nearest of the wargs comes at me, and I slice at it with my sword. It feels so different from fighting a man or an orc. I have to watch for teeth and claws, and somehow the lack of rationality makes it more difficult, not easier. I cannot place myself in its head, anticipate its moves, read it as I would a creature with a brain like mine.

Its hide is tough. My slicing stroke draws blood, but does no real damage. I duck away from the beast's claws, jabbing up at its snapping teeth as I do so. Thrust, move, strike, move, jab. It takes many more strokes than I had anticipated before the beast is dead. Beside me, Cynefrid has dealt with a pair of them. Now that I am moving, the sick feeling before combat has gone. Instead, my
movements feel as though they have slowed. I have time aplenty to watch the circling wargs, to pick them off as they approach. I dance on the balls of my feet, my sword an extension of my arm, feeling alive like I haven't done for some weeks, not since the disaster in the Firien wood.

With a great yell, several of the Riders come at the warg pack from our flanks. They bear flaming brands of wood which they swipe at the beasts who fall back with a yelp and a snarl. This proves the last straw for some of the horses. With a desperate lunge, the strongest of the stallions drags at the rope, dragging the picket to which it is tied from the ground. It and three others escape, running free.

“C'mon lass. We must see to the horses.” Cynefrid yells to me above the noise and clamour.

Sheathing our swords, we run after the horses. They buck and rear, heading away from the wargs. At the last minute, they seem to sense the presence of the fire embers, and swerve, careening headlong into the swollen stream.

“Grab a rope,” Cynefrid shouts, and starts to wade into the swirling, ink-black water after them. I run back to the embers of the fire and dig through my saddle bags. Grasping the coil of hemp, I run to the river bank. I watch in horror as the grey furthest into the stream loses its footing and goes under, swept off by the spate. With trembling, clumsy fingers, I tie a knot and throw the looped end to Cynefrid, who manages to get it round the neck of the nearest horse. Together, we haul on the rope, sinews straining, and gradually pull the horse from the stream. Cynefrid gets hold of the length of leather dangling from the horse's head stall and ties it to the trunk of an ash bush, then heads back into the stream for the next horse.

Behind us, chaos still reigns, but the snarls of the wargs are growing more distant as our comrades beat them back with the burning branches. I try my best to make gentle clicking noises to the horse tied near me to calm it, but it still tosses its head, teeth bared in fear.

“Bastard... Fuck...” Cyenfrid's voice comes out of the darkness, hoarse above the rushing water. I can dimly see him struggling to get the noose over the next horse's head. “Bastarding thing... Got it. Pull, Éowyn. Pull like fuck!” Again, I drag at the rope, my feet slithering on the muddy bank as I struggle to get any purchase. The horse thrashes in the water, but we pull until it is into the shallows, then Cynefrid moves round to shove its rump, and I manage to grab its bridle and tie it to the bush. Cynefrid wastes no time. He heads back into the water.

He reaches for the head of the remaining horse. It bucks in fear, hooves lashing out wildly. Suddenly Cynefrid loses his footing. I watch in horror as his head goes under, the horse dragged off balance too. A swirl of water seems to catch both of them and their bodies are towed by the rush of the stream. The rope goes taut, and I realise Cynefrid must still have hold of the other end. Taken by surprise, I stagger forwards into the icy water.

My feet slide on hidden moss, one ankle jerking as it slips into the hidden hollow between submerged boulders. I give a yelp, then tumble backwards. It turns out to be the best thing I could have done. Landing on my arse in the freezing current, I finally come to rest in a stable position. Tugging hand over hand, I pull the rope then make the end fast round a protruding rock spike. I hang onto the coarse hemp and use it for support as I scramble back to my feet and wade out into the stream. The water laps first round my knees, then thighs, then up to my waist. Béma, the current is fucking strong. I wipe the water from my eyes with one hand and make out the shape of Cynefrid's body, a couple of arm spans away. His face comes out of the water for a moment, pale in the moonlight, and he takes a sputtering gasp before going under again. I take another step, then feel my feet swept clear of the riverbed. But now I can just wrap one hand in Cyenfrid's clothes, the other wrapped round the rope. Fuck. I can't do anything. I manage to get my hand under Cynefrid's chin and hold his mouth and nose just out of the water, and cling to the rope. But I don't have the strength.
to pull both of us along the line. It's all I can do to keep us afloat. My hands are so cold, and I feel the strength draining from the one that holds the rope.

“Éowyn!” Elfhelm's yell penetrates over the roar of the water.

“Here, out in the stream. Rope... round boulder... Pull us into the shore.” Elfhelm's voice barks out orders. The rope jerks. I almost let go, then feel myself moving against the current. I go under for a moment, and take in a mouthful of water, then come up, spluttering. I feel the panic rising. I can't hang on much longer. Another jerk, and my feet make contact with the rocks below the water. I push towards the bank, dragging Cynefrid with me. A few more tugs, and both of us are in the shallows, strong hands grasping us and pulling us onto the bank. I finally let go of Cynefrid and roll over onto my belly, before getting onto all fours, then managing to kneel. For a moment, I stay still, bent forward, coughing my guts up. To one side, I see Elfhelm's corporal roll Cynefrid over and slap his back until with a splutter he vomits, then starts to take rasping breaths.

The rest of the night is a blur. I am dimly aware of Elfhelm himself stripping my wet clothes off. I suppose I should feel embarrassed. The whole bloody Éored can see me, after all. But I'm too cold and knackered to give a fuck. Elfhelm wraps me in blankets, then passes me a cup of something – it's some sort of mixture of mead and something stronger, warmed in the embers of the fire. It sits molten in my belly, but my extremities still feel like ice. I feel someone help me to lie down, then I pass out.

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I wake up in the cold, grey light of morning, stiff, sore and still frozen to the bone. Someone has hung my clothes from a branch near the fire. They are still damp to the touch, but at least no longer sodden through. Under cover of the blanket, I struggle back into them, damp wool clinging to cold, clammy skin as I pull the garments up clumsy limbs. Then I make my way to the other side of the fire where a young rider is tending the porridge pot. I help myself to a dollop, and take my wooden bowl and sit down.

A pair of legs appears in front of me. I look up. It is Cynefrid, bearing a couple of steaming mugs. He sits on the log beside me and hands me one. It is the bitter, black brew from Harad that some of our Riders developed a taste for after the Battle of Pelennor. I nod my thanks and take a sip, frowning slightly at the taste. But it warms me and sharpens my senses, and I start to feel better than I have since waking.

“Last night,” say Cynefrid. “Thanks.” We sit in a silence that is not quite companionable, but not uncomfortable either. It is the most time we have spent in each other’s company since Édrick was killed. I wonder whether to say anything, but I cannot think of any words that would not sound forced. Instead, I hold out my mug and knock it against his as if they were tankards of beer, then eat my porridge by way of filling the silence.

I have just time to swill out the mug and bowl before Elfhelm’s sergeant-at-arms calls us to muster. A couple of Riders have been injured by the wargs, and Elfhelm sends them back to Edoras - the bites have a tendency to turn pestilent and cause fever. Elfhelm argues that since we are not actually riding to war, but only to do some minor “tidying up” on the border, as he puts it, there is no need for the Éored to be at full strength. The loss of the horses is perhaps as keenly felt - the Riders are given re-mounts, but I know from my childhood how bitter it is to lose a horse.

It takes us until the sun is at its highest to reach the Mering stream well downstream of Sarn Esgar. Elfhelm carefully selects a spot relatively well camouflaged by some low hills bounding the curves in the river, with a small copse behind which we can disguise the size of our force. The next few hours are filled with constructing a camp. Bedrolls are all well and good for a night or two, but since we
will be here for several days, perhaps weeks, Elfhelm gives orders for tents to be pitched. Eventually he calls to his sergeant-at-arms and corporal.

“Time to ride to Sarn Esgar and meet up with the Rangers.” I try to busy myself with tending to Windfola’s gear so that Elfhelm will not see my face. But it turns out he is in an indulgent humour. “Éowyn, wipe that miserable look off your face (yes, I know it’s there) and saddle up. You’re coming too.”

Now I have the troublesome task of not looking too pleased, instead of not looking miserable. I put the saddle back on Windfola’s back, give him a jab in the gut with my elbow, then quickly tighten the girth as I hear him breathe out.

We set out along the green lane that skirts the river. After half a mile or so, it turns towards the water, running down onto a shingle beach. The river here is broad and shallow, flowing swiftly over the shallows. The water barely covers the horses’ fetlocks, and we cross comfortably. Once on the Anórien bank, we head upstream. Rounding a bend in the river, we get our first sight of the town of Sarn Esgar. Low red sandstone walls surround the central portion, with a large gatehouse across the road. Clustered up against the outside of the walls are countless thatched wooden houses. Like all towns it seems to have expanded beyond the original fortified citadel, but the buildings of importance remain safe inside.

With Elfhelm to the fore, we ride up to the main gate. Our way is barred by a couple of pikesmen. Their armour is crude but functional, breastplate and skirt, helms with a simple nose-guard. Local militia men, I think.

“Halt,” one cries. “By order of Hatholdir, lord of these lands. Who goes hither, thus armed?”

“Elfhelm, Marshal of the Riddermark. I have been requested to meet with the troops of King Elessar, who I am told are billeted in this town, and my liege-lord, Éomer King, desires that I go to this meeting.” I note that Elfhelm carefully avoids mention of Faramir's name.

The men lift their pikes. Elfhelm sits upon his horse, imperious and in control of the situation, and deputes his sergeant to ask for directions. The sergeant leads us through the narrow streets of the town, until eventually we see the swinging sign of an inn, and a low archway which leads into the ostler’s yard. Elfhelm charges the sergeant and his corporal to stable our horses, and sets off to find Faramir, with me trotting behind.
Elfhelm and I enter the inn, and the first people we come upon are Faramir and a fell looking, dark
haired warrior in a hauberk and cuirass, helmet tucked under his arm. They seem to be in the middle
of a dispute. It does not look as though they are in any danger of coming to blows, but the distaste
each holds the other in is evident to my eye.

“And I say,” says the stranger in an angry tone, “That these matters are best left to me and my lord,
and his liege-lord in turn. There's no need for Minas Tirith to involve itself, and certainly no need for
those bloody tow-haired savages to come across the border to interfere.”

“Well, seeing as how to date none of the bandits preying on the towns and hamlets around the Firien
wood have been caught, I beg to differ concerning the need for assistance from Minas Tirith,”
Faramir replies. “And the Rohirrim are not interfering, they will merely cut off the possibility of
escape across the border.”

“Too bloody cosy with the fuckers by half, if you ask me. Just because the new king is sword
brother to their king – an upstart from nowhere I heard, was only a Marshal this time last year…”
There is something unpleasant, suggestive, reminiscent of Wormtongue about the way the man says
“sword brother.”

The sharpness of Faramir’s response suggests to me that I am not imagining things. “You would do
desperately well to remember just who is ultimately overlord to you, your lord and his liege-lord. It is well for a
man to be clear where his loyalties lie. Should you harbour any doubts on this score, I suggest you
resolve those doubts speedily, for your own good.”

“Fairly easy to be lulled by the fact that for the most part he leads by engendering the sort of loyalty that make men ready to die for him, but he possesses
a will of iron, and when necessary will command rather than persuade.

Faramir notices us approaching. “Marshal, Captain,” he says, nodding to us. “This is Delion of the
local Militia attached to the town of Sarn Esgar” He turns back to the Gondorian and says, his voice
curt, “I think we have finished our business, or at least both said our piece. Elfhelm, have the two of
you supped yet?”

“No,” says Elfhelm, taking off his helmet.

“Good, neither have I. We can discuss matters over supper in my room. I've got you a room Elfhelm,
and I'll share with the Captain here.” He gives me a slight smile, but the genuine warmth is evident in
his eyes.

Elfhelm says, voice level, “In my Éored, Cornet, not Captain.” Faramir says nothing, but raises an
eyebrow and gives me a quizzical look.

The militia man interrupts with a parting shot, his voice a sneer. “So the rumours about the troops
from Mundburg are true, are they? Fancy a bit of horse-boy arse, do you? I hadn't thought their
officers would stoop so low as to act the pimp, though…”

I watch with a certain detached and dark amusement as both Elfhelm and Faramir's hands stray to
their sword hilts. I find my lips curling upwards into a grim smile, and take off my own helmet. “I
greatly doubt it's my arse he's interested in, and besides which, I rather gathered that your presence
was no longer required.” I let this last phrase hang in the air for a moment, then walk to Faramir's
side. “Come, husband, I believe you promised us some food.”

The militia man shoots me a glare, part disbelief, part thinly veiled anger at his dismissal, and disappears through the open door to the courtyard beyond. Faramir leads us into the main parlour of the inn, and summons the inn keeper, requesting food and drink to be brought to our room.

“Give me ten minutes to get my armour off and I'll join you,” Elfhelm says.

Faramir offers me his arm and takes up the stairs and into a private room, with (I am glad to see) a large bed, and space for a table and stools. Following close behind us, the landlord arrives with mugs of ale, accompanied by a maid bearing a tray of roast fowl and freshly cooked bread. She lays the food upon the table, then the two retire.

Faramir wraps his arms tightly around me and kisses me, stroking my hair. I return the kiss, pressing hard against him. After some moments, our lips part, and we cling to each other, my cheek pressed against his shoulder, his against my hair.

“My Shieldmaiden, my most beloved, rough, untamed, wild Shieldmaiden. Oh, how I have missed you.” I feel his breath ruffle my hair. Lifting his face, he continues, “Here, let me help you unbuckle all this gear,” and sets to work on the breastplate and backplate of my cuirass. Setting them against the wall, he pulls me close against him and nuzzles my neck. “Do you think Elfhelm really will arrive in ten minutes?”

I laugh. “Yes, unfortunately. Probably less. I have missed you too.” I run my fingers across his cheek. “Your letter...”

“And yours,” he replies. “It finally arrived yesterday, though I think I am right in concluding it was written some time earlier... Oh my love, I never want you to feel that I have trapped you, that you are in a cage.”

“Nor would you – that much was clear from your letter. You give me the freedom to be myself, to make my own mistakes, to give me the space to make amends. No other man would do that. I am truly blessed.” I kiss him, then stroke his cheek. “But you are frightened of the consequences. I know you have lost so much.” I rest my head against his chest and listen to the beat of his heart, strong, steady. His arms tighten round my back and his head comes to nestle against my hair.

“I will not lie. Part of me wants to keep you safe, to stand with my sword between you and all dangers,” he says. “I can think of few times in my life where my emotions have been in such conflict with my reason. The desperate pain I felt when I had a vision of my brother's body. The rage and impotence I felt when my father commanded me to retake Osgiliath, whatever the cost in terms of my men's lives, or indeed my own. I feel that pain and confusion when I think of losing you.” His voice is rough with emotion.

“Do you think I do not share that pain?” I ask. It seems to me that my words sound equally choked. “When Elfhelm and I saw the messenger riding across the plains towards Edoras, clad in the dark green of your Rangers, rather than the black and silver of Minas Tirith, do you not think I feared something terrible to have befallen you?”

Faramir lifts his head, and looks at me, a steady searching gaze. He raises one hand and strokes my cheek gently. “Oh my love.” His voice is little more than a whisper. “It seems that we are both to share the pain and fear of loving a soldier.”

“And I suppose I have the advantage of you, for all my life I have been surrounded by women who could do nothing except watch and wait as their men went to war.” I try to keep the bitterness out of
my voice. It has always seemed to me such an unjust burden to be placed upon my sex, but that burden is not Faramir's fault, nor is it of his making. I look at him, and add, “But you cannot have expected such a fate to befall you.”

“No, I did not. It still seems strange to me. For ever I was taught to protect the women within my household, as my duty as a soldier and even more so as my highest duty as a man.” Faramir looks at me, his eyes questioning, wanting to see what I make of this.

I think on this for a few moments, laying my head against his chest. Eventually I look up at him. “And so you shall still,” I answer. “For I should think myself honoured to fight beside you, to know that we fought for each other, would defend one another to the death. I think it is still the same thing... except that we will each be bound to protect the other.”

“It seems that in this instance, the obligation, the duty to offer protection will no longer rest only on one party.” I sense that my love is thinking aloud. Then he gives a wry look. “But, oh, my pride, my damnable male pride.” His lips form a half-smile. “There is a part of me still that rebels, that wants to protect you, to know that you are kept safe by my valour.” And now he gives a chuckle. “Starting with that militia man. I should like to give him a good whipping for his insolence to you.”

“I think the man has been slapped down sufficiently by his discovery that I am your wife, not your catamite,” I laugh. My laughter fades quickly though, and I find myself giving him a hesitant smile. “But does it not worry you that as well as your male pride suffering insult, my feminine softness is somewhat lacking? Do I fail in my duty to be a womanly wife?”

“I love you for who you are.” Faramir tightens his grasp round me, then slides his hands over my arse, pulling my hips tight against his. I can feel the effect I have on him. “I can assure you, my lady, that I find you a most womanly wife in all the ways that matter.” Again, he pauses, and I can see his thoughts writ large on his face. It is an expression that I have come to know, the expression that forms when he is going to say something which he knows to be true but thinks may not be well received. “Though I fear that it will not be easy to have a marriage where both of us have an equal say, not when the partners are as strong willed as you and I, but I would not have it any other way.”

I rest my cheek against Faramir's chest. He continues, “Did I tell you that in Gondor it is customary for a bride to promise to obey her husband?” I stiffen in his grasp. “I thought we could leave that part of the vows out, but I am thinking of putting in its place a promise to obey your ranking officers and listen to your sergeant's advice.” I snort with laughter.

“So,” my husband continues, drawing his head back to look at my face. He gives a knowing smile. “From Captain to Cornet...”

“My brother said that if I insisted on 'playing at soldiers'...” I give a pretend grimace, then continue, “I should learn to do it properly, and ride with Elfhelm's Éored, and learn some military discipline.”

Faramir laughs. “You know, maybe I should spend a bit of time with your brother. I think I could learn some useful things about how to handle you.”

“Funnily enough, he says much the same about you.”

Faramir trails a line of kisses down the side of my neck. “I think, my love, that at least some of the techniques of persuasion I use on you are not ones your brother could avail himself of.” His hand comes up to cup my breast, and I lean towards him and nip the top of his ear gently. At that moment, there is a sharp knock at the door. Faramir utters an oath in Sindarin, then, stepping back from me, says curtly, “Come in.”
Elfhelm enters. Faramir gestures to the table, and the Marshal and I sit side by side. Faramir sits down at right angles to us, then moves the food slightly to one side to make room for a map of heavy parchment which he unfurls upon the table.

“Being tow-haired savages,” says Elfhelm, “Do you mind if we eat while you talk?” He tears off a leg from one of the fowl and starts to tuck in. Not wanting to be left out, I grab the other leg and a chunk of the bread. Faramir takes a drink of ale and then starts to gesture to the map.

“You see here the White Mountains as they run from Helm's Deep in the West to Minas Tirith to the East, and slightly South. Here, we have the Mering Stream, dividing the Eastfold from Anórien.” He runs his fingers over the parchment, tracing out three parallel lines. “These three valleys, just beyond the edge of the Firien wood, are the fiefdoms of Lords Carandol, Nauron and Gwaethron. Gwaethron's fiefdom includes the town of Sarn Esgar, where our friend Delion's militia are based. And here is where things get really interesting – all three share the same liege-lord, Hatholdir of Mindon Maegorod, who is none other than Lord Castamir's nephew.”

I swallow the mouthful I've been chewing. “And, out of interest, how many troops did they supply for the defence of Minas Tirith.”

“None,” says Faramir darkly. “Anborn and Damrod have made visits to the three liege men in their manors, and it is the same tale you were told at Askburn: the messengers did not get to them. Now this is not impossible – we know that the messenger who brought the arrow to Edoras was slain on his return journey to Minas Tirith. Anórien has, in recent years, been a lawless and dangerous place, and, this close to Anduin, orcs made forays into these lands. But it seems remarkable that all three of them failed to receive any word.”

“And doubly interesting given their allegiance to a relative of the main opponent of King Elessar's claim to the throne,” says Elfhelm.

“How go things in Minas Tirith?” I ask.

“Well,” says Faramir, “Castamir and his faction have been very quiet since the coronation, but I have no doubt that they are simply biding their time. Not only do we have problems in Anórien, some of which seem to be taking place suspiciously close to his nephew's estates, his son-in-law, Megilagor, is lord of Harn Falas, just to the south of Ethir Anduin, the mouth of the Anduin – territory which has been only loosely tied to Gondor for a century or more now. My uncle and cousins suspect him of giving safe harbour to corsair ships, but as yet, have found no hard proof. It puts Castamir in an interesting position – if he can find the troops, both mounted men and footsoldiers in the north, and armed barques and sailors in the south, he could commit the King to war on two fronts, which given the losses at Pelennor and Morannon, could stretch Gondor to breaking point.”

“What proof have you to tie Castamir to any of this? Can you show that the liege-men are acting on the orders of his nephew, or in turn, that they are offering protection to bandits to run free through neighbouring fiefdoms, and into the Riddermark?” Elfhelm, as always, hits straight to the heart of the matter.

“Aye, there's the rub. All the pieces seem positioned on the board nicely, but I have no proof that Castamir placed them there,” Faramir says.

We eat the rest of the fowl and the bread, continuing our talk, with Faramir filling in some of the details: his rangers have scouted the woods extensively, but found no traces of the bandits, suggesting that they are instead hiding out among the general population. Elfhelm asks about Delion, and Faramir tells us that he and his militia have been, to say the least, uncooperative. Elfhelm suggests simply imposing the King’s rule directly on the province and replacing the men of dubious
loyalty with his own, whereupon I remind him of my brother's similar problem with respect to Askburn, and the danger of a new King, who is not sure of the loyalties of all below him, over-reaching himself only to find that too many of those of wavering loyalties come down on the wrong side. I watch as Elfhelm mulls this over, then gives one of his curt nods, signalling agreement.

Eventually, after long conversation, Elfhelm bids us goodnight.

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The inn keeper's wife has brought us a washing bowl and a couple of jugs of hot water. I stand at the table, stripped to the waist, washing myself. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Faramir lying on the bed. He has kicked his boots off and seems the picture of relaxation, legs stretched out, ankles crossed, fingers laced behind his head. He still wears his shirt, but untucked, its ties undone. In the candlelight I can make out just a tempting glimpse of his chest hair. My gaze wanders up, following the line of his neck, his jaw, his face... his eyes, looking back at me. His expression is a mixture of amusement and desire.

“What do you see that you like so well, my love?”

“Mmm, let me see. Your skin, wet and glistening, golden in the candlelight. The way your breasts move. The wonders the water and the cool night air have wrought on your nipples. I could lie here and watch you all night.”

I can't help myself: I give a snort of laughter. “I had not realised I had married a voyeur. Have you any idea what the look on your face is like?”

“And so the pot calls the kettle black,” Faramir retorts with an answering chuckle. “I know full well what my face must look like, for I remember exactly what yours looked like that morning in Minas Tirith when you looked upon me naked.”

I let the cloth drop back into the bowl, then walk over to the door, feeling Faramir's gaze burn my skin. Slowly and deliberately, I drop the bar across the door, then make my way to the bed, where I lift my leg across Faramir and straddle him. To my amusement, he lies there, hands still tucked behind his head, and simply watches me, a look of slight challenge in his eyes. I can feel his hardness through our clothes, but I am in no rush. I reach out and let my fingers drift along his jaw, gently touching the short, soft hair there, then trail my hand down his neck and along the skin so tantalisingly exposed by his open shirt. Still, he does not move, but I hear his breathing become shallower, more rapid, and I lean forward to brush my lips to the hair on his chest, my eyelids fluttering shut for a moment as I feel my nipples brush against the coarse cloth of his shirt. I lift my head up just a bit, and place my hands on his cheeks before brushing his lips gently with mine. I can feel him smile, but still he makes no move, and I find myself both intrigued and aroused by this new game he has invented for us to play.

I kiss him again, this time letting my mouth close round his lower lip and sucking gently. I tease at his mouth with my lips and tongue until eventually he parts his lips, but still he lets me control things. He still has not moved his hands – they remain behind his head. I decide to make up for this by letting my hands explore, and I run them first over his face and jaw, then down his neck. Then I sit back up, kneeling astride him, and reach for the hem of his shirt, tugging it up. With just the hint of a smile, he obediently raises his arms above his head to let me take the garment off, but then returns his hands to their resting place, elbows resting on the pillow, a raised eyebrow the only thing giving away his thoughts.
“You, my lord and husband, are the most dreadful tease,” I scold.

“Yes,” he says, his voice even and quiet.

His face is almost impassive save for the muscle at the corner of his mouth twitching and the slight crinkling of the lines at the corner of his eyes. I am assaulted by desire on two fronts – desire to win the competition, to make him lose his cool and sang-froid, and desire for his body, to feel it within me. Of the two, the desire to win is uppermost. With great deliberation, I grind my groin slowly across his, delighting in the stab of pleasure I feel, revelling in the twitch of his cock that this brings about. Slowly, I stretch my hands above my head in a pretence of undoing the knots in my spine from a long day in the saddle. I can see from the sudden flash in Faramir's eyes, darkening from grey to almost black, that the pretence hasn't fooled him for a moment. I can't help myself smiling – I can feel my breasts bounce as I move my arms, and the heat of Faramir's gaze is almost tangible. Almost, but not quite, and I want to feel a touch there, so bringing my hands back down, I skim my palms across my breasts, letting my head drop forward as my own skin grazes my nipples. Through my hair, I see Faramir's face change, the first chinks appearing in his armour. His lips part slightly, and I see the tip of his tongue run along them, then watch his throat move as he swallows. I slide my hands down my sides, then run them over his chest, dipping my face to flick my tongue across one of his nipples. Faramir makes a noise half way between a sharp intake of breath and a groan. His voice, when he speaks, is hoarse.

“It seems, my lady, that you are an even bigger tease than I, and in the pursuit of this art you wish me to cede to you the victory.”

I undo the ties of my breeches and start to push them down over my hips, then lean forward, letting my breasts brush his chest. I whisper, “Do you yield, my lord?” I nibble gently at his jaw line to distract him while I move my legs to get them free of the confinement of my clothes.

“And what sign would you have me give so that you might know of my surrender, sweet conqueror?” Faramir whispers back. His eyes look at me intently, and I smile, delaying my reply while I set to work on the ties of his garments. As I slide them down over his slim hips, I let my hands rove over the firm muscles of his thighs, feeling the warm flesh and the hair that lies there, dark against his white skin. Both completely naked now, I straddle him once more, giving my own gasp as I settle astride his cock, rubbing against him, feeling his hips start to move.

“That you might surrender your arms to me, and place them at my disposal for my use and pleasure.” I trail my fingers along the soft skin on the underside of his arm to underline the double meaning. Then I lift myself slightly and, as slowly as I can, slide down over his length, my thigh muscles trembling with the effort of holding myself just above him. Faramir shuts his eyes, his breath coming in ragged gasps. Surely I must be on the brink? One last move must leave me victorious on the field. I reach behind me and slide my hand between his legs to stroke his balls. And with that I find I have won, for Faramir suddenly reaches for me, his hands grasping my hip while he drives up into me.

“I yield, my lady.” His voice comes as a hoarse groan. He spreads the fingers that circle my hip, and his thumb moves down to stroke me, easing between my folds to find the hardened nub that hides there, circling it.

He pushes up against me again, filling me. I see the muscles in his stomach tense, outlined as he half sits so that his mouth can close on my nipple, and he swirls his tongue round it. I tangle my hands in his hair as he sucks, his hips still moving, fingers clenched round me, and always that pressure, the soft, silken movements of his thumbs, the fullness of his cock deep within me. Now he is in control, cradling my hips as he withdraws, and I feel a rush of moisture as the pressure is released, then he presses in once more. Gasping, I bear down on him. He lies back against the pillow, eyes watching
my every movement, and I lean forward until I can feel his breath on my lips. His mouth finds mine, and all is heat and desire, moving against one another. Oh Béma, the way he fills me – was there ever pleasure like this in my life before I knew him? I want him so, want all of him. His hips grind against me, and I writhe on top of him, riding him. Our rhythm becomes urgent, his cock thrusting up, my body bearing down on him, flesh against flesh. I feel myself poised on the bring, my whole body trembling with the pleasure that threatens to engulf me. Then I hear him call my name, and let the wave come crashing over me as we both reach the release we seek.

As we lie, panting, among the tangled sheets, Faramir catches my gaze, his grey eyes sparkling with humour, and we both start to laugh. Caught by a surge of embarrassment, I break away from his keen glance, and feel myself blushing. I am hit by a sense of the absurdity of the scene we have just acted out, and from Faramir's laughter, I think I am not the only one.

“What manner of game was this, my love?” he asks.

I reply, tentatively looking back at him, and cradling his cheek in my palm. “You should tell me the answer, for you started it.”

“Not as a conscious stratagem. It just happened in the moment. Though I fear that even should we make a habit of playing this game, it is a contest that is ever doomed to be a draw.”

“Why so?”

“Because, my lady, neither of us can resist the other, and we will always both surrender to our need for pleasure.” He pulls my head against his chest, and tucks his chin on top, stroking my hair. “My bold shieldmaiden, my heart's dearest love.”

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A hammering noise! I stir in my sleep, and roll over, still groggy. Faramir is already bolt upright beside me, his hand reaching for a weapon. The noise is repeated, and I realise someone is banging on the door.

“Lord Faramir... My Lady.” It is Elfhelm's voice. “Lord Faramir, you are needed. A brawl – your troops and the militia. Come quickly.” Faramir gets out of bed, and pulls on his breeches. I follow his example, adding a shirt just in time as Faramir opens the door. Elfhelm waits as the pair of us find boots and then he leads us down the stairs and out into the courtyard. I stop in amazement at the scene. Half a dozen or so men on each side are fighting. Men throw haymaker punches at one another, and some have ended up wrestling on the ground. Mercifully, no weapons seem to be involved. What in Béma's name will Faramir be able to do to stop this?

My husband seems in no rush. He settles against the door jamb with one shoulder, legs casually crossed, arms folded and watches. Eventually, as exhaustion begins to set in amongst the combatants, he signals to Damrod who has been waiting in the shadows.

“A bucket of water over the ring leaders to attract their attention, if you would?”

Damrod grins and fills a bucket from the horse trough. He and Anborn seize the two men by the collar and haul them to a semblance of attention. The melée comes to a halt and an awkward silence fills the courtyard. Faramir, his face impassive, lets the silence stretch out longer than I would be able to or would dare to. He fixes his eye on the militia captain we met earlier. The captain now nurses a black eye, clothing splattered with horse shit from rolling in the mud with one of the Rangers. Then Faramir speaks, a tone of utter contempt in his voice.
“Delion, take your men and administer whatever passes for discipline in your sorry rabble. That is if you are still able to exercise any discipline over your men after stooping to their level.” He turns his back pointedly, then addresses Damrod. “Line our men up, and assign punishment duties. I leave it to your discretion to make sure they are reminded of the level of behaviour fitting in members of my company.” He signals to Anborn to follow us and moves to lead us back indoors. As we pass Delion's men, I get a closer look at them. One in particular catches my eye, and I grab Faramir's sleeve.

“The man third from the right,” I whisper, “He's the one who killed Aelfred in the skirmish.”
No sooner have I told Faramir of my suspicions than he strides over to Delion and his men. Elfhelm, Faramir's junior officers and I hang back, watching to see how events will unfold. My hand drifts to my sword hilt, and I notice Elfhelm do the same. The atmosphere is tense, and I find myself noticing odd little details: the sharp tang of piss and manure from the midden; the drops of water from the eaves round the courtyard, the greasy surface of the cobbles, smeared with mud. Delion stands beside the man I have identified. Around them are clustered the group who had been fighting with the rangers. They lack the discipline of Faramir's men, but nonetheless carry themselves with the air of men who have seen combat. Taken together, the group has that cohesiveness that comes from fighting together repeatedly. They may not be regulars, but I for one am not going to make the mistake of underestimating them.

“Captain Delion, what can you tell me about this man,” Faramir asks, pointing to the man I have identified.

“He goes by the name of Haerth. He's a sell-sword,” Delion answers, his tone petulant. He brushes a hank of hair back from his forehead with a dirty hand, and glares at my husband.

“How long has he been with your company?” Faramir continues.

“This time? About three weeks. He fights with us on and off.” The militia man seems to be trying to sound casual and off-hand. To my ear, he simply sounds evasive.

“And when he’s not with your company? What does he do?”

“How the hell should I know? I'm their captain, not their bloody nursemaid.” The switch in tactics, from feigned indifference to anger, is abrupt. He shifts his stance, standing foursquare on the balls of his feet, poised for fight. I can see the men behind Delion eyeing Faramir aggressively. But they also take note of the four of us standing behind him, and the larger group of Rangers to one side.

“The Lady Éowyn tells me he was one of the bandits who attacked her troop of Riders in the Firien Wood a few weeks ago.” Faramir's tone is dismissive, as if that is as much information as he cares to bother imparting to Delion. He turns back to us, though I sense that he is aware of what is going on behind him, ready to move in an instant if any of the militiamen goes on the attack. It feels as if the very air around us crackles like a storm brewing. “Mablung, take him to the town gaol. Question him about his whereabouts, see if he can supply any alibi. Then leave him there overnight. We'll tackle the problem properly in the morning.” Now Faramir turns to Anborn and Elfhelm. “There's still the issue of my Rangers to be disciplined. See to that for me, if you would, Anborn. Marshal, what caused the fracas in the first place?”

Elfhelm gives me a sidelong glance. “A fight over a woman...” He hesitates, as if deciding how best to phrase things. “A woman who plies her trade here.” Oh, for Béma's sake, does Elfhelm think I am some sort of shrinking violet who is unaware of the existence of whores? Fortunately, it appears from Faramir's next words that he does not intend to shelter me from the realities of the world.

“My Lady Éowyn, could you go and talk to the woman? Find out what her version of the fight is, and any other useful details you can get out of her.” His eyes say more than his words, and I nod. He wants me to find out more about Haerth and his relation to Delion – is he just an occasional
mercenary, or does he have closer links to the Militia? The chances are that this woman has spent time with all these men. My husband continues, “Lord Elfhelm, come and bear witness while I question Delion and his men.” He calls over four of his Rangers who were not involved in the fight and bids them stand guard over the Militia while he questions them one by one. I go in search of the woman.

Ducking under the low arch and through the door into the main room of the inn, I start with the bar keeper, who points me to the woman. He tells me her name is Rustwen. From the little Sindarin I know, it seems an appropriate name: dark red hair is piled up on her head. She is young, scarcely out of her teens, to judge from her smooth skin and rounded cheeks, but her eyes look decades older. On her left cheekbone is a red bruise, already darkening. Clearly the men have not confined themselves to hitting one another.

“Have you a private parlour where I could talk to her?” I ask the bar keeper. He indicates a door diagonally behind the bar. I walk over to the table where the young woman sits. She eyes me suspiciously: women (other than those in her trade) are rare in establishments like this. I decide that the blunt approach is best.

“I am Éowyn, a shieldmaiden of the Mark, in the company of the Marshal Elfhelm. I understand you were present at the fight between some of Captain Faramir's men and the local Militia. He has sent me to get your account of events. Would you accompany me to the back parlour, so I can talk to you about it in private?”

“Nothing to say about it,” she says. Her tone is surly, her face superficially impassive, but I sense an undercurrent of aggression.

“Nonetheless, I would have conversation with you. The sooner you talk to me, the sooner we can both return to our beds.”

I see her gaze flit sideways to the main door into the courtyard, then back to me, as if assessing whether I can get round the table fast enough if she makes a run for it.

“Not wise. I think I have the advantage in speed: I definitely have the advantage in dress when it comes to a race. And I am armed and you are not. So... will you come quietly?” I note the slight trace of a smug knowingness which crosses her face as I mention the fact that I am armed: so, the wench has a blade of some sort hidden in her clothes. Best keep a table between us.

She makes as if to allow me to go first, in a pretence of deference to my rank. She must think I am a fool. Smiling, I usher her through the door ahead of me, cutting off her escape. I wonder if this cat-and-mouse game will continue when I start to question her. I gesture for her to sit down. The bar keeper appears with a jug of small-beer. Not ideal for keeping my wits about me on this little sleep, but I don't think I'd trust the water in this town. I pour us a mug each, hoping that the gesture may break down some of her air of defiance. I take a sip. With relief I realise it is very weak indeed – the sort you could give to children.

“So,” I say, “The fight. Who started it, and why?”

“Don't know,” she says. She looks down at her hands, avoiding my gaze. There's a truculence in her tone of voice, a desire to needle me.

“Let's try a question you do know the answer to: who hit you?”

“Don't know,” she says again. She shifts in her chair, lolling back slightly, just enough to convey the insolence which underlies the refusal to answer.
“Either you think I'm stupid,” I say, “Or you think that I believe you to be stupid. As for the first, I can assure you I'm not stupid. As for the second, I know this much. Women in your trade stay alive, stay unmarked and marketable, by knowing which of the men in a bar are likely to turn nasty. You know fine who hit you.”

“My trade?” She raises an eyebrow and finally looks at me, lip curling in a sneer. “Think you know all about it just because you've set foot in a tavern?”

It's the longest response I have had from her so far, so I decide to back off from the details of the fight in favour of simply getting her to talk. “I told you: I'm not daft. Of course I don't. So why don't you tell me?”

“Why? So you can get a bit of a thrill at second hand? Give you and that fancy bloke from the Mundburg you're screwing a game to play in bed?” Her eyes are knowing, her expression sly and smug. She's hoping for a reaction from me. But it's hardly a great secret that Faramir and I are sharing a room and a bed. I take a breath, then try another tack.

“Alright, so you don't want to make polite small talk about screwing.” This actually gets a half smile from her before she manages to return her features to their customary sulkiness. “So let's go back to the question of who hit you.”

“Nah, you want to talk about screwing, let's talk about screwing.” Damn, I've given her an opening to be evasive. She continues, eyes narrowing. “You know, if enjoying shagging makes a woman a wanton, then you're more of a whore than I am. I passed by your door earlier, heard you at it like a bitch on heat.”

This jab gets under my guard. What I do with Faramir – that is no business of hers. It is ours and ours alone. It feels as if she has trampled on something precious. Almost of its own volition, my hand rises as if to strike her, my palm itching. Then I catch sight once more of the bruise on her cheek, and my hand drops back to the table. I am not going to stoop to the level of Delion and his men. But I let some of my anger show as I snap back at her.

“I guess you'd know all about being a bitch on heat.”

She laughs, a hollow bitter laugh, years older than her face. “You think I enjoy screwing?” She sounds genuinely incredulous. “Half a dozen blokes of an evening, the first two or three before I've even covered the landlord's cut? And half of them stinking, or old and missing half their teeth, or both? You might get the odd one who's young and comely, but not often. And to be honest, your Ladyship...” Her voice drips with sarcasm, and her shifty look makes me think honesty is the last thing I'm likely to get out of her. But she continues. “By the time I've finished my shift, an Elf Lord in all his glory could walk in here of the end of an evening, and I'd still be pretending. Dunno why the blokes are dim enough to buy it really.”

“How many of them hit you?” I ask.

“Not that many. Some get a bit rough, but I don't tend to go with them twice. Ordig, the landlord, he takes a healthy cut of the takings. But he does work for his brass. He usually backs me up, chucks out the rough 'uns.'”

“Was that what tonight was about?” I ask, wondering if I've finally found my opening.

She nods, as if still reluctant to give any information away. Then she says, “Delion and Haerth are alright. They're just interested in a quick fuck, in and out, get it over with. But Delion's second, he's a right bastard. Gets off on hurting women. So I said no. He didn't want to take that as an answer. Said
whores don't get to say no. And what with all the militia here, and the Mundburg troops, Ordig was too rushed off his feet to notice. Or maybe didn't want to. One thing kicking out a farmhand who's had a few too many and got a bit arsey. Quite another thing kicking out a militiaman whose mates are all around. Anyway, Delion's sergeant belted me one in the face – like you said, it's my livelihood, and the bastard knows it. Then a couple of the Mundburg blokes said that was no way to treat a gentlewoman. Which was nice of them, seeing as I'd screwed both of them the night before, so they knew I was no gentlewoman. Then all hell broke loose.”

She pauses, takes a long pull of her beer. I top up the tankard from the jug the landlord left on the table. Rustwen sits in silence for a while, not looking at me. I give her some time to stew. I look round the room with its smoke stained walls and ceiling, the rough-hewn table pitted from years of use and heavily stained with beer, the floor with rushes, not changed often enough I think. Eventually I speak.

“So, Delion and Haerth... Delion tells us Haerth is a sell-sword, only fights with them occasionally.”

“Aye, that's right.” Rustwen twiddles a strand of her hair, then picks at her nails, not volunteering anything else.

“How well do the two of them know each other?” I ask.

“Dunno,” she replies sullenly. We're back to this game, are we?

“Look, you're a shrewd woman. You know who's friends with who, who'll back up who in a fight...”

“Nah, I just screw them...” She stares at me belligerently for a moment, then goes back to fiddling with the skin round her nails, pointedly ignoring me. As I try to search for an opening to draw her back into some sort of exchange once more, I realise how completely fuddled my mind is. It must be nearing dawn. As if in answer to my thoughts, I hear a cock crow. Giving my head a shake, I rub my hand across my eyes, which feel as if they are filled with grit.

Then I hear a soft knock at the door. Faramir enters, followed by Elfhelm and Mablung. They both look as tired as I feel. Elfhelm has that somewhat grumpy air about him, and Faramir just looks drawn and pinched. I look at Rustwen.

“Go and get some sleep. But I'll want to talk to you again when the sun is up. I think you're keeping something back.” I turn to Mablung. “See that she's bolted into her room – I don't want her taking the opportunity to disappear overnight.” Mablung nods his assent to me, and ushers Rustwen out.

Faramir and Elfhelm sit at the table. I briefly sketch what little I have learned from Rustwen, which backs up what Faramir has found. He tells me that he too has not got much more from the militia men than confirmation that Haerth is a mercenary who occasionally fights for them. They claim to know nothing of his life outside the militia. He also tells me that Mablung has not got anywhere questioning Haerth. Haerth apparently is pissed and punch-drunk and has been switching between aggression and moody silence (Faramir of course phrases this rather more elegantly).

Faramir sees me yawn, and takes my hand gently.

“Good night, or perhaps, good morrow, Elfhelm. I think my Lady is exhausted, as am I. We will try to get a few hours sleep before trying to untangle this web further. I suggest you do the same.” Faramir leads me to the door and up the stairs to our room.

As we undress, the question that's been nagging at me bobs to the surface of my sleepy mind. “My
love, does Delion – does his liege-lord – know who you are?”

Faramir gives a ghost of a smile. “Nay, I have been rather circumspect. I have not actually lied outright, but I have not told them all I might.”

“Why?”

“I suppose, keeping my arrows until the target is certain.” He quotes the familiar folk saying. “It may be useful to remain unknown, or it may become more useful to parade my rank. I shall wait and see how events unfold.”

By the time we have finished this exchange, we have stripped to our small clothes. By tacit agreement we go no further, both knowing that sleep is what we desire, before falling into the bed. He pulls the covers over us, then wraps his arms around me. I nestle into his familiar heat and solidity, and my last thought before sleep claims me is how comforting his presence is.

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Noises drag me back to consciousness. It feels as if every fibre of my being rebels against being dragged into the world of the waking. Bone tired – yes, every limb feels like lead, through muscles, sinews, and all the way to my bones. My eyes are filled with all the sand of the Haradwaith. Beside me, Faramir has already risen, and is hastily pulling his breeches on. Years as a Ranger have left him with the ability to go from sleep to complete alertness almost instantly. I wish I shared this ability. Groaning, I heft my legs over the edge of the bed and rise unsteadily, reaching for the heap of discarded clothes with bleary eyes.

As I pull my shirt over my head, I start to focus on the noises drifting through the window. Our room faces the front of the inn, not the courtyard, and the yells and jeers of a quite sizeable crowd come from the town square I saw in the dusk the previous evening. Above the shouts of the rabble, I hear Anborn’s clear voice.

“Halt, in the name of Gondor and of the King.”

Faramir now has on his tunic, bearing the white moon and stars, and straps his sword belt to his waist. I realise from his bearing that this is a situation where we must be seen to be in command, and though I have not the time to don my breast-plate, I pull the surcoat on anyway, and cast my rider’s cloak about me, tucking my helm under my arm. We run down the stairs, then through the archway, where Faramir slows to a brisk march, and makes for the town square.

The square is bounded by the town hall, the guild hall, and the rows, a curiously Gondorian form of building – wooden framed buildings, dark wood contrasting with white lath-and-plaster, with entrances both at ground level, and lining a second, higher arcade above. The space is thronged with people come to see the spectacle. A gallows has been erected, and on the platform stands Delion, flanked by his militia. His second in command holds Rustwen by the arm, her hands tied behind her back. Facing Delion, sword drawn, is Anborn. A group of Rangers stands behind him, a second group, led by Mablung, have climbed the stairs to the upper rows to gain the advantage of height. They stand with their bows at the ready, arrows nocked but bows not yet drawn.

Faramir strides into the gap between the two sides, and stands in silence for a moment, surveying the scene. Finally, he raises an eyebrow, and speaks, in a clear voice, but with an air of detachment and command.

“Would you care to tell me what’s going on, Anborn?” Delion starts to speak, but Faramir cuts him off. “I do not believe I asked you. You will get your turn to speak in a moment.”
“We caught Delion and his militia about to lynch this woman without trial,” Anborn replies, curtly.

Now Faramir turns to Delion. “Would you care to tell me why you chose to act without recourse to law?”

Before Delion can answer, a commotion interrupts. A group of men on horseback rides into the square, reining in their horses and coming to a halt beside the gallows. At their head is a middle aged man on what is (by Gondorian standards) a fine horse. The horse is matched by the apparel the man wears: fine linen lawns, silks and velvets. The rest of the group are men at arms, burnished breast plates and armour in much better condition than that of the militia. Given the height of the platform, the leader is on a level with Faramir, and he stares at him with a cold and dispassionate eye. Faramir returns the stare, his face closed and unreadable, but nonetheless conveying a quiet confidence and self-assurance. Eventually the newcomer speaks.

“Captain Delion, could you tell me what is going on here? Who are these men, and why are they preventing you from administering due justice in my name?” He pointedly ignores Faramir.

My husband, however, well used to playing this sort of game, interjects before Delion can gather his limited wits, and says in a cool voice, “Lord Gwaethron, I presume. I am the Captain General of the Rangers of Ithilien, charged by the King Elessar Telcontar to deal with the unchecked activities of bandits running amok in your fiefdom: bandits your militia, led by Captain Delion, seem to have failed to capture.”

Gwaethron raises an eyebrow. It seems he too has played this game before, for he responds, “While I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Captain General, I believe my question was aimed at Captain Delion.”

Delion attempts a garbled explanation of the situation, or at least, of his version of the situation, before Faramir interrupts again. “The issue, my Lord Gwaethron, is that what you have happened upon is not the administration of due justice, as you so succinctly put it, but rather an attempt at a lynching without recourse to law.”

“And I was trying to explain to this ponce from the Mundburg that this a matter for the local militia, answerable only to your Lordship. I'm your appointed representative. I get to say what's law round here. Excepting when you're present of course, my Lord,” Delion says, ever aggressive. He looks shiftily at Faramir, while oozing deference towards Gwaethron.

Gwaethron nods in approval. “My esteemed Captain may not have the greatest way with words, but he is correct. This is my fiefdom. I execute the laws of Gondor within its bounds.”

“On the contrary,” Faramir says, with a look which could turn braver men than Gwaethron and his lackey to stone, “As Steward of Gondor, answerable only to the King, I have authority to decide what actions are lawful throughout the realm. Anyone who questions my authority is committing treason against Gondor and her King. Now, I repeat my question: why are you acting without legal process and threatening to hang this woman?”

Slack-jawed, Delion looks stunned. I guess that until this moment, he has not realised that Faramir is anything more than captain of the Rangers. Gwaethron's expression is more interesting. My feeling is that he already harboured suspicions as to Faramir's identity, and feels that a temporary question mark raised as to his authority is a fair exchange for the intelligence to be gained in confirming those suspicions. He inclines his head a fraction, the bare minimum of deference he can pay to Faramir's station.

“Perhaps,” he says, affecting a slightly bored tone, “It would be best if you filled us in on the details
of the crime, Delion.”

Delion pulls himself together, squaring his shoulders, and manages to reply, his voice several shades less truculent than before.

“Haerth has been found murdered in his cell, this trull's knife beside him. And her dress has his blood on it.”

“That’s a fucking lie. And they smeared blood on my skirts as they brought me here – it's pig’s blood from the butchers...” Rustwen’s voice trails into a screech as Delion's sergeant back-hands her across the jaw.

“Shut up, bitch,” he says.

“Delion, get your men to behave as befits men of arms, not orcs,” Faramir says curtly. He beckons to Mablung, who makes his way down to the gallows. “Mablung, did you lock this woman into her room as I instructed?”

“Yes, my Lord,” Mablung replies.

“That don’t mean anything,” says Delion, “She could've climbed out the window, sly bitch like her, easy as anything.”

“Mablung, send one of your men to check the window catches in her room.” Faramir turns back to the militia man. “What evidence do you have, other than the knife, that she made her way to the town gaol?”

“Well, we know what time he died. There's a prisoner in a nearby cell, said he heard Haerth shouting and hollering till the early hours, then heard his death rattle some time in the night, nasty gurgly noise as his throat were slit, an hour or so before the cock crowed.”

“Then she cannot have done it,” I say, “For I was questioning her until near dawn and I heard the cock crow while she was still in my presence.”

“So, on the one side, we have your circumstantial evidence in the form of the knife. On the other side we have the prisoner's denial, the fact that one of my men locked her securely in her room, and Lady Éowyn's testimony that Rustwen was in her presence at the time your other witness says Haerth was killed,” Faramir says. “Lord Gwaethron, I feel it best that I investigate the matter more thoroughly before deciding upon the guilt or innocence of this woman. I trust that you concur.”

Gwaethron, who surely must realise that this last is a mere courtesy on Faramir's part, once more inclines his head very slightly. I sense that he would rather have seen summary execution, but is saving his arrows for a later date when they are more likely to hit the mark.

Faramir continues, “Mablung, see to it that this crowd disperses, then have the woman returned to her cell with two of my Rangers to stand guard. While you're there, check the other prisoner's account, in particular the time at which the murder took place. Delion – return your men to barracks and make sure none of them stray. Lord Gwaethron, I beg your leave for the time being. I shall of course report the results of my men's investigations at the earliest opportunity.” This last is delivered in a detached tone, polite enough that Gwaethron can have no cause for complaint, yet with a slightly patronising overtone which I am sure is intentional. His face giving nothing away, Faramir turns to us. “My Lady Éowyn, Lord Elfhelm, Anborn, would you be so good as to accompany me? I think we have much to discuss.”

~o~O~o~
The four of us sit round a table in the same back parlour of the inn where I talked to Rustwen last night – or perhaps this morning would be more accurate. I am so tired I am not sure I am capable of making accurate judgements about time any more.

“Well,” says Faramir, pinching the bridge of his nose, “We find ourselves in an interesting situation.”

“I've got an idea how I see events,” says Elfhelm, “But I won't say anything. I'm interested to see if your take on things is the same as mine.”

“I think Haerth, in addition to moonlighting with the bandits himself, also had enough information to implicate Delion. So Delion got one of his men to murder Haerth, tried to make it look as though the 'trull' did it, and hoped to hang her before anyone got her side of the story,” my husband says.

“That was indeed pretty much what I was thinking,” says Elfhelm. “But why would she have wanted to murder him anyway?”

“There was a fight over her last night,” says Anborn. “Perhaps she'd turned Haerth down, or tried to dun him for more money then not come across with the goods.”

“No, the fight started because of Delion's sergeant, the one who slapped her back in the square just now,” I explain. “Rustwen was clear last night that Haerth and Delion were reasonably well behaved as far as her customers go – the sergeant was the one who was rough with her, which is why she turned him down.”

“That accords with the account given to me by the men of my company whom I questioned last night,” says Faramir, with a nod. Again, his hand goes to his face; I can't help but notice the dark circles round his eyes. But his wits seem as sharp as ever, despite the exhaustion. “Lady Éowyn, would there be profit to be gained from a second attempt at talking to her? Perhaps, having come so close to losing her life, her tongue may be somewhat loosened.”

I nod, and rise from the table.

“Wait,” says Elfhelm. “I will not have you go alone – this town is not a safe place.” I nod, curtly. Elfhelm is right on this one. I will not run the risk of having a knife slipped from behind through a weak spot in my armour.

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On the way to the prison, I take the opportunity to explain to Elfhelm how hard it was to get Rustwen to talk to me at all the previous night, and suggest that he waits at the door to the cell rather than come in: I do not want to frighten her into silence. Within the cell, there is little light – a glimmer through the barred window high in the wall. Rustwen sits on a straw pallet in the corner of the cell, her knees drawn up to her chin, arms clutched round them, knuckles showing white. There is nowhere for me to sit, but it strikes me that perhaps remaining standing may be a useful aid to reminding her where the power lies – that is, if I can manage it without my legs crumpling under me. I feel near exhaustion.

I decide to go with a blunt opening gambit. “I think it’s fair to say you might as well talk to me properly this time. After all, I’m not going to lynch you, unlike some others.”

Rustwen gives a dark laugh. “And when your fancy-man's gone back to the Mundburg, what do you think Delion's going to do then? And his lordship, Lord Gwaethron, whose side is he going to come down on? His captain's or a whore's?”

“Well, that very much depends on what you can tell us about why Delion was so keen to hang you
without a trial. What was it that he didn't want us to know about Haerth?"

The false attempt at humour deserts her, and her shoulders slump. Even in the gloom I can see her face unnaturally white with fear, her eyes wide and hunted. “So, I talk, or I keep silent. Either way, I’m fucked. Even if you nail Delion, there’s just too many of his friends in this place. You think I’m going to last more than a day after you’ve gone?”

“Is there nowhere other than Sarn Esgar you could go?” I am aware that this takes me away from the information I am seeking, but part of me thinks it would set her at ease, another part thinks I owe it to her to try to come up with some escape route for her. “Are your family in the city.”

“Nah, they're tenant farmers from south of here.”

“Could you go back there?”

“You don’t have a clue, do you, my Lady?” Rustwen sounds bitter. “It were me da’ as sold me. Of course the bloke he sold me to said I’d get a job cleaning or in the kitchens of some fancy house… but we all knew, me, him, me da’, that wasn't the job on offer. In a way I got lucky, ’cos after a year or so I got away from him and found a better bloke. The bloke as bought me, he had a whole load of girls and used to knock us around. My new man's set me up on me own. He takes a bit of my earnings, of course, and the landlord takes a cut… but I'm still better off.”

I thought that after what I had been through, I could no longer be shocked, but it seems I was wrong. “Your own father sold you?” is all I can manage to say.

“He didn't really have much choice. The way Lord Gwaethron sets things up, the farms for the tenants are just that bit too small to feed a family, so the family has to work a day or two a week on his land too so they can pay for grain from his estates – and a pretty penny he charges. I was the youngest daughter – not that useful round the farm, just another mouth to feed and a dowry to find if I ever went a-courting. And me da’ couldn't afford to feed all of us. So I went into ‘service’…” Her voice becomes even more bitter at this point. “And me youngest brother – he were pressed into the militia. Not here, the next estate along, Lord Carandol's.”

There is a long silence while I mull this over. I am not consciously trying to string things out, to make the gap between words so long, so awkward that Rustwen feels compelled to fill it, but this seems to be the effect. “Haerth...” she says eventually, “He was from the same village as Delion. They'd known each other since they were lads – some sort of second cousins or something like that. Haerth was a sell-sword, but Delion seemed to spend a lot of time with him.”

“Enough time to know what he did when he wasn't with the militia?” I ask.

“Now, that I couldn't tell you. But I do know this much – Delion's village has never had any attacks from the bandits.”

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It is late afternoon before we gather again in the back parlour: myself, Elfhelm, Faramir and his two lieutenants. We have all reported back our findings, and now sit expectantly. Faramir pinches his nose – he makes a better fist of managing his tiredness than I, but I can see how exhausted he is – then runs his hand through his hair.

“So we have no hard evidence,” he says, “But much in the way of circumstantial evidence to suggest that Haerth's activities with the bandits were probably known to Delion, and likely supported too. Again though, we have nothing firm to indicate that Gwaethron knew of any links between his
militia and the bandits, though we may assume that care for his liege-men and tenants are not issues that feature heavily in his concerns. But being a bad overlord is not the same as being demonstrably a traitor to the crown, and however much one might want to remove him from his position, it is hard to see how it could be done. Faramir rests his chin on his hand.

“It is the same problem my Lady Éowyn encountered at Askburn,” says Elfhelm. “To seek redress on the basis of suspicion only, when a new king’s reign is barely established, is to run the risk of fomenting open rebellion.”

“What did you do about Askburn in the end?” asks Faramir.

“Billeted an Éored on them to eat the bastards out of house and home,” says Elfhelm, an evil grin splitting his face.

“I shall remember that for future use,” Faramir gives an answering grin. There is a silence which stretches out as Faramir considers the situation. Then finally he speaks again. “We need a ruse to draw them out. Elfhelm, Mablung, could you stage a conversation within earshot of, say, Delion’s second-in-command? Make out that we have had rather firmer information than we in fact have? And perhaps suggest that Haerth fell into conversation with the other prisoner in the gaol and revealed some compromising details of a connection between Delion and the outlaws? See if we can panic Delion into making some sort of a move.”

“I think we can try that,” says Elfhelm. “Mablung, are you interested in a mug of beer with me in the common room? Or in fact several, to give the illusion of our tongues becoming loose.”

“I think I could be reasonably indiscreet if I had enough to drink, my Lord,” says Mablung with a twinkle in his eye.

“And can you hold your drink? The aim is to pretend to get drunk, not to do so for real,” Elfhelm adds admonishingly.

“Aye, my Lord,” Mablung replies.

“And then what?” I ask.

“Then we wait,” says Faramir.

Chapter End Notes

Brewing was widely used in Medieval Europe as one way of making water safe to drink, hence the existence of “small beer” - very weak beer suitable for women and children! Somehow I can’t help but think it tells you a lot about our respective cultures that the Chinese discovered boiling water and making tea as a way of making water safe to drink, while the Europeans discovered brewing.

As I understand older usage of the terms, “lady” meant member of the nobility, while “gentlewoman” originally was the female equivalent of gentleman (and is used in this way by Jane Austen). However, some time in the 19th century, “gentlewoman” came to be used as a euphemism for prostitute, and “lady” took its place as a term for a bourgeois woman of good breeding, hence the phrase “ladies and gentlemen.”
I've based the “rows” on the late Medieval/Elizabethan rows of Chester (the county town of Cheshire, near where I grew up). They are half-timbered buildings as described, with a walkway at first level (i.e. second floor if you're from the US), and shops along this upper walkway as well as at ground level. As far as I know they are unique to Chester. If you're interested, the Wikipedia entry has pictures. (Chester also has rather fine Roman walls, half an amphitheatre, and one of the best-preserved Roman hypocausts in Britain).

The idea of a farm deliberately slightly too small is taken from the coastal crofting areas of Scotland. During the Highland Clearances, the landowners moved the peasant population away from the fertile inland valleys because it was more profitable to run sheep over the land than to have subsistence farming there. Some of the farmers were transported to Canada, others were resettled on the meagre lands near the coast, where the strips of land attached to each croft were allocated such as to be slightly too small to support the family so that they were tied to working for the Laird.
Chapter 25: To Bear the Spear to the Strife

I wake some time in the early hours of the morning, startled into wakefulness by some vague feeling of unease that I cannot place. Behind me, Faramir sleeps, curled against me, his arm round my waist. Mind unsettled, I reach my hand and place it upon his forearm, fingers running over the hair on his skin, hair which I know to be dark even though I cannot see it. Beneath the skin I trace out the long cords of muscle, the valleys between them which run from elbow to wrist, the hidden strength, relaxed now in sleep. How familiar his body is to me now.

Through the narrow window, a beam of moonlight cuts across the room, casting a stripe of pale, silver-grey light across the floor and up onto the bed, where it slants across the bed clothes as they lie over our hips. A full moon. Something nags at the back of my mind. There is something about the full moon. But its meaning eludes me, and the embryonic thought, whatever it was, slides from the periphery of my mind's eye and is lost.

In its place comes a memory, all too recent. A woman's voice, low and coarse, harsh from too much rough drink. A voice saying “like a bitch on heat.” I clench my jaw: something in my stomach seems to twist. Without realising it, I must have gripped Faramir's arm, for he stirs in his slumber.

“Éowyn?” His voice is laden with sleep.

“Shush, my love, go back to sleep,” I whisper. But he must sense some tension in my tone, for I feel the huff of his breath against my shoulder as he speaks again.

“What troubles you? I know too well the timbre of your voice when you are upset, my Éowyn. What has drawn you from your sleep?”

“Naught of any import,” I try to sound soothing, soft.

“Let me be the judge of that,” he murmurs. “It must be something, for you to wake after so little sleep and such exhausting events.”

I turn within Faramir's arms, and rest my cheek on his chest. “The woman... Rustwen. She heard us as we lay together. She taunted me about it. Told me I was more of a wanton than she. Told me I sounded like a bitch on heat.” As I tell him, I realise how deeply this barb cut. I turn my face against him, burying my nose in his skin, breathing in the scent of him. His chest rises and falls slowly, beneath my cheek, warm and solid and comforting.

He strokes my hair, gently. “She meant to wound you, and she did. But though she may know what we do with our bodies, she does not know what happens in our heads or our hearts. What we do is wondrous, joyful, loving, filled with laughter. I do not think it is so for Rustwen. I am annoyed that she angered you, but mostly I pity her.” He drops some kisses on my forehead. “Sleep now, my love.”

He wraps his arms around me. I nestle against him, my skin against the warmth of his. Before long, I hear his breathing slow as he drifts off, his body relaxing against me. It takes me some moments longer, but eventually, held close against him, his breath stirring my hair, I slide slowly back into sleep.
The next morning, as we break our fast with porridge that the kitchen maid has brought to us, there is a rap at the door.

“Come in,” says Faramir. Anborn enters, places his hand to his chest and bows in salute.

“Captain, it appears that Delion has indeed fled in the night.”

I start to my feet. “How long a head start has he got? Can we get on his trail?” I ask quickly.

Faramir laughs. “You don't surely expect me to do my own tracking?” he chuckles. “I had two of my best trackers watching his lodgings last night. They will be on his trail, and when he reaches his destination, one will stay to keep an eye on him, and one will report back. I expect the report some time late afternoon, assuming that the outlaws are stationed not too far from here, as the pattern of their attacks would indicate.”

I sit back down, feeling as daft as if Elfhelm had caught me out on some aspect of strategy I'd failed to study sufficiently thoroughly. Faramir gives me a knowing grin, then turns back to Anborn.

“Have the men check through their gear and make sure all is prepared and ready for us to move out at short notice. And ask Marshall Elfhelm if he would come and join us.”

Anborn bows, and turns smartly on his heel, closing the door behind him.

Faramir takes another mouthful of porridge, then sighs. “What are we going to do with the girl?” he asks. “What she told you last night was right: if she stays in this town, she won't last a night after we've gone.”

I mull this over. Part of me feels such antipathy towards her that I'd happily see her go hang. But I know this to be unreasonable. If I had been born in her circumstances, and forced into the life she now leads, I doubt I would be any different. “Elfhelm and I will have to return to his Éored on the river – perhaps we could take her?”

“Do you think Elfhelm will be happy to provide his men with a camp follower?” Faramir asks, with a twinkle.

“Well, we could put it to the girl that this is her chance for a clean start – she could find work in the Riddermark, on a farm or estate.”

“Not entirely beyond the bounds of possibility,” he replies. “As you've probably noticed, there's a lot of people cross the border, so much that some Rohirric words have passed into the local dialect here, and a lot of the place names are Rohirric names – you must have noticed the locals call Minas Tirith 'the Mundburg.' I guess she'd get by, and pick up the language reasonably well. Still, a penny to a silver coin that she goes back to her old trade within a couple of months.”

“Or we could send her to her brother on Carandol's estate – perhaps she could find employment in one of the towns there, or if she does continue to sell herself, at least she'll be doing it in a place where she's not going to get knifed or hanged.”

“Who's not going to get knifed or hanged?” Elfhelm has walked through the open door while we've been talking. He closes it carefully behind him.

“Rustwen,” says my husband with a grin. “Your cornet here thinks your Éored might be in need of a camp follower.”
Elfhelm's eyebrows shoot up. I hastily say, “That's not how I put it. I just thought perhaps we could take her to the Mark to prevent her being summarily executed or murdered for revenge.”

Elfhelm stands shaking his head. “Have you run mad, Éowyn? While on campaign? And one woman only with that many men? Think what it would do to discipline.”

Faramir grins. “It looks as though sending her to Carandol's estate in search of her brother is a more sensible option.”

“I think that the better course of action,” Elfhelm says, curtly. “Now, what news of Delion?”

In a few brief but clear remarks, Faramir tells Elfhelm the substance of Anborn's report, concluding, “So you see, Marshal, the plan is pretty much as it was when first I wrote to your King: you and your troops cut off the retreat while my Rangers and I attempt to flush out the bandits. But with one slight alteration. For it was Éowyn who recognised Haerth as one of the bandits; I should, with your permission, like her to join my company in case she is able to recognise any of the others from her encounter with them.”

“On the understanding that she is not to take part in the mêlée if one ensues. Êomer Cyning would have me torn apart by wild horses if anything happened to her.”

Faramir frowns. “You think I would put my wife in the way of danger?” he responds, sharply. This in turn is enough to raise my ire.

“Either you want me to be a useful part of this fight, or you leave me behind...” I begin.

“Peace, Éowyn,” he says, his brow relaxing. “I do not intend to place myself at the front of the fight either, for much the same reasons. I doubt my King would be well pleased were he to hear that his Steward had been wilfully courting danger.”

“And yet,” says Elfhelm with a knowing smile, “You are here and intending to lead your troops on the battlefield, rather than stay here in Sarn Esgar and depute Anborn to lead in your place.”

Faramir gives a wry grin. “A hit, my lord Marshal. Yes, I have perhaps brought a rather loose interpretation to my orders regarding my investigations here. Though I rather hope my King will forgive me, for he too spent many years as a Ranger, and knows what it is to want to enter the fray and lead one's troops by example rather than commanding them from safety behind the lines. And I cannot leave this particular problem unsolved.”

“Thus speaks the man who once told me he would give up fighting if he could,” I say. My husband inclines his head in a slight bow towards me, conceding the point, then lifts my hand to his lips and kisses my knuckles.

“If I could... but this situation I feel must be dealt with. It is like a festering wound which must be lanced, lest the outlaws – and more importantly, whoever controls them - get more powerful. Gondor faces unrest in the South: that much is beyond doubt. We cannot have our troops split by trying to face unrest in the North too. This trouble must be nipped in the bud before it grows, and a clear message must be sent to the Lords in this region that treason will be met with force of law.”

“Do you think you will be able to tie the lords to the bandits in any clear way?” I ask.

“I doubt it – but I will settle for success, not victory, in this instance.”

“Success, victory... I fail to see the difference.”
Faramir runs his hand through his hair, brushing it back from his face, and I am struck by how tired he looks. “Victory would be the complete overthrow of the lords whose loyalty we doubt. But I do not think we will gain any firm evidence. Success I would deem routing the outlaws, and sending enough of a signal of our suspicions to the lords that they conduct themselves more circumspectly.”

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Faramir returns from an inspection of his troops. The hours of morning have passed with them checking their gear: repairing fletches, sharpening swords and daggers, readying their armour. My husband seems well pleased with their preparations. He has ordered them to eat heartily of the noon meal, in anticipation of moving out in the late afternoon.

In our chambers, Beregond has tended to Faramir's arms and armour. He offered to see to mine also, but I declined. The man is already overstretched, I am not in Faramir's chain of command, and in any case, I need something to occupy my time and stop me from fretting. Faramir returns to find me sitting cross-legged on the floor, sharpening my sword with an oilstone. He settles onto the hearth rug by my side, leaning against the stonework to the side of the fireplace and stretching his long legs out. He gives me a steady, appraising glance, the one I know so well.

“I was getting the fidgets,” I say, by way of explanation.

“Waiting is always the worst bit,” he says with a nod. “I find it helps to talk about something completely unconnected with the looming campaign.”

“I could tell you about all the military history Elfhelm has been forcing me to study,” I reply, unable to stop my lips twitching into a smile.

“Or you could tell me what you thought of the sketches I sent you – the ones before our letters got so...” Faramir pauses. For once, my extraordinarily articulate husband seems lost for the correct phrase. Both of us are silent for some moments as we try to find the words we need.

“Before they became so painful?” I say, hesitantly.

“Painful...” Faramir repeats the word, then his voice trails away. I sense him mulling this over. “Though they were full of love and care too. And... I think perhaps it was a necessary pain. Part of trying to find out how we may live together well. A lifetime is a long time, at least I hope it will be.” He looks at me sidelong, raising one eyebrow. “It cannot be built on passion alone, wonderful as our passion is.” I see the corner of his mouth twitch, and his eyes on me, his gaze intent.

His look is enough to make the blood speed in my veins and desire rise within me, but I try to ignore it, for he is absolutely right – passion alone will not build decades of marriage. “I think... I hope that our letters have helped us. I think they have helped me. I was foolish in the Firien wood. I acted on impulse, born of rage. But somewhere underneath there was reason as well, or at least, some motive that stemmed not just from rage. It was to do with who I am, who I will always be.” I pause for a moment, trying to work out where this thread of thought is going, before adding, “Though I hope, eventually, a wiser version of me.”

Faramir smiles. “Yes, I think our letters have helped. But we shall always have this, I think. We shall always be headstrong and independent minded. So we shall always need honesty in our conversations, and humility – preparedness on both our parts to compromise.”

I smile back at him. “It is nice of you to include yourself under the description of “headstrong”, but I think it is one of your typically Gondorian polite diplomatic falsehoods to do so.”
“Ah, so you wish to reserve that attribute to yourself?” Faramir laughs.

“I think honesty compels me to admit that it fits my character better than yours.”

“And what of my flaws? Which one would you put top of the list?”

“This you know already, for I have told you so in the past,” I say with an answering laugh. “Your infuriating tendency always to be right, and to be so calm in the knowledge of your own rectitude.”

“Ah yes, I believe I promised you a quintain at Emyn Arnen for when that tendency became too aggravating. Though I think we can agree that I have given ample evidence in the past of my own shortcomings. After all, you have seen my study in the Citadel, and know how untidy I am. And I too have made mistakes in the field, lost men, lost men needlessly on that assault on Osgiliath…” He glances down at his hands, but not before I have caught a glimpse of the pain in his eyes. I study his profile, the curve of his aquiline nose, his jaw, his lips. I feel like setting the oilstone to one side and reaching out to stroke his sadness away. But he looks back up, jaw set determinedly, and gives a faint smile.

“I shall not get maudlin on the eve of battle, it would be bad luck. Let me think again of the quintain. That brings me back to where we started: what did you think of those sketches? We agreed the basic outline and plan of the house some months back, before the masons and carpenters started work, but I was wondering about your thoughts on the more detailed work still to be done.”

A thought strikes me. “Before we get to discussing the house, what about the estates?”

Faramir looks at me, his interest clearly aroused. “What of them?”

“Rustwen mentioned something last night which stuck in my mind. Her father sold her – I still find that hard to believe – he sold her because the family were so poor. And part of the reason they were so poor was that the farm they had tenancy of was too small to support them. Not by accident, mind you, but by design. Gwaethron’s factor organised it so, to make sure the tenant farmers had to work his land in addition to their own to be able to pay their rent and taxes.”

Faramir presses his fingers together and frowns. “That is bad governance indeed. When we get back from this engagement, I shall make sure this matter is looked into in full. I am not sure how much longer I will be able to stay in Anórien, but I shall leave Anborn behind with a company of men, and establishing the truth of this will be one of his tasks. I shall have to consult with the King about this.”

“But what of Ithilien? From all you have told me, most of the inhabitants were driven out by orcs or fled many years since. They will be coming back to farms overgrown with weeds and tares, buildings in decay.”

Faramir nods. “You are right, and I have already started to put into place plans to make sure there are grain stores and supplies to get them through the first year or so until they are self-sufficient.”

“But what of the size of farms, the allocation of fields?” I ask.

“There you have caught me out – I had assumed that the main problem would lie in establishing ownership – who had farmed the land before families were forced to flee. Doubly so since so many men fell in the war, and there are various disputes over inheritance. I had not thought to enquire as to how fruitful each farm, and on a larger scale, each estate was likely to be. I shall make enquiries of my factor and his staff.” Faramir gives me a grin. “You see, I do make mistakes – I had overlooked this, where you, with your experience of surveying the Mark, saw fit to ask the obvious question. I was thinking as a lawyer – you have been thinking as one who holds the stewardship of the land.”
He moves across the rug towards me, then cups my chin with his hand and kisses me. Then he sits back and smiles.

“And what of the house?” His look is so keen and eager, so anxious to check that I will be happy with our dwelling that I find myself smiling and wishing I could lead him back to bed, instead of having to ready ourselves to ride to war. But despite the impending fight, nonetheless, Faramir and I wile away the next few hours in discussion of the plans for our future house. Though in my mind, there is a constant undercurrent of disquiet for what is to come.

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It is past the fourth hour of the afternoon when one of Faramir’s scouts finds his way back to Sarn Esgar. Faramir receives his news in the small square in front of the inn, where the Rangers are already gathered together ready to set off. The scout informs Faramir of the location of the bandits, the size of their forces (as best as he and his comrade have been able to discover), and the way their position is organised and fortified.

Towards the end of their exchange, they are interrupted. A group of horsemen followed by a larger band of footsoldiers carrying pikes and halberds comes into the square. At their head rides Lord Gwaethron, and a second, slightly older nobleman with the typical dark hair of Gondor shot through with grey. Gwaethron inclines his head slightly and speaks.

“My Lord Prince, may I present to you Lord Carandol, lord of the neighbouring estates?”

Faramir acknowledges their presence with a diplomatic politeness. “Lord Carandol, Lord Gwaethron.” He waits a few heartbeats, before asking, his features carefully bland, “May I ask why you see fit to arrive at the head of an armed company?”

“It has come to my attention that are readying your troops to engage the outlaws who have so plagued our estates of late, and Lord Carandol and I felt it meet that we should offer our assistance in this matter, since it is primarily, though not only, of course...” Here he gives a very slight nod in my direction, “Our estates which have suffered from this pestilence.”

I feel my brows drawing together in a frown, and rapidly try to school my features. What is Gwaethron up to? Had he wished to root out bandits, surely he has had ample time to do so before now.

Carandol shifts in his saddle. He is tall and angular, in contrast to Gwaethron’s imposing bulk, and has a nose straight as an arrow, and dark eyes beneath equally dark brows. He raises a gloved hand, commanding attention. It seems to me, at least, that he carries a more imposing presence than Gwaethron. Clearing his throat, he speaks up. “We wish, of course, to put our loyalty to the crown to good use. And the greater numbers of troops if we combine forces should lessen the risks to all parties.”

Gwaethron adds his words. “For surely it would be a reassurance to our King to know that his Steward has the backing of nobles loyal to Gondor.”

Faramir’s face is impassive, but I think I see a slight tension in the set of his shoulders and neck. I do not trust these two, and nor does my husband, I suspect. His next words take me by surprise. “Certainly. If you would be so good as to dismount, I shall explain the situation as far as it has been reported to me, and show you on the map how I intend to dispose my troops. You may have some suggestions, being better acquainted with the lie of the land. But our aim must surely be to use your troops to complement the disposition of mine: I think we probably have differing approaches to battle which we must be clear on beforehand, lest we simply impede one another.”
The two Gondorians swing themselves easily from their saddles, and go to join him. They may not have ridden to the aid of Minas Tirith in her hour of need, but both of them, in movements and in carriage, give the impression of being experienced soldiers and commanders. Every instinct I possess tells me that they are dangerous, and that their loyalties are questionable. I sidle over to Elfhelm, who is also preparing to leave and return to our Éored. Very quietly I address him in Rohirric. “I do not trust this, and nor I think does my husband. There is some treason afoot. Why is he revealing all his plans to them?”

“He has been outflanked, I think,” Elfhelm replies, softly. “He cannot turn down their offer of aid without in effect openly accusing them of disloyalty. I think he is now trying merely to limit the damage, to cast them in a supporting role in the coming fracas so that they do not get in the way of his own troops.” Elfhelm pauses for a few heartbeats, his gaze fixed intently on me. “Éowyn, daughter of Éomund, I do not like this. Ride back to the Mering stream with me.”

I take a deep breath. “Do you ask me as my commander, as my brother's counsellor, or as my father's friend, who was to me as an uncle when I was a child?”

“Does it matter?” Elfhelm asks, his brow furrowing.

“I wish to know whether you issue a command or a request. For without me on hand to identify the outlaws who attacked us in the Firien wood, it will be hard for Faramir to gather the proof he needs to see how far this rot sets in – whether it is easily excised by pruning a few branches or goes all the way to the heart-wood.”

“And you feel your first loyalty is to Gondor, not to the Riddermark.” Elfhelm’s tone remains low, but I can tell that he is angry.

“My first loyalty is to my husband,” I answer, and as I say the words, I register my own surprise at them. Until this moment I had not clearly thought that there would, inevitably, be occasions where I suffered from divided loyalty.

Elfhelm nods. I get the sense that his anger has gone as fast as it came, replaced perhaps by something closer to regret. He looks now to one side, to the scene unfolding across the square. “I suppose this moment was inevitable. If it's any consolation, I don't see how you could have chosen differently. But after this campaign, we need to discuss your future. I think after my Éored has returned to Edoras, I shall have to leave you there. For there is no place in my command for a Rider whose loyalty is not above all other considerations given to the Mark alone.”

Now it is my turn to look elsewhere, covering my feelings of awkwardness. Again, there is a pause, then I say, “Thank you.”

“For what?” asks Elfhelm, and I look back at him to see his gaze back on me, eyebrow raised.

“For giving me a chance in your Éored. For teaching me so much. For being so reasonable about my choice.”

“Your choice is the only one. Had you chosen differently, I would have thought less of you.” He holds out his hand, and I clasp it, hand to forearm. He reaches out and claps me on the shoulder with his other hand. “Fare you well, Éowyn, daughter of Éomund, Lady of Ithilien... And hang back in the battle, use what little common sense you have, and try not to succumb to your family's damnable tendency to lose its temper.”

We smile at one another, then he turns and walks to where his sergeant is holding both their horses. He swings himself into the saddle, then calls to Faramir. “Good hunting, my Lord. We shall patrol
“...the far side of the Mering stream and cut off their retreat, as agreed.” He urges his horse on, and the destrier springs forward, cantering out of the courtyard and down the street in a display of horsemanship every bit as impressive as Elfhelm no doubt intends it to be.

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We are several hours ride from Sarn Esgar now, and our company rides in single file. Faramir drops down the column to ride beside me. His Rangers ride light horses, intended for covering large distances and carrying messages, not the heavy warhorses of the Mark. His horse seems light-boned and fragile beside Windfola.

“Westu, min leoflic swéte, hal,” he says. I am surprised at the greeting in Rohirric, not least because it seems strange to hear a greeting normally used after a long absence uttered instead when he has merely dropped back along the column of horse. However, I return the greeting, and wait expectantly.

He continues in the same language. His phrasing is hesitant, but he has obviously continued to study since his time in Edoras at our handfasting. In short, simple sentences, he indicates to me that he reads the situation exactly as I do: he does not trust Gwaethron and Carandol, and worries what the coming battle may bring. Then abruptly, he switches to Westron. “But enough of this love-making,” he says. “My troops will tease me without mercy if I continue for much longer.” I smile at the cleverness of his ruse. He gives me an answering smile, then begins to detail the arrangements he has come to with the two local lords for the disposition of the troops, arrangements which are common knowledge.

The scout has indicated to us that it is a goodly march to the outlaws' encampment, and as expected night falls before we are even at the half way point. Some of the Rangers are detailed to produce a stew for Faramir's troops, and set to with a will, using several sides of mutton brought with us from Sarn Esgar. Carandol comes upon us as Faramir is instructing Anborn to set up a rota for the watch.

“There is surely no need for that,” says Carandol. “Since my troops are to play only a supporting role and yours are to bear the brunt of the responsibility tomorrow, let them rest, and I will supply the sentries.”

I stiffen at the thought of us, at the mercy of Carandol and Gwaethron overnight, but Faramir responds with a smoothness which makes me think he has foreseen this move. “I thank you for your consideration, my lord Carandol. But my men are well used to military discipline, and to break with their normal routine before a battle would unsettle them. Besides which, I'm sure you know as well as I the superstitious nature of the average soldier: they would see such a change on the eve of a fight as a bad omen.” He gives an easy smile.

Nonetheless, as we settle for the night, our bed rolls a couple of handspans apart, I notice that both of us have placed our daggers beneath the rolled-up clothes which serve as pillows.

Chapter End Notes

Min leoflic swéte: (old English) my beautiful sweet.

The title is taken from the Old English Poem “The Battle of Maldon.”
Faramir returns from scouting out the lie of the land with Tirion, his tracker. We have approached the outlaws’ camp from the cover of a small copse – Thornbeare, according to Gwaethron’s chief man-at-arms. The name is well chosen: even through my breeches, some of the sharpest have penetrated to leave scratches. As arranged beforehand, most of Gwaethron and Carandol's troops are positioned a quarter of a league away, cutting off the two obvious escape routes downhill from the encampment. The two lords themselves, however, have chosen to come with Faramir and his Rangers, bringing half a dozen hand-picked men each.

When they told us of their intention, Faramir waited for a quiet moment on the morning ride to bring his horse alongside Windfola. Once more, he used my language to tell me what he thought of this move. His view was that while it was possible that they intended to use the cover of battle to attack him, he thought it more likely that they sought to make sure that no prisoners were taken, seeking to avoid any embarrassing details emerging during questioning. Now, as we shelter amid the blackthorn bushes, I wonder which is right. The burly figure of Gwaethron crouches beside Faramir looking at the rough sketch Tirion has made in the mud. Superficially at any rate, he seems affable, no hint of double dealing in his mien.

“We have the advantage of the high ground,” my husband says, with some satisfaction. “But their camp is in a slight hollow, so it is hard to position archers to maximum effect. Nonetheless I think we should be able to use that knoll over there…” He gestures towards a small rocky outcrop in a sea of bracken and gorse. “It is the best option, I think. Anborn?”

“Aye, Captain Faramir.” It amuses me that the Rangers mostly continue to call Faramir “captain”, rather than “my lord.”

“Gather your best archers – a dozen or so, and use the bracken for cover. Signal to me from the lee side when you're in position. We'll make our way down slope to within a few hundred paces, also using the cover. When you see me hold my dagger aloft, shoot at will. We will take advantage of the confusion to make up the rest of the ground and engage them at close quarters.”

As Anborn gathers his archers together, I seize the opportunity to say quietly to Faramir, “What happened to hanging back and commanding from behind the lines?” In response, he flashes me a smile. I realise that my husband is as much at the mercy of the heady rush of blood which comes with battle as the rest of us (despite his protestations that he would, given the chance, hang up his sword on the morrow). I follow him down the hill. At first he gives a frown, but I shake my head. “If you see no reason to hang back, neither do I.”

We have made maybe half the distance to the position from which Faramir intends to launch his attack when I see a glimpse of a piece of cloth being waved from the boulders to our left. Faramir nods and gestures with his hand, then continues on his way. Crouching to keep my head below the level of the topmost fronds of bracken, I follow him. I hate bracken – it is hard going, with no way to see hidden stones and rabbit holes. Cursing softly under my breath, I shove the green fronds out of the way, only to be whipped across the back of my hand by some gorse. I suck at the scratch, then continue, half crawling, half crouching.

I am sweating by the time Faramir comes to a halt. It is scant comfort that I can see a sheen of sweat on his brow too. Suddenly it strikes me that this will be the first time we have fought side by side.
The thought fills me with a fierce pride, almost a joy, enough at any rate to quench the butterflies that fill my stomach in these long moments before battle commences. But I barely have time to register this fact when beside me, Faramir silently unsheathes his dagger and holds it aloft.

A hail of arrows sails dark through the sky, arcing upwards then dropping with deadly precision into the middle of the camp. We hear the sudden yells of alarm and screams of pain. Faramir springs to his feet, the rest of us following him, and we start to run through the bracken, leaping down the hillside towards the camp. Anborn and his archers loose several more volleys of arrows as we run, only ceasing when we get near enough that we too would be at risk.

Skirmishes, I have now realised, rarely run to plan. At first we cut through the camp like a scythe through dry grass. But then the defenders, driven by desperation, rally. I find myself hard pressed by one who has more skill with a sword than I have been expecting. Never underestimate your enemy, Elfhelm always told me. It seems as though this is another lesson I have decided to learn the hard way.

I parry yet another blow. My wrist stings from the effort. He is taller and heavier and puts his weight into the downward stroke. With reflexes I did not realise I had, I duck out of the way just in time, then try to regain the initiative. I feint left, but he is too canny to be drawn so easily. I try to misdirect him, moving my body and shoulders away from where I intend to strike. But he knows to watch my blade, not to allow himself to be distracted. Speed, I must counter using speed. I make a half-hearted jab towards his flank, then, as he moves to block the stroke, abruptly change direction. I manage to make contact, just below his pauldron, catching him in the gap between breast-plate and arm. He gives a bellow of fury and lunges towards me. With a flick of my wrist, I manage to knock his sword from his hand, sending it into the bracken some distance from him.

But in the follow through from the stroke, I have got my sword point tangled in the gorse behind him. In horror as I try to wrest it free, I see him pull a dagger, keen with a jagged edge to rip flesh. He moves in to much closer quarters to close down my movements. I do the best I can, wenching my sword backwards then using the momentum to bring the hilt up towards his face.

He gives a grunt of pain, before grabbing my shoulder with his left hand. At close quarters I am at a massive disadvantage. The man is built like a bear. He moves his hand towards my throat as I try ineffectually to stab him. Held close, my blade is too long to be of much use, so I try once more to bring the hilt into his face. But I cannot get my hand past his arm – he blocks my movements effectively. Just as my vision is beginning to blur, suddenly his grasp slackens. For a moment I am at a loss, still disoriented by the near choking. Then I see a trickle of blood come from his mouth, and he slides to the ground. Behind him, Beregond stands, gore coating his blade.

I try to thank him, but no words come out of my mouth, just a hiss of breath. Beregond nods briefly, then turns to search out more foes. I also look to see what is happening in the thick of the battle. As I scan the chaos round about, I see Faramir, some ten or so strides away. I realise he has been watching my fight; indeed, more than watching – trying to get through the crowd to me. His face is ashen with shock. For an instant his eyes meet mine. I can see pain and fear in every line of his expression. I realise the fear is fear of losing me. Then I watch with horror the price of his moment of distraction. From the side, one of the bandits comes on him, slicing down his left arm, catching a weak spot in his armour just below the elbow. Faramir reacts, stopping the blow from reaching his body, but I watch dry mouthed as bright red blood drips from beneath his vambrace, trickling over the back of his hand and falling to the ground. Faramir seems unaware of this, or is too intent on the fight, and now it is my turn to watch, almost paralysed with fear, as the two circle and move. Eventually, it is not Faramir's sword, but the arrow of one of Anborn's archers that ends the fight.

Then we are swept apart again by the tidal flow of the battle round us. Part of my consciousness
remains fixed on Faramir, try as I might to keep myself focussed on the task in hand. So far, there are no indications that the militia are favouring the bandits. They appear to be fighting tooth and nail beside Faramir's Rangers. In fact, I see Carandol on a slight rise, rallying his troops around him in readiness for a fresh assault. He is joined by Mablung and a handful of his men. I try to make my way over to join them.

Then the battle takes the strangest turn yet. For the first time, I see a face among the bandits that I recognise: the traitor Delion. He is at the forefront of a group of men with pikes running towards the rise. As I sprint from the opposite direction, the two groups clash. There are the familiar sounds of battle: clanging metal upon metal; shouts of challenge and rage; grunts of pain. In the clamour and strife, I see Delion's hand on a knife, and before I can get close enough, he thrusts it into Carandol's side, in the gap between breast-plate and back-plate.

From behind him another figure looms up. Gwaethron knocks Delion to the ground with a stunning blow, then stands poised above him, sword held in both hands, ready to plunge into the traitor's throat. For a moment time stands still. I am just close enough to hear Delion's last words.

"Why, my lord? Why?" Then his breath is cut off with a horrible gurgle as the point of Gwaethron's sword plunges into his throat.

The battle seems to come to an end not long afterwards – not with any decisive moment, nor with any great show of valour, but simply by attrition. Half the bandits lie dead, the other half have fled. There have been losses on our side – in addition to Lord Carandol himself, three of Faramir's Rangers and two of Gwaethron's militia lie dead, together with five of Carandol's men at arms. The first thing I do is make haste to the side of the field where Faramir sits.

He has taken his vambrace off and has his sleeve rolled up. An angry slash runs across the top of his forearm, deep enough that it still bleeds relatively freely. Anborn appears to be the Rangers' unofficial surgeon. I am relieved to see that he seems to know at least the basics of the lore I learned during my time in the Houses of Healing. He has kindled a fire, and burns the needle to cleanse it of any poisons before stitching the gash in Faramir's arm. Faramir grimaces each time Anborn makes a stitch, his jaw clenching, but he makes no sound beyond a quiet hiss of breath. Anborn's stitches are small, neat, workmanlike. Once he has finished, he produces a bottle of the strange purple tincture of seaweed that I remember from the Houses, and splashes it over the wound, before wrapping a strip of clean linen round it.

"You'll need the stitches out in about a week, Captain," he says.

"Thank you, Anborn." Faramir gives a half-smile. "Fine needlework as always. My wife will be grateful that her husband is not too badly scarred." He gives me a wink.

"My thanks too," I say. "Not that I worry over much about his manly beauty..” I give Faramir an answering wink, then continue, “But I'm relieved that he won't bleed over me. And I'm glad to say your needlework is better than mine.”

Anborn packs away his physician's equipment and goes over to his archers to arrange their retreat. Faramir gives Mablung the task of organising scouting parties to scour the surrounding area to see if they can capture the outlaws who have fled.

“What do you intend to do?” I ask him.

“String up every last man of them, if we can find them,” he says. I am taken aback: Faramir's usual response to situations is to treat people as gently as the situation allows. He must see me frown, for he continues, “There are occasions to show mercy, and occasions to show strength. The return of
peace to this part of Gondor is dependent on a show of strength, to convince people that the rule of law holds sway.” I am aware as he says this, though, that he casts a sidelong glance to Gwaethron, almost as if checking that the man is listening. It is not in his nature to seek vengeance for its own sake, and I sense that there is more to his words than I am understanding.

He gets to his feet. “Come, let us go and show our respects for Lord Carandol's passing.”

Together we walk over to where Carandol's troops are laying his body on a bier they have hastily lashed together from branches. After a brief discussion, it is agreed that a mound should be raised over the other men who have fallen, but that Carandol's body will be taken back with all due reverence and returned to his widow. Gwaethron joins us, muttering unctuous platitudes. As he does so, I look at him, wondering what he is really thinking. I am still puzzling over Delion's final words. They were not at all the phrase I would expect from a turncoat, a traitor who had just slain Gwaethron's peer and, I presume, friend.

However, the polite exchange of tributes to the fallen, Carandol foremost among them, continues. From Gwaethron we discover that Carandol and his wife were never blessed with children, and she is now left a widow in her later years. A consultation with Carandol's lieutenant reveals that we are only half a day's ride from his manor and the market town nearby.

Faramir goes to consult with Mablung and Anborn, then returns to say that he and I will accompany Gwaethron to pay our respects to Carandol's widow, once we have finished laying his troops to rest. I am slightly surprised that Faramir is prepared to delegate the searching out of the final bandits, and also that he considers it so important to accompany the body instead, but I presume there is some political motivation I have not quite grasped. However, I am frustrated by this, since I will not be able to puzzle out my disquiet until I can get Faramir alone, out of earshot of Gwaethron or his men, and it looks as though it will be quite a while before I can manage that.

The next hour is filled with digging a grave for the fallen, laying them to rest and building a cairn in their memory. Both Rangers and Militia mourn according to their fashion. The Rangers sing a haunting song, chanting in sonorous harmonies, cold and bleak and open. The Militia (perhaps because Anórien is our close neighbour) sing songs much closer to those of my country. They lament for the fallen, bearing witness to the tears of their loved ones, then urge them to ride with the hunt of Oromë across the green fields of the hereafter. Silently, I mouth my own prayers to Béma, that he guides their souls, reuniting them with comrades who have gone before them, and bearing them company until their loved ones join them, until the ending of days.

Finally, the mourning is done, and we attend instead to the needs of the living: we eat a hasty lunch, gathered round in a circle on the ground. We take to our horses and join Gwaethron's troops. Faramir brings with us a few Rangers, supposedly as an honour guard to show respect for the fallen, but I suspect to ensure no double dealing from Gwaethron. As I feared, there is no opportunity to talk to Faramir without being overheard. However, it turns out that Faramir has other things he wishes to discuss with me.

“Min heorte,” he says, riding alongside. He continues in his exotically accented Rohirric (though I marvel at what a gift he has for picking up languages: his choice of words is near perfect). “You have no idea how afraid I was on the battlefield. I feared that man was going to choke the life from you with me unable to get through the battle to your side. If Beregond had not come, it would have gone ill indeed for you.”

“I know,” I reply. “I know how you feel, for fear for me made you lose your concentration. That blade came within a fingertip's length of slicing far more than your arm.”

Faramir rides beside me in silence for a few moments. I wonder whether to talk to him about Delion.
We could do so in my language. But I hesitate. If I mention anyone by name, that alone could alert eavesdroppers to our topic of conversation. Instead I find myself saying something altogether different.

“Faramir, my dearest love. When we made our way down that hillside, I felt the fiercest of joy at the thought of fighting beside you. But the image I had, the notion of bravely standing guard over each other – it was a fine picture, but the reality is not like that. The reality is that each of us worries for the other so much that we make mistakes.”

Faramir looks at me gravely with his grey eyes, his regard steady. “I know: it is an image which, in the peace of our chambers, or the long ride to battle, seems filled with romance. But it nearly led to the death of both of us.” He pauses, uncertain it seems. “I do not think we should be on the battlefield together, for we think of each other rather than the task in hand. And on a battlefield, nothing less than total, complete concentration will suffice.”

I realise how far I have come since our first discussions of this, and our careful exchange of letters. I certainly feel no sudden surge of rage. Perhaps it is because he has phrased it so carefully. ‘We cannot fight together,’ he seems to be saying, rather than ‘You must not fight at all.’ I temporise.

“You asked me to come,” I say. “You said that you needed me to identify the bandits.”


“And in doing so, forced me to make a choice. Having thrown in my lot with Gondor, Elfhelm will no longer have me in his Éored. He has no place for divided loyalties.”

“But you knew that day had to come.” My husband’s voice is gentle. “Whether now, or in a few week’s time when you ride to Minas Tirith to be recognised as my wife by the laws of my country in addition to those of yours.”

“Would you then have me refrain from fighting? It seems to me we have been over this ground several times before, and I thought we had come to an understanding.” Now I do find myself feeling hurt by his words.

Faramir brushes his hair back from his forehead with one hand. “We have indeed. But I do not see how we can fight, other than from direst necessity when our home and family are at risk, without so impeding one another as to put each other at risk. I am suggesting we should not fight where it is avoidable. Certainly we should not fight simply to prove our valour.” He frowns, then looks at me again, with a slightly hangdog expression. “And I suppose I am now found out as a hypocrite, for you can see that I am not immune to the quest for vainglory. I was supposed to hang back in that last battle, and yet went to lead from the front. Does it mitigate my crime that in the heat of the moment, I was happy to have you advance by my side?”

I pause for a moment. He looks at me so anxiously that I am torn between feelings of annoyance and a wave of affection. I put him out of his misery by managing a slight smile as I say, “I suppose in fairness, I did say that I would not be volunteering my services to the King to lead an expeditionary force to the Near Harad.” Then my mood becomes serious once more. “But there will be times when you will be away, at Minas Tirith or further afield, leaving me in Ithilien. Should our lands there be attacked, would you have me defer to your chosen lieutenant, or would you trust me to order our defence myself?”

“I think I answered that before, and I stand by my answer: I trust you to order the defence of our lands.” Then finally, the twinkle of humour I know so well returns to my husband’s eyes. “Provided you listen to your sergeant, of course. Talking of whom, how are things between you and Cynefrid?”
Smiling, I tell Faramir of hanging on to Cynefrid for grim life in the icy waters of the stream that night of the warg attack. “He has, he tells me, largely forgiven me, for, to use his own words, ‘every bugger makes mistakes now and again,’ but he tells me I am not to be ‘so bloody stupid again, if you'll forgive me saying so, my lady.’ So I think that he will come with me to Ithilien. And his wife's advice, to ask the housekeeper at Meduseld to recommend a housekeeper to me, has borne fruit. Edith is a widow who lost her husband on the Pelennor. Her son, by all accounts, is a forward young man, not half the man his father was, but of at least twice his ambition. And the son's wife even more so. Edith cannot face a lengthy period in the dower house on an estate where her daughter-in-law detests her presence. Being well born, she is lettered and knows her numbers, and is well used to keeping the accounts for an estate.”

“So you will come with a retinue who will help you to run our house and guard the borders of our estate. My wife, what will you leave me to do?” Faramir grins at me.

“Why, get heirs, of course. There is a task I would not have you delegate.”

And with that, Faramir and I fall to a more cheerful conversation which lasts for the best part of a league or more.

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This part of Anórien is a mixture of moorland and wooded valleys. The trail we follow winds across the open heath, then zigzags down to streams babbling between mossy boulders, hidden among green trees. It is late afternoon when we come down from the moor to a broader valley with fertile fields dotted with smallholdings and barns. Blue-grey smoke rises from the chimneys of small thatched longhouses. On the far side of the valley, where the ground begins to rise once more, stands a comfortable looking manor house, its position well chosen to be easily defended.

As we get nearer I see two women and an elderly male retainer standing on the terrace in front of the house. There is something stiff about the bearing of the taller of the two women. I may be letting my imagination run away with me, but I fear that this is Carandol's widow, and that she has already recognised his horse, bereft of its rider, and noted the bier strung between another two horses.

As we get closer, I see the woman next to her, an elderly woman in a wimple, take her arm and support her. Eventually, we dismount in front of the house. To give him his due, Gwaethron is dignified and gentle as he informs Carandol's widow of the news she has surely already guessed. Her face set in lines of deep sorrow, she thanks us for returning her husband's body. He then introduces Faramir, naming the widow to us as Lady Indwen. The lady's eyes widen as she realises this is the Steward of Gondor. Next he introduces me (a far cry from his dismissive attitude in the market square) as Faramir's wife.

To my intense relief, Lady Indwen offers us lodging for the night, and (presumably to buy herself a few much needed moments alone) sends her housekeeper to see that we are made comfortable. The housekeeper even manages to find a gown of approximately the right size for me. She brings hot water and helps me to dress. The evening is a horrible one, horrible for we must all keep up a front. Carandol's widow obviously wants nothing but to retire to her chambers and be alone with her grief. Gwaethron appears to be trying his best to be diplomatic, but his best is not particularly impressive. With indecent haste, he brings the conversation round to the future of the manor, reminding Lady Indwen of her husband's fondness for his, Gwaethron's, nephew: “almost like a son to him.” Yet again, Delion's final words come to my mind. How very convenient this day's events have been for Gwaethron's family. For her part, Indwen looks completely poleaxed by this unsubtle assault on her position.
Faramir intervenes to offer condolences once more, and to assure Lady Indwen that no hasty decisions will be made. He apologises for broaching the matter when her grief is still so new (casting an angry glance sideways at Gwaethron for forcing the topic of conversation), then adds that the manor is hers to look to in the medium term. As for its future, this is something that will be decided by King Elessar, but he assures Carandol's widow that her thoughts will be sought, and that nothing will be done until she can be settled into a dower house with lands enough to support her comfortably.

I feel a huge sense of relief when Indwen excuses herself. We stand in respect as she bids us goodnight. At last I can go to my bed, away from Gwaethron's machinations, and away from Indwen's pain. And I shall finally get a chance to talk to Faramir alone. Though not, it would appear, immediately.

“I have one or two pieces of business still to attend to,” Faramir says. “You look to be on the brink of exhaustion. Rest now, and I will come to our chamber immediately after I have finished.” He places his hands on my shoulders and presses a gentle kiss to my brow. In truth, I think there is nothing I yearn for more than my bed, though the thought of Delion's last words still weighs on my mind. I must talk it through with Faramir as soon as he returns to our chamber.

I make my way up the stairs, my feet leaden, dragging my body reluctantly. Once in my chamber, I strip off my garments as quickly as I can. The chamber is well set out; there is a separate closet behind a door with a chamber pot in it. I relieve myself, then decide against a second wash and simply fall onto the bed, pulling the bed clothes over myself. Despite my resolve to wait for Faramir so I can talk to him, I fall asleep almost at once.

The room is dark when I wake, or half wake. I realise that Faramir is curled round me, his arm round my waist, his face pressed against my shoulder. I must have slept so soundly that I did not stir when he got into bed. I move slightly, and he murmurs, his breath huffing across my skin.

“Éowyn, love,” he murmurs. I feel his lips brush a kiss across my arm, then a second on my neck. I press back against him, and feel the hardness which I am told seems to come to men more or less as a matter of course when they wake. Now it is my turn to make a soft humming murmur as I move my arse, wriggling against him. This time Faramir kisses my neck, then runs his tongue slowly from the base of my neck to my ear.

We have made love many times since that first night together (I smile at the thought that I have used Faramir's favourite phrase for this: it seems I too now use the words making love). And there is, it seems to me, almost infinite variety, not so much in the act itself (for there are only a finite number of ways to arrange two bodies to fit together), but in the mood in which it is undertaken. Our passion seems undimmed – many times we take one another with as much fervour as those early days. But there are times when all that we want is an almost lazy connection between the two of us, borne as much out of a need for comfort and release of tension as for any overwhelming explosion of desire.

I sense that this is one of these gentle times, for both of us. Faramir's hand drifts down to nestle at the apex of my thighs, long fingers deftly circling with slow, languid strokes. I settle, half on my side, half reclining back against him, my upper leg thrown over his, and gently he slides within me. I find myself making soft noises of pleasure, and he kisses my neck, my cheek, managing (when I turn my head) to kiss the corner of my mouth. We rock gently, and let our pleasure build slowly, inexorably. It is warmth, and tenderness, and a gentle, lazy loving. The world contracts until there is nothing other than our warm bodies and the centre where they join.

Perhaps because it has been so gentle in the building, I am taken completely by surprise at the intensity with which the waves of pleasure finally break. I feel him spill within me, feel him right up
hard against the inside of me, and the waves come crashing over me, leaving my whole body tingling. Afterwards, I lie panting in his arms, holding his hand in mine.

“Min leoflic,” he whispers, and his breathing too is ragged, his voice hoarse. We lie for long moments, and I can feel myself begin to drift on a warm tide of sleep. But then, in the way anxious thoughts have of intruding into the warmth of slumber, I remember the matter I need to address.

“Faramir?” I turn in his arms so that I am facing him.

“Mmm?” His response is sleepy.

“I could not talk to you of this earlier because so many people were within earshot, but it is, I deem, important.”

“So important it cannot wait for daybreak?” His voice is muffled by the pillow and my hair.

“Yes, for I am worried I will forget the precise words. After he stabbed Carandol, Delion was in turn stabbed by Gwaethron.”

“Yes, perhaps I was wrong about Gwaethron's loyalties being doubtful. Carandol certainly seemed to place himself beyond suspicion, alas for him, all too successfully.” Faramir's voice is sleepy, but his mind appears to be waking.

“But it was Delion’s last words as he fell at Gwaethron's feet. That is what worries me. He said, 'Why, my lord?'”

Instantly, Faramir stiffens. The space of a few heartbeats passes while I wait for him to speak. “And what interpretation do you put on his words?”

“That he was in fact in Gwaethron's pay all along, and probably took the opportunity on the battlefield to slay Carandol on Gwaethron's instruction, to leave the manor free for Gwaethron's nephew.”

Faramir is silent for another few moments. Then he speaks. “I think in all probability you are right, but I doubt that it would be clear-cut enough to convince a court, even with the additional circumstantial evidence about his nephew. Furthermore, your report of it would, unfortunately, count only as hearsay.”

I have been thinking about this during the course of the day, over the long hours when the presence of others has prevented me talking to Faramir. “The issue of hearsay would not matter in the Mark in this particular instance. For the one circumstance in which hearsay may be taken into account when sitting in judgement is when the speaker is now dead.”

“Then in this respect, I am afraid the laws of the Mark and of Gondor differ – and we are in Gondor. Besides which Gwaethron is a nobleman, at least by birth if not by behaviour... therefore the laws governing any trial he might be subjected to would be stricter than those for a commoner.” Faramir pauses. “You will not like this, but nonetheless it is the law. In trials of the nobility, a woman's evidence is not admissible unless corroborated by another witness.”

He is right. I do not like this. I sit bolt upright, leaving the covers in disarray. The cold night air hits my skin, the comforting cocoon of warmth gone. A string of Rohirric curses leaves my lips.

“Peace, my lady. Do not shoot the messenger...”

“Ah, but you are not the messenger. As you reminded all of us in the town square in Sarn Esgar but
two days ago, absent the King himself, you are the arbiter of what counts as law within Gondor.” I am even more furious that he should try to wriggle out of the situation in this way.

“Arbiter, in the sense that I get to interpret the law where there is scope for ambiguity. Not in the sense that I may re-write the law on a whim where its intended reading is crystal clear.”

“Does Gondor never repeal or revoke unjust laws?” I demand. “And what could be more unjust than treating women as having worth only one fraction of that of a man? How can you justify that in a realm whose Queen is the descendant of Lúthien herself, who broke into the fortress of Angband and wrested a Silmaril from the crown of Morgoth? Is Arwen but a fraction of the value of a man of this realm? Lúthien likewise? What of your Numenorean heritage?” (Here I offer silent thanks to Elfhelm sending me to the library to study history – for as well as preparing for his interrogations on military history, I read the history of the people into whose heritage I was marrying). “Was not Tar-Ancalimë deemed worthy of becoming your queen in ancient days?”

Faramir places his hand on my arm. “Again, peace, my love, peace. You argue your case nobly and well. And in truth, the law pertaining to women's testimony is of far more recent history than Tar-Ancalimë. It dates from the reign of our old friend, Alcarin, of the decadent court and affected pastoral poetry. He had numerous favourites, one of whom was almost certainly guilty of embezzlement. The main witness, however, who had overheard his financial dealings with his business partner, was the man's wife. Alcarin was able to cast doubt on her testimony by hinting that she was merely jealous at her husband's unfaithfulness. Thereafter, arguing that women were always wont thus to be swayed by their emotions, he introduced a law insisting that a woman's uncorroborated testimony was not admissible in a court of law.”

“So this law was brought in solely because of nepotism and corruption? It seems to me that it is long overdue for repeal.”

“And it shall be repealed. But the King and I have many pressing matters to attend to – this is far from being important in the grand scheme of things.”

If Faramir thought this would calm me down, he is mistaken. My rage rises once more. “A law which tells half your population, including your own wife, that they are unimportant adjuncts to the legal process which governs men? Far from important?”

“Éowyn... Please? Hear me out. At the moment we are still struggling to make sure that there is enough food, sufficiently fairly distributed, that no-one – be they man or woman – starves. And to ensure that the rule of law holds sway sufficiently well that men and women can go about their business without being attacked or murdered. Once there is food and civil order, then we can start to work on unjust laws.” In the dim light from the embers of the fire, I can see his eyes fixed on me, his expression serious. “In any case, its repeal would not help us to try Gwaethron. One cannot apply changes in law retrospectively.”

“But it would not be a change to the definition of the offence. He would not have carried out an action on Monday which was legal until Wednesday and illegal thereafter. The action – conspiracy to murder - was always illegal. All that would be being changed would be the admissibility of the evidence.”

Faramir gives a chuckle. “Ah, it is not surprising that not one, but two people have independently of one another warned me of your ability to frame an argument. Both Lord Elfhelm and my uncle, Imrahil, are of the opinion that you are possessed of a formidable legal mind. When the King and I get round to redrafting those laws, I shall definitely seek your advice. But my very first point still stands. Gwaethron, as a noble, would have to be tried before a jury of his peers. And the interpretation of Delion's dying words, even if we could get your testimony admitted in court, would
remain tenuous and circumstantial. They would not convict. And as you yourself have commented in connection with your brother's rule, when one is trying to cement a country after war, and under a new king, justice has not simply to be dealt out by order, but must be seen to be administered fairly.”

“Your uncle may believe me to have a shrewd legal mind, but it is clear, my love, that you have the honeyed tongue of a diplomat, to turn my words regarding the governance of the Mark so cleverly, and use them against my case.”

Faramir strokes my hair and kisses me gently. “Do you concede that it is hard to see how we could bring a case against Gwaethron, quite aside from the issues of unjust legal processes? Remember I said that I would settle for success rather than victory.”

“Mmm,” I murmur. I will not concede the point so easily, but I no longer have the energy to argue.

“Go neither to the Elves nor to shieldmaidens for counsel,” says Faramir with another laugh. “The former will say both yea and nay, the latter will say neither.”

I smile at this. Then another memory of the day floats to the surface of my sleepy mind. “I have a feeling that your plans to achieve success may be more far-reaching than today's impasse would suggest. Do you really intend for your men to summarily execute all the bandits they catch?”

Faramir looks at me, and raises an eyebrow. “You don't miss anything, do you? Yes, those words were mainly aimed at Gwaethron. Though in truth I was so worried for you that it was not hard to play-act. Had Beregond not saved you, I might well have uttered those words and meant them. But you are right. My hope is that if word gets back to those who escaped – and if Gwaethron is as perfidious as we believe him to be, it will – then those who are captured may be readier to tell what they know if they think they will die otherwise.” He pauses. “Can you think of any other way of tying up the loose ends?”

I try to think of some constructive response, but it feels as though my mind is filled with wisps of wool like those cast by sheep in spring. “I think I will have to sleep on the matter.”

“At the moment, I think you are more in danger of sleeping on me,” Faramir says with a smile, wrapping his arms around me. I think I make another “Mmm” sound before falling asleep once more.
attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.” I imagine Éowyn as wanting to play a similar role in advising on new laws and fairer representation in Fourth Age Gondor. (I have my wonderful beta, Lady Peter, to thank for pointing me in the direction of Abigail and John's letters to one another: it is not a period of history I studied in school, being from the country on the “wrong side”!) Of course, the progress of history is sometimes very slow, and it was not until 1920 that the 19th Amendment, giving women the right to vote, was passed in the USA (Britain got there two years earlier, with the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act in 1918).

My other inspiration (perhaps “source” would be a better word than “inspiration”, since their existence is far from inspirational) is of course legal systems still extant in some parts of the modern world where women’s evidence is not admissible in court unless there are no male witnesses, in which case two women’s word is accorded the same weight as one man’s word.
The next morning we wake early, and with a sense of sadness. I must now return to Elfhelm's Eored, and Faramir to Minas Tirith, leaving Mablung and Anborn behind to try to hunt down as many of the bandits as they can. I can tell that Faramir is annoyed with himself for failing to find conclusive proof of any wrong doing on Gwaethron's part.

“We can at least put one spoke in his wheel,” he says. “There are various men of lowly birth but high valour, who acquitted themselves with honour on the Fields of Pelennor and before the Black Gate. Since Carandol leaves no issue, it is possible for the King to gift his estates to one who has demonstrated his loyalty and bravery to the crown. That way, Gwaethron's plans for his nephew can be thwarted, and we set up a buffer between Gwaethron and Nauron's estates, and dilute some of Hatholdir's influence in the region.”

“There's a point,” I respond. “We may not be able to prove it, but the circumstantial evidence is pretty damning: Gwaethron is tied to the bandits. But what of Lord Hatholdir and his loyalties?”

“That I have not managed to establish,” Faramir replies, brushing his dark hair back from his brow with the gesture that is so familiar to me, the one that betokens frustration or tiredness, or in this case both. “It may be that Hatholdir is turning a blind eye to Gwaethron's activities, or it may be that a certain degree of lawlessness suits him. It would, after all, provide the prefect pretext to raise a large army under the guise of needing to suppress disorder within his province. And once raised, that army could be turned to other purposes.”

“And him Castamir's nephew.” I frown for a moment, trying to remember the complicated interlocking puzzle that is Gondorian court politics. Didn't you mention another relative of his?”

“Aye, his son-in-law, Megilagor, lord of Harn Falas just to the south of the Mouth of Anduin.”

“On the edge of the disputed territories?” I ask, and Faramir nods. “So,” I continue, “Perfectly placed to play a part in fomenting rebellion on two fronts.”

“That is what I fear, yes.”

“So what now?”

“Well, I return to Minas Tirith and make a full report to the King, then bury myself in administrative duties. I have played the soldier long enough. My presence here was as much to remove myself from Minas Tirith to allow King Elessar the chance to establish his rule on his own terms, and to remove any plausibility there might be to rumours that I was acting as puppet master for a naïve Northern Ranger, more suited to being a sell-sword than a monarch.” I raise my eyebrows at this last comment, and Faramir gives a tight smile. “Oh yes, you may be sure that the history of Thorongil's past service during my grandfather's time has not escaped Castamir's notice, and he has attempted to use it to his advantage.”

“But how could anyone be so foolish as to think that Aragorn was anything other than entirely his own man?”

“The issue is not their foolishness or otherwise in believing I could hold sway over the king. The issue is simply one of how much certainty or doubt can be shed over the interpretation of events, sewing enough confusion for Castamir to take advantage of the situation.”

“So your time in Anórien was simply an exercise in killing time while Aragorn showed that you
were not pulling the strings? It seems you have acted rather boldly, and put yourself and your troops at risk. And Hatholdir will undoubtedly make sure Gwaethron's version of events is also told in Minas Tirith. Surely Castamir will be able to use that to throw doubt on the soundness of your judgement, and perhaps even suggest that you pursued vainglory in contravention of common sense.” I muse on this for a moment, then add, “Is there not perhaps even a risk that the whole stratagem will miscarry, and Castamir will be able to argue that it is you who are now trying to establish your military credentials – that since you could not pull the strings from behind the throne you now seek to set the groundwork of a more direct, frontal assault by force?”

“Not on the basis of what was in fact a small skirmish, albeit one which went awry insofar as it led to the death of Lord Carandol. The aim of sending the Rangers here was always reconnaissance rather than military action, and though arguably I have over-reached my terms of engagement by getting so closely involved, nonetheless I think I may be excused, given the situation. This degree of lawlessness cannot be allowed to go unchecked.”

We make our way down the stairs to the hall where Carandol's widow sits alone at the high table, a statue frozen in grief. The image lasts for a moment before she catches sight of us and rises to greet us. We join her at the table and break our fast with bread, ham and porridge. Her household is obviously well-run; despite her bereavement, the servants keep to their tasks and the basic tasks continue in their regular pattern.

All too soon the time comes to make my way to the stables and return to Elfhelm. Faramir snatches a moment alone with me in the stables as I saddle Windfola. He wraps his arms around me. His mouth meets mine with a mixture of passion and tenderness, before stroking the hair back from my face and pressing a gentle kiss to my brow. Once in the stable yard, he watches as I mount, then brushes the back of my hand with his lips, before I ride out, accompanied by Beregond and three of his men.

The ride back to the Mering Stream is uneventful. As I reach the encampment, Elfhelm appears from his tent to greet me. He hails the Rangers, and explains that their presence has not been entirely in vain. Three bandits attempted to escape across the river. One was slain in the ensuing fight, but he hands custody of the remaining two, securely bound, to Faramir's troops, who set off back to Sam Esgar.

The Êored are making ready to depart. I track down Cynefrid, and find him bawling orders at his subordinates. To my surprise, who should be seated beside a heap of packs but Rustwen, looking sulky and rather cold. She is flanked by a couple of corporals. I raise my eyebrows at Cynefrid. He obligingly tells me the tale.

“The Marshall said she'd 'uv been killed if he'd left her in the town. So he brought her here. Heard him giving her a right chewing out – said the slightest hint of her lifting her skirts and causing a breakdown in discipline and he'd kill her himself. Then he set Torsten and Bede to guard her.”

“Torsten and Bede?” I say in surprise. “But they hate each other.”

“Aye, exactly Lord Elfhelm's thinking on the matter. Either of them steps out of line and tries it on with her, the Marshall knows the other one'll squawk louder than a constipated crow.”

“So what's he going to do?” I ask.

“Put her to service in the first manor we pass which is in need of extra hands to work the land and tend to the house. Just like you suggested. The Marshall made sure we knew it was your daft idea. The lieutenant's started a book on how long she lasts before she high-tails it to the nearest town and earning her bread on her back the way she's used to. I believe the Marshall's wager was on a shorter rather than longer time.”
I shake my head, but can't suppress a bit of a grin. “Well, at least I tried... And at least now the choice is hers, not forced on her by circumstances. She may surprise you yet.”

“Care to put your money where your mouth is?” Cynefrid grins. “The book's still open.”

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The next week or so is a peculiar one. At one and the same time I feel that I am constantly rushing to do things, yet at the same time there is more time for reflection than I am comfortable with. My belongings and dowry have to be packed, I must arrange the retinue that are to come with me, and I have to ensure that my brother's household will continue to run smoothly once I am gone. It surprises me to discover how much of a role I have taken in overseeing the housekeeping: for one who avoids womanly tasks like the plague, more of the responsibilities for this one seem to have fallen within my purview without me realising.

I keep with Éomer at meal times, but somehow the knowledge of my imminent departure casts a shadow over our interactions. We exchange platitudes, talk of the household, of the provisioning of garrisons, of the supply of food to far-flung corners of the Riddermark where the harvest will not come because orcs salted the fields or burned the barns holding the seed corn. But we do not talk of our feelings, not until the eve of my departure.

We have eaten and are retiring from the hall, I to my chambers, when Éomer suddenly places his hand on my arm.

“Come raise a farewell cup with me, sister.”

So we sit either side of the fire in his sitting room, a cup of mead each. The firelight flickers over the walls, adding russet tones to my brother's hair and beard. I kick off my slippers and wriggle my toes into the sheepskin on the hearth. Éomer grins, and says, “You used to do that when we were children.” He pauses for a few moments. “It's the little things like that which remind me how much I'll miss you.” I don't know how to answer, and sit, studying his face. Eventually, he raises his cup in salute.

“I wish I didn't have to leave,” I say. It seems a feeble comment, and Éomer pounces on it.

“You can't mean that... I've seen you and your Gondorian together. He thinks the sun shines out of your arse, and you're no better.” This makes me laugh. He continues somewhat more thoughtfully. “I am happy to see you so well married, to see you marry for love. You of all people deserve happiness.”

He pauses for a while to swirl his mead round the cup, then looks back at me, his eyes piercing. “Our uncle was a good, honourable and kind man. He loved us as much as he did Théodred. But he wasn't our father, or our mother. And the last few years were desperate indeed.” He pauses, and although he doesn't say it, I know he is thinking of the worm. A shiver runs down my spine. He gazes at the fire for a moment or two longer, then continues, “I am just so glad that somehow, from all the pain, you have managed to come through unscathed and find peace.”

“Not unscathed, but the hurts are healing, brother.” I take a sip of the honeyed liquid then say, “But what of yours, Éomer? Much as I am anxious to build a life with my husband, I do worry about leaving you.”

“I have a kingdom to rule, in case you had not noticed. I shall be too busy to brood.” Éomer's tone is a study in casual flippancy.
I feel the need to let him know I am not so easily fooled. “Ah, why would you protest that you shall not brood unless part of you fears that is exactly what you will do?”

“Oh, I am sure from time to time I shall succumb to the odd fit of the megrims – but nothing a concerted effort to throw myself into the task at hand, or failing that, a mug or five of ale with Éothain, will not cure.”

“You need to find a wife,” I say. “You know, I had thought perhaps you had found one.”

“Had I? How careless of me not to have noticed.” Still, it seems, he is determined to be flippant.

“You dally with many women, my brother, but it is not like you to toy with their hearts. Usually you are honest about the purely carnal nature of your intentions. Yet it seemed that you did mislead one lady in Minas Tirith, a lady whose company I came to value and whose honest and gentle nature is deserving of fair dealing.” To my surprise, the words come out more sharply than I had intended.

Éomer runs his hand over his brow, as if to smooth the furrows that have appeared between his eyes. “Do not meddle, sister of mine. I made her no promises, nor did any dalliance go beyond a swift and relatively chaste kiss – one which, I might add, she partook of with considerable enthusiasm. And at the time, I did not know her identity: she was just one of the healers assistants in their drab grey gowns, though one whose face made that gown fairer than the silks and velvets of many a court lady. And she did not know mine – I was just another Rider, fresh from the battlefield, war-weary and in need of comfort.” Éomer's voice softens all of a sudden and becomes almost wistful. “And the comfort she offered was not actually that of a welcoming pair of arms and soft lips. Most of the comfort she offered was in listening to me talk until I had talked away the horrors of the day, and of bearing me company. And I hope I was able to return the favour, for she also needed to talk of the horrors she had seen, the men carried into the Houses only to die in agony, and worse, the ones who would not die but clung to life, even though death might have been more merciful.”

“Aye, I know of that... I was there when the wounded were brought back from the skirmish on the way to Morannen.” For a moment, I gaze into the fire, trying not to let the images flood back. Éomer looking at my hands and realise that my knuckles are white as I grip the goblet in too tight a grasp. This time, when I speak, I do not mean to hector him, but rather to tease, to lighten the tone. Anything but allow myself to dwell on those horrors. I give him a sidelong glance. “But you did kiss her.”

He meets my glance reluctantly, and looks somewhat sheepish, but at the same time defiant. “The kiss was a bit of an afterthought. A nice afterthought, I'll admit. And if I were a gentleman I'd claim that I initiated it, but, as you know, I'm not a gentleman, though, as you also know, I am honest.” Here he gives the cheeky, cocksure grin I know so well.

“You are telling me the Princess of Dol Amroth kissed you?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

“Princess, but a woman too, alone with an irresistible handsome warrior like myself... oof!” The cushion I throw at him catches him squarely on the jaw. He adopts a wounded mien. “I will tell you no more sister, for some things are private, you know. And you have wounded me most grievously with my own cushions – who knows what you may do next. You do not deserve any details.”

“So, she likes you, you like her. Better still, the two of you can talk and bring each other comfort. She is an intelligent woman, well versed in state-craft and diplomacy, you are on good terms with her father and brothers... Why, you great horse's arse, have you not offered for her hand?” I glare at him. Béma preserve me from the idiocy of elder brothers.

“Éowyn,” he replies, and his tone is deadly serious once more. “You have been tireless in your
efforts to survey the damage wrought on our country by war – war on two fronts. I fear that the hordes of Orthanc did far more damage even than the legions of the Dark Lord. For the next few years, all the resources we have will have to be put to rebuilding, and there will be no luxury, nor even much comfort in the Golden Hall. My country must come first. How can I offer a bride price, how can I bring a princess from the far south, used to wealth beyond our imaginings, to a rush-strewn hovel?"

“You're a bloody fool, brother. For I recognise those words. You fought damn hard to throw off the yoke of Wormtongue and the sorcery of his master. I'll not have you use his words to besmirch the house of Eorl.”

Éomer lets his gaze fall. “I’m sorry. You are right. I should be... I am proud of our land, of the sacrifices we made. But it does not alter the fact that I have nothing to offer Lothíriel.”

“Do you think she gives a damn about that?”

“I don’t think she would – but her father? Her brothers? The court in Gondor?”

“Her father and brothers regard you – rightly so – as their shield-brother. And you have renewed the oath of Eorl. And their king also hails you as his brother. I don’t think any of them would give a damn, nor should they. As for the court, well, they’re going to have to get used to one northern barbarian, so why not two?” I look at him to see if I can get a grin out of him. “Write to her, you idiot. Write to her father.”

“I'll think about it.” I recognise the somewhat mulish tone and realise it would be counterproductive to press any farther. It also hits me how very alike the two of us are.

“So, thinking of us northern barbarians, do you think I will settle well into the court in the city of stone?”

Éomer gives me a grin. “They won't know what's hit them.” Then he gives a slightly slyer smile and adds, “You know, I heard Elfhelm reading the men the riot act after Pelennor. He explained to them that they must not dally with young maids of quality for they were expected to come to their marriage beds untouched. Stick to widows and professionals, was his advice. Makes me wonder what they will make of you.”

“Are you suggesting I am not a maid of quality?” I harrumph in fake disdain. Éomer howls with laughter at this response. “Seriously, though, sister, what are you going to do about all the strange rituals they have there? I've heard about their habit of insisting bloody sheets be hung from the windows like the triumphal banners of conquering armies. More than a bit weird if you ask me. I've always thought if you were going to marry, what mattered was not being the first, but being the last.” He catches my eye, and says, with one of his occasional flashes of seriousness, “On both sides.” Then he gives another smile and adds, “And a bit of practice beforehand – or indeed a lot of practice – can only help.”

I can't help myself: I laugh. “I think we are in agreement about the benefits of practice. But I think there will be no hanging of sheets. Faramir can be quite bloody minded when he wants to be, and on this matter, I think he will definitely want to be.”

We talk long into the night, recalling moments in our childhood, our first horses, sparring with each other in the training ring (and belting each other senseless out of it on occasion), the kindness of Théoden and Théodred. But it is Éomer's mannerisms which I try to memorise, his tone of voice, his shifts from carefully studied flippancy through a mask of heartiness to occasional flashes of either
seriousness or humour which are much truer to his nature, even though he does his best to hide them. And I sense he is doing the same with my quirks. Eventually, we both become too heavy-lidded to remain awake, and I hug him and depart.

~o~O~o~

It is many long leagues from Edoras to the City of Stone. As I ride, I think over and again of my parting from Éomer. He has been my rock ever since childhood, when he comforted me after the loss of our parents. Despite my sadness, I feel a small smile creep across my face at the thought of one of the many things tucked into the chests loaded onto the pack horses: a tiny, roughly carved, barely recognisable wooden horse, which Éomer carved for me for my birthday – the first birthday after our mother had died. And next to it, nestled in a square of blanket from my childhood bed is the doll my uncle gave me, my little shieldmaiden and dragon-slayer. I wonder whether I will have daughters, and if I do, whether they will cradle their dolls and sing them lullabies as girls are supposed to, or whether they will mount them on their toy horses and ride them off to war as I did.

Then, just as suddenly as it appeared, my smile fades. There will be no daughters yet a while. It was a week or so after the night when the moonlight played across our bed that its significance finally hit me. I realised there had been no monthly flow between the moonlit night of our wedding according to the customs of my people and that night in Sarn Esgar. For a day and a night I rejoiced, before cramps hit me the following day. In tears I sought out the midwife who tended to the women of the Golden Hall. She gave me willow bark tea to ease the pains, rubbed the small of my back and did her best to comfort me. The chances were, she said, that I had merely missed one of my monthly courses because of the activity and excitement of my life. Very sensibly she told me not to worry, that she was sure I would grow round with child before too long. She added that possibly it was for the best, as she had heard tell that the Gondorians viewed these things differently, and would think a child born so soon after their ceremonies had been completed to be half way to being a bastard. I wiped my tears more for her sake than for my own, and tried not to let my sadness show. She was right that there was no way of knowing, but still I grieved for the child that might have been, even if she were only a shadow of a possibility rather than a real corporeal being.

This train of thought leads me naturally enough to reflect on the next week or so. My sadness was soon pushed to the back of my mind by the flurry of activity packing my possessions and organising my retinue. Cynefrid was to be my sergeant at arms, as agreed, and with him came three other riders, Theodric, a middle-aged widower with no ties to bind him in the Mark, and two youths, Yffi and Sabert, both youngest sons drawn to seek fame, fortune and adventure in foreign lands. Edith had organised the packing of my bridal settlement: fine linens, elaborately woven woollen blankets, worked leather, pottery, jars of dried herbs, jewellery, as well as my own clothes. In a fit of enthusiasm, she had even carefully padded and wrapped the harp I had played as a girl, and had not touched for nearly a decade. She had also seen fit to engage the services of not one, but two maids. I took her to task for this extravagance, but she said firmly that it was only fitting that the King’s sister should arrive at the Mundburg well attended rather than trailing in like someone’s poor relation.

As I look at the retinue surrounding me – my own small company, Cynefrid’s family, my housekeeper, my maids – and the rather larger company comprising Elfhelm and a full Eored, I reflect that I shall certainly arrive in some style. I have covered most of the distance in my customary garb of riding gear and armour, not just because it is what I am used to, but for protection: I know only too well after recent events that much of Anórien is a lawless place. But now, within a couple of day’s ride of Minas Tirith, I am arrayed in a woman’s riding costume of split skirts over my breeches. Acha, one of my maids, spent interminable amounts of time this morning braiding and arranging my hair. For the time being, it would seem, it is no longer enough to drag a comb through my hair first thing in the morning and forget about it. Perhaps if I behave myself in Minas Tirith I will be able to do as I please once I am in Emyn Armen. My husband certainly seems to like my hair loose, if his
enthusiasm for running his hands through it, and burying his face in it is any indication. I stifle a
laugh as I remember more private signs of his enthusiasm – the appreciative noises he makes when
my hair brushes across his naked chest as I sit astride him.

My husband – how foolish this performance in Gondor seems. To marry not once but twice. And
most ludicrous of all, apparently we are to play the chaste, patient lovers for the week or so until the
ceremony, despite the fact that my brother and his uncle (and presumably cousins) are under no
illusions. Nor is, I suspect, the King of Gondor himself. But I suppose appearances matter to the
Castamirs of this world. Though again, I suppose this to be concern with just that: appearances. For
surely he and his wife had a pretty shrewd idea of the true state of things back in Gondor, if the barbs
I had to suffer from their poisonous tongues were any indication. So here we are, all pretending, all
playing the hypocrite, for the sake of some strange moral code which apparently means very little to
any of us.

I signal to Elfhelm that I am ready to set off, and he passes the order to his lieutenant who calls out to
the Éored in loud ringing tones. With a jingle of harness and clatter of armour and hooves, we set off.
It takes the best part of the morning to reach the breach in the Rammas Echor that I remember from
the previous March – that very different ride south along this road from which I did not expect to
return. I did not expect any of us to return. For a moment, my mind fills with images of smoke and
the clamour of battle, the twisted bodies of troops crumpled on the ground, fallen horses pierced by
 crude but deadly spears from the hosts of Mordor. I can smell the metallic tang of blood, the smell of
men's sweat rank with the fear of death, feel the red rage of battle. Then the cold ice freezes round
my heart and I see the fell beast on the ground before me, see the black figure rising from the wreck,
looming over my uncle's body.

Windfola must sense my thoughts, for he skitters sideways beneath me. My hands already grip the
reins as if my life depended on it, but I try to settle my weight in the saddle, and do my best to drag
my thoughts back to the present, making soft noises to try to calm him. He grows less restive, and I
manage to look around at my surroundings. I find the effort of concentrating on the real world helps
me escape the misty figures of my memory. For rather than the crumbling breach through which we
rode on that day without a dawn, there now stands a newly built archway, guarded by soldiers in the
livery of the Tower of the Guard. The freshly dressed stonework stands out, a bright and glistening
honey colour against the darker, weathered stonework which lay in ruins the year before. The
Gondorians stand to attention, and the captain of their guard steps forward and bows, first to me, then
to Elfhelm. He signals to a messenger who mounts smoothly onto a horse and sets off at the gallop to
inform of our impending arrival. I find myself taking in the lines of his horse, a light-boned, finely
bred gelding. Unless I miss my guess, it has some of the blood lines of the Near Harad in its
breeding. Too light for cavalry work, but fast enough to be ideal for its present duties.

With the Gondorian captain and a small party of his men accompanying us, we set off across the
Pelennor. The fields still bear the scars of war, but nonetheless I am amazed at how much the
landscape has recovered in such a short time. Everywhere there are signs of building work and repair
efforts. At last, after an hour or so of riding, we see a large party coming towards us, banners bearing
the tree and seven stars fluttering from lances, armour gleaming in the sun. At the front of the party a
herald and a squire ride next to a group in richly coloured garments. The banner the squire carries is
decorated with tree, stars and crown, and I realise with a start that Aragorn himself has come to greet
me. As my eyes take in the scene I see Arwen riding on a grey palfrey beside him. But my gaze
continues restlessly, trying to find the one I really seek. And then I finally see him, tall, at ease on a
bay destrier. His keen sight has already found me, for when I look at his face, his eyes meet mine,
and a smile like the sun rising spreads across his face.
Wedding March

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Note: in the last chapter, Éowyn and Éomer discussed his encounter with Lothiriel in the aftermath of the Battle of Pelennor Fields. Since then, I've written a short piece telling the story of this encounter. You don't have to read it to enjoy this chapter, but it might fill in a bit of the background. It's called The Red Tower of Ecthelion.

~o~O~o~

It is the second day since my arrival, and I feel as though I have not so much as paused for breath. I had hoped to stay with Faramir's uncle, in the town house owned for centuries by the princes of Dol Amroth. But no, I am Éomer's sister (and his heir) and so I must stay in guest chambers within the Royal Palace. Queen Arwen has been welcoming to me, but as with Legolas when he was in Edoras, I find myself ill at ease in the company of Elves. They seem strange, untouchable, so far set apart from the concerns of mere mortals, and I cannot read their faces or discern the workings of their minds.

I have also seen relatively little of Faramir. We were seated beside one another at dinner, and to be able to talk to him was comfort beyond measure, but raised high upon the dais, with all eyes looking at us, there was precious little chance for either of us to touch the other, even surreptitiously. At one point, he did whisper in my ear just how much, and in what ways, he had missed me. I swear that as he did so I glimpsed Arwen watching us, a tiny smile playing upon her lips. Then I saw her lean over to whisper something into the king's ear. Whatever she said, it caused Aragorn to smile broadly. Perhaps, I reflect, Elves are not as inscrutable as I thought. I certainly suspect that she does not find mortals at all inscrutable, but then I suppose she has had many years of practice in reading Aragorn's face.

The next morning, Faramir arrived to accompany me to the Dol Amroth townhouse, where he introduced me to his aunt, the Lady Ivriniel, and his cousin Elphir's wife, the Lady Galwien. They were kind, and well meaning, and (I think) found me exceedingly strange. However, they did me the great service of explaining much of what was to be expected of me at the wedding and helping to untangle some of the nuances and complexities of court behaviour which would otherwise have passed me by. Ivriniel, in particular, proved to be a mine of information. Although she turned out to be every bit as prudish and overly concerned with decorum as Lothíriel had hinted to me all those months ago, she also turned out to know every last detail of the political and familial alliances. I fear it will take me a long time to get to grips with Gondorian life, but at least I will not put my foot (clad in its unfeminine riding boot) in my mouth too many times. And thanks to Ivriniel, I finally know the name of Castamir's wife: Merendis. Though it was Galwien who revealed a quiet sense of humour by explaining to me (while Ivriniel was out of earshot) that never was a name more inappropriately given. My insufficient grasp of Sindarin had led me to miss the irony, but apparently Merendis means "joyous wife."

However, today my heart lifts. I am to meet Faramir in the gardens of the Palace. As I walk through the gates of the garden, I see that Faramir has brought my promised visitors. They both look terribly shy, pale faced and wide-eyed. The boy sketches a slightly gawky attempt at a courtly bow; his younger sister's courtesy is much better executed.
Faramir rests his hands gently on their shoulders. “These are my foster children, Borlas and Nimwen. This is the Lady Éowyn.”

The children both have the dark hair characteristic of Gondor, but they have green eyes, rather than Numenorean grey. The boy comes up nearly to Faramir’s shoulder, the girl a handspan or two smaller. I smile at them, and say, “Come, I have asked for a picnic to be laid out for us.” I give a wink to Faramir: I hope that food will ease the initial awkwardness. I have every intention in this instance of being the sort of indulgent adult who allows the children to eat honey cakes before they have to eat their meat. I lead them to the small bower in the centre of the garden. As we walk across the grass, Borlas turns to look at me, examining me with the intent expression and complete lack of self-consciousness that only a child can muster.

“Is it really true that you slew the Witch King?” he asks.

“Yes, indeed I did.”

“I should like to do that – well, not that, precisely, for he is dead and I cannot very well kill him all over again,” the boy says solemnly. “But I should like to ride to battle and do deeds of great renown that the minstrels will sing of in years to come.” This speech is delivered very earnestly, with hardly a pause for breath.

“So should I,” says his sister, firmly.

“You can’t do that, you're a girl,” her brother replies. Then he looks at me, realises what he has said and turns very pink.

“Battles are not nearly so much fun when you're in them,” I say. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Faramir giving me a wry look. I decide to ignore him, and continue, “Have you got a sword yet, Borlas?”

“I am to have one for my thirteenth birthday,” he says, proudly. “But I have already started learning with an old sword belonging to Master Tonnor.” He adds as an aside, “Master Tonnor and Mistress Merilbes look after us when Adachanor is busy doing important stuff – like fighting hundreds of orcs.”

I do my best to hide my smile at this artless description of Faramir (I also find the fond use of ‘stepfather’ in its familiar form moves me in a way that I was not expecting). “Ah, well, in that case, we had best start practising. After our picnic, we can find some garden canes – I think I saw some that the gardener had left in a corner.”

And that fills up an afternoon quite easily. I feed the children honey cakes (they largely ignore the savoury food), then we stage a mock battle with hastily improvised swords. The children have great fun, alternating between copying my simple practice steps, and leathering each other in duels slightly too earnest to be described as make-believe (how it reminds me of Éomer and myself). And when they flop, panting, on the grass, Faramir and I stage our own make-believe bout. It is a slightly cautious affair, for I am wearing a dress, and seeing as our sticks have no guards, there is an ever present risk of rapping each other over the knuckles (in fact this happens to both of us rather painfully several times).

Faramir is a good swordsman, not that this comes as a great surprise. I have seen him fight before, after all. But it is still a slightly different business being on the receiving end of his technique. He is quite fast, his footwork light, and he has the advantage of both reach and strength over me. But I think I am rather faster, and perhaps technically the better of the two of us (I learned early on that the only thing that would give me an edge was knowing more tricks than my male opponents). The
children cheer us on, and I discover much of their easy relationship with Faramir in how easily they laugh at our antics. To their glee and mine, I eventually force him onto the back foot, he trips over a tree root and lands on his arse. I delight in discovering he is equally happy to laugh along with us. I suppose I had never given it much thought, but it pleases me to find he is so comfortable and affectionate with the two of them.

“What will happen after your wedding, Adachanor?” asks Nimwen. Once again, the familiar address makes my insides knot with emotion, to realise they feel about Faramir the way Éomer and I felt about our uncle, Théoden. It makes me want to reach out and touch him, to draw him close into an embrace. I wonder whether Faramir senses any of this. If he does, he gives no sign, simply answering the little girl's question.

“Didn't Master Tonnor and Mistress Merilbes tell you? Now that the war is over and we have had time to rebuild the houses, we are all going back to Ithilien, to Emyn Arnen.”

Nimwen nods. “I just wanted to make sure. Sometimes I'm not sure that things will be right again. I miss the trees. There aren't enough trees in the city.”

Faramir smiles at her. “There will be a big house on the hill above the river, with lots of trees round it, and there I and my lady shall dwell, and your foster parents will have a house and a small holding in the hamlet near the foot of the hill. And you and Borlas shall spend most of your time with us in our house, for I no longer have to ride to war, and you are old enough to learn the ways of a great house. But you will be free to come and go, to visit your foster parents as often as you want. Once Borlas has his sword, he will spend time with the master at arms, learning to fight as well he can, and perhaps in a year or so, he will go as squire to some noble knight, to see more of the world.”

“Can I be your squire?” Nimwen asks me.

“Well, I shall most certainly teach you the use of a sword, and how to ride if you wish. But both I and your step father are leaving our fighting days behind us. He will be the king's counsellor, and I shall help him to rule Ithilien. There is more to ruling that wielding a sword. I have to help make sure that the new laws in our new realm are fair to everyone. That means reading lots of papers – do you think you can help me with that?” Out of the corner of my eye I can see Faramir struggling very hard not to laugh at me.

“I know all my letters already, and I can write my name,” the little girl responds with great seriousness.

After Merilbes has come to collect the children, Faramir and I stroll round the garden arm in arm.

“I like them, you know,” I say to him.

“I could tell,” he says. “I think you have found yourself a little shieldmaiden to mould in your image. Except that now you tell me you have reached a matronly, circumspect stage of your life and are to hang up your sword.” He is now laughing openly, and I dig him in the ribs with my elbow.

“I don't know why you seem so surprised by this: I seem to remember that I promised you some time ago that I would not be leading an expeditionary force to reconquer the debatable lands.”

“So you did,” he replies, and then (with a slightly sheepish glance round the garden to make sure we are not being watched) pulls me into his arms and kisses me with a quiet, gentle passion.

“You know, all this attention to propriety is not good for my constitution. I fear I may be subject to some sort of fit of melancholic humours,” he says with a grin. “I may have to take to my bed, except
that it feels so cold and empty without you I fear it would bring scant comfort.”

“And what is it, I wonder, that is in need of comfort? Your constitution, or something else entirely?” I reply.

At this he grins once more, saying, “If truth be known, mainly I fear for the state of the something else.” Then he pulls me into another embrace and kisses me again.

~o~O~o~

For the first time since my return to Minas Tirith, I find myself alone with Lothíriel. She has come to my chambers to help me to dress for tonight's party, held by her sister-in-law, the Lady Galwien. I find myself rather looking forward to seeing Galwien again. Her quiet barb at Castamir's wife has certainly left me well disposed towards her. The party is, I gather, some sort of women's gathering, traditional before a wedding.

“Will you be at this gathering tonight?” I ask Lothíriel. In response she raises an eyebrow, her mouth twitching in an effort not to smile.

“Oh no,” she says. “That would surely be most improper. For you see, it is to be hosted by married ladies of the city, so that they can prepare you for your marital duties. The intention is to ensure that the wedding night does not come as too much of a shock to your maidenly sensibilities. I, on the other hand, am expected to remain in blissful ignorance of the mysteries of the marriage bed for some time to come.”

I stare at her, dumbfounded. Then both of us collapse into gales of laughter. For some moments we are both unable to speak. I find myself reduced to that state where I can scarcely breathe, tears running down my face, taking hiccuping gasps of air. Lothíriel passes me her handkerchief. I wish I could say that it was only to dab at my tears, but I fear it more likely she intends me to wipe my nose. Eventually I manage to speak.

“Should I try to blush, or would it be best simply to take a fit of the vapours and faint clean away?”

“Can you blush to order?” Lothíriel asks, apparently taking my first suggestion absolutely seriously, with a solemn curiosity which for a fleeting moment reminds me of Faramir.

“Alas, I fear not. Perhaps I can simply settle for hiding my face in my hands, maybe with a groan of horror at the fate which awaits me.”

“Best not to over-egg the pudding,” says Lothíriel sternly. The quirk of her cheek muscles suggests that her strict tone of voice is only for show. Then she adds, “I expect a full account of it afterwards.”

“But what of your tender maidenly sensibilities?” I ask.

“I seem to remember that our first conversation together concerned my having to hold an injured soldier's manhood while he pissed in a chamberpot. I may still be able to claim the title of 'maidenly', but I have very little in the way of tender sensibilities left. Besides which, what interests me is not so much the mechanics of the act, for I am perfectly well acquainted with the theory if not the practice. No, I am intrigued to find out how many, and which, of our court ladies will admit to enjoying the ministrations of their husbands, and how many will suggest that you resign yourself to your fate in the hope that it will be over quickly. It is, I will admit, pure nosiness on my part.”

I look over at her. Her face bears a look of impish mischief. It suddenly strikes me how well suited she and Éomer will be.
“Has my brother written to you yet? I made him promise that he would,” I say.

The smile vanishes abruptly from her face. “No, no, I pray you have not. No, that would be most improper.” Her words leave me puzzled beyond measure; the look on her face leaves me with a growing feeling of unease.

“But,” I say, “I thought that you and he... That you liked one another.”

“Please, do not speak of that. It was a young girl's moment of foolishness, made more so by the strain of a day terrible almost beyond endurance. I pray you, do not remind me of my improper behaviour – and rest assured that your brother did not in any way take advantage of my foolishness.”

I am stunned. When last I talked to her of this, that afternoon in the garden, she seemed to hold the fondest of memories of her encounter with my brother. And indeed, had felt sufficiently strongly about it to have confided in Faramir, for it was he who told me that the man who had left her all aflutter was Éomer.

“But why is it so improper? You flirted with each other, perhaps, but where is the harm in that? And if he were to woo you, to ask your father if he could pay you suit?”

Lothíriel cuts off my questioning abruptly. “It is improper because I am betrothed to another. Please, let us talk no more of this.”

Then my temper flares. Oh, my wretched, impetuous temper. I will not stop talking. I continue, mostly in desperation, but with an undercurrent of anger. “What? You kissed him and yet were betrothed to another man?”

Lothíriel sounds as angry as I am; she snaps back at me. “Of course not. What sort of hoyden do you take me for? Although the match had been mooted, no arrangements of any sort had been made back then.”

“Then why did you not wait for my brother? Why accept this other man?”

Lothíriel's eyes flash with passion, and I sense an aggression which she holds back, but only barely. With a voice as cold as ice, she says, “Your brother? Would that be the brother who was so assiduous in his suit when he returned from Cormallen? Or would that be the brother who stood at the court functions drinking ale with his comrades? Would that be the brother who wrote to me at the first opportunity? Or would that be the brother from whom I have heard nary a word?”

Her anger feeds mine, but mine is tempered by a deep sadness, a sense of lost possibilities, not only for my brother but also for her. I try to argue my case. “But you said to me that you had had a glimpse of what a love match could be like, and that it would be hard to put up with an arranged marriage instead.”

It would seem my words fall on barren ground. Lothíriel looks at me with utter disdain. “Young and foolish I may have been, but not so foolish as to think that strength of feeling alone can suffice when it is felt by only one of the people involved and not the other.” She lets her breath out in a huff of irritation, then continues, “As for my betrothal – yes, it is an arranged marriage, but I have met my husband to be, been given the chance to come to know him, and been allowed to make my own decision as to whether or not to marry him. Herthedir is a noble and kind man. He fought bravely against the Corsairs raiding the coast and protected Minas Tirith from war on two fronts. He has never been anything other than gentle and considerate in his dealings with me. I have no doubt he will make a fine husband.”
I cannot think what to say. It seems so wrong – how can one go into a marriage on such a basis? How can one lie with another where there is no passion? Lothíriel catches my gaze and returns it defiantly.

“I wish for neither your judgement on my actions, nor for your misplaced pity. I think that we have said all that needs to be said to one another. May you have a pleasant evening, cousin.” She inclines her head slightly, turns on her heel and sweeps out of the door.

~o~O~o~

I find Faramir in his office. The ocean of untidy papers, the teetering cliffs and sea-stacks of books, all these are unchanged from my last visit. But unlike last time, when I came seeking him out with a mixture of concern and desire, this time I stride into his room aflame with anger. Faramir looks at my face and merely raises one dark eyebrow. One look at his infuriatingly controlled demeanour, and I explode. “I can't believe it. Imrahil seemed so sensible, so kind, so well able to understand the cage, the circumscribed lot of women. And yet he is marrying his daughter off as if she was a fine brood mare and he only concerned with blood lines. How can he do this?”

“He can do this because this is how it has always been done in our country. He has, in fact, been much more understanding of Lothíriel's position than you are giving him credit for. She has been given the chance to meet and get to know Lord Herthedir, and throughout this, it has always been made abundantly clear to her that she could refuse his suit with no shame or dishonour reflecting on her. And have no doubt – my uncle will have been clear that the possibility of refusal was a genuine one; he will have exerted no subtle pressure on her.” Faramir's voice is calm and even, but I can see that he is irritated by my anger: he sees me as unreasonable.

“But what of my brother? What of how she feels for him?”

Faramir gives me a sharp look. “And how does she feel for him? What has she said to you of this? For I know you well enough to know that you will have asked, bluntly and without regard for the consequences, where perhaps a wiser person might have held their tongue.”

“A wiser person? A bloody Gondorian hypocrite, you mean.” I am starting to get angry with Faramir as well as with his wretched relatives. “And why the hell didn't you tell me? How long have you known for?”

Faramir gives a sigh, then stands and walks over to me, taking me in his arms.

“Please, my bold shieldmaiden, do not let your anger get the better of you. And do not take it out on me. I didn’t tell you because I only found out shortly before I left for Anórien that the betrothal had been formalised. And if you remember, we had other, rather more pressing matters taking up our attention then – what seemed to me like another bit of court gossip simply slipped my mind.”

I try to get a grip on myself and take a few deep breaths, my face buried in his tunic. “But you know what happened after the battle – Lothíriel confided in you.”

“Not a great deal – happened, that is. Just a conversation, which, admittedly, by Gondorian standards should not have taken place unchaperoned, and a kiss, which definitely ought not to have happened according to the views of those such as my aunt, but which I'm inclined to think was innocent enough. I put it down to them both being over-wrought in the aftermath of the battle and needing comfort. With the benefit of hindsight, it would seem that Lothíriel views it the same way. And, so too does your brother, if his lack of interest in pursuing the matter is any indication. Beloved, you
appear to be the only person who reads it otherwise. You have constructed a castle in the air, an elaborate fairy tale with Lothi as the damsel in the tower and your brother as the prince who can rescue her. But she seems not to want to be rescued, and your brother does not seem disposed to do so in any case, so why not leave well alone?"

I cannot think of how to respond to this, so I remain, head tucked against his chest. Now the anger is subsiding I am starting to feel rather foolish.

“Of course, the irony of the situation is not lost on me. Your brother, who I gather from my cousins has something of a reputation with women, behaved himself impeccably, while I, whom Lothi has always teased about being the embodiment of virtue, too stiff and proper for my own good, spectacularly and dishonourably overstepped the bounds of propriety.” He looks down at me with his eyes crinkling with mirth. “Or as I rather think you might prefer to phrase it: while your brother for once in his life kept his breeches laced, I, the ‘Gondorian pansy’, was fucking his sister morning, day and night.”

I can't help it. I begin to laugh, snorting into his velvet surcoat, my shoulders shaking. I can hear the comforting rumble of his laughter joining mine. Eventually, we stop laughing, and I manage to look up at him. His eyes are serious once more – that shrewd, grey gaze that seems to delve right inside a person's soul. “Were you very angry with Lothi?” I nod, now feeling more than foolish: I feel rather ashamed. “Perhaps you should go and seek her out – I think you owe her an apology.”

“You are right, as always, and for once I can't find it in myself to be annoyed with you, for I have behaved like an utter fool.”

Faramir puts his hand under my chin and tilts my face up to look at him. “You mean it for the best, I know. You want everyone to have what we have. But I honestly think Lothi will be happy with Herthedir. He is a good man – brave, honourable and fair. And, let us be honest with one another – can you see your brother wanting for feminine company? But I should rather turn my attention to you, my lady, rather than the carryings on of our relatives.” He runs his hand across my cheek, then dips his head towards me and kisses me, a slow, hot kiss that speaks of desire.

Then there is a knock at the door. “My Lord Steward?” I recognise the voice as that of Lord Turgon.

Faramir curses quietly, steps back from our embrace, and says, coolly, “Enter.”

If Turgon is surprised to find me there, in breach of all Gondorian rules of etiquette, he is polite enough to show no sign. He bows to Faramir and says, “The King has sent me to bring word that the delegation from Harlond is here.”

“Thank you, my Lord.” Faramir turns back to me and takes my hand. “My Lady.” He raises my hand, turning it so that he can press a kiss to the palm. This does appear to ruffle Turgon's composure: it would seem that this gesture is nearly as scandalous as if Turgon had caught us as we were moments earlier, Faramir's tongue entwined with mine, our bodies pressed together.

But then the moment is gone. Faramir bows to me, and ushers Turgon through the door, following him out into the passage beyond.

~o~O~o~

I swear that Acha has studied the finer points of Easterling torture techniques under a master of the trade. She is primping me to within an inch of my life, and, had I any secrets of grand strategic importance to divulge, I would spill them readily into her ear if only to be spared the comb and the lacing. Much as I complain loudly, there is a part of me, a part I shall not acknowledge on pain of
death (probably death by comb) which is quite enjoying the process. Acha has brushed my hair and arranged it beautifully. And my housekeeper-in-waiting, Edith, has excelled herself in the preparation of my trousseau. She has had a fine underdress of soft linen made for me, and a kirtle of a deep green which will suit well the dark blue of the mantle Faramir gave to me. As Acha tightens the laces at the back of the gown, I finger the thick, rich layers of embroidery. Bands of gold thread in geometric patterns adorn the neck and cuffs, and the upper portion of the sleeves are worked with fantastical designs – horses and harts amid trees, beneath moon and stars. I am sure this is entirely intentional on the part of whichever woman came up with the design, combining the horses of the Mark and the moon of Ithilien. By thus working the symbols of both our houses into the very cloth of my marriage gown, the wise women will have sought to ensure good fortune for our marriage. I cast a glance at the girdle which Edith holds in her hands, ready to tie around my hips. I smile as I realise it too is delicately embroidered, with red clover and raspberry plants, and that these will nestle against my belly. Nothing, it would seem, is being left to chance.

As Acha works, I let my mind drift back to the aftermath of my row with Lothíriel. After seeing Faramir, I made my way to the Dol Amroth townhouse and apologised to his cousin. She accepted my apology graciously (in fact, that word might have been coined to describe the way she does almost everything). But I sensed a residual stiffness in her manner, and I wonder whether we will return to the easy friendship we shared in the last days of the war. However, I did manage to regain some ground the day after, when I was able to report back on the ladies' gathering.

I can't help but smile as I remember it: it was, if anything, even more excruciating than anticipated. The thing that was strangest was the mismatch between what was being said, and the twinkles in the eyes of some of the women which told an entirely different story. The general consensus for public consumption seemed to be that one got used to the activities of the marriage bed with time, and that if one's husband was sufficiently gentle, it could become passably pleasant. At that point in the conversation, I swear I saw several of the women hide smiles behind their sleeves. Had I known them well enough, and had I been able to talk to them in private, I expect they would have glossed “passably pleasant” in rather different ways. The sad thing, however, was those women who sat and nodded in agreement, like Arwen's hand-maiden Miriel. Or, worse, said that they simply found it bearable, but that at least once one's husband had begot the heir and the spare, he would then turn to a succession of mistresses and leave one in peace.

Miriel's presence reminded me that the evening could have been more excruciating still. Thank the heavens I was at least spared the presence of Arwen: she, apparently, had said it was clearly a celebration according to the customs of mortals, and that she would be out of place, though she graciously invited me to take my midday meal with her the following day.

And thank the gods too for Galwien. I suspect that Imrahil might have mentioned to his sons why there was quite such a precipitate rush to see me safely married according to the customs of the Mark. Certainly, they were all present at the wedding in Edoras, and must have known that thereafter, Faramir and I openly shared a bed chamber as husband and wife. As she accompanied me back to my chambers in the palace, Galwien had grinned broadly, and laughingly dismissed the evening's entertainment for the travesty it was, saying that she thought lying with her husband was the greatest sport to be had, daytime or night, and broadly hinting that furthermore she thought this opinion would come as no great surprise to me. She even went so far as to engage in various speculations about the apparently legendary (at least, within Gondorian legends) stamina of the Eldar, adding with a raise of her delicate eyebrows that she had heard suggestions that this was yet another respect in which the blood of the Eldar ran true in the veins of Imrahil and his kin. Most fortunately for the women who were lucky enough to wed them, she had added. I can't help but grin at the memory of this particular line of thought; it would certainly explain certain things about my husband that I find more than passing pleasant.
“A penny for your thoughts. They seem to amuse you greatly.” My wandering thoughts are interrupted by Edith.

“I was just remembering the gathering which was held in my honour a few days ago, where the married ladies of Minas Tirith sought to prepare me for my marriage bed, so it wouldn't come as too much of a shock to me.” I make a desperate effort to keep a straight face.

Acha gives a gasp of surprise. “But you and the Prince – you are already wed. I saw you wed in Edoras.”

“Aye, according to our customs, and my husband is more than happy to abide by those customs. But for the people of Gondor – they considered that to be merely my betrothal, and... Well, their customs are rather stuffier than ours.” And at this point, I give up the doomed struggle and let myself laugh out loud.

“Well, my lady,” says Edith, with a twinkle, “If thoughts of your marriage bed can make you smile that broadly, it's just as well I have had this prepared.”

And, with a flourish, she reaches into the cedar chest and produces the flimsiest, most diaphanous nightgown I have ever seen. The thing is near transparent as glass. I find myself clapping my hands in delight.

“Oh my, that will shock the Gondorian ladies of the chamber! I don't think they expect me to look forward to enjoying my wedding night.”

“Well, before you get too carried away, my lady, I should also point out...” Here, Edith purses her lips, “That the lady Miriel brought round a robe to wear over your nightdress, as a present from her family's house. I think she hopes to curry favour with you, as wife of the Steward. I fear she may have missed her mark with this one.”

Edith now holds out a voluminous red velvet robe, richly but to my eye rather tastelessly embroidered. The folds of fabric stand stiffly, almost as if they need no support from a frail human body.

“Well,” says Acha thoughtfully, “If ever there was a garment designed to make your husband wish to rip it from your body, that's it! Though not in the way usually meant on a wedding night.”

“Oh my...” My voice trails away. “And she is one of the ladies appointed to accompany me from the dinner to my bedchamber and to help me prepare. Oh Béma – there’s no way out of wearing it.”

Edith gives a warm chuckle. “If the way I've seen Lord Faramir look at you is any indication, my lady, I shouldn't worry over much. You're not going to be wearing it for long.”

~o~O~o~

“You look every bit Éomer King's sister, and beautiful beyond the words of the bards. Far too good for a Gondorian Steward, if you ask me.” Elfhelm winks, then offers me his arm. He leads me into the antechamber where my husband (or perhaps that should be husband to be) is waiting.

Faramir looks at me, and his face breaks into a huge smile. My near death by comb and lacing was well worth it for that smile. I break free from Elfhelm, and rush across the room to him. He takes me by both hands and stands, dumb struck. I am similarly at a loss for words. Fortunately for the patience of the assembly in the grand chamber of the Kings through the great oaken doors, Elfhelm breaks the spell.
“The two of you want to watch out. Keep looking at one another like that and the court may begin to suspect that this is more than an arranged marriage to cement the Oath of Eorl.” He strides up to us and claps Faramir on the back, which seems to bring my beloved to his senses.

The Warden of the Keys watches this performance with a slightly bemused expression. Sensing that we are not about to do anything too outrageous, he nods to the two attendants, who open the great doors. He marches into the great hall, and announces in a loud voice that Faramir, Steward of Gondor and Prince of Ithilien, seeks leave to present his betrothed, Éowyn Eomundsdōhtor, sister of the King of Rohan, to King Elessar, and to petition the King to join them in marriage.

I had thought I would find the pomp of the occasion either ridiculous or overwhelming, but to my surprise, my main feeling is one of relief: relief that we have reached this final hurdle, and once it is out of the way, everyone will accept us as husband and wife. There will be no more creeping down corridors, no more sneers from Castamir and his esteemed and joyous lady. But this is not a moment to dwell on the back-stabbing of the court (even if this ceremony is largely for their benefit). Faramir smiles at me, and in this moment, that is my whole world. Together, we advance between the crowds of nobles at either side of the hall, my hand on his arm, his hand resting on top of mine. We reach the steps up to the dais, where Aragorn and Arwen sit side by side in their thrones. As I have been instructed, I take my hand from Faramir's arm.

Faramir bows low, and I perform a courtesy (by my standards, an unusually graceful one, I feel: I am quite pleased with myself).

Aragorn stands and steps forward to greet us. The actual ceremony is quite short, but to my surprise, he prefaces it by a short speech. He tells of my husband's valiant years of service, in Ithilien, holding the shadow at bay, and of his bravery in buying vital time for the city before the siege by trying to hold the crossing at Osgiliath against the enemy. He speaks of his efforts to defend his men to the last, bringing up the rearguard in the retreat, and how his struggle almost cost him his life. And he speaks warmly of Faramir's service in guiding the city through the last, dark days before victory was won against the odds, and of his invaluable help in advising the King in how best to rebuild Gondor and restore her to her glory.

Then he amazes me by turning to me, an affectionate smile on his face. He speaks to the hall at large, but his eyes meet mine, as he offers thanks to me and my countrymen for riding to the aid of Gondor in her darkest hour, and preventing the fall of the city. And he describes my fight with the Witch King, lauding the moment when I slew him as the turning point in the battle. For a moment, a dark cloud comes over me, and I feel once more a stabbing cold in my right arm, my sword arm. But Aragorn's gaze holds me, reminding me of how he drew me back from the shadow after the battle, and the dark cloud passes.

Then, in a ringing voice, he says: “Hear, oh Lords of Gondor. The Steward, Faramir son of Denethor, comes to ask for the hand of the Lady Éowyn. Faramir, is it your will, freely chosen, that you should marry the Lady Éowyn?”

“It is, my liege lord.” Faramir's voice echoes round the hall, deep, confident, totally without doubt.

“Lady Éowyn of Rohan, is it your will, freely chosen, that you should marry the Lord Faramir?”

“It is, my liege lord.” My voice is as loud as Faramir's.

Aragorn takes our hands and joins them. “Behold, Faramir and Éowyn, from this day forth you shall be husband and wife.”

~o~O~o~
By the time the maids have finished preparing my night attire, I feel as if I am a gift wrapped for Yuletide. Miriel presses a hand gently on my shoulder and whispers to me.

“It will be fine, dear lady. Nerves are normal, but assuredly the prince will be gentle and most solicitous.”

Over her shoulder I see Galwien mouthing “most solicitous” with a positively wicked grin on her lips, and it is all I can do not to burst into laughter. Finally, with much giggling, the maids and women attending me leave.

I perch on the edge of the bed, then as the feeling of anticipation builds, I get up and start to pace to and fro. Then I start to laugh as it occurs to me that I am doing a pretty good impression of a nervous bride. I doubt that it can be more than a short space of time, but it feels like a whole candlemark has passed before finally I hear the sounds of male voices in the corridor, carrying the unmistakable note of those who are deep in their cups. Among them I can make out Amrothos' voice. I should have guessed he would be among the most ribald of the company. I cannot quite make out Faramir's words in reply, but I recognise the tone all too well: it is the tone he uses for cutting insolent rank and file soldiers down to size, albeit in this instance, delivered with a note of humour to soften the blow. I don't hear Amrothos again.

Finally the chamber door opens, and Faramir enters, though at the moment his attention seems to be more taken with the men outside the door. One comment carries clearly above the general hubbub: “May your arrows find their mark, oh captain of archers.”

My husband raises an eyebrow and sketches just the hint of an ironic bow before shutting the door firmly in their faces. Outside the door the merry band break into a raucous and somewhat off-key song – in so far as I can make out the words, off-key in more senses than one. Gradually, their carousing peters out as they finally make their way back down the passage.

Faramir rests his head on the door and gives a theatrical groan. “I think great things are expected of me tonight.”

“I am assured, though, that you will be gentle and most solicitous.” I try my best to imitate Miriel's voice. Faramir bursts out laughing, then turns to look at me.

“Good mercy of the Valar, what are you wearing?”

“That's a fine way to greet your bride,” I say. I try to affect a hurt expression, but in vain: within moments, I too am laughing. “It is a present from the family of one of the court worthies – Lady Miriel, Lord Turgon's daughter. I think she seeks our good graces and political favour.”

“And she thinks this will help? Valar preserve us!” With a broad smile, he reaches out to grab my hand. He pulls me in to him, and presses a soft kiss to my lips. Wrapping his arms around me, he whispers in my ear.

“This last week has been torture – to have you so close and yet unable to bed you.”

Now it is my turn to laugh – the wait must indeed have affected my husband, for him to be so uncharacteristically forthright. I tease him, “So, my love, do you want to unwrap me delicately and with tender care from my layers of finery, as befits a blushing, maidenly bride. Or shall we both take our clothes off as quickly as we can and set to it?”

“It is your wedding night, min leoflic. Which would you prefer?” His eyes are sparkling with mirth and lust.
“Take your clothes off,” I say, and he obediently shrugs off his tunic and starts to untuck his shirt, looking at me with those grey eyes which have become dark.

“Have I told you, Éowyn, the effect your words have?” Faramir’s hands have stilled, and his face has become intent, focussed. “When you order me to strip, I am near undone with want.” I raise my eyebrows in response to this admission, and with a half smile he continues, “That night when first you told me to take off my braies and get into your bed completely naked, I came close to spending myself on the spot just at your words, before I had even touched you.”

I swallow hard. I can feel my pulse thudding in the swelling flesh between my legs, the growing wetness there. I feel an almost irresistible urge to say, ‘Forget undressing’, then throw myself upon the bed, spread my legs and urge him to take me there and then with his breeches round his knees. Instead, I manage to speak, though my voice wavers slightly.

“I can encourage as well as command. Let me lead by example.” I finally finish unfastening the absurd robe and let it fall to my feet.

Now it is Faramir's turn – he looks stunned, and I see, as if through his eyes, the sight I glimpsed in the mirror as the maids dressed me: the sheer silk, near transparent, the shape of my body outlined, shadows of my nipples, my belly button, the triangle of curls below, half visible, tantalisingly half hidden.

“Ah, Elbereth, what did I do to deserve so fair a wife?” His voice is little more than a murmur of breath. He pulls his shirt over his head, the muscles beneath his skin moving as he stretches his arms up. I watch every movement as he unfastens his belt and lets it fall to the ground. Then he starts to undo the laces on his breeches.

“Beautiful as the sight is, I want to feel your skin against mine, not take you half clothed, not tonight,” he whispers. “I pray you, take off the rest of your garments.”

With a nod, I unlace the front of the bodice and let the gauzy material drift to the ground, feeling the breath of night air on my skin. Faramir looks at me with an expression of wonder, almost as if this were indeed the first time. Alas at this point, the mood is interrupted, for my husband realises he should have taken his boots off first before attempting to undo his breeches. He hops awkwardly, cloth bundled round his knees, his cock already fully stiff and brushing his stomach. Then we catch one another's eyes and start to laugh.

“I see I must take charge once more,” I say, and step towards him. I place my hand on his chest and push him back so he sits upon the bed, then kneel at his feet. As I tug at his boots, it occurs to me what a strange position this is, to kneel naked at his feet, and I wonder that I should find it not disturbing, but rather arousing. Then it comes to me that I can kneel naked before him because he would do the same for me in an instant – that there is no subservience here, but rather an equal offering of all we have to each other.

Boots thrown to one side, I pull off his breeches and let them fall to the floor too. Faramir reaches out his hands and draws me to my feet. I step astride his legs, and he lets go, only to slide his hands round my hips. The callouses on his hands send sparks across my skin as I let him pull me closer. Taking hold of his shoulders, I ease myself down onto him. There is a moment of tantalising anticipation as I feel his cock against my entrance, then I slide down upon him, enveloping him, feeling him fill me.

“Bema, that feels good.” I press my lips against his hair, whispering into his ear. Then he pushes his hips up against me, burying himself still deeper. Taking his time, he makes long, slow thrusts within me. I find myself urging him on. “Oh yes, oh fuck, yes...”
Faramir tries to roll both of us over, and somehow in the process slips out from within me. He looks down on me, face half curtained by his hair, and grins. “Not the most polished attempt at that manoeuvre I have ever carried out,” he says ruefully, then adds, “I must be overcome by the sense of occasion.”

I laugh, and stroke his cheek. “Ah, but there is no cause for concern. It simply means I get to have that lovely sensation of your cock sliding all the way inside me all over again.”

Faramir whispers, “Like this?” He dutifully illustrates his point.

“Oh gods, yes, yes, like that.” And I pull his body against me, further inside me, lifting my hips off the bed. Together we settle into a rhythm, long and slow to start with, gradually building in tempo until I half wonder if our efforts will shift the bed across the room. Sensing that Faramir is near, I slip my hand between us and with a few strokes of my fingers I lose myself completely, only just enough awareness to register him spill himself within me.

In the aftermath, Faramir lies on top of me, his head on my shoulder. I can feel his cock resting where it has slipped from within me, lying heavy and sticky against my thigh. His limbs are tangled with mine, and his face bears a look of sated happiness.

“I love the noises you make, the look on your face when you reach your greatest pleasure,” he murmurs, then adds, “That makes that torturous week of waiting worth it.”

I cannot find the words to say anything in reply, so I content myself by humming appreciatively and letting my palms slide across the muscles of his arse. It is, I think to myself, a very shapely arse.

“Mmm, that feels nice,” Faramir mutters. “But if you’re hoping for more, you’ll have to wait a while. You have exhausted me.”

I can’t help myself: I give a snort of laughter, and bring my hands back up the line of his spine, his skin now damp with sweat, then let them drift across his shoulder blades. Idly, I trace the muscles of his arm with my finger tips. He shifts slightly, and I feel the faint trickle of his seed on the inside of my thigh. Faramir kisses my skin, then rolls onto one side. I reach for his discarded shirt and wipe myself. He grins, and I guess he is recalling our early days and nights together.

“More gossip for the laundry maids,” he says, wryly.

I glance down, first at the shirt which I drop over the edge of the bed, then at the sheet, slightly damp, but otherwise unstained. “I fear we may well supply gossip for the laundry maids, but not in the way you are thinking,” I say, suddenly serious, remembering Lothíriel’s comments about girls being disgraced on their wedding nights. “I think tomorrow the gossip may be occasioned by the lack of marks rather than their presence.”

Faramir wriggles across the mattress, hanging over the edge of the bed for a moment and fumbling in the heap of clothes there. To my surprise, he unsheathes his dress dagger. Before I can work out what he is up to, he draws the blade swiftly across the heel of his hand, nicking the skin slightly, then smears his own blood across the appropriate part of the bed linen.

“My uncle explained to me many years ago that a gentleman should know what to do in this eventuality,” he says, smiling at me.

“Increasingly, I am coming to realise that there is a big gap between the behaviour you Gondorians pronounce in public to be acceptable, and the behaviour you actually engage in within the privacy of your chambers.”
“Quite so,” says Faramir, adding, “And may I be the first to applaud your growing sense of diplomacy in abjuring the use of the word 'hypocrisy'.”

I pick up a linen cloth from the tray on the table beneath the window, and bring it to him to hold against the wound until it stops bleeding, then draw him into the bed with me, and pull the covers over both of us. Faramir puts his arms round me and I pull his head onto my bosom, stroking his hair, filled with a quiet joy at the thought that we will do this for the rest of our days together.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks as usual to my wonderful beta, Lady Peter, for her really thoughtful comments, and to Wheelrider for picking up various typos, and to everyone on the Garden of Ithilien site for encouragement. Also, thanks to Lasgalendil for finding an Elvish word for "stepfather." And also belated acknowledgement to Queef Queen who gave me the idea (in the last chapter) for having Elfhelm set two rivals to guard Rustwen, thus ensuring no-one got up to any hanky-panky!

AN: For the gown, I drew upon various painters – Giotto, Boticelli, Ucello, Van Eyck. The gold bands of embroidery were stolen from one of the figures in the background of Giotto's painting of St. Joachim and St. Anne's kiss before the gates of Jerusalem, and I got the idea for the embroidered sleeves from paintings by Veneziano, Piero della Francesca and Van der Weyden. (As always, I'm adopting a shamelessly mix-and-match approach with historical periods, and stealing whatever takes my fancy: my defence, as always, is that I'm convinced Tolkien did this too).

Raspberry leaves and red clover are herbs traditionally believed to enhance fertility.

The hideous red night gown is left to the reader's imagination.

And yes, I am evil, setting things up to be so complicated for Lothíriel and Éomer. It will make the sequel(s) so much more fun to write.
The sun is beginning to drift down towards the mountains behind us as we wind our way up from the river bank towards the house at the top of the hill. Not just any house – the house that is to my home... our home. I feel an odd surge of feelings, a mixture of anticipation and worry lest I do not warm to the place. For it clearly means so much to Faramir that he has rebuilt the home of his ancestors.

We have already passed the settlement of sturdily built houses, enclosed within a ring of earthworks and a stout log fence, where the tenant farmers have their dwellings. As we rode along the loop of road past them, Faramir's engineer explained with enthusiasm the planning of the place: each cottage to have its own vegetable garden facing south, pens for farrowing sows and pigs, hen coops. And when I responded with questions, he was happy to tell me more of the work. Like most good craftsmen, once started on describing his work, no detail was too minor – I now know even the arrangement of the privies, and the careful way in which they have been designed to drain into reed banks which will cleanse the waste before it drains into the river. It also pleases me to think that once one has finally escaped the confines of court life in Minas Tirith, it seems that ordinary Gondorian tradespeople and artisans are as down-to-earth and lacking in prudishness as their counterparts in the Mark.

The slope we now traverse faces south and is planted with vines, only small at present, and probably several years from bearing their first harvest, but obviously carefully tended. We ride steadily up the road, and I take a sidelong glance at my husband. Faramir's face glows with excitement and eager anticipation. In his letters, he has described the building work at length, sent sketches of the plans, drawings of the work in progress, and asked what it was I desired for our house, but this is the first time I will have seen the place. The road here is wide and level, well surfaced, so I bring Windfola along side his bay, and reach out to take his hand. He clasps mine in response, and as I look at him I know that my own excitement must show in my face.

The main bulk of the house sits on a rocky outcrop above the scarp slope of the hill, but on the gentler side, there is a wide area enclosed within a stone wall, with a deep dyke running along the outside. If I needed any reminder that Ithilien was still not a safe place, and needed defending and cleansing of the remnant of our enemies, the care with which Faramir and his engineer have prepared the defences would serve as that reminder. The road leads up to a gatehouse, but I note that above each hairpin in the road, high on the walls above there is a guard tower. They provide an ideal vantage point from which to rain arrows on attackers just at the point where their advance slows.

“These fortifications are well thought out,” I say.

“Thank you, my lady wife,” Faramir replies with a little bow of his head. “Praise from a battle-hardened soldier is worth the having. Though I pray to the Valar that we may need them rarely if at all.”

“They are much more extensive than the ones round the village.”

“The fortifications for the village are intended to help them to withstand occasional attacks from bandits – should a larger military threat arise, the villagers would have to take shelter in the outer courtyard of our house.”
We turn the last bend, and the gates of the house open. From within, a small group of men-at-arms appear, and stand to attention flanking the entrance. As we finally reach the gate, I realise they are led by Beregond. Faramir greets him warmly, and in response he brings his hand to his chest in salutation. We ride into the courtyard, and Faramir swings himself down from the saddle, then walks over to me.

“My lady, may I help you dismount?” My eyebrows must give away my surprise, for he smiles and continues, “Not because I think you need help – only a fool would think that. I know you could best me in any test of horsemanship that I could imagine. His grin broadens, and he adds, “And probably a few that I have never even thought of. I simply wish to welcome my bride to her new home.” He holds up his hands, and I slide from Windfola's back into his embrace. He presses a kiss to my brow, then releases me, only to tuck my hand in the crook of his arm, his face positively aglow with happiness.

The next hour or so passes in a whirl of activity. Faramir shows me everything – the stables (of course he knows me well enough to start with the stables), the store rooms and granaries, the soldiers' barracks, the servants' quarters, the hall, the kitchens. I am very surprised to discover that in one corner of the enclosed courtyard there are several dozen newly-planted saplings of fruit trees, barely more than an ell high.

“There were fruit trees in the garden of our house in Minas Tirith. My mother planted them summer after Boromir was born, and it is one of my few memories of early childhood, sitting under the trees with my mother. I got the gardeners in Minas Tirith to take cuttings so that I could plant them in this corner next to the new house.” Faramir's voice is soft, his face lost in memories of his childhood. “We would sit out beneath their shade every summer to escape the heat of the city. And my mother would play hide and seek with us amid the trees, or sit beneath their shade and recite stories. But then, after she died, we came no more.”

I am not one for flowery words, so instead I reach out and clasp his hand, and say, simply, “I am glad you have been able to plant the trees.” Faramir smiles, and leads me back within the house.

The hall is well appointed, with an elegant wooden roof (I remember Faramir saying he had asked my brother for master carvers from the Mark to come and assist his engineer). In place of the traditional Rohirric fire-pit, however, it has the huge fireplace set within a chimney breast that is typical of Gondor. Faramir looks slightly uncertain as to how I will react to this detail, but I assure him that I consider the lack of smoke within the hall to be an improvement on my country's traditions, and that the beautiful wood carvings on the beams will do more than enough to assuage any yearning for my homeland. Finally my husband leads me (and, regrettably, our entourage as well) to our own private living rooms. Still, there is an enticing glint in his eye as he he shows me into a small room next to our bed chamber.

He smiles and says, “See, madam, many moons ago in Edoras I promised you a bath large enough for both of us, and I have made good on my promise.”

Edith, who has been following us around on our tour, says (with an admirably straight face), “Shall I have hot water prepared for after your supper, my lord, my lady?”

“Yes, please do.” I cannot keep my countenance as well as she can – I feel a broad grin spread across my face.

Edith busies herself inspecting the bedchamber. She gives a nod of approval. “I see the linens have been properly aired, and the clothes presses scented with lavender and cedar oils to keep the moths away. I'll see to it that the bed is warmed ready for you to retire.”
Faramir smiles. “I think Beregond's wife has taken charge of the household while they waited for our arrival.” Ever the diplomat, he adds, “But I think she will be glad to get back to her own house in the village, and to the running of her small holding. Bergil, their eldest, is old enough now to be in training as a squire, but the four younger ones keep her busy.”

We return to the hall, where Bergond's lady, Haleth, has seen to it that a meal is set out for us – fowl, meat, vegetables. We take our place at the high table on the dais, our servants and men-at-arms at the tables running the length of the hall. There is food aplenty, though plain, hearty fare, and Haleth serves all of us a welcome cup of mead. Tomorrow we shall have the feast to celebrate our arrival, and all the members of the household and villagers shall have a chance to make merry. But tonight is a simple meal of welcome after our long journey.

I sit at Faramir's left and reach out to take his hand. Fingers laced together, our hands rest upon the oak table, and we look at one another. His smile is broad, the corners of his eyes crinkling with a warm affection. We care not that this is more affection than noble couples are meant to display in public.

And after supper, we retire to our chambers. The bath is indeed large enough for both of us, the water hot, and the bed afterwards warm and welcoming, and tired as we are, it is still several hours before we sleep, hours which are by turns loving, gentle, then filled with passionate desire, then gentle once more. And we sleep in each other's arms, untroubled by nightmares.

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As we break our fast, Faramir and I discuss what needs to be done this day. I agree with Faramir that we should meet with his factor and ride round the nearer part of estates to visit the various tenant farmers. Once the serving maids have cleared the table, Faramir spreads a map across it and indicates the lie of the land. Immediately round Emyn Arnen is a swathe of land whose tenants owe their allegiance directly to Faramir. Further afield are small manors belonging to various knights of Gondor, with Faramir as their liege-lord and prince. Most were abandoned as Ithilien became increasingly lawless and dangerous, and are only now slowly being rebuilt.

Faramir and I discuss the things we wish to discover on our travels. First and foremost, it behoves us to check that there are sufficient supplies of food and seed for everyone. Winter is coming to an end. This means that everyone is dependent on stored food from the last harvest, supplemented by whatever small game they can take from the woods, and whatever fish they can catch in Anduin. We need to check that no family is struggling. But it also means it is the time of the first planting, and with no grain laid aside from previous harvests, we need to check that the supplies of seed corn from the coastal areas have arrived and have been fairly distributed. I hope that we can learn both from my experiences in the Mark, and from having seen the shocking and parlous state of some parts of Anórien.

However, before we set off, I have household matters to attend to. I make my way to the kitchen to find both Edith and Haleth directing a veritable army of cooks, assistants, turnspits, scullery maids and the like. I check on their plans for the feast, and for details like the long trestle tables to be placed outside for the villagers, with two large bonfires to roast wild boar and an ox, and braziers to stop the festive mood being spoiled by the chill night air. Haleth assures me that plenty of fallen wood from winter storms has been gathered in from the surrounding woods. In the corner I see Borlas and Nimwen sitting playing a game of rolling stones. I catch a glimpse of Edith looking at them with a slightly irritated look, and beckon to them. Best to get them engaged in something constructive rather than simply getting under everyone's feet.

“Would you like a job?”
The two of them nod shyly.

“Go and ask Haleth what sorts of evergreens and herbs would be best to decorate the tables, then see what you can find amid the fruit trees and kitchen garden. But mind you only take what Haleth can spare.” The two of them nod and whisk off to find Haleth.

A few last checks to make sure that there is nothing I need to do, and I leave the kitchens in the safe hands of Edith and Haleth. Faramir is waiting for me beside the stables, both our horses already saddled.

As we ride through the gate, I rein Windfola in tight, and stop for a moment. My biggest worry before I came here had been that I would feel as trapped in the densely wooded slopes around Emyn Arnem as I had amid the stone walls of Minas Tirith. But the view is breathtaking. The hillside we rode up late yesterday afternoon now drops away spectacularly, sweeping down to the river. Beyond the broad, slow moving waters, the green plain stretches all the way to Mount Mindolluin, the southern end of the White Mountains behind it. And perched on its prow of rock sits the White City, glistening in the morning light shining from the east.

Faramir has wheeled his destrier round and faces me, an expectant look on his face. “Béma, it's beautiful,” I say, and a joyous smile spreads across his face.

We ride many miles that morning, attended by the factor and a clerk, as well as a few men-at-arms. The factor turns out to be another of Faramir's retired rangers, and Faramir has made his choice well. As we visit not just the village at the foot of the hill, but various smaller hamlets and lone farms, it seems that food has been distributed in sufficient quantity and sufficiently fairly that no one has been left wanting, although (as is the case everywhere in the aftermath of war) supplies are basic, and rations are short. The seed stock is a bit more of a problem. Some of the farmers more recently returned from seeking refuge in the city have not yet got supplies to plant, and on the instruction of the factor, the clerk makes careful notes as to where the next shipments of seed should be sent when they arrive.

The clerk also turns out to be a valuable addition to the household. A man from the rich, fertile lands of Lamedon, he has useful thoughts on agriculture. In particular, he recommends a couple of techniques to the farmers, for avoiding potato blight and carrot root flies – rotating crops and allowing the fields to lie fallow, and making sure that potato and carrot leaving should not be put back in the kitchen garden, but instead should be mulched into the grain fields when the stubble is ploughed back into the land in Autumn. This way, he says, any blight or fly eggs do not lie in the soil to ready to hatch the next year's crop. Some of the farmers, I can tell, are sceptical and do not see the point of making a fuss. But others regard him with shrewd eyes that seem to say that at the very least these suggestions will be mulled over in the coming months.

The sun is past her zenith by several hours when we return to Emyn Arnem. We find the hall swept up in a frenzy of preparation, so collect some bread and cheese and a couple of tankards of ale from the kitchen and retire to our private sitting room. After a short period of most welcome rest, our solitude is interrupted by Acha, who comes bustling in and shoos Faramir away, insisting that she must dress my hair and help me into my gown in readiness for the evening's feast.

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Edith and Haleth have excelled themselves with the feast. Somehow they have cleverly used the provisions we have, supplemented with game from the forest, to provide everyone from the guests on the high table to the villagers at the trestles outside with generous amounts of food. There is suckling pig, and roast ox, venison and duck, loaves of bread, platters of root vegetables, sauces flavoured with herbs and meat juices. Ale and mead flows freely, and everyone eats and drinks to their heart’s
After the meal is finished, we go outside to where the ox and boars have been roasted above bonfires to feed the villagers and tenant farmers. The menfolk move the trestle tables to one side to make space for dancing. As Faramir and I stand together on the steps, a couple of the children come up to us with posies made from evergreen leaves and a few of the early crocuses that begin to appear presaging the spring. On impulse, as the children hand us the flowers, I stoop and kiss each of them on the brow. I can feel my cheeks warming as the crowd cheers my gesture. Then Faramir holds up a hand.

In a clear, strong voice, he thanks the people of the estate for their welcome, and for joining us in this feast to celebrate our arrival. He talks briefly of what we have seen so far, and the hard work he has already seen. He stresses that we know there may be some farms and small holdings struggling to find enough seed corn, and that he intends to visit the whole estate over the coming days. Not surprisingly, for I know my husband to be a skilled diplomat, he keeps the speech short and to the point, then invites the small band of musicians to strike up so that everyone can dance.

We stand side by side, watching the adults and children dance beneath the trees. The dance is a simple country dance: the men and women face one another in a long line. With much shrieking and gaiety, each couple takes a turn to gallop up the centre of the set and back. Then the real fun begins. The pair pass down the line a third time, alternately spinning each other and being spun by the men and women lining the side of the set until finally, giddy and breathless, they reach the top and a new couple take their turn. The air is full of the cries and shouts of merriment. The men seem to delight in seeing how fast they can spin each woman, skirts swirling, hair flying and coming loose from hairpins and braids. The women, if their giggles are any indication, take just as much delight in being flung around in wild arcs.

Faramir smiles at me. “This was always my favourite dance as a child, and even more so as a youth. When we visited our cousins in Dol Amroth in the summer, Boromir and I used to vie with one another to see how loudly we could make the girls squeal.”

“I am glad to see that Gondor has some dances that are not staid court measures,” I reply. I glance at him, his profile cast into shadow by the light from the bonfire and the torches that light the garden. The outline of his face transports back to that night in the houses of healing where we sat alone in the kitchens in the darkest hours of the night, sharing a flagon of wine. I study his aquiline nose, the line of his neck, his short beard, remembering how I saw him then. Of course, now he is in his courtly finery, dress appropriate to his station, and to the occasion. A very handsome man, I reflect. My very handsome man, and I feel my lips move into a smile. Back in the houses, so many moons ago, he wore a simple shirt, open at the neck and cuffs, sleeves pushed up his forearms.

Filled with a rush of fond amusement, I think back to how much I noticed about him, without really being aware of it. Or perhaps, more accurately, without being consciously aware of it. For surely I must have noticed quite a lot to remember so clearly the way my eyes were drawn to his forearms, sinewy, with a clearly defined but wiry strength. And I recall the breadth of his shoulders beneath the linen shirt. And the faint glimpse of hair on his chest. “Comely” is the word which comes into my mind. I can feel my smile broaden into a grin. I may have been a maiden, but my mind was definitely entertaining some most unmaidenly thoughts.

Faramir turns his head slightly, and studies me for a moment, before his mouth quirks into a half smile. “A penny for your thoughts, my lady of Ithilien. From the look on your face, I'd wager that I'll like whatever has captured your fancy.” He reaches out and takes my hand, raising my fingers to his lips, then turning it over and brushing his lips over the inside of my wrist.
“I was thinking of that night when I came upon you in the kitchens in the houses of healing. We had both had nightmares, I think, and gone in search of warmth and sustenance. All we did was to sit together and talk in the glow of the kitchen fire.” I hesitate for a moment, then give a quick sidelong glance, smiling at him, before fixing my gaze once more on the dancers. Then I whisper, “But I think, maid that I was, even then, without really realising, I was very aware of you as a man.”

Faramir slides his hand across the small of my back. He leans towards me, and brings his head close to mine, the breath from his lips on my ears as he speaks. “Were you now?” His voice is low, seductive, meant only for my ears. The air between us suddenly seems heavy, as if a sudden tension thrums in the night breeze, like a taut cord drawing us together.

Then it suddenly strikes me that, being older and more experienced than me, he might well have been all too aware of my interest in him, even then, right at the beginning, and suddenly I flush with embarrassment. “Did you not realise?” I ask.

I sense a slight lessening of the tension between us, a faint relaxation. “No, I don't think I did. I suppose I assumed you thought of me perhaps as Lothi does, or as an older brother.” I take another sidelong glance and see that he is grinning at me. “I am glad I was wrong,” he adds, a knowing glint in his eye.

“You were very wrong,” I say, realising as I speak that my voice is catching in my throat. Faramir moves a shade closer and leans towards me, his lips near my ear. “To start with? Well, I think I have told you many times before that I was already enamoured of your beauty. But to begin with you told me of your dream, and I felt nothing more than concern and a desire to comfort you. In fact, I think it would have been strange to hear of your fear and suffering and think of anything other than concern.” He looks at me, slight frown lines on his brow. But then he reaches out and runs his finger tips across my cheeks. The frown vanishes, to be replaced by one of his faint smiles. “Later, however, it was a different story...” He looks at me, eyes dark in the glimmering firelight.

“Different?” I feel his hand slide from the small of my back to cradle my hip. “We fell to talking of love, of past love and lost love. And I remember looking at you as you sat by the light of the fire – looking at you and realising I wanted to kiss you... realising I wanted to do more than just kiss you, a lot more.”

“And then?”

“And then I tried my hardest to pull myself together. For I could see your total inexperience, your vulnerability, and your trust in me, and I did not wish to abuse that trust.”

I cannot help myself – I laugh. “I have said this before, I know. In fact I think I may have said something along those lines that very night: you are too principled for your own good. It is just as well that I did not wait for you to overcome your qualms but instead simply climbed into your bed.”

Faramir laughs too, and tightens his grip on my hip, pulling me against him. “I am principled, but not a fool,” he says with a grin. “And I can always be swayed by a well-constructed argument... And
you argued so eloquently that women should be allowed the same freedoms as men. What could I do but bow to the force of your case?"

“So you only bedded me because of the strength of my rhetoric?” I raise an eyebrow.

“Nay, my lady. Mere rhetoric alone would not have swayed me. It was your unassailable logic. And...” He leans close to me once more, his lips on my hair. “Your voice. It is low, and warm, and enticing, and flows like honey. Have I told you how your voice can set fire to my blood? And your hair like spun gold beneath my hands, your skin like silk, the softness of your breasts, the curve of your hips, your long slender legs wrapped around mine, the touch of your lips on my chest, the way you move against me.” He pauses for a moment. When he speaks again, the tone of his voice almost undoes me as he whispers, “The way you taste...”

Audience be damned, I let myself rest my head against his shoulder, clasping his hand in mine. Faramir pulls me closer to him. “I wanted you then, and I still want you now.”

We are interrupted by the sound of someone clearing their throat. I raise my head from Faramir’s shoulder and look round, to see Cynefrid standing beside us. He gives us a knowing grin, then speaks.

“The folks here on the estate tell me it’s traditional for the Lord and Lady to join in this next dance.”

Faramir grins back at Cynefrid, a shared understanding between men who both know exactly what Faramir’s thought processes were a few moments earlier. Then Faramir inclines his head in a gesture of assent.

“Of course, Cynefrid.” He takes my hand and leads me into the centre of the clearing, and we take our place in the set. The dance is not as wild as the one which preceded it, but is lively nonetheless. And so we share several more dances together, until the hour is late, and the dancers begin to flag. Finally, Faramir whispers to me that we can now retire to our chambers.

“For, min leoflic, I would like to explore further our earlier conversation.” He lets his hand drift across the small of my back, drawing me closer to him, and I feel the familiar flames of desire lick through my body.

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In the middle of the night, I find myself awake. Faramir lies beside me, face down, cocooned in the bed clothes, his arm thrown over his face. In the faint light from the window, I see his dark hair spread across the pillow, and see the gentle rise and fall of his shoulder as he breathes. He sleeps deeply, not surprisingly, for his actions made good the promise implicit in his words earlier in the evening, and left both of us sated and happily exhausted.

Filtering through the window, I see beams of moonlight dance across the floor of the room, and somehow, the silvery light draws me from the bed to see what lies outside. I get up, and wrapping myself in a blanket, take a few steps to the stone sill beneath the window. The moon is high in the sky, and near full, and his light illuminates the scene before me. The wooded hill, with trees inky black, drops away sharply to the river, which winds, grey and silver, placid and calm on its way to the unseen seas. Beyond, the moonlit plain spreads towards the white mountains, whose snow-capped peaks gleam in the ethereal light.

As I stand, drinking in the scene, I hear a quiet rustling of bed clothes, then the soft pad of feet. Faramir comes up behind me, and holds me close, his chin nuzzling my shoulder, beard rough against my skin.
“It is beautiful beyond what I could have imagined,” I whisper.

“Can you come to love this land, do you think?” he replies.

“I love its prince beyond measure, and already hold its people in esteem, and deem it beautiful – yes, in time, I think I will grow to love it. And we will make of it a peaceful and bountiful land, and we will raise children and watch them grow in this beautiful land of yours, this land which is now ours.”

His hands fold together over my belly, and somehow in that moment I know with absolute certainty that this time his seed has taken root, and that over the coming months my belly will grow round beneath his hands, grow as surely as will our love for each other and our love of this land we now govern. I lean back into him, letting his comforting warmth and strength cradle me and fill me with a quiet joy.

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THE END

Chapter End Notes

Well, it feels like the end of an era, finally finishing this. First, I'd like to thank my wonderful beta, Lady Peter, who has put in so many hours of hard work, and whose fantastic eye for a story and editing abilities have made this so much better than it would otherwise have been. I'd also like to thank the Ladies of the Garden of Ithilien for their helpful suggestions and encouragement, and QueefQueen for many useful conversations about military strategy.

Also, thank you to those of you kind enough to leave comments - it is great to get feedback from readers.

One final author's note – in allowing Éowyn and Faramir a rather precipitate attitude to getting sexually involved, I've diverged from canon but perhaps not entirely from what actually took place in the Middle Ages. We tend to see Medieval mores filtered through Walter Scott and the Victorians. But to a large extent they were projecting their own moral values back onto the past. Written works from the period indicate things were different: the letters of Heloise and Abelard, and Abelard's Apologia (thank heavens for Faramir that my Éomer took a different attitude to Heloise's relatives); Boccaccio's Decameron (with a refreshingly pragmatic attitude of “I'm sure chastity is a wonderful virtue, but if you can't manage it, sex has its compensations”); Margueritte of Navarre's Heptameron (fascinating because it's so much darker than the Decameron – perhaps unsurprisingly, a man who can walk away from the consequences of sex in a world before contraception views the matter somewhat more lightheartedly than a woman who knows that women cannot escape from the consequences of pregnancy once it's happened); Chaucer's Wife of Bath.

There may be a sequel, but I think I need a bit of a rest first.
With thanks to "Lady Peter" for her tireless work in reading this and offering such useful comments, and many friends who have helped out with suggestions on military, social and legal history.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!