Captains and Pawns

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Captains and Pawns

by sian22

Summary

"The board is set and the pieces are moving." So Gandalf said, but what unseen hand made them move? How far back did the game start and with what unexpected results? The Lords of Gondor and Rohan find Saruman will use them for his own end and both the Steward's sons and Rohan's Prince and Lady must find their way. A tale from Faramir's birth until the fateful kiss.
Chapter 1

Once he was as great as his fame made him. His knowledge was deep, his thought was subtle, ... and he had a power over the minds of others. The wise he could persuade, and the smaller folk he could daunt. ....There are not many in Middle-earth that I should say were safe, if they were left alone to talk with him,'

Aragorn speaking of Saruman, FOTR, JRR Tolkien.

And I know, you were just like me with someone disappointed in you’
Numb, Linkin Park

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Ecthelion, Steward of Gondor, a man of rare patience and insight, was puzzled.

Before him stood his Captains. His star and his son. Each so alike to the other as nearest kin; tall, grey-eyed, valiant, even kingly one would say of the Eagle of the Star and the Steward's Son; yet at heart so very different. Thorongil was a man modest and mysterious, calm and grave; come to Mindolluin out of Rohan with his name and birthplace hidden. Denethor, son of Ecthelion, was man proud and quiet, intense and ordered; a true scion of Numenor.

This morn, as Steward, he had asked their advice and not expected what he received.

Intently argued but utterly divergent counsels.

‘Their discord grows deeper ’ Ecthelion thought with dismay, ‘and somehow I am become the field that they contest’

"My Lord," urged Thorongil, "I doubt not that Saruman is wise and learned, yet Mithrandir has traveled the lands of Umbar, and warns of our danger there, should the Enemy move. We cannot fight on three flanks, Gondor now can scarcely cover two. We should remove the threat while we have the chance, and are not stretched. Give me a fleet and I will by stealth come down Anduin and destroy the Corsairs as they lie at anchor."

"Nay this is folly,´ said Denethor shaking his dark head. “Why waste our resources against an undeclared enemy? Why risk the men and the ships, when we have so few? Saruman is the greatest of their order and is wisest. Forget not that for that very reason, your forefather Beren gave him Orthanc and Isengard to guard the Gap of Rohan. Would you spurn his counsel?"

The Steward frowned, fingering the hilt of the great sword he wore always as a reminder of the trials to come and the need for strength. Not a simple choice. Or straightforward. Denethor’s words had merit but if there were a natural inclination in his chest it would be to make some move. Gondor had little enough of a fleet. That made the enemy complacent. And vulnerable to surprise.

He looked up. Thorongil stood waiting patiently as ever; grave and carefully respectful, watching his lord and gaze straying but once to his rival a little warily. Denethor for his part seemed to barely able contain his irritation. The fingers of his sword hand drummed steadily against his thigh.

Ecthelion sighed, turned away from heavy desk to stare out at the soothing green and white of the Steward's terrace, heart heavy but knowing he must choose. *I need them both. Working together.*
Not circling me like a prize. I thought in time my son would grow easy with his place but that seems futile now. And if I choose Thorongil's way again he will, perhaps justly, be aggrieved.

A quiet cough broke into his thoughts. He looked back. Thorongil bowed, ready to withdraw.

"I will leave you now my Lord. But ere I go, on my honour I entreat you, do not place your trust in Saruman. Do not forget he stayed his hand against Dol Gulder, to our regret.

Our regret and the White Council's consternation. Ecthelion caught that deep grey gaze and felt a pang of regret catch in his chest. He could see it, the outcome he had come to dread.

Thorongil will leave me. He will quit this field of conflict and yield it to my son. Refuse to play this game of chess, on a board where the Istari are the bishops and my Captains are the pawns.

Wearily he rubbed a heavy hand across his brow. "Leave me. Let me think on it this night. I will give you my decision on the morrow."

He could not know exactly how he was right.

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Knuckles white with barely hidden fury, the young Captain Denethor strode from his father's study, boot heels striking so hard upon the marble floor they could have raised up sparks.

How dare he?

Does his arrogance know no bounds?

How can his counsel be the only way?

By rote he turned from one hallway to the next. Frustration lengthened his already considerable stride and spurred him quickly to the family's private wing.

This was not the first time or the tenth he had come this way seeking solace from the fray. The disagreements of late had become a constant, and, in truth, he was not quite sure if he were more frustrated by Thorongil or his father. Both were inclined to not see his points. Both all too readily agreed with the other. It was infuriating. His father simply had to see that he, Denethor, the youngest Captain-General of Gondor's sterling army, had the kingdom's welfare in mind. His words should have more weight. Let Thorongil be adored by the common folk- the cheering and the flowers would not keep their borders safe. He, the Steward's heir, would do what was right, if sometimes hard.

So long as he could count on the knowledge that his voice of reason would be listened to.

By a familiar door, Denethor stopped short. Already at this late hour Finduilas would have retired to the nursery with Boromir. Much to the nanny's consternation she preferred to oversee bedtime for herself and so he pushed the door ajar and peered inside, comfortably certain of what he would find.

There, curled up beside the little trundle bed, was his beautiful young wife. Asleep. With a book open across her lap and her head laid beside her son's upon the pillow.

The tight band of anger in his chest eased somewhat.

Denethor tiptoed into the dim but tidy room; bent low and brushed the boy's fair straight locks back
from his forehead, planting a kiss of good night. It was a wonder to him that he could love so intently this little one. Utterly. Completely. Without reservation and almost as much as the graceful, doll-like princess who had borne him. Almost, but not quite.

“Darling”, he whispered low, nudging Finduilas’ arm and kissing her cool cheek lightly. "Come. You must to bed. You cannot sleep well here."

Finduilas stirred and looked up, her slow smile catching at his heart. "Are you done your evening's work?"

“Not yet,” he admitted regretfully, setting the book carefully aside. "Go to your rest. I will join you soon."

With that, he lifted her up in his strong arms and set her back on her feet, promising to join her in a while and turning to his own smaller study.

The fire would still be lit and his guest would still be waiting.

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“What news of your council with the Steward, Captain?”

Saruman the White sat in a deep chair beside the crackling fire, his face half hidden by its wing and his gnarled hands upon his staff.

Denethor, poised in the act of pouring a glass of wine, tensed and stilled. Lines of disappointment deepened about his mouth. They, and the weary shadows below his eyes, told the wizard his guess was true.

Ecthelion was not pleased with his only son.

Denethor raised the goblet to his lips; drank deeply, before turning the vessel restlessly in his hands. "He will follow Thorongil as he always does,” he said flatly, without rancor, for above all else Denethor was a man of stern control. “I have said my piece and done my best. But it is, as usual, too little to actually sway him."

The wizard rose, white robes shimmering, face a picture of compassion. A bitter man was vulnerable. Vulnerable and often blind and could be used in ways he did not perceive. Saruman had seen that this moment would soon come and made sure to be present at the crux.

“This is ill news for Gondor!” he said, staff tapping for emphasis upon the floor. “Should she waste her defenses on a trifling southern land? Why should he follow Thorongil's counsel over yours?”

Denethor’s handsome face twisted unhappily. They were often at cross purposes, but he loved his father yet. “He believes his advice is sound and together they have had many victories. Success is compelling is it not?”

Saruman spread a hand in question. "My lord Denethor, I little understand why you are second always in your father's heart. This great captain whom he loves above all and has raised to high status, this Eagle- he has not your sight, your knowledge or your lineage."

The proud head shook. "It matters for naught with my father. He believes Thorongil has shown his worth. He gives rank and reward to all so proven."
Saruman frowned. Loyalty and reason were not in the moves to be desired. Denethor had strength. It would take more to goad him toward the goal. He let power swell his voice. "But not to his own son! Be wary Captain. Thorongil is, I fear, a pupil of Mithrandir. Long I have suspected that the Grey Pilgrim works against me. They are natural allies, the Eagle and this lesser wizard, both seeking to supplant their betters." The smooth tones dropped, became soft as the chair's velvet and just as deep. "Mithrandir would supplant me, jealous of my place as head of the White Council. Thorongil would supplant you"

"How so?"

The wizard pulled up to his full height and stood a moment with the firelight shadowing his eyes. Denethor had looked sharply over. Was primed and ready for the play. "Do you know who he claims to be? I have long sight and have gleaned it. Chieftain of the Dunadain of the North. The direct heir, father to son, of Isildur. Elrond of Imladris accepts his claim. Thorongil desires to be King."

The young man gasped. "Can this be proven?"

“No. The line of Elendil has long failed. He is an upstart and the Eldar, in their nostalgia for another time, are blinded. Cede this round to their plotting, Denethor, but fear not, we shall win the day after."

Just a few choice words. Ironically the truth, albeit sprinkled with a little falsehood. They should be enough to set the board. Saruman bade Denethor good night. Left the man brooding into his cup and walked out of the Steward's palace into the empty forecourt of the Citadel.

Amidst the ink dark pool, unshadowed on that moonless night, the dead white tree stood. Eerie. Stiff and ghostly white.

Saruman reached a hand out, pretending to stroke the hallowed bark.

*Let your counsel be subtle but piercing. Theoden, Thengel's son, I will in time suborn, the Eorlingas are men of the twilight and easily moved. Ecthelion's son I will sway, though he be the harder test and take more effort for a man of Numenor has strength. An old Age fades and a new power rises. With patience I will come to direct it.*

He smiled and gripped the end of one brittle branch. Snapped it off. Turned the victim over and over in his fingers, well satisfied with how the game had begun.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After that day, it was as Denethor foretold. Thorongil was given a fleet of ships and many men and so ambushed the Corsairs of Umber by night. A great victory was achieved, with little loss for Gondor. As the White City made ready to welcome him, the Captain tarried in Pelargir. There he sent a message of farewell to his Steward, saying "Other tasks now call me, lord, and much time and many perils must pass, ere I come again to Gondor, if that be my fate." And so the Eagle of the Star moved on to other labors, sailing across the wide Anduin and setting his road toward the Mountains of Shadow.

Many, seeking for answers where none lay, surmised he had withdrawn from the field ere his rival became his Steward. Ecthelion, bereft of the son of his twilight, mourned openly Thorongil's loss, but of necessity leaned the more upon his son.

Less often then did Mithrandir come to the city and the more did Saruman, consumed as he was in learning all that could be found about that which he desired. It was at this time he found the scroll of Isildur and first understood truly that which he sought.

With dismay, Denethor watched in those years as Ecthelion, now stooped with age and the weariness of his ninety-seven years, began to fail. A man of foresight, he perceived that in his time as Steward the last test should come, thus he strove to learn much of the Enemy and his designs from Saruman and his own study. The time for watchfulness was passing and so it was that into a city of hushed and anxious waiting, Finduilas was delivered early of a second son.

The Steward of Gondor, against all protest at the lateness of the hour and his need for rest, came at once see his new grandson. He entered the torch lit room and saw Finduilas settled in her bed, Denethor beside her. The healers, dropping their lord a curtsey, left at his signal, giving them a moment of peace.

"You are well my lady, and the babe?" he asked, noting with concern the marks of exhaustion on the lady's pale but beautiful face. Her dark hair for once unbound, lay damp upon the pillows.

"Yes, my lord, it was a trial, but it is over." she smiled tiredly, looked adoringly at her little one, contentedly asleep, unaware of the consternation he had caused. Impossibly small the baby seemed to Ecthelion, but perfectly formed, a shock of dark hair and long dark lashes on his cheeks. Such a perfect reward, he thought, for two days of pain and fear.

"She was very brave, father. He is little but the healers say he is strong enough." Denethor absently dropped a kiss on his wife's brow. Ecthelion marveled, thinking as ever that she brought out the best in his stern son.

"Do you wish to hold him?" Finduilas asked, sitting up a little straighter.

Delighted, Ecthelion took the little bundle from her hands, cradling him carefully. "Êl sîla erin lû e-govaned vîn Dunadan" he blessed the babe. Searching his peaceful face the Steward thought saw something of his father, tempered with a fineness that must come from his mother. Old fool, they all change so much, he reminded himself. His heart was lost completely when the babe started in his sleep, tiny fingers fanning open in surprise. One hand gripped reflexively his finger and the babe's
eyes opened. Ecthelion, in wonder, beheld in their dark blue a calm and focused gaze he did not expect with one so new. As the babe and his grandfather beheld each other for the first time, theirs was a recognition, two wise and happy souls, for the nonce, at one with the world.

"What have you named him?" his voice rough with emotion. *You are doting, old man.*

"Faramir " Finduilas explained, "We have another jewel."

"You are greatly blessed, my lady, as are we all." Ecthelion felt strangely bereft as he passed his grandson back to his father.

A knock came upon the door. A guard entered at their biding. "Captain, Lord Saruman is without, he has a tonic for your lady". Denethor turned to his wife, "May I show him the little one?"

"Yes love" she said, "I would sleep now awhile, if you will return him to the nurse". Leaving Finduilas to her rest, they entered the sitting room beside.

In the hushed, expectant outer room, three once and future stewards of Gondor gathered, each Captain with their part own play upon the board. The grandfather to rebuild its defenses, left idle after too long in decay; the father to hold against the gathering storm; drawing knowledge in to turn the oncoming tide; the son: to lift up and steady their salvation on his road. The Maia, come out of Valinor to aid the peoples of Middle-Earth, had strayed from his position, reshaping the future entrusted to him to preserve. He was the bishop but he would be king.

"My greatest congratulations to you Captain, on this happy eve." exclaimed the wizard "I am relieved to find they are both so well".

"As are we all, after all the hours and concerns." agreed the current Steward, gazing steadily upon their visitor. He found himself wary, uncertain of Saruman's haste to intrude upon the event.

"Indeed, I have brought some herbs of my own stock, to strengthen his lady mother. My heart was afeared that the trial last so long and difficult.

"Thank you for your consideration, lord" replied Denethor.

"What is the child to be called?"

"Faramir" explained his father, proudly.

"A noble name, his namesake was a valiant prince." Lying and flattery was reflexive to the wizard, even on so trivial a point. *An ill portent.* Sarumen considered to himself. *Why name the child for a prince who, disobeying his father, was slain in battle and so robed the throne of Gondor of an heir?*

Peering intently at the little one in Denethor's arms, he touched the baby's cheek with a gnarled finger, its skin rough against the down of the new. "I offer my blessing". Faarmir's eyes flew open and he gave a single mewing cry of protest.

*A fair and grey-eyed man sits in cloak and hood upon a wooden chair, a lamp beside, throwing shadows about the rough stone walls. He speaks low." The One Ring that was thought to have perished from the world. And Boromir tried to take it.....and here in the wild I have you and a host of men at my call and the Ring of Rings."

As if burned, the wizard drew back his hand, but as quickly schooled his features. "He is so little lords" he chuckled, "I am afraid to hurt him." As ever, he dissembled well, under the flowing robes
his body trembled in fear.

Both grandsire and father laughed in their turn, at the sound and the thought of a boisterous reception to come. Ecthelion smiled ruefully "Yes, indeed, he is the tiniest babe I have seen. His big brother will have to be gentle with him when they meet on the morrow."

Smiling, the wizard took his leave, "I will leave you the herbs for the Lady Finduilas, my blessings again on the babe"

As he walked the torch lit corridors of the Steward's apartment, Saruman's mind was swiftly shifting strategies. For him a new pawn had been placed upon the opposing side. *Somehow the man this babe will become plays a part against my design. I will not let that happen.*

Despite his small size the baby thrived, and Finduilas, though slow to heal, gained in health each day. Her husband worried that the wakeful baby tired her too much, but she would not have a wet nurse and insisted on caring for him herself. By summer the colour had returned to her cheeks and she delighted in her son, a quiet and happy child, intently observing everything around him, rarely fussy or difficult. If he would only sleep more, she wished, knowing it was not in his power to grant.

A routine settled into their days. They would almost always be in the gardens, Boromir playing nearly, at five just learning a few feints with a knife and set upon his first pony. "Look at me, Mama" he would call, pretending to parry the moves from a Harad captain, swooping in to plant a messy kiss on the baby's forehead and running back out to his battles. "Gentle Boromir, gentle" she would say, but Faramir was untroubled by the rough affection. His eyes ever would follow his big brother, hands and feet kicking in excitement.

"When is he going to be able to play Mama? Babies are a bit boring." She laughed. "Soon, love, soon."

As she came back in from the garden, the warm summer sun streaming through the rooms, Finduilas laid the baby down in the cradle by the bed. Denethor was dressing, his formal black uniform, a council meeting soon to start. He was a handsome man still, she thought. His black hair untouched by time, the intent grey of his eyes reflected in the silver tree upon the tunic.

"This always suits you so well, my lord," she smiled, smoothing the velvet across the broad expanse of his shoulders, her fine fingers lingering upon his ribs.

"Lady, surely it is too soon." He murmured, always embarrassed but thrilled by her forwardness.

"I am now surrounded by men" she replied, eyes shinig. " I think I should also like a daughter."

Her ever reserved and carefully composed husband blushed. "In time, my Lady, in due time."

At midsummer festival the great and the good gathered in the city, and Denethor, once again, invited Saruman to attend. Throughout those days, Finduilas dressed in the clear Dol Amroth blue, diamonds at her throat and upon her brow. She acted as hostess for the city as Ecthelion, now feeling the weight of his lengthening years, had begun to tire easily. Boromir, bursting with pride in a little mail shirt, cloak and dagger made just for the occasion, strutted across the court, imitating his father's march, his grandsire in body, if not in personality. Faramir, nestled in his mother's arms,
seemed a replica of his father. His body long and lean, and his eyes grey, although his face and temperament were his mother's. "At least there is something of Dol Amroth in one of my children." she sighed.

They were sunny, happy days, the only uneasiness arose when the lady looked up now and then to find the wizard's eyes upon her. Or rather, she realized, it was Faramir he was looking at intently. A shiver of fear ran through her at his gaze, although no dreams of certain dread troubled the long nights.

As the first of the many dinners began, she and her lord stand in the receiving line, Boromir proudly in front, as they welcomed the many guests. She saw with gathering unease, the wizard come forward. Reaching out, Saruman cradled the baby's scalp with one gnarled hand, as he greeted Denethor.

Finduila, her eyes suddenly unfocused and the room receded, shared a vision with the wizard. Hope unlooked for sprang within her heart.

Thorongil kneels beside the bed of her son, who lies at the brink of death. With one hand the Captain clasps a fevered hand and lays the other upon his brow. 'Faramir', he calls, fainter and fainter, again and again. The young man opens his eyes and there is a light of love and understanding in them. 'My lord, you called me. I come. What does the king command?"

Saruman, walking once again that night beside the dead and lifeless tree, decided he must act. The babe has thrived. Is it too much to hope that that his great oaf of a brother would drop him? His mother guards him too closely. But there are many maladies that will take a child early...

That eve, Finduila spoke with her husband. "Denethor, the wizard frightens me. I do not like how he looks at Faramir. I beg of you, please send him away."

Her lord, surprised and puzzled at her reaction, wondered if it is some fantasy of a new mother? "Lady, he is a wizard, and indeed has little experience of children, he looks stern yes. But I see or hear no malice in him."

"Denethor, please, send him away. I cannot attend the festivals, otherwise. I must protect our son and will not have that creature staring at him so."

At a loss what to say her husband murmured words of comfort and took his leave.

The next morn, the Captain walked in the courtyard, stern and serious, unlike his mien of the day before.

"My lord what troubles you." asked the wizard, "Where is your Lady, is she well?"

Denethor sighed. "She is well, but much concerned with the baby and would not be apart from him. I wish I could reassure her."

An opportunity presents itself. "Captain, if she is concerned, I have a tincture to give the babe for his strength. He is so small he must be more subject to the many slights of childhood."

"I thank you, lord, it will ease her mind, I am sure."

And so, the next day the wizard passed a vial of clear red liquid to the babe's father, his voice a river of calm, brimming with reassurance. "A few drops each day will ensure he thrives, my Lord. Be
Denethor, thinking it would ease his lady wife's concerns, found himself instead shocked by her reaction.

"No, I will have nothing from that wizard, near my son!" Finduilas, afraid and agitated, held Faramir so tightly that he started to wail.

"Finduilas! This was a thoughtful offer on his part, to the babe's benefit. You are starting at shadows."

"No!"

"You will give it to the babe, it is for his good." Anger rumbled in Denethor's voice and for the first she beheld the steel-born grey of his most insistent gaze.

"No!" Tears pricked her eyes as she looked at the thunder in her husband's face. Always he had looked on her with love, he who never so much as raised his voice.

"Your objections are unfounded." He recalled a conversation in the study, years ago. "Does the lady pine for the Captain?" Saruman had asked, artless innocence in his tone. "They were much together. Now even she will not listen to me, he thought, and the bitterness rose up within him, "Finduilas, do as I say, now! " He found himself shouting.

With trembling hands she gripped the proffered vial. Afraid, of a sudden, that Denethor would force it on the baby himself, Finduilas swiftly raised the vial to her lips and in one movement drank it down.

"There, are you happy?" she cried, flinging the empty vial with all her strength back at him. It smashed against the stone wall beside, crystal pieces splintering to the floor and on the velvet shoulder of his tunic. A scent of green grass filled the room, oddly bright amidst the discord. Reaching up with one unsteady hand he felt a wet nick on his cheek. The lady did not see, comforting the wailing boy and avoiding her husband's gaze.

Aghast at the fury and fierceness on his wife's face and her actions, Denethor kept his distance. Is this some malady of the birth? What has happened to my gentle wife? He strove to calm his voice before he spoke.

"Lady, you are overwrought and imagining dangers where none exist. I will give orders for you to rest. You will not attend the rest of the festival, which seems to be your wish. After we will find a nurse for Faramir, you have become obsessed with him. It is doing you no good" Her husband, in his dismay, turned away and left them be.

That night, as Finduilas rocked and crooned to Faramir in their empty bed, the tincture coursed its way through her veins, winding its way back to her trembling heart. A dose to scythe the babe but slowly, it did not kill her, but worked its damage. She was never the same.

Chapter End Notes

A/N Thorongil's words to Ecthelion are from the Appendix, Return of the King, JRR Tolkien. Saruman's first vision is paraphrased from the Two Towers; his second vision
paraphrased from the Houses of Healing, Return of the King, all by JRR Tolkien. I make no recompense from this but greatly appreciate the opportunity to play in his legendarium.
As midsummer passed and the sun-bleached days made the ramparts of Minas Tirith shimmer, Finduilas left the White City for her childhood home by the bay. Some, noting how pale and drawn she had become, wondered aloud if she missed the sea. Others, seeing her husband’s unceasing work on Gondor’s defenses, wondered if she was afraid, dismayed by the shadow gathering in the east. In truth, it was far more simple: they were hardly speaking. She, the daughter of Dol Amroth, her dreams at night of peace, was by day filled with dread and a growing fatigue. He, who in his quiet way loved her more than any other, was too bewildered, too proud to speak. The man of Numenor fabled for his Sight, could no longer see into his wife’s now guarded heart.

As the freshening breeze sent clouds scudding across the blue, Finduilas walked along the sand, below the high sea-cliffs. Kittiwakes wheeled and cried, diving into the waves to fish, or flitted back and forth to nests on the rocks above. Carelessly, she carried her shoes in one hand, her skirts in the other, the hems soaked by errant waves of the rising tide. “Bear!” she called, “No so far!” Her son was also barefoot, running along the strand, chasing the retreating waves and shrieking as they came back to catch him. He was sun-kissed and sandy and quite happily ignoring her. “Boromir” she called louder, “that is far enough!” His given name betokening her seriousness, he changed direction and the game began anew, back towards her.

Looking up, she smiled to see Nera, their nurse, walking down the cliff path with the baby in her arms. As the young woman drew close, Finduilas reached out eagerly and gathered Faramir in her arms, his solid warmth sending a feeling of relief flooding through her anxious limbs. Safe with me again. “He just woke up, my lady” explained Nera, her sandy hair waving in the breeze, “and is of course hungry. Will you and your son, come up for the meal? The Prince is asking.” She would not speak of their hasty ride out from the city nor ask when they would return. She too felt relieved to be away from the brooding silences.

“Yes we will, in just a few more minutes.” I want some time alone, Finduilas thought, before the questions come. She thanked the woman, who turned away and started to ascend once more.

For an idle few minutes, keeping always a watchful eye over her firstborn, Finduilas played with the baby. Wading in, her skirts soaked to the knees, she held him under the arms and swung him high over the waves, again and again dipping back down to touch his feet in the water. He squealed in surprise at the cold and she laughed at the furious expression on his face. Back on the strand, she set Faramir down, and he, delighted at the warmth, crawled eagerly, trying his skill on a new surface. Gaining speed and focused on the task, he bumped in surprise against a pair of sturdy legs. “Ha, I’ve got you.” grinned his big brother, jumping sideways and back to block the little one’s path.

Finduilas sighed, knowing she could no longer put off the day. She scooped up a protesting Faramir. “Let us go, Bear, you must be hungry.” “Yes!” came the happy reply and he darted off toward the path “Grandfather always has sweets!”

As she make her way up the steep and stony path she had climbed so many times as a girl, Finduilas felt the weight of her sodden skirts drag at her. I should not have got so wet. A few feet higher still, she had to stop and rest, dizzy and breathless. She held a hand to the pain in her side.
Twice more on the trip to the cliff top, she paused so, panting and tired. Nera, holding tight to Boromir’s hand as he leaned carelessly over the edge, frowned in concern at the sight below. “My lady, are you unwell?” she called.

Finduilas shook her head quickly. “No, no I am fine, just a little winded. Walking here will get me back in shape again.” With relief she reached the top and found she walk with ease along the flat, slowly back to the palace.

The lunch table was set in the garden and quite conspicuously laden with her favourite foods and sweet treats for her son. They are spoiling me, Finduilas thought as she sat between her siblings. Imrahil had come straight from a morning’s ride, smelling of hay and horse. Ivriniel, usually so full of questions, was carefully and quietly cutting up pieces of fruit for the baby to wave in the air and mush. Their father, Prince Adrahil, his clear grey eyes missing nothing, sat thoughtfully at the head of the table and let the talk relax into easy questions about the palace and the town. He watched his middle daughter all the while. She was beautiful still, with her fine dark hair and delicate face, but now he found she looked pale and pinched, and did not laugh. No, he thought, this is not her.

Rising after the servants had cleared their places, the Prince stretched out his hand. “My daughter, come walk at whiles with me.” Finduilas knew it was a summons. All had been arranged, her loving, if determined, family conferring late last night after she arrived. Imrahil took Boromir off to find a pony to ride, while her ever competent big sister announced she would take the baby for a walk. Finduilas gave herself up to the inevitable.

As they strolled arm in arm along the formal garden path, Adrahil reflected on how best to start. His gentle daughter seemed skittish and tense, lines of care around her eyes and a line across her forehead. He remembered it from tantrums of old. He placed his hand upon hers and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Fin, we are as ever thrilled to see you and the boys. This is a welcome surprise, indeed. But quite the surprise. You arrived before your letter.”

Finduilas did not meet his gaze, pretending to inspect the fruit on an apple tree nearby. She was tired; tired of the angry silences, tired of the strain, tired of the fear. “I needed to get away, papa. Things have become…difficult.”

“With your lord?” he asked gently, as his heart clenched. Lalith always feared they would be unsuited.

“Yes”, she admitted, the line across her forehead more pronounced. “We had a quarrel.”

Adrahil tried and failed to imagine what simple quarrel would bring his sensitive but brave middle daughter fleeing from her home and the man he knew she loved. “Has he hit you?” Surely not. Denethor would never lose control so. He would be mortified.

Swiftly she turned. “No, papa. He shouted at me. I would not do as he asked.” Her fingers plucked in agitation at the folds of her skirts, now drying in the sun. “He listens too much to that wizard. It frightens me.”

The Prince paused, certain there must be more and lifted her pale face up to him. Dark smudges marked the creamy skin below grey eyes so alike to his own. “Have you Seen something?”

Finduilas shook her head. “No, my dreams are full of light and hope. I have Seen the boys well grown in manhood, triumphant, happy.” She paused, afraid to give him too much hope. “And I saw a king, a healer, a Dunadan.” She could not bring herself to say his name aloud. “But I know not if it
is a fever dream of hope or True, it was not clear."

Adrahil breathed a silent prayer. Lórien, Master of Dreams make it so. “Then whence comes your fear, my daughter?”

“It is the reason of my waking mind. I cannot dispel the fear that Saruman wishes Faramir harm.” A trembling hand brushed strands of black from out of her eyes. She is truly afraid. Her father clasped it, hoping to quiet both their fears. “What do you think?”

“That I must keep him safe, as any mother should. I am not starting at shadows!”

“Surely your husband can allay your fears, Fin? Ask him to send this wizard away?” Would he really do it? she wondered, remembering the fury and the vial. “He thinks I merely cross him. He does not understand”

The Prince drew a parchment from inside his tunic. Her heart sank as he showed her seal of the Steward. “I had a letter by rider late this morning. He must have set out directly as you left. Ecthelion asks after you and the children and how long you intend to ‘holiday’ with us.”

His daughter could not bring herself to answer nor would she read the words. How very angry must her husband must be, forced to swallow his pride and have her father-in-law write.

“My dear, you know you must be reconciled in time. Denethor will never let you take his heir and you will not be parted from either boy.” His eyes were full of pity, but too long the Prince of Dol Amroth had watched the House of Hurin rule the kingdom. He knew it would not be otherwise. “Talk to him. Help him to understand your fears. As you are, there can be no understanding.”

“Not yet. I need time.” He saw the lines upon her face and her fists clenched and thought, They are both stubborn.

“I am tired, father. May we go in?” The Prince acquiesced with a heavy heart, hoping time and tide would bring an answer.

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Saruman the White came with the bitter north wind as the leaves lay brown on the slopes of Mindolluin. Whispered words of scandal had reached even his ears at Isengard, as they had most inns on the Great North road. The son of the Steward of Gondor has been deserted by his young and beautiful wife. A new play had opened upon the board and he was intent to make best its use.

He found the Steward’s son, grim-faced and brooding, upon his seat in the Great Hall. Lost in pride and misery, he did not look up as the wizard’s steps rang across the stone slabs of the hall.

Perfect, thought Saruman, as he struck his staff upon the ground, the ringing tones at last brought up the young man’s gaze. “Good morrow, Lord Denethor, I am come in your time of need, with counsel to ease your heart and your mind”
The grey eyes flashed in sudden anger. “I should not have thought, Saruman the Wise, that you listened to fishwives tales.” Careful….careful. The wizard had misjudged his tolerance. His pride is wounded too.

“I do not need to listen to prattling and idle chatter, my Lord, to know well what happens in Middle-Earth. I have seen that your lady’s seat is empty. Since it grieves you so, I thought it would ease your heart to see her, to see your sons”

Denethor’s face was a mask, grim and grey. “I do think I would be welcome to Dol Amroth at this time. There is no point.”

“Ah, but there you are wrong, my lord. There is a way to see from afar, kept still and waiting here in the City. You alone have the key.” The wizard leaned upon his staff, waiting for his poisoned words to seed.

The Steward's son, his heart heavy and his need great, slowly nodded once. He remembered then there was a high tower room, long locked and dark.

Saruman led the younger man up through the seventh circle and at the Tower of the first Ecthelion the two ascended the many stairs in hushed and pregnant silence. At the topmost stair there was a narrow wooden door, bound in iron, rusted and unpolished. Denethor slipped in the one great key long unused, alone of those given with his office. The lock was stiff, not turned in centuries. No warden had watched the tower-room since Earnur rode off to Minas Morgul. At last the door was opened and they entered.

The room was round and deeply shrouded, myriad grey motes of dust deepening the gloom. There were no adornments, no furnishings such as a great king would have, the walls were bare. The white stones of the tower itself gave off the only light; a pale, unearthly glow. A tall round pedestal of black marble stood in the very centre of the room. It was carved about the top and plinth, the runes too faint to read, their message lost to time. Heavy and smooth, a great black orb, two handspans width, lay within a shallow bowl upon its top. Ungoverned by a directing mind, about its circumference the visions lay; wayward and haphazard, images diminishing forever in the distance, blurred and distorted.

Saruman walked around the palantir, his gaze intent upon the ever-changing images. His voice, when he spoke, echoed in the gloom, thrumming with power.

“As a learned man, you know the rhyme of Elendil, Denethor. Seven stars and seven stones the Faithful brought from the wreck of Numenor. The Stones of Annunimas and Amon Sul are sunk
beneath the waves, shipwrecked with Arvedui when the North Kingdom fell. The Great Stone of Osgiliath was lost in Anduin. Emyn Beraid looks only west to Elvenhome that was. This, this is the Anor-stone, once twinned with its brethren in Orthanc and Minas Ithil. The Ithil-stone surely was destroyed, ere the city fell to the Enemy. The Stone of Orthanc yet lives and I have used it…its visions clear as when Elendil first set foot out of the west.” He looked up and caught his quarry’s gaze,

Denethor’s face did not raise from the orb, faint hope and fear both vying to break the grey mask. “The palantir.”

“Just so. Will you take up what is yours by right, son of Hurin? It is your destiny to lead the people at this time. You are the Ruling Steward. It will be amenable to your will. With it you can look to see events great and small. From the palace of Dol Amroth to the Orc-ridden glades of Ithilien, think of the advantage you would have, the knowledge you could gain.”

The wizard beckoned to the younger man and walked around the stone to the north-north east. He looked through it then, back along a line to the south-southwest; his will intent upon a farther shore. The tumbling images disappeared and in their place towards his gaze there appeared a city, small figures moving to and fro about its streets.

“Concentrate my lord, focus on the people, bring them closer, closer with your will.” Denethor turned his eyes upon the image and instantly it sharpened…the stone recognized its rightful master. With a deep sigh of need he bent his head and the people enlarged, the image shifting through the streets as he sought the vision he most desired. There she was, holding Boromir’s hand, walking through the market stalls. Oh my love. Oh my son.

The wizard’s now velvet voice came low beside his ear. “Focus more, you can see if she wears her rings.” Trembling with the effort, Denethor willed the image to enlarge the more. There on his wife’s hand he made out their wedding ring. He heaved a great sigh, as relief and fatigue both overtook his limbs.

Thus it was that the Steward who so greatly loved Gondor and its people, first turned to his will the tool he hoped would help the defend the kingdom. As they locked the door again and began to descend, Saruman played out the final move, before a new game was to begin. “Be careful Denethor. Never gaze toward Minas Morgul. The Ithil-stone was paired with yours and so would see its twin quite easily. It has been long thought lost, but we know not for sure. Best to not tempt fate, however great ones will.”

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In the years that followed, an uneasy peace settled over the Steward’s palace and all within it. Finduilas rarely let her youngest out of her sight and her lord pretended not to notice. Consulting quietly far and wide, all told him to give his lady rest and time and humour her. He did and if they spoke little, at least they spoke and the air was less fraught, although saddened in time by Ecthelion’s passing. With the old Steward gone, Mithrandir came then little to Minas Tirith and there was none to check the pride and counsel of the Steward. Denethor came to see that the less he mentioned of Saruman, the less Finduilas fretted. She did not care that her husband spent many nights alone and never dreamed that the wizard saw into the very heart of the great white Tower.

If Denethor ignored her obsession with the boy, he could not ignore her slowly worsening health. At first she was merely tired and breathless climbing stairs. Soon, she wheezed after lifting the smallest item and was often dizzy. The Healers told them it was a weakness of her heart, perhaps long dormant from childhood, perhaps brought on by the difficult birth. Tinctures and medicines were tried, but little helped. He told himself it was weak of him to blame a mere child, but in his heart of hearts a tendril of resentment grew. He has taken her love from me. What else can be taken?

With a gasping cry, the little boy awoke. Only slowly did his body realize he was not truly drowning, not robbed of breath, enveloped by the roiling green waves of water. It was the summer of his fifth year and Faramir was terrified. He knew his eyes were open yet it seemed to him the dream was still so bright he could see it before his waking eyes. A great wave moved heartlessly over the green land, over the grey stone of the city, sweeping ships and people and animals all before it. Unstoppable it was, and in its wake a great brooding darkness arose, silent save for the cries of the eagles and the keen of the wind. Darkness Inescapable. He shivered, unable to let the image go.

The door to his small bedroom opened. A welcome sliver of light fell across his face, and she came in. He could hear Finduilas’ wheezing breath from the short walk. Laying a light down on the windowsill, she nestled down beside him. As her breath slowed and steadied she stroked his damp hair and hugged him close.

“What did you dream, my love?” she asked, when finally she could speak.

Low and halting he described the wave, the green, the fear and sense of devastation. She nodded all the while. He is a child of Westernesse after all.

“I have that dream, dear one, as does your grandfather. You dream of Numenor, brought low by Manwe in ages past, when the High Kings lost their way. Do not fear the sea, it will not harm you. The Valar raised it up for their purpose in that time to teach the Fallen the error of their ways. In their pride and folly they tried to challenge the gift of the One to Men. Pride ever drives kings and kingdoms, men and crofts alike, to their fall.”

Faramir frowned, thinking sleepily that sometimes he was proud of his reading. “How can we have the same dream?”
“Do you remember the rhyme of Elendil?”

He nodded and recited it by heart.

“Tall kings and tall ships

Three times three

What brought they from the foundered land

Over the flowing sea?

Seven star and seven stones

And one white tree.”

Finduilas thought of a great mural in the Prince's palace: a ship sailing into the haven of the bay. “The houses of Dol Amroth and Hurin both come east in those ships, bringing gifts that the Valar gave to the Faithful of Numenor. It is the gift of your father’s family to read the minds of men and so to speak. It is the gift of my family to Dream True, to See.” Could you have both? Would your father tell me, if he knew it?

A line of worry appeared on his forehead, a mirror of her own. “How do I know if the dream is true? Are they always true?” He thought anxiously of Wargs and Orcs and scoldings half-remembered from other disturbed nights.

“No, not all are true. You will know. A true dream stays in your mind’s eye as if etched. It is bright and sharp and does not fade. Most often it is just a picture, a moment, not great events, but little things that seem to not have meaning. If you can read the scene you can understand what it foretells.”

The worry line grew only deeper. He is little for this, she thought, but I have no time.

“Let me tell you one of mine.” She smiled in the dimness. My dearest dream and it is True, praise Lórien. “I see a tall man in his prime kneel beside a tree with golden leaves. He is smiling and he has your eyes. Two blond and sturdy boys race up and tackle him together. They wrestle and he lets them pin him to the grass. They are laughing. A little girl, dark and with our eyes, leaps upon them all. It is just that scene but I know you are that man and they are my grandchildren, and you will be happy.” If naught changes the music of Arda. Eru hear my prayer. She hugged him hard again.
‘Did you dream of Boromir, also?’ he asked, wanting his brother to be happy too.

“Oh yes love, I have. I see him stand on the heights of Osgiliath, a great sword in his hand and the standard of the Stewards fluttering in the breeze. All around the troops are shouting his name. There has been a great battle and he is victorious. He looks like King Earnur of old; broad and tall and strong. I see his pride and love for the people and our land. I know it is a day he remembers as one of his happiest.”

“He would like that, Mama.”

“Oh yes,” Finduilas waited, hoping he would not ask more. He did not. With relief, she tucked him in and began the slow, labored walk back to her room. That night, as she lay down again and could not catch her breath at all for many minutes, she knew. *It has begun.*

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The winter of his fifth year, Faramir was confused. The Steward’s palace was full of people, but there was no laughter and no one seemed to celebrate. All was hushed, silent as the snow dusting the city and seemed just as quietly waiting. Grandfather had arrived, and Uncle Imrahil and his pretty new wife, and Aunt Ivriniel. ‘Is it for Mettare?’, he asked Nera for the second time, who now simply shook her head, her eyes swollen and red. Boromir did not want to play and seemed angry when he asked. He did not understand why.

They were taken to see their mother in the morning, the room close and stuffy, smelling oddly sweet. Finduilas sat in the great chair, as she had for months, propped up on many pillows. Faramir knew she slept at night that way, unable to breathe save in that pose. Her wheezing was slow and labored, her face gaunt, her body wasted. Every now and then she coughed with a terrible force and the healer gently wiped the bloody froth from her lips. She was too weak to lift her hands.

Boromir went first to her and he hugged her hard, his nose was running and his eyes were red. He was so very angry that he shook as he held her hand. She tried to soothe him with what voice she had left. “I will love you always, my Bear. Remember me when you laugh, for your laugh has always brought me joy. Be brave and strong and follow your heart. Protect your brother for me and keep him safe. Will you promise?” Her grey and sunken eyes pleaded. “I promise.” he vowed to her cold but sweating brow as he kissed her. Her hand squeezed his for a moment and the tears began to fall.

Nera had then brought Faramir forward and he stood on tiptoe to kiss her cheek and hug her carefully, straining to hear her murmured words of love. ‘You are the light of my life, Fara. I will love you always. Be true and remember my dream.” She had not said goodbye. She had little breath left.

He dreamed that night of her, walking lightly through a shrouded hall, its walls lined with golden
tapestries. She did not wheeze and her eyes were bright, her head held high. *Remember me, little one. I will await you here.*

In the morning, everything had changed again.

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As was the custom on the third day, the Steward and his sons; the Princes and Princess of Dol Amroth walked slowly behind the bier as they wove their way through the City to the gate of the Silent Street. Despite the cold the streets were thronged with mourners. Many wept openly, for the wife of the Steward had been gentle and gracious; dearly loved and taken untimely. Flowers lay on the stones beneath their feet; the winter rose and mistletoe, white and frosted.

Faramir walked as long as he could, remembering his father’s words to be straight and steady and not to cry. Imrahil was the first the spy the little head droop and his nephew’s steps slow; angered again that his brother-in-law, unbending and proud, made one so young walk with them. He was about to break the line and help, when Boromir grasped his little brother around the waist and lifted him up. So they walked, for some few yards. He was determined, although the path was still long, and his brother heavy. Then, when he worried he could not continue but must put his burden down, strong arms lifted them both together. High in their father’s arms, the sons of the Steward went through the gate together: to a white and silent tomb that one day would ring with the sounds of battle and be blackened by despair.

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Late that night a little boy walked shivering in his nightshirt down a silent corridor. Too young to truly understand, he was frightened: by the sadness, the hushed voices, and most of all, his brother’s unceasing tears as they tried to sleep. Unheard, Faramir entered his father’s room and padded softly to the fireside. There his father sat, carved in stone, unmoving, grey, his face to the flames. Like stone, there were now a myriad tiny fractures within, inflicted by the hammer blow of her loss. His hands on the arms of the chair were so locked his knuckles were white, as if with force alone he could hold the fault planes together. He did not notice his small son. Faramir, looking up, was frightened all the more when he saw the firelight flicker in wet tracks upon his father’s face. *The Steward did not cry.* Climbing up onto the great lap, he rested his head on his father’s chest, feeling the soft damp of the black tunic on his face. Thinking he understood what upset his father so, he sought for words of comfort.

“Mama will be able to breathe, papa.” he insisted, “They will know she must sit up. Eru knows how to take care of someone who is sick.” With an anguished cry, the Steward’s hands at last let go the chair. He hugged his son fiercely, whispering “I love you.” into the damp straight locks. Cruel fate decreed the boy would be too young to remember what he most desired to hear, the last time it was spoken.
Chapter 4

In which a new captain is placed upon the board, a pawn is moved and several feints are planned

Denethor, Steward of Gondor, long known as a man stern and proud, became ever more grim and grey in the years that followed his lady's loss. Mourning always the bright jewel of his heart, he wore only black; great sable robes that hid the mail and sword he wore to keep his body strong. Long hours he would sit in the White tower of his forefather, deep in thought and searching o'er the wider realm. Gondor's defences he and his father had strengthened: the Rammas rebuilt, the beacons set and ready, foreseeing that their final trial with Mordor would come within in his time.

His sons had grown and now he readied them, tools also to be used in war. Boromir had his father's pride and face, but not the blood of Westernesse, the gifts of both Hurin and Dol Amroth had passed him by. He had his mother's sense of humour, but his own great heart and an appetite for life to match, delighting always in arms and deeds of valour. Just 19, he had become the youngest Captain of Gondor's army, his fame and renown growing with each skirmish. Faramir was his mother in personality; sensitive and steadfast, ever curious, looking out on the world with her gentle grey eyes. His face was the mirror of his father's and his body also: lithe and quick and strong. Already he was training in arms and archery, although he stole what time he could for what he loved best, lore and language and history. In him, as in his father, the blood of Westernesse ran nearly true.

Mithrandir pulled his great grey cloak more tightly round, shivering a little at the damp. The rain was softly pelting down, the pavement wet beneath his feet, and a steady drip commenced again from the brim of his battered hat. The staff beat time with his footsteps upon the stones, steady as he climbed up through the city's streets. He was in no hurry, indeed taking his time, pondering how best to attain his goal, in this city where he was little welcome.

A ring Bilbo had shown to him, a gold ring without device or design, simple in its beauty, less simple in its uses. Mithrandir remembered once again the words of Saruman, the last time the White Council met. "It is gone" said the great wizard, his words ringing in the air. "Gone down the mighty Anduin to the sea. Washed outside our reach and only great Ulmo can find it now." And so he has believed for long and long. Was not Saruman the most learned of their order? Had he not spent many years researching the One Ring's very fate? Surely Bilbo's ring must then be one of many rings of magic, wrought by a smith of lesser skill.

And yet of late the wizard had witnessed many things that made him uneasy about the eldest of their order. Manwe himself had charged them with their toil: to give such aid and guidance as they were able, but not impose their will upon events. Grown proud and arrogant as his power waxed, already Saruman had broken this vow; overruled the Council and stayed their hand against Dol Gulder. Many had been slain and taken when, emboldened by their hesitation, the Enemy attacked the woodland realm.

Now having come to doubt his mentor's intent, Mithrandir found he doubted all he had been told. "Naught but an account of the moment he cut his prize from the Enemy's hand, my old friend. Nothing to describe the ring itself." Saruman had said as he declared useless the scroll of Isildur.

Perhaps this was a waste of precious time and yet, here to Minas Tirith he had come, misgiving in his
heart, hoping to search once again for some sign, some design that would identify the ring. The wizard wished to see the scroll for himself. He paced on up through the final circles, through the wet and lowering weather, thinking he would need a strategy indeed to convince the Steward to let him rummage in his vaults.

Faramir skidded to a sudden halt outside the breakfast room, as the Tower guardsmen hid their smiles at the haystack of his hair, unbrushed and quite forgotten at the news. Nera had come to wake him as she always did, setting out the order of the day.

"My lord, you are to breakfast with your father straight away and then apply yourself to your studies in the morning." Faramir sat up in bed, rubbing his eyes. Flushed from sleep and hair more tangled than usual, his pupils were wide despite the light. Nera wondered Had he dreamed again?

"In the afternoon you have arms practise with the Captain and then you will attend the feast tonight with all the companies. Mind you wash after the drills and dress in your best boots and a clean tunic." Now governess, she kept a close but gentle rein upon on her forgetful charge, lest he feel too often his father's easy wrath. Lord Denethor was always punctual and well turned out. His younger son was not.

"The feast is tonight?! Which Captain? Are they back?" The covers were thrown quickly back, Faramir forgetting in his excitement that she still looked through the doorway.

"Why, your brother of course and yes they came back late yestereve." Nera smiled and gave him a last instruction. "Lord Faramir, don't forget to brush your hair!"

Now that he stood before the door, clothed in a wrinkled shirt and breeches pulled hastily from the floor, the boy licked his palm and tried to smooth the unruly black locks that stuck out in all directions. Father would not be happy with the presentation, but he didn't care. Boromir was back! At his nod the guardsmen opened the door and announced his presence.

It was no dream that sat at the table with his father, spreading jam upon a bun, smiling broadly, as if he had not been gone these four months past. Faramir just barely remembered his manners.

"Good morning father" He bowed his head respectfully. His father nodded and placed his teacup down, a mixture of displeasure and resignation upon his face.

"Good morning, Captain." He bowed to Boromir, who pushed his chair back and rose, a napkin falling to the floor. "You don't need to Captain me!" Boromir protested as he engulfed his younger brother in a fierce hug. He stepped back to survey his little brother at arms length. "Fara, Valar you have grown! I almost can't do this" he grinned, reaching out to perch his elbow on his brother's head. He laughed as Faramir squirmed away, but their usual joke was on him. Indeed he couldn't, his brother was now taller than his shoulder.

As they settled back at the table, Boromir was peppered with excited questions, launched around mouthfuls of the copious breakfast the fourteen-year-old was wolfing down. "Faramir," their father admonished sternly, before turning back to his ever present papers. His younger son tried to swallow before speaking.

"You went all the way to Firien wood? It must have been wonderful to be camping out every night." Boromir laughed ruefully. The boy made campaigning sound almost like a picnic.

"Wonderful is not the adjective that comes to mind, little brother. Wet, cold, or hard more like. I prefer a bed, and a warm meal. I am very thankful now that as Captain I do not need to cook. A well
fed company is a happy company, I have quickly learned that."

"They probably put you up for promotion." Faramir's teasing grin lit up his gentle face. "No more risk of poisoning!"

"What?" The Captain turned wide-eyed upon his brother, poised to clip him on the shoulder. Denethor, not entirely ignoring his sons, read his eldest with ease and shot him a quelling look. The hand was lowered. Boromir had indeed laid low half a squad with a carcass of rotten meat, he remembered, but how had Faramir heard about it?

The brothers thought it prudent to eat quietly for a while, Boromir silently passing to his brother every last pastry on the table and most of the fruit too. Where was the slighter boy putting it all?

"What have you been doing, Fara, other than growing and eating and sleeping late." He ruffled his brother's hair, to show that he was teasing.

"Archery and sword practice of course." His brother nodded. "History with Ivanduil, and lots and lots about the laws of Cirion. Did you know he started the beacons?" he asked excitedly. Faramir reveled in the chance to talk. It had been too quiet. Their father these days was a man of few words and little time.

Boromir, for whom learning was a skill done with energy, imprinted by experience and not reading, snorted. "Have you not yet ruined your eyes, peering at all those dates and names?" He knew full well that Faramir could recite it all by heart and was really rather proud of that.

"No! My sight is better than yours. Belegon says that is why I make the better archer." The Captain raised an eyebrow, thinking he must have a word with the armsmaster. His brother was enjoying himself far too much at his expense!

Denethor paused in marking notes upon a parchment and closed the folio. He stood up, the meal was over, and his sons rose obediently. He looked pointedly at his second born. "Mithrandir has arrived and I have reluctantly given him leave to use the archives. You are not to disturb him Faramir. By midday I expect you to give me the Oath that Cirion spoke to Eorl, its history and importance to governance by our house."

As his father strode purposefully from the room, Faramir had to remember to close his mouth. Mirthandir was here! And Boromir! This was going to be a most wonderful day.

The early morning passed slowly for the young Dunadan, for once less intent upon his studies than the promise of events to come. The dim and filtered light of the library did not help the task, nor did the flat and droning voice of Ivanduil, his tutor, a dedicated historian who quite despaired of Boromir's attention but usually found his younger brother eager to learn. Not so this day. The boy fidgeted and turned his gaze away, looking past the heavy curtains on the great arched windows to the sunshine outside the Citadel and the parade ground beyond.

As Faramir failed to answer his question for a second time, the silver-haired and grey-eyed gentleman sighed and put his quill down, rubbing his thinning temple. "Young master, is there any point in continuing? I am afraid your heart is not with Cirion this morning."

The boy looked back with a start, and flushed. He was being rude and Ivanduil was trying. "I am very sorry Sir. I am not making good use of your efforts."

"Then I think I will release you. Perhaps fresh air and sunshine will help you focus."
"Thank you, Sir!" Faramir bowed and rose, the delight at his release all too evident. The elder man waved him away, concealing a smile, knowing the boy's quick mind would make up for it another day.

"Do not thank me, but I sincerely hope you have a considered answer for your Lord Father's question come the time."

Faramir made his way towards the side door, closest to the practise ground. Here the library divided into smaller rooms, arranged off a low-ceilinged and little used hallway. As he trod the hall in silence, the worn carpet muffling his footfalls, the boy heard a low, insistent muttering. A door just farther on was open a crack. Curiosity waylaid his original purpose and he peered in.

In the small dim room packed nigh to the ceiling the aged scrolls, sat Mithrandir intent upon his research. Murmuring all the while in the Elven tongue, the wizard scanned the papers before him, one gnarled finger traversing each line in quick succession. The great worn staff leaned against the desk and beside it floated the only source of the light in the shrouded room, a softly glowing yellow sphere. Faramir exclaimed softly in wonder at the sight. Magic!

As the wizard looked up, he saw the young boy duck his head, ever courteous and apologetic for intruding. "Welcome, Lord Mithrandir. I am sorry I disturbed you." Could this youth, all coltish limbs, hair and tunic askew, be the quiet and serious child he had last seen? Eyes twinkling like stars in inky sky, a smile lit up the lined and careworn face. 'Lord Faramir, how good it is to see you again! Come in, come in."

Faramir moved lightly through the door, a hesitant smile alighting on his features. It seemed to the wizard he could see the thirst for knowledge in his face, the sense of wonder in the keen grey eyes. "What are you searching for sir? Can I help? I read Sindarin and a bit of Quenya too."

"Nothing to interest you lad, just dusty tomes of long forgotten history." He would not speak openly of his quest. It would not due to speak of rings aloud, so close under the mountains to the east. "What have you studying young lad?" He motioned the boy to sit in a chair beside the desk.

"The history of Gondor, sir. Today it was the Oath of Eorl and our alliance with Rohan."

"Ah. Now there is an exciting tale. The Riders of Eotheod came upon the field at Celebrant just when your forefather thought all hope was lost and defeat stared us in the face. It was a moving day when Eorl and Cirion swore oaths in gratitude and friendship and Cirion gave Calenardhon to the Rohirrim to keep and guard."

"You were there!" Faramir marvelled at the agelessness of wizards.

"Yes I was. It was the first time a steward swore an oath to Eru, reserved only for the Kings. Cirion was wise and laid his hand upon Elendil's tomb as he spoke the words. An oath so sworn will not be forsaken, not by Gondor or Rohan, however burdensome the cost."

The two fell easily into talk of history, Mithrandir delighted to answer the boy's thoughtful questions, intent upon the morning's subject now brought to life. So lost in the enjoyment of their discussion was Faramir that he did not sense the morning slipping by, and heard with dismay the midday bell ringing in the courtyard nearby.

Suddenly the easiness was gone and the boy leapt up from the chair, tense and worried. "The bell..I am late! I'll be in trouble with Father again." He groaned started for the door. "He was already annoyed at how I came to breakfast."
"And your transgression was?" Mithrandir tilted his head to one side and surveyed the anxiety in the boy's face.

It came all out in a sorry rush. "I was late then too and I wasn't neat and I forgot to comb my hair, and my clothes were rumpled." He heaved a heavy sigh, dejectedness in the very set of his shoulders. "Everything I do annoys him."

The wizard smiled ruefully. Oh the agonies of youth. "I daresay, young Faramir, there are other matters to worry more about." He fingered his long and ragged beard and his eyes were merry as he chuckled softly. "I am certain I would displease your father also. I am not renowned for my turnout either. Nor is the mightiest warrior I know."

Relief and gratefulness at the unaccustomed support flooded the boy's anxious features. As he paused, his hand upon the door, Faramir turned back. His eyes were dark wide pools, brimming with hope and longing.

"Mithrandir, who is Aragorn?"

The floating globe evaporated with a loud and sudden pop as the wizard started badly. His voice was rough; the parchment shook within his grasp. "How did you know that name, Faramir? Tell me!"

The air in the room felt suddenly close and cool as fear unlooked for clenched at the wizard's heart.

"You...you just said it." The boy was puzzled, not understanding. What had he done wrong?

Mithrandir rose and walked slowly around the desk, willing his feet to be steady as he went. Faramir did not flinch as the older man reached out and clasped the boy's chin, searching carefully his face for the truth.

"No I did not, lad." Two sets of wide and worried eyes met each other across the dim.

"I am sorry my lord." The boy shook his head as if to clear an image. "It must be a waking dream. I dream sometimes, as my mother did." He wanted to explain, to give his mentor hope. He was not used to seeing Mithrandir afraid. "She saw a king returned and I was there."

Did she? But he did not, else he might have recognized Estel. The wizard frowned. This was too near an escape. He has the gifts of both his houses and strong to be able to read me, even if I was not guarding.

"No, this was no dream, Faramir. You read it from my heart. However it came to you, it is a name you must keep safe. His time is not yet come. Swear, swear to me you will not speak of this to anyone. Not your father, not your brother. No one." The walls about the room seemed to gather in as Mithrandir's words rang out loud, laced with a power he was ever loathe to use.

Faramir licked lips gone suddenly dry, but his eyes were steady and held no guile. "I swear my Lord." The wizard nodded gravely and the very air relaxed with a quiet sigh. "Go, young Dunadan, and tell your father I will speak with him later. And do not speak to him of kings. He would not thank you."

Within the dark and many-windowed tower of Orthanc, the Lord of Isengard had sent his spies away, their orders clear and specific. Three men they were, loyal to his gold and his guile, certain of the approbation they would receive upon the seemingly easy task. Search the Shire for a hobbit named Baggins. Bring me word of his habits and his doings. One only had an additional task. At this their master smiled faintly. He would find out the use of this leaf of which the grey one was so
enamored.

It was the appointed hour for his contact with the Anor-stone, and so the wizard drew his cloak of changing colours about him and climbed higher up into the tower. From four great monoliths of black obsidian Orthanc was wrought, by the men of Numenor long ago. At its summit four spires sharp as the points of spears stretched to the sky, the bones of the earth reaching out of the tormented hills. Between them lay a single room, the home of the Orthanc-stone, itself as black as the walls and spires around.

Saruman turned his gaze upon the stone resting on its plinth and his thoughts to one he sought to reach. The hazy, tumbling images refocused and he saw a room as white as his was black: the Tower of Ecthelion. The grave and serious face of the Steward came in to view, lines of care and worry etched ever deeper on the proud and high face.

No words were spoken into the chilled silence of each tower, yet each warden heard the other's words. The very air crackled with a cool and focused power.

Hail Denethor son of Ecthelion. It is good to see you yet again for our council. I trust you fare well and your sons also.

"We are well Saruman. The elder is newly made a captain and is a credit to his company. We are in good hands. He will in time be the Captain-General and key to our defences."

Prudent my steward. He seems a man worthy and valiant. And the younger boy? What of him?

"There, it will take time to temper him to Gondor's need. He is dreamer and little inclined to the deeds he must take on. His fills his head with songs and lore and fables. He has spent already too many hours at the feet of Mithrandir, entranced by his tales. The grey one has come again to Minas Tirith and I am keeping them apart."

Come again to the city, whatever for?

"To search our archives for scrolls of knowledge. He seeks he says a weapon that will aid us all in our hour of need to come."

The wizard's chuckle echoes down the link. He was ever the lesser of our order, Denethor. Lesser in wisdom, but not in pride. I have searched as you know and have gleaned all that can be got. He resents my knowledge and so seeks on his own to copy what I have done. Thorongil placed his trust in Mithrandir as did your father, wanting only gain and greater power. But I would not expect your son to be this way at such a tender age.

"I little understand him, I confess. He is a wilful, undisciplined youth.

I would watch him warily my Lord. If he is already allying himself with Mithrandir, who know what plots have been put within his head? Be careful he follows your counsel and does not seek to keep his own. You have said his brother loves him greatly. Be ware that the younger does not come between you if he is learning guile from that master of dissembling.

Their council turned to matters of defence, the wizard plying the steward for news of the Enemy's position to the east and south, the state of the local lords and their troops. In return Saruman gave Denethor but tasty morsels, movements in Rohan, stirrings about the Mirkwood and word from his spies of the Dunlendings farther east.

As they broke off, the wizard pondered what he had learned. The treacherous are ever distrustful and so he gnawed in worry upon the news from Minas Tirith. So that old fool seeks again. Why would he
do so? What treachery does he plot against me? He felt a flicker of unease. *What draws the boy to that upstart?*

Resentment coiled within the wizard's chest, as it did within the Steward's. *Cirdan gave Narya to Mithrandir and not to me! I was the first, I volunteered to aid the children. Why should it not have come to me?*

Suddenly he laughed aloud, the black eyes flickering madly within the high and kingly face. *It is no matter, I have made my own! And will gain the other in due time.* He fingered a gold and silver ring upon his hand. From its jagged runes he drew new strength and gathered himself, walking westward about the tower to shift the palantir's gaze.

This time the image he sees is near as black as the spires above. Far away in a city once fair and beautiful, now stinking with the fires of corrupt creation, the Ithil-stone focuses upon a ring of fire, circled round a red and lidless eye. Even expecting what he would see, Saruman trembles at the awesome sight.

"*The Power of Isengard is at your command, Sauron, Lord of Earth.*" His thoughts ring with the enchantment of his speaking voice. The fallen one must not know of what he too desires.

*What news Saruman, from beyond my borders? What news?*

"*Great Lord, I have stayed those who would oppose you. I have kept the peace with the peoples of the west, all the better for your search. Your instrument wants only to return to you. As the kingdoms lie idle you may regain what was has been lost.*"

"Very good, wizard. Very good. I would have what was taken from me. With it, none can stand before my designs.*

Despite his new power, Saruman's breath grew laboured and his limbs weak with the strain of guiding the Orthanc-stone. He was not its rightful owner and thus it grew more wayward with each use. He turned himself to one last thought; bargaining with one, in his swollen pride, he believed he could coerce.

"*Together, my lord, we shall rule this Middle-earth. The old world will burn, the forests, fail, a new age of orc will rise. Before all is done we will drive the machine of war with the sword and fire and the iron fist of fear.*"

Leagues away in another black and dreaded tower, the mightiest of the Maia, fallen even farther than his pawn, laughed and his servants cowered at the sound.

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Mithrandir sought the Steward of Gondor that afternoon within the hall of Kings, anxious to be away and looking little forward to their talk, yet knowing he must speak of what he learned. He approached the Steward's throne where Denethor sat surrounded by his Captains: the talk of border-war and orc-spies and too little supplies. The youngest among them looked up at his approach and motioned to his father. The Steward raised his hand for silence and nodded for him to speak.

The wizard bowed low, leaning lightly on his staff. "*My lord, I give you thanks for the use of your archives. It was princely done, and I believe to Gondor's benefit.*"

"*Mithrandir you are ever a flatterer as much a stormcrow. I know your desire and can see your aims but at least in this search for knowledge we row together.*"

"*Lord, I have a last request ere I make your leave. May we speak in private?*"
"A black eyebrow raised above an aquiline nose. Surprised, Denethor decided to allow it to leave us", he motioned to the men. At Boromir's quick gaze, he inclined his head and his son followed suit.

"Denethor, the time is coming when all our strengths must be put together to halt the menace as it grows. We must marshall our defences, our strength of arms and wits not least. I see Boromir is made a captain, that is indeed well for Gondor. I deem also that the more we learn of the weapon of the Enemy the greater our chance to forestall it reaching its owner. For this I came. Yet in my search I have learned something else and it concerns your other son."

"Faramir?" The Steward's eyes darkened.

"Your younger son is more like to you, my Lord, than you realize. He has both the Gifts of Hurin and Dol Amroth. Did you not know?"

"Nay, he would be young yet for at least the one to show. I had not time to test or think upon it."

"Well I tell you now both are full upon him: wild and without control. Untutored the gift of Hurin is a burden, as you well know. You must send him to Lorien as your father did for you. There is much he must be taught, to use the gift, wisely and well to our benefit."

The Steward shook his head. No power under Arda would have him send his son closer to those lands, away from his control. At least it explains his raging need for sleep and sustenance. Wild the gift burns energy like little else. "I will teach him myself what is necessary, Mithrandir. If you have not noticed there are fires stoked in Mordor to breed armies and forge black weapons. We have need of arms, not visions. He will be a soldier, not a seer."

The wizard looked as if he might speak again, but at the stubborn set of Denethor's jaw, bowed his head and turned away. He hoped in his heart that for the boy's sake his father taught him soon.

The afternoon passed quickly as the brothers sparred and joked, at ease with each other as with no one else. Faramir, unsettled by the morning's events, felt all the better when even Boromir had to allow that he was doing somewhat better with his swordsmanship. That night at the feast, he was excited to sit at the main table, at his brother's urging allowed a small glass of watered wine and quite miraculously allowed to stay when the songs and dancing started. He had of course, enthusiastically tried every dish that came his way.

Throughout the night he noticed his father's eyes were on him, and he tried to mind all his manners with the lords and ladies present, striving for his deportment to be perfect. Even Denethor could not be unhappy with what Faramir had managed of his appearance. His hair was washed and pulled back with a black ribbon, curling slightly behind his shoulders, and he was clad in his best dark blue tunic and polished boots. The boy was shyly thrilled when one of his more sprightly great aunts asked him to dance and blushed pink when the pretty wife of the Captain General asked him next. He loved dancing and clearly did well, as after that he never lacked for a partner.

Well fed and happy, up late and enjoying himself, all too soon Faramir found his father at his elbow. From across the hall he caught his brother's eye and waved good night. Boromir, caught in the centre of a throng of singing men, raised his tankard in salute and smiled. Faramir knew he would not be home for many hours, yet.

As he walked quietly back through courtyard to the Steward's Palace, Ithil was rising and very bright. He could just make the scimitar and the swan. The night was soft and Faramir found himself..."
getting sleepy.

As they reached their rooms, his father turned and spoke. "My son I would speak with you." Certain he heard a note of displeasure in the voice, he nervously wondered what had he done. Had he insulted someone at the dance? Said something wrong?

Denethor spoke, coolly and calmly but anger simmered in his gaze "Faramir, did I not give you specific instructions this morning to stay away from Mithrandir?"

"Yes, sir, but…" The boy hesitated. His heart had fallen into his stomach.

"But what?" An eyebrow raised and dark eyes glittered all the more.

"I thought that since Ivanduil and I were done, there would be no harm."

"You thought. You thought. Were you given leave to think?"

"No, sir." The black ponytail fell forward as the boy examined intently the tips of his polished boots.

"You knowingly defied me. And in doing so you spent so long enraptured at the feet of that wizard, that you missed lunch and were late to the practice ground. Did you think I would not find out?" The boy for the moment kept silent, hearing with trepidation the tone of his father's voice rise.

Denethor in his fury spat the next words out. "Wooly headed child, you have not the sense to know your own mistakes. You want to learn, to have lore and understanding, but without experience and resolve it is useless. And now I find I am being given lessons in how to raise my own son by that upstart! Saruman was the head of the council for a good reason. Mithrandir is the lesser of their order. It is ill done to put too much stock in the lesser man."

Faramir could not help himself. He would not usually speak his mind, between his exuberant brother and his stern father he always kept his counsel. But just this once it hurt too much to hear his beloved mentor mocked. "But that is politics. What does it matter who is where within the order? Mithrandir knows so much."

"Everything is politics!" Denethor shouted, face practically purple with rage. "Your brother and I are trying to protect our people and this kingdom. Staying ones hand and sitting long listening to foolish wizards may have served the kings of old, but Gondor is in need of soldiers with the wit to follow orders. The wolf is at the door."

Faramir, in agony of indecision, tried to explain. "But father,"

"I did not give you leave to speak, do not gainsay me!" Denethor was scarcely conscious of the hand that raised: a decade of resentment uncoiled within an instant. Like a striking snake it hit and gathered back with startling speed. He was yet a man of strength, and the force of the blow rocked the boy back, the livid mark of the great ring already rising on his cheek.

Disasters are ever a mix of little events, each alone of no consequence: combined together a chain of misery. Had Faramir not moved to step forward when he did, he would have been more firmly planted. Had he expected the blow, he might have blocked it, although the instinct not to raise his hand to his lord was great. Had the stool not been behind him he would not have gone down.

As he put his hand out to break his fall, Faramir felt a short sharp pain within in his wrist and then a spreading warmth. He bit back a cry, struggling to his knees, knowing it would only enrage his father more if he stayed upon the floor. How had he fallen? What had he done?
Childish bones are easily broken, as can be trust, but love sometimes less so. Finduilas' eyes looked out, newly wary, from a younger, softer version of Denethor's own face. Within their depths hurt now lay but not anger, uncertainty but not judgement. He remembered her eyes, alight with anger and reproach, but never with forgiveness. It seemed too much bear to see it now, when she lay forever beyond his reach.

To drive those unwittingly accusing eyes away, therein lay his only solace. "Get out of my sight" Denethor roared, "Speak to me no more of wizards." The boy, cradling his arm, ran.

Boromir, Gondor's youngest and likely drunkest Captain, pressed himself lightly up the rampart wall. He was quite pleased that he could still to pull off a trick practised many nights when sneaking home after conquests in the City. He paused only a moment upon the top to smile and steady himself, reflecting that really he was only moderately drunk, not so far gone that he could not make it home without an escort. It had been a memorable evening, the men in high spirits, the ale good, the girls pretty and welcoming.

He sprang quickly down but staggered, swearing softly in the dark, his knees barked upon the stone. It was a farther drop to the garden side, longer than he remembered, and just perhaps he was a tad less steady than he first had thought. He rubbed his knee, as his eyes adjusted to the greater dim underneath the willow tree. No one came, but he listened carefully for a moment. It would not do to have his cover blown and Father see him in this state. He could hear the words. *Unbecoming of your new responsibilities.*

Of a sudden, he heard a faint scrape of boot on stone and what he thought was a hushed and ragged breath. It moved deeper into the shadows beside the corner bench. Springing forward, he grabbed the skulking figure about the shoulders. A familiar voice yelped and he caught a scent of soap and sweat he knew. "Fara...it's only you." He let go the shoulders at once but the figure stood taut and still. "You startled me. What are you doing out here, isn't time for you to be abed?"

Even in the shadows, Boromir could see his brother's face looked pale, his grey eyes bleary, his arm held protectively against his chest. Faramir did not say a word, but by the set of his mouth his brother knew he was in pain.

"What has happened? Did you sprain it when we sparred?" Worried that he might have unknowingly hurt his beloved brother, Boromir tried to lift the arm and see the nature of the injury. The younger boy hissed at the pain and pulled back. The wrist was clearly swollen and darkly bruised.

Now Boromir was truly worried and this helped to quickly to clear his fuzzy head. "Can you move it? It may be broken. We should take you to the Houses." He laid an arm gently across Faramir's shoulders, intending to steer him back through the garden toward their rooms.

Once out of the shadows the full light of Ithil showed clearly the angry red mark upon the boy's face and the imprint of the ring. The Heir of Gondor knew well indeed the seal of the Steward. An awful realization dawned.

"Boromir no. Leave it. I will go get it looked at." Faramir's voice was strained and pleading. The Captain whirled, fury dogging his steps as he ran through the apartment halls. The remnants of the ale loosed his tongue as he threw open the study door.

"How could you?!!"

"How could I what, my son?" Denethor at last looked up from the parchment he was scanning, a
frown upon his face. "I am busy and this is a rather unpleasant scene. You smell like a tavern."

Boromir held tight to a chair back, his knuckles white upon the rail; strove hard to find measured words within his fury. "How could you do this to him? I found Fara in the garden. Did you know his wrist may be broken?"

A muscle jumped upon the Steward's cheek. "No I did not. There was an accident and he tripped. Have him seen to in the Houses."

"That was no accident. You have hurt him!" The younger man's voice was sharp with reproach. The tone, but not the sentiment, made flat grey eyes narrow in concern.

Denethor was in an unaccustomed place. He was unused to explaining himself to anyone; but for his beloved son's consideration he would try. "It was not meant to have happened this way. He talked back to me, out of turn. Your own backside has seen my hand many times."

"Not like this!" Boromir thought of his brother's pale and pained face, heard again a decade of unkind words and unkind silences. "Ever he tries to please you and you think little of it. You promised her. I heard you. You promised her you would keep him safe. Is this how you do it? You criticise him and belittle what he does, and now you hurt him? By all the Valar, why?"

Pride and grief warred within the man, gnawing at Denethor's fabled self control. How dare he mention her. "Do not speak to me of my responsibilities! I would not be keeping Gondor safe alone but for him!"

Boromir gasped. The truth was a vile and twisted thing and it could not be unsaid. Here was the stinking root from which the rancor grew. Why would he blame him? Fara is the best of all of us. How could he not see that? Boromir's hands shook as he moved around the chair and advanced upon his father.

"I promised her as she lay dying that I would keep him safe, I never dreamed she meant me to protect him from you."

The accusation fell like a blow. Denethor flinched and took a step back at the mounting fury in his son's eyes. It is as the wizard said, the boy would come between us. Years spent walking a tightrope between those he loved the most made his choice no easier, but he was certain where his love and duty lay. Boromir's voice was cold, rising in volume with each step. "I will honour my promise, if I have to beat you black and blue to do it. You no longer have the reach or strength to stand your ground against me. Do not ever lay a hand on him again!"

The object of their discussion walked, humiliated, past the guards standing sentinel outside his father's door. Sick at heart, his cheek throbbing, nauseated each time the pain jolted in his wrist, Faramir walked unseen into the room. The two he loved best stood fighting like a pair of snarling dogs, the shouting loud enough that he and the guards had heard it all.

He could not bear the thought that he had come between them, nor could he bear what had been said: his father's truth or his brother's defence. Sometimes even a gift born of love hurts.

"Enough! Enough!" The soprano voice cracked. It had not yet settled into its final baritone. The two combatants, surprised at the sound and the interruption, paused. Faramir stood very still, trembling a little from the shock. His voice was bitter but quieter now.

"Thank you both, so very much. Now the entire household, nay the City, knows you think I am worthless and cannot protect myself."
He fled.

Chapter End Notes

The description of Orthanc is based in part upon that from the Two Towers, by J.R.R Tolkien. Saruman's words to Sauron about the machine of war are modified from the original phrases in the Two Towers, the motion picture, New Line Cinema. These works are of course their authors own and I derive no profit.

Thanks to Annafan and Lady P for their encouragement
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In which the white pawn moves and the black king plans to take it

A small worn patch appeared to be starting in the carpet where the nervous young esquire paced that bright Lothron morning. The weather was unusually warm and windy. Khand winds people called them: hot and dusty and fey. Perhaps they were the trigger of the young man’s mood, perhaps it was an unaccustomed case of nerves. Both had conspired to make that morning’s practice far longer than either the esquire or his brother hoped.

The gentle baritone started again, just a shade too fast. “Here do I swear fealty and service to Gondor, and to the Lord and Steward of the realm, to speak and to be silent, to do and to let…, to let …. Faramir bit back a groan of frustration; words that should flow smoothly were caught again. He ran his fingers through his long black hair, as if the motion could soothe his nerves and his quickly beating heart. Starting again the ancient oath, he tried to be slow and measured, pacing all the while.

”to do and to let be, to come and to go, in peace or war.” Once again he halted, the sequence wasn’t right. “Valar, no!... it is need or plenty first!” The young Dunadan threw himself down upon the bench, hands raised in supplication, the very picture of dejection. “Boromir why can’t I get this?!”

The older man eyed his brother with amusement. “Frankly little brother I am at a loss. You seem able to remember every piece of Elven doggerel written back to the Second Age so why not this?” Boromir sat with his arms crossed over his chest, an ill-concealed smirk upon his handsome face. Beside him his brother’s leg vibrated with equally ill-concealed tension. He found it highly entertaining. His famously cool and composed younger brother was unnerved by such simple ceremony.

“And what did you do when you took your oath, oh mighty Captain mush-for-brains. Memorizing things for Ivanduil used to make you pee your pants. You can’t get a stores order straight without a list.” Faramir’s unusual vehemence only made his brother’s grin wider.
“Had a drink!” the captain admitted, glancing sidelong and gauging the reaction. The younger man smiled ruefully and shook his head. *Of course you did.*

“Relax! You are thinking too hard, as usual.” The leg shook faster as Faramir nervously ran his sweaty palms across the tops of his thighs. Boromir’s amusement began to trip over to concern. His brother, known for being dry after sparring matches or hikes halfway up Mindolluin, was sweating visibly. Now *this* was getting serious. Reaching into his tunic, he pulled out a small silver flask and silently offered it over.

Black hair waved as Faramir slowly shook his head. “That won’t help.” A long slow breath let out. “What time is it?”

Putting the flask away, Boromir settled for draping an arm across the tense shoulders and giving his brother a swift hug of reassurance. “A bell after the last time you asked. Why are you so worried about the time?”

“I don’t want to be late.” *You don’t want to disappoint Father, more like.* He gave the young man’s shoulders a little shake, willing him to settle. “I won’t let you be late! Relax!”

The line of worry only deepened. *Gods,* thought Boromir *it wasn’t like this for me. But then Anor shines out of my arse as far as Father is concerned. ‘Tis not fair.*

He looked over to the tense and worried face he knew so well and wished again that his attempts to pierce their father’s grief, to shine the light of reason on its dark and twisted heart, had been successful. All that had changed was Faramir, grown ever more reserved with each unkind word, until here he sat, fighting the very oath that would bind him to the father he both loved and averred. How unfair and how perverse it seemed that his brother with the gift for law and learning but no love for soldiering would be forced by this act to fight while he, with a gift for soldiering, no patience for diplomacy and even less for governance would be forced by fate to rule. *Not fair indeed.*

Faramir sighed and rested his head against his brother’s broad shoulder beside for a moment. It helped a bit, as it always did, but not enough it seemed for this auspicious day. He had checked his tunic twice and his boots twice more, fixed the unruly hair that had been wild from his restless night. Now all the remained was to memorize the oath. *Just for once I want him to be proud.*

A gentle knock came at the study door and two voices chorused “Come in”

Adrahil, the Prince of Dol Amroth entered with a flourish, his blue cape flowing and his grey eyes merry beneath the famous mane of snow white hair. “We made it, lads, let the party begin!”
Still tall and hale despite his 83 years, he smiled upon his eldest grandsons with pride, accepting gratefully with open arms the bows and hugs of welcome.

“Grandfather! You have come just in time, we were starting to worry a bit.”

A bit?! Boromir’s snort beside was faintly audible. Faramir kissed his grandfather’s cheek in greeting, surprised to find he had to stoop.

“Indeed dear boy, the winds beat hard against us across the bay, but we made double time to Harlond. I think your aunt would have taken an oar herself if she thought it would have made a difference.” They all chuckled. The determination of Ivriniel, his eldest daughter, was a thing of legend within the family.

Waving off offers of refreshment, Adrahil sat himself just a little stiffly in a chair beside the hearth, unlit in the unseasonable warmth. “We are all that pleased to be here for your oath-taking Fara… and on this day. Imagine. Did your father arrange it so?”

“No, Grandfather,” Boromir replied. “He picked the day to suit the captains and we realized after it was Faramir’s birthday.” The two young men exchanged a look that the Prince wisely chose to ignore.

“Only once do you come of age, so we have all the more celebrate this day.” Adrahil, beamed upon them, hoping the mood would catch. He could feel the tension in the room. “Leylin is just settling the children for a bit, and later we will all be at the hall. Your cousins are so excited we may have to tie them to their seats.” He paused a moment, shifting the package he had concealed within his cape. “Now, for the reason I have come.” What is a grandfather for, but to spoil the grandsons their parent tries to sternly guide?

From beneath his cloak the Prince drew a sword, sheathed within a scabbard of faded leather. Old and worn it was, but age could not erase the beauty of the workmanship, the tengwar stamped in silver, a ijlolite cut in trilliant upon the belt. He held it across both hands, presenting it as if in tribute.

“As is right, Ecthelion’s sword is yours Boromir, but that does not mean Fara, you should take your oath with any blade to hand.” The Prince hugged him hard. “Happy birthday, dear boy. Now you have something fine to pass on to your sons in due time.” Faramir’s eyes were wide with surprise and his cheeks were ruddy, as a flush of surprise and pleasure crept up his face. Adrahil nodded and smiled his encouragement as his grandson hesitantly reached out to grasp the scabbard.

“Grandfather..it is… beautiful.” Holding the scabbard in one hand, Faramir pulled lightly on the hilt
and the blade slid out with a sigh. Another stone was set within the pommel and a swan was engraved below the tang. Examining it closely he could see knicks upon the guard and stains upon the grip, attesting to long use. The blade was as bright and sharp as the morning light that flashed silver along its length.

“I do not know well its lineage” Adrahil admitted “but it is as old as the city, made in Nogrod we think like the other swords of our house. It last belonged to your great-uncle Aglamir.” Where has the time gone? he wondered, thinking of his dashing, footloose youngest brother, dead now these thirty years.

“But is there no one of his family to claim it?” asked Faramir, not wanting to deprive anyone of such a precious heirloom. He felt chagrined that he knew so little of his mother’s wider family. He had been too young to remember the tales she told to them at the fireside.

“Nay lad. For my brother the sea was his wife and mistress both. Well favoured he was to die within his bed of fever, despite the raids he led and pirates he put down. It would tickle him to know that a son of Finduillas’ has it now.”

Boromir examined closely the runes and the detail upon the scabbard, while beside him his brother swung the sword with practiced ease, testing its weight and balance. Finding he could not read the runes and wondering about the design he asked. “What is the stone, Grandfather? Do you know?”

“Indeed I do, do you not recognize it? It is the same as in my circlet. Ijolite it is, from the old worn mountains of Dor-En-Ernil. Mariners have long used it as a compass to guide their way at sea. It has different colours in the northern or southern skies and is a seeing stone, much prized within our house. I do not know if will guide you on the land Faramir, but it is a good talisman ne’er the less.”

The young man took back the proffered scabbard and slid the sword back in, examining the stones that shimmered sapphire and violet in the sun. Faramir hugged the Prince again, murmuring words of thanks. Looking back he caught his brother’s gaze. “If only the stones could help me see the words I need to speak. If I cannot get the oath out, the sword will be for naught!”

“How so?” Adrahil gazed intently upon his grandson. His words were clearly half in jest, but the sudden tension in the young man’s face was very real.

“He is having trouble with the order of the oath, Grandfather.” Boromir explained quietly. There he goes again. Happy distraction over, Faramir had begun to pace again.

“Truly?!” His grandson’s wit and scholastic abilities were well known, but as Adrahil regarded the
nervous young man he thought he knew the cause. To swear an oath before his stern and demanding son-in-law would discomfit anyone. For his grandson to do so knowing every imperfection would be criticized was harder still.

“You would not be the first esquire to need help upon this day! Has no one taught you the trick we use? All the Swan Knights learn it before their big day.” Both men shook their heads in puzzlement and so Adrahil rose and drew himself up to his full height. How could it be he had first said them nearly seventy years ago? “Speak before doing; come before need, peace before living. If you get that sequence all the rest comes easily.” A look of grateful happiness now graced both his grandson’s faces. He smiled, pleased to find at least in this he could help.

As the Prince took his leave he waved away their thanks. In his wake the anxious pacing began anew, but just perhaps with somewhat less agitation.

The Great Hall in Minas Tirith was alight with sun and happy sounds early that same afternoon as families, supporters, captains and recruits all gathered for the season’s solemn oath-taking. Parchments, papers, and hands were all pressed into service, those gathered fanning themselves in the already rising heat. The recruits stood loosely in a haze of nerves at the back of the hall, a dozen immaculate dress uniforms neatly pressed but already stained with damp, allowed the illusion it was due to warmth. The audience sat in rows of chairs before the Steward’s dais, while on either side the Captains stood as honour guard. There was still some time. The Steward, ever punctual, was not due for several candlemarks.

Faramir could not remember the last time his entire family had been together, much less in Minas Tirith, grateful again that the Prince had made the journey just for this day. Looking upon the entire row of seats taken up by his Dol Amroth relatives, he was amazed. The Prince, his aunt Ivriniel, Imrahil and Leylin all sat expectantly. His uncle, as if feeling his nephew’s gaze, turned around and winked.

The three youngest princes tried their best to behave, already threatened once by pain of removal. For Elphir and Erchirion, thirteen and ten, it was not so much a hardship, but for Amrothos, six, it was a trial. He darted out repeatedly as Leylin tried vainly to keep her son in place. Baby Lothiriel, just one, behaved perfectly and slept peacefully upon her mother’s lap.

The Princess gave Boromir a grateful smile as he broke ranks and scooped up his little cousin. Having effortlessly pinned the wriggling miscreant with one hand, the captain looked back to the line of recruits and saw a pale face. “Come see this.” he exclaimed with a sudden flash of inspiration.
Over his retreating back a childish tongue wagged at two older brothers. Boromir walked half way down the hall along the frieze of ancient kings, each visage as stern and aquiline as the last. He stopped below one distinctive statue, its hook nose and slighter height infamous amongst the tall and handsome scions of Numenor. Pointing to the lofty heights above, Boromir held a giggling Amrothos upside down. Elphir and Erchirion, unwilling to be left out, had gathered under the watchful eye of their father.

Aware he had an audience, their adored older cousin looked up. “Do you know which king this is?” he asked.

“Castamir the Usurper!” Erchirion chimed excitedly.

“Correct! Can you guess what Faramir and I did when we were your age?” Wide-eyed, the boys shook their heads solemnly.

“It was Yule and very cold and we had to play inside. I boosted Faramir up and he climbed to the top of the king.”

“Up there!?!” The three boys shivered with excitement, while their father looked up to the height with unease. *Up there?! Valar, don’t give them any ideas.*

“I had a rope.” added Faramir quietly, having joined them as his brother knew he would.

Trust his younger nephew to be precise on the details, thought Imrahil, relieved there had been some thought for safety if not for the priceless art. It seemed to him to epitomize how his nephews worked together. Boromir had the impetuous ideas and Faramir thought them through and put them into practice. No wonder their father considered it wise to assign them to different units.

“He put…” began Boromir. “We put…” corrected Faramir.

“a helmet and mistletoe upon King Castamir’s head.” His cousins burst into laughter at the thought and even Imrahil smiled. “The lords and ladies had a quite a surprise when they gathered for the evening service.” Across three dark, young heads the Steward’s sons grinned at each other, remembering the boys they were, face down upon their bunks and backsides raw. They had been helpless with laughter, both at their prank and the look on Lady Castamir’s face.
Catching a hurried gesture from the front, Boromir guided Amrothos back to his seat and took his place. *Mission accomplished,* he thought, looking back at the recruits and noting the smile upon his brother’s face yet lingered for a while. At last a trumpet sounded and their father entered.

The solemn service soon began and into the hushed silence each new recruit in turn walked up the aisle and knelt before the Steward, reciting the oath and receiving the Steward’s blessing.

Imrahil watched anxiously for a sign of welcome to light his brother-in-law’s face as his own son, the last to take the oath, walked steadily to the dais. How could he fail to glimpse the worry lines between Faramir’s eyes and the stiff set of his shoulders?

Leylin caught her husband’s glance sidelong and they both thought back three years before, when they suddenly had Faramir to stay, recovering from his broken wrist. The boy had arrived so unlike himself; sullen and withdrawn, barely speaking even to Imrahil himself. His sword arm injured, he could not write or train for months. At first it was natural to assume his mood was mere frustration. As time went on it seemed there was something else. Leylin quickly noticed that the letters arriving dutifully from his father went unread while Boromir’s were devoured in an instant.

“Do you think?” she had asked one evening as they sat together, all their charges put to bed. “Surely not,” he had replied, uncertain if he was reassuring his wife or his own self. Imrahil began to watch the boy more closely and he noted that Faramir was now wary in a way others his age were not. Something it seemed had made him grow up in hurry.

In truth, the Heir of Dol Amroth had never liked his brother-in-law but had managed a friendly civility for his sister’s sake. Knowing it must be hard to raise two sons alone he had offered many times to host the boys for longer periods, always to be rebuffed. Their styles of parenting, just like their personalities, were completely opposite, he and the Steward: one stern and demanding; the other indulgent but fair. This time, however, instinct told him to keep the boy close and so he had suggested that Faramir finish his training in Dol Amroth. He was surprised to find the offer accepted. In the two years that followed his nephew had become such a part of the family the boys soon forgot to call him cousin. Faramir clearly relished being in a loud and happy home, especially with Boromir gone so often from the City. In time his easy nature returned, if more reserved than before. They had missed him terribly when time came for him to return to Minas Tirith.

Faramir at last reached the Steward’s chair and knelt down, looking up into the stern and commanding face he knew so well. Denethor nodded slowly, waiting for his son to begin. The sword was pulled from its scabbard and the shining blade laid across his outstretched palms. As the young man placed his hands upon the hilt, he licked lips gone suddenly dry as the morning’s winds, and took a deep breath. Loud and steady, for the first time that day the words flowed freely from his tongue.
“Here do I swear fealty and service to Gondor, and to the Lord and Steward of the realm, to speak and to be silent, to do and to let be, to come and to go, in need or plenty, in peace or war, in living or dying, from this hour henceforth, until my lord release me, or death take me, or the world end. So say I, Faramir son of Denethor, of Gondor.”

Only his son before him could hear the faint rush of air as if the Steward had been holding his breath. As he had many times that afternoon the Lord looked upon the kneeling supplicant and raised his voice to carry in the hall.

“This I do hear, Denethor son of Ecthelion, Lord of Gondor, Steward of the High King. I will not forget it, nor fail to reward that which is given: fealty with love, valour with honour, oath-breaking with vengeance.’

He lifted back the sword to his son, and heard the hiss as it slid home in the scabbard. His hand was offered. Faramir closed his eyes and touched his lips to the great ring, its surface as cool as the one who wore it. To him it seemed it should have burned, despising in his heart the article and the gesture.

As he rose he felt his father’s hand upon his elbow and two pairs of eyes, one clear; the other stormy grey met. It felt almost painful to stand so close, as if the unspoken gulf between them became compressed.

”Make me proud, my son.” The kindest words that Denethor could find, they felt to Faramir both a benediction and a sentence. It is done. Duty would bind him now more surely than the battered love he felt.

“I will try Father.” came the low reply. Relief and resignation washed over him like a wave, so strong that for a moment he was unsure how long his legs could hold him up.

Applause rang out around the hall, now the last oath was heard and witnessed. As the captains came forward to meet their new recruits, Boromir clasped his brother’s shoulder first, thinking ‘protocol be damned’. As he turned away, he avoided the Steward’s gaze and returned his brother’s nod of thanks.

Faramir’s new captain was Eldacar, one of the canniest and more experienced of Gondor’s officers. Middle-aged, with greying fair hair and an ugly scar aside one eye, he walked over and shook his new lieutenant’s hand, offering his congratulations. A shorter, green-eyed, mountain-man of Nimrais, he was known to be spare with words and praise but scrupulously fair. His men adored him.
“Come down to the barrack in a day or so. We go to Anorien and the Druadan. Need to get you organized and soon.” A shrewd and practised gaze looked him up and down. “I have two other lieutenants, so you’ll help me until you know the lay of the land and the company. Won’t hurt to keep your eyes and ears open for a while.”

“Yes sir” came the quick response. “I will be happy to do whatever is needed.” Eldacar grunted his approval, pleased to find he didn’t have some lordling expecting to be issuing orders.

“Good lad,” The captain nodded. Eyeing Faramir for a moment, he tried and failed to reconcile the bright but reserved young man before him with the undisciplined youth the Steward had described. “Do not let him get away with anything.” had been his order. Well, well, he thought, Anorien was a long way off and reports would be slow in reaching Minas Tirith. The craggy face lightened for a minute and an eyebrow raised in query “Your brother told me that you play?”

“The feadan sir..”

“Good.” came the gruff answer. “Bring it along. The men are surely tired of my fiddle.” With a wink, he departed, leaving a surprised and hopeful Faramir to his Dol Amroth relatives, to be wrapped in many smiles and hugs.

Dinner that night was a noisy and happy affair, held just as the sunset drew streaks of pink and gold across Mindolluin’s upper slopes. Leylin and Ivriniel had conspired with the cook and housekeeper to hold the party in the garden, knowing that the guest of honour was happiest there; in the green and restful space that his mother too had loved.

A long table was laid for all the family and another to one side held presents. Faramir was last to arrive and shook his head in wonder at the sight of the family gathered around. The space seemed to sparkle with light and laughter: the many candles and torches scattered all around reflected off the silver and crystal that graced the table.

He had bowed to the older members of the family and accepted wishes from them all. Seated at the centre, Faramir was enchanted to have upon his lap a wide awake Lothiriel, whom he had only met once before. Babies and horses, reflected Boromir to himself, both seemed to find his brother’s quiet warmth reassuring.
Everyone seemed intent to get along. Denethor, Ivriniel, and Adrahil conducted a lively and long discussion about trade tariffs amongst the southern fiefs. Boromir and Imrahil compared the merits of various captains they had served under. Leylin expertly mediated a three-way argument amongst her sons, while describing to Faramir a new book she had recently acquired.

As the first of several courses were served, Erchirion eyed suspiciously a liver pate and asked if it was the same as in Dol Amroth, the birthday boy got to pick his favourite foods for dinner. It was Boromir who answered when the laughter died down. “No ‘Chirion the cook had to choose, with Faramir his favourite food is anything in reach.” They laughed again and he ducked in jest as the birthday boy reached and made to cuff him.

After the meal came the presents; the younger cousins only too happy to help in this. From his Aunt Rini came a book of his favourite Sindarin poems, printed upon oilcloth and bound in treated leather, made especially to weather a campaign. From his brother he received a new bow and quiver, the latter of black leather and stamped with the silver tree of Gondor. From the three young cousins he received a fine new bridle, bought on their own after a week of chores under Ivriniel’s direction.

He had already that afternoon received a present from his father and uncle and aunt. Blindfolded at their request, all three young boys had excitedly pulled him toward the stables, not realizing he could tell exactly where they were bound by the sound and scent.

There in a stall stood a tall but lithe Dol Amroth war stallion. Grey with dappled flanks, a darker mane and tail and deep dark eyes, he was of the line of mounts favoured by Adrahil’s Swan Knights. Boromir had whistled, exclaiming at his beauty, but was the first to laugh when Elphir whispered to Faramir “Grandfather said you could have a gray because you aren’t as big as cousin Boromir.”

“His name is Mithros” Erchirion added proudly, and Faramir nodded, patting the small, proud head and murmuring low in Sindarin, as the great animal trembled slightly under his unfamiliar touch. The Prince advised his grandson to give Mithros time to adjust before taking him out to ride and train. “He had the hardest crossing of us all” he explained. “Mind you give him some days yet to get his land legs back.” Overwhelmed by the generous gift, he had hugged Imrahil and Leylin tightly. His father had offered his hand to shake.

Now in the twilight, surrounded by the happy noise of the whole family, Faramir realized this was what he missed most about his mother’s childhood home. Not the sound of the sea or the view but the laughter and teasing and easy banter. Not for the first time he regretted turning down Grandfather’s offer to commission as a Swan Knight. But really that had been only a fantasy. His father would never have allowed it. With a heartfelt sigh of happiness, he settled back to enjoy the precious evening while it lasted.
The White Kine in the third circle was a favourite haunt of the Steward’s young heir and his first choice of destination late that starlight night, the new lieutenant in tow. As they entered, Geran the barkeep nodded a solemn greeting, and for a moment inclined his head in question. The Captain shook his head just slightly. At the Kine they made no fuss, not for the heir of the Steward, an outland merchant, or the local cutpurse. That was in truth its attraction, everyone kept themself to themself. All that mattered was to keep ones peace, ignore ones neighbour and tip Nell heartily when she brought the drinks.

As they grabbed an empty table by the window, Faramir looked around. The ceiling was low and its beams were covered in nicks from knives and the smoke of years. The seats felt as worn as the flagstones, polished smooth by generations of serious drinkers. The room was dim, the few windows set deep and the white stone was a dusky grey, smoke and shoulders having stained the walls. The Kine was not noted for its ambiance, but it was known for its ale, which was not watered, and its wine, which was even better.

The low hum of conversation all about suddenly stilled in anticipation, as a paneled door Faramir had not noticed opened in the wall beside the bar. The White Kine was also famous for its gaming. Not officially famous of course, being against the City laws, but well known amongst the serious gamblers none the less. Light and laughter spilled out from a back room beyond and an expectant pause arose. Nearby a knot of men stood and were escorted through to the tables. As he watched their procession, Boromir’s fingers fairly itched to get in the game. Not tonight, he thought. Tonight was for serious drinking.

The buxom, fair-haired lady of the house put down a pair overflowing tankards with a wink. “Young lord, good to see you back. Your guest is?” Nell would not normally ask but Faramir was just of age and to his chagrin looked younger still. Geran was very careful to have an outward sense of propriety. It would not do to have the Tower Guard feel the need to investigate.

“My brother Faramir, seventeen today, Nell.” Boromir quietly introduced them. The barmaid appraised the young man with a practised eye for subterfuge, noting the resemblance and the uniform. He would do. “Welcome to the White Kine, my lord.” Faramir murmured his thanks, surprised to find himself enjoying the sense of freedom. A freedom that came with responsibility he realized: there now being more establishments from which he could carry his brother home.

Boromir eyed the foaming head with relish and raised the tankard in a toast. ”Happy birthday little brother.” He drank and gave a satisfied sigh. ”Aah now that is the stuff. What do you think?” Faramir sampled his own, and with an appreciative look sampled some more. ”This really good.“

“Best in the City” Boromir agreed, quaffing half the tankard in one go. “Drink up! You said you would keep up tonight. My turn to escort you home, tonight of all nights.”

Faramir, shook his head and eyed his brother’s cup warily. *I’ll never keep up if he keeps going like
this. Contrary to Boromir’s oft-repeated impression, Faramir did not dislike drinking, he simply
found it pointless to drink too fast or too much. Neither made any difference to the final effect as far
as he could tell, inexplicably mostly sober at the end of the night no matter what he did. Boromir
seemed to think that if he really set his mind to it the outcome would be different. Rather reluctantly
he had agreed for once to try.

They talked long that evening of the day and all its enjoyments, skirting around the serious, knowing
that time spent together would be all the more precious very soon. When Boromir had refilled their
tankards from a new pitcher for a second time, he judged the moment right. Leaning forward, resting
his chin upon one solid fist, he gazed steadily and seriously across the table. ‘Have you done yet
what I suggested?’ he asked pointedly.

The younger man could not help the groan that escaped his lips, nor the embarrassed flush that crept
up his face. Sitting deeper back within his chair, he examined the beam overhead for a moment and
waited out the intemperate response upon his lips. He knew his brother meant well, but at times he
could be as single-minded as the tavern’s namesake. “Boromir, stop pushing.” The unusually frigid
tone would have stopped most people in their tracks, let alone the flinty look. In equal measures
obstinate and oblivious, his older brother was undeterred.

“I can tell by your face you haven’t. Brother mine, this is serious. I have told you how the
conversations will go. You will be blooded in battle soon and after the talk will turn to other things.
First blood always leads to talk of other firsts. You can’t lie worth an Orc’s arse. A lieutenant who
is a virgin, and hardly drinks. They will make mincemeat of you in the ranks.”

“Keep your voice down!” The flush intensified, as did the look of annoyance. Faramir scanned the
room. Their fellow patrons were thankfully busy with their drinks. He really is not going to leave this
alone, he thought with growing dismay.

“I still don’t get why you walked out on that girl I bought you last year.” Boromir lowered his voice,
his expression one of genuine puzzlement. “The girls at the Mallos Blossom are experienced and
discreet. They will do anything.”

The last thing Faramir wanted was to be reminded of that unhappy night, the events and the
excruciating discussion with his brother afterward. Anger faded but the clear grey eyes remained
troubled. “I am not like you. Bedding just any girl that breathes does not interest me.”

“They need to do more than breathe, little brother.” Boromir’s wicked smile stilled at the dirty look
he received. Surprised to find his tankard empty again, he reached and refilled both their cups. This
time Faramir’s had been hardly touched. “Has there been no serving maid in the kitchens who struck
your fancy?”
“You know Father would flay me if word got back. There is no point in even trying.” Allowing his brother had a point, Boromir regarded him closely for a moment.

“You don’t fancy men do you?”

“Boromir!” The look on his brother’s face was priceless. Equal parts shock, offence, and exasperation. Good, he thought, chuckling at the reaction. Maybe it would goad him into action. “No I thought not. Then for the love of all that is holy, what is the problem?”

I don’t know! Faramir picked up his tankard and drained it, hoping for once that oblivion would lie at the bottom of the cup. Holding it for a moment, he thought of what to say. He means well but does not realize I lie better than he thinks when pressed. Looking at the expectant face before him, he cleared his throat. “I just need more time to find the right girl in the right house. You need to leave me be to sort it out myself.”

Seemingly satisfied with the response, a grin spread across the Captain’s face. He sat back and raised his tankard in salute. “Good. Now we’ve settled that problem, let’s work on your tolerance for drink. Order another round! See if you can keep up this time!”

Faramir awoke the next morning at the third bell after sunrise fully expecting to be hungover. As his senses adjusted to the half light, he heard the sound of the palace stirring from without the hall. Lying still upon his bed, the sheets tossed and twisted around him, he carefully took stock. His mouth was certainly dry and his limbs felt tired, but that could simply be the lack of sleep. What time had they returned? He remembered a cock crowing as they walked back up through the quiet City. When he found his bed at last, sleep had been long coming, agonized as he was about his brother’s advice.

He turned his head experimentally against the pillow. It was fine, no headache at all. He groaned. How many pitchers had they gone through? How many had he had himself? Two, he thought, and felt nothing at all. He really didn’t understand it. Another night of partying and he was stone cold sober. It was getting tiresome.

Rising quickly before his courage failed him, Faramir washed away the smell of stale ale and hearth smoke and dressed in a fresh tunic and breeches. Next he pulled on his boots, gave them a swipe with a cloth and dragged a comb through his hair. It wouldn’t do to look unkempt this morning, determined as he was to launch the plan devised the night before. As he headed out into the palace
halls, he paused and listened at Boromir’s door nearby. A faint sound of snoring could be heard, cresting and falling in time to his brother’s deep breathing. Good. He would sleep for hours more, the coast was clear.

Grabbing a bite of breakfast from the kitchen he went out into the city, nervous but resolute as he walked quickly down, thinking once again of their conversation at the Kine. The issue was making him crazy and he too wanted it settled before they mustered out. It seemed he had to find a willing partner who wasn’t in the Steward’s palace and wasn’t from the houses. A tall order, and one that needed discretion to orchestrate.

He stopped in the 6th circle before the elegant townhouse of the Duchess of Lossarnach and hesitantly knocked. They knew each other well, having met countless times at council meetings, festivals and dinners. Famous for her discretion about her reputedly numerous indiscretions, his instinct said the duchess could be trusted and might be sympathetic. She was, in truth, one of the few adults in the City Faramir felt he could really talk to. His brother just didn’t seem to understand and his uncle was leaving soon. The idea of confiding in his father didn’t bear considering.

The door was answered by an elderly gentleman in the formal livery of Lebenin. Having ascertained that the Duchess was home he was shown in and led to a bright and colourful salon, the very antithesis of the dark and neglected rooms of the Steward’s palace.

After several minutes of anxious waiting on Faramir’s part, Amerith, the Lady of Lossarnach and Lebinin, strode gracefully into the room. She was tall and elegant, with auburn hair and green eyes, dressed as always at the height of fashion. Hers was a sad tale, he knew. Married at sixteen and widowed by twenty, a dozen years later she had still not remarried after her young husband had been killed in battle. Heir to both Lossarnach in her own right and the rich fields of Lebenin through her marriage, she had not been content to sit and pine. The wealthiest noble in Gondor after the Prince of Dol Amroth, she used her position and power on Council to both aid and influence his father. He knew the Steward was by turns both pleased and frustrated at her efforts.

The lady was most surprised, but not displeased, to find the handsome young second son of the Steward in her salon. Green eyes examined him apprisingly, as a captain would a new recruit. Tall he had always been but now the young man had filled out quite a bit, lean muscle added to his narrow frame after months of training. With his black hair falling in waves down to his shoulders and his clear grey eyes she thought he looked even more noticeably like his mother. He also, she noted curiously, looked extremely nervous.

With pleasure she accepted the impeccably correct bow and friendly peck upon her cheek. “Lord Faramir, welcome. Please take a seat.” She gestured to a nearby couch, and seated herself, her skirts arrayed around in regal precision, In the months since they had seen each other last he had grown so much she found she had to look up to him as he sat perched hesitantly on the edge of a green and gold settle. “To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit? Your father is well?” she asked, opening with the formalities.
“Indeed, he is, Lady Amerith, as always.” The reply was steady, belying the faint tremor in his long fingers where they lay against the brocade seat.

“And your brother? I hear his captaincy is a great success.” She smiled broadly for his benefit but inwardly sighed mightily, remembering the twittering girls swooning over Boromir at the last ball. Predictably and tediously the heir's marriage prospects were the dominant conversation topic this season. Really anyone with a half a brain could see the Steward’s heir was not the least bit interested in the ladies of the court. Looking on the fair and sensitive face before her, she thought it might only be a season or two before it was Faramir’s turn to be hunted.

“Yes, my Lady, he is doing well.” The response was rather spare and conventional. Although quiet and reserved in a group, she had never found Faramir to lack in conversation, particularly one on one. She eyed the young man thoughtfully, wondering at the reason for his reticence.

“Are you here on an errand for your father?” Could that explain it? Something Denethor didn’t want to do or say himself? That would be like the man, she knew, sending others out to do the dirty work.

The object of her scrutiny shook his head and had to swallow hard to get the words out. “No lady. I….I have a personal problem that I thought perhaps you might advise on.”

Surprised, the duchess sat back with a quiet rustle of silk, stifling a smile. So that was it. Today appears to be rather more interesting than I expected. She quite liked to be surprised. Noticing his gaze strayed repeatedly to her servant, she thought she should take pity upon her guest, now plucking unconsciously at the trim on his cuff.

“May I offer you some refreshment?” Beckoning the older man forward, she thought quickly of what the young man might like. “Willen, please bring us some cider and the last of the honeycakes.”

“Right away, my lady.” The gentleman glided away soundlessly and Amerith turned back. Smoothing an invisible crease in her gown, she gave Faramir a moment to collect himself. When it seemed the set of his shoulders had relaxed a fraction, she gestured for him to begin again.

“You know I will join the army in some weeks for my first campaign?” The clear grey eyes at last met hers.

“Congratulations. I have heard you will be under Eldacar. He is a fine officer, the men seem to
respect and like him well” Seeing Faramir’s nod, she tested the waters a little. “You are… happy about the commission are you not?” She was well aware of the dysfunction in the Steward’s family. Little that passed within the City or the kingdom escaped Amerith’s notice or her network.

Now settled with a glass of cider, Faramir fidgeted, turning the glass within his hands and trying to think of what to say. The duchess waited patiently, amused to recognize Denethor’s habit when he too was thinking hard.

“Yes…It is just, my brother is concerned because of my, umm, status.” A flush began to creep up his cheeks. “He thinks it would be ill advised to enter the ranks inexperienced.” The final words game out in a strangled rush, as if the speed might lessen the discomfort.

Auburn eyebrows raised in surprise. This was unusual. Most young men of his age at court had long past discovered the delights of the female sex. “And you thought I could help advise you on this…problem?”

“Yes my Lady…” The embarrassed flush now reached the tips of his ears and headed to his hairline.

“Amerith, please. Surely we are well past titles today?” How unfortunate that this gentle young man was caught between two extremes; a brash brother as different from him as chalk and cheese, and a cold, distracted, demanding father. Was it any wonder that they were the ones having this rather awkward conversation?

“Amerith, Father would flog me if I sought someone in the palace.” It seemed hardly possible but his cheeks flamed all the redder. The cup twirled but did not shake. “I thought…I thought you might know how I could meet a girl from another family, that might be interested.” Amerith bit back a laugh. This was too absurd. Did he realize what he was asking? She looked at the fair face lined with worry and the agonized grey eyes. Yes it seemed so, and although she did not doubt that there were girls who would be very interested in the second son of the Steward, it seemed quite odd that he would think it the obvious solution.

“And what about the ladies of the houses?” she asked. “That is where most young men of your position go. Surely that is simpler?”

“I know,” he admitted quietly. “I have tried.” The dark head dipped down again. Surely no glass in the City had been examined so minutely. “It is not that I’m not interested…but I just… can’t.” Embarrassment and misery were plain upon his face.
Not without sympathy, she offered the best advice she knew.

“Faramir, you are young, you are over thinking this. This anxiety sets up in a young man’s mind. That is usually the problem, not the particular girl. Go down to one of the better houses and drink a little more. You will be less anxious and your problem will settle itself quite naturally.”

Instead of helping, she had seemingly touched a nerve.

He bolted up and turned away, a stricken look upon his face. “That won’t help, I can’t seem to get drunk either!” Walking quickly to the door, Faramir paused on the threshold, turning back to meet her gaze as an anxious hand rubbed the back of his neck in misery. How mistaken his plan had been. “I am sorry Amerith, I am making a mess of this. My apologies for disturbing you.”

Startled by the intensity of emotion upon his face, she rose and meant to stop him going, but already his back was turned, heading for the hallway.

Unable to get drunk, his body burning every source of energy like wildfire. Unable to bed the ladies of the houses. Realization dawned. An image flashed briefly in her mind. Another young and virgin, miserable, grey-eyed son of Numenor. This time upon their wedding night. Oh Taras. Of course, she thought, he is his father’s son in this. He has the gift of Hurin.

“Faramir” quickly she sent out the thought, unsure what training he would have had.

He stopped short and whirled around, a look of shocked surprise upon his face. No, she was not wrong.

“Amerith, I...I heard you?...” He hardly knew what to say, utterly startled by the intrusion.

“Yes, yes you did Faramir. As you can tell, the House of Hurin is not the only noble house of ancient lineage to preserve the blood of Westernesse. I have the gift as well, as did my husband. Some few of us do.” She looked up into the wide grey eyes and spoke gently.

“Did you never think that this was the root of your problem? Of course you cannot bed a head-blind woman who does not love you. No man with the gift can. It is why your own father married late, why he waited twenty years until he found your mother.”
Total bewilderment met her statement. “What is head-blind?” he asked.

It was Amerith’s turn to be shocked. *Was it possible he had not been taught?* “Your father has spoken to you about your gift has he not? You have been trained to shield yourself?”

He shook his head in confusion. “No. It was my mother who told me a little of the dreams. Sometimes I hear or see things, but I have never thought it was something to direct, just a type of waking dream.” Faramir bit his lip, thinking suddenly of the conversation with Mithrandir that he would never divulge. *He said I read him too, is this what he meant?*

Amerith was stunned.  *Sweet merciful Yavanne, he has no idea.* A sickening thought followed and a sliver of fear touched her heart. *They are sending him off to fight, untrained and unguarded.* Reaching out, she placed a hand upon his arm and led him over to a seat. As they both sat down, she sought for words of explanation.

“Head-blind is an old term for those who cannot see into others hearts and minds, as we do. Faramir your father knows all about this, he himself has been trained. Your grandfather lacked the gift, it does sometimes skip generations, but he understood the need. I believe he sent your father to Lorien to be tutored as a boy.”

“Father? He has never said. I didn’t know.” A flicker of pain moved behind his eyes. “We talk very little these days.”

The revelation had clearly shocked him, his paleness all the more stark after the flush he had carried some minutes before. She rose and walked over to an elaborately inlaid table, poured a large glass of brandy for each of them. Holding out the glass she ordered him “Drink it all, very fast and it just might work a little.”

He considered the glass for a moment and then did as bidden, throwing most of it back, choking as the fiery liquid burned its way down. After a moment he was surprised to find he felt a little steadier. “This is very good.”

“It should be,” she said matter of factly. “I won it off your uncle in a card game.” A ghost of a smile lit his features and a bit of colour returned to his cheeks.

*That is better.* Taking several sips of her own, she turned back to the matter at hand. “Faramir, you
have an ability to read other men’s minds, to see and speak in a different way. It is a skill that needs training, both in the sending and receiving. Most important is to know how to shield yourself. There are also manners and rules, codes of conduct as go along with any skill. You do not just walk into another person’s mind unannounced. In point of fact what I just did amongst the Eldar would be considered the height of rudeness, if one did not know the other person had the gift.” She smiled ruefully. “I do apologize, Faramir, but I needed to know.”

Pursing her lips in concentration for a moment, she made a quick decision. “When do you ship out?”

“In two weeks. Why?”

“Well then, young Dunadan, you came looking for an education and you shall have it, although not what you had thought. I think I will need to clear my schedule. Two weeks will have to suffice for the basics. As for your other goal, I expect that will sort itself after we have dealt with your needed education.” And, she thought silently to herself after I have dealt with your father.

When the Lady of Lossarnach was admitted that very eve to the Steward of Gondor’s study, a single glance was all it took for her to know this was bound to be an unpleasant encounter. Denethor, stern and unyielding at the best of times, now carried a look of strain about his eyes and mouth that bespoke a bone deep fatigue. She wondered, yet again, what it was he did for the hours he spent alone in the tower of his forefather? It did not seem to help his temper or his demeanor.

The Steward looked up wearily. The duchess was the last person he felt minded to engage after a long and tiring evening gathering knowledge. He would have to be on his toes. “My Lady, this is an unusual hour. Can our business not wait until the morrow? Or have you learned of something amiss that needs my attention now?”

“Not with kingdom, my Lord Steward.” Tightly shielded, only her gaze and her voice belied some of anger she was feeling. “Can you guess how I spent my morning? “ There was just a touch of acid in her tone.

“Indeed not my lady, you have so many pastimes, I am long past count.” Undeterred by his impatience at the intrusion, her sense of urgency and alarm would not let the matter rest.
“Your younger son was in my salon.”

Grey eyes widened at this news. His mouth twisted, the scorn seemed automatic. “So that is where the boy got too. Boromir was looking for him.” His tone and expression only served to irk her more.

“Denethor do you ever actually speak to your son? How is it that he is come of age and you have not talked to him of his gift? And more importantly its implications. I cannot believe you haven’t recognized it. The poor boy has had to discover for himself how it can unman him.”

“Has he indeed?” A black eyebrow raised, his face showed no sympathy at all. “How do you know this, Amerith? Has Faramir become the latest toy you dally with in your quest to forget Taras? They seem to be getting younger.”

The mental slap rang in his skull, stinging just as surely as if she had been close enough to hand to reach him. Stunned by its force, in its wake the tension drained out of him like water. Fatigue had made him careless. He dared not push her too far. “That was uncivil of me.” he murmured by way of apology.

“Indeed it was and speaks volumes about what you think of your own son.” Green eyes flashed but the apology was accepted. “No he is not my toy, and he is assuredly your responsibility. It is unconscionable what you are doing by your negligence. Some day soon he will be on a field of battle, one filled with the agonies of dying, stricken, terrified men and he has not been taught to shield!?”

The Steward at least had the grace to look abashed. “He has some natural shields., Amerith…he can shield from me at times.” She gave him a long and level stare…And what does that say about you, she thought, that he naturally blocks out the one he should love the most?

‘Oh and you think that sufficient to stand up on a field of war? Already the crossings are thick with Southron parties, Orc raids grow in number every day.” They both knew the details in the dispatches, the likelihood of battle soon. “I will not stand by and let another young man suffer as Taras did. You were his captain Denethor. You saw what it did to him. It nearly broke his reason. At least his family could claim true ignorance as their excuse. Would you not lift a finger to spare your own son that torment?”

“That is why I am sending him to Druadan” said Denethor mildly. “I am not a monster, Amerith whatever you might think.”
“No, not yet, but you are getting perilously close through sheer neglect.” Two pairs of grey and angered eyes spit fire at each other for a moment. The Steward was the first to look away.

“I seems I must do what you cannot and train him now before he leaves. It will have to suffice. But in exchange you will accept my one demand.”

“Which is?”

“Do for him what your father did for you when he found you had the gift. Give him the freedom to choose a woman he loves to marry and the time to wait until it happens.”

Denethor waved a hand in acquiescence. “Granted. Boromir is the heir. The greatest advantage to gain lies in alliance with him. Soon it will matter little. I am close to having arranged a marriage for him.”

The duchess was startled by the news. “Does he know?” From the look in his father’s eyes, she could tell the young captain did not.

Amerith shook her head. Was he really so blind to both his sons? “Denethor, you spend so much time in thought upon the kingdom you miss what is under your nose. Boromir will not thank you for not consulting him on this.” Already set upon the road, she chose to continue whatever the effect. “Have you not noticed that he drinks too much? Have you never stopped to wonder what it is that he does not want, what it is he seeks to escape while he can? Be careful lest your constant demands overweigh what even his great heart can give.”

Fury fairly crackled in the air. “How dare you? Lady it seems I have allowed you overmuch liberty, despite our long association. I am doing all I can every moment of the day to sustain Gondor, though I have no mother for my sons and no wife to stand beside me. Do not criticize that which you do not understand.”

Too late Denethor realized what he had said. Amerith had gone very pale. When she spoke it was if her words turned to frost upon the air.

“Lord Steward you are not the only person in this kingdom to have lost your spouse untimely. At the least you are fortunate to have something of her left. You have two beautiful and well-grown sons, both as much of her as you. I have nothing. Nothing but my memories and his estates to run. Think on that, as you swim in your selfish, self-indulgent grief. You are close to squandering what you
have.” She turned on her heel and strode from the room without his leave, wishing the truth for once would be heard by one usually too proud to hear it.

The Steward shook out his tired shoulders and bent again to his ever present work. For some long minutes he did not concentrate on the task before him, his gaze returned again and again to the door the duchess had departed through.

The short and swarthy Southron man in stained and ragged cloak stood quietly in the shadows, happy to be ignored for the moment, as a tempest of fury swirled around the tower room. Saruman was not pleased with his captain’s report. The Uruk party had failed again to capture their prize and the wizard was getting impatient.

“What does one yellow-hair matter over another, master? The black and dirty Uruk was confused. “Master said ‘bring me the yellow-hair alive’. I have brought two, and they are alive. Will they not do?” Silently he hoped they were still alive. They had been when he had left. The troop was hungry, but perhaps not that hungry quite as yet.

“No they will not” the wizard snapped. “I need the one I asked for.” Realizing further discussion with this dim-witted first breed was pointless, he thought carefully for a moment. “Are they whole?” The captain grunted his assent. “Give them to the breeding pits. I have no other need for them.” The Uruk captain grovelled at the show of mercy. He knew it had been close. “Get out.” Weak-kneed with relief he scuttled out.

Saruman beckoned forward to the spy, it was his turn. In his low and rasping speech he described much of what he’d seen in his months upon the road. Doings of the Shire and Bree, the northern roads, were all carefully relayed. He had an excellent memory, such was his worth to this chancy and uncertain master.

When he turned to what to him was a mere curiosity, the wizard sat up in startlement, his gaze intent and asking for every detail. The birthday party for the Baggins had been a lavish affair, many many guests and presents, the food and drink had freely flowed. He described the finale of the old man’s fireworks, a large red-gold dragon flying out of a mountain, breathing fire and circling over the Hobbits’ heads. He described the Baggin’s speech, “I like less than half of you half as well as you deserve.” and the bewildered looks upon the guests as he said goodbye and promptly vanished. The wizard thoughtfully stroked his beard as he handed a large purse across, well pleased with the report.

Saruman, once alone again with just his plots, thought back to his council with the Steward the day before. His son’s were grown to manhood, both now sent out to fight. He did not yet know for certain what tool the hobbit had, but he had vanished. And Mithrandir it seemed had ages of time to spend with the little people. Why? He is not addled, he not yet Radagast, the wizard thought. There could only be one reason that made sense. A finger of fear twined with desire and snaked up his spine. The Ring. It was the time. It was time to take another pawn.
Chapter End Notes

a/n: The line of Bilbo's speech is from "The Fellowship of the Ring" by J.R.R. Tolkien and his is ...etc. etc. Thanks to Borys for discussion on matters military and thank you to Annafan for encouragement
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

In which the ruk is employed, play opens up and the black bishop takes a pawn

T.A. 3001

The Captain slowly ran the back of his hand across his brow to mop the sweat that threatened once again to drip into his eyes. *Valar*, thought Eldacar, his hauberk was hotter than the pits of Mordor. The hottest Uruin in half an age; the crops lay desiccated and browning in the fields; the creeks drying up it seemed before their very eyes. He shook his head. Here they were labouring in full armor. *We don't need to be in Far Harad to roast.*

He and his lieutenants rode side by side down the Great West Road as they lead the company back to Sir Govad and their billets. Scanning the country as they passed, they could see the smallholders taking crops off the fields, hurrying before what little had grown withered in the heat. This was the time the folk should be gathering berries; instead the fruit lay upon the canes to be plundered by the waiting birds. He could see them wheeling about, intent upon the chaff left beside as well.

To add to the farmers' misery reports had come from outlying villages of missing livestock and damaged fences. What they found that day had been frustrating and inconclusive. The losses *could* be due to Orcs grabbing food wherever they could, or at the outside wargs. Despite their efforts they found little evidence of an encampment or tracks. *If it is Orcs he mused these maggots are unusually good at hiding.*

Turing in the saddle, Eldacar eyed the column of mounted men who trailed behind, grumpy and hot. Man and beast alike were suffering, they had spent a long and sweltering day to no good result. He could hear both men and horses panting, but for the most part they were a quiet parade, the men saving their breath. Just as he turned back his keen hearing caught a phrase: *Nanny duty.* Listening closely he picked out Derhan's voice. It was the third time in as many days he had heard that very complaint.

Glancing sidelong at the object of Derhan's derision, the Captain considered the puzzle of his new lieutenant, riding beside and seemingly untroubled by the heat. The newest blood in the unit always put up with more than their fair share of ribbing, but with Faramir the taunting had been rife. This was puzzling. On the face of things he was a good fit for their troop, men drawn mostly from far Blackfoot Vale. They wouldn't tolerate a puffed-up lordling and Faramir certainly didn't flaunt his status. In fact, quite the opposite: his clothes were as worn as the others, his tack was just as basic. He worked hard and didn't curry favour, kept his obviously keen wits about him at all times. As the lad had got to know them even a sense of humour had emerged: well-aimed, witty comebacks delivered with one eyebrow raised and a half-smile. Only his Dol Amroth mount and his sword betrayed his noble blood.

Simple psychology told Eldacar much of the gibing had to do with Faramir's basically unflappable nature, forged at court and under his father's demanding gaze. The men had to work hard to get him to react and so work hard they did. But of late he had wondered if some of the commentary didn't root in most soldiers' basically superstitious natures. Faramir *knew* things: things another man wouldn't or shouldn't. At times it felt as if he practically read one's thoughts. Sometimes he seemed to sense events before they actually happened. This last came most often after he had had one of his now infamous dreams, waking half the hall with his cries. It made the men twitchy. They did not like
what they did not understand.

For Eldacar, raised to believe implicitly in Nimrais' ghostly legions, this was not a stretch. If his lieutenant became definite on the oddest things, things that later proved to spare them casualties or effort, who was he to question the source of the young man's knowledge? If Faramir had a bad feeling, which if truth be told was not that often, his captain by experience listened and acted accordingly.

He was thankful that for most of the men acceptance of the young man's strange skills had come not some days past. Loran, thrown from his horse when it stepped into a critter hole, had lain mute and pained that night, jaw and ribs broken. Unknown by their leech, a rib had punctured his lung and over the hours it had slowly collapsed under the weight of seeping air. The desperate man had awoken unable to breathe or cry out, panicked and suffocating. Faramir, sensing something amiss, had roused the healer and held the gasping man up until help arrived. Now the grumbling had mostly stopped, all except Derhan of course, the troop's perennial trouble maker. By black Erech, he thought I will have that idiot's tongue out. Eldacar had had enough.

'Derhan, fall up!' the Captain barked, urging his bay stallion forward with a light touch upon his barrel. As the younger man joined him, he shifted one leg back, the signal to canter. They took off, thundering up the road. Eldacar made Derhan ride until the young man looked fit to drop. As they pulled up, both horses blew hard and he patted Sirian in apology. Green eyes flashed and grabbed his private's attention.

"Enough" Eldacar growled, looking on the younger man with ill-concealed contempt. The private knew better than to speak, sitting silently to attention as sweat dripped off his nose. "We are here for a job. You want more action and don't like the heat I'll get you shifted to Ithilien. You can freeze your arse off in a cave this winter, seeing as you're too sour to have man or beast help warm you. But you'll have action. Want the transfer?" Eldacar raised a bushy eyebrow in query. The scent of horse and hay rose all around them as the air shimmered with the heat.

"No sir." Drops of sweat flew sideways as Derhan quickly shook his head.

"I thought not. Then shut yer gob. One of these days it could be your sorry hide he saves."

This impressively long speech from their unusually loquacious captain worked. There were no more comments as they wended their way home.

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Once back in the town and at the barracks there was good news: the letter mule had arrived. Being his job to hand out the bounty, Eldacar knew full well who got correspondance. He, of course, had his biweekly letter from the Steward and tossed it aside to consider later when his temper improved. The Steward's son, by contrast, had typically none from his father but did have one the seal of Lossarnach and, unexpectedly, another from his brother.

One by one the Captain handed out the letters to men who had just dunked their heads in the water barrel beside the stables, mounts seen to first. Most trailed into the nearby inn for a pint and a chance to tear open their news. Faramir, sitting down with the other lieutenants and totally focused on his two letters to read, smiled politely at the bar maid who served his ale. He was utterly oblivious to her pout and jutting hip. Nearby a knot of men noticed the girl if he did not. Derhan, still smarting, could not resist some ribbing. The Captain was out of earshot.

"Must be a fancy boy. Wouldn't know what to do with his dick if Yavana herself descended." Only one or two quiet snickers round the table met this latest sally.
"Naw." replied Damrod, growing tired of the man's malcontent. "Got to keep himself clean don't he? Won't do bringing the pox back to the palace." The lieutenant sensed their gaze upon him and looked up, unruffled by the attention. Quickly the table found their tankards very interesting.

"Doesn't seem to stop his brother." The men laughed out loud at that. Boromir's exploits were of course a thing of legend.

"Aye" Anborn took a noisy pull on his pint. The newest private in the troop, he was sympathetic to Faramir's plight, which matched his own. "But that one's blessed with the Valar's own luck. Besides, what does the lieutenant need with a scrawny wench when he's got a duchess?"

"'E never…” Four pairs of wide eyes looked on him in disbelief. The private elaborated, enjoying for once his attentive audience.

"Not stupid he is. Older women know what their doing. He gets them letters on fancy paper regular. Sometimes more 'an one. I know the seal of Lossarnach, it's my home. Mark me, he's the Duchess's latest favourite." A man whistled low and there were nods all around. It seemed entirely plausible. With new found, but grudging, respect for the young lieutenant they returned to their drinks and talk of other matters.

Faramir, unaware that an enduring rumour had been born that very minute, had put aside Amerith's letter and opened the one from Boromir. It was unusually thick. He scanned the hastily scrawled pages, words uneven as if written on a rough surface. Even he had to squint hard at the looping letters in parts; his brother's handwriting, unlike his own elegant script, was atrocious.

The first few pages contained his brother's customary terse responses to Faramir's previous letter. It was only once family news from Dol Amroth had been relayed that Boromir revealed the real reason for having written. Faramir read it with growing dismay.

Well brother mine..it has happened at last. I always thought it would be something Father did to you that would make me lose control. I find myself shocked that it was something he has done to me.

I was called back to Minas Tirith 3 weeks past and he met me in the evening in his study.

Lord Anfalas was already there and they seemed quite pleased about some negotiation. I was utterly shocked by Father's next words. He turned to me and said I was to greet my future father. No word, no warning or consultation. I felt gut riven.

I can scarcely credit it even now. He has sold my life and happiness to this man in exchange for a promise of money and land and 1000 troops. He has done it with no thought for myself or I presume the slip of a girl involved. She is fourteen. A child.

I do not know how I kept myself from challenging him there and then. I stood mute, while they discussed contracts and details, not listening to what was said. I could tell from the Lord's expression he was surprised to find me so surprised, but he yapped on about my meeting her when next I was back from patrol. Ysabet is her name. My future wife. Gods Fara, just the word makes me sick to write it now.

Of course when Lord Anfalas left we quarrelled bitterly. Nothing I said could change his mind: that I was too busy with the company to look after a wife; that I did not wish to marry someone I had not chosen; that I did not wish to marry; that you could carry on our House if I did not. You can imagine how he reacted to that last.
Finally, I lost my temper and flat out told him no. That he could take the girl and marry her himself if he wanted to bind Anfalas even tighter to Gondor. At that his face twisted with a rage I only remember once before. He raised his hand to strike me but I caught it and when I shoved his arm away I was so angry I gripped too hard. I know I hurt him and at that moment I was so miserable I could have cared less.

He would not listen, raging and shouting about my duty and my fealty. Once I would have said he thought of Gondor first, mother second but us third. Now I am not so sure he thinks of us at all. We are merely pawns in the war he needs to win. The father I knew would have never done this; not this way, so callously.

He ordered me out. We have not spoken since.

I would do my duty in any way he asked, risk every drop of my blood for Gondor, save this. I will not be a hostage to the politics of governing. I had not realized how little I want my birthright until this moment. I am meant to be a soldier not an administrator, not bound to a chair by the chains of office. If 10,000 years would not suffice for the Steward to become a King, as he has told me oft, then what does it matter which son becomes the Steward? You would do a far better job than I.

You can rest assured that now I too am more than capable of displeasing him. In fact I suspect this pains him more than anything you have ever done, for he did not see it coming.

I need not tell you to burn this when you are done. I hope that we can see each other and talk before Ivanneth at least.

Valar guard and guide you on your patrols.

Your loving brother

Boromir

Faramir stood up and strode quickly to the hearth, threw in the pages and watched while the paper quickly curled and turned to ash. He sighed heavily. There could be no comfort in knowing that for now he had company as the object of his father's displeasure. For all his years of coping, of learning to take their Father's unreasonable anger; to let it wash over him and not react, he could think of nothing to say that would help Boromir in this. Pawns indeed, he thought unhappily, pawns indeed.

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The pony had galloped as fast as his short legs would take him into the forecourt of the barracks; eyes wild and foam flecked. The young boy and girl bareback upon him had terror in their eyes and smoke within their hair. It took but a moment for the alarm to be raised. Orcs, a large band of them. Looking west, the Captain could just make out the smoke now rising from burning farm.

They rode out with all haste but half strength: by some ill-luck Madril had already taken part of the company north to patrol early that very morning. As the troop of riders overtopped the low swale they saw a band of thirty Orc-like creatures armed with spears and swords laying waste to the farmsted.
Eldacar, with the quick and practised assurance, assessed their strength and ordered them to meet the enemy. "Not too many. We need to make as quick work of them as we can." He eyed his second. "Gallan, secure the sted and clear it out, get the men on fire duty as soon as you can. See to any casualities." The man nodded and quickly assembled a group of men. The Captain turned back to his young lieutenant. "Faramir, take ten men and loop around the west paddock. Drive them toward me and we will crush them in the middle. Watch the spears."

There was barely time for Faramir's nod to register before the cry went up. The troops wheeled into formation. "Gondor!"

Faramir's mouth was dry and his heart raced as Mithros pounded down the hard-packed field, his men close set behind. Intense sun beat down and nearly blinded him as they turned back east. This was no drill. He heard the ululating war cry of the Orcs as they quickly realized a greater foe had come. As ordered, he and his men formed a line and charged, driving them forward onto his Captain's wall of steel. Already several Orcs had fallen against Eldacar's onslaught and the men beside: the light Orc armor no match for Gondorian blades.

Then it happened. A few of the foul creatures turned to fight and Faramir found himself engaging blows with the enemy at last. The Orc's short sword, corroded and black but with a wicked edge, shook violently as it he blocked its thrust. The ijolite flashed cool sapphire in the sun as his sword rose again and fell, slashing the creature with yellow fangs before him. Feral eyes widened in shock, its chest opened, blade falling from its now boneless grasp. The scent was putrid. A far part of Faramir's mind marveled at how easily the creature cleaved.

Eldacar, across the yard, now found his way oddly light. Resistance had melted suddenly away. He did not understand, there had been more. For a worried moment he wondered if this was trap, were they being drawn out? Out of the corner of his eye he spied with dismay where the Orcs had gone. Faramir was overrun. A dozen of the creatures had swarmed the one man, heedless of their backs and the soldiers around. Surrounded on all sides, Mithros laid his ears back and bared his teeth; lashing out with forelegs and hindquarters. Faramir, a dark yet calmly dangerous look in his eyes, wheeled the stallion with his knees as he drove his sword repeatedly down upon his foes. The creatures scrabbled at the man's legs and the horses sides trying to pull him down, but they were no match for Nogrod steel. Each time the Orc's claws and blades came close Faramir would stab and slash, but even as he dispatched one, another pressed from the other side.

"Gondor!" the Captain called, as he cut his way across, his blade a rain of red cutting through the throng. Just as he arrived, the two closest men to Faramir joined in. The stench of Orc blood became intense, but under it he could smell the iron tang of man. Amidst the clash of steel, howls of Orc and cries of men and horse, he heard a word repeated. 'Kal murg' the foul creatures cried as they threw themselves in a frenzy against his lieutenant. He had no time to worry at their odd behaviour, intent for now upon freeing the space around him.

Redoubling their efforts, the Captain and his men felled creature after creature, until all the filth around Faramir before them had been dispatched. Panting, Eldacar turned Sirion back to the yard and took in the scene. Not a single Orc was standing and back by the house he spied another pile of bodies from Gallan's men. The lieutenant pumped his hand and motioned that all was secure there. He could see the men carry out a wounded man and his shaken wife. Blessedly, it seemed there were little casualty. The fire had been confined to the barn and smouldered slowly; nearly out.

Eldacar rubbed absently at the scar beside his eye as he dismounted and looked over the pile of still warm corpses beside. Their armour bore an odd badge emblazoned upon the breast: a white hand upraised. What did it mean? He shoved a sprawled black body absently with his boot.
A veteran of thirty years in Gondor's army he had never seen Orcs that looked like this. Larger, with narrower faces, blacker than night itself. More manlike. He shivered, and the hairs on the back of his neck raised.

Faramir dismounted slowly. His legs felt wobbly and his body suddenly stiff and heavy. His leg stung and pain jolted in his calf as he landed. Holding onto the saddle lightly for support, he checked Mithros carefully for wounds. The stallion had claw and bite marks upon his flank and hocks, but nothing that looked too serious. He pranced as Faramir tried to run his hands along his quivering legs, the big stallion as keyed up as his master by their first skirmish.

_Thala mellon nim_ he murmured low.

The battle fever was slowly leaving them, both tired but both quietly pleased with how they had performed. Mithros gave a small whinny and Faramir smiled.

"Are you wounded?" His captain asked quietly as he walked up behind, a troubled look upon his craggy face. The men of Faramir's wing had dismounted and clustered around. Unneeded for the moment, like him, they checked their mounts' condition first.

"No, sir." Faramir's reply was firm as he shook his head.

"What were they yelling? Why did they like your mug so much?" Eldacar's sixth sense prickled once again, thinking back to the foul Orcish cries as they tried to grab the man.

"He's pretty, they fancied him." The speaker was quickly shushed as the Captain looked quickly over, but he could not see the culprit.

'Wanted to know their fortune more likely.' This brought more general laughter and even Eldacar could not resist the briefest of smirks. Just for good measure he gave them all a quelling look and Gallan, having joined them, stepped over and clipped Denham on the head. "Feckin idiots. This is serious."

"Kal Murg" Faramir repeated quietly, a puzzled frown upon his face. 'I do not know what it means. But Murg I think is horse.'

Orcs looking and behaving oddly, attacking in daylight and swarming one man. Eldacar did not like this turn of events. Not one bit. Distracted by the bantering and his own thoughts, belatedly he noticed that his young lieutenant had a dark stain seeping through his breeches on the back of his leg.

"Lad." The Captain's voice was low, pitched just for the two of them. Its tone was unmistakably tinged with anger. "You do not lie to me. Ever. Especially about a wound. Out here something slight can kill if it is not treated."

Clear grey eyes looked abashed. Silently Faramir turned and showed his captain the four inch gash across his calf. A cut from an Orc-blade, it was not too deep, but bled steadily and would need to be stitched. And watched. Dirty weapons made for dirty wounds.

The older man swore colourfully and long. He would have to write a report to the Steward after all.
The fruit of Laurelin, fair Anor burned as brightly down that day upon the black spires of Isengard as she did upon fields and forests of Druadan. The fortress's very stone became a furnace, gripping her fires within its core, twin to the fire of hate that lay within the wizard's breast. Perched high, above the breeding pits and forges, the Orthanc-stone reluctantly showed it master a vision: the parched and smoking yard; the young Steward's son limping carefully as he helped the men pile the Orc bodies on a pyre. So, he will not be dispatched so easily. Saruman's long and skilful fingers stroked the stone, the vision dissolved, this time to show the plains of west Emnet. It is time use my arts.

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T.A. 3002

Theodred, Prince of Rohan, crumpled the parchment within his mailed fist, beyond annoyed at the words writ upon it. How dare that lickspittle demand anything from me? The exhausted messenger kneeling before him swallowed nervously. He had ridden far and fast to bring what seemed obviously unwelcome news. Keeping still, he hoped he would not feel the weight of his Prince's famous temper.

Theodred shook his blond head and furrowed his brow, incensed that Grima would order him to send his second to council. What a bloody waste, he thought. Elfhelm and Eomer will not welcome this either. It would only be more useless talk in circles, a particular tactic it seemed of his father's oily advisor. Why does Father put any credence in the man?

Looking down pensively at the still kneeling young Rider he gestured to the man to rise.

"Get yourself some food and await a response," he ordered. Though quick to anger, he would never vent his spleen unjustified upon his men.

"Géa min æðeling. " the Rider murmured, hand to heart and with alacrity rose and moved away.

The Prince turned and walked towards the camp fire, nodding at his men absently as he passed. The spring air was yet chill, the fire blessedly warm against the twilight. He crouched down and reached toward the flames, watched with relish as the parchment caught. Holding it upright for a moment, the end burned brightly, he tossed it quickly in. One day, he thought, one day I will have that Worm's throat between my hands and we will see who demands from whom.

Theodred's first reaction was of course to refuse, but as his ire slowly faded he considered their situation. Perhaps this could be put to use. He and his eored had spent three weeks ranging near the Gap, where villagers have talked with fear of odd creatures come down from the Dunland hills. He would not normally have given them much credence, folk can be superstitious, but his intuition has been pricked. He misliked the reports: fell Orc-like creatures that do not shun the light and attacked in day, come down the Isen. That flattering, pandering wizard is behind it somehow he thinks, although he has no proof. He must tell his father, and that at least required a messenger sent to Edoras. Reluctantly he decided to acquiesce. Unfolding his long legs, he rose up above the flames.

"Alfgrim!" Much taller than the other Riders, the blood of Rohan and Numenor in his veins, the Prince's booming voice carried across the camp to where his captain stood, instructing the scouts on the evening's patrol.

"My Lord?" Alfgrim pushed past the milling men. Patiently he awaited his friend's instruction.
Theodred could not help the grin that creased his handsome face. His Prince's right hand both on and off the field, Alfgrim was newly married, still very much taken with his young and lovely wife. "Ready yourself at once, min freówine. You ride for Edoras." The Rider's bushy blond eyebrows raised in delighted surprise.

"The reason, my Prince?" Why not just send a messenger back if there was a reply? As much as he appreciated the gesture, the captain knew something was clearly afoot.

"A council. Grima has asked for you specifically." Alfgrim's expression twists into a grimace as he turned and spat upon the ground. Theodred's smile widened even more as placed his hand upon the captain's shoulder.

"My sentiments exactly. You must know that I will be in your debt. You will save me committing murder at another of these endless councils. Perhaps Grima has finally realized I cannot stand to listen to his prattle." The Captain grinned. The Prince's exuberance and energy were as much a thing of legend as his dislike of his father's chief advisor.

"And you can spend some time with Godwyn." Theodred's grey eyes danced, pleased to see the flush of happiness that crept up his old friend's cheeks. "Come and we shall discuss my message to the King."

"I will my lord."

They went to find the messenger.

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Some hours later, not five leagues from their encampment, both horses riding hard caught their fetlocks upon the snare, tumbled to the golden plain and threw their mounts. The Uruk-hai, well-hidden in the waving grass, rose up. The messenger they slew, the startled captain they grabbed and bound, as he thrashed and fought with all his might. At last they had their prize.

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Fatigue showed clearly upon the Istari's face, lit starkly by the fires within black Orthanc's deepest cellars. He had laboured long and long through the moonless night with tongs and bellows. New rings of power have been hammered, beaten and fired, as he dripped with sweat at the unaccustomed exertion. To direct the rings more surely only his hand had the making of them; his malice and intent turned with ruthless efficiency to physical force.

Three rings of power, glowing red, lay upon the cooling tile. One is a finger ring for his direction, two are arm rings to affect the change. Each bears an inscription, a name, that burned darkly red against the golden metal.

Fear marked the Rohir's face as he lay naked and shivering upon the filthy straw beside the forge. Exhausted and bewildered, chained at hands and feet, he tried to fold his midriff, desperate to ease the pain from the beating he received. He did not understand. Yes Theodred had suspicions of
Saruman's desire for expansion, but surely the wizard was not an outright enemy of Rohan? Yet, how else to understand his capture?

Alfgrim cannot guess what is to happen, the uncertainly only amplified his fear. What is this place and what is the wizard doing? He watched as water was splashed across the tile to cool two rings. Slowly and deliberately the wizard muttered an incantation. Afar Melkor madom na inglan. Tab orka na ui-narg ângh. Marr pusk ob tak shara latan. Agh sha-uruk tak forik shakrig. The Rohir does not recognize the language but even its words sound foul. As Saruman slid the finger ring upon his right hand he smiled. The smooth warm metal sang to his heart and at his howl of triumph Alfgrim's bowels suddenly turn to water.

The scent of fear now hung heavily in the room, its air already heavy with words of power. With a ragged breath, the Rider raised his head up, strove to keep his eye upon his foe. Somehow he must survive, must warn the Prince and King that the Keeper of Isengard is turned traitor.

The first arm ring, inscribed with Alfgrim's name, is passed to an Uruk-Hai standing still and silent beside the forge. Ganen, bred from an Uruk and Dunadan woman of Bree, is tall and broad of chest and black-skinned. An unusual intelligence glinted in his tiny slanted eyes. He is impatient for his mission, proud that he has been called to this special errand for the master. He does not fear the sun or man, the fiercest and foulest of his generation.

The arm ring lay comfortably warm upon his palm as he tested its weight. With a grunt of approval Ganen slid the ring up his naked arm. It came to rest glinting gold against the creature's black and scabby skin.

Slowly the wizard raised the remaining ring with heated tongs, muttering all the while. He paced forward and nodded to his minions. Two other Uruk-Hai sprang forward, grabbed Alfgrim's right arm and held it outward. Realization dawned within the captive's red-rimmed eyes. Pinned fast though he is, the Rider struggled desperately. With one swift move Saruman shoved the burning ring up to the Rider's bicep. As it sealed Ganen's name into his very flesh, the hair and skin alike melted to the hungry metal, the tortured man lost all control. Blood curdling screams began to echo through the chamber. Heedless of the sound of pain and terror, Ganen smiled and his face began to change.

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The battle was almost over, the air as heavy now with the stench of foul Orc blood as it was the hot and dusty scent of pine needles crushed below. Boromir, Captain of the White company, dispatched the Orcs before him in a dance of steel-born skill, arm and sword flowing seamlessly from one foe to the next. His blood sang with joy and the smile upon his face behind the helm was wide and fey.

What were they thinking, this party, he wondered, attacking near to Cair Andros so brazenly? Scouts had warned the companies and with ease they had set up a position along the wooded ridge: set to sweep down upon the band from high above. One hundred strong, they were no match for the fewer men of Gondor. He scanned the field. They were making quick work of their foe, so far with little casualty.

Unpressed and blithely slaying all before him, Boromir glanced over and spared a thought for his new lieutenant. Frankly amazed that their father had placed Faramir under his command so soon, he had delighted in the chance to have him by his side. Covertly he watched his brother's movements for a moment. Graceful and forceful; Faramir was becoming a fine swordsman and excellent
lieutenant, always quick to see what needed to be done on the battlefield. They worked well together. His little brother seemed to know what Boromir needed even before he himself knew enough to ask.

"Eorlingas!" The cry rang out beyond Faramir, where Alfgrim's sword ran black with the blood of another Orc. This too had been a surprise: that Theodred would let his second go and Theoden should send him here to Gondor. Friends of old, they reminisced of their time together raising hell and breaking hearts; the year he himself had served with Theodred. Kindred spirits were Alfgrim and the heirs of Rohan and Gondor: men of energy and courage; great strength and even greater pride.

The only note of discord came as Alfgrim talked long of Rohan and the doings there. Faramir watched the man each time warily, distrust and uncertainty plain upon his face. Many times Boromir had asked what troubled his brother so about the man. He could not explain, save to say that his mind seemed oddly blank and guarded. Boromir choose to leave his brother be, not interfering when the young man rudely declined a drink from the Rohir's hand or sidled away repeatedly.

By fate the chances of the battlefield brought the two combatants now close together. Faramir worked quickly and efficiently, a growing pile of Orc bodies laid out before him. Snarling and slavering the latest beast lunged, its curved black blade finding only air where before there had been a man.

Through the cries and clanging metal, Faramir heard a man's startled cry of pain. He glanced mid-blow down the line and saw Tardil back away, bright blood welling quickly from his side. With weight and force behind his counter-strike, he pressed ahead. The Orc before him was disarmed: the stones of ijolite flashed briefly as his sword withdrew from within the creature's leather helm.

"Faramir to me!" Alfgrim plea was urgent, he too had seen the wounded man. The lieutenant and the captain moved to close the gap: the two, blond- and raven-haired, worked quickly side by side. Together they cleared the last few Orcs from upon their flank, standing over the young soldier now prone upon the ground.

As Faramir slew the last vile creature before him, he turned quickly back to Tardil and scanned the ranks behind to find a healer. Intent upon his task, he did not register that Alfgrim, unopposed, had moved to stand beside him.

Upon the battlefield where all around are distracted. Such were the orders Ganen had when he set out. Far away, watching and wielding a red gold ring, Saruman ordered "Now!"

A flash of green and silver upon a shining blade was the last thing that Faramir saw before the Rohir's sword came arcing down.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: 'Valar guard and guide' I first saw in Isabeau of Greenlea's Captain my Captain. It seems so fitting a benediction I have borrowed it here. I hope she doesn't mind.

The Black speech incantation doesn't have a real translation..I could only find some of the words, so a several of the words used above have no translation
Regarding Theodred's heritage: His grandmother was Morwen of Lossarnach, he is 1/4 Numenorean, as are Eomer and Eowyn.

Thank you everyone for reading and reviewing.
Thanks to everyone who read and commented and kudoed. It is so very much appreciated! I will try to post these updates weekly until we reach chapter 12 and then it will be every three weeks. Enjoy.

**A pawn is attacked, the black bishop presses his hand.**

*T.A. 3001*

Boromir could never say later exactly how or why he found himself where he did at the moment Alfgrim's sword was raised to kill. He had had no sense of foreboding, no suspicion of ill, only an overwhelming need to be nearer to his brother, to move. He had not been aware he had followed his body's call but had no memory of running nor of the sunlit flash upon the blade moving where it should not be. Too late to see its ascent, he knew in his very bones the movement it would follow and with all his reach and strength thrust the tip of his sword forward, into the space between the blade and the flesh for which it sang.

His desperate parry halted some of the sword's momentum but not its downward flight. Twisting, he thrust upward with all the force both arms could muster. Alfgrim's blade flew up again but in its wake a red arc sprayed. His brother fell and a cry of pain died swiftly upon Faramir's lips.

The grin of exultation upon Alfgrim's face became a snarl, raw fury rose within his eyes. Robbed for a moment of his triumph, the Rohir thrust back at the Captain with a strength and speed that seemed unholy. The gold arm ring flashed and with grief Boromir saw battle madness in Alfgrim's eyes. He did not have time to understand, thought only of driving more space between the madman and his brother. Assailed by a rain of heavy blows Boromir found himself fighting his friend for his very life, to disarm no longer passed his thoughts. Out of the corner of his vision he saw Mablung race toward him, but knew this would end far too quickly for aid to come.

He parried yet another lunge and their swords locked, so close Boromir felt Alfgrim's hot breath upon his face, saw the sweat of battle slick upon his brow. A voice at once familiar and unknown cried low with glee. "I shall have both of you this day!"

"No!" Boromir heaved. With the force of his heavier body, he threw Alfgrim back. The man stumbled but brought up his sword, intent to launch another strike. He stepped back to steady his stance, glinting eyes intent upon his foe and Tardil, prone upon the ground, forgotten in his fury. Alfgrim trod upon the private's legs, and as the young man screamed, the startled Rohir overbalanced.

It was perhaps the Captain's only chance; he lunged and thrust his sword up under the man's upraised arm. Alfgrim howled in pain and in that instant Boromir leapt across, drove his sword with both hands through the blond man's chest. It slid out again with a sickening slurp, had drunk deep and well. The threat was gone: sky blue eyes raised to the blue sky above faded slowly to blue-grey and then to black.

Boromir stood as one transfixed, paralyzed as the battle fever poured away. His chest heaved from
the effort, his arms felt like water and his sword tip rested on the dirt. With horror he took in the black slick of clinging blood upon his blade and the inky, putrid stain that flowed across the Rider's body. As he bent double, panting and mind desperate to understand, Alfgrim's features shimmered and seemed to melt. A black tint, corrupted and lifeless like Morgulduin, crept across his skin and through his hair. It was not a man that lay dead before him but a huge and monstrous Orc, an Uruk-hai.

The noise of battle had fallen away but now rushed back to assault his senses. Boromir heard his soldiers' shouts and the shrieking cries of the last few orcs, heard the startled cries of men nearby as they raced towards him, intent to help and bewildered by the scene. He added his hoarse voice to theirs, called for aid but choked upon the stench of the foul orc blood and another stronger scent above it, copper-bright. Faramir!

"Brother! No!" He pushed strong arms away and spun to take in the scene beside, men gathered around his brother upon the muddied forest floor.

Renil, the company's newest and youngest healer, anxious but determined, had come for Tardil when he heard his lieutenant's call. He had done his best to navigate his first battle, running as fast as he was able, dodging men and casualties both. All the while silently blessing instinct and training that had taken over, despite his awe and fear.

The second agonized cry near to the first had only made him run the faster, until he had stood in shock to see his lieutenant down. Aghast, he took in the ugly gash across the Faramir's upper thigh; the bright blood that gushed out rhythmically with each beat of young man's straining heart. Already a pool had spread below the lieutenant's legs: a hideous crimson lake.

The young healer looked back to Tardil and the two men locked in combat. He could not have reached the private and saw him pained but clearly conscious, the wound in his side bled only sluggishly. He knew the decision he had to make.

"Anborn, help me!" he cried, spying a soldier whose name he knew. His mouth was so dry he could hardly form the words. I am not the one for this! But he knew there was little time and no other choice. Other soldiers had run over, some to help the Captain, and some to help the private.

Hurriedly he dropped to his knees beside Faramir who lay still and silent upon the mud and wrack. Renil could smell pine and mud and sweat, but over all the hideous bright copper tang of arterial blood, a scent that boded very ill. Minutes. The young healer knew he had just minutes to stop the flow before Faramir bled out.

Someone had already removed the lieutenant's helm, his raven hair clung sweat-damp to a smooth, unblemished cheek. For just a second, Renil remembered they were of an age; wondered if Faramir too had been awed and frightened by the clamour of the battle. He thought not and this gave him courage. Like his young lieutenant he too must his duty.

Renil tore away Faramir's bloodied breeches and found the wound was so high up the thigh there could be no tourniquet. With a silent prayer to Estë, he issued the only order he could to the men clustered anxiously around. "Mablung, Anborn press down here as hard as you can." His voice was high but steady as he pointed to the artery above the wound. "Press with your thumbs. Lean in with all your weight. Hard!"

The men scrambled to obey, knelt on either side of the unconscious man and leaned over. Two pairs of thumbs pressed down. Renil knew this was a risk. Too much pressure and the flesh could die, but
too little and the flow would not stop. His mind reeled at the possible outcome, yet this was all he
could do. Without this, one outcome at least was deadly certain.

Time had slowed down, but he had so little of it. His stomach twisted at the thought of how much
time had passed and his hands shook violently as he tried to thread the needle. The wound must be
closed, regardless of the dirt and filth in which they lay. The gash was deepest on the outer edge but
thinned toward the inner thigh. But for the Captain's parry, an inch deeper and the artery would have
been severed. Stop thinking, he ordered himself. As the thread slipped awkwardly through the
needle's eye at last, he could have cried with relief.

There was so much blood upon the wound he could hardly see to work. Water was sloshed from a
quickly proffered flask and methodically he felt inside the gash for something that was not muscle.
At last he touched the artery, slippery smooth but with just one small ragged spot. Touching it, blood
spurted in his face and he cursed. Working then almost blind, he stitched hurriedly as he had been
taught, the finest stitches he could do, lumen first then the inner muscle wall and then the outer edge.

The sinister beating gush had slowed, the men pressed very hard and sweat gathered on Anborn's
brow. Faramir's body shivered now but Renil could not stop his stitching. Mablung saw his anxious
look and called for cloak. One was quickly found and covered the young man's upper body. The
healer noted the green cloth rose and fell much too fast, already the young man's skin was white and
wet with shock. He knew that blood spread far like water, looked much greater than it was, but there
was so much.

"What can I do?!" The heartfelt cry broke into his thoughts. Beside he saw the Captain, armour
streaked with black and rancid blood, his own helm off, looking on his brother's hushed and pallid
face with horror as he held one limp and lifeless hand. It seemed to Renil looking at his face that the
Captain's heart had never really considered this, had never fathomed the soldier's risk of dying. He
looked so utterly shocked, kneeling there in a pool of his brother's blood.

The lieutenant's body shook more, it was harder now to stitch. He glanced at Faramir's face
anxiously, worried for a moment that the man was conscious and agonized, but it was not so.
Boromir, however, was visibly shaking, holding hard his brother's lifeless hand within both his own.

"Captain! you are not helping!" he cried, then realized whom he has criticized. Renil softened his
tone "Have mercy, my Lord...you must keep still." Some part of the young man's training clicked in
to place. Give him something to do...

"What colour are his fingernails?" he asked. Boromir peered carefully, hurriedly brushed off grime
and blood off several fingers. "Pale."

Renil spoke hurriedly around a mouthful of thread as he readied a second needle for the outer layer.
"Press his nail hard. Let go and count until the colour comes again."

Boromir did as he was asked, counting under his breath. It seemed an eternity. "Three seconds."

" Thank the Valar." The prayer was low, whispered through lips pressed thin with concentration, as
the next round of stitching went in over the first. There was the barest tinge of hope now within the
young healer's voice.

"What? What does it mean?!" The Captain's grey and pleading eyes met his.

Renil did not have time to hold his gaze but offered what he could, his hands working all the while.
"We have not lost him yet."
He felt Mablung and Anborn shift. Their hands must be numb after all this time. He looked around for two others to help and soon four pairs of thumbs pressed down before two slipped carefully out. There is the barest seep about the wound. As the men rose he saw their breeches to their knees were soaked with blood. Boromir saw it too and his stomach lurched. *I too am lying in my brother's blood.*

Renil did not realize how cramped his fingers had become until he tied off the last knot and sat back upon his haunches, watching not his patient's face but the wound, its sharp and crimson edges had become his whole world. He ordered the men to remove the pressure slowly. One soldier gingerly raised up, slipping first one and then a second hand away. They watched for what seemed an eternity but nothing had burst as blood and pressure flooded back into the artery. At his nod the second man removed his hands. At last, grimly certain bleeding had been stopped, he took a roll of bandage from his pack and covered the wound as tightly as he dared.

Boromir stood then, amazed to find he could think and stand: his mind whirled so hard and fast he could not focus. He looked across to where a knot of men stand over the Uruk's body. They must investigate, he must speak to the men about what they saw.

A stretcher had already arrived and many hands came forward to lift his brother up. All the wounded would be moved to Cair Andros and swiftly, the garrison at least had a basic house of healing. Noting Mablung had taken charge, he was grateful for his men, doing what must be done while he did what he must do. He did not let go his brother's hand as they moved down slope toward the river.

When the lieutenant had been carried carefully away, legs slightly raised as ordered, young healer Renil was helped up by his comrades. With the sound of congratulations fading in his ears, the enormity of what he done for the very first time sank in. Quite gracefully and quietly the world went black. The young man fainted.

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The Captain sat still and straight by his brother's bed side, unheeding of the birds' bright chorus as the dawn spread its glow across Cair Andros' grey walls. His tired eyes burned like coals, his tired shoulders were leaden. He had not left, not slept, not drunk or eaten in all the hours since Faramir had been brought into the garrison the day before. He held the pale and lifeless hand gently, as if it were the most treasured talisman in all the realm; indeed it was.

He brushed a lock of hair from where it lay on Faramir's cool but sweating brow, watched his brother's chest rise and fall, shallowly and much too fast. Already they had said the flesh about the wound showed signs of dying. If will and faith alone could heal, Faramir's fingers would have grasped his back, so much hope and love he poured into the touch. But he had seen the looks upon the healers' faces, their quiet grim efficiency, their compassion and regret.

He heard the crash of Great Anduin upon the rocks below, the footfalls in the corridor, the wind keening about the high stone walls. Within the dim room the quiet was so great it filled every mote of space and pained him by its very volume. His brother did not move: there was no restless jostling of pain, no rustle of sheets to signal an impatient but improving patient. He wanted to howl.

The memory came to him of another sickroom; one also full of hushed voices and little to be said. Always made for action, he wondered if his dislike of quiet inactivity stemmed from the months before his mother's death; the household unnaturally quiet, a fearful expectation lying on it. Looking at the still and silent face beside he wondered then how much of his brother's quiet nature was also rooted in that time. Had he learned too well, too young the need for silence? The lesson taught by the big brother charged with keeping a little one occupied and their mother undisturbed? It seemed ironic that, once grown, in Faramir's gentle company was the only place he could stay quiet and settled for long. What he would not give now to have some sound, however muffled; to hear his low and
teasing laugh.

"My Lord."

Boromir could not tear himself away from the sight of the pale unmoving face, stark against the lank black hair. The warden stepped closer, his footfalls echoed in the quiet space. A hand rested lightly upon his shoulder and gave a gentle squeeze.

Boromir looked slowly up. He blinked as the light of the warden's lantern hurt his eyes. He was an older man, with long experience of healing both the sick and sick-at-heart; knew the words to come would hurt, but could find no way to blunt their cut; swift and sharp as broken glass.

"My Lord, you must send for your father."

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The door to Faramir's room opened and at the sound his brother jerked awake, neck muscles protesting as he raised his head from where it had drooped awkwardly upon his chest. For a moment, startled and disoriented, Boromir heard the clanging of battle again and he wondered where he was. Grey stone walls, grey healer's robes and the feel of Faramir's limp hand in his reminded him. He had fallen asleep holding his brother's hand.

The young woman who had entered bobbed a shy curtsey and laid a steaming basin upon a table near the bed. Its fresh scent and warmth roused him a little more, and he stood quickly to give her room, swaying a little with dizziness from the sudden movement. She gestured to the young man who came behind her, laden with clothes and bandages.

"My Lord, my name is Ailin and this is Torren. We are here to clean out the lieutenant's wound. The warden came earlier but bade us let you sleep. I am sorry we have disturbed you." She looked upon him with grave concern. He had the distinct and unpleasant impression that he was the one now being assessed. Proudly he straightened his sagging shoulders, not wanting her to think him in need of any care. Days and nights without sleep were after all nothing on campaign.

He inclined his head in acknowledgement. "Do not trouble yourself mistress. It is better that I rise for a while and let you do your work. I thank you greatly for your efforts."

He walked to the window, rolling his head upon his shoulders, trying to ease his stiffened back. Sunlight streamed through the embrasure; it seemed another dawn had come and the sun arisen in bright defiance of his mood. Heedless of the view below, he laid his cheek against the cool stone, grateful to rest his head. How long had he sat beside Faramir? Two days, he thought; one since the messenger set out. His father should come soon.

He looked back toward the bed. The only sound was Ailin's low murmur as she instructed Torren; the two peeling back the bandages. Her expression was grim as she gently prodded at the wound. Faramir lay unmoving even as the swollen flesh was touched. Neither healer said what they did not like, but for once he paid their worried discussion little heed. His heart could not stand to hear aught more of ill.

He heard a scrape of boot on stone and turned. Mablung had paused upon the threshold, grey eyes averted from the bed and concern upon his craggy face. His lieutenant, a shy but caring man, hesitated to intrude but stood determined to complete his errand. He cleared his throat nervously. "Captain, will you come? You must eat and rest at least a little."

Boromir shook his head and was about to speak when Ailin looked up and caught his gaze.
“My Lord, please do. We have work to do and it would be best if you left us now for a while.”

He thought to protest, but looked to his brother upon the bed. The bandages pulled back, he could see the skin along one side the wound was an ugly tapestry of mottled brown and black. An putrid smell had pervaded the room and sunlight glinted on a knife laid upon a cloth beside. Sick at the implication and in need of air, he acquiesced. Perhaps, he thought, his lieutenant was right. Exhaustion would only dull his wits and truly he did not want to see them work.

Relieved, yet guilty at the thought of leaving, he looked to Ailin. "You will call for me, if there is any change?"

"Of course, my Lord." she replied, "where should we call if the need arise?"

Boromir looked to his lieutenant. "The mess" Mablung replied. "Or his quarters if I can persuade him." The young woman nodded gravely and bent to pick up the knife.

Before his captain had a chance to see the move, Mablung took his arm and hurriedly steered from out the house. They passed under an archway to the forecourt to find themselves in the open midday sun. Boromir blinked suddenly and sighed; he had not felt its light and warmth for days.

They crossed the square and entered the mess; it was alive with the noise of chatter and laughter from the many men arrayed upon long tables. The open hall, like the fort itself, had rough stone walls. They amplified the sound and made it nearly deafening after the quietude of the past few days. As he stood and grew accustomed to the noise, Boromir welcomed the warmth from the large hearth, the ease and contentment of the men arrayed on the long tables. The smell of rich stew and bread wafted up and against his mind's direction, his empty stomach grumbled.

His men looked up expectantly from the tables, pleased to see their Captain. A scrape of wood on stone sounded as all made move to rise, but he deferred them with a lowered hand. He was too tired to stand on ceremony, to nod or raise a hand, to speak. The men turned quietly back to their meals. None remarked but all knew this was unusual, that it boded ill. That Captain always welcomed them in turn.

Mablung made directly for a far table with a young face he recognized. "Anborn." Boromir gave a nod in greeting. The young, fair-haired private made space beside upon the bench and looked up in hopeful expectation.

"Captain, any news?" Boromir shook his head wearily. He owed this man an answer, he had helped upon the battle field.

"No change. He does not wake." A wooden bowl was placed in front of him and a tankard of early cider. It smelled delicious but he found had not the energy to lift the spoon. He drank the cider thirstily, hoping it might settle his queasy stomach. Mablung took note and gently chided.

"Captain, you do not help him if you yourself collapse. I will hold the spoon myself if you will not."

Boromir sighed and broke his bread in half, soaked it in the sauce and choked it down. He found to his surprise that they were right; he felt a little better for it and tried the other half. Soon he was surprised to find he eaten all before him.

Around mouthfuls of his own meal, Mablung gave his Captain a full report of all that had passed in the days before, the state of the other casualties, the reports from farther scouts. At last he turned his attention to what they most needed to understand.

"Captain we have already had Alfgrim's pallet searched and his clothing and effects." We found
nothing suspicious or untoward."

"Truly?" Boromir was puzzled and worried both. This spoke of careful planning and that he did not like.

Mablung gestured to their companion with his knife. "Anborn here searched Algrim's pallet, he can tell you more."

The young man spoke up, eyes intent upon his Captain. "There was nothing unusual, my Lord. Clothes such as the Rohirrim wear. No pictures, trinkets, charms or any such. No letters, no other weapons. The sword with which he cut down Lord Faramir was just such a one as the Rohirrim use, shorter than ours, with their runes upon the blade." None said it aloud, but all three shared the thought: shorter yes, but just as deadly.

Mablung pressed another piece of bread into his Captain's hand. "It seems odd for one who had come for several months to a foreign land to have no tokens. You saw his papers yourself did you not, my Lord?"

"Aye, it was the signature of King Theoden himself, as best I know. I have no reason to suspect it false. Nor was the parchment different from any I used in Edoras, yet I cannot fathom a reason for Rohan to betray us so, nor do I know them to use sorcery. This enchantment changed its form to a man I knew. That speaks of deliberation and knowledge of my service."

The lieutenant lowered his voice. "Some ill design of the nameless One?" One did not speak openly of the menace to the east, here so close to the passes where once battle rang.

"So one must assume." Boromir sighed and drained his cup. "But why my brother? That I cannot see. Was he its target and not some chance foe? Faramir disliked Alfgrim from the moment he arrived. For him to dislike someone so quickly is very odd indeed. Did he sense the falseness in the man, the creature?"

Anborn hesitantly spoke up. "Captain Eldacar was convinced he could sense things others do not see."

Mablung nodded. He too had noted this in just the few months they had served together. "We would all do well to heed Lieutenant Faramir's ill feelings, when they come again."

Boromir looked up, startled by his friend's choice of words. A ghost of a small and grateful smile spread across his face, the first in many days. Mablung nodded "They will."

He then reached out and laid upon the table the gold arm ring. It glinted red against the darker wood, lit by the light of torches set all around. Anborn drew back as if it itself was evil. "We have brought the creature's body here to the fort. It is secured and I have searched it myself. This is the ring from upon its arm. There are runes about the rim, but I do not know them."

Boromir fingered it carefully. It was of the same gold and weight as many Rohir soldiers wore. His eyes grew troubled as they looked sadly on the script. "They are not Elvish, that much I know. Faramir would tell us. Would that he were awake and well enough to read this riddle for us. What of the creature?"

"Truthfully, I hope never to look so closely upon such a one again. Orcs are as foul in death as they are in life." With a puzzled frown, Mablung drew from his tunic a parchment. "There was one oddity. A device or design, cut into the flesh upon its hip, a tattoo as I think the men of Harad or Umbar wear. I sketched it. " He slid the parchment across the table to Boromir. "In outline it is a
hand upraised, four fingers and a thumb. The creature's skin is black but the design was filled in white, as if by ink."

Anborn looked on the design with shock. He recognized the sign.

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The low-prowed boat bumped against the dock, tilting with the sudden shift in weight as the visitors stepped ashore. The taller figure stepped stiffly down; the ride to the shore had been long and taxing. It had been many months since he had sat a horse and many years since he had ventured this far beyond the Pelennor. Both men clasped arms with the Captain in greeting, the younger of two he knew as well. Varan, the most experienced of the City's healers, had come at the Steward's request.

Hesitantly Boromir sought to read the mood upon his father's face. Though it was no longer spoken of he still felt a strain between them: an unsettled and uneasy truce in place since the great discord of the year before. It pained him, but there was no going back. As he looked upon the father he had not seen for nigh six months he was shocked to find he looked his age, grey and tired and greatly worried.

The Steward of Gondor in turn looked searchingly upon his son, a question in his eyes. Boromir shook his head. "There is no change." Denethor let out a quiet breath, gave silent thanks for this news at least.

They walked up through the quay through the gates of the garrison, past the great stone pillars carved in his great-grandfather's time. Turin had rebuilt Cair Andros and fortified it shrewdly, knowing it best placed to guard the crossings to Anorien, This and many other secret outposts he had manned in North Ithilien, anticipating that there should come a time when the Morannon opened once again. Hoarding knowledge for his own designs, not yet certain where the hammer blow would fall, Denethor did not share with those around that that day would come and all too soon.

As they passed, all saluted, right hands to hearts. Hood up, clad in a great black cloak, his carriage and height alone betokened the Steward of Gondor. The news that the lieutenant's father had come spread like wildfire through the fort. *His son is dying* some said, shaking their heads in sadness.

They entered the sick room, and for the Steward the sight was at once frightening and too familiar. Faramir looked so very young, his face smooth, with no furrow of worry or strain, but profoundly quiet: too white, too still.

The father listened with growing fear as the warden, not without compassion, gave a tally of the hurts visited upon his son. Two healers spoke low but he could not miss their words: shock, grave blood loss, too hard upon his heart. Already twice they have had to cut out dead flesh, although they no longer think to lose the leg. The men conferred for many minutes, the bandages undone to see the hurt.

"Is there aught more to be done?" he asked, desperate to hear some grain of good.

Varan bowed and spoke up quietly. His words were sure but far from encouraging. "My Lord, the healers here have done very well and all they could. I have brought some stronger herbs for infection, and to fight the rot. This may help, but it is far from certain." The Steward tried to wait patiently as leaves were soaked and placed upon on the wound and a tea was brewed and used to soak the bandages.

When Varan had finished his ministrations Denethor sat down upon a chair and took his son's limp hand. He felt the new calluses upon the palm from the Dol Amroth sword and the old callus upon
one finger from a quill. This last was softer now; Faramir had had little time to write.

The piercing gaze that sought ever to see Gondor's need softened then to look upon the pale and silent face upon the bed. He saw another face, white and still, framed by the same gently waved black hair, the same narrow cheekbones and slender neck.

"You have something of her" Amerith had said. Now at last he saw: he had two sons, each with something of Finduilas and himself, something tangible, a link beyond the memories. Boromir had little of her looks, but had her merry laugh, her sense of humour and his own pride. Faramir had her fine-boned beauty; her gentleness and his own reserve.

Adrahil was the one who had come closest once to making him understand. "It is selfish Denethor to scorn the blessing you have before you because you cannot have the one you want." Perhaps, he thought, the Prince had known the right of it.

Someone had tried to kill his son. Certainty brought no comfort, only cold and hopeless rage.

He remembered then Finduilas' brow furrowed in fear and fury as she clutched a babe protectively as he held out a crystal vial. Could his lady of dreams, a true daughter of Mithrellas, have seen something after all that he had not? The evidence of real danger lay still and silent, accusingly before him.

Denethor had made Finduilas a promise once: to protect his secondborn, though in his heart of hearts he knew it to have been made thoughtlessly. He would have promised her to run naked about the fifth circle of the City to bring her greater comfort in those final days, but then given no more credence to its completion than he had her concerns for the boy. With pain he remembered those darkening days; how the harder he had held on to her, the more surely she had slipped away, anxious to be released. He felt again a little boy's warm body pressed against his own, a warmth that strove to lighten need and pain, though it had been too great. That memory and the face so alike to her before him now washed at the dark root of resentment from which the discord grew.

To lose this son he knew would be to lose her once again; to lose them both. He gasped, for with the knowledge the hand of grief clutched anew within his chest, so hard it robbed his breath.

Holding tight his son's hand, the father's mind reached out. Unguarded and unshielded the slow fleeting thoughts he found within his son's unconscious mind were frightening. Great weariness there was, and pain, and a memory of fear. The mind he knew, quicksilver and curious, gentle yet determined, was dim and shadowed.

A gently as he could he sent out the plea. Fight my son. Fight hard.

Arms that ached to hold the little boy again reached out and held the man, as the father's lips were pressed to a fair, damp brow.

A deep sigh beyond his shoulder gave longing and surprise a sound; it rushed out and mingled with the close, expectant air. Denethor turned. Another son of Finduilas stood there, straight and hale; unshed tears glimmered in the lamplight.

Nestled within his wrinkled, aged hand upon the bed, a young man's fine long fingers fluttered for but a moment.

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The evening sky had lowered and a rising north wind keened as the foam and rush of Anduin broke against the island's prow. High above, the meeting chamber was buffeted by the wind and spray and
seemed at once much chiller. In this, it reflected closely the Steward's mood: both the chamber and its lord had suddenly lost their warmth.

Denethor looked up from the cup of warmed wine he held within his lap and regarded the officers and men assembled in the room. Boromir stood there, surrounded by those who had helped upon the battle field: Renil and Mablung and Anborn. All three had been greatly praised and cited for their courage and their actions. All knew that the time for fulsome approbation had passed: now came the questions.

When their Lord spoke his voice was low and smooth as steel. No one in the room mistook the depth of his displeasure. "Pray gentlemen explain why no one saw fit to tell me that someone is trying to kill my son?"

The silence stretched uncomfortably. The wind rattled the window panes. A soft hiss rose up as coals crumbled in the brasier beside the Steward's chair.

Boromir stood beside his men and marvelled once again at how his father commanded any room he occupied: Even seated, he seemed to look down upon them all. One by one the men who stood before him dropped their eyes, trembling at the thought of their lord's censure.

Denethor raised the pewter cup and took a sip. Across the rim he looked pointedly at his son. Alone among them, his eldest held his gaze, although he too could find no answer.

"Then I must assume I was not told because you did not know. Tell me then why no one recognized this plot?"

Young Renil shifted nervously. Grateful and humbled by his lord's gracious thanks, flushed with surprise at his commission, he wished fervently he were somewhere else. He knew nothing of the circumstances and could not help.

Denethor's sharp grey eyes caught his. As if he read the young man's thoughts he motioned for him to leave. "I thank you young man once again for your service to my son. I shall not forget it. Fare you well." The other occupants of the room watched silently as he quickly left the room.

"Let me see if I understand the situation correctly." The Lord of Gondor drummed his fingers on the armrest, turning the puzzle over and over in his mind. "Some enemy, as yet unknown, placed a glamour upon this giant Orc. The creature was enspelled to resemble a Captain of the Rohirrim, a personal friend of Prince Theodred no less. He was possessed of seals and letters of introduction from King Theoden himself and was welcomed into the company. You stand there Captain and tell me this was so perfectly executed a plot that no one recognized anything amiss."

Boromir licked lips, his mouth unaccountably dry. "In fairness Father, I think Faramir himself sensed there was something wrong."

"And you did not heed him?" Denethor's voice was a low and sharp.

"No sir. He could not say what was wrong. You know how not all he sees or senses is true." Two pairs of steel grey eyes met and held. And you yourself rarely gave credence to anything from him" thought his son, impatient of the tone.

"That may be so. But neither I am foolish enough to dismiss out of hand such an oddity, when the circumstance was already odd. We have not seen such an exchange of men with Rohan in decades! I should not have thought my men have become too trusting in these troubled times."

"I am sorry my Lord. The fault is mine and mine alone." Boromir answered stiffly. The accusation
hurt but not more than the guilt that he had worried endlessly over the long uncertain hours. "Would that I had your vision and your wit. I would have done anything to spare my brother this."

This time it was Denethor who had to look away as he caught the stricken look in his eldest's eyes. With an effort he softened his tone.

"This was no hasty plot. Has aught else been found to help understand its source?"

Relief was palpable in the room: the storm had passed. At Boromir's nod, Mablung passed to his Lord the parchment he had inked.

"My Lord, this design was tattooed upon the creature's skin. I have never seen it, but Anborn here has seen it before."

Denethor examined the device carefully, turning the image about within his hands, but it meant no more to him that to his men. He gestured for to young private to tell his tale.

Daunted by the request to speak, Anborn fought to keep his voice steady and his gaze upon his Lord's. "My Lord Steward I served with Lieutenant Faramir at Firien last year. On that campaign there was another incident, something odd as well. I believe the Captain sent a full report. The lieutenant was set upon by Orcs, larger ones. Not as great as the creature here: but little similar."

The Steward, whose memory never faltered, recalled clearly the report. "Yes, Faramir was wounded in the leg. It was not serious, but the circumstances odd.' He gestured to the private to continue, eyes narrowed in concentration.

"The orcs that swarmed him were all shrieking the same words. Kal murg. We did not know their meaning, but the Lieutenant said murg was horse in Orcish."

"That is true enough. The other word I do not know. But the design you have seen before?"

"Yes my Lord." Anborn replied. "The orcs that day bore this emblem on their clothes. The very same white hand."

What else he would have said they never learned, for just then the oaken door was thrown open hurriedly and without leave. Flushed and chest heaving from exertion, Torren stood, having obviously run up the many flights of stairs. He fought for his breath and gasped out words that none expected they would hear. "My Lord, please come and quickly. Praise Este, your son is awake."

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Faramir awoke to a feeling of such bone-deep weariness he was unsure if he had the strength to keep even his eyelids up. He raised them just enough to catch the amber glow from the twilight fading through the window. His head felt oddly light and his right leg throbbed intensely. He was confused. He had no memory of being injured. Had not the battle been nearly over? Stiff and uncomfortable, he shifted his leg just slightly. Perhaps moving would relieve the ache. He was quite wrong: he could not bite back a cry as a searing jolt of pain flared from hip to knee. It was the cry that awoke a startled Torren and soon sent him running from the room. Hazy from many medicines Faramir was quite certain he was dreaming when a short few minutes later both his father and his brother rushed into the room.
"Valar," exclaimed the young lieutenant as the cup tipped and spilled its green and viscous contents across his lap. The coverlet upon the bed was soaked and tinged a sickly hue. He sighed; he was supposed to drink the tonic, not wash himself in it. It seemed it would be a long day. Already he was dropping things; his hands still shook and even Beruthiel, the new kitten eying hopefully his breakfast, had more energy than he.

He swallowed the dregs within the cup and made a face. Aunt Ivriniel of course had insisted that her latest mixture, just as sinister-looking and bitter as the last, was essential to thicken his blood. Beruthiel started and shook her head when she stuck out her tongue and licked delicately at the spill. Faramir was at the moment unusually rather frustrated. He had been home in Minas Tirith for two weeks. Released the day before from the Houses of Healing to recuperate at home, he did feel somewhat better. His leg no longer pained him constantly so long as he kept it up enough. He could even move a little on his own, shuffling one foot across the floor, though he was not to put weight upon his injured leg. Unused to being ill in any way, to be so needy was trying his legendary patience. Ivriniel had already scolded him soundly once when he tried to reach the privy on his own. Asked when his patient could start training once again, Varan had quietly shook his head and replied succinctly 'Months'. Faramir's heart had fallen into his stomach at the news. He sighed resignedly, thinking of Armsmaster Belegon's off repeated dictate: \textit{There was no point in wasting arrows for just the pleasure of drawing the bow.}

Ivriniel bustled that very moment, taking in her nephew's frown, his shaking fingers and the cup upon the bed. Without a word she lifted off the tray. Faramir lay back against the pillows, his pale face framed an apologetic smile. "Sorry Aunt Rini" he mumbled.

"For what?" Ivriniel, efficient and always on move, quickly wiped up the mess and refilled the cup from a pitcher laid nearby. With a grimace, but holding carefully with both hands this time, he drank down the entire cup.

"Being a bother. I can't seem to do anything for myself."

Gray eyes alike to his own looked sternly down. "Funny, young man, I never took you for one to feel sorry for yourself." Ivriniel softened the comment with a smile. "I know this is frustrating, but you must strive to be a bit more patient. Come, we need to clean up bed and you. Starting with this thing" She lifted the housecat off the bed, a moue of distaste upon her face. Ivriniel, organized and tidy almost to a fault, considered pets an unnecessary mess. Beruthiel, insulted, ran to sit upon the window seat and groomed haughtily one flank.

Faramir carefully swung his legs over the edge of the bed and found that just to sit straight up made him dizzy. Embarrassed, he had to cling to his tiny birdlike aunt as she helped him shuffle to the chair bedside the bed. It was a welcome change to be upright but his leg began to throb as soon as it rested straight down, his foot upon the floor.
A serving girl came and left a steaming basin of hot water within reach and Ivriniel held out a washcloth for him. "We will change the bed while you wash what you can reach." she said practically, waiting patiently for him to pull off his nightshirt.

He hated this. Hated needing help to wash and dress and do everything he would rather do himself. When he hesitated, the Princess of Dol Amroth gave him a withering and impatient look. "Faramir I changed your breechclout when you were a baby and bathed you as a child. I daresay I have seen parts of your skin you have never looked directly on yourself. Enough of this. Let me know when you need help with your back." She turned away and gestured to Mallina to take one end of the coverlet, as they both began stripping and remaking the soiled bed.

It appeared that with his liberation from the Houses came a new nurse. Aunt Rini, a competent healer in her own right, was caring, formidably efficient and famously determined. No wonder the Dol Amroth men were rarely ill.

He watched fondly for a moment as Ivriniel moved around the room. His memories were dim of the time after his mother's death, but the brightest of them was his aunt, come to live with them in Minas Tirith. The frightened little boy had clung to her. Amongst everything that changed so much, she looked and smelled so like his mother: the same dark hair and fine-boned build, the clear gray eyes, the same perfume. A celebrated herbalist, Ivriniel made her own scent and shared it with her sister, distilled from a white sweet flower from far off Khand that grew in the grand gardens at the seaside palace. He could picture Finduilas sitting on a bench, one of the trumpet-shaped blooms tucked behind her ear, her beautiful ebony hair loose about her shoulders, lifted gently by the sea breeze. He was not wholly sure it was his memory or something Boromir had told him of. Even now he smiled as a whiff of the fragrance came to him from across the room.

Reluctantly he pulled his wet nightshirt over his head. Quickly then, loathe to receive another look of censure, he washed everything he could reach while the women's backs were turned. He watched Ivriniel as he did so; the bed had been changed and now she moved restlessly about the room, straightening up, tidying, opening the window to let sun and air in. Perhaps, he mused, there was something of Dol Amroth about his wholly Hurin brother. His Aunt, it seemed, also could not stand still for long. It made him tired just watching her.

Ivriniel fluffed and resettled the pillows upon the bed, eying sidelong her nephew as he stood and grimaced, struggling to pull a fresh pair of breeches up over his hips, standing on one foot. She waited until he sheepishly asked for help and stood quietly pulling up the waistband as he balanced with one hand upon her shoulder. A quick swipe of the cloth finished the washing and she handed him a shirt. By the white set of his lips and restless shifting in the chair it was likely time put him back to bed.

A delicate black eyebrow was raised in query. "Is your leg bothering you or is the headache back?"

"Both." Standing she was almost level with his gaze, as Faramir answered miserably, running his hand absently through his tangled hair.

"Varan said there would be headaches, it is common if you have lost too much blood. Do you want something for it?"

"No, I am tired of sleeping."

Arms crossed across her chest, Ivriniel had a rather pointed look upon her face. "There is no sedative, it is just for the pain. Fighting pain increases fatigue, fatigue interferes with healing."

Faramir shut his mouth, deciding against what he had been going to say. He knew the tone that had crept into her voice. Silently then she mixed and handed him a mug of steaming herbs.
He sipped and made a face. "It tastes awful." Ivriniel hid a smile while she waited for him to finish the drink. It was not like her young nephew to complain or be grumpy. She glanced up to the bright sun flooding through the window. "What will you do this morning? We could go out to the garden for a while?"

"I suppose so. At least it is better than being inside all the time." Without comment but with alacrity the Princess reached for the shaking cup and set it down. "My days have a certain predictability." Faramir's mouth twisted wryly, replicating exactly an expression his mother had often worn.

Startled by the intensity of the memory, Ivriniel spoke more sternly than she intended. "Are you saying young man that you are bored?"

Aghast that she might feel he was not grateful for the company and the help, her nephew's natural courtesy reasserted itself "No, no of course not, Aunt Rini."

Ivriniel, with her long experience of nursing the Dol Amroth brood, assorted esquires and knights, was not fooled. That was exactly what he was. Trying to reassure him she smiled gently, but behind it was a great relief. If he is bored he is on the mend. He remembered little, not the attack, his time at Cair Andros nor the journey home by boat along the river. With a silent prayer of thanks, she shook away the memory of the pale and drawn sleeping face she first spied upon the quay. Denethor had looked gray and haggard himself as he stepped down from the river boat. Their eyes had met, a look of entreaty turned to her, begging she not acknowledge how near a thing his son's recovery had been. Too near.

Settled once more upon the bed, Faramir laid his head back upon the pillows. Beruthiel jumped lightly down and crossed the floor, taking up again her watch upon the bed. Ivriniel, with a huff of displeasure, strode over to the sideboard, picked up packet of letters that lay forgotten in her haste to clean the mess. "I forgot to pass you these, Faramir, they came for you at the townhouse the past few days. " Pleased that she could cheer him up a bit, she handed him the letters that Imrahil's butler had received.

Excitedly Faramir tore open the first envelope and held the letter in one hand as he idly stroked Beruthiel with the other. He scanned quickly the scrawling pages from his cousins, the lines of sheet music enclosed. "Rothos and Erchirion have sent the Lay of Falas!" he explained. The first smile of genuine happiness she had seen lit up his pale face. "Now we can play together." Her youngest nephew was already showing signs of being the gifted musician in the family. Denethor's son would say he played with more enthusiasm than skill.

Trip to the garden momentarily forgotten, Faramir reached to the bedside and picked up his feadan from where it always lay. He worked through the fingering of the old tune, trying several of the more difficult passages, stopping and restarting each time he missed a note. Beruthiel helpfully tried to bat at the end of the feadan as it moved.

"Come." They both called, as a knock sounded on the door. Amerith, Duchess of Lossarnach, breezed into the room, wreathed as always in perfume and lilac silk.

"Are you decent darling? Or have I missed all the fun?" Reaching down, she kissed Ivriniel on both cheeks in greeting, ignoring completely the disapproving look upon the older woman's face as she brushed past. The Princess of Dol Amroth thought the Duchess frivolous and self-centred; the Duchess found the Princess humourless and bossy. Neither was exactly wrong, and knowing this, they strove for polite tolerance. Both were equally devoted to the young man upon the bed.

"Princess, you are the very soul of patience with this impossible young man. I heard from Denethor yesterday that he had positively sulked at being confined to bed. Faramir sulking! So out of
character. How delightful. Such a novelty. I had to see it for myself."

Amerith glided across the floor to stand beside the bed, her mouth twitching with amusement. Faramir raised his cheek to be kissed, grinning back. Trust Amerith to lift his spirits. The day seemed suddenly much brighter. "No my Lady, I am just restless."

"And bored," added his aunt acerbically, refusing to be mollified by the extravagant flattery. She turned wary gray eyes upon her rival. Something was up and experience told her she would not like it.

"Well, I think I have a solution for that." Hands clasped, the Duchess turned her widest smile of expectant agreement upon them all. "I have a surprise for you, dear. It is a glorious day and your father has made the necessary arrangements. You are going on a picnic." Amerith, looking entirely too pleased with herself, turning from Faramir to Ivriniel. An eyebrow raised, she inclined her head. "With the Princess' permission of course."

Seeing the look of hope her nephew turned her way, obviously outmanouvered, Ivriniel could only grind her teeth in frustration. It did not take her legendary wit to guess that she was not invited.

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The guards that now accompanied the young lieutenant everywhere set the litter down gently upon the grassy slope. "Thank you Amrod," said Faramir, as one of them helped him up. Pausing to settle his balance, one hand on the young man's shoulder, he looked up to find the snows of Mindolluin sparkling in the sun. The breeze lifted gently his dark hair as he turned. Below them the walls of the City shone. It felt so much better to be outside.

Amerith walked forward to speak with her seneschal. Willen had achieved a minor miracle and stood proudly before the fruit of his morning’s labours. The tableau spread out in the meadow was perfect in every way. Blankets were laid down upon the grass, cushions piled up just so to support back and legs, buckets filled with snow and cool drinks, plates and food enough to feed a small army. Faramir was stunned and looked upon his friend in amazement. "You arranged all this for me?"

The Duchess smiled, pleased that the line upon his forehead had vanished for the moment. "Yes indeed my dear, it is high time you got out of doors. I plan to make this a weekly expedition. It is more than doable. Ivriniel has agreed, so long as we obey a few rules. I am quaking in my stays thought of the tongue-lashing I would receive if you did not elevate your leg, hence this perfect replica of Mindolluin made of cushions."

She directed Amrod to help Faramir over to the blankets. Once settled, propped against the pillows, leg up, he raised his face to the sun. The breeze wafted lightly the scent of anemones from the grass beside. He looked down upon the White tower of his forefather gleaming in the sun. It was wondrous.

The Duchess of Lossarnach had thought of everything. She passed a smaller basket to the guards. Two sat and picnicked while to Faramir's dismay two stood at attention nearby. They really were quite seriously standing guard, even here. His father was not taking any chances.

Amerith, noting the direction of his gaze and obvious discomfort with all the fuss, tapped his shoulder and passed her young friend a cup. "I would treble them if I were Denethor. Don't go doing that again darling, I quite disliked having to fear for you. So tiresome, a waste of energy and concentration. And frowning makes my wrinkles worse. I shall curse you every time I am passed up at the Midsummer Ball in future."
He shook his head ruefully, allowed himself a small half-smile at her jest. He knew her frivolous banter was a front, deployed at council to her advantage but also to hide uncomfortable emotion. She did not like being vulnerable. Ever.

Amerith opened a basket beside and his eyes widened in anticipation. Real food! She caught his look of anticipation and smiled. "I expect Ivriniel has begun giving you her famous tonics. I don't know what is in them but Imrahil tells me they are vile. Quite an incentive to stay healthy at the palace I should imagine." Faramir blushed, they were his sentiments exactly but he did not want to criticize his aunt.

"No. It would be quite rude of me to drink when you should not. Nothing that will thin your blood, I have my orders."

They ate in companionable quiet for a while, enjoying the sun and the view. The pie was rich and the berries tart. He felt better than he had in weeks. A fat little sparrow darted forward to try to grab a crumb of pastry.

Laying aside her plate and shooing off the bold little creature, Amerith sat back and sipped her tea. "Now tell me what you have been doing besides resting. I should have thought for you this is a sort of windfall. The time and leisure to read everything in the library?"

"Are you quite done moping?" She looked at him expectantly. "I wouldn't want a sour disposition to ruin the taste of this food. The berries have been brought straight from the fields." He flushed. He knew he was being crabby but it was hard not to chafe at the restrictions. Boromir was the one who was always hurting himself, throwing himself headlong into life. Faramir, the more careful of the two, had never so much as sprained a wrist, even as a child.

"Well then," Amerith continued lightly, "you will just have to cultivate the art of conversation. It could come in handy next season, as you are beating off the debutantes."

"I would rather not engage them in the sport!" he replied. The wry grin was back but the flush remained. His pallor was less pronounced for the moment against his long black hair. "Have not you arranged for musicians even here? You are slipping."

"That is next week dear..today we are in pastoral mode. Think Alcarin."

He laughed out loud at that. "Really? You hate Alcarin, despite the beauty of his words."

"Yes he is pompous, overblown and thoughtless, but appreciated a sunny day." She stood and went to check in with the guardsmen. When she returned he was tracing a pattern on the blanket, lost in thought. She sat down and waited for the question to come.

As they had many times in the past few weeks, his thoughts had turned to the brother who had saved his life. He had no more insight than anyone about the events upon the field but he remembered with
dismay the look of utter agony and tortured hope upon Boromir's face as he awoke. He had not realized how much his brother had come to depend upon him, how lost he would be without his 'little one'. It was meant to be the other way around was it not?

"Have you heard about the broken engagement?" he asked eventually. "I expected you, of all people, might have." His eyes were worried and she nodded slowly.

"Yes, Ysabet is a whey-faced little thing. Whatever was your father thinking? She would have fainted on the spot the moment his great hands touched her. And then died of embarrassment to find he cannot keep them to himself."

Faramir looked at her sharply. She shrugged and nibbled delicately at a ginger cake. "Do you deny it?" Would he ever stay faithful to one woman?"

"No," he admitted to the blanket, fingers tracing the threads within the weave. She could sense that he was worried and wanted to understand.

"It is all of piece you know Faramir." He looked intently up. "The gaming, the drinking, endless conquests both on and off the battlefield. He is quite simply addicted to risk. It makes him feel alive. It is as if something inside him is not quite right, although what that is I do not know."

"I think sometimes I do." Faramir replied quietly.

Surprised, Amerith glanced sidelong. The line of worry had reappeared between his brows. *He was too young to have such a constant mark.* She imagined reaching out and smoothing it with her fingers.

Her young friend took a hesitant breath, afraid that to speak aloud his thoughts would make them right. "I watch him sometimes in the council meetings. He has trouble reading and retaining all the endless facts and figures. All the details that shift from one minute to the next and have nothing to do with soldiering. They just are not his strength. I think he is terrified of people knowing and too proud to ask for help. Father is a lot to live up to. He is afraid to let him down, let Gondor down. Sometimes I wonder what he would do to avoid becoming Steward."

Amerith digested this for a moment. It rang true, but was hardly insurmountable. "Then you must support him in every way. Help him to understand that a leader need not be all things. A wise man surrounds himself with good people that complement his strengths. Surely he realizes that."

Lost in thought Faramir plucked a stalk of grass from beside the blanket's fringe. He tried to blow it, but still slightly short of breath could only manage a quiet squawk. "Amerith, have you ever thought of marrying again?"

Taken aback, unsure of where this was going, the Duchess took refuge banter once again. "Why are you proposing? Has your conscience got the better of you now that the rumor of our supposed dalliance is all over the realm?"

He groaned, running a hand over his eyes and laying his head back upon the pillow. "You have heard!"

"Come come, don't be silly. Of course I have heard." The green eyes were sparkling with amusement.

"I thought you might be wroth." Her bell-like laugh floated up beside.

"Well you are handsome enough that no one would think my standards are slipping."
He flushed with embarrassment and appreciation. It was not often that he was complimented. "No, but I have a brother who right now is desperate and would gladly propose. Especially to a lady who would promise to let him be himself in exchange for her own freedom."

Amerith turned sharply away to hide her surprise. She had not thought of this. *It would never work.* For moment she stared rapt at the antics of the little birds beside the meadow, searching for words to let him down gently.

"We would be throwing dishes at each other in a sen-night, Faramir. We are each far too used to organizing life our own way. Besides to be thought simply dallying with a son of the Steward suits me much better. Let them think what they will. It is useful. People will tell me things if they think we simply share a pillow that they would never say if I were the wife of the Steward's heir."

At his look of consternation she chided. "Faramir, don't pretend to be so naive as to think I do not collect information. You know that is one of my roles. The rumor is actually quite helpful in its way. In fact we should really make it look as if it is true." He turned a slightly horrified look upon her.

"My dear, this really is all about Gondor. I shall flirt with you in public…"

"You do that anyway, with everyone." he interjected.

"Not outrageously dear, just wait. This is the perfect cover. You shall have to stay overnight at the townhouse. I will arrange for Willen to open you a suite of rooms. This is perfect, you can attend a few of my scintillating dinners." Faramir, dismayed at how fast this was unfolding, could almost see the wheels clicking in her brain as she plotted out the path their subterfuge would take.

"I will have to buy you a bauble or tunic or three. Be seen to be indulging the young man with whom I am in love. Something in that latest blue of the season to minimize your pallor. What it called? 'A peacock's passion' or some such ridiculousness."

"A Peacock's passion, truly?" He laughed. She really was not serious? "Hypochondriac's veins, have they got that?"

Happy to see a smile upon his face even if he was laughing at her, Amerith nevertheless had the bit in her teeth and would not turn. "You should probably arrange to send something to me. Selected in the fourth level. More of court would see you there. Buy something and have it sent to me at the townhouse. Oh yes, the handsome and wounded son, struggles out of his sickbed to buy a present for his lady love. They will titter like finches."

"Amerith, do I have any say in this…ruining of my reputation?"

"Ruining? Certainly not…I am making your reputation."

"What do I get out of it?" A black eyebrow raised. He felt the need to protest, at least a little, from some odd sense of his own honor.

"The company of the most witty and celebrated…"

"and shameless…" A manicured hand waved slightly in acceptance.

"And shameless woman in Gondor. The respect and wonder of your troops. And somewhere to go of an evening that isn't the Steward's palace."

"Well, you have me there." he allowed. Faramir shifted just slightly against the cushions, uncomfortable, although whether with her perceptiveness or his injury he was unsure. Shrewd green
eyes did not let it pass unnoticed.

"I thought so." She did not bask, but wanted him to understand. "You will be well fed, entertained, spoiled just a little, and have complete freedom. Just delicious."

He complained then but not too heatedly, just enough to let her know it hurt a bit to be manipulated. He had his pride. "Am I to like it that you don't take me too seriously? That I am a game?"

Amerith started to speak, but wisely stopped. The cool green gaze became pained for just a moment. There had been other picnics. She too was a creature who loved the out of doors. If she blurred her sight just a little she could imagine him slightly heavier, at little older, bearded. *Doomed*. The crickets droned in the sun for what seemed an age. *Time*, she thought, shaking her head, *time runs both ways and chance makes a game of all our lives.*

The mask had slipped and Faramir was startled to see the pain that lay behind. He did her now the courtesy of pretending not to notice.

Grateful, against her better judgement she reached out and brushed the hair out of his eyes.

"I take you far too seriously and care for you far too much to make of you a favourite, Faramir. They come and they go. We, as friends, will endure. One day I will be the wicked friend who embarrasses you to your bride. Yavanna knows Ivrianel is too proper for it. I will spoil your children with too many honeycakes. I shall look forward to it."

"Oh well, now that you have my entire life mapped out I feel much better." He frowned and shifted painfully yet again. "I am relieved to find that you picture me surviving whatever is to come."

She was not sure she liked this air of melancholy that kept pervading his rejoinders. Was it just the pain and fatigue or the boredom? That might be understandable, Loathe to speak before the guards she sent the thought out lightly. "Have you Seen something?"

Gray eyes found her hers. "No, no, quite the opposite...Mother said she saw me settled. I have always trusted in her visions. But now, somehow, the world feels off." He tried to send the image to her, the dream Finduilas had shared. He focused, intending to broadcast narrowly just to her but had not the strength or training to complete his goal.

Laughter suddenly reverberated in the quiet. The guards looked quickly up. "Lorien, that was sloppy. It was the mental equivalent of a baby spitting up." Amerith chuckled and he joined her. He knew the truth when he heard it.

She noticed him shift uncomfortably once again. He was getting tired and stiff from lying in the same position. She pushed him slightly upright, massaging his shoulders for a moment.

*You are still too fatigued for lessons. In some weeks when you are better we will work again upon your gift.*

Soon it would be time to go. She shifted, thinking there would be opportunities enough in the days to come to discover what dreams were troubling him. She sat back against the cushions, his dark head now cradled in her lap. Between the warmth of the sun and the drone of the bees he drifted off. She watched contentedly a while his pale and peaceful face. *Sometimes*, she thought, *the life we are allowed is just enough.*

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The fat sparrow, a berry in its beak, moved not far way upon a branch, head cocked as if it too had
been interested in their banter. Amrod, ever a keen observer of the wildlife near the City, wondered for the second time that day why a sparrow hadn't headed already to the warm and sunny plains of Rohan.

Ithil had long risen and the city lay in peaceful slumber as her Lord and Steward turned the great key within the tower door and descended the tower of pearl and silver. His steps upon the stairs of stone were hesitant, body stiff from fatigue and hours of too little movement, his arm aching as he held the torch for light. It would not do now to fall. At the bottom he nodded briefly to the guards and at his signal, young Beregond fell in step behind.

Despite the lateness of the hour he did not turn towards his bed. Cold fear focused his mind as much as need or want he found, perhaps better. This was a threat. He needed to follow the thread now before he lost its course. Slowly he left behind the many images, discarded them as pebbles on the strand, his mind sifted through to.

At the door of the archive he left Beregond standing watch, slipped inside and took a lamp and lit it. Despite the dim his steps were sure, unerring. Like his younger son, he too had spent many hours learning all he could of the lore preserved in this fair city, the last of the men of Numenor. They each thirsted for the wisdom housed honourably in her walls, but thirsted differently. His son craved the sheer joy of the pursuit, the wonder of touching places and peoples of the past. He, Gondor's Steward through every sinew and drop of ancient blood, craved every crumb and grain of knowledge that would gain their upper hand.

Past cases and tomes and statues thick with dust he walked, pulling an arm within his heavy robe, intent to ease the cold and ache of his evening's labours. The fires had long gone out and the room he sought was never used. It would be cool. Beside an oaken door dark with wax and soot he paused, fumbling a little for the key. It turned but the metal moving in the lock shrieked its age.

This room held the oldest works within the archive: tome upon tome piled high and holding all there was of lore and languages, early ages of Middle-Earth and the making of Arda. Two books he sought: the room but little changed from his younger days he found them quickly.

The first he opened was a compendium of the fouler tongues of Middle Earth. The cracked leather flaked as he turned open the cover. The parchment whispered as he lifted the page. *I, Belechthor, in the rule of Eradan, second Steward of the High King of Gondor, archivist of the City, do humbly submit this work at the request of Herion, Captain-General. May it, in recompense of the foul nature it entails, bring to our fair kingdom advantage in understanding.*

It was divided into Orcish, Goblin, and Black Speech sections and within each the words were grouped by subject in the Sindarin tongue. Candlemarks passed before at last he found the word..."Karl: Mithrin" Fluent in Sindarin he did not need to translate more. Karl was the colour gray. Murg was horse. The Orcs at Druadan had sought a man upon a gray horse.

As Eldacar had feared, it was not happenstance. His heart clenched, it did not make him happy to be right. The moreso that it raised another fear. A rarity, all knew the Dol Amroth grays, they were famous through the land. Who knew and how so that Faramir rode Mithros?

The Second work he pulled forward then was far more ancient, the vellum cracked and yellowed, the tengwar faded with age. Not without some slow and halting effort could he read the work, the Lord of Gondor knew Quenya but less well. He had touched that very book some 70 years before, doubted others had touched it since, there had been little need in those times to dwell on ages past. In these lesser, latter days the scholars considered the near history of the realm and her founding suitable for research, not the distant, fading past, kept and remembered by the undying ones who had turned
away from Men.

Valaquenta: An account of the Valar and Maiar according to the lore of the Eldar.

Perhaps borne of instinct or a faint echo of long discarded memory he scanned the painted plates in the elegant work in turn, searching each in detail for the symbol.

Manwe, Lord of Air: robed in blue, a sceptre of sapphire in his hands and a sapphire upon his brow. Around him rose the great eagles and scudding clouds of Arda.

Next Ulmo, Lord of Waters: fearsome of mien and wreathed by a giant wave and glittering green armour. He held close great horns of pearl and watched the closest the Children of Iluvatar.

Aulë, smith and master of craft, Lord of Arda's substance: A giant, his body banded in muscle as strong as very stones he himself had fashioned, his white hand was upraised and he wept, prepared to smite his children.

A white hand upraised. This was an image from the depths of time, Denethor knew. Like Melkor, delighted by craft and the making of artful things, Aulë had been impatient with the unfolding of the Music. In his folly he created the Dwarves as his own children before the Firstborn of Illuvatar had come. Ashamed, anxious to not foment unrest, he had been prepared to destroy what he had created. Illuvatar stayed him, bade the Dwarf fathers sleep until the Eldar had awakened within Arda.

The Steward read farther on, bringing clear again such lore as he knew now of the Maiar: the servants and helpers of the Valar.

Mairon was the most powerful of the Maiar who looked to Aulë. Mairon, who when he fell, became Sauron and among the Eldar, Aulëndil the devotee of Aulë. Master of shadows, Sauron misshaped and twisted the very bones of Arda, its earth and metal so beloved of his first mentor.

Next in might to Mairon was Curumo, the skillful one, knowledgeable also in works of craft and metal.

At this Denethor placed a shaking hand upon the plate. The White Hand would not be the symbol of Sauron, that was the Eye. But could another pledged to Aulë choose to use it? The only other named of note was Curumo. Could it be that both Maiar of Aulë were corrupted by Melkor and his servants? Both fallen? It seemed it could not be true and yet with craft and skill such as Aulë governed came power. Those that lust for power can be corrupted if they are weaker willed. Machines of skill turned to another darker purpose.

The Lord of Gondor thought then on the chiefest prize and craft in Arda: the Silmarils. The greatest pupil of Aulë among the Firstborn had been Feanor, their maker. He who was the mightiest of the children of Illuvatar in body and in craft. Prideful and powerful, his works had unwittingly turned to ill. A deep foreboding settled on Denethor at the thought. It seemed it could be far too easy to turn those with Aulë's skill and power to ill if they lacked his great compassion.

A cold sweat of fear broke out upon his brow. The Istari. Like the Maiar the Istari were said to come out of the utter west. One, in the language of the Eldar was called Curunir, also greatly skilled and filled with industry. He that in Westron was called Saruman the White. Possessed of another craft of Feanor, a palantir, with which to see events. Isengard loomed over Rohan, in that the puzzle made more sense. Sauron had no need of Eorlingas for men.

Yet did it not defy reason that the head of the council could be set against them? It made little and all too perfect sense.
Weary in body, mind and heart, Denethor returned the works and shut the room once more. *Woe betide Gondor if she faced another enemy from Orthanc.* He would watch more intently now, be wary and gather such evidence as he could. He needed to be certain, but could do no more this night.

Deep in thought he dismissed the guard and paced slowly back to the palace. He sought his bed but paused at one door on sudden impulse. The soft carpet muffled his footfalls as he walked slowly to stand beside the bed. Beruthiel looked up at his approach and yawned and stretched. This was no threat. She stood and purred and rubbed her face against the hand the cupped her master's cheek, its pallor noticeably less after the sunny afternoon.

Gray eyes looked down as a grim smile stole across a proud and noble face. Fate, ever the hunter, listened too as the father made a promise to the close and silken dark.

*I will never let them take my son.*

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A/N: Thank you to Annafan, Thanwen and Gythja for helpful suggestions and critters
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The white bishop checks the black; a pawn is concealed

The sky that day was the fleeting brilliant blue it can only be when the air is dry and kissed by the barest warmth, its colour not muted by the haze of summer heat. The light of the afternoon's lingering hours was golden; as burnished as the fields about the Townlands, as tawny as Dol Amroth's summer wine or Lebennin's famous ales. Within those fields the men and women worked hard and quickly. All too soon the rains would come and there would be ample time for comparing the bounty of the season; caught in liquid gold for another year.

Anor's path was changing yet again. The land readied itself for sleep and Yavanne's fruits were picked. In this city of stone, where in its lowest level a young archer made the most of the perfect light, there were few reminders of the season's change. Only where Men were careless and let cushion plants grow about the walls could you see the colour of the leaves change. Thankfully, still, this was all too rare.

For a young man like the Steward's second son, born to the City and raised on her bed of rock and duty, it was through the air that you could tell the season. Stone heated faithfully with the sun but in each season the air was different. All summer he had waited patiently for the time to pass, for the air to give up its heaviness. Restless now with anticipation, he strove through repetition to soothe his jangled nerves.

\[
\text{Draw, exhale, sight, release.} \quad \text{His fingertips stung. The calluses below the pads were still too soft from months of rest but they would harden in time. Faramir brushed a lock of hair out of his eyes and ignored the sting; looked with pleasure toward the practice butts, to the white fletching of two arrows sitting exactly in the centre. It felt improbably good to be training once again. He raised his arm to notch another arrow, thankful his muscles no longer trembled with the effort. Sighting without conscious thought, his stance felt exactly right. Draw, exhale, sight, release. The arrow sped home and joined its fellows. He allowed himself a small but satisfied smile.}
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The sound of lazy clapping broke his concentration as he raised to fire once again. "You have not yet ruined your eyes I see, little one; passing your lazy summer in the dark and dust of the library."

Faramir looked up at the familiar voice and found Boromir gesturing down the range with a mail clad hand.

Grinning crookedly to show he had heard his brother's jibe, he turned to finish his round. "Watch this." There were others waiting and the light was perfect. Draw, exhale, sight, release. A fourth arrow sped. Squeezed itself barely in between the waiting shafts. The grin widened. There were some things for which he allowed himself a little pride.

The marshall signaled clear and the Steward's younger son walked quickly forward to collect his arrows. The elder made out only the very slightest hesitation in his stride. The fluid grace was there but muscles had yet to fully balance.

Faramir returned and laid his bow carefully down. Before he had fully righted he found himself crushed against a broad and sweaty chest. Boromir smelled like horse and whetting oil; clearly he had come straight in from Osgiliath. The young man felt more than heard his brother's lips move against his hair; thanking Manwe as he had vowed in the long watch of an anxious night. This has
become the ritual; practiced every time the Captain returned and felt the beat of his brother's heart
against his chest. *Fear can do that to a man. Make him seek for help in unaccustomed quarters.*

"You are back early." He grinned up at the sight of sun chapped skin and lanky hair. A sigh brushed
past his ear as they both pulled back; reluctant to let go. "What is the rush?"

"Father called us in. I suspect he intends to finally assign you back. It has been long enough." Boromir
smiled, surreptitiously squeezing hard a shoulder. It was bulkier than the last time they had met, more
than a month before. *Good.* "I look greatly forward to it. My records are a mess, the
reports are left undone."

"That is all you need me for? A secretary?" The indignation feined, above the scowl the clear grey
eyes sparkled with amusement.

"Not much good any other way are you?" Now there was real indignation in his brother's face.
Reaching out, Boromir affectionately ruffled the waving raven hair. "If I have to save your hide from
every simple Orc we come upon what good are you in the line? Even your vaunted dreams couldn't
help you there."

Those were fighting words and Faramir would not let them rest. He wagged a long thin finger under
Boromir's aquiline nose. "Not then, but just you wait. One day I will see the night your luck at the
Kine will turn. I haven't decided if I will tell you yet."

His brother's laugh was loud and free. "And remind me why I thought I missed you while I was
away?" He slung an arm across the slighter man's shoulders. It felt so good to be together once again.
"Perhaps I should drag you out to the tables tonight. Mayhap the environment will bring the visions
on."

The two men walked off the range towards a water barrel, followed at a distance by Faramir's ever
present guards. He dipped the wooden scoop and took a drink. Gestured, but the older man shook
his head. "The whole company is in?" His eyebrow raised once more in query. This would be
welcome news.

"Yes. The men are making for the second circle and then tomorrow is the feast. I will join them
tonight after I grace the Kine." Faramir raised his eyebrows even higher. His brother's itching fingers
could obviously not resist the lure of the dice. Dipping the scoop once again, he took another drink
and looked thoughtfully across. He decided for the moment it was prudent not to comment.

"I go now to give Father my report." Boromir explained. "What is his mood?" Faramir could not fail
to notice the anxiety in his brother's face. The change of season had also chilled somewhat their
father's recent warmth.

"He has been spending more time within the tower of late." Two pairs of grey eyes held each other.
Both thought they knew what that portended but would never speak of it in place so public. "I have
hardly seen him these last few weeks and suddenly this morning over breakfast he announced it is
time to pass on some of Mother's things. He wants you to have her wedding rings, he says."

Faramir nodded at the look of shocked incredulity on his brother's face. "He is clearly changing his
strategy and hopes to appeal to your sentimental side." Quickly he regretted the teasing tone. It was
unfair to bait his brother so about a topic that pained him so intensely. "He has revised his will and
cedes immediately to you all of Mother's dower lands. You are about to become a wealthy lord, my
brother, and thus even more attractive on the market."

"Uinen's blessed tits." Boromir swore so loudly the guards nearby looked up. Clearly their father has
not given up the idea of finding him a wife. Finduilas' dower lands were rich country. Adrahil had been generous to his (secret favourite) daughter. Wine and fish and trading rights were the valued coin of Dol Amroth. "What of you? What provision does he make for you?"

"Me?" Faramir shrugged and shook his head. "Emyn Amren of course, there is nothing else outside the City. For the moment devoid of any income and about as valuable as the slopes of Ephel Duath I expect." This last, of course, was not said in bitterness. It was merely a statement of the fact.

Boromir rolled his eyes. It seemed their father reflexively slighted Faramir in even this. "He could have divided the dower lands, they are surely more than ample." His brother raised his hand to forestall any further protest.

"Leave it be, Boromir. What does it matter? I will be a Captain one day and have little need of income. So long as it is enough to keep me in quills and parchment I will be happy." As expected, that brought a smile to his brother's face. "He has given me her mantle, her winter mantle. Do you remember it?" Boromir nodded, thinking of its silver thread sparkling in the candleglow; their mother bidding them each good night and kissing each one in turn. That is right. It is a pretty thing and he, at least, will appreciate its artistry.

"I should go." said Boromir, hearing a bell toll from the Tower in the Citadel. "The sooner I report the sooner I will hear that I have my best lieutenant back." Faramir, flushing at the compliment, picked up his bow and quiver and fell in step. The guards, as ever, followed close upon his heals.

Together, the sons of the Steward walked back up through the city streets toward the Citadel. Both were determined to enjoy this unexpected furlough. Each for his own reason looked forward its end.

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Meduseld was ablaze that eve in Haligmonad, the holy month; her fires lit, light gleaming on spear and shield, pride gleaming in her warriors' great hearts. The day had been given to the fair: animals had been bought and sold, grain and barley laid down for another year, provision made for the long winter yet to come. Now, as the moon rose and made tracks upon a sea of grass, the time had come for the symbel; a ritual born before even the Rohir came to the golden plains. Before Eorl signed an oath and before Wainriders stalked the woods of Rhovannion.

Theodred, Prince of Rohan, sat next to his father upon the dais; his dark blond hair in warrior's braids, a golden torque about his neck. He alone among the assembled men was smooth of cheek; as had been his grandsire Thengel from whom he traced his broader face and blue-grey eyes. An affectation yes, but one that pleased him greatly. He wished also to honour his grandmother Morwen, Thengel's adored and feisty wife. Over ninety and shrunk with age, still sharp in mind and gaze, the dowager Queen looked suddenly up and smiled upon her grandson, grey eyes twinkling in the light. Not for the first he wondered if she read his mind and heart.

To Theodred fell the toasts; each round an honour in itself. First Eorl's goblet, horn doubly curved and chased in silver, was filled by his aunt Theodwyn. As was right and proper she was ealu bora for the night. His toast, to victory and to power for his king, rang wide within the hall. The next in Béma's goblet, singly curved and bound in gold, he gave to peace. The last poured into Vána's silver chalice, twined in vines and flowers, he gave for good season and prosperity. About the hall men drunk long and well of the season's sweet harvest ale.
The beot came then; the warriors boast. Met always with a mocking challenge. He fingered lightly the torque upon his neck, uncertain what to say. Down the table he watched Theodywn refill her husband's cup in readiness. Eomund, as Chief Marshall, had the honour to be thyle that night. To him came the task of challenging unwelcome or unlawful toasts. Theodred watched as Theodwyn poured, bending forward past her husband's cheek. He whispered something and she blushed, swatted his shoulder as she passed. There, there was a match that he could wish for; to love as his aunt and uncle did. They were truly blessed. Vana in her favour smiled on all who flowered and flourished well.

It was not in his heart that night to boast of his renown. The challenge he wished to give would surely bring dishonour to the hall, sour its luck, force Eomund to stand. He would not do that to his uncle needlessly. Yet when the minni, the remembrance, had been drunk, the Prince thought painfully of Alfgrim, his widow and his child. The letter from Boromir had felt like a second blow, confirming only what they had thought. His sword-brother must be truly gone.

He rose and brought the men roaring to their feet, boasting that in the coming year he would find the courage to be beardless once again. It played well, but fortune demanded a serious boast. Feeling like a coward, he sat down and caught his father's eye.

Theoden-King looked levelly but with compassion upon his son; he knew the letter and his pain. The king rose and did his boasting for him, speaking of brave deeds and strength and gifts to come. Theodred sat silently by his side, burning with shame and anger hot as the hearth where turned the spitted pig.

It was Grima's miscalculation, oily as ever and enquiring, to cross paths with the Prince when he had gone to catch some air while the bragafull was drunk. "Prince Theodred, you have the look of one haunted here this evening. It is unlucky it is not, to grieve tonight outside the minni. But such a tragedy. My condolences for your loss."

Theodred saw the next moment as through a rising fog. It felt as if he stood aside and looked on to see another man react. He saw the hand that grabbed, the crack of Grima's head against the outer wall, the little man's pleading gibberish. Eomund, he remembered, Eomund had told him once this was how it felt when the red rage took control.

He saw with no little satisfaction fear and loathing fill the advisor's pale and sweating face. The voice he heard (his own?) was low and deadly earnest. "If I find you have any complicity in my sword-brother's end, my beot, I vow, shall be to rip your traitorous head from off your shoulders. No thyle would challenge me for that."

A scarred and sinewed hand descended to firmly grasp his own. "Theodred. Min æðeling. Leave him be." He looked up into his uncle's grave blue eyes, surprised to find the fiery marshall was the one counseling restraint. It made him realize how very near was the fine edge of his control.

The great blond mustache twitched into a mocking grimace. "The Worm is not worth it, my friend. Go. Drink long and deep. Honour Alfgrim with your song."

Theodred looked up to the older man's eyes. He took a shaky breath, let go his hand. Slowly and deliberately he threw his braids back across his shoulder and adjusted carefully his tunic.

Eomund smiled up at the younger man. "My honour to serve, my Prince."

The moment the Prince of Rohan turned and walked back to the blazing hall, Grima began to sidle out of reach. In one swift move, the Marshall's beefy hand had grabbed his coat and pinned him once again. Slowly and with great deliberation, the Lord of Aldburg spat upon his face.
"Worm, you are not fit to walk anywhere his blessed soles touch our hallowed ground. I am thyle. I promise you I will not challenge his beot."

Later, when he had changed his soiled and sodden robe, the Wormtongue breathed his own oath silently into the waning night. "You will both pay."

With that, he walked back to the King and began to implement his master's plan.

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'A peacock's passion' was an indigo blue that suited rather well the pale complexion and dark hair of the young lieutenant. To judge from the number of other tunics of in that shade scattered about the Great Hall that night it truly was the colour of the season. None of the other stylish lords sported a tunic quite so fine as the Steward's second son, the son favoured by a duchess and recipient of her impeccably extravagant and slightly flamboyant gift. The tunic, graced with silver thread embroidery and real sapphire buttons, finely detailed like no other he had ever worn, made Faramir feel like the colour's namesake. Eyeing him, Boromir had laughed and he had blushed. To be noticed was rather the point. He sighed inwardly. It would take some getting used to.

The Steward's son bowed deeply to his benefactress and raised her elegant fingers to his waiting lips. The Duchess of Lossarnach was particularly resplendent that eve in a gown of lapis blue and corset of blue and silver. Sapphires shimmered in her necklet and dangled from her ears. Seemingly mesmerized, the young lord looked adoringly into her emerald eyes. Slowly (for emphasis) he turned her hand and quite scandalously kissed the inside of her wrist. As was expected, a murmur rose nearby.

"Gods Amerith," he thought; grey eyes dancing with amusement, "you've made us match."

The duchess giggled, quite obviously delighted by the gesture, and did not seek to retrieve her hand. Her tinkling laugh carried quite far across the throng. "Some here are not as bright as others. They need a rod to the face to notice."

Her hair piled intricately in curls and braids, Amerith blushed prettily as she quite supposedly unconsciously fingered the ornament in her hair. Delicate and sparkling argent, made of marcasite stylized as a swan of course, it caught the light of every candle and was the envy of all the ladies in the hall. Standing rapt, fascinated by the tableau arranged before them, not a few of the young debutantes imagined the handsome young lord giving them such a lovely and delicate gift. The story had run rife about the upper circles. Wounded while gallantly defending one of his own men, saved by his heroic elder brother, the Steward's second son had been seen to limp (obviously still in pain and not yet healed!) into one of the City's better jewellers. Quiet sighs of disappointment competed with the music's gentle strains. Now all of Gondor knew where the gift had been bestowed.

The duchess's voice pitched just slightly louder to carry further. "Your gift is so unexpected and so very beautiful Lord Faramir. You are spoiling me, my darling. Here I thought you a typical oblivious young man. Immune to accoutrements of beauty."

"No one can be immune to your extravagant beauty, my Lady," Faramir drawled slowly but loudly, as the tittering intensified beyond his elbow. He leaned close to whisper into her ear (she smelled of roses, a scent he was starting to associate with subterfuge). "Actually I am a typically oblivious young man. I asked Nera to suggest something."
Faramir winced inwardly at the thought. The most constant female in his world; Nera, his former nurse and governess, had glowed with thinly veiled excitement. She truly thought he was in love.

Amerith, of course, read easily his discomfiture. "It makes her happy, my dear. Never feel guilty for making someone happy."

They were undisturbed within the crowd for quite some time; pretending to be oblivious, laughing and sharing evidently many private jests. Faramir blushed on cue and the Duchess uncharacteristically ignored the discussions swirling all about them. Blushes the young ladies assumed were from undoubtedly inappropriate conversation were actually quite genuine. Amerith indulged in a running silent monologue about the failings and proclivities of those who passed them by. The Steward's younger son was mildly appalled to find, for once, that he was actually having fun.

Between the moments of all too public flirting Faramir danced with most of the more eligible young women, fetched them drinks and treats, flattered their mothers, and engaged the Captains present in more serious discussion. Frequently he would look up from his latest dance and catch Amerith's adoring eye. In short, he behaved exactly as the young ladies present swooningly expected. They were meant, after all, to be being only slightly indiscreet.

What Faramir was actually doing was attempting to pass a test set by his rather exacting tutor. Sent out each time to read guests the duchess selected about the room; he reported back and the accuracy of his gift was compared against his teacher. The greater challenge was for he himself to broadcast narrowly or receive amidst the distraction of a dance; even hurriedly and without warning when she unexpectedly broadcast a command back to him. In this way he changed partners and discussions throughout the night; seemingly moved by his own restlessness but silently answering her commands with alacrity. Amerith was quietly pleased. She found he had made quite impressive gains in focus and control over the weeks of their concentrated study.

By the time the Duchess halted her assessment (noting at the midnight bell the first lines of genuine fatigue about his eyes) the young lieutenant had given his ever present guards a merry chase.

Ceridwen, Lady Langstrand, looked upon the evening's subject of scandal and speculation and debated how best to wedge the Duchess of Lossarnach from off her young admirer. Lord Faramir, she felt certain, was perfectly suited to her highly decorative, if vacuous, middle daughter. Possessed of a rare courage and determination unbecoming the typical highborn Gondorian lady, she was nothing if not determined. It was, she felt, a mother's duty to give her daughter a fighting chance.

With a majestic prow that would have done justice to Langstrand's famous schooners, she circled the hall and divided the throng, stopping as needed to acknowledge the competition as she passed. Purely out of courtesy of course, she stopped to speak to the Duchess and the Steward's son. It was important in any campaign to gauge the strength of the enemy's position.

Faramir bowed and the sapphires on his tunic flashed. His supposed lady love smiled at the sight with all the possessive satisfaction of an artist placing a detail on a canvas. Lady Langstrand grit her teeth and smiled.

"My lady, it is a pleasure indeed to see you once again." Bent over her proffered hand politely,
Faramir did not actually kiss the back of it; the many rings upon her ample fingers were noticeably quite overlarge. For a moment he feared to get too close or he might do his face an injury.

Ceridwen preened to be subject of his attention. "Lord Faramir, we are all so thrilled to see you here this evening. You have been quite hiding away from court. It must have been so trying for a true warrior such as yourself to have been idle for so long. We are so relieved you are recovered fully from such a terrible wound. And gained defending another man. We are all so very grateful that the Steward's sons give so much of themselves to Gondor."

"One of them certainly does." Amerith, silently laughing to, took his arm and leaned much too close for appropriate decorum. It was always important to clearly stake out ones ground.

Sometimes, her supposed favourite thought, it was rather trying to blush so easily. Langstrand of course assumed he was embarrassed and pleased by her compliment.

A black eyebrow raised and grey eyes danced. Someone had to defend his brother. "Is that what you call it, Amerith? Giving of yourself to Gondor?"

Ignoring the duchess's momentary sputter, he answered Ceridwen with an elegant half bow. "It is my duty to serve, my Lady" he said, and as he did, clear grey eyes slid away and caught the Duchess's tiny smile. They flitted back just as he straightened up. Ceridwen, of course, did not miss the move and frowned for the barest moment.

Oh well done. Amerith's green eyes flashed. You are catching on. He was doing rather better than she expected, but still the gibe could not rest unmatched. As if pulled by an irresistible force, she quite shockingly slid her hand down his arm to rest too long upon the fingers of his sword hand. Ceridwen's eyes, as she expected, followed every move.

"As ours is to support the Steward and his house in every way." Amerith turned a wide-eyed, innocent gaze upon her rival. "Lady Langstrand, I simply have to compliment Lord Faramir on how well he is doing with his training now that his energy is coming back. His fingers have quite regained their speed and famously deft touch. His thrust is just as strong, if not stronger with all the hours of practice he has put in."

Leaving a little pause for the words to properly sink in, she savored the look of appalled fascination Lady Langtstrand could not hide. "With the bow and sword of course. So I am told."

Faramir, choking with barely concealed laughter, protested that he was not yet adept as his older brother. A fraction too late, with an inward groan, he realized Amerith was not about to stop the game.

The Duchess, exultant at the opening he had made, sailed right on through, gazing adoringly up at her young love. "Oh my dear, of course you will be. All you need is a more experienced partner and more practice."

This was too much. Throwing the Duchess a look of purest disgust, Ceridwen excused herself and sailed off into the throng.

This was clearly going to be a rather more difficult battle than she had first thought.

Sieges, unfortunately, always favoured the defender.

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Somewhere after the first morning bell Boromir himself had seen and heard quite enough of their
Settling on a strategy, he tried a tactic that had always served him well: a full frontal assault. He waded in, armed with two full tankards of the bitter ale on offer.

"What, in the fires of cursed Angbad, is going on little brother?" He asked, as he quietly sidled up the younger man. Faramir leaned nonchalantly against a pillar; his buttons winking in the glow from the candle sconce beside. He accepted the drink but did not speak, waiting patiently to see which way the wind was blowing.

The Captain drank long and deep. "I laughed it off when the men started whispering that you were getting love letters from a duchess. I ignored them when they started to say that you were her latest favourite. But now I find you hanging off her every word and showering her with all too public compliments. I could almost believe that you were in genuinely in love. Except, I don't."

Twice. Twice Boromir had seen his little brother infatuated. Once with the scullery maid and once with their tutor's daughter. Both times, the attention was unrequited, the girls terrified by their father's grim regard. Faramir had locked himself within his room and poured out his heart in words. Mooned like a lovesick calf and hardly ate. Not this.

Faramir ducked his head to hide the embarrassment on his face, searched the tankard for a place to hide. He could never lie to his beloved brother. "What gave it away?" he finally asked.

Boromir surveyed the room as he raised his tankard once again to wet his lips. Across the hall he found Amerith dancing with the Warden of the Keys; heard her laugh floating above the music. He sincerely hoped his little brother was not in too very far over his normally guileless head. "You are paying far too much attention to the other young ladies in the room. Normally you avoid them at all costs." That much was true. Faramir nodded only slightly.

"Then what is this in aid of, hmmm?"

"You will have to ask Amerith, Boromir, the greater part of this set piece is hers. For myself, I hope to gain a little freedom. Against the event we are not always posted on campaign together. It makes a useful excuse to avoid the Citadel when I am alone. She, at least, he is unlikely to want to cross."

Boromir snorted but realized, to his chagrin, his brother likely had the right of it.

At that there was nothing for it but to find the duchess and further probe the issue.

He caught Amerith's hand as she began to leave the dance floor. She looked startled, but guessed quickly his intent, schooled her features and smiled and curtseyed. An almain began and without adieu the Captain swung her into the line, their hands overlapped and facing forward in the parade. As they glided back and forth in slow and stately time, Boromir found he had ample opportunity to focus on his interrogation.

"My Lady, I have had to change my speech this evening. I was going to warn you against toying with my brother's heart. Perhaps even threaten you with violent harm if you hurt him in any way. Now I find I have to congratulate you on improving his acting skills. Normally I would have said he was far too reticent to set foot upon a stage."

Green eyes glanced up sharply as the couple paused upon the pointe. "You are being very perceptive, Captain. My compliments." Flattery was for the easily lead. He chose to feel just slightly insulted at her comment.

"I am only stupid on Tuesdays, Amerith. Today is Thursday."

She laughed out loud at that. Revelers arrayed along the walls glanced up to see the source of the
amusement. He was not easily dissuaded. "I repeat. To what do we owe this little farce?"

As one the couples spun, clasped hands again and the procession began once more along the hall. Amerith gave the slightest of sighs as he squeezed lightly her fingers for added emphasis. "I will elaborate but first you must tell me. How did you know?"

"He does not show his emotions so casually to anyone. He has had far too much experience holding them back. Life has taught him not to offer up what needs to be protected."

"And what if he were truly in love? Would he not then be more open?"

Boromir shook his head, trying to make her understand an instinct, a surety, borne of their enduring and unbreakable bond. "I would know. He would shine."

Even as he said the words, Boromir truly wondered: how should he know? He, who had never felt the need to shine, how could he be so sure? A woman, late one languid night, had asked him if his heart like his city was made of stone. Of course he had laughed it off, but deep inside it stung. No, his heart was not stone; it was tender flesh and warm bright blood as any other. The difficulty was that there was no room within it for anything but his father, his brother and his birthright. His brother's heart, on the other hand, his brother's heart he suspected could hold whole kingdoms within its expansive chambers. Faramir was naturally given to great passions; encompassed these present days by poetry and lore, languages and learning. What would he not give to see his brother's heart truly given to another? It would be, he was quite certain, a quietly breathtaking sight.

Never one to retreat, regardless of the cost, he pressed again. "You have not answered my question Amerith. What is this all in aid of?"

The emerald gaze became thoughtful; focused down the hall upon the knot of officers standing there. "I gamble the long game Boromir, you the short. It has rather chancier odds."

Three steps and they twirled about again. He had quite forgotten how tedious this was. Her chuckle sounded low. For a moment he wondered how she caught his thought.

"I have two goals Captain: stability and intelligence. Through this game I convince your father to keep your brother off the market for as long as possible. Help to rectify the damage done by your refusal. The disaffected fiefs will continue to hope for a chance at power and influence through him. Not to mention a route to sharing both Dol Amroth's and Hurin's wealth. The poorer fiefs tithe just as much in men and arms to Gondor's army, but they struggle still. That is fertile ground on which resentment can start to grow."

He was startled and not a little nonplussed. It had never struck him so. "What is so very different now than in grandfather's time? The people love the Steward. They are loyal. They know we do our duty in every way we can."

"They were loyal, Boromir. Hope. Hope is the difference. Ecthelion held peoples' hearts and minds. Your father can command only their loyalty, not their love. Since Thorongil there has been no Captain for the people to follow." He hissed at that, the urge to not speak the name aloud reflexive. Amerith rolled her eyes. "You and Faramir must become the figureheads the people look too. That the people love. In war, in time of threat, people react on instinct with their hearts. It is not in your father's nature to understand this. I work to soften that."

"No King or Steward could have worked harder for Gondor. Many worked much less…"

"Yes that is true. But think. When was the last time your father toured the country? His father did so
every summer."

Absurdly, he found himself defending a man he was uncertain of himself. "We have best army of the free peoples of Middle-Earth."

"Yes and you, in time, will be its head. War is threatening, the shadow will grow. As of now we can confidently field but 10,000 men. That is scarce the size the van when last Gondor went to war."

"The fiefs would not dare fail in their support?" For the first time he began to feel queasily uncertain.

"Perhaps. And just perhaps we need to keep them on their toes. If people think we are lovers Boromir they will tell me things, hoping to influence events. Denethor keeps his own counsel far too much, relying on his not inconsiderable abilities. His mistake is thinking that others will be as logical and calculating as he is. Events could get away from him."

She looked up into his worried face and laughed low and quietly. "Oh dear one, the council is a cesspool. I am afraid I have shown you more than you want to know. But worry not, it is years yet before you need to coat the skin of even a toe in its decay."

After that they finished the measure, each caught within their thoughts. Boromir bowed as the music died away and escorted her from off the floor. Suddenly, more than anything, he wanted to be back in Osgiliath, away from the need to think around corners, from the need to peer too closely into people's hearts.

Faramir hurried over. He did not hide the frown of concern upon his face. "That seemed rather a serious conversation for a ball?"

Amerith tilted her head and gave him a wry and knowing smile. "Why gambling, gambling is always serious."

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The gentle sound of birdsong rose in the predawn glow, yet the Steward's eldest son, the one used to sleeping deeply and undisturbed, lay still awake and restless on his bed. Even as he tossed and turned, his younger brother slept peacefully (alone) in an elegant townhouse, for once not beset by dreams of green and dying.

Boromir should have slept. Really there was no reason not too. He had done well in the gambling; very well in fact. Had treated himself on the proceeds to the best brandy he could find and the most exclusive lady in the city. This scratched an itch, but only for a while.

Now in the light of dawn he worried guiltily. Once again, his heart was left unmoved. There was no room. No room for any but those he held so close: his brother, his father, and always Gondor. All three he loved fiercely, so fiercely that that he feared to let them down. His father he knew loved Gondor too. Had loved it so long and well that he no longer knew where her needs and his were to be divided. Sometimes Boromir worried that this too would be his fate.

*He believed his heart, like his father's, held no more room.*

Sometimes, we are given the tools to know ourselves. More rarely we are given the grace to understand we have been wrong.
It would be many years, many tankards, many women and many paths, before Boromir learned something all too precious.

Lying cradled by an ancient tree, his blood watering its roots with pain and iron, the son of the Steward was gifted a moment of exquisite clarity.

He understood, after all, he had been wrong. He had room in his heart for a king.

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The Twenty-seventh ruling Steward, as was his custom, had excused himself early from the feast. As many would surmise, he retired to his study to make useful the later hours of the evening. In haste not to let down his lord, Cahil, his faithful butler, slipped out as well. It seemed likely the Steward would need some of the many papers of the council or reports from the company just come in. It helped, his servant found, to anticipate his lord and master's needs. In that way he was less likely to feel the heat of his master's chancy temper.

Pausing briefly at the council room, the pudgy older man adjusted his robes and mopped his brow. His lord expected proper turn out and he had indulged a little in the dancing. Most everyone, except the unlucky with the watch, would be still at the Great Hall, partaking of the merriment. He sighed. Picking up two neatly labelled stacks, he hurried along the nearly empty corridors.

At the Steward's richly paneled door the guardsman knocked and he was admitted. He found his lord not seated working at the desk as he expected, but standing by the window, gazing thoughtfully out at an ink dark sky. The stars were hard and brilliant. Fair Ithil, bright and nearly full, shone clearly through the clouds gathered above Osgiliath athwart the river.

Cahill bowed correctly as he was able with his arms full of parchment. "My Lord. Is there aught else you require? Warmed wine and bread and fruit perhaps?" The older man did not know what tired the Steward so, but it was usual for him to fortify himself before continuing. Of late, it seemed, not a night went by that his lord worked there long past the midnight bell.

"Yes...that will do. My thanks."

Cahil laid his burden down and moved towards the door. His master sounded unusually tired and distracted. Perhaps he should bring meat and cheese as well. Oft times the Lord of Gondor needed encouragement to eat.

Denethor stood once again beside the window, pondering its view of moonlit field and river, the mountains to the east already cloaked in snow. He scrubbed wearily along his jaw, his gaze hard and unyielding as the stars. Suddenly he turned back.

"Cahil?"

"My Lord?"

"There is something else that I require. Bring me my suit of mail."

If he was surprised by the unusual request the faithful servant was too well trained to let it show. "Yes, my Lord." He bowed again and swiftly left the room.
The first decision taken, alone again with his grim and troubled thoughts, Denethor turned to the issue of most pressing need. *What to do about his younger son?*

The evening past the Lord of Gondor had learned all he could from the wizard he once thought to trust. Higher in his forefather's shining tower he had listened to his traitorous advisor's words, sifting through the chaff for kernals of truth, wrapped as always in flattery and distraction. *How are your sons? How fares your younger boy? He was wounded was he not?* Innocent questions on the surface but with his knowledge they had taken on a deeper meaning. He had bided his time, trading trivia of orc ambushes and rumours from the south. Nothing that the wizard could not have gained quite easily another way.

When he judged the moment right, he had asked a question of his own.

"*Saruman, I ask a boon. I have need of your deeper knowledge of old lore.*"

Caught within black and shining stone, the wizard's long and somewhat mournful face, split in to a smile. "*Of course, Lord Denethor. I live to serve the need of Gondor in any way within my power.*"

"*We have found a strange device upon an orc. The one who tried to slay my son. It may help to understand why the creature bore him ill. I have searched such scrolls as I can find but can only find one image like it.*" Here he had taken his greatest risk. Drawing attention to his knowledge. It would not do for the Istari to think also of a plate of Curumo.

"Ah, well done, my Lord. And what is this new design?"

The voice was one of guileless interest.

"*A hand upraised, traced out in white. As of Aule, the master of design and craft.*"

Here he chose his words and images with utmost care. The palantiri, wrought by Feanor in his youth, were made by one who loved the honesty of art and the beauty held in truth. They could not show falseness in any way. "*I am... uncertain of my gleanings. But the text notes the name of one Aulendil, a devotee of Aule. Aulendil who is also the Nameless One. I wonder if it could be he.*" *I wonder, but I do not believe.*

He had trembled at the effort, his hands concealed under the black and silver flowing robes of office. The Steward marshaled then the one advantage he truly had in this chancy game. He alone was the rightful user of the Anor-stone. It would do his bidding in a way the stone under Saruman's control would not. At his thought Orthanc's highest chamber was revealed in far greater detail, its minutest sounds clear as a lark's song on quiet summer day.

"*The hand upraised. Yes my Lord, I have seen it long ages past. Aule poised to smite the seven Dwarf fathers before Eru stayed his hand.*" Denethor had seen the barest sheen of sweat upon the wizard's brow. That was the time to press.

"*Then is it Aulendil's sign Saruman? Think you the One behind the plot?*"

The wizard's expression had become one of sorrow and resignation. "*Yes, yes I do. Your reasoning, Denethor, is impeccable. You must look closely to your eastern borders if he is set against your sons.*"

Ironic were those final words. The Lord of Gondor spoke truly when he replied. "*Thank you for your learned council. That is, of course, what I shall do.*"

He had broken the contact and slumped back within a waiting chair, panting slightly from his effort.
The cost was high but to be certain was essential. Much rested now on the path that he would take.

Saruman the White, the master of deceit and lies, would never know that a Noldor's love of truth had betrayed him to his foe. The Orthanc-stone, unwilling to transmit words too close to falsehood, had shrieked, low but faintly audibly. Far away in the Tower of the Anor, the Lord of Gondor (also learned in lore of ages past) had heard and read the sign.

Now, this evening, the Lord judged the time had come to act upon the knowledge. The greatest safety lay in acting while the wizard thought he followed a false lead.

Denethor had no need of maps or diagrams to know exactly where every unit and company in his army was assigned, where every orc party had been sited, each recent skirmish had been fought. His formidable memory kept every line and detail ever at his fingertips.

He had already in his mind discarded most of the companies in the farther reaches. The risk of another focused skirmish was too great. A small part of him counseled to keep Faramir under guard in Minas Tirith, but that too had its risks. It would be always hard to protect from hidden risk in the crowds and throngs and he had little desire keep his son locked away within the Citadel. If he was honest with himself he knew also they would both quickly tire of the constant contact.

He could of course, send Faramir back to second Boromir. The Captain could rely upon his younger brother while keeping him close under his watch. Knowing his eldest as he did, that would be exactly what Boromir wanted and expected. It was also most likely what others expected he would decide, and that alone made it less appealing.

There was, however, another point that the Steward mulled, one that made him more than a little hesitant. Denethor loved his eldest son. Intensely. Unreservedly. Perhaps even a little unequally. But not blindly. He was not entirely certain that Boromir had the skills and instinct to forestall another plot. It was not his eldest's style: the dagger in the dark, the poisoned dart or drink. He simply did not think like that at all and he had to to keep his brother safe. No, Osgiliath was not the place.

That left one company: Ithilien. Hidden. Safe in refuges utterly secret and built in Turin's time, designed to never draw attention to their ways. There his son could be kept from all but the chancest harm. It was an idea that had much merit. It suited well, he thought, his youngest's natural abilities and temperament. There was, for the moment, little fighting. Scouting, knowledge gathering, denoting details to glean a greater picture, these were the company's focus. He knew Faramir was skilled at observation and had his own uncanny memory. Would notice the subtle changes in the land, the sounds and patterns that were disturbed. His younger son, lithe and lean but strong, could learn to move silently and with stealth in a harsh terrain. And he had, the father must allow, no small skill at archery. Ithilien it would be.

The decision taken to his satisfaction, Denethor partook of the wine and food that his butler had brought. Swiftly, the man returned and laid the object of his errand upon a nearby couch. Denethor dismissed him and, with an ease that would have surprised his sons (never in their memory had they seen him dressed to fight), slipped on the stained and padded doublet, adorned with the White Tree as befitted one who had been the Captain-General. The hauberk he pulled on next but left off the coif. Wrought of mithril steel, the suit was strong and light, but not too light: it was meant to be worn ahorse. Through its weight he would increase his strength and stamina. The long ride to Cair Andros had shown the need for that.

He was absurdly pleased to find how well it fit. Lean and lithe despite his seventy four years, Denethor found the padding pinched just a little on the arms. Elven-thin some would have said, but he would not have thanked them for it, this man who long ago had closed his heart to Eru's first children, pierced by the knowing gaze of a lady who had stood serenely beside a mirrored pool.
The sable and silver robes installed again, he reached for the waiting cup. The wine too, if he was honest, gave him needed strength. There was no tremor or hesitation as he drained it to the rich and spicy dregs.
He had thought long on this. *It was time.* He surprised himself, liking the symbolism of the act. This too would be a battle, one to test him as nothing else. He did not plan to fail.

Moving a little slowly and carefully at first, unused to the bulk and restriction of the armour, Denethor ascended the steep and winding stair of the Tower of Ecthelion and left far below the sounds of feasting and enjoyment. *Let them revel. All too soon Gondor's winter time would come.*

Girded as for battle, he stood once again in the hushed, expectant silence of the high and secret chamber. Ithil had risen more. His silver light poured down and cast streaks of light and shadow across the chamber floor. One, a shadow from the east, fell across the polished orb and blurred the images tumbling there.

One by one, the Steward reached out and closed carefully the shutters upon the crenelated windows; the weight of the mail by the sixth and last made his fingers tremble just a little. *Were it only so easy, he thought, to banish the Shadow from our land.*

His steps were measured, already gained in confidence as he walked carefully around the gleaming plinth to look toward the east. He bent down, cast his mind outward, forced the images to stillness. Opened the long debated move.

Beset now from east and west, the need for Gondor to know the true strength of the Enemy had become a sharpened goad. Trusting his own will, blinded by his pride, the Steward of the palantir in the Tower of the Setting Sun reached out and touched its corrupted twin in the Tower of the Rising Moon.

Chapter End Notes

Notes on the Old English

- ealu bora: the main pourer at a feast
- bragafull: a ceremonial drink by the host after speeches by the war leaders
- beot: a ceremonial toast, typically a boast of deeds to come.
- thyle: the warrior who challenges an unlucky toast and turns it back.

Thank you so very much to the Guest and Guest44 who both reviewed recently. It is so very encouraging and thrilling to know that people are enjoying this ever expanding story.

Thank you so much to Thanwen and Annafan for critters and encouragement! Sloppy punctuation (as always!) is my own :)
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A Captain is taken; one move is opened, another closed: the end game turns

*Fall T.A. 3003*

One could sometimes anticipate events or be anticipated by them. Or, like a leaf upon a river, swept along in its turbid rush, only their outline could be discerned within the spiral; clearer once caught in a quiet eddy for a moment. Too often, one could only see once the spinning stops.

Sometimes there was a sense upon the land that events were starting to move in greater earnest. A gathering sort of restlessness that could be felt in the slightest of things: a shift upon too humid air, a fall of shadow upon greensward or a bird's song in the early morning. Sometimes it was more personal, an intensity of a father's gaze, growing ever harder, as if the unyielding stone of the mountain has come to settle in a heart.

In the kingdom eying warily a range of shadow to the east the land gathered and shifted uncomfortably upon its bed: beneath its boughs a young Dunadan slept troubled by dreams of green and dying.

Somewhere the land slumbered peacefully still and a carefree village in a softly rolling shire was oblivious for yet a while. Somewhere a city built on air was destined to fade away with the passing of an age. Somewhere a daughter of a blessed but tumultuous elder race watched and moved the pieces with more subtlety than any other. Somewhere a Maia tried to fulfill his duty, while another twisted what it meant.

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A flash of brown and white sped through the air as the little sparrow darted and dipped, racing across the golden fields in her hurry. She was tired, the wheat stalks looked so tempting to stop and rest, but he had called her and so she came in haste.

The swiftly beating tiny heart fluttered in joy and she trilled to spy him along the road beside the tower dark and high. This day he was cloaked as an old man, stooped and bent; but he has many shapes and colours, of bird and beast, hart and hound, dapple green or fawn brown. Today his clothes crackled like the dried brown leaves of the forest floor, his hair was spider silk and his skin deeply furrowed as the white oaks that grew beside his home.

She circled down to his outstretched hand, warbling a greeting to her brethren on his shoulders and dipped her head to the circling bees and dragonflies. They swooped and dove as ever but did not alight. They were his honour guard and watched ever over him.

Steady on his finger he brought her close, eyes shining great and bright as the wisest of her kin. In song he praised her for not tarrying in the Emnet, he knew her desire too. Joyfully she told of what she saw and heard in the great tower white and glistening. The big one angry, the littler one surprised but not upset, resigned. The grey one stern and certain as ever. She has seen much of them these past months and knew them more than any could have guessed.

With a gentle stroke across her back he released her. The little servant darted ever higher, seeking fresh water and good grain. There was some food left in the scarred land around the tower, but she
had to hunt for it amid the turf churned to mud and the clumps of withered stunted trees. Her song was sorrowful. Her kind remembered the green grass of the plain around and river's laughing water, diverted now to feed the fires whose stinking air buffeted her ever higher.

Inside the brooding, obsidian walls, the lord and master of Orthanc spoke quietly to his guest. His manner and his speech were as smooth as the tower's glossy surface, his motives as black, they too did not reflect the world's streaming light.

Seeming to be the gracious host, Saruman offered the younger wizard food and drink, professing his pleasure at the news of the Steward and his sons. "I am delighted that Denethor's younger son is well and goes to a new company, Radagast. Ithilien is an honourable commission and will forge a hardy soldier."

Yavanna's disciple sat ill at ease upon the carven chair. Restless hands fingered the grey beard, their movements very like a bird's, sharp yet hesitant. His lips when they moved fluttered slightly. Radagast had had little practise in the rounder speech of men of late. "Yes, yes, perhaps. But the elder brother was not so pleased. He will miss him I am sure but wonderful news that one so high in the Steward's favour will join that company. I am afraid I have had little time and inclination to check on the lavan and aewen there. I hope the soldiers do not disturb them overmuch." The little wizard turned a pained and hesitant stare upon the great cords of firewood laid upon the courtyard stones. Perhaps he should be more concerned about the beasts and birds beyond his woodland home.

Saruman, stilling a sudden moue of disgust, flicked a corner of his white woollen robe away from the dust and leaves that settled always in the other's wake. Radagast the Brown, the Fey, the Fool. He has just the wit to play the part that I have set for him, thinking he aids the council with his efforts. I pray he does that with skill and speed and does not wander farther into his creature world.

He thanked the wizard and showed him out. Once alone, Saruman turned back to his interrupted efforts in the lower caverns. He was forging another casting, a new ring of power to join the several that glinted darkly on his hand. This time he hoped through subtle and skilful design to craft a tool that would see the One, would yearn for it and aid him in his search. For this he needed something tangible from he who had last wielded it, something that had known the pull of its power and its voice. A slow smile spread across the wrinkled face as he lifted the grey and weathered bones with heavy tongs and thrust them roughly into the forge's hungry flames. Their ash and white gold and mithril he would pour into his greatest work.

There was no doubt. About the skull had lain the Elendilmir, a beautiful thing, a white star of Elvish crystal upon a fillet of mithril, now twisted and bent but gleaming still. This he had set aside to add to his growing hoard About the sternum had hung the greatest prize of all. With a cry of exhultation he had taken up the golden case upon its chain and with shaking fingers opened it. But the ring, eager to return to its anxious master, had fallen out into the River, the case was empty. It had been a bitter blow, but one he strove now to turn to his advantage.

As he moved his tongs and bellows the wizard considered more the import of Radagast's unwitting spying. The wheels of his ordered mind turned around and around a strategy. He knew that the
young son, at least for yet a while, would be beyond his reach. The Captains. The Captains on the field must become the target. Theodred it seemed was too much like his grandsire Thengel: Grima could not turn him. Others the wizard hoped could be turned against the Prince, to isolate his threat and isolate his father. Theoden soon would become his servant's focus, his time had almost come. Of Denethor's elder son he must learn more. He was reputed to be valiant but even the greatest warrior had a weakness.

His spies he was certain would find out soon and he would know.

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"This is not right."

"Ealdemóder, Grandmother?…” Morwen started, she had not realized that she spoke aloud. Looking on Eomer's pinched and tired face the thought came again… *So much was not right.* There should not be lines of fatigue on one so young, sitting vigil while his young mother wasted silently away. Yet she must not pour her own frustration upon the boy, not burden the child more than Bema seemed fit to do. He is still a boy, eleven summers did not make a man. He would not understand: how could he, so young and still grieving for his father? *So are we all.*

She cleared her throat, lifted a hand to him with the moistened cloth with which she tried to bathe her daughter's fevered skin. "Could you ask Gulfred for another cloth? At this time of night she will still be up." She used the Rohirric. For months now the boy had refused to answer to anything else. The children of Kings, scions of Númenor, Théodwyn had always had them speak Sindarin, just as she had herself had done in Edoras. But here in Aldburg its Lord had always spoken Rohirric, as fiercely proud of Eorl his forefather as any of the royal sons of Brego. The new young lord had chosen to follow suit.

Eomer looked upon his Grandmother sitting stiffly beside the bed. Her white hair was braided neatly, her wrinkled hands gentled bathed his mother's brow but it was her eyes he noticed. The great grey eyes in the deeply lined but still beautiful face were just his mother's. Hers he had not seen now for many days.

He swallowed nervously. He had done something wrong, for surely the look his grandmother bore was her angry face, used for young boys who had tracked mud across her floor or failed to mind their lessons and their manners?

As if she caught the thought Morwen sadly shook her head, squeezed gently his hand that held the cloth. "I am not angry, min swéte, I am sore of heart is all."

He nodded, for he truly understood. His own heart felt so pained and swollen he thought it might burst from within his chest. *He knew.* Though he would not say it, most certainly not to Wyn. He knew what was to come, as surely as he had known, the day the Eóred and their mounts came walking much too slowly, a bier swaying gently between the horses, bringing his father home.

Wearily Eomer raised his drooping head and squared his shoulders. *Had Uncle not said he was the head of their household now?* Morwen pretended not to notice as tears were roughly dashed from reddened eyes. She smiled and nodded when the hand that reeached out and took the cloth was steady.

For many minutes all was quiet but for the sound of slow and laboured breathing from the great carved bed. Outside the dark veil of another night had fallen and beside the Dowager Queen her
daughter lay slowly dying.

Theodwyn had become a shell of her once vibrant self, eyes sunken, the glorious golden cornsilk hair brittle and lifeless where it lay about her on the pillow. Thengel's hair, but that too, hurt too sharply to remember.

Morwen could not help herself, she foolishly reached out and with shaking fingers stroked the long blond locks. She could not still a gasp of pain. It hurt so very much. *My littlest one, my baby... It is so very wrong to outlive one's children.*

Her heart clenched but ruthlessly, with a will of finest steel she pushed the grief away. Anger, anger was what she wanted to feel, needed to feel. Somehow her blazing need had to spark something in her daughter, give her the strength to fight. Morwen wanted to shake her, slap her, shout at her, anything to rouse her little girl from the apathy that had led them to this pass.

Theodwyn had grieved too hard, unable to let go, so much so that she shrunk in upon herself, not sleeping, not eating for days on end, until her weakened body had given in to a simple winter sickness. She no longer had the strength to fight and Morwen could not give it to her. Each day and hour she slipped farther from them.

*It was all so wrong. She has given up and I can do nothing to stop her.*

Oh, but she was angry at her daughter. It felt almost to Morwen like a betrayal; that a child of hers and Thengel's should be a coward; could not face life without her husband. *But no that was not truly fair.* It was not cowardice to love or love too much. Only to never try. But how could Theodwyn love him so much that she was unable to make herself care for her little ones, to rise from her bed, do anything but lie? That also was not the way of things. A mother's love should be the fiercest, strongest bond there could be in all of Arda.

Never had she thought to rue letting her laughing, headstrong little daughter indulge herself, to make a love match with the handsome, wild but caring Marshall. Yet she could not bring herself to be so angry at Eomund.

They said he had been reckless, raging, took on too many with too few. But how was that unnatural? It is what the men in her world did; threw themselves into the dangers of the world, dangers that were many and unpredictable. The party of Orcs they had pursued across the east Emnet all the way to the East Wall, the cliffs of Emyn Muil. Perhaps, just perhaps, it had stiffened their evil backs to be up against such a barrier. That was what Elfhelm had thought, hollowed-eyed with grief, bearing his friend and Marshall home. He had also claimed, drunk and raging after the funeral cup, that only the arrow meant for Eomund had been poisoned. How could they ever know the truth of that?

Sitting in the pale golden light of the one oil lamp, she moistened once again another cloth and touched it gently to Theodwyn's chapped and colourless lips. Her own back hurt and limbs trembled with fatigue but she would not leave. Not until it was time to bring Eowyn and Eomer to Edoras, after, would she leave her daughter's side.

She looked over to the window bench, where lay Eowyn, asleep at an awkward angle. The little girl had tried to stay awake, but at last, exhausted, had simply slumped where she had sat. Not for the first time in those dark weeks Morwen wished the girl was not so old. It would be a greater mercy were she unable to remember so well the mother and father both who were now to leave her. That could not be changed, nor it seemed, could she pour her own iron will into her daughter, however much she wished to, to spare her grandchildren further hurt.
Foolish woman, what a waste of energy to think on what cannot be. Better to prepare honestly for what will come.

Looking at the sunken cheeks, dry fevered brow and hollow eyes that were, once, like to her own, the anger flared again. She felt so very tired with it. Anger also took energy and in these hours she felt every one of her eighty years. This winter past she had first begun to feel that to fight the aches and pains had become that more difficult. Her strength had waned and in her very bones she had felt she had but little time.

The little girl stirred, shifted in her sleep and the bright gold waterfall of hair slipped across her cheek, her daughter's beauty wrapped about her son-in law's fierce and passionate nature. They needed her. Motherless, fatherless, they would need her. An anchor in this world that was tilting too perilously and much too fast. An anchor that it would be unutterably cruel to loose too soon.

So be it.

Husbanding her strength, Morwen took a deep and steadying breath. She let it out and with it let her anger drift away; gently as the leaves that settled down upon the cool and heedless land.

She would bide and be angry no more.

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The two horsemen rode as hastily as they dared along the forest track, eyes alert and scanning always the verge ahead. The road, once wide and carefully kept, was now little more than a straight ribbon of shorter green within a tangle of yew and laurel. Moss and lichen lay as thick upon the hemlock trees as on the trackway underfoot. Orcs had driven the people from this land long ago and although Najir trusted their horses to outrun the scum, it would not do to be in any way complacent. Their errand was dangerous, as was the land before them. And so the land behind.

The young Haradim wound his blue and black keffiyah once more about his coif, dark eyes ever upon the trees. About them the forest lay hushed and waiting; the winter rains not yet begun, the bees had sought their refuge and the birds begun their journey down Anduin toward the warmer coast. He and his companion made little sound as they passed: all decoration had been stripped from the horses' harnesses and saddles, their brazen plate lay muffled under black linen robes. Fearful, in truth, more of their countryman than the Gondorim, they bore nothing that would reveal his rank, that the hereditary Sheikh of the Qahtani rode without a proper escort.

Najir peered behind. Goran, riding close, also looked on edge; his nephew’s lips were narrowed, as were his wide-set black eyes. Seeing his ammu touch once his sword hilt, the younger man reached down and loosened yet again the wickedly curved sword within its scabbard. Najir nodded. Great Rider lend us speed.

The farther into the land of the Gondorim they rode the more often Najir felt the need the resettle his keffiyah. The movement oddly brought him comfort. Na’man too felt the uneasiness of his master and shook his small proud head. The trees with their sharply honed and spikey needles were strange and the green about them felt oppressive. Nothing at all like the gentle green of an oasis and its promise of life and bounty. Even the sunlight here was muted, the waning autumn sun shaded by the dense canopy of the overarching trees. He felt hemmed in, wished longingly for open sky and room to run.
Not for the first time in this anxious month of the šutam the young man wondered at his actions. *Am I making the right choice? Do I have any choice at all?* He thought painfully of his people and Shayana left behind; dark skin, dark hair, dark and endless eyes. His father's still and quiet face. Released from his suffering at last.

Out in the endless desert Suladan's forces conquer all before them: men and horses, riches and women flow only east to the shaven priests of the many temples.

It seems nothing can stop the Black Serpent now that he is blessed by the Lord of Fire. Abaan had spoken, his visions bright and urgent: the Great Rider spurns the Lord of Fire; his priests were evil and corrupted, they practised unspeakable acts upon the women captured. *Surely Araw is greater than such a one?* Had not the Sea Men had told them so in ages past, as had the Prophets? But for Najir it is always difficult to believe the obvious is the case. He had inherited his father's subtlety and shrewdness; he too takes delight in the twists and turns of words, honouring Araw with verses bright and strong. *There had to be something he could do to protect his people more than pray?*

And so he found himself upon a foreign road in the pale morning light, or what passed for it in this sheltered land. Seeking the help of a foreign people. *The enemy of my enemy is my friend.* Only the Qahtan hold to the old ways, the old gods. In this too, he thought, they have something other than an enemy in common. Or so he hoped. It occurred to him what he might have said when Abaan urged him to seek the hated Gondorim. *Foolishness.* He'd have to have been a different man, reached a different place with his life to do so. *There are forks in every road.* He told himself he still followed the path of righteousness.

Once past the Poros they had slept fitfully at night under the forest canopy; unused as ever to a land so still and green. The stars here were also a little off, the Hunter on his side, yet in Najir's desert home they looked just as coldly down, were unchangeable, wheeled oblivious to the struggles of his people and the land. What would Abaan, chief poet as well as shaman, make of this? The question made him smile in the early morning light. Surely the honoured one would say that it was right, that there should be balance in the world: steel with silk; green leaf with yellow sand; cold star with belly's heat.

They rode alone, but not unwatched. Few in these latter days came down the road from Poros, their very presence was unusual. Though a hundred years had passed since the war upon the Crossings, the company of Ithilien watched always the Harad road. They too had heard word of battles to the east. That the fractured tribes of that desert land were fighting amongst each other.

Concealed by shrubs and bracken that grew thickly about the half-wild track, Eradan pulled his hood farther over his grizzled shock of hair and rubbed a hand across his beard beneath the green cloth mask. This served two purposes. It helped the itch (on leave he had given in to his wife's plea for him to shave) and it helped him think. The veteran captain of the Ithilien company was decidedly unhappy with the word from their forward scouts. A pair of Haradrim this far north upon the road in open daylight? Never in his long experience had he heard of such a thing. Haradrim near the crossings, attacking swiftly under cover of the night sometimes, but not this: a bold and open foray in their lands.

The bowmen hidden well on either side the road made no sound as they held their arrows notched and ready. The law was clear, the company was to kill all caught within Ithilien without the Steward's leave. The captain had done so many times: would do so many more. But he much preferred to follow orders when the trespassers were Orcs.

He hesitated. Eradan was always a careful and a thoughtful man. Something here seemed different and dead men could not explain their actions; could not give notice of more to come. A double note
of an oriole's song rode lightly on the air. *Two intruders coming.*

The company watched in perfect, expectant silence as the brown-skinned Southron men drew nigh, black eyes glinting through curious cloth headdresses. They rode with exquisite grace, backs straight, no wasted movement, horses responding to the subtlest of commands. The Captain admired their skill but pondered their apparent naivite, to ride so openly upon the Harad road. Were they truly oblivious to the danger? They carried the cruelly efficient shorter swords of the Haradrim, but these were sheathed. They bore no shields or spears or bows. It made no sense. Yet spies surely would not ride so openly or so heavily laden? He quickly made a gut decision: hold fire.

The whistle and rapid trill of a cardinal erupted from the brush. The shorter Haradrim behind started and then spoke: a rapid burst of harsh words that the captain could not understand. The tone needed no translation; the unfamiliar sound had made the young rider nervous. Two pairs of black and wary eyes scanned over the Rangers heads.

Eradan looked over to his lieutenant crouching low nearby, arrow at the ready, and raised one grizzled eyebrow. Faramir silently shook his head. He knew some Haradi but the rider's words had been muffled by the head-scarf and much too fast. He held his position and his bow, as puzzled as his captain by the exotic sight.

Najir did not reply to Goran's anxious query but he too felt the hair rise on the back of his neck. Na'man whickered, nervous and low; he smelled something that was not right. *Ala Mahlak 'slow down'* he called softly back, as he eased off his touch upon the horse's barrel. The stallion listened and slowed at once. At his master's gentle touch upon the reins he stopped. *It is about time,* the older man thought, *the Gondorim must watch these roads.*

A bird he did not recognize called again from beside the road and its mate answered to his left. Suddenly two rows of green-clad men burst upon them, great bows set, arms raised. Startled, Goran's bay stallion threw up his head and took a quick step back, the young man struggled to rein him in. Na'nam, older and more confident of his master's judgement, held steady and accepted as is his due a grateful pat. Najir made no sudden move but looked carefully around, marvelling at the speed and silence of men who now surrounded them. *Gondorim. Now perhaps, events would move. Bless Abaan for his wisdom and the Great Rider for his words.*

Wetting lips gone suddenly dry, Najir decided that words quickly understood might forestall a nervous hand. He spoke quietly and slowly in halting Westron to the front of the party: he could not decide which green-clad hood to speak to.

"Honoured men of Gondor, we beg leave of you to pass through your kingdom. We seek the City of White and its Sultan, to bring tidings out of the east."

Eradan, standing hidden amongst his archers, was startled to hear words of his own tongue, but in that moment was decidedly unmoved by their meaning. Southrons had not come to Minas Tirith to parley for a century. *Why should they think we will let them pass so easily?* Green eyes narrowed; he spoke loudly and slowly through the mask. "You need not ride so far to pass on what you know."

He caught the dark and intelligent gaze of the rider in the lead. "We do not pay spies for news here in Gondor, nor do we suffer them to ride unhindered through our lands."

Goran uttered a string of imprecations. His Westron, better in fact than his uncle's, had been good enough to understand the insult. Najir, not daring to turn right round lest he startle a nervous archer, chided quickly. 'Tifl.' *Child.* The young man, chastened, bowed his head. It was a risk bringing a hot-headed youngster to a diplomatic mission, but what choice did he have after all? No other in their tribe but Abaan knew the language. He smiled grimly. He fancied he could hear steam coming out of his nephew's large and hairy ears.
"Not so, esteemed….?” He inclined his head respectfully in query to the tall figure that had spoken.

'Captain…” came the gruff reply. Not a single bow wavered from its target.

" Captain." The Haradrim executed a slow and perfect obeisiance from atop his horse. "We are not spies. It is just as I have said. I am Najir, son of Najram, blessings on his memory, Sheikh of the Qahtani people. We come from Harondar to seek the aid of the Sultan of Gondor.” As he raised up again, Najir noticed the steady gaze of one tall, green-clad Gondorim. The man's odd light eyes seemed more merciful: sharp with an inquisitive intensity that boded well. If these were the men of Gondor he must ally with he felt in that moment a little comforted.

The tip of Fararmir's arrow did not waiver from its target as he looked searchingly within the Haradrim's proud and glinting gaze. Surrounded by the headdress, his eyes burned brightly, but the young lieutenant sensed no malice or subterfuge, only wariness and urgency. The Haradrim's manner was careful, collected but perfectly respectful. Either he was an accomplished actor or he was, incredibly, just as he seemed. Lightly Faramir brushed the man's thoughts as Amerith had taught him. Najir frowned and shook his head, sensing the intrusion but not its source.

Faramir looked left and caught Eradan's eye. He nodded very slightly. He had felt no guile or ill intent; it was clear from the man's forward mind that what he said was true.

Eradan, let out a quiet breath, knowing well to trust his young lieutenant's judgement.

"Drop your swords." The order brooked no hesitation. In earnest of his peaceful intentions, Najir unbuckled the scabbard from his saddle and dropped it down. He heard the thud upon the dirt as Goran's fell behind.

"Dismount." With enviable agility the Haradrim at once threw their legs across their saddle bows and slid lightly down. Four bows lowered and they were held tight and fast, though no more roughly than one expected.

Najir, standing proud and tall but dwarfed by every Ranger there, prayed silently that his nephew kept his head.

Packs and bodies searched and stripped of their daggers and their knives, the Captain elected to let their prisoners sit at the camp unbound but not unguarded. He questioned ever more deeply the men’s motives and their mission. From Najir he learned with growing concern of the spread of the Black Serpent's forces, his desire to unite all of Harad under one Sheikh of Sheikhs. He learned too of the new cult spreading closer to their borders, of the tribute and attendance to the Lord of Fire. When the Haradrim spoke those words a look of outright alarm crossed Eradan's craggy face, his bushy eyebrows crawled halfway up his furrowed forehead.

To Najir these seemed to be well-educated men. They spoke courteously and well, would know some history and lore. Loosening his keffiyah to reveal his narrow, neatly-bearded face, he stroked his moustache thoughtfully. How to help them understand that his was not an easy choice? That it was made and held with greater purpose, knowing full well how much it would cost them to set aside the old grievances.

"Captain, long have we and the Gondorim made war, each side losing as the other wins, never finding any lasting peace. Our interests have rarely been the same. But here, in this time at last, we judge they march together. You have need of certain peace upon your borders. "

"And your interests truly march with ours?” Carefully sceptical, Eradan gestured for him to carry on..
Najir smiled, pleased to find the Captain had not dismissed him out of hand. "We need more men, more fighters, swords and horses. We are one tribe. Alone, the Serpent will take us swiftly when the winter fighting season begins."

The older man nodded at that last. He had stood at the Crossings of the Poros, dipped a cup and said a silent prayer to Tulkas for the sons of Rohan and Gondor who had fallen there. How ironic that their sacrifice had ultimately mattered little; Ithilien had still been abandoned, her people fled, the green and fragrant land given up to an enemy from the east instead of from the south. A veteran, Eradan understood the exigencies of war, that change came and a good soldier rode with it. In his bones, he knew too that they were already losing ground.

He took in the high proud cheekbones and hawk-like set of the Haradrim's dark eyes. Eradan could well believe he commanded the loyalty of a thousand men as he had said. The thought was sobering. *How many more are waiting on the sands if he is fearful of being overrun?*

"I cannot promise anything. But I know well that you should be heard. Then we shall see what the Steward thinks and what we are to do."

Najir completed once again the curious half bow. "Shukran Jazīlan, Captain, I thank you. I can ask for nothing more."

Eradan rose from the low stool on which he sat. Swiftly he gave orders for them to be fed and housed within the camp and for a party to escort them under guard back to the city on the morrow.

There was nothing for the two Haradrim to do but sit and wait patiently as all around them the Gondorim went about their business. They were offered bowls to wash in before meat and handed plates of a hot but listless smelling stew. Najir, comforted to follow his prophet's teachings, turned to the west to honour the Great Rider. He watched dumbfounded as the many tall and grey-eyed men also turned west and stood in silence before they ate. *Perhaps it was as Abaan had said: the Gondorim honoured Araw and his brethren well.*

He ate quickly but with the little relish, the food had little taste. Goran sniffed suspiciously at an orange chunk of vegetable but tried his best. *'Fit for dogs',* he mumbled to his uncle, who chuckled quietly. *'Yes indeed, but better than an arrow through the eye'.*

Afterward he pulled a small ornate book from his pack and tried to read: the words of the Prophet he hoped would soothe the anxiety in his heart and head. So passed much of an afternoon in which he had hoped they would move farther on. Goran, deprived of even his writing quill, took a small stick and lazily traced a script upon the dirt.

*Patience,* he thought, *patience.*

The sun's westering light was slanting even lower when he felt a presence by his side.

"May I join you?" asked the tall, keen-eyed Gondorim. The man spoke carefully and slowly in an oddly slurred, archaic form of Haradi. Surprised, the sheikh gestured courteously for the man to sit. *"Honoured guest. Peace upon your people."* The traditional words were ironic in the circumstance.

Mouth quirking slightly, Faramir folded his long legs and settled down beside. He too found humour in their implication. He inclined his head respectfully. *"Honoured guest, I am Faramir, son of Denethor, Lieutenant of Gondor."*

Now that the green hood and mask of the Gondorim had been removed, Najir could see that the man was about his own age, with a fair beardless face and long black hair. His hands were calloused from
the bow and sword, but not aged and dirty. *A noble son,* he thought. One with access to good teaching and good manners.

Faramir looked with interest upon the book Najir was holding; its swirling script was delicate and elegant, inked with care. The pages at the edge were dipped in gold. A work of art. It was odd to see it here out in the wild; in his experience, such treasures were to be found only in the archive.

He gestured to it and switched to the common tongue. "It is very beautiful, the lettering and decoration are so detailed. We have little like it. Do all your people value books?"

"Very much." A wide smile of purest pleasure split the darker man's face. "It is a way to honour the Great Rider. Art and letters were brought to us by his prophet. My people are nomads; we have no space to carry heavy things or art that is not useful. Decoration, writing and even words themselves become our art."

Faramir smiled. "I can see so, this is skillfully done." Hesitantly, he leaned over and pointed to the inside of Najir's wrist. Dark swirls alike to those upon the book were visible below his highly ornamented cuff. Curiosity got the better of him. He hoped he was not being abominably rude. "And these? You paint words also upon your body?"

Rolling up his sleeve, the Haradrim displayed proudly the graceful arabesques, swirls, and diamonds running in brown ink across his inner forearm. The lines were just as elegant as those upon the book, done by a skilful hand and faded just a little from the sun.

"What does it say?"

"Words from the prophet. 'You are not a grain of sand within the desert. You are the desert within a grain of sand.'" A dark head dipped in silent benediction. *Araw fill me with the desert's strength that I may protect my people.*

Faramir smiled in evident delight. "We say something quite similar. 'I hold within, a part of all that I have met. And all that I have met holds me.'"

Najir nodded, a slow smile warming his chiseled features. "Yes, that is wise and well formed indeed. You also honour your gods with words and poetry?"

"We do" explained Faramir quietly, "although songs are more common than longer prayers." Something about the other man's easiness and gentle grace made him suddenly want to share. "I love words and the way they sound, the ease with which they go together." He flushed. "Most soldiers would not say so."

"Then they miss a chance to serve their spirit with highest honour." Pitching his voice low, the Haradrim spoke haltingly, clearly concentrating to find the words in the language that they shared.

*I said to the night,
"If you are in love with the moon,
it is because you never stay for long."
The night turned to me and said,
"It is not my fault. I never see the Sun,
how can I know that love is endless?"

"That is beautiful" exclaimed Faramir.

Najir held his hands to his heart and bowed his head. 'Thank you. When my heart is still, the Great Rider fills me and I write.'"
"That is yours?" The young lieutenant was delighted and surprised. "I write a little," he admitted shyly. "But for me it seems to be when my heart is anything but still. More often when it is troubled." A ghost of a frown crossed the lieutenant's face and the Haradim wondered suddenly what troubles had could come to one so young. But do I, he admitted to himself, have troubles any less?

"Faramir!" A call rang across the camp. He looked up. Mablung was beckoning, message scrolls in hand. It seemed he as well, would be sent to Minas Tirith.

"I must go. The young lieutenant hastily stood and after a moments hesitation bowed carefully to the sitting man, trying to imitate Najir's own, far more elegant, obeisance. "I thank you learned one for your time."

The odd cadence to the ancient words and the heartfelt but awkward gesture made the sheik's mouth quirk in return. It would not do to laugh, the young man was clearly trying, however graceless were his efforts. One's enemies are not always men of lesser worth.

Seized by a feeling he could not name, Najir bowed from the waist right to the soft and grassy sward. "Time flows lightly when one is honoured by good company, Lieutenant."

Najir closed carefully the cherished book of prayer and watched as the tall young soldier strode away. He marveled. This would be, he thought, the first of many surprises on the road. That there would be so little difference at heart between a man of Gondor and Qahtan. For the first time that day he felt more hopeful of his errand.

Chapter End Notes

The possibility that Saruman may have found and desecrated Isildur's bones is noted in The Unfinished Tales by JRR. I have taken liberty a little with timelines here and moved Eomund's and Theodywn's deaths a year later for simplicity.

Najir's poem is by the great Persian poet Rumi: Whispers from the Beloved.

Grateful thanks once again to Annafan, Thanwen and Wheelrider for comments and critters and forbearance with my interminable tense changes.
Chapter 11

The black knight seeks the white rook, the white bishop seeks the king, a new gambit opens.

Goran sat his horse, wide-eyed, mouth slack, trembling in fear and wonder like a new born foal. He quite simply could not find a point of reference for the sight that lay before him. Awe-struck, he risked a glance beside. Na'man whickered but stood peacefully, untroubled by his master's more internalized anxiety, but Goran was not fooled. Behind the dark keffiyah Najir's face had blanched so very pale.

Already the first Gondorim trotted smartly across the bridge, supremely unconcerned by what for them was merely a routine event, to pass thereby from one side of the ruined city to the other. The shoes of their heavier mounts thudded dully on the stone, as Mablung and Faramir hung back behind. The two lieutenants waited patiently for their guests to move, exchanged glances when the seconds stretched into minutes.

Still the Haradrim sat unmoving, awed by a sight they had never contemplated.

Great Anduin, a ribbon of shining blue, misted in the early morning sun, stretched as far as the men could see. North and south, for many, many leagues and many times wider than a horse, the cool bounty of the river flowed on. It was impossible, yet here they stood, poised to cross a bridge over more land-locked water than either could have dreamed. Poros, fabled in song and story, was as a trickle next to this.

It hurt to see.

Najir let out a long slow breath. The sun played upon the water, sparkled and kissed the lazy eddies, the grasses waving along the bank. The view was gentle, serene, the river wide and slow, but evidently quite deep.

So much. Lips moved repeatedly, a prayer of thanks, wending westward on the wind.

"Is something wrong?" Faramir's voice betrayed no great concern, more puzzlement, as he looked between the two men who sat frozen at the edge. They were safe, the bridge was whole, there seemed to be no reason for any great problem that he could see. He looked toward the older man, one eyebrow raised.

Najir, in truth, knew hardly what to say. How could he explain? How could he make these men understand a thirst so terrible one could not speak, tongue turned to stone, rigid behind lips so parched that they would not press together? How could he explain the deep and burning ache of shoulder muscles straining to pull up buckets from the well; minutes and minutes of desperate pulling for a taste of brakish, bitter wet?

"No." Najir replied. With difficulty he tore his gaze from the bounty below their feet. "It is…a shock, that is all, to see this, Lieutenant. Our home lies upon the desert. Water there is life. A gift of the gods. It is precious and sustains us. You must understand, to us this is wealth beyond imaging. We
have heard of the boundless water of the sea, but the sea one cannot drink."

Faramir seemed to understand something of his conflict, waited patiently while the Haradrim's gaze followed the ribbon yet again. Light played upon the water. A golden leaf drifted gently down, its path wayward as ripples on a dune. Caught in the river's foaming, Najir wondered whither it was bound and if he had fortitude to follow.

_Great Araw are we unworthy to have so little?_ When he spoke again he tried to keep the bitterness deep down within his heart. "East beyond even our home the oases are few and far between. The people had grown more desperate as the winter rains failed year by year. The priests came down the shadowed mountains and promised water and wealth to all who would worship their new Lord. I am not sure I can censure a thirsty man for abandoning his god."

Courage gathered for the ride, the Haradrim urged their skittish mounts under the bridge's eastern arch. It took a little time and many pleading words before Goran and Najir convinced their horses to step quickly by. Lest they change their minds, their masters kept both at a steady trot over the rush and murmur of the river underfoot.

Once crossed, within the silent, towering streets of west Osgiliath, they drew a quiet breath. Here the stones and monuments and palisades were a marvel too, but next to the River, a modest one for the Haradrim who knew well that stone lay under sand.

To pass the Causeway road they spread out and rode two by two. Mablung rode with Goran and answered sparingly as ever the many questions that came to him. Faramir rode with Najir, who for the present, seemed unmoved to speak.

The young sheikh, in truth, was struggling with all that he had seen and noted. _So many challenges, so many false assumptions._ This he now had to face, as he sifted the past days' experiences. How could he reach these men and make them understand? Were they truly too different to bridge an ancient gulf?

As they rode, he watched the Gondorim ride beside. Faramir wore no helmet, had thrown off his hood to catch the wan rays of the autumn sun upon his face. The sunlight glinted on raven hair that whipped about his face in the rising breeze.

The Sheikh shook his head at this small but telling difference between two men of war. In his home only those of little sense or reason went uncovered in the sun. This looked so very strange. He noted to his surprise that through the day that the Gondorim's milk white skin did not burn. Perhaps here, where the sun above was pale and the air was cool, it was not unusual.

Abaan said too much water and pale, weak sun bred men of little purpose. Soft, uncaring men, not used to toiling for their very days. To look upon the Gondorim, he knew this was not right. They were not weak and worthless men like the godless, uncovered hedons of the southern coast. These men had defeated the Qahtani many times before: the name of the Gondorim still struck fear into a rider's heart. Uncomfortably, the Haradrim let another of his prejudices fall.

Faramir rode patiently through the morning light, not wishing to intrude upon his companion's thoughts. At last a long slow sigh let him know Najir had settled something in himself, the high proud face grew less strained, dark eyes less troubled and more clear. He decided to risk a comment, looked admiringly upon Na'man's proud arched neck and powerful small body.
"Your horses are very beautiful, they move so very gracefully yet are so light and swift."

"They are bred to run, Lieutenant, with large nostrils to breathe the open wind and small bodies to fly upon the sands." White teeth flashed in the dark-skinned face. "We have a saying... 'One can have enough women, one never has enough horses.'"

Faramir laughed. "How does one handle more than one of each?"

"Gondorim take only one?" Najir asked, genuinely surprised. "Who then keeps your wife company when you are away in 'Ithilien'?" The word felt strange and twisted up his tongue.

An embarrassed flush crept up Faramir's pale cheeks. "I have no wife."

Najir caught briefly a hooded sadness that played about the young man's eyes. Gravely, with no hint of irony he spoke as honestly as he could. "I mourn for you. To be not yet blessed by sons of your loins is a great sadness for so fine a warrior."

How could a man, a high born man, not be wedded at his age? He looked on Faramir's handsome, though oddly beardless face, kind grey eyes and marveled yet again. It was unheard of in Harad, most especially for the son of a ruling Sheikh. Perhaps customs were very different in this place, blessed as it was by all a man could need. Perhaps there was no rush, when the land was easy and babes thrived as easily as the land.

He pondered this before he spoke again. "It is said that after Poros we sent tribute to your land; horses and gold, but never women. To share kin ties a tribe together. It is unfortunate that my daughters are too young."

At the lieutenant's startled laugh he looked over in surprise. "That is the way is it not?"

"Yes," allowed Faramir "but my brother is the heir, not I."

"I would not aim so high." explained Najir, but suddenly, aghast, realized the import of his words. "You brother, surely, is not unwed?"

Faramir's mouth quirked, and to his companion's relief, a light of humour graced the grey eyes again. "I thank you, honoured Sheikh, for your gracious consideration. You have may solved a major problem. I think to have more than just one wife might suit my brother very well indeed."

The party rode smartly under the twin towers of the Forts and out onto the wide, brown fields of the Pelennor. The golden townlands had been cut some weeks before and now the fields were tawny brown, just stubble showing above the rich dark earth. Here too was plenty, enriched by the flooding of the river, a wide and open sky with ample sun; sustained by centuries of careful cultivation.

The Rangers horses eagerly picked up their pace, recognizing by the flat straight road that home was near. Na'man whinnied and shook his head, happy like his master to be in the open once again. Najir, caught his nephew's eye. The younger man was grinning, the whole set of his body more relaxed than it had been in many days.

They raised their eyes into the middle-distance. In a day of many wonders, the last, but most certainly not the least, was the sight of the White City gleaming in the mid-day sun.
To the Qahtani blue was a sacred colour, beloved of the Prophets, the hue of water and and of life. Here in Minas Tirith it was all around; blue of the river beyond the fields, blue in the eyes of tall and fair-skinned men, blue in the sky that was touched by the sparkling mountain peaks, blue shadows on the white snows of Mindolluin.

By the time a trumpet called the Ranger's bright and climbing note and they passed through the great carven gate, the Haradrim had fallen silent once again.

So many people, so many streets, so very many strange and startling sights. Can a man, Najir wondered, wander so very far that he cannot find his way back again?

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The urgency of the season's change was felt upon the now gelid air and in the frost-hard soil; forest creatures scurried quickly to lay in their winter store, birds flew hurriedly to find their winter haven. For Eru's children, the autumn's steep decline meant only more travail. Most shivered as the days grew cold, but thought little of the change. This year was harsh, the last was so, the next would be the same. Eru only knew why it should be so.

A few, a very few, understood this change to mean this season would be different.

A prince from the far southeast sought help before winter's cooler air brought thunder with the rain.

A lord of the fading west spent every waking minute gleaning knowledge before the dark of winter's night trammeled visions in a stone.

A wizard worried for the still quiet north at last sought help, before winter's snows locked too many spies upon the land.

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The sharp fall wind blew oak leaves dry and sable-brown aloft upon the air. Those already fallen underfoot crackled at each step. The sound they made was taunting, a perfect imitation of the warm and welcoming fire he hoped to find at the end of the long road.

The old man gestured, and a capricious gust of wind pulled a trail of burnished leaves upward in its spiral. For a moment a great mallorn tree sprouted, rose and bloomed, danced lightly on the breeze, before another gust tore its leaves away to begin their dance again.

Beneath the grey and battered hat the Maia shook his head, the faintest of smiles just visible below its brim. Old fool, you are playing like a youngling.

Ages of Arda had passed and still Gandalf liked best in all the year this golden time; the ripened wheat taken from the fields of Rohan, the pipe weed cut and dried in the Shire's barns, the mallorn leaves of Cerin Amroth limned by their winter majesty.

Sadly, in the raw and windswept eve he had no time for harvest ritual, nor even time for rest. He was
in haste. The messages from Rivendell spoke of byways no longer safe and spies along the road. Every lane and weald and upland that he had passed north of the Greyflood sported new ears and eyes. Invisible to the unwary yes, but not to one who was ever vigilant.

Treason was the foe he had always worried most about, both on high and in the alleyways and hedgerows. Wariness had long guided his designs, made his search for knowledge a solitary pursuit, ruminating to himself upon the many paths before him. So rarely had he company on the road, man or elf, bird or beast, the disguise of a muttering, wandering old man was not much of a disguise at all. It had, through long years, slowly become the truth.

He pulled his hat more tightly down, lengthened his stride and hastened again his pace. When last they spoke, Elrond had scolded gently; reminded him that the time had passed for comfort in long established habits. Counseled him to seek out and lean upon another ally. Though he trusted his learned friend, it would not come easily to speak of his fears or concerns so openly, however pressing was their present need. However trustworthy and vested the recipient.

"Niena, lady of Mercy, help me see my way, thy servant toils and has need of thy greater wisdom." The words fell gently from wind chapped lips. It was prideful folly to think that he should do too much himself. Guide and assist. That had been his charge. I thank you Lady also for the wisdom to know when I am being foolishly stubborn.

Sometimes one must take a risk, drop a stone into the water to see what it will bring and watch the ripples carry across the pool of time.

Patience, old man, anno enni i innas an narthad a estel

Gandalf stooped that wild and blustery night and passed the Inn's front door, shaking the clinging leaves from his stained grey cloak. It was not the first time he had graced the Prancing Pony, nor would it be the last, but it was the first with its new young publican, the latest in a long unbroken line of loquacious and distracted Butterburs.

Barliman Butterbur certainly thought nothing so very odd of his new patron, the coins he laid were not so new, his manners easy and not obsequious. The portly host drew a pint without looking down or stilling in his chatter, his hands knew by instinct where spigot stood and the lip upon the cup. He talked lightly and without pause of local happenings. The newcomer surveyed the room; it was merry and bright, a fiddler warmed up in one far corner, while about the tables voices warmed as well.

The old man before him accepted his pint with grateful thanks and raised the jar. "Your heath, good man." With a grateful sigh he rested his long bones upon a stool and took a sip.

"Aye, thank ye, sir. Enjoy your drink and grab another quick. We've 'ad so many feet these last few days I wager we could run out of beer if it keeps on this rate all night."

Gandalf's eyes crinkled in appreciation. "Folk far and wide surely know the quality of the Prancing Pony's pint."

"Folk far and wide is right, but many new faces too. Everyone coming and going these days, though why so many for'ners want to come to Bree I am sure as I don't know. And them Rangers…more 'an them, here and the road." A damp dishcloth swiped at glass, busy hands never still just like the busy
"Rangers, yes an entirely doubtful lot." The wizard's lined and weathered lips curved into a smile. "Have you one called Strider? I was told I could meet him here."

"What would you want with one o' them skulking, no good, trouble makers?" Butterbur's eyes narrowed just a little. He was, by nature, less sure of a man who would truck with the wandering folk.

The wizard pondered quickly what he could say, here where ears were listening and tongues were ever wagging. He had yet to make up his mind about the trustworthiness of his new host. Caution, as ever, he felt to be expedient. "They have their uses surely? They know the North and all its tracks 'tis said. I must find my way to the Last Bridge."

"Last Bridge, that is a piece. Well if it's Strider you must want he is over there." A hand paused in its drying of another glass to point to the dim recess of the farthest corner, well out of the way of the merriment to come.

Hidden by a hood, the object of their perusal sat silently and still, pipe in hand, long legs spread out before him and ankles crossed. He sat, as always, with not the easy sort of still that comes from well-earned rest beside the fire, but with the brooding sort of still that could shatter in a moment. Pale grey eyes roved restlessly about the hazy room, caught the wizard's eye and nodded once. As he stood and drained his tankard, the grim and weatherbeaten face quirked just slightly. It was, the Gandalf knew, what passed in these uncertain days for his widest, welcoming smile.

As they drew together under the low and smoke-stained beams, the elder pressed a gnarled finger to his lips, head tilted to a small, swarthy figure by the door. "We are watched." In the bustle of the room, only the Ranger heard his whispered words.

"I am not surprised." said Aragorn, twitching his hood farther over his lanky hair. The small half smile widened to a feral grin.

"Shall we lead him a merry chase?"

They did not, of course, take the expected route out of town, nor did they hurry. Perhaps it truly was the aimless wandering of old friends, making for a fire and a nightcap somewhere else, keen to rest their weary feet upon a hearth. Perhaps it was merely an evening's stroll to take in some fresher air. A well played ruse, but not one they truly thought would fool the one who followed.

He was, in fact, quite good. The little Dunlander had done such jobs before, found he liked the easy coin; far easier a job than trying to coax a few tubers from their family's stone-filled ground.

The shadows cloaked him well, as he slid from the lee of a spreading oak to another farther on; the moon was just a fingernail, he was in luck. The night was dark but it was still alive and far from silent, the creatures were restless with the wind and cooling air. Birds called somewhere down the lane, but he could not place them.

The caw from near above was unfamiliar, sharp and grating, like a scratch upon a child's learning slate. He started but then forced himself to settle.

His eyes followed the pair of men as they walked in an unhurried fashion, moving with the ease of
long companions, comfortable in each others pace. He did not know their names, only roughly where they were bound and that he was to meet his handler back again.

The chitter of a squirrel next echoed in the branches overhead; the angry scolding staccato that meant the creature was perturbed.

He glanced upward in irritation, not need anything that drew attention to his hiding spot. *Shut up, you nervous ninny*, he thought, *it is not you that I am after.*

It was just ill luck that they stopped beside his tree. Slowly he faded back behind the mightly trunk, blended farther into the shadows, hoped those who passed assumed they were the ones to startle the little creature. His keen eyes caught a sudden movement: the Ranger had reached up and tugged sharply on the old man's hat, remonstrating surely with something the old coot said.

The sudden movement made him nervous; it never paid in his line of business to be caught unawares. A knife rested in his boot top. He thought longingly of its comforting haft and reached.

With a startled cry he found he could not pull it, another set of hands seized his, pinched cruelly at the tendons in his wrists. He dropped the knife with a strangled cry, muffled by a heavy gloved hand that clasped across his face. He struggled wildly, but the man who held him was much taller and fiercely strong, and nearly had him pinned.

Nearly, but not quite. Halbarad's leap had been a little too awkward for his road weary boots. He had struggled not to curse as the battered sole split and threw his balance off.

For a few uncertain moments, not planted as surely as he'd like, the Ranger worried his captive might break free. A sudden whoosh of air brought a second pair of flying feet and knocked the little man flat to the ground.

"Nice of you stop by lad," Halbarad's mouth was set in a fine white line. He was not pleased. None too gently he pushed the spy onto his chest and tied his hands behind.

"Thought I'd finish my pint first." Caradoc, hood thrown back and dark hair wild from his sudden sprint, grinned brightly back. It felt good for once, to have been the one to help.

A low grunt made certain the youngling knew what the veteran thought of his jest. "Tie his legs and grab the knife." A dirty gag that tasted of whetting oil was shoved roughly across his mouth.

"Some help you two were. Thought you were walking straight to Weathertop." The Chieftan and the wizard exchanged a knowing glance. Halbarad's growl was not entirely unexpected.

"I have to cut the apron strings sometime." Aragorn explained, grey eyes dancing under the bright moon. "Come, bring him along. We shall see what we can learn."

The camp was rough but remarkably efficient, ten men had settled into the many small tasks of the early eventide. Commotion over, their captive lay hands bound, little worse for the wear and tear of careful questioning. He had, as Aragorn had expected, known nothing of great use, but the search of his filthy, ragged person revealed much more than he could know. *Scillingas*, small and gold, the coin of Rohan and Isengard, lay sewn into his cloak.

Gandalf stood thoughtfully to one side, let the preparations for their meagre evening meal pass
unhindered. He watched the Chieftain of the Dunadain go about his business, conferring with the men, easy with his role but attentive to all he should.

Elrond, the wizard realized, had been exactly right. Here was a man leagues away from the eager youth he had first met nearly fifty years before, humbled and no little daunted by the weight of lineage revealed. Many miles and years of toil were now marked indelibly in his wary eyes. Wary but wiser now in the ways of men. From Thengel he had learned it was not weakness to be patient, even for Men who had little time, swept along by the unending rush of years. From Ecthelion he had learned that praise does not diminish the one whose gives it, nor is it lessened to be shared.

Throughout the meal Gandalf watched the dark and brooding forest, oddly alive this night though Ithil was but a pale shining sliver. The sparrows that flitted from branch to branch had not found their evenings rest, nor had the smaller woodland creatures. A marten, to the men's amusement, boldly pinched a piece of bread.

He coaxed and cajoled the little birds, trilled a passable imitation of their song, yet they would not come to him, nor take the seeds and nuts he offered from his hand.

Suspicion gnawed and he could not settle. The Rangers looked on in puzzlement as their guest rose and raised up his arm, staff glimmering in the dim.

"Forgive me blessed Yavanne." The words were low but thrummed with purpose. All at once his arm thrust down and the staff pounded upon the turf. A dark shimmering in the air fanned outward, grew and rose to cover their meeting place. A startled noise arose as wings and paws all fled. Inside the veil an eerie quiet fell.

"Now, I hope, we may confer without ears beside."

"Ears and eyes, I should think." said Halbarad, reaching out a curious palm to touch the curtain that lay just beyond his perch. He looked no more astonished to see such magic aloft upon the air than to find a firefly flickering in the night.

Others were not so easygoing. Caradoc, a load of firewood in his arms, near jumped out of his skin as the walls rose around him. A log fell and, embarrassed by his fumble, the young Ranger quickly bent to pick it up. His flushed cheeks flared darker still when Gandalf reached out and laid an unexpected hand upon his shoulder. "Hold young Dunadan. We will not stoke the flames for now. I ask in fact that you douse the fire for a while."

Uncertain what to do, the young man caught his Chieftain's doubtful eye. Gandalf hastened to explain his strange request.

"By firelight we can be seen if by some ill-chance an Eye is roving near. The barest glimmer could be enough. In this, I take no chances."

It took but a moment for Aragorn ponder the advisedness of the wizard's words. He nodded quickly to the younger man. Clearly, this evening was to be more than simple visit with his friend.

The fierce hiss of rising steam filled the quiet space as Caradoc bent to pour water on the glowing coals.

Satisfied that all precautions had been met, Gandalf settled his long frame upon a log, gesturing for Aragorn to sit beside. "It is very good to see you my friend, but we have, I am afraid, little time for smaller matters. By tomorrow I must be on the road again." Blue eyes turned intently to scan the Dunadan's grim face. "The first signs that all is not as it should be have come to Rivendell."
"Aye," said Aragron, and it was clear the knowledge did not please him. "Strange creatures and stranger persons gather here as well: wolves, foxes and even elk boldly hang about the outer fences. Swarthy men of uncertain errand hover on the byways. Hald has had far too many strangers ask for help with broken horseshoes."

The grey head nodded thoughtfully and a lined hand stroked absently the long white beard. "Just so. There are many types of spies. The very birds and beasts, as you have seen, are watching all we do."

Aragorn turned to search the wizard's face. "Whose? His or another?" There was no need to give a name, Gandalf's sense of caution had seeped into his bones.

"Both I fear. Though Saruman does not yet have dominion over Yavanna's works. I suspect he has used his silver tongue to turn one guileless to his tool."

Aragorn's voice was low and weighted deeply with unease. "All counsel must then be guarded if we cannot trust the land around."

Gandalf looked for a while into the waiting dark, ordered thoughts made darker by the implication. "I do not think it is yet quite so very dire, but we must be more prudent than before. Long and selflessly have the Dunedain guarded Eriador. Now the time of gathering begins. I would ask you double your watch upon its borders, especially the Shire."

"The Shire" Aragorn seemed surprised. "It is still a sleepy place. What of interest would spies seek there?"

"A pure and enduring heart and the gift that it yet holds." Gandalf replied. Beneath the bushy eyebrows, blue eyes twinkled for a moment.

The expression on the The Chieftain's was puzzled. He raised an eyebrow and waited patiently.

"There are... happenings that give me pause. A Hobbit who has never lied to me has lied."

Aragorn sighed and shook his head, uncertain still of what the wizard meant. "Your words are no more full than one of Barliman's famous pints."

Gandalf chuckled and smiled ruefully to himself. "I am sorry, I speak in riddles. It is difficult for me to speak openly to anyone." The wizard bent his head and sighed, rubbed his hands anxiously across his knees. It seemed to Aragorn he was almost at war within himself.

The wizard's gaze now raised and Aragorn followed where it led.

Halbarad sat not far away, keeping close to his Chieftain as was his habit. The quiet stretched and a soft creak of leather sounded as the Dunadan rose and moved away. He had had no need to look upon his cousin's face to know that was the best time in all that day to mend his boots.

"Blessed man. Yet still the wizard hesitated. Elrond's gentle voice echoed in his head. Estel is the one we have been waiting for. Trust him. Open your heart to him. You have not the time to watch and wait and make your own judgement. Trust me." "Enough." The word was spoken impatiently, heavily, but clearly to himself. It came out into the world compelling a response.

"You are the heir of Isildur, Aragorn. What I must now speak of concerns you most closely. What do you know of how your forefather died?"

"He fell at the river, Great Anduin, pursued by Orcs." the ranger answered, surprised by the line of questioning. This was old but well thumbed lore. "Drowned there it is thought, though his body was
Gandalf nodded slowly. Below the heavy brows, blue shone brightly in the night. "From that day the weregild Isildur took from his Enemy's hand has been thought lost. Saruman counselled us that it was drowned and lies yet safe in Ulmo's keeping. But I do not believe him."

Aragorn's grey eyes grew wide and dark. He could not speak; his heart hammered in his chest. Hope, hope they needed most, in those years that grew only colder and more grim.

"A hobbit of the Shire many years ago took from a chance wayfarer a gold ring, one with uncommon powers. At first I thought naught of it, many are the lesser rings of power. But I have come to understand that Bilbo, this hobbit, has lied to me about how it came to him. Never before would he have done so Aragorn. And yet more worrisome I have heard him say it is precious, just as Isildur spoke of it."

"You think it could be the Enemy's…?"

Gandalf quickly raised his hand…"Do not name it! We understand each other enough I think. I believe we need to know better how this unnamed ring came to that wayfarer and how he had in his keeping. The creature, Gollum by name, ranges widely, has been many places far and dark."

The Chieftain's craggy face was for the moment unconvinced. "You believe it could be…what many seek…and yet you leave it with this hobbit? Do you not take it to guard yourself?"

"No!" exclaimed Gandalf, his voice laced with startled fear. "I do not trust myself. Nor any man or elf in Middle-earth. The temptation is too very great, my friend. Even your foster-father will not touch it. A pure and earnest heart is no great defense against its siren call. It tempts all who tarry near or carry it. Seeks to turn them to its purpose, dominate their will, turn them its own dark designs. Always it will promise what its subject desires most. No man that does not want something within this world is safe."

"And the hobbit, is he not also in great danger of corruption?"

The wizard's face was split with a gentle smile. "Ah, now there is one advantage we have in these uncertain times. There is a reason Celebrimbor did not forge rings for the Little People. They are not so easily tempted, Aragorn, not so much as Men. Their wants are simply made: good food and drink, a quiet hearth. They have no need of magic to achieve them. For now, I believe it will be safest where it is."

Aragorn stretched and sighed. He gazed up at the dark vault of the encroaching night and the stars hanging in their cradles, searching, it seemed, for an answer out of time. "Then we must hunt for this creature, this Gollum, and hear the story from his own lips. And without delay." He glanced sidelong and caught the wizard's gaze. "I will join you on the search if you will have me. My forefather's action set us to this place, it is fitting that I should help repair the fault."

Gandalf smiled and clapped a wrinkled hand upon his shoulder. "I knew I could count on you my friend." They rose and the wizard turned to tip his staff against rippling dark. The curtain fell and the gentle murmer of the night rose around them all again.

Halbarad, quiet as a cat, rose from his seat and walked back to where they stood. Without a word, he reached up to touch his liege's tattered cloak and unpinned with nimble fingers the six-pointed star that glinted dully against the green.

"You are going again in secret, are you not?" he asked, glancing between the two startled men.
"How did you know?" asked Aragorn, surprised. "You did not listen to our counsels?"

"Of course not." The Dunadan glared for effect and slowly shook his head. Aragorn knew him better for all that. "I do not need a wizard's sight to know the pattern before my eyes. Every time we meet Gandalf at the Pony our plans turn upside down and we lose you for a while."

Halbarad fingered the brooch within his hand, seeming to collect himself before he spoke again. His eyes were worried and pleaded softly in the dim.

"Just don't be gone so long this time."

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"Lieutenant! What an unexpected pleasure. Her ladyship did not say we were to expect you. Do come in." Amerith's elderly seneschal bowed to the visitors on the townhouse step and opened wide the door. Only the barest hesitation belied that there was anything curious about the circumstance. Faramir smiled. Trust Willen to treat a Haradrim on the stoop as no more than an everyday occurrence.

"I did not know myself that I was coming. I am sorry we have come unannounced." the young man explained as he gestured for Najir to lead the way. The Haradrim gathered his flowing robes and stepped lightly across the threshold.

Faramir hastened to introduce his guest. "Willen, this is Najir, Sheikh of Qahtan. He is here on an embassy to the council."

Najir gracefully inclined his head, hand clasped about his wrist and palm open, in the curious gesture that Faramir had seen the day before. He wondered for a moment how imposing a sight the man must be, all black robes, elaborate curved sword, nothing but his eyes visible through the equally dark headdress.

"Your excellency." Willen's greeting and the bow that followed were as smooth and polished as the floor of Merethrond. "The honour is ours." He turned his attention back to the younger man. "Please come this way." He motioned for them to follow, steps nearly silent against the soft plush carpet of the entrance hall.

Faramir was surprised when they did not turn at the door to Amerith's salon. Willen discretely cleared his throat and hastened to explain, as the younger man started by habit to turn that way. "I am afraid we did not expect guests, Lord Faramir. The salon is being cleaned and rearranged on her ladyship's orders."

He continued down the hall to a quiet, darker room that Faramir knew was rarely used. The carven door bore the Ship and Star sigil of Pelargir, the ducal seat of Lebennin. This had once been, he realized, Taras' study.

Najir, gazing thoughtfully about the richly appointed room, rewrapped his keffiyah with a practised hand: the room was cool, the fire had not been lit.

Willen, too well trained to stare, kept his gaze on the young lieutenant, who was himself admiring the polished carvings. "I will send in the housemaid to light the fire right away, milord. The Duchess has just yesterday herself returned. Should I have your rooms made up?"
"No, no need," Faramir replied. "The sheikh and I will stay at the Citadel. We will meet with the Steward, but there are a few things I must pick up before we do. I seem to not remember where my dress clothes are these days. I assumed that they were here."

"I had then sent for cleaning, my Lord. If you will attend a moment I will lay them out for you to choose." Silently, the elder man bowed again and left.

As he walked slowly through the room, the Haradrim admired closely the designs upon the walls. What he saw was a delight to one more used to art on a small and detailed scale. Panelled in red lebrethon, each wall bore a design depicting the journey of the Faithful, the stars that guided them and their landing on the shores of Beleriand. Grand and darkly elegant, Faramir was quite certain he had seen nothing like it in the Steward's palace. But it was large canvas above the stone fireplace that caught his eye and for a moment made his heart beat hard in instinctive fear. The fall of Westernesse, a rising, foaming wave and Meneltarma to be lost had been painted by a skilful hand. Beautiful, and terrible and almost too very real.

Najir paused in his puzzled examination of the fireplace itself to look up at his companion. "What is it, my friend?" he asked, wondering at the wistful yet haunted look within the pale, grey eyes.

"Numenor." explained Faramir, in a hushed tone of reverence. "It is of Numenor at the very moment the Valar struck it down."

This too then, was another wonder. The scene could be one taken from their prayers. "The Prophets spoke of a wave, but one that washed clean an evil place, home to men of pride and greed, heretics had turned away from Araw and been lost. Perhaps it is the same."

Faramir looked back, brow furrowed in concentration. "Perhaps it is. I did not know Amerith had a painting of this scene."

"Amerith is a woman who lives here?" Najir asked, curious after the earlier conversation that he could not help to overhear. Faramir had said he was unwed, yet clearly, if Najir understood their quickly spoken words, he lived at times with a woman at this place. A small smile graced the Haradrim's dark features. There was obviously more to the young Gondorim than he was letting on.

"Yes, she is our hostess, duchess of two of our larger fiefs. I expect we shall see her any moment."

"Is she your sister or your aunt, Lieutenant?" Najir asked, wondering at the connection still. In his experience, one did not ever live with a woman who was not a relative.

"No," Faramir shook his head, a slight flush rising up his throat. "Neither actually, I only have a brother. My aunts and uncle live in Dol Amroth to south."

"Ah. The Haradrim frowned in puzzlement for a moment. Unless…. Black eyes glimmered with understanding and amusement. "Your concubine." he said, satisfied at his deduction. Surely that explained the discomfort on the young man's face.

"No." Faramir hastened to reply, blushing redder still. "No, she is not my concubine." Nor am I, more rightly, hers…he thought ruefully for a moment. "Amerith is a widow, a member of the council," Valar, he did not want to risk offending the Haradrim, but how could he succinctly explain Amerith? "It is…. complicated."

Najir threw back his head and laughed. "Are women ever otherwise?"
Willen returned quite quickly after that and, while a young maid laid a fire in the grate, he led Faramir through the house to his usual suite of rooms. The room was neatly made, far larger and tidier than his chamber in the Steward's apartments. A small selection of his favourite books lay stacked upon the bedside table; papers and letters arranged carefully upon the desk. He smiled. Nera and the Steward's staff had long ago quite given up trying to order his habitually cluttered space.

"Your dress tunic and uniform are in the press, milord. A few stitches and buttons have been fixed." The older man stood patiently just inside the door, awaiting any further needs.

"Thank you Willen," Faramir smiled, appreciating as always the efficient running of the house. It never wavered, even with his rather irregular comings and goings. "As always your service is by far the very best."

"Thank you my lord. We each serve in our own way." The elder man's tone was just slightly wistful. He had, Faramir remembered, served with the Lord of Lebennin; been with him when he fell. A white scar from orc blade curved across his cheek to the corner of an eye than no longer caught the light.

A sound of footsteps came from out the hall and both men turned. They had caught the distinctive whisper of silken slippers and skirts hastening to the room.

"Faramir! Oh darling, we did not expect you." Amerith, positively dancing with excitement, ran across the room and caught him swiftly in a hug. Waves of delight and surprise washed over him. He stooped to peck her on the cheek.

Hair hastily piled, dressed simply in a morning dress, she was possibly the least made up that he had ever seen.

"Have I brought you from your toilette? You are dressing late this morning." Gazing pointedly over her shoulder, he grinned and pretended to search the outer hall. "Should I make myself scarce? Have you a guest?"

The tinkling laugh rose up as a small white hand swatted him on the shoulder. "No!"

With a happy sigh she looked him up and down, relieved to see no injury or hurt. In the year that had passed she learned to not worry so. It was an old familiar feeling to wait and wonder. It did not change.

Faramir caught the thought and smiled, lacing long fingers through one hand to kiss her wrist. "I am quite fine, not a scratch."

"What brings you?"

"I have left a Haradrim in your sitting room."

"Really! my word. Chained to the furniture?"

"Amerith, you are terrible." Faramir laughed. "No, he is not a spoil of war. A supplicant to the council."

"Too bad." Came the quick reply, green eyes dancing wickedly at his blush. She laid one hand upon his arm, ready to lead him back, as he gathered the clean uniform. "Ah, well that is different then. We must not keep him waiting."
Faramir followed Amerith's gliding skirts back through the halls and to the study door. They found Najir, hands clasped behind upon his lap, waiting patiently upon a window seat. At their entrance he smoothly rose and bowed so low he might surely have kissed his knees.

"Shukran Jazīlan, duchess, blessings on your house."

It took a moment for Faramir to realize what had changed: the keffiyah had been removed and hung loosely about the Haradrim's neck. Gold winked in tiny beads that threaded through the long waves of his dark and glossy hair and dangled from his ears. A design of curves and graceful arabesques was patterned across one cheek. He made, the young Gondorim realized, a handsomely exotic sight.

Amerith smiled prettily and to Faramir's astonishment, sank low, eyes cast down toward her toes. "We are honoured by your presence. You are well come to the city and this house, Shiekh of the Qahtan."

The Haradim reached forward and grasped her hand as he smoothly raised her up. Gold glinted in dark, expressive eyes as the barest kiss of darker lips grazed across her knuckles. "It is said on a day when the wind is perfect, a sail must open and the world is full of beauty. Today is such a day. Your beauty, great lady, has been under-exaggerated by my men."

"As have your manners, Prince of the Sands." The duchess graced him with her most radiant smile. She waited just a moment longer than strictly necessary before letting go her hand.

Faramir stood dumbfounded, mouth hanging open, wondering by the Valar, what was going on? They knew of each other? How had that come to pass?

"Catch up my dear, paddle a little faster." The thought made him sputter in indignation, as laughing green eyes turned back toward their guest. "Your man, Najir, said you would be here upon the 4th. I am greatly relieved to find you are safe and well."

"We were delayed by some soldiers upon the road, my Lady." Najir explained, fingering lightly his mustache and hiding a sudden smile. He at least, had the good grace not to laugh. The duchess, felt no such compunction.

"All is ready for your arrival…." She began, but Faramir, now decidedly out of patience, cut across her.

"Willen said you had been away." Pale grey eyes flashed accusingly. Surely he would not lie, but Amerith, he suspected, was quite adept. Saying whatever suited, whenever it suited her.

"I have been." The duchess took a sip from a goblet of warmed wine a footman was silently passing round. "Taking the country air, visiting my nephew in Pelargir. It is amazing how many ships hurry to make it up the river this time of year."

An elegant hand picked up a morsel from the tray the servant now proffered in his other hand. "You must try these dear." she suggested airily, nibbling on a small pink cube. "They are made from rose water and sugar, delicate and delicious. I thought the Sheikh would appreciate a familiar treat after his long and taxing ride."

"Thank you no, my lady, I am not hungry." Faramir replied, determined not to be mollified. Surely she deserved him something of an explanation?

Silent laughter rippled across his thoughts. "You are jealous, Faramir, son of Denethor. I can't
"I am not!" The retort was quick and he realized to his chagrin he had not meant to sound so loud. Amerith winced. Faramir had practically shouted with his gift.

Najir, all this time, placidly watched a minor war of emotion flit across the faces of his silent hosts. *Not concubine,* he mused, *but surely not just a friend?*

With an effort, Faramir mastered his rising anger. "I presume Father does not know about your meetings?"

Amerith shrugged, supremely unconcerned. "Denethor does not know everything I do. Yet."

"He would toss you from the council if he knew you acted without his leave."

"Oh I hardly think so," Amerith answered dryly. "He has always been shrewd enough to take the rough along with the smooth. I know just exactly where the line falls and am very careful to never step across it."

It was Najir, not wishing to offend his friend, who explained a little more. "The Duke had made contacts over many years with our people, Lieutenant. Trade of course runs down the river in Lebenin and across the bay. My father always felt it greatly wise to know better those of the Gondorim who might listen before shooting us in the back."

"Najram was a wise and learned man, peace be upon his soul." Amerith allowed. "I have been enquiring of the quorum present for the council. You will not find a greatly open welcome. A few of us consider this is an advised move. Lossarnach and Lebenin, Anfalas and Dol Amroth at the least. Elphir is here for your uncle, Faramir, Leylin has been ill again."

Faramir murmured quiet words of commiseration but his thoughts were only partly on his aunt. *Was there no end to the network that Amerith kept her fingers in?* he wondered, watching the two conferring in low somber tones about the various fiefdoms and their leaders.

He looked over to hear Najir ask the question that was also foremost on his mind.

"The Sheik of Gondor, the Steward? Do you know what are his thoughts?"

"Not positive." admitted Amerith, sudden nerves betrayed by the long hand playing nervously at the ornament in her hair.

"His will be your most difficult mind to change."

Chapter End Notes

Eternal thanks to Annafan, Wheelrider, Thanwen and Gythja for excellent suggestions and beta'ing. As always remaining embarrassments are my own.
A captain suffers to be used; the end game turns

Najir slept that night a little fitfully and rose before the sun. It was dark and cool within the room; the fire had burned low. Hurriedly, he pulled his dress robes from within his pack and wrapped them tightly round. Red tunic and soft pants first, then the heavier blue silk of the outer robe. He wound the length of darkest blue silk precisely the prescribed three turns around. Once for the Hunter and once each for his blessed prophets. The weight of the sash about his waist was comforting. It steadied him; his fingers by feel alone knew the the ritual, even as the prayer played across his lips. Araw, I am your faithful servant. I bow my head; my soul I kneel before you.

With relief he slipped chilled toes into the finely embroidered slippers and padded softly across the floor. Pleased to find the silk warmed quickly to his body, he bent to the fire and placed on another log, eying thoughtfully for a moment the sparks that jumped and flared. He was unwilling yet to venture out and navigate the many winding, unfamiliar halls and so he stayed in place; sat lightly on the great carved chair before the fire. The room was sumptuous and well appointed, but felt to him stern and far too cold. How did these men sleep throughout the winter within stone walls that did not heat, where the light of the sun could not penetrate? He pulled the chair a little closer to the fire's flickering glow.

Though he knew he lied Najir told himself it was the unsettledness of sleep upon a mountain that made his muscles tingle nervously, not the import of the day. He took up his beads and began to braid them through his unbound hair. The words of prayer and the gentle motion of his fingers helped to sooth his jangled nerves. With surprise he realized the dawn had come, when with the flash of sun upon a bead, he heard bird song return to greet the day.

After they hurriedly broke their fast with their hosts, the Haradrim retreated to their rooms to finish their preparations. Goran retraced the henna upon his uncle's cheeks and hands. As he did, he grumbled, face set and thunder in his eyes; the memory of their meeting with the Steward rankled still.

"Their sheikh, I do not trust him." he said, as nimble fingers traced a careful curve.

Najir kept carefully still, let his sigh escape through the pleading motion of his hands. "You must keep your temper this day, young one. If you cannot, it is better to remain silent."

"Silent!" Goran stepped back, expression incredulous. The cone of coloured paste now shook within his hands. "When that one speaks with little reverence for our people? Did not bow respectfully before you?"

"I suspect that there is no one that he bows before, Goran. No slight was meant specifically to us. He is their Sheikh of Sheikhs. He is proud and sees no one as worthy of his equal."

At the sudden derisive snort Najir worriedly placed a hand upon his nephew's arm. "It is better to be silent and thought a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt. He is not one to be swayed by the fire of our words. Only the careful craft of our argument. The prophet says 'Raise your words, not your voice. It is rain that grows flowers, not thunder.'"
A dark brow quirked higher and dark eyes held the young man fast.

Goran flushed and nodded. "I will try, my sheikh."

As the young man again turned his attention to a soaring bird upon his uncle's fist, Najir thought upon their meeting in the citadel. The older brother had been different from the lieutenant that they knew but had made them very welcome. A large and laughing man, a great warrior by all accounts, honourable and warm. It was as clear that he valued his brother's judgement as it was that their father did not. Najir had been quite shocked. This Steward was a noble man and learned like his younger son in lore and language but the Haradrim would never have guessed the cold and haughty lord to be his sire. Hard he seemed, fair perhaps, but not generous. Neither pretty words, nor music, nor often beauty would move him.

The last touches to the finer details were just finished when a knock sounded at their door. Faramir, dressed in the black and sable, dress uniform, waited patiently in the hall. Drab as the birds that hopped to keep warm upon the stone windowsill, thought the Haradrim with a smile. Men and birds should have brighter plumage.

"Are you ready my Lord?" Faramir's question, spoken in their fair language, was the soul of earnest consideration, as different from his father's earlier indifference as it was possible to be.

Najir smiled and nodded, more than a little relieved to find the young man bore him no great ill for the surprise he had received the day before. The knowledge the Haradrim had gained, he hoped, had made the little obsfuscation very worth it.

They walked without further word for many minutes, traversing the distance from the Citadel to the Great Hall of Merethrond. At the great carved doors a pair of guards stood sharply to attention.

Faramir was about to ask to be announced, when Najir spoke one single word. "Hold."

The lieutenant turned quickly back.

The dark man's lips moved silently as he settled his elaborate robes one last time; gold beads gleamed like a hundred tiny suns in a sudden shaft of morning light. Behind him Goran looked pale and worried.

The Shiekh clenched a fist and took a breath. It was an illusion, but a pleasing one, that made the hawk's wings appear to fold. He was startled then, but should not have been, to hear the young lieutenant use a saying born of wide sky and wider, shifting sand.

"I have your weather, Najir." Faramir spoke quietly and bowed his head, left hand clasped upon his forearm.

I have your weather. 'I have your back.' it meant and was only used between two who were honoured friends. He heard the offering unspoken in the air; let it wash into his heart and made one back.

"A new friend is an oasis unexpected." Grey eyes and black held each other for another moment.

"Water was life. To find a friend is to open a page for life.

"Let us go…"
The fourth bell of morning rang out across a city bathed in sun but kissed by the first strong chill of approaching winter. Her marble colonnades and walls shone brightly, white as the coming snow but did not hold the heat. In his study the Steward stood before a fire and tried to warm hands and face chilled from the morning's audience. The frigid air, as always, had sunk through the vaults of Merethrond.

He was, he found, so very cold and tired. For a moment Denethor contemplated sending Cahil for a warmer robe. The thought of sitting wrapped and at ease before the fire was suddenly quite enticing. But with dismay he wondered if he had not the fortitude for the weather now, what then would he do when winter's true biting cold arrived?

The Lord of Gondor knew all too well it was not age or malady that sapped him but an ever pressing need whose demand would only surely grow. What had been taxing before was now a very battle. The stone had become more wayward. He had reached out east and with it encountered something new. A presence, a brooding adumbration that sat and waited, content to let him come. He knew its game but his will was strong; there was strength of old within his blood and his need to know was great. Yet the other's focus, its pressure, its dark and brooding haze crept ever down. Each day it took more will and energy to hold the stone, to see what he wished to see: Gondor, his lands, the gathering strength of the Enemy beyond the shadowed palisade of Ephel Duath.

The witless, slavering Orcs he saw were many. The Abhorred One gathered more to him and their numbers multiplied like maggots feasting upon foul carrion. Still Denethor did not quail; they were not men, their will was weak and without their captain he judged they would be easily assailed. He tempered what pity and fear darkened his secret heart with numbers. In time his thirst for numbers, for knowledge, had became as sharp as another's need for drink or dice. And just as irresistible.

The closer to Mettare that they came the hours he could search decreased: the stone needed light to see, however faint. Beyond the Mountains of Shadow there was little such, the denizens of Mordor were used to a deeper, redder glow and Ithil penetrated very little. His knowledge had become more dearly bought, wrested with greater cost from the waning light of day.

Unconsciously Denethor shivered; a chill coursed through him. Whether weariness or season he could not tell. Pacing in agitation before the hearth, he wrapped thin, spare arms about his body, the new laid fire was not enough. Surely the greater weariness would fade as his mastery of the stone's now sharper will improved? Perhaps he should not search night after night; should pace out his visits, give his body more time to recover in between? It was better, he felt, to accept and adjust with time than to coddle, or so he had been taught. Belatedly, he made a mental note to order fires to be lit the day long now that season had truly turned.

Some time for quiet contemplation now was no more than his due. The council had been more than usually tedius that morn. With great effort he had kept his countenance thoughtful and composed, listened to each and every lord and councilor. All had felt the need to recount his fief's experience on the Crossings, their current encroaching threats and their views upon the plea before them.

It had been so very, very predictable.

While his stratagem of disregarding, but listening to, each and every councilor in turn had served him well, he found it more trying to orchestrate of late. Sadly, it was all too necessary: propriety must be satisfied; appropriate airing of the options done and seen to have been done. The latter was always the most important.

Nothing that the Sheikh of the Qahtani or the sententious, long-winded councilors had said had
moved his mind one whit. His own decision on the matter had been reached long before the Haradrim spoke so eloquently before the hall. He had, Denethor allowed, been a most persuasive, impressive sight; the flowery words and ringing tones had painted a vivid picture of need and threat. The Steward had almost been persuaded of his good intentions. Almost.

The idea of an alliance was out of the question. It was far too risky. Suspicion, the old battles and old fears, should not be set aside too lightly. Nor dismissed for the prettiness of one man's words. The Haradrim, time and again, had broken truce with their indulgent neighbour, behaved as wayward children, never held to one design or purpose for very long. One trusted repeated oathbreakers at their peril.

And what in the end, more to the point, would be the benefit of giving aid? To lose men they could ill afford for the gain of a few hundred horse? Better to hold what they had, strengthen their will and sharpen their steel, than to overreach.

None of it truly mattered. The time of testing would come all too soon.

The morning’s pressing issue settled to his satisfaction, the Steward gave no further thought to another delegation, and so the guard's voice startled him. He was surprised and no little annoyed, when the call and knock upon his door. A tired grimace flared briefly on the high, proud face. Reluctantly, he acquiesced.

"Come." The sternness and impatience in that single word would have made many think twice about the advisedness of interrupting the Steward at that point. But not his eldest, who led from the front per usual; nor his youngest for whom the tone was quite routine; nor his chief councillor, who felt quite naturally inclined to disregard his many moods.

Denethor took a deep and steadying breath, choose to sit upon the chair beside the fire. It was not a throne, this was not the hall, but he knew that they were supplicants and it suited him to have them stand before him.

His sons, courtesy drummed into them from an early age, waited patiently for the Duchess of Lossarnach to precede them into the room. She glided quietly forward and stood upon his left. He sensed only firm resolve but knew she held her inner thoughts in careful check. That Amerith might choose to weigh in again did not bother him overmuch, nor did the news that she had been in contact with the Haradrim. Such was the price of keeping her support. It was usefull: it kept her busy and out of his more urgent and burdensome designs.

Faramir came next and walked with ill concealed annoyance, eyes dark with anger. He had recived his lord's decision with the shock that came only when one is blinded by emotion. Unable to accept he might be wrong, learned but not with a needed shrewdness, Denethor worried he was soft and easily swayed. Amerith had not done him a service working on his gift. The boy had too much empathy; was moved to weakness by what he saw in men.

Boromir strode last through the room to stand close beside the hearth. His hair had grown longer in the weeks he had been abroad to the kingdom's north. Straighter than his brother's, its longer length made his face seem narrower, and with it more like to Faramir.

Their father wondered for a moment whose idea it had been to argue more, the Captain or his youngest? Surely it was Faramir. But then looking upon the storm in Boromir's grey Hurin eyes, the greater resemblance between the now grown men, he thought for once he had been wrong. Perhaps they are more alike in heart sometimes than I give them credit for.

He gazed upon the three arrayed before him with weary indignation. Each had counselled for
alliance, had said their piece, had heard him give his final decision on the matter. It mattered little that they did not like his decision. He expected to be obeyed.

Boromir spoke first. He stood straight and proud as ever, but the hand upon the mantelpiece drummed impatiently upon the carven wood, belying his greater agitation.

"Father, I believe this petition needs far more serious consideration than it has received this day."

"Oh do you?" Denethor, with difficulty, kept the taint of acid from his tone. "And what, in your opinion have I failed to understand about this rather chancy enterprise?"

A wiser man would have recognized the thinness of the ice on which he walked, but not the Captain, who in that moment believed implicitly in his father's fair regard. "The risk to our future security should all the tribes unite and follow this new Sheikh. So many mounted warriors, united, trained well and better organized would be difficult for us to face."

A mocking eyebrow wended its way higher. *Oh my stolid son, you really have no idea.* "And truly you think that expending our forces to help this single tribe would be enough to hold them off?" Contempt glittered in the Steward's gaze, dripped thickly from each word.

Boromir shifted a little uncomfortably, looked down and for no reason that he knew took off his Captain's ring. He was not used to this more personal interrogation, the mocking tone Denethor now used with him. *How does Fara put up with this?* A flush of unaccustomed anger crept up his throat. He was their father, for Valar's sake. They were not children; neither of them should be spoken to this way.

"Yes, yes I do. And believe that we can gain greater benefit thereby."

"And what, my son, is to guarantee that once saved they do not turn against us? Qahtan fought with the tribes at Poros, or have you forgotten that? I wager Theoden-King has not. Thanks to the Haradrim Rohan lost two heirs, both of his grand-uncles gave their lives upon the Crossings. The river ran red with the blood of Gondor and Rohan both. You would trust them?" Denethor's voice held a dangerous note and he turned hard eyes upon both his sons.

Faramir steadied his gaze, put all his certainty into a carefully measured tone. *"I trust Najir." Surely Father can see this in him as well as I?* He found he did not have it in him to ask directly, to remind his father of one of his less martial skills.

The answer came with immediate disdain. "Then you are more of a fool than I had thought." Denethor spat out. "They have betrayed us many times. One man is not an entire people."

Nor is he always just a grain of sand within the desert. Faramir did not say it aloud. He was well versed in retreating before his father's sudden onslaughts.

Boromir, impetuous as always, was not so willing back down, incensed as he was by this latest needless swipe and his father's tone. "Father we have little cavalry save Uncle's and Rohan may be beset by troubles of her own. Surely we must support them. There could be much to gain."

"Enough." Silence fell into the room, oppressive and unyielding. Denethor let it stretch to make his point. As the Lord and Steward, it was not their place to question him.

Furious at the challenge, he choose to let his elder son feel the force of his greater ire.

"I am not surprised to hear you council for battle Boromir. Ever your wish is to be valiant, to do great deeds. I could almost think you as vainglorious as Earnur was of old. That did him little good, does
us little good now. Only knowledge and vigilance can keep our people safe as the Enemy gathers beyond our gate."

"And if the Eldar came in need, would it be your counsel to turn them away as well?" Boromir exclaimed.

With shock his little brother recognized a face from upon the battlefield: nostrils flared in fury, the handsome brows stretched together in concentration. "All those bloody battles Ivanduil had me memorize, time and again in every great and glorious victory we had allies! The Rohirrim, the Eldar, the Five armies."

Denethor cut him off with an impatient hand. "Your example is a poorly chosen one my son. It is the Eldar who have turned away from us. They look only west and wait patiently for the day they can leave this morass behind and find the solace only they are promised."

Amerith, silent until now, watched uneasily as the tension began to mount. The debate seemed almost to Denethor to be a challenge, his sons the young pups facing an older cur who snapped and snarled, impatient of the testing. _Was everything to him now framed in conflict? _It was all too unsettling a thought.

With little hope, she tried a different tack: used his title as a lesson and a goad, reminding him of the smallness that the kingdom had now become. "My Lord Steward of Gondor, if we deny them aid a great many people will come to harm."

"Amerith you know as well as I we cannot right all the evils in the world nor take in every supplicant. It is not our concern. Gondor must hold against the Enemy. We need all our strength for that."

The duchess looked upon her ally. Where was the just and thoughtful man she had come to know? Denethor of old had been able to see beyond the borders he guarded with such care. "Yet surely women and children could be sent here to safety? We cannot just abandon them to the slaughter."

"We cannot find shelter and sustenance for the hundreds or thousands who would be displaced. Without our language how would they fare? With no menfolk to provide how would they live? Will Lossarnach and Lebinin feed them all? They are not Edain. They not our people." Denethor rose abruptly and strode toward his desk. Clearly, for him the audience was finished.

Faramir, appalled by the justification and sick at the thought of what would come, incautiously grabbed his father's arm as he passed by. Somehow he had to make his father see.

"Najir's people workship Araw Father, Orome, the Valar. Their prayers are but little different than our own. They _are_ our people. Did Earnur turn away when Gilgalad needed aid at Fornost? When the Faithful landed did the Noldor and Sindar turn them from these shores? They were refugees too."

Denethor roughly threw off the grasp and turned toward his son. He was tired of this. How dare they question anything he said? The words came out in mocking snarl. "Well done, Faramir. And I doubt not you can give me also the dates of their landing and the names of their generals. But still it does us no more good than your fool brother's wish for glory!"

There was a swift intake of breath. Faramir drew back, wariness and shock in the set of every sinew. Never had Denethor spoken of his eldest that way.

Amerith found that she was trembling, uncertain of where the end game lay. Was there nothing solid
in this time, if even bedrock, the certainty of a father's fair regard, could shift under the force of opposition?

Denethor avoided the look of surprise and fury upon his eldest's face and continued to berate his younger son. "That was a time of peace! Utterly different. Have you not noticed we are soon to be at war? It may not be declared as such but it is coming. Why else do you believe I toil all the hours of the day!"

A cold white anger boiled up inside. *Fools.* He was surrounded by sentimental fools who had no real comprehension of their foe. "Our concern is Gondor. We cannot do more."

The Steward looked up and caught his Captain's thunderous gaze. Defiance was written in the hard set of Boromir's furrowed brow, the steady clenching and unclenching of a fist about a ring.

*Well then.* If his son did not understand, it was long past time for his heir to learn a crucial lesson.

Denethor turned, and gestured toward the door. "Come my son. It is clear that you need to understand a little better your inheritance." His voice was iron, his expression expectant and implacable. He did not imagine he would be disobeyed.

Not one of them in the room misunderstood which son he meant.

Faramir, lines of unhappiness deeply etched upon his brow, held his breath. For once he could not predict what his beloved brother would choose to do.

Boromir squared his shoulders but did not take a step. Slowly, even a little insolently, he slid his ring of office back on his hand, looked around and nodded to them both. Without a word he followed his father through the door.

Amerith was never quite sure what had flashed for the briefest moment behind the steel grey eyes of Gondor's youngest Captain. She hoped it was a trick of the fading firelight, but always feared it had truly been a momentary hatred.

*Oh please, have care.*

She sent out the silent plea but knew not who it was for: the father or the son.

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Boromir followed his father up the endless winding steps, torchlight flickering upon the walls and shadowing a countenance that brimmed with anger and frustration. Neither man spoke as they turned and turned and turned again, climbing the tower of their forefather to its highest point.

Nearly at the topmost stair, the Steward's elegant sable robes caught for a moment upon an iron bracket. As Denethor lifted the hem to free the heavy fabric, his son caught a glint of silver underneath.

*Armour?* Boromir was startled by the sight. *What does Father need armour for?*

Another bitter thought followed quickly on the first.

*He has no need for such. His body and his heart are become harder each passing day.*

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The door to Boromir's room was not yet locked when Faramir sought out his elder brother many hours later. The evening bell had come and gone and all through the fading light of afternoon he had felt a feeling of disquiet settle in his chest. It had swelled and knotted up his stomach, pounded dully behind his eyes.

Najir and Goran had been sent with Mablung and the Rangers to find a meal and see something of the middle circles. At first he had tried to join them, to converse and act as a good host should, but restless with the gnawing uneasiness he found could not eat, every bite made his stomach clench in sour indignation. Finally, he had excused himself and sought respite in their study and the distraction of a book. Though he had tried to read, his mind and heart pulled elsewhere. After every second sentence he had looked up, hoping to hear his brother's heavy footfall.

At last, after hours more of anxious waiting, a guardsman came to say that the Captain had descended the tower steps. Throwing down the forgotten book, Faramir passed through the hall almost a run, not stopping for his usual friendly word to the guardsman that he knew.

A sense of urgency had compelled him to reach his brother's door, yet quixotically once there, he hesitated to turn the familiar latch. The sick feeling in his stomach had not abated, in fact it had intensified. He took a deep and steadying breath, gripped the handle, and peered into the room.

The golden glow of a brightly burning fire warmed the tidy space. As usual swords and armour were laid carefully against the wall, the bed made without a wrinkle and a stack of reporting scrolls were piled neatly on the desk. Unlike his own messy abandon there were few books and no mementos of any kind. Boromir liked an uncluttered space. His two favourite things were the sole exception: a large painting above the bed and an intricately stitched coverlet. Both in blues and greens, both had been made by Finduilas long ago.

His brother sat in an armchair by the fire, still dressed in his dress uniform, boots and belt flung carelessly across the carpet. Slumped forward, elbows upon his knees, Boromir sat, tankard in hand, staring with unseeing eyes into the blaze. The straight raven hair fell lankly. It hid a little the firelight that played across the angled planes of his handsome face. It did not hide the dark smudges below the haunted eyes nor the lines of fatigue set about nose and mouth.

Faramir padded softly forward. The tankard was full and from the heady fumes it was full of brandy. He found himself grateful that his brother did not have far to go to make it to his bed. From the look of him, even that might yet be too great a task.

Long minutes passed before Boromir made to move or even seemed to notice Faramir standing there, waiting patiently for the weary man to speak. When at last he did, the Captain's voice was hoarse, pitched barely above a whisper.

"I wish that the taste could scrub the memory from my mind. Medicinal is it not? Kills infection and other types of rot."

The anguished eyes had still not left the hidden vision that danced within the flames. Suddenly he shook his head and reached wearily for the flask, slopped another measure in and gestured for his little brother to help himself.

Faramir shook his head. He still felt ill. More to the point it would not work and it might be hours yet before he could seek his bed.

He did not like his brother's stillness.
The Boromir he knew would be throwing something, swearing, raging on about their father's stubbornness and lack of accommodation. Not sitting brooding; still and white as if carved from Mindolluin's bones. The room was so eerily hushed and quiet, and his brother with it, Faramir fancied for a moment he could hear the wax drip from the candles set on the low table beside the hearth.

The older man scrubbed his hand tiredly across his face and took another swig. Red rimmed and bloodshot eyes at last looked up. For a long moment Faramir thought he wouldn't speak of it, but then, with a sigh, he did.

"It is exhausting holding the images still. I am surprised how very much they tug and turn, try to twist away from your grasp. I don't know how he does it little brother, up there, night after night. Surely the fatigue alone would cripple a lesser man."

The great head wearily dropped again, red eyes fixed once again on redder flames. A great shudder shook his frame.

The fire crackled and spat out a spark. Faramir walked over and carefully ground it out below his heel. He rested one arm upon the mantle and watched his brother's reflection flicker, small and fragile, in the amber glass of the brandy flask.

For Father this has never been about just us, our lives, and our own family. It has always been Gondor. Headache now pounding at a screaming pitch, Faramir asked the question in his heart.

"What did you see?"

Boromir shuddered, raised the tankard and swallowed; gulped unseeing like a drowning man. An arm shot out and fumbled blindly for the bottle. Faramir reached to settle it, placed his own steadier hands over his brother's shaking fingers.

How much had he had so quickly for his hands to be already trembling? He looked, but the tankard was half full and the bottle more than half. It was not the brandy that made his brother's fingers shake.

Eyes as bleak as the slopes of Ephel Duath raised up and held his own.

"Orcs."

"More than there are blades of grass upon the wold."

The rich bass voice was but a hollow whisper: certainty and awe, weariness and dread rode pillion its wake.

The pounding in Faramir's head became a roar. Baruk Khazâd! Khazâd ai-mênu! Rank upon rank of marching feet thundered in the half-forgotten dream that twisted before his eyes. Oh Valar, it had been true.

Desperate to erase the vision, find an anchor in their swiftly tilting world, he reached out and clasped his brother's shoulder. A trembling hand reached up to grasp his own.

Did their their father know what he had done? Did he understand where time and tide would take them now? He doubted it. Denethor thought only on Gondor's need. His sons were pawns to be used to their best advantage.

A new and formless fear clutched with twisted fingers at his heart. He believed he knew why it
should be so.

"Boromir, he did not mean it."

"Oh yes he did, but it is kind of you to say so." A smile that was more a grimace quirked upon his brother's face. The tankard thudded on the table. Suddenly the older man heaved unsteadily to his feet.

Boromir walked slowly and stiffly over to stand beside the bed; stared up at the painting upon the wall. He saw not rock and wave and shingle but high and narrow cheekbones, a bow shaped mouth. From long ago he heard a soft, contralto voice, reduced almost to a whisper. "Promise to take care of him my bear…"

He would never tell Faramir of it but once in a long while, just as now, it hurt to see the mother he needed so very much staring back from his little brother's eyes.

Mother, please tell me what did you see?

He did not understand. He did not want to understand. Frustration was a white hot anger that welled up yet again. How could their father who loved them treat them so? Did Denethor, after all, truly love anyone, even the wife he mourned down all these years? Did he truly love her, or had he loved that she loved him?

"Boromir?"

Callused fingers now reached to trace the swirls of silken thread upon the coverlet. The slate grey eyes at last looked back from out a face taut and grim. "Do you think that he truly loves us or only what he believes we are? What he wants us to be."

Faramir bit back a laugh. "He knows me, it is why he finds me wanting." He shook his head. He had been long used to hoarding the imagined teaspoonfuls of care doled out by a man who barely noticed he existed. Yet he knew his brother's need this night was greater than his need to guard such precious treasure. "Love? Sometimes, sometimes I think so. But it must be buried deep; under duty, and need, and Gondor that he must think on first."

"You are lucky then" Boromir's own laugh was bitter. "His regard of you at least is not a fiction. I smile and act and do everything he wants and allow the lie. Faithless to myself. Sometimes it sickens me."

"No…"

A large and callused hand upraised to stop the thought.

With dismay, Faramir knew there was nothing he could do to turn this mood. Even his brother, he thought, knew not how to settle it. It had been aired for him, only ever him, just often enough now that the younger man had come to realize it was the other side of the coin. A payment, a wergild as it were, for the fearless, big-hearted and large living warrior the world knew to be his brother. Without the one there could not be the other. He steeled himself to listen to what came. It was all he knew to do.

"You know little brother sometimes I hate that bastard Earmur. If he had not bloody well got himself killed we could not be here. The Steward's would be advisors only." In one straight gulp he downed the tankard. "I too am tired to trying to be what he wants me to be. I have had his fair regard but it is an increasingly exhausting effort just to keep it. Perhaps I should let it go."
As if the words were too large an anchor, Boromir at last lay down, stretched his frame wearily upon the bed. He did not bother to undress or pull the cover over.

Faramir walked over and made to raise the blanket up. A hand shot out and grabbed his wrist. "Nay I cannot sleep." The bleary eyes burned like two coals within an iron brazier. "When I close my eyes all I see is dark."

It was agony to see his beloved brother suffer in this way. "Then I will stay."

Faramir toed off his boots, lay down upon the bed and, just as they had done as little boys, pressed his back against his brother's shivering form. Just had Boromir had done so many nights when the Wave came to haunt his dreams, holding back the night's dark embrace with warmth and words of comfort.

They lay so for many minutes: two sons; the one that had had his father's fair regard but was now no longer sure he really wanted it and the one that rarely had it but thought that he still wanted it.

Neither of them spoke. What was there to be said? A page had turned and they must follow on.

Near the midnight bell Faramir heard his brother's breathing slow but still the shivering did not abate. Worried, he turned and pressed his warm chest and flank against Boromir's back, wrapped an arm snugly against the dark.

This time a brother's love held back a different wave. Not one green and roiling, thrown up from the deep seabed, but a black and angry tide that poured dread across the land and deep into a heart.

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Days later the mounted party halted at the crossings. Najir looked to the Gondorim sitting sullenly upon their mounts. Duty could not mask their great unhappiness.

Since ever Melkor turned jealous eyes upon the light Abaan had said. This endless clash had been the sorrow of the land, a wound in Arda and a ragged tear within its music.

Najir knew he spoken with an eloquence that would have brought tears to his father's eyes. He had not pleaded, he was too proud for that. He had spoken of the darkness that was coming and the restless gathering in the Lord of Fire's land, but the Steward of all Gondor remained unmoved. With a pang of guilt he wondered if he had spoken truth when he told Goran their embassy would never be in vain.

Faramir turned troubled grey eyes upon him. "Will you fight now?" It was an unexpected question, he saw. There had been no thought of any other action. He bowed his head, guilty to have considered it.

Najir looked upon the golden leaves and remembered another autumn, the greening of the desert and its flowers, a boy practicing his verse. Out beyond the shining river in the desert it was not yet cool, but here the waiting forests shed their leaves. They knew that winter was to come.

A sense of coming change lay within both men. Now also with a sense of loss.

Najir shook his head slowly, as if even that movement was a pain. Dark is a way and light is a path.
How would he know that what he did was right?

Dark eyes held light gray and gave them the greatest honour: honesty. "I cannot stop the moon from rising. Suladan will come, and my people will bleed."

Almost as if he sensed what the Haradrim was thinking, Faramr let out a breath. When he spoke it was with a weight of years he did not own. "My friend, between our idea of right and wrong there lies a grey field, ploughed by necessity. Do what you must. Likely, I will meet you there."

*My friend.* Silent words given through a handclasp. Najir realized the tightness in his chest was love, but almost as he noticed it, it slipped away. Their time was almost gone.

As they thundered off down the Harad road, the horsemen gave their eager horses a longer rein.

Heat and dust and blood lay far ahead.

Behind a silken sash fluttered in the breeze, blue as the ribbon of bright water they never thought to see again.

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One could sometimes anticipate events or be anticipated by them. More often we cannot see the link, the chain, the consequence of our acts. Suborned by a voice of twisted velvet, the Steward of Gondor did not see: that he had distrusted she who loved him as no other; that he had made a promise born of love to the waiting dark; that he had ignored one threat to their greater peril.

Denied an alliance, Najir watched his warriors not some months hence, his heart breaking at the beauty of their courage, his faith shaken by its futility. Proud and desperate, the Qahtani spilt their blood, their women wept, and still the riders of the Serpent thundered across the pitiless sands.

Saludan, now Emperor of all the land from Poros to the eastern wastes, was known to be a cruel and ruthless man. But not foolish one. Not ever that. A leader, he knew, could have enough concubines and wives but never enough good men and horses.

Judging swiftly the merit of what lay before him, the Emperor of all Harad did something unusual and unforeseen. He chose not to execute the leader of his newly subjugated people, kill their boys, nor take (many) of their women.

Najir, after months of endless struggle, many prayers and hopeless words, was dragged at last in chains before the Serpent throne. He prayed fervently that somewhere on the shifting sands his nephew and his shaman were still safe, would never know what he was about to do.

Desperate to stem the destruction of his people, their fabled poetry, their harsh but honourable way of life, the young Sheikh did the one thing he had sworn he would never do.

*Out beyond right and wrong there is a field. Oh my friend I am here but you are not.*

Torn and bleeding, dazed by fatigue and pain, he knelt down and performed the ritual obesience. Pressed his split and swollen lips to the soft and scented feet of the shaven priests, bowed his head, and swallowed bile, swore an oath to the Lord of Fire.
So it was that many years and many leagues hence, Najir found himself with his Serpent upon a field of red and dying.

He knew there could be no going back. Could be no failure. That behind lay only the Emperor's terrible displeasure and yet farther back, the all consuming dark of the Lord of Fire's fearsome general.

He turned and looked upon their vast and seething host; the desperate, tortured Gondorim and felt pity for a moment take his breath. Suladan had been right. The Qahtani were the finest horsemen, scythed the Gondor ranks like so much pale, churned butter,

*Dark is a way and light is a path. Now there was no way but forward.*

Scimitar flashing through the cruelly cool and evil smelling air, he urged Na'man onward with all speed. Surely great Araw wept as his once faithful servant hewed a Captain of the Gondorim; a dart struck out of the raging din; and a father's hope was lost.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: The words of the prophet are abridged from Rumi's gorgeous verse. Faramir's comment about right and wrong owes its inspiration there also. Thank you so very much to all who have commented and kudo'd. It keeps me going.

My sincerest thanks as always to Annafan, Lia, Thanwen and Gythja for their comments and encouragement
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A prince is lost. A new Captain joins the board. A new gambit is employed

T.A. 3010 Gwirith

The deck's worn, dark planks lay sure beneath his feet, while all about the sky's dark vault enrobed him like a mantle; blue-black and studded with a myriad white and sparkling jewels. Ithil, above, kissed the churning sea and gave of his faded lamp a silver light to twine in endless swirls of shimmering green and blue upon the waves. To seaward, low in the sky, the brightest star of all the dawn led them on: bound to Vingilot that sailed the heavens round.

The ship he trod was not Vingilot, not silver-white wings and oars of gold and sails of shining light. She was no swan, but a swan-ship, silver on deep sea blue, graced the flag upon the mizzen mast. A hunter, a fighter, lean and swift and foaming grey to hide upon wide dark sea. Minuramar, Wings of the Dawn, was her name and east she had ever sailed.

At the shrill broken cry of a kittiwake he looked up and caught the flag snapping as a stiff and following breeze took hold. Boards creaked and groaned, protested like an old man rising in the morning, now the boat heeled and turned to windward. Around him a dozen men hurried to and fro, tied down the great foresails and set the jib.

The tall young seaman stood half hidden by the flurry, relaxed and easy with the roll, a strong hand upon the starboard shroud. The neck of his tan linen shirt lay open, his dark blue coat was worn and faded from many hours in the sun and spray. A short black beard framed a proud and narrow face: unlined but for a few creases about the merry eyes. His glossy raven hair was tied in braids twined with bead and shell and clasped about his head by a sash of darker blue. Upon his arm was a golden band of dolphins leaping in the foam.

Drawn forward, with a shock he realized he knew the shining light grey eyes and wry half-grin, if the not hair and garb. The smile was his own and so the eyes. They were the ones they both shared with his long-departed mother.

"Grandfather." He found himself pulled into a swift embrace by strong arms and work callused hands.

"Faramir." Warmth and love washed over him but the touch of hands and chest were gossamer, fleeting, light as a siren's call. "I am so sorry we could not meet again, my lad, but I must go. My time here is done."

He felt a sharp pain twist within his breast. "But where do you go?" It seemed impossible. That the years had flown so swiftly, that the prince had been called to judgement at the last.

Adrahil shook his head and smiled sadly upon his young grandson. "You know well, lad. Do not fight what has to be. Not all walk the Qalvanda to the Halls of Waiting, some of us are blessed to sail. But I have little time, the veil approaches and there is much I need to say." The grey eyes shone
intently, held within a luminescence near as bright as that upon the waves. They caught his gaze and spoke into his very soul.

"No man could have been so blessed to have so many worthy grandsons. Please tell your brother what I say to you. It is not in him to hear me, to dream and cross the twilight. You and Boromir, both, I love so very much. You have made me so very proud."

"I will...I will tell him, Grandfather. I....."

"Nay lad, there is more and I have little time. I know your love, I feel it ever."

The light grey gaze became then serious, darker, more like to the shingle of Adrahil's home and bay. It was a thoughtful look he knew, from council or debate, points of lore and games of chess.

"You know Finduilas saw a king before she died..."

It was not a question. They both knew her vision and the pain.

"Yes." All at once hope and excitement coiled with urgency in his chest. His voice was low. He could barely breathe for the fire of the words. "Do you know him? Who he is? What is his name?"

The young prince shook his head. "I do not know. But again the dream has come to me. I give it to you now that you may know him in his time, our true king who will come again."

An image of a man washed over him, clothes rent and stiff with dirt, dark with the sweat and grime of long, rough toil. Brow furrowed at the scent of danger, he seemed ageless and yet laden with a weight of years and wisdom, grace and purpose. His brow and hair and eyes all told of the blood of Numenor. In the fold of the dark green cloak shone the thinnest edge of silver, the ray of a many pointed star.

"Adra, will you come." The stern young man who touched his grandfather's arm was surely the ship's captain by his commanding bearing. The image of his grandfather, this man was shorter, more wiry and weatherbeaten, with many scars upon his arms and Haradi tattoos upon his hands. With a thrill, Faramir realized who it had to be: Aglamir, his great uncle, whom he had never met.

"Yes." Adhril turned back and spoke quickly once again. "You must go, grandson. The way is dark ahead for Gondor but there is light. Trust. Be true. Hold fast, Ulmo watches the children of the One. Up from the riverbed and then the sea will salvation come." One more swift hug and then the moonlight glimmered, made the dolphins upon a strong forearm all seem to leap as swiftly they drew apart.

He turned and stepped down the waiting ladder. The rope was rough and unfamiliar under his archer's hands, the crusted salt stung the little fletching cuts. He stepped down carefully and sat in the small skiff that bobbed beside.

As he watched, the great ship turned to westward, her sails bellied and filled. He heard his grandfather's voice, eager, exultant, saw the high proud face and smile of purest joy. Above him a flock of darting kittiwakes keened and cried and followed his small boat back to shore.

Faramir sat up with a start, heart pounding in his chest, eyes wide and dark, blankets all askew. Around him were not wave and foam and starry sky but rough granite walls and woolen bedrolls, the snoring and shuffling of sleeping men and the soft sussurration of the falls.

Panting, he took deep steadying breaths, filled his lungs with the familiar scent of pine and broom, and unwashed men. He did not see them. The vision blazed, it would not leave his sight. So it was
He lay back down: a tide of wistfulness and grief washed gently through. With the sound of the
crying gulls and crashing waves receding, he knew then that Adrahil, Prince of Dol Amroth was
gone.

Dol Amroth's many walls and graceful spires rose in tiers of blue-grey stone but little darker than the
shining eyes of her fabled brave and wily princes. Perched upon a steep-sided peninsula jutting west
into the bay, she sat serene and proud, steady as a swan upon calm water, impervious to the winds
that blew ever to the shore. Her great sea walls, built also of the smooth and sparkling shale that
strode the coves near by, enclosed an inner harbour studded with every ship and craft that folk could
mind. Most graceful of all among a city nigh Elven fair was her Seaward Tower, Tirith Aear,
standing high and prouder still just to the north. Listening it was said for the voice of Amroth, who
searched always for his Nimrodel about the Bay.

On this sunny spring afternoon, Eomer, young Lord of Aldburg and Rider of the Mark, looked
around him with keen-eyed interest, admiring the sparkle of the stone and the sun upon the waves.
He and Rohan's Crown Prince had journeyed far from their home for the morrow's funeral. Adrahil,
Dol Amroth's Prince for whom Tirth Aear's pennant lowered and her bell tolled mournfully, was a
distant kinsman and steadfast ally. It was their honour to bring Rohan's respect and admiration.

The day before, he had walked in anxious silence through the Prince's palace to where its lord was
laid in state. Imrahil, his three strong sons, his wife and daughter, stood pale and composed to receive
their honoured guests. The young Lord, already awed by the splendour of the gardens, the rooms,
and the abundance all around, was further awed by the sight of so many of Gondor's high nobility.
Eomer was not used to feeling short. In Rohan he was considered tall indeed, but shaking hands in
greeting, following Theodred through the receiving line, he was conscious of being an anomaly
amongst the many tall, grey-eyed men. Tallest of them all, forbidding even, was the Steward of
Gondor. By order of precedence, representative of the King, Denethor greeted his kinsmen ahead of
them, his two handsome sons striding just behind. All the men and women who stood in the hushed
and peaceful space were pale of skin and dark of hair, though Princess Leylin, he thought, looked
more than a little pale…

Eomer had discovered over the days before that there was great hospitality to be found in other lands.
He was surprised, thought why that should be so he could not explain. Princess Leylin had made
sure their rooms, as befitted a Prince and his retinue, looked over the great walled garden toward the
sea. When she had asked what he thought to be near the sea, well aware it was his first trip outside
his home, he found himself admitting it felt familiar. The sky was wide and blue and the ever-present
waves rode away into the distance like the swaying grass upon the fold.

Now, as he and his Prince walked at leisure down through the city streets to the market place, Eomer
found himself grateful for his cloak. It was every bit as windy as he had been warned. A smell he did
not recognize rode the breeze; sharp and green and briny as the sea itself. It was not unpleasant, but
simply odd, one of many oddities he was adjusting to in this foreign land.

The market stalls were thronged that early afternoon. Folk strode hurriedly by, on their last errands
before the day to come. The Prince's funeral had been declared a day of mourning. It felt
uncomfortable to be so hemmed in, he and Theodred at times could barely walk for the people
jostling all around. But each time he felt his discomfort rise some new and unusual sight caught his
distracted eye: spices in red and orange and yellow piled in little pyramids upon flat woven baskets. Silks and swords, pots and bowls of many strange and intricate designs that Theodred explained
were from far Harad. A great fish with a sword upon its nose he found altogether ugly, but was told,
skeptically, it tasted best of all.

There was nothing that could not be bought. Except, it seemed, the perfect gift for Eowyn. He felt a
 pang of guilt. She had been so disappointed not to come. And though he had argued hard, Theoden, only just recovered from the illness that kept him in his bed, would not hear of being separated from
his niece. The weak and querulous voice had pleaded. None other tended him so carefully, knew his
needs so well. "Of course, Uncle." She had acquiesced, face set in the barest dutiful smile, but
disappointment limned again her wide grey eyes. It was an expression he realized she wore all too
frequently of late.

They walked up and down the stalls, Eomer searching with increasing desperation for something that
would suit his proud and fearless little sister. Books and kirtles and handkerchiefs were all examined
but did not suffice. A merchant eyeing their good swords and warrior's braids tried to interest them in
jugs of the celebrated Belfalas yellow wine. It tasted thin and sour. He swallowed and mumbled a
polite half-hearted compliment but wished longingly for ale.

As they wandered, Eomer realized they too were the subject of curious and admiring looks. Few
around had fairer hair and Theodred's heavy torque was as exotic here as the soldiers' white Swan
belts were to them. Eomer flushed with embarrassment to be eyed but Theodred took it with
uncommonly good grace. The Prince could charm the birds from the very trees for all his temper and
moved about with an understated confidence that was reassuring rather than intimidating. He
admired his cousin's ability to carry himself in this unfamiliar place, the fire in him well hidden by a
disarming manner and self-deprecating charm.

"They look like boys." Eomer remarked a little truculently in Rohirric, now thoroughly irritated after
an hour's searching and no success in their urgent quest. He was amazed to see that not a single man
within the lane before him wore a beard.

His Prince's snort of laughter was lost amid the buzz and clamour of the throng. "I assure you they
are not boys." Theodred fingered his own chin thoughtfully and grinned. "Is that how you take me?"
He turned broad shoulders for a moment to squeeze past a goodwife laden with heavy baskets.

"Of course not." Eomer replied quickly. "But your face looks older. They look so young…"

The Prince, quite untroubled to be called old, forebore to tease harder his obviously unsettled cousin.
"Dúnedain. They live longer than we do, Eomer. Did you not see the Steward yester morn? He is
twenty years older than Father but looks younger still."

Chewing quietly on this thought, the younger man desisted for a while, but as they rounded a
dressmaker's stall he raised the point again. "Only one has even a really decent beard."

Theodred, who had been idly examining a bolt of fine blue velvet, looked up as Eomer nodded his
head toward a tall soldier walking with a pretty woman on his arm. "Who is that woman with the red
hair?"

The dark-haired man spoke quietly to his companion and a peal of merry laughter rose up.
Something about both of them seemed familiar.

The Prince's face lit suddenly with surprise and happiness. "Lady Lossarnach, our cousin! Surely
you remember…?" But with a pang of guilt he let the comment fade. How would the young Rider
remember? They had only ever met at Theodwyn's funeral.

Awkwardly, Theodred cleared his throat and continued on. "You met her some years ago. Her grandfather was grandmother's eldest brother."

"And the man with her?" Above the close black beard, something about the man's intent light eyes reminded Eomer of Prince Imrahil. Surely he was a noble? The scabbard at his side was finely worked.

Taking in the grey eyes, aquiline nose, and narrow jaw, Theodred knew suddenly who it had to be. "Do you not recognize him from the hall? That is Faramir, the Steward's younger son. He left to stand honour guard before we could meet yesterday. Boromir said he is newly made a Captain of the Ithilien Rangers and has come straight here from patrol. I assure you the beard will be gone upon the morrow. We should pay our respects."

The Rohirrim pushed their way forward through the crowd. As they drew near, Theodred hailed them in his best Sindarin. "Lady Lossarnach, my eyes have been dazzled by the many fair sights of this fair city, but the sight of you puts them all to shame."

A startled but delighted smile and bright tinkling laugh greeted his extravagant compliment. "Cousin! Theodred!" Amerith put down the light gloves she had been fingering and accepted her kinsman's kiss upon her hand. "The sight of you is a fair surprise indeed. You are far from home."

"We would not miss a chance to honour the Prince. He has ever been a good friend to Rohan." Theodred turned and pulled a suddenly shy Eomer a little closer. "You remember our cousin, my Lady?" he asked.

"Indeed, I do." Amerith's bright green eyes sparkled with welcome. "Lord Aldburg, it is a very great pleasure to see you once again."

Somewhat less smoothly, the young Rider took the proffered hand and pressed it to his lips. He had had little practice in the formal courtly manners the Gondorians preferred but if the lady noticed his nervousness and hesitation she did not show it.

The Duchess turned and pulled her companion close. "Prince Theodred, Lord Aldburg, may I present my friend, Captain Faramir of Gondor."

The tall Gondorian inclined his head in a respectful and graceful bow, the rondels upon his black velvet tunic flashing briefly in the sun. "Westu Hal min Aelfric," he addressed Theodred in perfect, if oddly accented, Rohirric.

"You speak our language?" Eomer exclaimed, delighted to hear the familiar words.

"I have studied it some, yes." came the modest reply. This son of Steward, with his elegant manners and elocution, clearly had had far more experience at courtly life but he was no dandy. There was also in his light grey eyes a keen intelligence and a calmness and competence to his demeanour that Eomer found he liked at once.

"Westu Hal, Captain." Theodred returned. "It is a surprise and pleasure indeed to find you both here."

"It has been too long since I last heard your charming speech." Amerith's voice was teasing but the bright green eyes sparkled in happy amusement. "How is Uncle? And Great Aunt Morwen?"

The Prince of Rohan's brows drew together in a frown. "I have little time for friendly visits I am
afraid. These days we are ever on patrol. But Grandmother is as much a force of nature as she ever was. Still hale, if but a little slower." The faint smile at the mention of his redoubtable grandmother faded quickly once again. "Father has been…. less well…. of late."

Theodred's quick glance to Eomer was brief, but the Duchess's shrewd green gaze did not miss it nor the hesitation in his carefully chosen words. Less than fortuitous affairs of state should not be discussed in the open air with so many ears about.

"I am sorry to hear it so." Smoothly, she let the obvious question pass and turned to Eomer. "Cousin, your sister, the Lady Eowyn, how is she?"

"Very well," he replied, saying the first thing that came into his head but then fearing his face looked less than earnest. *Well* was decidedly not the right word. There had been a worrying bleak emptiness to her soft grey eyes as she dutifully lifted the stirrup cup.

Theodred's eyebrows shot halfway up his brow as he struggled mightily not to laugh. His awkward smirk did not pass unnoticed. Eomer, catching the interested gaze of his companions, tossed his older cousin a dirty look and hastened to carefully explain. "She was not pleased to miss a chance to come. Uncle would not allow it. That is why we are here this afternoon. I am a little aggrieved to not find a suitable gift to bring her home."

The duchess clutched excitedly at Faramir's arm, her face lit brightly at the thought of focused shopping. "Surely we can help you find something! Dol Amroth has the best market in all of Gondor. How old is she now?"

"Fourteen my lady." Eomer replied.

Faramir, trying to be helpful, gestured back the way they came. "We just passed a stall with some dolls and other toys."

Amerith's tinkling laugh made him blush. "She is a little old for those, my dear. You have, I forget, had little practice buying gifts for girls."

"I know my cousin Lothiriel." the Captain protested, but a finely-tuned sense of humour showed in the laughter-lines about his wry half-smirk.

"She is only ten. The Lady Eowyn is nearly a woman. There is wonderful stall with ribbons and rare beads just one alley over." She pointed crosswise to their path and made to move, but looked back nonplussed at Theodred's quiet snort of laughter.

Eomer once more hastened to explain. "Nay, my lady that wouldn't suit Eowyn either."

Theodred could not contain himself, enjoying immensely his cousin's discomfiture. "The Lord of Aldburg, dear cousin, has much to learn about women. I am afraid the one he knows the best is somewhat… unusual."

"Knowing women better hasn't helped you any in your quest." Eomer snapped, but just as quickly flushed scarlet with embarrassment. He had forgotten to use Rohirric in his haste.

Two pairs of eyebrows, red and black, raised up. "Ah, am I to assume the funeral may be the main, but not the only, reason for your visit? Every young woman of marriageable age in Gondor is here. It would, of course, not be done for any of them to miss paying their respects to Adrahil and his sons." A smile of mischievous delight graced the Duchess's face.

"As you guess, my lady, I must find a wife…." Now it was Theodred's turn to blush. With no mother
of his own, his aunts busy with their own manors, and his father less than well, Rohan's Crown Prince had been left to his own devices to search out a suitable Princess. He was finding it an increasingly frustrating endeavour.

Now speaking to his cousin once again, he was reminded of how enjoyable her company was. They were nearly of an age. At one time it had been thought a promising match.

"I don't suppose I could convince you to reconsider, my lady?" he asked, picking up her fingers to kiss her hand once more.

The red hair tossed and green eyes sparkled at the compliment. "And deny an ambitious young debutante the chance to be a Queen? Never. Besides, I understand you are quite famous for your skills at gentling young restive fillies. Why deprive you a chance to display them?"

As Eomer raised his hand to hide his smile he noticed a sudden furious frown upon the Captain's face. The man's lips were pressed tightly together in a thin angry line and his light grey eyes were stormy. A smile of polite and bland correctness slid so quickly back the young lord of Rohan thought it must surely have been his imagination.

The tall Gondorian looked quickly up toward the sun to gauge the time. With a hurried mumbled comment about his turn for the honour guard, Faramir excused himself and suddenly wheeled and strode away.

The two Rohirrim exchanged a confused and startled glance. Had they done something to cause offence?

Gondor's Captain left the startled group so quickly in his wake he did not see the Duchess's eyes narrow thoughtfully nor hear her words as she took the Prince's arm to walk.

"Come, we shall find something for the Lady Eowyn and discuss the merits of the other young ladies you may meet."

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The stretching shadows of late afternoon cast their soft grey embrace, their quiet introspection, upon the hushed and patient hall. Soon the sun would go down into the western sea and eventide would quickly fall. Then the last of the Prince's subjects would bid their farewells and the honour guard would watch his final rest.

Faramir, grandson of Adrahil and Captain of Gondor, stood to the west at the foot of the golden bier. Torches had been lit against the closing dark. Their flickering glow made the great iolite in his sword gimmer, as did the silver thread of Gondor's tree upon his breast. His cousin Amrothos stood to the right. The thin white belt of Dol Amroth's knights esquire was for the first time about his waist and made him look much older than his sixteen years. Rothos stood so stiff and still, so proud to have newly gained his honour from his grandfather's hand, that Faramir found himself checking his face quite frequently. It would not do to have the new Prince's son faint before them all.

In time, the last visitors drained away and the family were alone again. Quiet words and brief steadying clasps were given in exchange. Faramir shyly hugged his Aunts, a little startled by how thin and pinched Leylin had become. He wished he could ask his uncle about the change but knew it was not the time; the focus for the moment was otherwise, as it should be.
As he passed the silent bier, Faramir bent to kiss his grandfather's brow. It was cool and smelled pleasantly of cinnamon and cedar oil. The scent of the embalmer's wares lingered yet. Adrahil lay enrobed in deepest blue, his circlet of iholite and mithril upon the long white hair, the silver swan chased in fine needlework upon his breast. A captain's glass lay beneath his hands but not his sword. That blade he had gifted to Imrahil years before saying a man who rode a chair had need only for a quill. Now, still and silent, merry grey eyes dimmed, his grandson was amazed how little of Adrahil's three and ninety years showed in the smooth, proud face. Only his wrinkled, weathered hands and famous snowy mane gave away his age.

Faramir felt so very blessed for this gentle and thoughtful man, the one who had been such a constant in his life. No matter the vagaries of his father's chancy but coveted fair regard, the long years and months of swift, sure change, the fleeting happiness and bitter disappointments, the rock of his true self had rested longest here. Not upon the white stone of Minas Tirith, so often absent of his brother, but the grey and delicate spires where he had always known he was welcome, always known that he was loved.

With a heavy but grateful heart he turned and stood to attention once again. In the solemn quiet he could not keep his thoughts from Adrahil's final gift. The vision burned as bright before his eyes as it had in Ithilien weeks ago, as bright the leaping dolphins upon the gold arm band. The leisure to worry its import made him uncertain if he were blessed or cursed to be his mother's son in this.

Anxiety and hope now chased each other endlessly by the tail. They had been amplified by the closer quarters the Steward and his sons had shared on ship from Minas Tirith. Relieved to find his father and his brother speaking once again, Faramir had not even minded that Denethor quickly re-embraced his fulsome praise of his eldest's martial exploits. Boromir, for his part, had returned a wary courtesy. Trust would be hard won. Yet over the idle days both men had found they had something more in common. They were restless, each suffering to be cut off from their mirrored vices of knowledge and sated oblivion. Gradually they had become more at ease their enforced rest and Denethor had lost the harder edge that marked his recent days. Still Faramir had not found the fortitude to tell him of his dream nor why he had reached the City before a messenger had been dispatched.

The urge to share the hope was strong. The urge to keep it was stronger still.

Watching the two he loved the best debate hotly some point of tactic Faramir had admired them, the way they threw themselves wholly into their pursuits. He felt these days that he had become too much the Ranger, moved too lightly across the land. Doing everything well but nothing deep. Holding his passions back while inside a hollow ache grew ever greater. His own restlessness he held carefully in check, as if he were on guard the long days round.

Brow furrowed in the deepening twilight, he sighed quietly and glanced toward his cousin. Rothos looked tired but not glassy-eyed. That was good. With a start he wondered where was Boromir? The evening shadows were growing longer and was he not supposed to be with him on this watch?

Faramir was not certain, but he thought ruefully he could well guess where his brother was. The Captain-General had become nothing if not wilder since his promotion, indulging every whim in the hard won moments away from his increasing duties.

A rush of telltale heavy footfalls echoed across the hall then slowed respectfully as they approached the bier. Boromir saluted his younger cousin, green-grey eyes flashing, hair just barely combed. He looked handsome and far more sober than Faramir expected. His knots of rank were straight upon his shoulder and sash flat across his chest. Amrothos gravely shook his head and retreated to his rest.

Alone then, the brothers stood properly still once more, heads bowed. The quiet huff of their breath
and gentle hiss from a single brazier were the only sound. Faramir, unable to contain himself, risked a sidelong glance. Boromir was well turned out, there was little hint that not long before he had been underdressed. With one exception. A stray black thread dangled on his brother's tunic. A silver rondel was missing from its place.

A knowing smile lit his elder brother's eyes. They had caught his gaze and followed it, down to his uniform and up again. The corner of Boromir's mouth twitched as he struggled not to grin.

They both knew why his brother had been late. With a wink and toss of his raven hair, Boromir pursed his lips, raised a hand, and furtively blew his little one a kiss.

Faramir shook his head, his own mouth twitching with the effort not to smile.

_Blessed Valar his brother would never change._

Suddenly helpless to stop the laughter that bubbled up, Faramir heard the merry echo in the hall and let it flow. He knew with grateful happiness that their grandfather would not mind.

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"Thank you Nelleth. That will be all."

The young woman put down the brush she had been wielding and curtseyed once. Attuned to her mistress's moods, she shut the door quietly behind her.

Amerith had dismissed her maid unusually early; she wanted time to think. Her evening's necessary errand required thoughtful preparation.

Practised hands twisted the long red hair into a neat chignon and pinned it carefully in place. A quick look in the mirror showing nothing out of place. She picked up the fine cut crystal glass from the table and took a tiny sip. The smooth and honeyed amber liquid burned. It was Imrahil's best brandy of course. She must remember to thank Leylin for knowing her always unconventional taste.

With no small relief, she was pleased to find herself in Dol Amroth for the succession. Not Langstrand or Erech, or any of the other far but crucial places where the Steward's reach grew long.

She had listened and watched intently in the marketplace that afternoon. The Prince was loved and his son was too. Imrahil was indeed a gem. Fair. Just. Strong. The people would follow him unquestioningly. Her discrete questions about the Steward brought a quite different response but that was no great surprise. These days she heard a wary obedience to Minas Tirith in all her travels, but thankfully no open scorn. That, she knew, may yet come. Denethor's recent raising of the levies had rankled many lords. There were less folk these days from which to draw. The merchants grumbled too. Goods went unsold, crofts lay empty and fields stood fallow. The people of Gondor were dwindling. She could see it, as did her lord, but he was increasingly obsessed with only looking east. Somehow she had to find a way to make Denethor look also to his lands.

It was still a bitter disappointment that the chance for help from Far Harad was gone. For Gondor, the only source of greater aid lay to the west in the long neglected farther fiefs and Rohan farther still. How much aid could they share if they too were increasingly beset? She must find time to speak to Theodred privately. The guarded looks between the Prince and Eomer had been worrying. Something was afoot, something more than a simple illness of the King. She needed to know more.
Amerith knew her own position had become more difficult. Denethor had knowledge he was less and less inclined share. The lords were now asked to vote and agree with one who clearly did not trust them and gave them little credence. The grumbling had begun. She needed room. To manoeuvre. To counter Denethor's worst instincts. To stiffen the resolve of those who had begun to waver. Being allied openly with him no longer helped.

Her first instinct was for their split to be a highly public one. It would suit for the gossip to run wild and here in Dol Amroth most of the nobility would be party to the show.

And though it rankled she knew full well the way the spectacle would be seen. *The Duchess, no longer young poor thing, cannot keep the attention of her handsome lover.*

She sighed. Ran a still smooth hand across a creamy throat. Her pride was not the issue here. Indeed for her to be thought taken down a peg would only make the rumour run faster still.

Yet now she hesitated. The afternoon's events had been more than puzzling. Indeed they were a worry. Faramir, she knew, would have ridden in haste to Minas Tirith then had a long journey down the river. Surely he was fatigued, but could that alone explain his behaviour that afternoon?

Mulling the options, she absently dabbed a touch of rare and precious gardenia oil behind her ear. None of them were good. She had not before considered that the Steward's son would not want to follow the end game to its logical conclusion. Developments, it seemed, had outweighed her careful plans. For the moment a public show was out.

From across the bay the bell of Tirith Aear tolled the evening hour. Amerith put down her pins and bottle of scent and picked up her new bought gloves.

Drab for once, in linen skirts and a plain grey cloak with her bright hair covered, she hustled through the palace unrecognized.

It was time they truly talked.

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The Duchess held back within the hall, found a vantage point near the door to watch and wait until Faramir was released. To her practiced eye he looked more tired and even a little stiff. Boromir seemed fresher and, as usual, better dressed. She smiled fondly. There was something about formal clothes that made the Steward's younger son look just a little out of place, as if he were surprised to find he was no longer on patrol.

While she watched, a tanned young man in the lieutenant's uniform of Dol Amroth's fighting fleet walked shyly up to the bier. This must be Erchirion. She would not have recognized him but for his uniform; he was bulkier now, with a harder wiriness from time at sea. The Captain hugged his cousin hard and quiet words of commiseration echoed softly in the vaulted hall. Saluting his still captive elder brother, Faramir turned and walked quickly across the grey stone pavement, body tight as a bowstring. Clearly he wished to finish his duty and be away.

"Fara may we speak..?" She had not meant to startle him but in her haste, Amerith stepped more quickly then she had planned.

He stiffened. Grey eyes narrowed briefly in annoyance but they knew each other far too well for him
to stay taken aback for very long. He had reason to hide before but to do so now would be more than simply hurtful, it would be foolish. With a sigh of resignation, he bowed and offered her his arm.

Together they walked down the colonnade to the high sea wall. At this time of night the crowds were gone and the street was clear. A fresh wind arose and a few wisps of cloud lightly cloaked the evening stars and quarter moon. The scent of white jasmine, sweet and pure, drifted down on the soft and sultry air.

Faramir, ever-courteous, had shortened his stride to hers. They ambled, in no great hurry to reach their destination nor worry the thorn that pierced them both. He was afraid to speak the truth. She was afraid she knew what it would be.

Once they reached the wall and found a bench, the lady sat patiently, pretending to admire the play and sparkle of moon light on the waves. Amerith was determined to let Faramir have the opening and could be far more patient than many would have guessed.

She did not, in the end, have to wait too very long. He knew it too. Could read her mood in this, if in other things he did not read her very well.

"He asked." The quiet baritone, to do him credit, did not sound so very jealous. "He asked for your hand. He was not entirely joking."

"Not entirely. No." She felt him tense at the swiftness of her agreement while he studiously refused to meet her gaze. The ornamental braid upon his cuff held a curiously uncommon fascination.

She inclined her head and tapped his hand to gather his attention. "Theodred is perhaps getting a little desperate. He has done just as your brother has. Sown his oats, kept an eye to war and sung songs of slaying in the hall. He has a daughter and a mistress in the Hornburg, did you know?"

Faramir's light grey eyes widened. He obviously had not. That perhaps explained the strength of his reaction. "So long as they are not under Theoden's nose in Meduseld it seems to matter not. But now he has woken up and still he is prince and heir and there are other necessities that must be."

"Is that the reason you are not interested? That it would be a just marriage of convenience?" The angry toss of his head made a few strands of raven hair come loose from the velvet ribbon. Annoyed, one hand reached back to roughly pull the tie, but he did not look her way.

"Why do you think I should be interested in this at all?" she asked. Had they not talked of this long before? What possessed him to think that she would want it now?

"You could be a Queen…." Jealously, blind and thoughtless, leaked from around the oh so straightforward words.

"Stop! Just… stop."

Deliberately, Amerith let a little of her hurt wash over him, to make him feel what he had refused to see. "Please, use your fabled wits for but a moment. Whether I wanted to leave my home, leave Lossarnach and Lebinnin, which I do not, I cannot be queen to any king. The whole point is that he needs a legal heir. You know I cannot give him that."

Faramir flushed and bit his lip, abashed. She saw the light of understanding in his eyes. Her greatest grief and he had chosen to awkwardly rub it in. "I am so sorry."

"You should be." She watched him rise and turn away, trying to hide his discomfiture in motion. At the wall, Faramir planted both hands upon the smooth top surface. In the dark, the black velvet of his
tunic gave the illusion of a deeper shadow.

"Why? Why do you do this?" the lady asked when he was still again. "Why sully what we have with jealousy?"

She watched the fine, long fingers restlessly pluck a few tendrils of green from between the joints. They fell like faded prayers about their feet.

Too many heartbeats passed and still Faramir did not speak. The warm, salt-kissed wind rose higher. It whipped the long black locks about his face, made a curtain of night that hid the pain and confusion she knew must lie within the clear grey gaze.

When he spoke it was to the sea and not to her. "I do not know." The usually unforgiving sea could not know that he was lying.

With a sigh she reached and stilled the hand restlessly shredding its victims on the wall. Was she not, next to his brother, the one person with whom he need not stand sentry on his words?

"I thought, dear heart, we had agreed to be always honest with each other?"

He flinched and turned. The words stung as she had meant them too. For once, if he choose, he could be foolish and let emotion guide his tongue. She saw the decision flit through his eyes and waited for the long guarded words to come.

"Is there…. no one you could give your heart to?" The whispered words were low. It took less courage to speak so soft and she had to strain to catch them above the wind.

He held his breath, uncertain of their reception.

So that was it. She held her thoughts shielded tightly as a drum. This man who had always loved so deeply, so selflessly, who drew out the best in others and put their needs before his own, had at last wanted something for himself.

Aching at what she had to say, Amerith pulled off one silken glove and with fingers that trembled but a little reached up to touch his cheek. The new beard was soft and downy. It filled the hollows below the narrow cheekbones and put years upon his younger face.

"Oh love, I cannot give away something that I do not hold. I have tried, time and again, but it does not last. My heart will always come back to lie, with dust and silence, in Rath Dinen under stone."

Swift sure hurt darkened the clear grey eyes. In that instant she knew what she had to do. There would be no public row, no entertainment, the split had already begun in truth. Still she could give him a little more. Just enough to blunt the hurt but not foster hope. Green eyes pleaded, asking him to follow where she led.

"Niena, lady of mercy. I know. I know the yearning in you. The long shadow that grows. The light that is becoming hard to find." As always she had read him well. The chiseled face jerked round, pained eyes were all too bright. A few wisps of cloud had now veiled the thin and pallid moon.

Then, because she was weak and could not bear to see him hurt, she reached up and touched, just once, the bow-shaped lips. Stopped him speaking before she went on. Her voice quavered a little through the gentle smile.

"It would be so very easy, do not doubt, ever, that. And yes, for a time it would light the closing dark. But it would not be fair to you. You are too like him Faramir. You deserve to be loved wholly
for yourself."

Bare fingers trembled harder now but not with cold. They reached down to clasp his, seeking an anchor, a buttress for the part of her heart that would give in, that needed comfort as surely as he did.

She saw the confusion in the clear grey gaze. *How to make him understand?*

"You have a chance for something more. For a love that will pierce your breast and take your breath. That will gallop roughshod through your heart. When that day comes, *Valar* may it be soon, all the heart that I have left will overflow with joy."

She saw his pride war with the hurt and watched, grieving, as the mask slid back in place. He took a single pace that might as well have been a league.

"You and my brother both. Though where either of you find your certainty I do not now." It was as if they had never talked, though the fine archer's fingers did not grasp hers back.

"Will you come…?" The clouds had cleared. The stars glimmered hard and brilliant in their vault of bluest-black. Across the sky white fire streaked, a shooting star was one minute there and another gone. Just so had their moment of danger passed.

The dark head shook once. "No. I have been too long within the hall. I need some air."

He looked to seaward once again. She dropped her hands and meant to turn away but impulse grabbed her hard and would not let go.

She stood on tiptoe. "Goodnight." His cheek below her lips was cool. He did not flinch and but neither did he move. *That was enough.*

Amerith forced herself to not look back, to leave him to his thoughts and walk swiftly up the nearly silent streets. Outside a house arrayed with the Prince's blue and silver banner an old lullaby drifted out on the nighttime air. The tune should have hurt but this night she found it oddly comforting.

True love, a mother's or a lover's or even of a land, was ever selfless. But the right thing was sometimes very hard to do.

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A/N The Bell Tower of Tirith Aear is referred to in the Red Book of Westmarch. I have moved the timeline of Theoden's illness back four years to merge events. I apologize profusely to the Eomeristas out there. I have taken liberty with his height. :)

My grateful thanks and kudos to Annafan, Thanwen, Adaneth, Lia and Artura for comments on this draft and to Wheelrider for her wonderful and skillful beta'ing.
The day Prince Adrahil was laid to rest was one of sun and high scudding cloud and sharp winds aloft but gentle breezes by the bay. A good sailing day 'twas said, but not so very good that any felt the lack to rest in port. The city's streets were thronged ten deep. Hushed with expectation and heady with the scent of caborpin, the 'little frog', the brave buttercup that clung to every rock and now graced the path below the mourners' feet.

For the Steward's sons, arms interlaced, hearts full, to walk was to traverse again the path of memory. To feel the grey-green stalks of mistletoe beneath their feet and smell once more the sweet perfume of winter rose along a silent street. Not for their mother the scent of spring, the earthiness and warmth and bright airiness of new green weed, but the scent of snow, that cool and slightly dusty freshness, so quickly marred by trampling boots and hooves. Old grief, they found, does not diminish, but slumbered. Rested uneasily until the wheel of time brought it aloft again.

At last, the cortege came to Lond Medui, the final port, the haven and resting place for every Prince since Mardil the Good took the Steward's seat. Twenty grey stone tombs sat low and silent, arrayed about a central path. Each was shaped in profile as a ship and in its hold lay its lord and captain. Swords and shields, horns and harness fore and aft, each prince slept forever with feet toward the west. Whither his spirit had been called.

Adrahil was laid in the twenty-first, paler that its companions, made of blocks but newly cut and unweathered by the stiff sea air. Salt water and the Bay's sweet green oil and pale straw wine were poured about his feet to ease his path. When at last the blue and silver shroud of swans and ships was laid over all and the door was softly closed there came the moment that Faramir would remember all his days.

With the bright new latch just closed and heads still bowed, a rush of wings and a prickling at his nape made the young captain look to the sky. A flock of kittiwakes, hundreds strong and crying in
perfect unison, soared straight overhead. *A flag snapped in a following breeze.* The sight and the joyous sound lifted his drooping heart.

Boromir, attuned as ever to his little one, felt his brother's spirits rise and looked to skyward though he knew not why. He followed the flock out across the bay and with a sigh of longing wondered if others had felt it too. Joy. A pure and unfettered joy had travelled on those wings. Dol Amroth's twenty-second prince, his face suffused with wonder, turned and met his nephew's questioning gaze. He nodded. He had felt it too.

Beside them, the Steward's second son watched as the white ribbon travelled westward into the setting sun.

*Thank you grandfather,* Faramir whispered to Manwe's air, certain now that the Prince's spirit had reached the blessed shores.

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After the service and a subdued if excellent dinner, the family and their honoured guests gathered in the library. The warm, sunny day had receded. Belfalas' famous winds rose once more and turned to shoreward. Now the sashes rattled with each heavy gust and Dol Amroth's new prince thought ruefully the morrow would be wet. An onshore wind always brought with it rain.

Imrahil had ordered the fire to be lit, though more for comfort than for warmth. In its golden glow he sipped his brandy and reflected on the day. Together, they had toasted the old Prince, and remembered his many years, filled with love and more than ample laughter. Truly, he found that he could not be very sad. He would miss his father, yes, but Adrahil's had been an uncommonly long and happy life.

*I should be so lucky,* was his heartfelt prayer. For Imrahil the only note of lasting pain came as he looked upon his wife. Leylin's pale and tired face contrasted starkly with the others in the room. A malady sapped at her strength and none knew what to do. His heart clenched. Fear would not help, just as the healers' tonics had not done. He must be strong and hold fast to hope. She would need him all the more. *Niena, lady of mercy, let us have more time.*

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In a far corner of the room another man stood and thought with pain of love taken all too soon.
Denethor had not been to Finduilas's childhood home for many years. It was an act of will to stand in the room. It was the space where they had courted, had laughed and stolen a brief first kiss. He leaned against the sill and placed his aching head against the cool window pane. Memories swirled, like dry leaves before a tempest, and with them the longing grew. So intense was his need, so strong her spirit here, he thought he caught a note of white jasmine below the scent of wood smoke and stronger spirit.

He took a steadying sip from his trembling glass and made a face. Denethor did not like Belfalas' dark amber brandy but she had. It was, of course, part of her attraction. Well bred ladies of Gondor did not enjoy the stronger spirits. It had seemed then such a shocking and beguiling thing that his delicate flower of Dol Amroth had flouted convention in this way. Finduilas had been undefinable, a bundle of contradictions: gentle and delicate of form yet schrewd as her father, with wit to match his own and no hesitation in her tongue when she judged the moment right. It had been a heady mix and like nothing the young Captain of Gondor had ever seen. He dared a glance across the room. To see this in their son, the same fair narrow face, the long elegant hands, the shining smile he missed so much, should have been a balm. He shook his head, took a larger gulp of drink but the burn on his tongue only made the ache grow more.

Across the din of conversation and happier reminiscence another guest thought fleetingly of jasmine and fine dark hair. Ivrenna, the Dowager Duchess of Tolfalas, Adrahil's last remaining sister, saw the mask of grief cross the Steward's face and rose stiffly from her chair. She too remembered her favourite niece here and understood something of what he felt. Slowly, but with grim determination Ivrenna rose stiffly and made her way to the cool of the embrasure.

"Denethor, does your man not feed you? You are far too thin," remarked Ivrenna with her customary bluntness. Petite and swift and delicate as the sandpipers on the shore, the duchess cocked her white head and looked up expectantly for a reply. She knew him well, knew he would not willingly be rude to his old friend.

"I take in sufficient to my needs, my Lady," came the clipped and formal answer. A correct half-bow accompanied the Steward's hand, as he led her to a nearby seat. She could not stand for very long and he would not be so churlish as to make her.

"Don't be ridiculous," she smiled gratefully at his courtesy and settled her walking stick beside. "Your tunic is loose and your sleeves hang long because your shoulders are too thin. I expect it is overwork. Have a care for yourself, Lord Steward. Gondor needs you at your best."

"My condolences on your loss, Duchess."

The snort that greeted his stiff and formal words showed Denethor she had lost nothing of her skill within the ring. Ivrenna frowned a little, but nodded graciously. "I will miss my brother terribly but I
know he went gratefully to his rest." Would he really let formal courtesies take the place of real discussion between old friends?

"It has been many years since we saw each other last. Have you been happy on the island?"
Denethor asked, clearing his throat in the embarrassed manner she remembered from many shy and stilted, but carefully chaperoned, conversations.

Uinen's tears, she thought. Denethor was so stressed he was resorting to meaningless prattle. She must not allow him that. "Yes indeed. I dote on my grandchildren and work on my schemes. I suspect the fisherfolk wish I did not dote on improving their livelihood. They chafe at my innovations." The young Lord of Tolfalas had told the Steward proudly of their increased production that very eve. Fish, I shall bore Denethor with fish if he refuses to speak his mind.

The Steward coughed. "Indeed, you have always led the parade, Ivrenna. I would expect nothing less."

That was a little better. At least he relaxed enough to use her name. She waited a moment to look pointedly about the room and let him catch her gaze. Oh so gently she set about settling the ghost that hovered still.

"I find the library much changed from Firiel's time. Her taste was pretty but perhaps a trifle too carefully correct. Leylin's is much more relaxed and with it more refined."

The barest slight had the hoped-for effect. His sharp grey eyes flashed briefly for a moment but the smallest of smiles now graced the grave, proud face. Her dear departed sister-in-law, used to the more open and easy Dol Amroth men, had objected strongly to her daughter's chosen match. Finduilas had asked her favourite aunt to intercede. With pleasure, she noted the smallest of smiles now graced the grave, proud face.

"Indeed." Denethor strove to show his appreciation. He nodded to a cluster of tall, dark-haired men beside the standing harp. Lord Tolfalas and his sons, alone of the Dúnedain in the room, bore the fabled grey-lilac eyes of their elven foremother. "I had not recently spoken with Galathon. Your son and grandsons do you credit, Ivrenna. They are most open to the tariffs and do not begrudge the levies we must raise."

She smiled. He was trying to butter her up. Ivrenna gazed fondly on her eldest, animatedly talking with Imrahil and the Steward's sons. Laughter rang out. Galathon was, as usual, recounting with vigour some tale from the merchant fleet. He was a man who loved stories and talked always with his hands. She could see them flying even from across the room. Gazing on them all she was struck
again how much Gondor's young Captains were the image of the Steward at their age. The elder in particular was Ecthelion through and through, down to his straighter locks and powerful, commanding build.

Ivrenna looked sidelong to the thinner face of Denethor. Always he had worked too hard, trying futilely to gain the trust of one who stubbornly would not give it. It explained so very much and yet so very little. Seeing his sons, she could not let it pass.

"I last saw your sons as young children, Denethor, when they were still unformed with so much change to come. But now, seeing them as young men grown, I find there is much of Hurin about them both. Do you not think so?" Surely at her age, she thought, she was allowed a little latitude?

The Steward stiffened. He feared he knew where this was going. All Angelimir's children had courage and had been taught to speak their minds. It was a disquieting combination.

"Ivrenna…"

His voice was cold but she blithely ignored the warning. Forty years on and still the need to prove drove Denethor without mercy. It was high time he stopped. She dropped her voice for just the two of them.

"Though you favour Eleanna a little in your looks, your elder son is very much Ecthelion, even Turgon in some lights."

"He looked more like Mother as a babe." The agony, the bite of his Father's stern and reflexive cool regard, whispered as a bitter wind through his heart.

"They change so much when they are little, do they not? Your son may have her wildness, her love of life, but there can be no doubt now that they, and you, are your father's blood."

A muscle twitched on the high proud cheek as the glass turned around and around in uncalloused but wrinkled hands. She could see it, see the wheels turning, just like the brandy circling in the glass.

"We all make mistakes. Your mother's, in her gay, self-centered way, was to test the bonds of love too much. Your father's was to hate where he had loved, to hold her caged and with it, hold the sin of the mother against the child."
"I hated the countryside," murmured the Steward, so low Ivrenna had to lean to catch his words. The dark grey eyes were bleak, seeing another time and place. "It might have been Langstrand itself, for all it was an hour or so away."

Denethor, like his younger son, had been a solemn, watchful child but unlike his son he had been alone, cut off from all he knew. The isolation, she knew, had been intense. Ivrenna watched as the hurtful memories played across his chiseled, still handsome features.

Tapping her stick for emphasis, Ivrenna called him back. "Not a person in this room remembers the world as we do, Denethor. The parties, the day-long hunts, it all seems so bright and innocent now the world has grown much darker. But it all fades. Even the scandals. There is no doubt and no one left to doubt it. You need not prove yourself so very hard."

A clear, contralto voice rang softly in his head. "Let it go. Your father loves you dearest, though he finds it hard to show it. In his way he lets you know, doing so very much on the boys you also love so very much."

Could he do it now, what he could not do then?

Failing courage took refuge in formality again. "Lady, I have proved my loyalty to Gondor many times over since I came of age. I cannot rest while the Shadow grows."

Lilac-grey, aged eyes flashed with thinly-veiled impatience. "Do not be deliberately obtuse, Lord Steward. I have heard that your days are filled entirely with Gondor, you have little room even for your own sons. You have always been the most single-minded man I know. The people must rejoice. How can the Enemy prevail when his opponent simply will not back down?"

"I will use all my faculties and every ounce of strength to keep Gondor safe. It is my duty."

"Oh Denethor, for Ulmo's sake, I was paying you a compliment." Ivrenna's sigh was heavy and heartfelt. Clearly she would not get any further with him now. It was time to let the lesson sink in quietly and hope it would take in time.

The lady turned her winningest smile to the frowning face. Best to leave him with a happy memory. "I remember your determination."
It had been the talk of the city, the Steward's handsome son, the Midsummer ball and a lovely and delicate Princess who adored dancing above all. A determined young man who chose a matron to be his teacher, learned every step in just a few long days.

Ivrenna chuckled. "It was exhausting but I was bored and Galadan was away at sea always in those days. You still owe me a pair of slippers, Denethor. My shoes were trod to ruins. Thank heaven we were in the garden or you would have crushed my toes."

The Steward could not help himself. He laughed. A deep, bass rumble that made heads turn and brought quickly-stilled looks of shock. He tried not to notice their surprise. The sound had simply bubbled up and with it an unfamiliar feeling, a lightness in his chest.

*She too had made him laugh…*

The chuckle subsided into quiet ripples. "Then allow me to repay my debt, my Lady. With interest. Two pairs shall be in your room upon the morrow." He bowed, offered his hand to help Ivrenna rise. Her garled but still strong hand took his and squeezed, she was pleased with him after all.

As the tiny but redoubtable Princess of Dol Amroth glided to the centre of the room, he watched, brow furrowed. Why should it be that the daughters of Dol Amroth were so annoying, yet so very beguiling for all that?

The lights of the room swam and it was not Ivrenna walking away in cool evening of early spring, but a gay young girl, black hair unbound, on a hot Midsummer's eve. A wry and witty Princess to whom he had once opened his aching heart.

He smiled, lifted the glass and tossed the dregs quickly back. For once, the shard of memory did not sting. He knew it was a fragile thing, his heart. Which was why of course he guarded it so very tightly…even from those he loved.

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More than curious about a woman who could make his father laugh, Faramir hastened forward to help his tiny Great Aunt into a low and cushioned chair. Her hand grasped his, gratefully. Its skin was thin and papery, stretched taught over bird-like bones. She felt light as a feather but something told him she could immovable as the rock of Belfalas' fabled cliffs.
Only too happy to have a handsome young Captain's attention, Ivrenna tapped his arm lightly with her stick and prepared to be entertained. "You are the younger son. Forgive me. I don't remember everything these days. Undoubtedly you are too polite to ask. I am one hundred next mid-summer." She turned a wrinkled but beaming smile upon him. "Which 'Mir are you, young man?"

"Faramir, my Lady."

She found she liked his quiet manner and the thoughtfulness in his gentle eyes. "Faramir. A good name. Finduilas had the sense name her sons for her Grandfather Angelimir. Thank the Valar she did not let her husband saddle either of you with those ridiculous Hurin names. Ecthelion. Belecthor. Thorondir. Hmmpf. Of course I should imagine Denethor would not choose Thoron anything."

Boromir, catching his little brother's startled but wry half-grin, set his drink too hastily down upon a polished table. Faramir had been far too solemn and oddly forlorn in the past few days. It was good to see him smile. With an unerring sense for the scandalous, and no worry for the wet upon the wood, he excused himself to Imrahil and wandered over in time to hear Ivrenna in full flight.

"I remember you as a very sensible child, far too knowing at an improbably young age. I am glad to see you have learned to smile. I was worried for a while. You have her look you know, the same eyes and certainly the same brow."

Faramir blushed. He hated to be the subject of conversation. "I am told that I favour my mother, although I remember her very little."

Ivrenna patted his arm consolingly. She remembered a beautiful little boy at the funeral, bewildered by the storm of emotion swirling all around. "Indeed you do, although there is much of your father there as well. I was the one who introduced them, did you know that?"

"No, my lady," Faramir looked up with excited interest. "Father never speaks of those times."

"It was the Midsummer ball. He was too shy to ask, hid in a corner. I practically had to place his hand in hers." The lilac-grey eyes twinkled. "He was an excellent dancer, he remembered the steps so well and your mother loved to dance. My father, your great-grandfather Angelimir that is, was delighted he lived just long enough to see Finduilas wed. She was such a beauty and your father was so besotted. He would do anything for her."
The Steward's sons could not believe their luck. Someone who remembered the father as a younger man and unafraid to speak about it. They listened closely and did not interrupt, unwilling to halt the unexpected trove of memories.

"Now Boromir, you are right to hold off on getting married. Your father will not have told you but it is something of a Dol Amroth male tradition to wait to marry. They all sow their oats a good long while before finally settling down."

Both brothers grinned. This was of course another story they had not heard. Both of them listened so intently the drinks and food offered by the butler went unnoticed. Ivrenna helped herself to a small delicately iced white cake.

"Of course Imrahil was rather younger to marry but then he sowed his oats just as long before and rather wilder, if the reports are to be believed."

Two pairs of identical black eyebrows raised at that. In unison, they turned and eyed with newfound admiration their neatly turned-out Uncle. Imrahil sat, relaxed and elegant as always, in an overstuffed chair beside the fire. He, at least, they could ask for more details on the morrow.

Ivrenna saw their interest and carried merrily on. "Oh he was a rakehell. I blame Aglamir myself. The two of them were so much alike. Both the spoiled babies of the family."

The Dowager reached up and with surprising strength twitched a startled Faramir's arm. "Look to yourself, young Dunadan. If there is a younger son he almost always marries first. That is a tradition unbroken in ten generations before your Great-Uncle died."

Boromir laughed and elbowed his blushing brother in the ribs. "Better you than me, little one! Best not to let the tradition down."

Faramir's light grey eyes rolled in indigation but his mouth quirked nonetheless. Ivrenna did not miss that he also had his mother's sense of when not to speak.

Ivrenna fingered thoughtfully the silver swan twinned around her walking stick. The elder brother, now he was clearly cut from much different cloth. She thought she saw his grandmother's fabled passion in the broad and generous mouth. If he was anything like Eleanna he thought quite enough of himself all on his very own. It would not do to not let him get away with too very much. She had her sources. They would serve to keep the young one on his toes.
"And you, Boromir of Gondor." The older man started at the now acerbic tone in her still-commanding voice. "Best look to your reputation. What is charmingly dashing in a Captain, may be a little too careless in a Captain-General. One wouldn't want to make a habit of being late to the battlefield."

Now it was Boromir's turn to blush. As he hastened to apologize his brother barely smothered a sudden urge to grin.

Enjoying herself immensely Ivrenna shifted in her chair to ease her stiffened back. Old age had its benefits and its banes. Settled once more, she inclined her elegant snow white head toward the hearth, grabbed young Faramir's attention.

"Bring the Duchess of Lossarnach over if you please. I wish to partake of the only truly entertaining indoor sport left to a lady of my age. I need the latest Minas Tirith gossip…"

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"I do so hope I am interrupting something."

With a swish of dark silk skirts and smile of invitation Amerith of Lossarnach joined the little group, most intrigued by the remnant of an embarrassed flush on Boromir's high proud face. She was delighted to have a chance to speak privately with Princess Ivrenna. Any one who could make Denethor laugh and Boromir a little nervous was worth knowing very well indeed.

"No, my dear, I have just finished making a better acquaintance of Denethor's charming sons."

Princess Ivrenna sat elegantly upright, her bright eyes as sharp as when they had first met nearly twenty-five years before. Amerith's mother had been Princess Firiel's close companion. She remembered many visits to Dol Amroth as a girl and Taras had always spoken highly of Lord Tolfalas as a leader. Gondor was, after all, a small and insulated place. All its noble families were intertwined if one looked back or sideways far enough.

The word 'finished' had made the expression on the Captain-General's face lighten with relief. Glancing swiftly askance, he caught Theodred's dark grey eyes. The young prince nodded, a wry grin on his smooth, tanned face. Clearly he too was well abreast of the conversations swirling in the room.
"Come brother," insisted Boromir, "the Prince wishes to hear a bit about Ithilien. His grandfather once served there I am told."

Faramir looked as if he might protest but quickly bowed his head and excused himself, all but dragged by his elder brother away from the knot of women. The Steward's eldest clearly recognized when the numbers of an enemy were large enough they should not be engaged.

Amerith watched them go and stifled a quiet sigh. Their departure was not a slight at her, but it was not easy to still the disappointment. She had caught the polite mask descend to hide the welcome on Faramir's handsome face. Only time would make things easier.

"Whatever did you do to make such a brave warrior quake in his boots?" she asked the Princess, seeking a distraction from her own discomfort.

"I was advising the Captain-General on his tactics." The small but slightly wicked grin was quite discrete in case Boromir looked back to their way. Amerith pulled a side chair over and sat closer to Ivrenna.

"You will have had a rare success if you can make that stick. And you made the Steward laugh. Quite the coup for one short evening. What did you do?" Across the room Denethor was speaking in low and earnest tones with Imrahil. Something about his face looked different here, a certain tension was relieved. He looked more rested, without the constant unsettledness in his limbs Amerith had came to associate with his evening work. Whatever it was, and she meant to learn truth, being away from it had certainly done him good.

"I reminded him of his large and once clumsy feet. Well before your time my dear." Ivrenna patted the elegant hand nearly lost in the armrest's pattern of large blue flowers. "But I understand you also are adept at managing him? Perhaps are the only person on council who can change his mind?"

A tinkling laugh rose up. Amerith approved. Ivrenna was definitely accomplished. The inquiry was well covered in pretty compliment but it took more than a casual compliment to get information out of her. "Sometimes, Princess, sometimes. And all too infrequently these days. I will not have a man tell me what my opinions are. Even one as worthy as the Steward." The Princess was reputed to be outspoken like her famous mother. Surely that outweighed that Ivrenna and Denethor were old friends.

A beaming smile of approval met her quip. "And even more adept at managing his son…?"
"We are just friends." she replied, wincing inwardly. The feint was a little limp even to her own ears.

"Truly?" White eyebrows shot up a wrinkled brow. "That explains the decided resemblance between the young man and Ivriinel's sad-eyed sable dog, I suppose."

This time the brows that rose were auburn. It appeared the older lady's dainty bird-like manners were deceiving.

"Amerith dear, you are quite amazingly peripatetic these days. How do you do it? You are seen everywhere. From one end of the kingdom to the other." Ivrenna had neatly turned the subject. Amerith was impressed. Perhaps she was bird-like after all if it were not something small and delicate but swift and merciless like a hawk. "It must be such an effort to keeping up appearances all the time. We live more simply on the island I am relieved to say. Perhaps that is why we haven't been graced by your presence yet?"

The younger woman's mouth set in thin and disapproving line. What Galathon needed to know he already did. She would not be pulled into a net no matter how much his mother wished to help. "Ivrenna, as I am sure you are aware that was fishing with the wrong weight of line." There were limits to the subjects she could discuss. Surely the Princess knew that as well as anyone?

Ivrenna sat back, nostrils slightly flared and two spots of colour high upon her sharply jutting cheekbones. She tapped her stick firmly on the floor. Imrahil's butler hastened to bring another tray of drinks.

Wide-eyed, Amerith watched the Princess helped herself to a large double brandy before selecting a small single of her own. "Does it not bother your digestion Ivrenna? It always did my mother as time wore on." Was that too low? she worried for a moment. No, the Princess was in another league. She would appreciate a game played hard and well.

"No my dear, I sleep little enough these days without something to help me down." Lilac eyes flashed once but then softened to a gentle glow. The cut crystal glass was raised in silent toast. A draw. Amerith, relieved, took the smallest sip. "How go things in the city?"
"There has been much fuss about the newest levies and court has been sadly rather quieter of late. The Steward's sons are ever on patrol and the season is a subdued affair. I have seen more obvious entertainment and speculation here, to be quite honest. If Lady Castamir or her daughters mention the greatly improved refinement of Edoras since Morwen's time or the Prince's quite impressive grasp of Sindarin one more time I shall be quite unable to partake of lunch."

Both ladies chuckled quietly and quite without thinking glanced across the room. Theodred threw back his head and laughed at something quipped by the Steward's eldest son. As if aware of the ladies' keen attention he looked over and with one hand carelessly threw his gold-trimmed braids back over a strong broad shoulder. He was a catch. Amerith positively shuddered at the thought of either of the Castamir girls winning Theodred's hand.

"I should think her daughters would be surprised by the Prince's impressive grasp of other things as well." Ivrenna observed when they had turned their attention quickly back.

The young duchess now looked upon her companion with a growing sense of awe. How ever did Ivrenna learn so much sequested on that rock? True, Galathon was in to every port between Tharbad and Anduin, but she didn't picture the bluff, good-natured ship's captain as interested in gossip. Perhaps she had underestimated him as well. Rumours, it was said, flew faster on the waves.

"He is my cousin. Perhaps I should not say." 'Anything' was the sudden thought that followed quickly on her words.

The Princess's hopeful expression sagged. "What a disappointment. I am afraid I can only applaud your circumspection after you have left the room."

Well. Against her better judgement Amerith wanted to smile at that. This was too much fun. Perhaps a tidbit would be enough.

"Our dashing Prince is a man who knows his mind. He needs a Queen who will not pout and fret when he seeks every excuse he can to inspect the fortifications at Helm's Deep. He has entanglements he must pay attention to."

A snow-white head inclined just very slightly. Clearly the Princess appreciated someone who could impart intelligence without appearing over eager. "Can you imagine Malina of Castamir at Meduseld?" Mischief danced in lilac eyes. "Mastering how to run a foreign court? Standing up to Eowyn, Eomer's younger sister. She would be lost. Someone would run her through from sheer
frustration."

The tinkling laugh was genuine. "Have no fear. He has better taste than that. It is too bad that Lothiriel is a little young to be betrothed." Or perhaps better for the girl, she thought, given the Prince's situation. The young lady was already famously a little wild, traipsing around after her pack of elder brothers. Her idea of marrying likely did not include accommodating another woman. At ten the new Prince's youngest had already said her goodnights, all the while pleading quite loudly with her parents to stay up later with the guests. Imrahil was a happily indulgent parent. Denethor sons would have been punished for such an open display of disagreement.

"Do you think Eowyn would then make a suitable match for Boromir?" asked Ivrenna with a smile.

The small sip of brandy caught awkwardly in her throat. The duchess raised her hand and discreetly coughed to clear it out. "No, not at all. By all accounts she is as headstrong as he is. She needs a foil, someone with a gentle hand." She could hear the Steward's elder son in high good humour, surrounded by a clutch of younger men. Who was to say what was the better course? A discrete but accepted mistress or an endless stream of courtesans. On balance, she suspected Theordred to be happier.

"What of Faramir? I am surprised Denethor does not seek to bind him to a lesser house or one standing on shaky footing. Langstrand or even Lossarnach perhaps?"

Lossarnach a lesser house? Clearly Ivrenna was still nonplused that her companion had doled out so very little. The young duchess kept her features carefully impassive. "No. My niece is already betrothed and more to the point you know Denethor. He felt justified in forcing Faramir into soldiering but he is not stupid. A good blacksmith can mould good steel as needed but only so very far or it might break. He will not force either son to marry someone not of his choosing. The woman they wed will be their choice."

Or none, she thought, looking at the Captain-General and the other men scattered around the room. So it was with all the children of Mithrellas. They married for love or not at all. Imrahil and Finduillas had chosen for themselves. Ivrenna had fallen for Galadan as a gay young girl. Adrahil had adored Firiel all his long and happy days. Even Ivrenna's sons had followed the tradition, had married their sweethearts the moment they made sea captain as Elphir seemed set to do. And those who did not? Well, Ivriniel was wedded to her plants and patients as Aglamir had been wedded only to the sea.

With a worried heart the Duchess looked on the three handsome soldiers by the fireside, the ones next in line to lead the failing kingdoms of the west. What did it mean that those charged with holding back the coming dark could not find it in themselves for now to settle?
The first to take their leave were the Prince and the young Marshall, planning to rise early the next morn and inspect the herds of Dol Amroth's famous greys. They bowed and bid goodnight and after them, bit by bit, the study emptied until only the Steward and his younger son were left.

Faramir, oddly too unsettled to go to bed, bent to poke the fire and raise it up. He watched intently as the tongues of flame licked hungrily at the wood, hoping some clarity would be found in their softly glowing light. Why now? Why the feeling of restlessness tonight?

He shook his head and with a moment's hesitation threw back the last mouthful of brandy so very fast the sweet before the burn was almost lost. Thoughtful fingers traced the design upon the crystal, the firelight playing in arcs of colour off the facets. It felt odd to hold something so delicate after months of only wood or pewter. Trust Imrahil to use the very best, both he and his sister loved beautiful and exotic things.

With a smile Faramir remembered: stitches or script, brushstrokes or notes, they all had held a fascination for Dol Amroth's gentle princess. The image Ivrenna had painted of his father dancing came suddenly to mind. Here, relieved a little of his duties, face more relaxed than his son could remember, Faramir fancied he could see in his father something of the younger man he had been. It was a surprise to realize Denethor son of Ecthelion had been beautiful too. For Finduilas he also must have been something rare and unusual amongst the exuberant folk of her home; a shy man who hid his feelings and his passion, kept them inside, well locked, a treasure to found by one who made a little effort.

His father sat by the window once again, seemingly lost in thought and worlds away. The wind had risen, the gusts that now lashed the windows were now laden with fat, wet drops. A plate of dainties lay ignored upon the tufted window bench, as did his half-full glass. A sudden frown graced his brow and Faramir flushed, embarrassed like a little child caught out with less than perfect manners. He had been staring, hoping to see in the high proud face the young man who had danced so happily so long ago.

Denethor, not for the first time that very night, studied Faramir's face in turn. The son knew instinctively at times like this what his father sought: to draw aside the veil, to catch, however painfully, a needed glimpse of her. The slight frown was all the sign of how hard the struggle was, along with a familiar crease upon his brow and a twisting of his mouth just so. Like the armour concealed under rich dark robes, the Steward did not advertise his strength and most assuredly not his weakness: the emotions he could not master to his satisfaction.
Seeing the frown, Faramir thought it had been inevitable, the collision between them both. Between the father who hid everything and the son, by nature so like his mother, who had worn his heart upon his sleeve. Faramir had learned. He did not do so any more, he hid his more wayward emotions behind a door inscribed with duty and bound in stout iron locks.

The room was very quiet. The only sound was the soft hissing of burning sap within the wood and the gentle crackle of the flames. The crystal chimed just very slightly as Faramir poured himself another measure and touched the decanter to the glass's lip. He gestured but his father shook his head.

Denethor turned back and looked out the window at the moonlight that poured clear and silver across the swelling ink-dark waves. The wind would move the system quickly through and it promised to be fine upon the morrow.

Something in his face relaxed, its angle of repose became gentler once again. "As I am here a few more days I think I will take Imrahil up on his offer and go for a sail. The wind, he says, should to be just right." The faintest of smiles drew his mouth quickly up. "This time I will remember not take your brother." Boromir had been woefully seasick once they left Anduin's calmer mouth. It had been his stated excuse for his frequent absences.

"You will enjoy it, Father, I am sure." Faramir smiled in return, heart leaping in his breast. What an unexpected thing: his father doing something for himself. It felt so precious to stand there and hear Denethor speak so lightly and so at ease. In the years since he had patrolled Ithilien they had had been little time together and all the while Denethor had recoeded more. Grown ever harder. The young Captain wondered what had happened on the voyage down, what had changed to ease his father's strain. Whatever the cause, praise Este it would endure, would linger after their return to the City. It was almost as if his father's bitter winter had begun thaw.

"Before you leave I would also have your written report on the Company."

Denethor's sudden words started the young man out of his reverie. "Yes sir. It is very nearly complete."

Faramir was Captain now and with went the paperwork. It was a good feeling to do a job he liked and do it well. More than well if Boromir's compliments were not exageration. It was an unfamiliar feeling to have a commander generous in finding praise, after his father's reflexive and almost automatic fault. Perhaps in this new found ease he could nurture Denethor's grudging respect the more.
In an evening already heady with surprise and reminiscence, the young man then found the strangest yet. The Steward began to pace a little restlessly about the room, stopped beside a small portrait of the Prince, regarded it silently for many minutes.

No outward emotion played upon the sere, proud face but his voice, when next he spoke, was wistful.

"I will miss him." Faramir knew he meant the father-in-law who had supported the young Steward's son, had encouraged his daughter's choice over Princess Firiel's strong objection. "I valued his support. He had much of your mother's gentleness, but was canny and resolute when the need was hard."

It occurred to him how isolated his father must now feel. Denethor had not been close to his own father. His wife was gone. Theoden he knew not well and Imrahil was new come to his responsibilities. There was no man near to the Steward who understood as well what it truly took to lead.

The picture was set back down. Restless again, Denethor now reached to lightly stroke Adrahil's great harp. The Prince, like his middle daughter, had been a fine musician. A cascade of notes in a climbing scale chimed softly in the room. "He was the last of a generation, Faramir. Thengel, Ecthelion, Adrahil, all were men of the world from when it was younger, when the shadow was less pressing and the peaks of Ephel Duath could yet be seen."

The young Captain nodded. He knew those peaks, their brooding adumbration, a wall between fair green and darker shadow that waited to be breached.

The fingers quite by habit adjusted a tuning pin. "Thengel was a hothead in his youth but in time was a wise and respected leader. He brought stability to a land drained by his father's greed. Adrahil I think, though the youngest, was the shrewdest of them all. He knew trade and its profit would encourage the Umbari merchants to keep the Corsairs quiet and bound in port."

A single sweet, high note was plucked in counterpoint and with it memory stirred. A little boy sat on his mother's lap, wreathed by tenderness and the soft ringing tones of an old sea tune. Of course Denethor would have learned to play. Finduilas had delighted in it. As in everything he did, he would have ensured he did it well.

He remembered his grandfather sitting by this very hearth at the harp, delighting his young grandsons at Mettare long ago. Not for the first time, Faramir felt saddened that his other grandfather was only a name to him. Boromir's memories were the hazy images of a very little child and Denethor was not
one to share anecdotes and stories.

"Ecthelion I never knew…"

A shadow passed behind his father’s storm grey eyes and the single note was followed by a darker tone. "He loved you greatly Faramir. I believe he knew he had little time and made the most of it. He was as besotted with you as your mother was and would hardly put you down. He was generous like your brother and had always a particular weakness for strays in dogs and men. Thengel, Thorongil, all of them he raised up to the heights, decreed those in his service should prosper by the force of their abilities, not by their birth. I had to work always doubly hard, to fight for every grain of his regard." The voice trailed off, low and darkly pensive. "We were so very different, Father and I. Others could please him just by their very presence."

The irony bit hard and deep. For once Faramir had downed his brandy very fast. The glass was empty once again and discarded on the mantle. Perhaps he was just a little drunk, else he might not have said what came into his heart.

"I know that too."

The grey head snapped upward, eyes blazing like a meteor in the winter's sky. Valar, what had made him speak?

Then his lord and father did a surprising thing. He turned away, rubbed hard at the frown line upon his brow as if scouring the edge of a difficult emotion. From the hint of sadness on his face, Faramir thought it might be guilt, but more likely it was just embarrassment.

"Perhaps….perhaps that is fair."

Two pairs of startled eyes held each other across the room. Their gaze, like their words, half revealed and half concealed the souls within, the truth that hung between them.

*Is this is perhaps the closest to understanding we shall find?* wondered the younger son with no little awe.

"Trust" Adrahil had said. Anxiety and knowledge chased each other round in the long and pregnant pause. Faramir had seen a vision. Duty said he should tell it to his Lord. Now love and honour said
he should also tell it to his father.

He took a steadying breath.

"I saw a king…"

"Show me!" The order was immediate. It brooked no refusal or denial.

Unguarded, Faramir was never certain how well his father could bend his shields. And just for once he thought he might welcome the closer contact. Carefully he sent the image: a Dunadan, clothed in green, ageless, a proud graceful face, sea grey eyes and long dark hair and close dark beard. The grey eyes shone, as did the sliver of the many pointed star.

The quiet gasp told all.

The Lord and father heard the unspoken query in the air. Felt his son’s confusion but could not answer yet. He wanted to disbelieve. To think it some simulcarum sent by the enemy, distorted, meant to undermine them while the shadow grew. Yet in his heart of hearts he knew it to be not so. Saruman’s words of long ago came back. The line of Elendil has long failed. A terrible anger grew. To think he had been prey to yet more of the wizard’s lies.

The face that had lost some of its recent pallor became white and hard as the Citadel’s shining marble once again. As its Lord stood by the hearth and searched the fire for words that would not come, he was a mirror, alternately gleaming and shadowed by the flickering of the flames,

The words when they came were bitter. "If this is truly so what is he waiting for?" Gravely, with no hint of irony, Denethor asked the question to the tense, expectant air. His son, not understanding and seemingly forgotten, stood by, afraid to ask but needing still to know, as much if not more than he.

"What does he do? Skulk and hide. Play cat and mouse, watching ever from the sidelines." Denethor spoke so angrily and yet so low it was almost to himself. "Why not declare himself before? Surely Mithrandir’s hand lies on this. They wait and bide their time and still we bleed. We are already at war. They, victorious, will sweep in at the last when the harder, less glorious toil is done."

The dark angry gaze snapped up and held his son’s. "No. No I will not have it! I am the one who worked to keep Gondor safe. I am the one who has sacrificed everything for duty while he played at
To Faramir it was clear this was someone his father had known but did not aver, but still he did not know who it was. The disappointment was acute. As he watched the fire light play across his father's face he mourned. Moved always by hope far quicker than by fear, the vision seemed to him to be a candle in the closing dark, a gift, a touchstone. To hold close and use as a shield, like his mother's words about the rising wave.

"But surely this is a portent of greater hope? That we will prevail, though all looks bleak. That when he comes, it be will at Gondor's greatest need?"

The scorn was immediate. "Who would you faine have...an image of glory without substance or the effort of one appointed to keep her people safe? What could he bring that we truly need? Where are his troops? His ships? A rabble of dirty Rangers is all he has. The Star of the North." Denethor almost spat the words. "There his lineage and his first love lie and there he may stay."

Faramir felt the precious understanding wash away, dashed to pieces like a skiff upon the rocks. Sick at heart, he had no words. The silence stretched, the heavy walls held out the quiet moaning of the wind and in the distance the Bell of the Tower rang mournfully.

Contempt. It was an insidious thing. Released once before when the sons had dared to question their Lord and father. In the years since Faramir had seen its tendrils spread and grow in the dark and silence of a high and storied tower. But now all too fleetingly they had withered in the light of this brief and glorious spring. Was it amnesty or capitulation to agree to not treat each other so? He toyed with speaking, to bind them both in promises, to love and be loved. But in the end he shut his mouth. Perhaps he did not need them after all.

"You will speak of this to no one." The wrinkled hand and the signet ring were proffered.

It was an insult, to think he must make his own son swear. Faramir swallowed hard, mouth drying in the bitter wind of the angry words. He could no more have looked away than he could refuse his father's order.

"I obey you my Lord, as I have sworn." He did not move to kneel.

The hard grey gaze held the young Captain caught, measured the tenor of his words, the stiffness of his jaw and its sudden tilt. "Just. To the very thinnest edge in what you judge to be correct and not a
hairsbreadth more."

Denethor, it seemed, had heard the words and tone many times before, knew at times how grudgingly they were given.

Thorongil too had listened and spoken little, turned almost never in his counsel.

"Do not think I do not see it."

Because he needed an anchor in that moment Faramir held his father's gaze a moment more. Nodded once and swallowed around the hard lump that blocked both his throat and heart.

His silence bought them peace. But even then he knew it was not a beachhead but a temporary purchase on slick, unsteady rock.

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It was not an entirely unexpected sight for a merchant of far Umbar to be about the grey and shingled shores of Belfalas' wide and windy bay. The Prince had always encouraged trade and so long as the men of the Serpent's Fire kept the Prince's peace and did not cheat, too outrageously, on their deals they were made welcome, with one eye on their hands and a firm grip on one's purse.

Nor indeed was it considered so very strange for one to walk of a fine but briskly breezy evening about the city streets. The man, grey of hair and dark of eye, was that quite interdeterminate age of one who has lived long in the sun and wind, with a keen sharp gaze and scarf wrapped the proscribed five turns about his head. His beard was neatly clipped and his robes bound in the common man's sash, a muddy gold that against the pale cream robes brought to mind sun and sand. If the pads of his fingertips were oddly calloused, well, indeed that could easily be explained. He had been a mercenary, had paid off his bond to his wealthy master and in recompense for saving his master's life not once, but twice, had been set up with enough coin for a small but thriving business. The Lord of Fire is benevolent in many ways is he not?

The little man was not curious. He little cared the reason for the mark. All he knew was the gold was oddly stamped and old, not in castars or the dinars he knew well. Gold was gold. All that mattered was what it weighed in the usurer's scale.
He had watched the tall dark-haired Dunadan walk down the seawall boulevard most evenings, shaking off the hours of his watch and turning his face to the western stars. The Umbari had waited patiently take his chance, the gold pieces already weighed nicely at his hip, the commission had not come with any hurry. Tonight, the rising wind would mask the sound and keep most people huddled close inside. The Dunadan was alone. Perfect.

All was set in readiness. Yarn to damp the oiled string's ready hum swayed beside each axle. No quiver hung in which the arrows would clang and make a noise. Dark fingers lightly grasped the nock, the arrow was set and notched. As the bowstring strained in readiness there was the barest creak, even the rest had been thickly laid with fleece. The Umbari smiled, arm straining with the tautness of the bow. Yek... Do....

As Ithil shined cool and silver-fair he was not the only one to keep the shadows on that moon lit eve. Another man, tall and dark, green-eyed, padded silently out of sight. He was not a regular tower guardsman and was only unoffically attached to his company. Had particularly elusive skills, learned by dint of long experience on another set of docks: the rougher, harder quay in Pelargir. If he owed his allegiance to the duchess first, what of that? He would guard her friend, unobtrusively, with all his skill and care. He was after all very very grateful his head still rode his shoulders. In time there would be horses and good pasture and a pretty lass waiting while he made his way,..

The Steward and his chief counsellor, although they disagreed on many things these days, still stood firm upon this point. The Steward's second son did not walk anywhere abroad alone. Not in the White City or any space that was not covered deep and green by forest.

The Umbari did not get to three. The liquid gurgle that sounded as blood welled up around the dagger through his throat was nigh as quiet as the arrow would have been.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Thank you so very much to Caroline who commented and those who kudo'd this past month. It is so very much appreciated. And grateful thanks of course to Annafan, Thanwen, Adaneth, Artura and JuneGloom who commented and gave great pickies as usual. And most especially to Wheelrider for her wonderful beta'ing.

I am amazed to find I have been working on this story for a year. It feels like its birthday in a way and seems fitting that finally, finally we get to the time of the War of the Ring next chapter, jumping forward to 3014-3017. And a certain Shieldmaiden finally appears.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A white king is placed in check, a captain fears a gambit, the white bishop sees too many moves ahead.

Lothron, T.A. 3014

In the last, soft lingering weeks of spring it was the colour of the land that lifted hearts. Many had been weighted down by the long, harsh winter and the cold, uncertain spring. Now, as Anor warmed the air, at last the soft greens and blues burst forth, every wood and meadow sang of hope and life returned. Soon the cooler hues would give way to warmer pinks and gold of summer. A promised bursting of abundance, and so work must hurry too.

About the lands of Arda there were those who waited, each to their wont, their colour as varied as their nature. One who waited kept to the deepest of green shadows, searching for a pale phantom that ached for something that was lost. One who guided with a gentle hand was all in grey, as smoke or gathering storm, in deference to his master, swift lord of all the air. One who now but served himself wore a cloak of many colours, faithless image of all those he had once served.

Two wore only black: the craven servant, who like a magpie collected baubles and rewards as blithely as words and lies; and the lord of the land, collecting knowledge for his needs as a dam against a blacker tide.

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The old oaken door whined softly on its hinges as it swung open just a little. Enough for the slip of a girl to sneak inside and tend the fire, not so much that the room's occupant need acknowledge he was awake.

The pretty maid knelt upon the hearth and made up the fire, her motions quick and sure, wasting no tinder and as quiet as she could be.

Within the great carved bed Theoden-King shrank a little lower. Let Emelinde think him still asleep. He was in no mood to speak or test the wavering rasp of voice Bema blessed him with these days. Instead he lay, brooding and ashamed to hide but unable to find the energy to test his strength. To give voice and protest it was almost summer and he needed not the extra warmth. Except, of course, he did. Nothing warmed his bones these days it seemed.

The crackle of the fire soon filled the quiet space and the door hinge whined again. Emelinde was gone.

Theoden sank deeper in the pillows, shivering again with chill, his blue eyes bright with fever and faded hair lank with sweat. He had been ill for weeks. Each time the ague receded and he gained a
little strength, rose and took back his work, it snuck back again. As relentless in its grip as the eternal
snows of Thyrindon.

The King’s rooms faced east and on this late spring morning the sun was already high. She cast her
promise across the pale green of unripened wheat within the fields, lent warmth to the climbing
breeze. Upon her heated airs a tawny kestrel flashed and dove upon the wing, hunting voles in the
longer grass. He could just see the bird through the parted curtains, just hear the sharp stacatto call of
her excitement. How many hours as a boy had he watched the majestic hunter at her work, longing
to follow where she soared? Now he lay, his thick and aching head only hurt more at the sound.

Listlessly he pulled the winter coverlet back up upon a shoulder. So much for the promise of the day.
It had been a silly fancy that he might be getting better once again. Weak and old. That is what he
was. No more the vital warrior than the eternally still, golden Riders that graced the great bed posts
about him, carved as the pillars of the hall.

Lost in his reverie, the King did not see his niece walk purposefully into the room. He caught the
sound, the soft but purposeful tread that could only be his sister-daughter. Cautiously, he peered
above the blanket. The bright light hurt his eyes, but still he smiled.

Eowyn, seeing no motion from the bed, had made straight for the window seat, thrown back the
curtains even farther and opened the casements to let in a breath of air. The room could quickly
become stifling this time of year. Outside the new foals were trying out their legs, whinnying as they
capered about the fields. His niece watched them longingly for a moment, golden as the spring
herself, bathed in the morning’s rays that caught facets in the glass and scattering rainbows around
the room.

Tall and straight Eowyn stood, hair a river of shining gold, face fair and young and fearless. For a
moment the sight of her made Theoden's heart constrict. Could it be really nineteen years since she
had been born? Since Theodwyn had beamed with joy to have a daughter and Eomund had nearly
burst with pride, already lost at the feel of a tiny finger coiled around his finger. Since her doting
uncle dangled her over his head to hear her laugh with glee as loud as any boy.

So like her mother she was: the cornsilk hair, grey eyes with the barest hint of blue. But also like to
her father; proud and fierce and stubborn. At times it seemed she and Eomer were twins, not years
apart, both determined to master every skill, practice endlessly on horseback or in the sparring ring.
Fleetingly, he worried he had done her a disservice, not done what was best for her but for himself.
Spoiled the young girl, unable to deny her any boon, but now, when he had need of comfort,
keeping her tied to his side when she should be finding a house of her own. The weak and tired part
of him tried not to think too long upon it.

"How are you this morning, Uncle?" Eowyn placed a silver ewer and a basin beside his bed and
smiled a little hopefully. A small, strong hand was placed below Theoden's elbow as he pushed
himself up to meet the day. His erstwhile nurse bent to plump the pillows behind his back and
scanned his face surreptitiously. The exhaustion, he knew, made dark circles like bruises below his
eyes.

"The same sister-daughter, just the same." was the tired answer she received. A warm, wet wash
cloth was offered without comment. When he did not quickly take it, it was wiped gently, without
ceremony, across his face and neck.

"Thank you" he murmured, embarrassed at his own lack of effort. At least it felt a little better to be
clean.

Eowyn nodded and tried to smile. "Would you like to break your fast?" This was in truth no
question. Theoden had been a squire, knew marching orders when he heard them. Hidden in the covers, he had not seen at first the tray she carried. It overflowed, resting on a table near the wardrobe, carrying enough food for an eored not one ill and tired King of little appetite. Clearly this morning his niece was taking a different tack. Overwhelm his senses. Next to the usual, oatmeal with milk and honey, breads and cheese, there were small plump sausages and cured meats.

His stomach roiled. "Nay…" A green and slightly evil looking tonic stood beside a pot of tea. "I have no hunger, Eowyn. Perhaps a little later."

The bright cascade of hair was tossed past a shoulder as Eowyn placed her hands upon her hips.

"Uncle. We all wish to see you better. To regain your strength you have to eat."

Theoden watched her turn and reach for a pot. A firm smile graced her lips but the grey eyes were grave, full of pity and determination. "I have yarrow tea as well, when you are done. To help the fever…"

"It is vile." He grumbled, sounding more like a boy than a man of six and sixty summers.

That brought a swift sure smile. "I have something to chase the taste away."

Theoden looked up with sudden interest but one fair eyebrow raised back at him in challenge. Eowyn set the teacup carefully in both his hands and nodded. "Only if you finish that."

The cup shook just a little but not so much that the saucer could not catch the drips. The patient sipped and made a face. The brew was hot and bitter but surely it must help. As his niece fiddled with something hidden on the tray Theoden did his best and by the time she presented the treat for his inspection, half the cup was gone.

"Mallant!" he exclaimed, elated at the sight of a small golden cake upon the proffered plate. Blessed girl. That she should remember his favourite childhood treat from Minas Tirith.

"Yes. But only if you eat and drink that tonic."

With new found courage and a little enthusiasm the King ate and drank a little as instructed, eyeing all the while the small bar-shaped almond cakes that lay, moist and golden, upon the plate Eowyn had now set just out of reach. The sight brought back such memory, his hand held tight by his mother, his elder sisters skipping on ahead, heading to the bakery on the morning after Thengel had headed out for a new patrol. It became a well-loved tradition this treat for breakfast, to cheer them up and distract Morwen's noisy brood from the fact their father was gone again on the Steward's service.

"Did you make them?"

"No..Cook did, to Grandmama's specifications. We found the recipe in her housekeeping book."

With the tea and tonic gone and half a bowl of oatmeal downed, Eowyn pushed the plate of mallant a little closer.

"Thank you daughter. That was a thoughtful surprise." With relish, Theoden picked up his treat and took a bite. It was wonderful. Firm but moist as he remembered. With renewed enthusiasm he reached for a second bar but his shaking hands lost their grip. Crumbs and broken cake decorated the coverlet and the small plate slipped with a rattle onto the floor.

"Bema." He exclaimed. Could he not do anything? Mournfully, he gave up and sank back onto the pillows once again. "I am a trial to you…"
"Of course not…" Wordlessly, Eowyn stooped to gather up the mess as a hastily smoothed look of worry crossed her brow.

What a state for a warrior to be in. An invalid. Unable even to feed himself. Self-pity was not an emotion Theoden usually familiar indulged, but in the past few months he had come to know its sting. "I am indeed trying but you are too mannerly to show it. My sister and my mother both trained you well. A true daughter of kings, polite and proud, even in the face of dishonoured dotage."

"Uncle! Never! You will be well and soon." came the quick reply. "Would you like me to read once your head pains you a little less? The tea should bring the fever down quite quickly."

A hopeful smile quirked on Eowyn's fair face but her Uncle sadly noticed it did not light her eyes. Worry was scarcely a fitting companion for so young a woman. What had Theodwyn been concerned with at her age? Horses and Riders. Festivals and the free air. Not caring months on end for an old, sick man.

He sighed and reached out a hand. "No…but I would be happy for the company." Gently Eowyn sat upon the bed and laced her fingers in his gnarled and painful ones. "I am an old sway-backed nag, getting whiter than Snowmane with each passing day." he grumbled. His own fair hair was more grey than blond, like an old warhorse, its coat getting lighter with the years.

Eowyn's blond head shook in disagreement as the wash cloth was pressed into service once again. "Lightfoot is older in horse-years than you but does not feel his age. He still has an eye for a pretty mare. Had you not heard that Firethorn dropped her foal? A fine dappled colt with his sire's long legs and temper. Eomer already has his eye on him, has dubbed him Firefoot."

"Really? That is well, the old scoundrel. When did he get to her?"

"No one is quite sure," Eowyn replied, wiping the last of the sticky honey from off his fingers. "But I am certain that he is anxious to have you ride him once again."

"May be." Theoden replied weakly, not wanting to disappoint. He watched as she rose and went to the wardrobe. A fresh robe and nightshirt were laid across the bed.

"Come in!" Eowyn answered in surprise as a knock sounded on the door. No one was to interrupt them unless she was consulted. Who would dare disturb the King before he had even been dressed for the day?

As swiftly as the door was answered, the tall, gangly, dark figure of his chief counsellor strode into the room.

"My King, my lady." Grima bowed obsequiously low, clutching tight to a great sheaf of papers in his arms. The sight of them made Theoden's head ache suddenly. "How are you this fine morning my liege?" Bent almost double, arms and legs akimbo, the son of Galmod looked to Eowyn nothing so much as one of the grasshoppers that would plague the wheat some weeks hence.

"The same." The sternness of Theoden's voice to most would have been a warning, for all that it was low.

Grima, self-centred as he was, ignored it.

"That is good at least. Not worse." A wide smile stretched tight across the man's narrow, horse-like face. "I am sorry to disturb you so early Theoden-King, but some new requests arrived late yesterday and are quite urgent."

"What have you brought?" Eowyn's question was curt and sharp. Standing now on the far side of the
great carved bed, she arranged the pillows carefully at Theoden's back to help him sit a little
straighter.

The King glanced sidelong at his young niece. Her hands were clenched and the knuckles white.
Was Eowyn angry that his councillor sought to disturb him on his sickbed or was there some other
reason for her mood?"

"Drought has taken grip in east Enmet, my Lord and the grain is withering on the stalk. They are
paying the price for this wonderful sun. Lord Grimbold has asked that we rebalance the tithes right
now so that no one in the east will go without. It appears he has a record crop." Long thin fingers,
heavy with jewel-studded rings, held the parchment out for him to see.

Theoden suppressed a groan, reached with trembling fingers for the sheaf. He tried to read but the
numbers swam before his eyes. Focusing made the pounding in his head much worse and with it his
stomach give a sickly twist.

"Grima, just…."

The young man's face was all heart felt consideration. "Shall I ask the Prince to deal with it, your
majesty?"

"Yes, perhaps that would be best." The King sighed. His voice sounded weak and listless even to his
own ears.

"Ah…."

Grima had gathered the papers but then stopped as he turned away, frowning thoughtfully and
glancing back. "I have just remembered, my liege. He is not here. I saw Prince Theodred ride out this
morning, toward the west." The black eyebrows raised in speculation. "I wonder where he went so
soon. He was just back…. "

Theoden's eyes narrowed at the obvious implication. Helm's Deep was west and there lived his son's
mistress and his daughter. Of course Theodred would take time to see them. Surely no one
begrudged him that after a long patrol.

"He will be back tomorrow Grima. Can you not ask him then?" he asked. And leave me be was the
unvoiced extra thought.

"No I am sorry, sire. Lord Grimbold is here just today…it would be helpful to sign the addendum
now. This is most inconvenient."

Theoden raised a hand to cover his eyes a moment. The man's loud and tinny voice truly made his
head feel as if it could split in two. "Then deal with it and do not bother me again!" he growled,
surprised at the force of his own worlds.

The dark figure jumped in startlement but quickly recovered and bent in a hasty bow, backing
toward the door. "I will Sire. Right away. Of course you must rest. I will do my best to handle affairs
until the Prince is back."

Theoden sighed as the door slid shut with a heavy thud. "I am sorry, daughter. That was a little
unkingly of me."

Eowyn had turned away, looking out towards the sun and green beyond. The golden river of long
hair hid her face but from the stiff set of shoulders and rigid back he knew she must be trying hard to
keep her peace. Was she angry at him or something Grima had said?
"Not at all, Uncle. It was unseemly for him to interrupt." By the time she turned and soft hands smoothed once more the coverlet, Eowyn's face was an expressionless mask. Unreadable. Polite and cool and shuttered like a window against the westering sun.

"Sleep and I will see you later." Cool lips grazed his brow. Then gratefully, wearied with all the fuss, Theoden-King sank down onto the pillows to take his rest.

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Eowyn padded softly through the doorway and closed the door behind, hands full with the still heavily laden tray. For the barest moment, drained and worried that her beloved Uncle had not eaten sufficiently once again, she rested her head against the door. Perhaps it was time to find another healer. Nothing they gave the King seemed to work for very long and the thought of vital, energetic Theoden confined all summer long to his bed made her heart twist. Perhaps they should even send to the famous healing school at Mundburg, but that was an unwelcome thought. Surely his malady was not so very serious?

Annoyed at her own anxiousness, she shook her head. It was childish to borrow trouble from another day. He would be fine. She would give him careful care and soon he would be back with them in the Hall again.

Resettling her grip, Eowyn turned quickly and nearly collided with someone in the hall. "Oh! Grima! Were you waiting for me?" she asked, juggling the tray as the tea pot slid a little precariously near the rim.

The tall, dark figure of Theoden's councillor stood uncomfortably close. He was not unhandsome but, unusual for a Rider, fair-skinned with dark hair curling above his nape. From far Westmarch it was said, though behind his back some said he had Dunlending blood. Something about his broad hopeful smile made her think of Grandmama's words. \textit{Beware the man with a smile abroad and a scowl at home.}

One hand gripped her arm as another reached for the handle. "Let me help my Lady. You have such a heavy load." The tips of his fingers brushed her wrist, they were quite oddly cold.

"No thank you. I am just fine. I am quite strong enough." she demurred. It was ridiculous. Both of them were standing quite unseemly close. She could smell the oil he had used in his hair and the morning's tea upon his breath.

"Of course, my Lady. But we must work together. The King is ill again and who knows when he will be well. You work so long and tirelessly for him. I would only make your day a little easier."

The dark eyes glittered brightly above the all too ready smile.

"Thank you Grima but I must away."

She jerked the tray but his fingers still lingered upon hers. They tightened, hard like an iron band, cold and suddenly unyielding, pressing hard into her flesh. Panicked, she tried to jerk a little harder.

"Did you not hear or are your ears as poor as your manners?" came a sudden deep and commanding voice. "My sister is fine."
Unheard, unseen, Eomer had appeared as swift and silently as a fox upon the plain. He towered above the councillor, a scowl upon his lips and grey steel within his gaze. Daggers could not have been sharper than his look.

*Lady of mercy.* Had the tray not been braced against the jamb Eowyn felt surely her knees would have buckled in relief.

"Of course." Grima swallowed hard and adjusted his collar nervously. The white, cool fingers quickly released their grip. "I was only trying to be helpful Marshal. Nothing more."

Eomer's eyes narrowed skeptically. "Then it would be best in future to make sure that your helpfulness is welcome before you offer it."

Bowing and apologizing profusely, Grima hastily took his leave. Eomer reached quickly to grab the tilting tray, watching thoughtfully the councillor's stiff, retreating back. Was it his imagination or had the man's apologetic, fawning smile not light his dark and roving eyes?

"Are you all right?" he asked worriedly, looking down at his little sister's face. She looked suddenly all too pale and wan.

"I will be." Eowyn gave a shuddering sigh and shook the tension from her hands, wondering why the man's insistence bothered her so very much. Could he not have been simply trying to be helpful? She could not explain, yet somehow it did not feel so very straight and right.

"Come." Her brother balanced the load easily against his hip while he draped an arm about her shoulders and lightly squeezed. She looked so troubled. He tried and failed to think when he had last seen her smile. Perhaps he could do something to help lift her mood.

"Can your big brother not win your favour? I had promised you a match, 'Wyn, had I not?"

Her face suddenly brightened like the sun as they walked through the hall toward the kitchens. "Yes, please!"

Later, when Eowyn had donned a pair of his old breeches, rolled up the cuffs and shrugged into a linen shirt, they squared off in the practice yard.

The match, unusually, did not go as either of them expected. Time and again her brother got past her guard, touching Eowyn lightly for the kill on knee or hip or shoulder.

"Wyn?" Eomer fell back, frowning, pulling off his helm and letting his sword point rest in the dirt. How was it that Eowyn was so easy he could use her for a pell? He should not have able to best her so very soon.

"Sorry" came the half-hearted reply. The blue-grey eyes beneath the helm were troubled, stormy as the thunderheads that raced across the plain in high midsummer. "My mind is elsewhere."

'So I can see," Eomer rubbed the bridge of his nose thoughtfully. What the young shieldmaiden lacked in strength and reach she made up for in speed and agility. Perhaps the unpleasant exchange with Grima bothered her more than either of them expected.

"Are you sure you want to do this now?"

"Yes!" The proud chin that had been drooping lifted defiantly a little higher.

"Well then," he mused, "let us go with your thoughts." Eomer grinned and raised his sword. He had
an idea that just might help her focus. "Imagine me with black hair and too much nose."

That time the young Rider had to jump quite sharply back…

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"Well that bloody does it, you cheating bastard son of a Wraith. Enough. I am out of the game."

Dusty and dog-eared playing cards flew into the air and the crash from the up-ended stool echoed off Henneth Annun's rough rock walls.

Over by the rushing water curtain, Madril winced. Day fifty-two with no break looked to be ending with a bang. What a change from morning to the eve. At breakfast they had all laughed at the new recruit's choice remark, cheered as he 'put it on the table', carved it into the wood for posterity. Now, a hard, hot patrol done for the day, they were nearly into fisticuffs. He shook his great shaggy head. The men's mood these days turned wildly from one moment to the next.

The fracas looked to be heating up. Terrell glared at Mablung who glared just as sharply back. "I did not cheat!"

"Then what do you call stuffing cards down your sorry breeches?"

The lieutenant reached to grab at something sticking out of his sergeant's waistband but the young man was having none of it. "Leave off!" Mablung shoulders were roughly shoved away.

Around the torchlit chamber, men looked up from their evening tasks hopefully. Even a fist-fight at this point would be a welcome break from the routine.

Mablung sneered and gestured to his waist. "Oh right, it's the only action your packet's like to get."

A laugh ricocheted round the room and the younger man's face flushed scarlet. "You whoreson!" Terrell cried, winding up, readying to throw a punch.

Anborn, worry plain on his fair, bearded face, reached to grab his friend's raised arm but was roughly shaken off. The Captain's rules were clear: no fighting, whatever the provocation and there were worse rotations than the Refuge.

Much worse.

From the suddenly doubtful look on Terrell's face he had suddenly remembered it. That at least was good. The two combatants circled warily. Insults flew but for now the fists had lowered.

Madril, senior lieutenant of the bunch, put down the bow he had been oiling and decided it was time to act. He walked over to a farther alcove and stood at ease, waiting for the Captain to take his notice.

The big lieutenant was not a man given to advising others about their jobs. To him, the best way to manage was to train the men right and then, by Osse, trust them. Get the blazes out of their way and let them do their jobs. He trusted his commander implicitly, but at that moment things had a bad feeling about them. Best to make sure the boss was aware.

Faramir sat by the light of a sputtering lamp, forcing himself to do the least favourite of his chores:
reports to Minas Tirith. Any excuse to stop was welcome and the quill stilled against parchment. He cocked his head, black eyebrow raised.

"See the fools?" The Tolfalas man nodded toward the knot of men in the centre of the chamber. Slowly he folded his uncommonly long legs under the trestle table and took a seat on an upturned crate.

"Yes Madril, I did and heard them." Faramir gave a nod of thoughtful agreement. His grey eyes ranged about the torchlit space, taking in the rustling and the tension in the air. It was amazing any of them could breathe for the heaviness that suddenly filled the space.

"'Tis not like Mab to get so riled about anything. When even he is losing his cool, I reckon we have a problem. Three nights now we've needed to throw the boot at Damrod, him snoring like a Mumak and so grumpy with being woken for it now he's gone and put young Will on report."

"What for?" asked Faramir in surprise, turning to eye the grizzled lieutenant by his side. Will was an earnest new recruit. Careful and from Faramir's limited experience, thoughtful. What could he have done that merited any censure?

"Nowt. Pissing too close to the Forbidden Pool Damrod said." They both rolled their eyes at that. "Need to do something, sir, if you don't mind my saying so."

"Not at all and I have been thinking on it…"

Faramir ran his fingers through his long black hair. Veteran now of ten years leading the company of Ithilien, he understood all too well that of the all the things a soldier faced, the isolation, the discomfort, the daily danger and thankfully infrequent major battle, only the discomfort was something he could do much about. The small miseries of living in the wild were like small debts. They hit one in so many places that what they wanted in weight they more than made up for in number.

He sighed. That spring had been unusual. First cold, then dry for weeks on end, cursed with a hot and steady eastern wind that moaned about the trees and shriveled the leaf buds of their moisture. Even the animals seemed maddened by it, roaming down slope in search of moisture. Elk and moose out in the open where they had no wont to be. Between the orc parties and hot, uncommon weather there had been no break for the men, no change to rest and regroup a bit. Normally by now there would have been a day or two of storms so foul they would simply hunker down. Sleep. Eat. Get their wits back.

Making up his mind, the Captain rose. At this hour evening chores were all but done but it was still earlyish for bed. The majority of their hundred men sat on around the central pit, talking in quiet groups. It was time to engineer a little break.

"Gather round gentlemen." The rustle and babble quieted as man by man they took note of their Captain's careful posture and upraised hand. Faramir had no need to raise his voice to gain attention.

"I know some of you were woken the last few nights by the noise some one was making."

"If that's what you call it." some wag called out. Damrod scowled, but held his tongue. Normally he could be counted on to take a little ribbing. Faramir paused to let the catcalls settle down.

"I must apologize for this. I can only assume you heard me dream."

Laughter echoed off the walls. Damrod's frown smoothed to a set and displeased line. Hopefully his Captain's ruse would let the Ranger save a little face before he truly lost his temper.
"Only if it t'were dreaming of the Lieutenant's snoring." This time Damrod's own sergeant made the quip. The old Ranger reached across and clipped him upside the head.

"Nay Hallan. It was not that. I have had a premonition."

The room went very quiet. Faramir scanned the expectant faces. A decade on he was still surprised they had never resorted to the boot, never flung it over the curtain at him, when the dream of the Wave broke his rest. Often enough it woke him shouting and tossing, trembling in fear. He had come to understand the dream was most often a portent of his own disquiet, a sign that things were ill. But blessedly it had not plagued him in a while.

There was no harm, he thought, in a little fibbing.

"It is going to rain tomorrow, Gentlemen. Absolutely, simply pour. The entire day. I know this without a shred of doubt. Given this unfortunate event there will be no breakfast call and no formal muster."

He paused to enjoy the change in the air as smiles lit like little flames around the room.

"Who has midnight watch?"

"My men, Captain," Erlin raised his hand. This was crucial. The others would get extra sleep but the men on early watch missed out.

"They are excused from other chores on the morrow then. Damrod, Erlin you personally will have the day watch. Madril and myself will take the perimeter patrol …"

He caught his lieutenant's slightly pleading look. "… third turn after sunrise. We shall expect there to be a warm and elaborate supper when we return."

A cheer went up and suddenly there was a rush to ready bedrolls. The prospect of a day off had done much already to improve the mood.

Faramir, relieved and smiling, went to ready his own gear for the morning.

It would be a nice change from reports.

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The next morning Faramir found himself striding through the pines, light of heart and more than pleased with his day's plan.

He and Madril had grabbed a quick breadroll and descended the stone stair long after the bird's dawn chorus. Now moving carefully downslope toward the river, he breathed the sharp, dusky scent of pine litter below their feet and dodged a looming spider web.

The morning's air was still a little cool but there was a lightness to it that promised heat to come. He did not mind. To simply go and run a routine patrol was a luxury he rarely had these days, more often on the move from one refuge to the next, assessing the defenses and making sure all ran well.

Long used to each others way of ranging, he and his lieutenant spread a little farther out, just out of sight but near enough and in earshot should the need the arise. Bows were slung and swords readied
at the hip, though they did not expect to encounter any trouble. Orcs had not been through these parts for nigh on a month. Denethor’s reports and his own scouts showed all the movement near to the Crossroads. They would be alert but he expected no action in the day. Perhaps if they were lucky, some of the spring’s bounty could be foraged for a treat.

The morning passed. Lunchtime found them happily back up a farther ridge and beside a rock outcrop, having slogged through some heavy underbrush to gain the height. The breeze was stiffer there, welcome in the heat, and kept the early midges down as they took big mouthfuls of bread and cheese. The only good use for the unseasonable heat was it might bake the small creeks dry and keep the little monsters down. A man sweat terribly in a mask and hood and there was no way to keep the tenacious creatures out.

And there also only so much added chewy insect he could stand in his food. All of it, the bugs, the heat, the work, was making them to a man a little grumpy.

The Rangers packed up their meal and headed out, wending their way back down the ridge toward the hidden stair. It was as the sun fell westering after hours of solid walking and nothing untoward, that Madril sent out a hurried, chirpy call. *Over here.*

Faramir pushed aside the aspen and sage and yarrow that choked the understory, spying the big Ranger a ways farther down. He was bent over something the Captain could not see. Ahead rose a stand of birch and Faramir could make out the soft chime of water amidst the birdsong. A brook must lie ahead.

"Fiddleheads!" Madril grinned and held up his prize in triumph.

Faramir looked about his feet and there in the wet, damp bank was vast drift of the tiny, coiled up ferns. Shaped perfectly like the head of a fiddle, they were bright green little gems, succulent and packed with goodness this early in the season. Damrod’s patrol had brought a fair few back the day before. Now with these there might be enough to feed the men. Grinning, Faramir unslung his pack and the two men began picking quickly, brushing off the dry brown paper beards that covered the tight coils and laying them safely in an outer pocket.

By the time the patch was almost stripped both men were near ten feet apart, stopping now and then to scan the trees and listen. Perhaps it was the wind direction not in their favour or the loud rushing of the brook in full spring spate. Perhaps it was simply rare ill chance, but in the event, neither heard the creature until too late.

Madril gave a loud, broken shout.

Growling and grunting, the black bear was upon him before he could react, its claws digging into the heavy leather of his jerkin and jaws snapping at his nape.

"Protect your neck!" Faramir yelled, dropping everything and unsheathing his sword. He closed the distance as fast as he was able, heart pounding quickly in anxiety and fear, trying to see where he could aim.

The lieutenant did as he was bid, lacing his hands over the back of his hood and trying to roll up in a ball and over on his back. Desperately he rocked, trying to get over on his side and jar the creature off. He could feel the bear’s hot, fetid breath and pinpoint stabs of pain where it tried to bite, instinct driving it to his most vital spots.

Madril's face was white and shocked but he was still struggling hard as Faramir leapt and plunged his blade into the bear's broad back. It shrieked, so very like a man for a moment the Captian worried it...
was his lieutenant he had hit.

Thankfully it was not so. As the bear dropped its grip and turned to face the new opponent, Madril rolled away, grunting in pain when his shoulder bashed a hidden rock. Panting with adrenalin, bleeding where teeth had found their purchase, he watched Faramir pull back and drive a second strike deeper through the animal's broad chest.

It gave long howling moan, shivered from nose to tail, and slumped.

"Are you all right?" Thin-lipped, Faramir pulled out his sword and rushed over to his friend, looking anxiously at the cuts across the backs of Madril's hands. Six perfect round punctures were driven in and there were small gashes across his back. None of them looked serious but he hurriedly pulled out the lieutenant's water flask and washed the saliva and dirt from the slowly bleeding cuts.

"It didn't bluff!" said Madril dazedly, looking over at the carcass. His great bulk shook like a leaf. The shock was beginning to set in.

Faramir looked up from his ministrations. "I know. It charged without declaring." He tried to hide his frown. He did not like it. Bears almost always faked a charge and turned away before attacking. They were usually wary of a man-sized foe. This was highly unusual for a creature on its own. From its thicker neck and shoulders it was a male. Not likely that there were hidden cubs nearby.

He began to pull bandages from out of his pack but then quickly stopped, looking closely at the bear's long muzzle. He had had another awful thought. Rabies. Oh Valar, the animal could be ill and Madril could be infected. Then their only hope would be to let the Ranger's body bleed, drive the infection out.

"Captain?" Madril asked in puzzlement, as the younger man went to the body and began to examine its face and neck.

"Just a moment."

He did not want to alarm his friend unduly, but they all knew Rabies, like as not, was a death sentence. Using the edge of his cloak he pried opened the creature's jaw. There was no sign of foaming, thankfully, but the animal was thin. Undernourished. Could that mean it was infected?

Heart in mouth, Faramir began to slice through the pelt, looking for signs of an infected wound. Its jaw had not been paralyzed, it was not that far gone if it could bite Madril as it did.

Methodically he continued his examination, nearly choking at the stench of the creature's musk. It was a wonder they hadn't smelled it coming. Finally, as he worked toward the head, peeling the fur away he something glint that looked unusual.

Deep in the muscle of the neck was a collar of flat, black metal, so tight it bit into the throat. Clearly it was impossible for the poor thing to swallow. Faramir felt dizzy for a moment with relief. It was starving, driven wild with it. Not likely rabid.

Peering closer at the collar, an ill feeling pricked at the edge of his sensation. Faramir could just make out tiny runes crudely carved into the surface. Not Tengwar or Cirth but something else. Orcish…or Black Speech. An ill and worrying sign. The bear had likely escaped from Morgul Vale, been tormented for some dark design he could not surmise. It was not the first such refugee they had found wandering Ithilien's cool green slopes. And likely not the last

Now settled in his mind as to the cause, the Captain turned back to his lieutenant. "It has been tortured, Madril. Driven mad. Starved. Not likely sick"
"Tha's all right then. A mercy to end its misery." The look in Madril's eyes spoke volumes. He too had worried it was diseased.

It was not long before they had his injured hands bound in bandages. After one last long pull on the water bottle and a bite to eat, Madril declared himself fit to move. He was only a little shaky and felt stronger now he'd had a rest.

The two men made their way for home, less light of step than they had set out.

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"A little dearly bought," was Renil's quiet comment as he dressed Madril's wounds with healing salve. The healer of course had noticed the bandages at once when the Lieutenant held his prize high for all to see.

"Just a scratch." But the uncomfortable twitch of a clawed and bruised shoulder as Madril raised his tankard to his lips put the lie to the brave words.

Faramir deposited their bounty with the cook and stood back, grinning with amusement and relief, nursing a small tankard of his own. Man after man had come over to see Madril's wounds and by the time the story had been round once or twice his normally reticent lieutenant was soused enough to begin enjoying all of the attention.

Their little adventure had turned out to be simply that, little, but the Captain decided he would pass on the word. The last thing the patrols needed was the normally friendly animals of Ithilien hampering them in their work.

The now much more rested men were in high spirits, going about the business of setting dinner on the board and easy with it. Many appeared much cleaner and by the humidity in the cave he guessed that a lot of laundry had been done.

Damrod and Erlin had reported nothing untoward.

After a loud and boisterous meal of rich rabbit stew with the spring's wild garlic and the fiddleheads braised with butter, Faramir sat back, enjoying the happy swirl around. He had taken ribbing for his failed premonition with good grace, pleased to let the men have their joke and relieved that all seemed well. Another cask of ale had been broached. Not wine for it was back to the rota on the morrow.

Later, when the dice came out, and books, and an instrument or two, Mablung had come over, swung his long legs under the bench and sat beside his Captain.

"Sir, I…" he began, clearly planning to apologize.

Faramir shook his head, a wry half smirk upon his face, his long fingers cradling the last of his drink. "Not me Lieutenant, it is your sergeant you should be speaking to. I expect he has already apologized to you."

"Yes sir, he has, but no sir if you'll pardon me. 'Tis not that." Embarrassed, the craggy-faced young man flushed red to the roots of his dark brown hair. Mablung bent and took a bracing pull of what looked to be his second or third ale of the evening. "You see sir, I knew that I was getting bushed.
"Should have said something soonest when I noticed. Not tried to muscle through. It never works."

"That it doesn't." Faramir agreed, eyeing Mablung appreciatively. It took guts to admit when one was wrong. Even more to admit when one was spent. "I'll be grateful if you'll let me know next time Mablung. When even my best lieutenants are thinking squirrely I need to know."

"Thank you, sir." The young man let out a breath, looking entirely relieved to have not got more of a bollocking. "Captain, what's in store now? Are we going to be heading farther east, ranging closer to the Vale?" Morgul Vale he meant. They did not name it unless seriously pressed. There were enough evil sounds within the world.

"I will think about it Mab. That certainly that comes to mind."

Across the bench Madril's ears perked up as he tried with questionable success to concentrate and mend the hole in his leather jerkin. His hands were clearly starting to be stiff and sore and Faramir expected he was regretting his earlier blithe refusal of Renil's willowbark tea.

"Here let me do that, my fingers are half the size of yours." Anborn reached across the table and took the awl, began stitching carefully and neatly, pulling the slit shut tight.

"I can fletch." The big Ranger protested, but flexed his aching hands gratefully. Holes meant midges in your shirt and Anborn's father was a cobbler. The young man knew what he was about.

"Know you can, but not with hands like that." Anborn, fingers sure on leather, looked up, interested also in the Captain's plans. "Would we sir? Range near't Vale?" It was not a thought any of them welcomed, though they would if the orders came down.

Faramir downed his last mouthful and rose, rolling his head tiredly on his shoulders. "I will be moving on in a week or so, to Dolen dant, I will see how many other incidents there have been." The Steward had ordered him to complete a round of all the refuges before Midsummer. It had been a hard winter and he needed to assess what state they were in, what needed to be done to keep them well in readiness.

"But you just got here!" Mablung protested. Around the table eyebrows raised in surprise. He had only arrived a week before. They knew there were too few men and too many jobs to cover. But all rested easier when they had their Captain back again.

Faramir shook his head ruefully. "I know. It feels strange. I am not used to this. I don't usually come so late and pull out early."

He froze. Oh Valar. They had him. Knew it the moment the phrase left his mouth.

The fact that their Captain never swore, never used vulgar language or joined in the ribald talk was something the men of Ithilien company were, quixotically, quite proud of. One of the things they loved about him, like the absolute certainty that he did not lie and always considered their needs before his own. Not prissy or a prude, Faramir simply considered it a failure of his own quite considerable imagination to speak unnecessarily cruelly.

"Captain. Captain. Captain…"

His infelicitous turn of phrase ran through the cavern fast as wildfire. Rhythmic thumping of hands on knees and bench reverberated about the central room. Men stood hastily back and the wooden trestle table was ceremoniously flipped upside down.

*He was finally going on the table.*
Faramir shook his head, trying not to laugh. Ten years a Captain and half that again a lieutenant and he had never slipped up so.

Boromir's words and name were of course proudly carved into the worn wooden underside. His little brother still remembered the drunken Midsummer's eve when the Captain-General had visited unannounced and had, with a flourish, performed his part of the ritual.

The chanting did not let up. Broad grins showed far and wide, the stamping and hollering had become only louder still. No way he could get out of this now.

Madril rose and offered Faramir his own knife. Striving mightily to keep a grin off his face, the older Ranger's wide blue eyes twinkled merrily in the flickering torchlight.

"Well, my Lord," he said, at last giving in to a low chuckle only the two of them need hear. "If you have to get on the table it might as well be for a corker."

Faramir sighed, reluctantly took the proffered knife.

"Just don't tell my elder brother what I said. I would never hear the end of it."

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"Pray tell me Denethor what was that about?"

The Steward froze, resigned. He knew it would be her. Had caught the distinctive rustle of heavy silk and the scent of Imloth's fabled roses that she wore.

The Duchess, despite her elaborate overskirts, caught him up quite quickly in the hall and reached to grab his arm, furious at the dressing down she had so publically received.

Denethor took in the white set of her lips, the implacable hardness to her eyes and cringed.

*Perhaps he should not have indulged his temper so.*

Reluctantly he tried to explain a little further, she of all of the councillors deserved a little more. "Lady your intelligence is a bit behind the times. If you will insist on being in the game, I demand that you play at my level. Is not your favourite phrase to paddle faster? I do not have time for slow and steady gathering. I need useful information now."

There was a scrape of boot on stone as all around them guards stood hastily straighter to attention. They too had heard his angry tone and strove to sink a little farther back to the walls. All seen the flash of steel below his robes. All knew the whip of steel within his tongue.

Fools. He was surrounded by cowards and fools.

Reluctantly Denethor forced himself to focus on Amerith again. The lady did not look convinced and with a flash of irritation, he realized she was her espousing her arguments for the second time, shaking her elegantly coiffed head in disagreement.

"Surely the levies are for all the companies, not just Osgiliath and Ithilien. Why not bolster all those around? Denethor, you showing precious little common sense. Do you not realize you will get more co-operation in the long run if you share what you know right now!" Amerith's voice was near to
pleading. Its tone of earnest solicitude and outright frustration made him want to grind his teeth.

"Out of the question."

What could he say? I have spied secretly on the Enemy's inner fastness and seen the storm of misery of come? There are 20,000 orcs alone held in readiness above Morgul Vale.

Impossible.

Who knew when the Enemy would move? Night in, night out he spent every last ounce of will and strength, striving to answer that dreadful question. Only he alone was strong enough to carry the knowledge for the uncertain present. Not his councillor. Not his heir. He had discovered that to his chagrin.

_Oh Boromir, how had I misjudged you so?

The Steward swayed, exhausted. It was getting harder to manage on his own. Suddenly he felt as white as the City’s stone. The ever present headache pounded harder still and for a moment he could not think for the pain behind his eyes. Nor, more alarmingly, could he remember what he had meant to do.

The Duchess saw the flash of confusion on his face, the lines of worry and fatigue deepen about his nose and brow. As his tall, sere form listed suddenly she quickly clasped his arm.

"Denethor are you all right?" she sent, looking about for a seat within the hall. "When did you last eat or sleep?"

All right? he wondered, blindly following the steady pressure of Amerith's hand into a meeting room. Gratefully he sank down upon a chair. What did that mean? Ludicrous construct. How could he be all right when the kingdom he had sworn to serve was crumbling and he could no more stop it than order Anduin to flow up the Argonath?

"My Lord, rest here while I fetch Varan to look at you. He I trust to be discreet."

He did not look up as each one of the lady's footfalls echoed like a thunderbolt round his skull. No one must see him incapacitated. Steeling himself against the pain he opened his eyes and rose, took in the opulence of his surroundings.

With a mirthless laugh he realized what room he had taken refuge in.

King Minardil's fabled study, covered inch by inch with priceless tapestries. Minardil who own steward was the first Lord of Emyn Arnen. Mindardil who died untimely in Pelargir because he doubted intelligence about the Corsair fleet.

How fitting. A king of long ago and a king yet to come. One who doubted the signs and the other who claimed to see them.

Well they were not finished yet. They had yet to see the result of Thorongil's lauded gamble. Gondor had not yet come to the end, merely the ending of the beginning moves.

Half blinded by pain but driven mercilessly by need, he staggered toward the Steward's more modest palace. They had to win, else the black king tilt the board and all was lost.

For now, as so often at the outset of the game, no certain conclusion was possible.
Definitions of names I have created here.

Mallant: Sindarin: golden gift.

Dolen dant: Sindarin: hidden fall

Thank you so very much to Caroline for her faithful reviewing. Your support is what keeps me going!

As always I am indebted to Annafan and Wheelrider for their critters and comments and encouragement. You guys are the best.
Chapter 16: One captain leads defense, another an attack; the white king and a black rook castle

Ninnui-Gwaeron, T.A. 3017

A winter of watch and want began to wane and many moves began in earnest. Those who served the people and the One sought for a strategy and a perhaps a sign. Those who served the dark and her impatient Master gathered strength, discarded tools that could not be turned. Those who but served themselves readied a long planned move and weakened their victim from within.

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"Age comes to us all, my King. Do not fret. This latest malady is but a passing thing. Give yourself time to heal and worry not. I will ensure that all carries on most smoothly."

Theoden-King sat his throne in Meduseld's high and storied hall, his blue eyes pale and veiled, face pinched, a picture of discomfort and irritation. He nodded uncertainly to his chief counsellor, hesitation dragging down his posture and his mind.

A pile of heavy furs lay across his lap. The hall had cleared. Folk has sought their beds against the lingering chill of the late's winter's eve. Only his most trusted councillor remained behind. Eager to pour encouragement and flattery in equal measure on his aging King.

"Grima so hard and long you toil for Rohan. What would I do without you?" The thin and quavering voice rose quietly, twining with lazy spirals of thin grey smoke wending upward from the fire that yet languished in the hearth. Fretful fingers plucked disconsolately at the furs. Even their softness was not a balm.

Tall and whippet thin, the son of Gálmód paused in the act of stirring a tonic into the king's own gilded cup. His unctous smile was firm encouragement embodied. "Sire, of course you would manage. No one man is ever indispensible. You have your son and nephew to help." The smooth high voice trailed off as thin lips pulled into a firmer line. "When they can be found, of course."

The pale, rheumy eyes grew anxious once again. When had Theoden seen his son the last? Yesterday? Today? He could not remember, nor what it was that Theodred had wanted. Something about the western fords? Trying to remember made his head ache all the more. Theoden shifted uncomfortably and shook his head. That was it. Of course Grima had explained it would only insult Orthanc. There was no need.

The goblet was passed to a trembling hand and with no delay the king drank it down. Unlike the medicines his sister-daughter brought this one was sweet and quite palatable.

A little dribbled down his chin to stain a snow white beard and rich red robe. Grima's neat and ever skillful hands had been ready with a napkin. The counsellor waited patiently, watching with a
sympathic frown while the King dabbed ineffectually at his person.

"Surely Theodred did not go against my wishes?" The King of Rohan loved his only son, so alike in face and manner to his beautiful Elfhild sometimes his heart skipped a beat. It would pain him to hear again that they were at odds.

"The Prince is overmuch concerned with the western fords, my liege. One can only hope he gives as much attention to the safety of the Emnet, to its farmers and goodwives, as he does a certain lady and her daughter." Eyes as smooth and black as flint glittered for a moment. "I should hate to think that his counsel to you is based on the considered opinion of another, less thoughtful, organ."

High above the doleful scene there came a quickly stifled gasp. Eowyn crouched in the shadows of a long abandoned gallery, hands clasped in fury at the daring of the Wormtongue's words.

Yet another eve had come and once again she listened in dismay as the repulsive, fawning man, like an icicle warmed by the first rays of spring, steadily dripped suspicion into her uncle's ear. At first Grima had been so smooth, so plausible and earnest that none noticed the first hints of bile seep into his counsel.

*Prince Theodred is gone again. Surely he would not neglect his duty? The Third Marshal wishes to enlarge his Eored. Does he not have men and reach enough?*

It made Eowyn wanted to grit her teeth. As if her own brother would desire more than Aldburg, his cherished home.

Just as worrying were the words and acts that slithered uncomfortably underneath her skin. At first they were so innocent she had hardly noticed her unease began to blossom, to flower into doubt. A hand held too long. A lingering gaze. A sudden touch upon her arm. So skillful was the Worm she had hesitated to speak to even Eomer. Afraid that to say the words aloud would be to hear how thin and baseless they really were.

Instead she watched, kept skirts and arms and feelings close to herself, not realizing until too late just how heavy were the man's words and deeds. How very often she held her breath until at last she felt she must suffocate.

Uncertain of her reception she had hatched a plan. A simple one. Too simple she now realized. Present the Marshals with evidence of Grima's increasing ill influence and encourage them to act. Eomer she hoped would believe her words and Theodred positively loathed the man. Neither could go against their King without evidence of calumny on the Wormtongue's part.

And so, in the long evenings while others of the household retired to their beds, she sat in the dust and shadows hoping to see or hear something that could help.

She learned to her chagrin how very subtle and detailed where the lies hidden in Grima's counsel, how very deep Theoden relied upon his powerful counsellor. It hurt. That her brave and glorious Uncle's world would shrink before her very eyes. Become but his bed and hall, never sun nor sky nor field and meadow. Each night she watched as Grima stirred *something* into Theoden's waiting cup. Each night she watched the veil cloud her Uncle's eyes, while a mist of icy doubt and dread began to seep into her heart.

That night, focused on the unfolding scene below, she did not hear a sound, did not notice she was not alone until a pair of rough, calloused hands clasped hard against her mouth.

*Bema she was caught!*
Pinned fast in the darkened alcove, she struggled, fear coursing through her veins like fire. The strong hands held her fast as images of pale, roving hands flashed through her thoughts.

*He could not be here!* With her heart thudding wildly in her chest, she forced herself to still, to breathe again, not to struggle hard. The Worm could not be in the room. He could not be both behind her and below.

"Peace, cousin. It is I."

The whispered words of Sindarin were known only to a friendly few. Even as they reassured she caught a whiff of scent: honing oil and almond, the one Theodred used upon his blade.

"Forgive me, Eowyn. I was not certain in the dark it was you." Theodred's fingers squeezed her shoulder gently in apology as the hard hands relaxed and left her mouoth

She turned. Her cousin knelt behind her, braid clasps barely glinting in the dark, a look of worry upon his smooth and handsome face. *Her Theo.* With relief she slumped against the broad and welcoming chest. It had been her cousin not her Uncle who held her and wiped her tears as a little girl, put her back up on her horse when she jumped fences too hard and high. Cousin, brother, father, it mattered not. He was part of her foundation. Her surety that not all was faithless in the swiftly changing world.

"Do you do this often?" She was pleased to find her voice was calm. Obviously he too was no stranger to the alcove.

"Do you?"

His grim smile lit the darkness with just the barest shine of whiter teeth. Theodred's fire lay banked but she could sense it, ready at his call. It thrummed through muscles coiled and ready, through every bated breath. He had learned. Long years of ever growing frustration had taught him to keep his temper in greater check.

"No…" Her hands still shook, putting the lie to the illusion they were not in any danger, were not committing treason, spying on their king. Eowyn clasped her kirtle to stop them trembling, but as she gripped the cambric tightly a sudden thought appeared. Her glass! In her fright she had dropped her little spy glass, the miniature Captain's glass Eomer had gifted her so long ago. She had been using it to see more clearly the hall the below.

Quickly she bent down, felt with her hands and searched but in the dim she could not see it. There was no light to illuminate the brass. With a heavy heart she realized she would have to wait until the morning.

Theodred's look of puzzled concern went unanswered as more poisoned words drifted upward in the heated air.

"Sire you must not give credance to your nephew's words upon the matter. Eomer is over eager. Thinks only of glory and his name sung in future songs of battle. He is rash and all too proud just like his father was. Eomund's house may well trace it lineage to Brego, but royal blood does not always run quite true."

Eowyn stiffened. Theoden had asked again about the Fords. The snake. To insult her brother and their father's lineage in a single breath. In that moment she wanted nothing more than get her own hands upon the man, challenge him openly, not skulk around in the darkened eve.

'Peace.' Theodred's hand raised to brush lightly across her hair, gently stroking as he would a
nervous filly or a colt. She tried to let the anger flow away like water, to turn her attention downward once again.

"Your son has not the temper for the thoughtful consideration a King must use. He lacks yet the shrewdness of his grandsire but has all his famous fire. An unhealthy combination. Only time and careful guidance from us all will show him the proper path."

Brows pressed like thunderclouds, the object of Grima's insults held quite still. Eowyn caught his dark grey gaze. He shook his head, he would not react though it seemed to her that Theodred's hand was now clenched so hard the fingernails must draw blood upon his palms. He moved a little farther forward, straining to see through the railing of the gallery, to see his father far below.

It was then that disaster struck.

The Prince had shifted but a step but by some ill chance his foot struck the little telescope. They froze, hearts in mouth, praying both alike to Bema as the spy glass rolled, the bronze glinting palely in the light of the gallery's edge. It rolled across the uneven planks and banged against the baluster. It rocked. Once, then twice, but finally came to rest and did not fall.

Grima's head whipped up at the sound. It had not been loud but came from a place he had not expected.

The sudden beat of heavy steps fell rapidly on the flagstones. Eowyn's stomach lurched. Oh she knew them, Grima's steps, hard and chill and loud. What were they to do? There was no time to descend the stair: he would come up and they would be found.

Grima needed no better excuse than this to have them banned, exiled from their home.

As quickly as the panic rose, a warm sure hand grasped hers and drew them both deeper into the shadows.

Theodred quickly pressed her down across a wooden chair and bent his body over hers. His cloak fell about them both and then all sight was blocked, as one large hand dragged a mouldy curtain down across the rail.

Seconds turned to minutes, Eowyn tried to hold her breath. She could feel Theo's heart hammering against her back, the quiver of his arm as he braced himself, bent over but straining not to crush her with his greater weight. The air was foul. The cloth was musty and with an effort she pressed her lips tightly closed. She must not cough, no matter the temptation.

Steps sounded on the stair. She shut her eyes more tightly and tried to count. How soon would Grima gain the floor? How long could Theodred hold that pose?

Suddenly she felt the press of cold steel against her arm. Theodred's dagger was drawn and waiting. Ten, she counted ten, when a sudden wailing yelp rose up and a muffled curse was heard.

"Dofaþ catte."

A cat! One of the housekeeper's many brood must have hidden on the stair. The heavy steps descended once again but they both stayed still, heard with relief the next words that drifted up.

"It was nothing Sire. Simply Efrida's mangy creature stalking vermin in the loft."

The heavy footsteps stopped near the centre of the hall as Grima's voice resumed its fawning note.
"My lord, you look quite fatigued. Would you like me to finish the tedious correspondance while you retire to your bed?"

"Thank you Grima." Theoden's tone of helpless gratitude made Eowyn wince. "I am perhaps not as well as I had hoped."

The faint sound of a goblet being settled was heard and a quiet rustle as furs were raised. From her vantage point, Eowyn could not see her Uncle but the groan as he rose was unmistakeable and the halting steps were clear.

Slowly and steadily Grima escorted his master to the door to where the chamberlain would take him to his rest.

The door closed and they were at last alone.

Theodred took her hand and helped raise her to her feet, throwing off both the curtain and the cloak, brushing absently at the clumps of rotting linen that clung to skirt and arms.

His grip tightened on her arm. Her cousin knew her well, knew what was in her heart to think upon the scene. She could not meet his gaze, ashamed of the darkness in her thoughts.

The fury of it. To see and hear that…that Worm try to turn their Uncle against Eomer. To insult Theodred. His Prince. One who worked tirelessly for their safety. It made her ill to have her fears confirmed and yet she should not be surprised. Had she not seen Grima disagree with them all at the councils? Had she not heard him deny their opinions over and over until the Prince rose and stalked the outer halls in sheer frustration, dispelling in action the fury he must not show before his father?

Of course Theodred understood what hurt the most. He felt it too. "It is no dishonour to bear a sickness." Grey eyes were soft and full of pity. "To serve your king brings honour just as surely, no matter his health or fortitude. But to see him thus pains us all dear heart."

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

"Come…we should away. I want to check that cup before the revolting one returns." Theodred bent and untied and removed his boots. They needed to be quiet. She quickly did the same but even as Theodred tip-toed down the stairs she paused beside the rail.

"My gift…"

He paused and nodded, jerked his head toward the dais door. "Be swift. I will meet you on the terrace."

It seemed she had hardly had a moment to put her skirts to rights, sneak down the stairs precious glass in one hand and slippers in another, before her cousin was by her side again.

The corridors were quiet and only a lone sentry stood upon stone. Theodred took her arm and casually together they sauntered across the flagstones toward the lawn, looking for all the world as if they just needed a breath of air, heedless of the cold, wet snow beneath their feet.

Of course they were challenged before they made it very far.
"Who goes?"

"Hama." Theodred's voice was approving. "It is I and lady Eowyn. We wish to walk. The night air is fine."

"Min Leofric, my lady." Thank heaven it was a guard they knew. The man bowed and as he did his gaze fell to the dirk still in his Prince's hand. The barest flicker of understanding moved within the light blue eyes. He saluted and spread his arm and ushered them on their way.

Indeed the night air was fine. Earendil's star rose high and clear and as they strode away from the Golden Hall the moon lit the everlasting crown of snow upon proud Starkhorn. It glowed, constant and immutable as the stars that winked above. They walked in silence for many minutes, not down Meduseld's winding path but across the sloping grass. Always her cousin would choose the rougher path. He was a man who liked free spaces, eschewed the set. She followed. What matter if the damp soaked into her shoes. She was free, free of the gilded cage for a few precious moments.

The light sweet scent of symbelmine rose upon the night air. They had walked farther than she realized, silently but attuned, each worrying about the night and its revelations.

In the pale moonlight, the left hand barrows glowed eerily, a myriad tiny faces covering each King, Eorl to Helm, shining like a silver cloud. A breeze arose from in the west and the tiny flowers quivered, bringing as it did a memory of high snows and cirques. Eowyn shivered too, her dress and kirtle were far too thin.

Even as she felt it a cloak was laid around her shoulders. "Better than a rotted curtain, no?" Theodred's smile was hesitant.

"Oh yes. But still smells strongly. Almond oil or no." She tried to smile and Theodred snorted quietly. He prized the oil for its longer life, yet still she could not resist a little teasing. Godwyn's farm kept a single precious almond tree. He had told her how his daughter loved the blooms and their heady fragrance.

"What was in the cup?"

Theodred sighed and rubbed distractedly at his neck. "Nothing ill that is obvious to me. Although there is a leech I trust to look into it more." He did not say it, though they both knew. Someone beyond the Worm's long reach.

He paused and looked up toward the hall. "I would that you were away from here, little one."

He used her nickname. She knew it meant that he was worried, needed even in his words to comfort and protect her as he had always done. Theodred had already been a Rider, already posted to Erkenbrand's Eored, when she was born. And later, when she and Eomer had come to Edoras, bereft and grieving, the young Marshal had been only too happy to let a lonely coltish girl follow in his wake whenever he was home. Spar, and jest and act as if the world was unfolding as it should.

Eowyn realized with a start that he would have known young girls her age quite well. His own daughter, Malina, was but a little younger.

The wind whipped her cornsilk hair around her face. A large callused hand raised to brush it from her eyes. "I have asked. Theoden-King will not agree to send you thence to Aldburg. Eomer is now Third Marshal, he will be more away." This words trailed off and there was hesitation in the blue-grey eyes. Unconsciously she braced for the words to come.

"The Worm has convinced Father to assign me permanently as Second."
Eowyn gasped. It seemed too loud in the quiet of the night though none was close to hear. Theodred placed a finger to her lips. His eyes were pained. They both knew the repercussion.

"But you are Crown Prince! It falls to you to be First if Uncle cannot ride!" Her protest was fierce but low, heart sinking all the while.

Permanently. Theodred would be miles away at Helm's Deep, Eomer in Aldburg and she would be here. Alone. Helpless against that hooded gaze. That...that thing dogging her every step.

"Why?"

Theodred tried to grin wryly and pitched his voice into a higher tone. "It is an honour my brave Prince to defend the storied Hornburg."

Eowyn could not help herself. She giggled at the near perfect impersonation of Grima's fawning voice. Theodred had always been good acting, it was she realized a skill he used most oft these days, acquiescing with good grace to his Father's seemingly capricious commands.

The brief wry smile soon faded to a grimace. "And so, quite neatly, he has us both away. He is not stupid. Moves us all for his own ends, the puppet master to a game where some larger unseen hand moves all the pieces on the board." The blue-grey gaze became intent, turned to northward where these days all his worries flowed. "I am afraid I know which one and what his faithful servant has asked for his prize...."

Eowyn shivered, certain also of what he meant.

Saruman.

Theodred had long suspected that the wizard plotted against the kingdom, nursed a fierce and swelling ambition alone in his black tower of obsidian.

"Take this in earnest of my vow. If ever Grima touches a hair upon your head he will not live to see another sunrise." A sliver of cold steel was pressed into her palm.

The dirk shone silver-blue in the moon's faint, waning light. A perfect weight, the hilt was chased in gold, steeds and stags raced the wold across it. It was beautiful. She had seen it in the hall. A long ago gift from Theoden to his only son upon his naming day.

She hugged her cousin hard, a lump rising in her throat. "Thank you Theo. I know that you and Eomer both will be back here as often as you can." And between she must be brave.

His frown grew deeper. "Forgive me cousin to speak so bluntly. I find I am relieved. It unmans him, the scent of fear. He is as much a coward as I had hoped. I greatly worried it to be otherwise..."

She started. Eowyn was not a total innocent. Knew from the older ladies talk that some men liked a little pain to spice their pleasure. But to enjoy another's fear.... Her mouth went dry.

The blue-grey gaze dropped to his waist where her small, sure fingers rested in his own. "Father may not see what is in his gaze but we all do." He took a deeper breath. "Be strong., but do not fear. Look at Grima's neck when we meet upon the morrow. He wears a bandage and in time will bear a scar."

His eyes flicked to the knife now in her hand...She gasped. Surely they had not.

Theodred nodded as if he caught her thought. "Last night we made an oath, sealed in the barest
trickle of his blood, in earnest of more to come. Hama, myself, Eomer and Elfhelm, all of us in turn pricked at his nape." He chucked low. "I can scarce credit it but the man's face can become even whiter than it is now."

Eowyn closed her eyes a moment. Bema, that they should risk doing such a thing. "What did you promise?"

"To slay him outright should he so much as touch any part of you. Your hand, your arm, a single strand of your hair. You need not fear for your person. He is too much the coward to act when he knows all eyes will watch. Elfhelm and Hama and all the men. They know. He cannot hurt you even if Eomer and I are gone."

She swayed. The relief was so intense she felt for a moment that her knees might buckle underneath. "Thank you."

Strong hands held her steady as a smile and welcome words lifted up and raised the mask; the one she kept these days so tightly on her feelings.

"I know that you must wait and watch, Eowyn. Help father and worry for his health while the Worm wanders everywhere, shoring up his plots. To wait is hard on all of us, but I think, perhaps, you have the hardest watch."

"You can do something!" Eowyn cried suddenly. "What can I do? Nothing but tend the sick and mind the hall." *And avoid the Worm's slavering gaze*, she thought, though she did not say it loud.

"I would that things were different." Theodred's gaze grew wistfull as he tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. She was nearly twenty and still her hair was unadorned, unbound. A maiden. No betrothal had come her way. Her Uncle had made it clear he would keep her by his side. "By now you should be thronged by suitors, planning a betrothal, looking to a life and hall all of your own. Do not despair my little one. Your time will come."

The proud blond head tossed, the glorious cornsilk hair whipped wildly in a gust of wind as pale grey eyes flashed. "I want but to serve." she cried. " As you and Eomer both do. With honour."

Gently, he bent and kissed her brow. Saw her spirit and her fire. Trusted that she would find her way somehow.

"You will, Eowyn. I have no doubt you will."

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Aragorn came to full wakefulness with a start.

He had long cultivated the ability: to rise from the deepest sleep in but a heartbeat, to take note of his surroundings no matter how poor or sound the rest, the lumpy ground or the rudeness of shelter.

Above the dim fir trees the fading fire of Gil-Estel rode a twilight sky. It was near an hour before dawn. Aragorn sat and cocked an ear, anxious to divine the reason for his wakefulness. He had no horse, nor any companion now; Gandalf had at last forsaken their chase, despairing of their errand.

For many months, through the bite of winter, they had ranged down Wilderland, seeking Gollum himself or at least rumour of him. Unto the very teeth that girt the Land of Shadow they had come
and listened long, certain the creature would be found.

After a fruitless hunt, the Wizard, pressed by an ever-growing sense of urgency, had left for Minas Tirith. Gandalf was certain that Isildur had not marched straight to Annunimas from Mordor, that the victorious King of Arnor would have gone instead to his dead brother's city, to comfort his nephew and plant a last scion of the White Tree in Minas Anor in memory of one who would not come again. Saruman claimed to have read it a scroll, penned by Isildur himself. Gandalf, grown more doubtful of his mentor's motives, very much wished to see the parchment for himself.

By purest chance it was but days after that Aragorn had at last found Gollum. Or more precisely had found the Orc patrol that dragged Gollum, chained and beaten, the marks of torture clear upon him, down through Morgul Vale.

Swiftly he made haste to follow, puzzled by their direction. For what purpose were the Enemy's minions taking their prize away from their dominion? The Ranger could not guess, but followed closely, patiently waiting for his own chance. While he felt a certain pity for Gollum's poor condition, a few fingers broken, one shoulder bruised and newly askew, he felt no compunction at the thought of becoming his next gaoler.

The creature had knowledge they needed desperately.

From farther down the slope he heard the restless shuffling of sleeping orcs, the muffled leaden footfalls of the two who stood sentry on the rest. The filth had camped for the night, safe in the assumption that these upper reaches of Ithilien were far from the river and Gondor's reach.

Unrolling himself from his cloak, Aragorn sat and tightened the laces of his boots, rose silently and padded to a nearby clear and icy spring. He cracked the morning rime, it tinkled like a bell, a most welcome sound after the brooding silence of Morgul Vale.

The Ranger had not dared to fill his skin for days, having trod the deadly flowers of that accursed space. He had stared fascinated yet repulsed at their painful, twisted stems; their succulent, glossy black petals drooping down, testament that all within was poisoned.

It was a relief to be back within the fragrant groves of Ithilien's eastern slope. Spring was still a month away but already the air felt kissed by a stronger sun. Icicles at the root-bound verge dripped steadily and animals had begun to stir.

Above, a bossy squirrel chittered furiously, an angry counterpoint to the rising chorus of dawn birds. It was time to move. Aragorn closed the top and tied the skin back on his pack, slung it up and shifted his sword belt back to its welcome place.

From down the slope, a western wind that the trees did not buffer brought a sound he did not expect. He paused, still as stone, waiting for it to come again. In a moment the soft but clear high kip repeated from farther still, from beyond the slumbering camp.

A tern? What was a tern, a creature of the northern vales, doing here?

It was answered swiftly by its mate, a lower timbre, nearer on his right. A call. This had to be a call such as his own Dunadain sometimes used. Aragorn pulled his sword from its worn and weathered scabbard and cocked an ear again. Amidst the predawn song he caught more notes that should not be. Men: moving into position about the Orcs' encampment. They must be readying to attack.

Gondor patrolled these woods, just as he himself had done so long ago.

Swiftly making a decision, he turned and climbed through the winter-dusted trees for higher ground.
Though he longed to meet another friendly face, to hear the gentle, ancient speech of the Dúnedain not the harsh, throat-heavy words of Orcish, he was anxious to keep out of the affray. A Ranger of North, so far from home and possessed of one single goal, dared not explain to any Captain's satisfaction his secret errand.

He had not long to wait. As the first rays of the morning sun flowed down toward the valley floor, a great panicked cry arose. The dusky scent of pine litter and leaf mold, trampled to life by many feet, came to him and with it another note.

Fear. The battle was joined.

Perhaps, just perhaps this was the chance he had waited for.

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Sergeant Anborn was, to general consensus, the best sleight of hand in Ithilien's motley company. Many a man had watched his pennies scooped up, first puzzled then alarmed by how often the cards cut in the fair-haired soldier's favour. With time they quickly learned. Only the newest recruits now would take up his offer for a flutter, blissfully unaware of the steely prowess masked by his nonchalant and quiet air.

That same skill, a discerning eye for minute and hidden detail, also made him the best tracker of Mablung's troop. So it was, late on a winter morning, the young Nimrais man found himself searching in ever-widening circles for a vanished prisoner.

His young private followed close behind, managing to be eager and glum at once. Anborn could not tell whether it was more for the temper of the cold and soggy weather or the perceived slight of chasing phantoms instead of fighting. Will was young enough to feel the need to prove himself, to pine for the glory in the fight.

No longer a raw recruit, the young man's shooting was coming on and he showed some decent promise as a scout. Mablung had paired him with Anborn in the hopes that he would catch an interest in the chase. He was bright, uncommonly so, with a sharp memory that boded well for observation. Even so he had yet to settle truly to wild, to find his peace with its many and varied forms of discomfort and surprise.

Disconsolately, the young Ranger squelched through a remnant patch of snow and pulled his cloak a little tighter. "We've been round this patch before." The complaint was pitched low and only for Anborn's uncanny hearing.

"Nay. Not this exact patch you dolt." The sergeant gestured impatiently with one green-gloved hand. The lad needed to pay attention. "See there, that bit of leaf is new."

Will peered closely and found sure enough a few spear-like leaves of niphredil poked through a crusty rind of dirty snow. "It's a snowdrop, 'Born. That's a sign of spring." The young man smiled delightedly. Yavanna be praised. Sun and warmth would come and perhaps even his spare boots might dry out.

"I don't ruddy care if it's a mallorn sprout itself, it was not beside the other patch of snow we passed before. Now follow on." Anbron bent to his task again but carefully set his boot beyond the gay evidence of the Lady's bounty.
When the forward scouts had come back with news of an Orc band and their prisoner moving boldly out of the Morgul road, the company had moved fast. Captain Faramir had set the ambush for near dawn and by the time the first rays of pale winter sun had broached the teeth of Ephel Duath not an Orc still lived.

The men had searched the glade and found neither prisoner nor clear sign of one. It was passing odd. The scouts had been adamant. The poor wretch had been spied, bound and chained, the day before. Surely they had not gone far.

Anborn had been set to search to east and north. Only well beyond the camp’s perimeter had he found evidence of something promising. Beside a clear pair of Orcish prints a slick of mud bore a narrow indented trail, just what a chain might make if it were dragged behind. Cautiously the two men followed, picking up the Orc's footprints and another mark or two. Smaller and barefoot. Too small for a man but too large for a child.

After that first flush of hope they had followed cautiously. Track but not engage were their orders. Most likely the Orc had simply bolted but they stayed on guard in case it doubled back.

Near a rotting log the paths diverged. The smaller prints had turned north and they had followed, hoping to quickly catch the prisoner up. After many minutes silent tracking Anborn shook his head. There was no sign. No sound. How could prisoner on a chain simply vanish into thin air? Why would they try to hide once it was clear the Rangers had won the day?

As the pair wound their up through the trees the sounds of the skirmish and mopping up grew fainter. Will kept his eyes on the trees around and a ready hand upon his bow, watching Anborn's back while the older man used his skill. From the open plains of Lebennin, the young man did not like this thicker part of the forest. It still felt unnatural to have to walk constantly around the sentinels of wood, to remember to pass first one side and then the other, lest he veer off of his course. The sergent seemed to do it without thinking, moved easily and fast, so at home his feet seemed to barely touch the ground.

"This looks fresh!" Anborn's quiet exclamation broke Will from his reverie.

A deeper print, Orcish even to the young man's eye, was sunk into a patch of dead brown moss. "Should we draw off?" he asked anxiously, whispering as he scanned the ranks of trees. They were thin and the faennan had yet to sprout though the broom grew thick. Its myriad ever green, tiny leaves wink in the dappled sun.

Anborn shook his head but pulled out his own sword and pulled his hood farther off. He raised his oddly delicate nose and sniffed. "Orc blood." He frowned, testing the scent again. "And something else."

There was nothing for it but for Will to follow close, Anborn was off like a hound upon the scent.

They found the creature quick enough in a small stand of yew lying on its back. Dead. A gash across its chest and foul black blood oozing still. Anborn knelt and closed its splayed fingers about its leathered palm. They still moved, clearly it had been but a short time before it had last breathed.

"Did the prisoner kill it to escape?" Will asked, as he reached to be safe pulled a dagger out of its belt. Though its arm was flung wide it had no sword. Had the prisoner taken it? The young man shuddered, hearing again in his head the fireside tales of torment inflicted on those unfortunate to be taken by the brutal beasts.

Anborn did not answer. Head down, he was scanning the leaf litter once again. The faintest of prints
lead away from the creature's body. "There was someone here."

Will looked up surprised. Another? The older Ranger pointed to the print.

"Heavier in front not the heel. Not an Orc. Nor the one we first sought. See the print is larger and in a boot or shoe." Anborn looked up, puzzled, turning this way and that, searching in the tree trunks for sign of something caught or a branch bent awkwardly. There was nothing. For a frightened prisoner fleeing a skirmish in full flight they were uncommonly neat moving through the bush.

The faintest rustle of sliding brittle needles sounded from his right. Anborn rubbed his brow and frowned. The fair hairs on the back of his large and callused hand had stood on end.

They were being watched.

"They're still here." He whispered, though he could not say exactly how he knew it to be true.

"Be careful." Will placed a warning hand upon his arm as the older man made to step. "They must be frightened." He too felt like there were eyes upon them both, though for once the forest did not feel malevolent.

Anborn paced slowly, sword point down and left hand open, toward the sound. "Sîdh" he called quietly. Peace. In Westron and Sindarin he called but no answer came. The uncanny feeling did not leave.

Anxious not to lose the man, the sergeant pushed gingerly through a thicker patch of willow and swallowed a muffled curse, it was denser than it looked. "Bloody hell, these little effing bushes, they'll rip yer boots off."

They did more than grab his boots, they masked a hole. With a quiet cry of outraged surprise, the Ranger's leg went through. Will reached to grab a flailing arm but not before the older man fell and twisted hard.

Once he had his partner back on solid ground it was clear that the manoeuver had not done the sergeant good. Anborn was hopping awkwardly, gingerly walking but grimacing each time his foot set down upon the turf.

His devoted partner snorted derisively. "That'll teach you to keep sight of what's under your feet not just what's before your pretty nose."

"Aye and I love you too." Anborn reached down and massaged the offending foot. Fine time for this to happen. Right when he was getting close.

Will stilled his grin. "Come, see if you can walk it off. They must be near. Sooner we find them, sooner we get you home."

They set off slowly but in the end did not find what they sought and that was the greater puzzle.

An hour later Anborn reported, late and limping, to his most surprised Lieutenant.

"Daft bugger twisted his ankle on a root." Will announced loudly, to all and sundry, when Renil and Mablung hustled over.

Faramir looked up from where he stood listening to the other scouts' reports. With a practiced eye he quickly assessed Anborn's look of pain. It held a healthy dose of acute embarrassment with the not-too-serious physical distress. Thank the Valar. Thirty Orcs wiped out and no injury more serious than
Renil lead Anborn to a stump, sat him down and carefully unlaced just the top of his heavy boot. The sergeant hissed in pain as the dark-haired healer rotated his ankle carefully side to side. He could move it, that was good, but the healer dared not take the boot off now, or they'd never get it on again.

"We were sure we found someone Sir" Anborn explained, as Mablung stood, hands on hips, frowning at the swelling quite evident about the bruised and battered ankle. "They vanished. Straight into the trees."

"Well, if they are friend not foe they'll like as not be back. Once the shock has gone." Mablung caught Faramir's eye as the Captain joined their little group. Anborn was the last scout to report. Neither of them liked that they had not found the prisoner. This time of year there was little forage in the forest unless one knew where to look. Would not like to see a man starve so close to succor.

Anborn looked from one man to the other with a puzzled frown, stoically ignoring Renil's further prodding. "Captain, it was the oddest thing. First set of prints were small, almost like a child's, but the last, beside the Orc, were large. Bigger than my own. That's two."

"Nice counting." His partner quipped. At Mablung's glare Will bent and began to methodically tie the older man's pack onto his own.

Faramir's clear grey eyes narrowed thoughtfully and he nodded. "Maric saw them also, smallish prints farther on. A youth separated from an adult?" He shared a worried look with Mablung. It would not be the first time patrols encountered younglings, slaves from Mordor. No surprise they were too traumatized to trust.

"I like it not." The craggy lieutenant rumbled. "The scouts said only one."

"We used all the signals, Sir. T'was not one of ours. Perhaps an elf?"

"I do not know." Slowly Faramir shook his head. "I like to think one of the Eldar would respond when you used their word for peace."

Brows furrowed, the Captain looked up toward the higher slopes. There was the faintest prickling of something at the very edge of his awareness, something he had not felt before. Carefully he cast out his gift, searching, hoping to gauge what type of person wandered there, to brush their thoughts, but nothing came. The forest felt smooth and blank.

Faramir turned his attention back and raised an eyebrow. "Renil?"

The healer had finished his examination and now bound a length of bandage securely about his patient's ankle. "Not broken Captain. Just a sprain. But mind it's a long way back." Renil took Anborn by the elbow and carefully helped him up. The sergeant tried a step or two but was clearly in some pain.

"Will!"

At the Captain's call the young Ranger's head snapped up. "You can organize the litter detail. Use their spears for poles." As the private trotted off, a quickly raised hand stopped Anborn's instant protest. "Just because you can walk does not mean you should. And we will move much faster without you hopping. Renil has willow bark tea alrady on the boil. You should avail yourself of that."

Anborn sighed. He could smell it, a woodsy top note above the stench of Orc. With ill-concealed
frustration, the fair man sat down again and resigned himself to his fate.

Faramir and Mablung turned to go but the sergeant twisted hurriedly in his seat and winced. "Sir, one more thing."

Expecting further protest, Faramir kept his gaze carefully stern and set.

"I forgot to say. You asked us to report any odd or fey-acting creatures. We saw the strangest thing. A largish squirrel or perchance a possum. Up in a tree. Nasty temper like a wolverine, that hissed as we went past. Pale, with great big eyes, but hairless. I have never seen its like."

"Thank you Anborn. Nor have I. Perhaps it will come round again."

The Captain of Ithilien's Rangers did not know how prophetic his words would prove to be.

But one year on the creature did return again. Dragging this time not a broken chain but the twisted strands of fate it tangled on the Weaver's loom.
air the rustling and shuffling of two men rose clearly, heading along the slope and farther south, 
away from Gollum's tree. Two men and no other creature.

All should be well.

Relieved at what he heard, the Ranger turned to ascend again. From out of the corner of his vision 
there came a white flash against soft ruddy brown. A green gloved hand reached down and plucked 
from the loam a white and perfect sprig of niphredil, pressed into the mud by one of Gollum's hasty 
prints.

What was such a fair and delicate flower doing here? So early. High on cool and shrouded slopes, 
long chilled by growing Shadow.

.....As if the very land resists....

Lightened in his heart, Aragorn settled again into the hollow of his post. Up above, the dark shape of 
his quarry was just visible against the reddish-brown and flaking bark. He would give the creature a 
little more time to settle, to fall into an uneasy but desperately needed sleep before he pounced.

Idly the Ranger twirled the delicate harbinger of spring in dirt-stained and roughened fingers. 
Niphredil, small and sweet, was the flower that bloomed first to greet fair Luthien. It also bloomed, a 
gossamer ribbon of white and green, on Cerin Amroth.

Where he and his own Luthien, his Undomiel, had plighted their troth and crushed them underfoot.

He smiled. Perhaps it was a sign.

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It is precious to me though I buy it with great pain…

His heart misgave him to depart the City without taking proper leave of its Lord and Steward but the 
import of the words, just a faded smudge of cerulean blue on yellow parchment, was far too great. 
Isildur long ago had uttered them even as his prize burned upon his finger and set a torment in his 
flesh and his mind.

Precious….

Gandalf shuddered. He had heard another use that adjective about a band of gold. Not in a City built 
for war but in a green and gentle far off land that had no inkling of its peril

For that reason he was in desperate hurry now.

It had taken all his considerable will, bending and twisting words like rings of smoke, to hide his true 
intent. To stop the Gondor's noble Steward from gleaning what drove him to the Archive. The errand 
that had driven him to forsake his friend above the cursed Morgul Vale and come in search of an 
answer at long last.

Denethor, his energy focused towards the gathering dark, cared little at the wizard's stated goal. 
"What matters Mithrandir the early history of the city, its ancient days and its fair beginning? They are 
far less dark than what is to come."

True perhaps but only in the earliest records of the the city from King Meneldil's time could he find a
scroll penned by his uncle, Isildur. As so the wizard had searched, and searched, and searched again.
Lighting candles and his own glows as the early dark of winter's night descended. Hoping against
hope that this time his search would prove more fruitful.

Saruman had seen the scroll. That he knew without a doubt.

It was where the eldest of their order, in truer times, had learned the nature of Isildur's fateful
weregild and all its fellows:

The nine, the seven and the three each had their proper gem, my friend: ruby and adamant,
sapphire and pearl, citrine and emerald. Many designs of surpassing fairness did Celebrimbor
make. But not so the One. Sauron himself made it. Unlike the Elven smiths he cared not for beauty
or delight within this world, left it plain and unadorned. It is by this that we should know it were it
not in Ulmo's keeping now.

Many years and many journeys later Gandalf had learned by hard experience not to trust all that
came from Saruman's polished tongue. The need to know, to be certain, had fueled his errand. The
need to be certain of his memory now drove his errand north.

Already the writing upon it, which at first was as clear as red flame, fadeth and is now only barely to
be read…. maybe were the gold made hot again, the writing would be refreshed….

So now he dearly hoped. That by these words he would learn the truth of Bilbo's ring.

Carefully but in haste Gandalf set the stirrups up and checked his horse's girth. He would ride like
Manwe's strongest wind was upon his tail, breaking only when she could not go on. Ellin, a fine bay
roan with heart to spare, caught something of his excitement and fear. She sidled sideways. Patting
her withers soothingly, he murmured gentle words to settle the skittish horse. Forgive me brave one
but we must away.

A sudden clatter of hooves upon cobblestone told him another was readying to leave. The large grey
charger that appeared was a magnificent mount, bred for war and shod in sharper iron. His rider,
head bent to confer with the shorter groom, spoke quietly Gandalf looked up sharply. It was a voice
he knew. Boromir..Denethor's eldest son.

With the ease of long practise the Captain-General tossed a stirrup over his saddle seat to check the
girth. It was a little loose. "Breigun, you rogue.." he laughed, quickly thumping the war horse on his
barrel. Surprised, the stallion exhaled the extra air he had hastily drawn in and Boromir quickly
tightened the girth another notch.

Ellin shook her head as if abashed, her dark mane tossing and bit jangling in the quiet of the court.
The sudden noise made Boromir look up…

"Mithrandir! Father had not told me you were here…" The stirrups were dropped back as the big
man took up the reins and extended a hand in greeting. "Well met!"

"Well met indeed my Lord." Gandalf shook the proffered hand, set a smile he did not feel on his
weathered face. Any delay felt like a burden.

"Whither are you bound?" asked Boromir, a smile of surprise and pleasure on his handsome face.
Behind him Breigun stamped impatiently. A sparrow hopped about the horse's feet, pecking at the
stray chaff upon the stone.

Caution held the wizard's tongue. Saruman's spies could be anywhere… "Wandering, as always is
my wont." Gandalf replied. "Yourself?"
"To Osgiliath. Back to my men. Will you join me across the Pelennor? Tis a fine day for a ride."

Gandalf hesitated. *And a fine day to make some speed.* But perhaps it would be wisest to not been seen to be in haste. "With pleasure. I will join you to the Great West road."

Soon enough packs were tied onto saddles and the two men made their way down through the City's streets and out the great main gate. They kept a steady trot, past cots and farms, the smallholders taking advantage of the clear, fine weather to mend fences before the calves and kids arrived. Waves and happy greetings followed the Captain-General all along.

"What brought you to the City?" Boromir asked companionably when they had left the last of worked fields behind. Before them lay only wide grass and hard packed earth and in the middle distance the imposing darker stone of the Causeway Forts, the sentinelen at the Pelennor's eastern gate.  

"Lore, the earliest archives of the City's founding."

Boromir, but half in jest, pulled a sour face. "Better you than me, my Lord. Although Faramir would have enjoyed the ancient dust upon his sleeve. It is all of a piece for him. Histor, lands and languages. All the things that put me right to sleep."

Gandalf returned his grin. He would not speak openly of his errand to Boromir or anyone. Denethor most of all must not know what he had sought or that he had found it. The Steward had long ago studied the lore of Gondor with Saruman, enough to know that *something* had been taken from the Enemy's black hand. He wondered what, if anything, the Lord of Gondor had told his sons.

"I am sorry to have missed your brother on this trip. He is well?"

Boromir shrugged expressively. 'As he can be. He and Father have been arguing again about the state of needs in Ithilien."

The wizard searched carefully the young man's face. That very morn he had noted the heavy lines of care about Denethor's brow and mouth, the thinness of his face, the greater streaks of grey within his hair. Something of that tension was reflected in his son: a certain set to his shoulders, a tighter grip on the rein than was strictly necessary. There was, he thought, something more to this than just the challenge of supplying a forward base.

"Your father has ever held Faramir tightly to account. That theatre becomes more fraught." Gandalf glanced sidelong as the younger man, gauging the reaction. Perhaps it would be a relief for him to speak. "The strain and worry I expect make Denethor more short. With everyone."

Boromir, bluff and straightforward as he was, knew when he was being plied. He laughed and ruefully shook his head. "I should never expect to hide from you Mithrandir. Father is a little aggrieved with me, not just my brother." He sighed. "My cousin Elphir has just sired a large and healthy boy, a new heir for Dol Amroth, the next link in the succession. He is, as Father pointed out, younger than both Faramir and I."

Despite the lightness of his words Gandalf could see the discomfort in the man. It had long been a point of consternation. For proud and duty-bound Denethor the continuation of the House of Hurin was paramount. "How he expects Faramir to settle down, cooped up most of the year in one Refuge or another, I will never understand. For myself, I have no wish to marry a woman I do not love. I cannot compel my heart, no matter the censure of my Father."

"Just so, my Lord. A capricious organ but once given, a constant one. You are wise to wait." It was
then that Gandalf noticed the band of black cloth on Boromir's saddle bow, the colour of his shirt. Leyrin. The house of Dol Amroth was still in official mourning for its Princess, succumbed last harvest-time to a wasting sickness. "I had not heard the happy news. Let us hope it lifts all spirits."

After that both men were forced to concentrate, straying from a section of the path washed out by heavy winter rains. Come spring rebuilding of the roads and the Rmmas Echor would proceed apace.

Gandalf gave Eilinn a looser rein, letting her pick her way carefully through the loose rock and mud where a steep bank had been cut. Ahead Boromir's mount moved steadily, with his longer legs easily traversing the higher slope on the far side of the channel.

As the stallion gained the road, by chance the pale winter sun caught the boss of Boromir's round shield and flashed. Almost at once a cold hard finger of sudden doubt snaked along the wizard's spine. The Captain-General turned in the saddle but he could not hear his words…

A bright summer day filled with flashing light as armored men, so many skittles in a children's game, tumble into darkly churning water. Cries of man and beast alike rend the heavy air.

Startled, Gandalf shook his head but the image, the vision, would not clear. Lorien grant me grace. What have I seen?

Ahead in the distance lay the shining ribbon of fair Anduin, blue and placid, seemingly untroubled by any vision of greater woe.

"Is all well?" Boromir asked again, a puzzled frown creasing his fair face.

Finally, Eilinn made the lip and pulled beside, quivering from nose to tail. Fret not dear heart, he thought, this worry is not for you. With an effort Gandalf kept his voice calm as if they were just two travelers keeping easy company.

"Boromir do you swim?" If the son of Gondor was nonplussed by the unexpected question he did not show it.

"Of course."

"And your brother?" He had to ask. Need was a troll that sat upon his chest, pounding at his breath.

"Yes. We played often in Anduin as children, both by the shore and in little boats." A wistful smile softened the lines of strain about slate grey eyes. "I remember my mother playing with Faramir in the sea, teaching him to be easy with the waves."

The pounding eased but the cries of frightened men echoed still, specters in the sunlit air. A kestrel, beloved of Eonwe, his master's herald, hovered on the steady wind, hunting in the grass for the first meadow voles awakened by the warmth.

"That is good."

He knew it to be so, although he had no words for why.
A/N: Thank you so much to the guests and readers who kudo'd. It is so very much appreciated.

Grateful thanks go out to Annafan, Gwynnyd, Thanwen, Artura, and Gythja for their comments/critters on this latest chapter. Particular thanks as always to Wheelrider for her amazing beta skills in the midst of busy life.

Note that I am not quite sure when the next chapter will appear. I am off to the wilds again and won't be online. I aim to be back at it in August but hope it might be worth the wait...the next chapter is 'The Vision of Rivendell'. Happy Summer everyone
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_The Dread Captain shows himself, a feint is blocked, two towers eye each other across the board_

_Norui 19, T.A. 3018_

"Bagginssss?"

The fell sound, a rush of bleak and bitter wind, slithered urgently past lips as bloodless as a worm. One pale and haggard finger, shorn for eternity of its ring, lifted high in query.

Although no mortal creature could see its form, the very sound of its dreadful voice was sufficient unto the evil of the day. Beside the gate Saruman's creations cowered, threw themselves in terror and supplication upon the bare rock bones of Isengard.

Death and decay were the notes that rode the Úlairi's words. Their import chilled the wizard's heart but not the sound. For the barest of moments he smiled. Oh the irony that a King of Men, renowned in long Ages past for the beauty of his singing (but not his mercy and never his munificence) should have in servitude a voice of carrion. It was enough to make one think his rival harboured a sense of humour.

Safe inside the gleaming ebon fastness, Saruman had not expected to entertain such a question at his front gate, still less a retinue of the Nine. So urgent was their errand, so great their Master's fear of Gollum's capture by his enemies, that the Lord of Morgul and six of his fell companions had issued from the Vale. Long had Saruman's own spies watched the Shire. It had never dawned that Sauron would not yet know of it, would not know the name of a small Hobbit he sought for his own ends.

What did the Lord of Morgul really know? Could this too be a feint to test his truthfulness? It would not do to yield the knowledge he had been hoarding: the meaning of the name.

The White Council now knew him to be enemy. Unavoidably, the Dark One now knew him to be at least not friend.

He needed time. To rethink, to plan, now that his prize had flown. Rohan would still fall. It mattered not that Cirdan had withheld what should be his, that the Grey One had power still. He had his rings; skill and wit not granted others of their order.

For a fleeting moment the wizard considered offering up a tidbit. A vision. Rock wall and flickering torchlight. A hobbit and a man. Word of the prize. To the victor go the spoils, but only if one is part of the favored circle.

Yes, that might do. Might do quite nicely. Divert attention and set no small force to the task of attaining what he had sought for years: the death of Denethor's youngest son.

Saruman gathered his robes and paced hurriedly to the balcony, gazed again upon the one before his gate.

The light of Varda's early stars could not touch that which had no earthly form, yet he, born into the early Circles of the World, could perceive what to others was long gone: a pale figure, incongruously robed in white and a high golden crown upon his head. Oh vain had been the Lord of Angmar. It
would be a pleasure to send him on his way.

Even as the wizard took a breath, felt the power to charm the words swell within his breast, he hesitated.

Had he himself not come to doubt the vision?

In long years no word of a hidden refuge had come to him. No image graced the Palantir no matter how assiduously he searched. He dared not have the Dark One think him further false….

Not all visions are true foresight. Lorien plays perchance.

A shaking hand rubbed along his jaw as a coal-black gaze glittered like the stone. What if the dream were true? What if, by some ill-luck, Sauron's minions found the pair? Ever the Ring sought to be reunited with its Master. With a shudder he imagined his disadvantage if that should come to pass.

His best defence must still lie in finding the prize for himself.

The Ring was not yet in the Council's hands. Of that he was quite sure. Though long had he watched Mithrandir where the wizard wandered, no glimmers of power had he used. The Grey One gathered nothing and no one to himself. If he had found the Ring he would not be still wandering, still in tatters, but triumphant, at the head of a mighty army. Awesome and fearsome to behold.

Nay, the wizard did not have it… but what of the vision? There could be only one purpose for which a hobbit kept it hidden, sneaking through the wilds….

The wise considered all possible hidden paths of fate. Should the Dark One lose his power, only one tower then would still stand upon the board…

The wizard's smile was wide. Better to be parsimonious with the truth than outright lie, no matter that he was mightier than the Dread One down below. His reply was short and sufficient to his needs.

The Witch-King and his companions rode in haste away, terror striking wild as the sparks that flew about their horses' heels.

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A flash of sun on steel blinded his opponent for a heartbeat as the older man pushed down his helm. The two circled warily, swords raised, muscles warm below the plates of hammered metal.

Boromir sat on a ruined column and watched intently as Malec, his best lieutenant, took the measure of the new recruit. Around them, sun warmed the grey smooth stone of Ogiliath, lit the shadows of her crumbled colonades, sparkled on the shattered Dome of Stars.

A bout… this was just a bout but one with now deadly earnest. Away across Anduin and her great stone bridge an army gathered. The first scouts had passed word but a day before. Not just Orcs but Easterlings and Haradrim. A force such they had not seen in nigh two hundred years.

Finally! Something would happen. The months of endless talk and still more endless waiting had turned his wits to sap. Boromir needed to move, to do, to lose himself in action before he withered in despair. No more thinking and strategizing. No more boredom and frustration to drive him, maddened like a midge-bit stag, to drown his frustrations at the bottom of a pint.

Fed up with sitting through yet another round of endless bickering, he had fled the council rooms some days before, heedless of the censure on his father's careworn face. It was at the Kine that
Amerith had found him later. The quick one had raised his spirits but more so the news that something could be done.

He had unfortunately not been able to hide from the bright green gaze. To the sound of swords clanging he thought once more on what Amerith had asked. What was he meant for? What would make him happy? To be Steward? To govern a people beset by endless war? Was the right leader born into the right time as the Duchess had opined? Or was it just that the times shaped, will he, nil he, the man to their clawing need?

Always (or nearly so, he thought ruefully, mindful of his single state) he had scrupulously done as asked. With courage. With daring. With all the heart that he could muster.

Bitterly, he felt at the ragged edges of his disquiet. Was it enough? Would it ever be enough? Like a scab that itched, he was drawn again and again, to worry at his father's words. Fool.

Aye, but a fool that his father needed. That Gondor needed ever. What did he need other than to feel oblivion, to forget for a while the hollow ache in the heat of combat or the lush softness of a woman's arms?

He shook his head. The most honest thing that I have ever done is love my brother. His answer to Amerith had been flip, but echoed still, for it had, all unintended, been the truth.

Grateful for the distraction from his thoughts, Boromir turned and watched the bout wind its way to the expected finish. Young Edric was having ever greater difficulty fending off the thrusts by Malec. Grimly, the taller man pressed his advantage, stabbed repeatedly at his too open offhand side until, with a clang, his sword touched the youngster's shining new cuirass.

The small audience cheered and clapped as Edric bowed to his superior. Shaking out his arm to release the pent up tension, the private made his way through the throng to gratefully dunk his dark head in the cool of a water barrel. Boromir watched him go. Had he ever been that young? How many times had he and Faramir squared off, the exuberance of youth long honed to grim determination by the grinding effort of the intervening years?

Of a sudden he could no more stand the wait.

"Edric!"

"Sir?" The smooth, beardless face snapped up, flushed with effort and now hopeful apprehension.

"Your guard is weak on your left side. Do not drop it so very often lad."

"Will you show me?"

"With pleasure." Gondor's best swordsman pulled out his grandsire's fabled blade. Confident in his reach and strength, blessed with speed for one so large, he knew it would not go long. He grinned. "First we spar..and then we will broach a cask of ale."

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Before a battle the waiting was the hardest part.

So it always seemed to Gondor's Captain-General, who had, over the years, formed many habits to soothe his impatient nerves.
Per his routine the late reports had been received from the forward scouts. He had checked the perimeter of East Osgiliath one last time, walked her grand causeway along the river, echoing this night not with lilting strains of lute and viol but with the ring of steel on stone. They had no need for stealthy quiet. The enemy that had swiftly marshalled beyond the verge knew full where they were to be found. Boromir watched for many minutes the efforts of the masons, heartbroken to defile the ancient city's last standing bridge. Though he hoped it would not be needed, that the battle would not come to such desperate straights, he knew full well the exigency of one last obstacle. The enemy must not cross upon the morrow, whatever the cost to the city and its men.

He had then turned back toward the west, stopping on his round to jest or lay a large, strong hand upon a shoulder. Other soldiers were awake and sleepless before the battle. Young and old, the newly anxious and those anxious with other times and other comrades in their mind's eye, waited through the unnatural quiet of this night.

He gave what comfort that he could, bid the night watch well and then retired to his own bunk; to the other habit, the woman who could give him momentary solace.

It was hours later, close to moonset, when Boromir emerged, sought a quiet space in which to think. The barracks, once a grand row of stately townhouses, gave onto a small canal. He strode past the dark liquid ribbon toward a faint patch of green, a little garden, its ruined fountain no longer pouring water from Vana's urn to nurture the stone flowers at her feet.

With a start he saw a shadow, a figure bent, head in hands, beside the Lady's feet. He did not need the moon's last glow to know that pose, the weariness it held.

"Hail little brother." he said quietly, stopping close, not wishing to startle Faramir too badly from his reverie.

Drawing near, Boromir could just make out twin shadows that smudged the pale skin below his brother's light grey eyes. They were not limned by waning Ithil.

"Have you not slept?" he asked, keeping his voice light, calm as if he were but asking for the candlemark. There was something fey to Faramir's pose, something to his stillness he did not like. It was as if, were he to startle too very much, his brother would vanish. Melt into the city's shadows like one of Eldar he so revered.

After a long moment the pale, wan face rose up, mouth quirked slowly to one side. "Who is it tonight? Liriel or Ariel?" His little brother knew full well the elder's battle habits.

"Does it matter?" Boromir grinned and stretched, joints popping, oddly loud in the quiet of the darkened green. "They are both so alike…:"

"You are impossible." His little brother ruefully shook his head. Boromir would never change. It was one of the things he knew his little one loved best about him. He was constant, predictable, certain as the seasons. A contrast to their ever more chancy father.

"Unlike you little brother I am not happy as a hermit. You think too much."

"And you too little." Faramir replied. "It is not simply an itch you scratch with any handy brush. There are hearts and minds involved."

Boromir had ever been quick to insult where his honor was concerned—but after a moment, the sudden flash of anger quickly faded. He should not bait his brother so on something he knew he could not help.
Sitting down on the edge of fountain's lip the older man pulled a chased flask out of his pocket, unscrewed the top, and passed it over. As liquid apologies went it was not the best but it was all he had.

Faramir took a long swig, winced as the second rate brandy burned. Ten years it had been since they had laughed and shared that flask at grandfather's funeral. That was another lifetime. For Boromir that was when the page had turned in earnest, when the endless struggle had begun.

"What makes you think that I am happy?" His brother's voice was low, so low that he almost missed the words, gulping back a raw mouthful of his own.

"What about your duchess, does she not bring you some comfort?"

The black locks waved quickly in denial. "We are just good friends, Boromir, not lovers. You can speak to women, you know, not just bed them. Try it some time, you might find it enlightening."

Brother's normally booming laugh was the barest chuckle, pitched to not carry on the night air "Really? The performance had lasted so long and well I had come to think it no longer fake." He grinned, knowing his brother had never expected him to keep a secret.

"That was rather the point." Faramir grimaced in reply. Surely it was the harshness of the dregs? "It has kept Father off my back and I spend less time with him in the palace when you are not there."

Neither of them commented on the excruciating evenings all together, the grim and brooding silences, how much Denethor had aged in recent months.

"But you are here." he observed, screwing back the flask's silver cap, running his thumb thoughtfully over its band of stars. "and for that I am very grateful."

There was no reply.

Alarmed he looked askance. His brother's gaze was oddly bright. Ripples of moonlight played within the wide dark pools, banded only by the barest edge of grey. He knew that look. It was the one he had seen on many nights when Lorien's touch came to trouble the younger man's rest.

"You dreamed again."

Faramir nodded and looked away. "Yes… I… I heard a voice. And words. They will not leave me be. They…"

Boromir looked with growing dismay upon his brother, disquiet blooming in his chest. Faramir, who if he chose could put a stores order to perfect verse, was struggling to speak. It was if the words caught painfully, yet were so powerful they could not be denied. He was long used to his brother's dreams, so often mostly snatches, indistinct, vanishing with the dawn like so much gossamer. Not this…

Faramir was panting, desperate to force the words out. His soft and lilting baritone was cracked, hoarse as the rasp of a blacksmith's file on iron.

"The sky in the East grows dark. There is thunder and great fear, but in the West, I see a pale light, lingering still. Over all….. a voice. High and urgent, born on wings of need."

Then, at once, as if a dam had burst, words tumbled freely from his brother's lips.

"Seek for the Sword that was broken:
In Imladris it dwells;"
There shall be counsels taken
Stronger than Morgul-spells.
There shall be shown a token
That Doom is near at hand,
For Isildur's Bane shall waken,
And the Halfling forth shall stand."

Faramir shook his head, scrubbed at his eyes as if the words blurred and swam before his sight. Perhaps they did. Boromir caught the gleam, the well of unshed tears. For a moment he was not breathing and neither was Faramir. There was a feeling in his heart much larger than what it could hold inside; it blocked his breath. He hugged his brother; hard. Held on, a living tether to the earth.

"What does it mean? What Bane?" Isildur's Bane had been an Orc's black sword. Did this mean the One who they did not name had some new weapon? A sword? Something fell, against which they could not stand? "Doom. You speak of doom. Is it Gondor's doom that is near at hand?"

"Nay." The questions seemed to shake Faramir out of his trance. The young man ran one thin hand through his dark, sleep-tousled hair. It was a mannerism they both shared: he when he was thinking, his brother when he must not.

"Nay…it does not strike me so. The light is pale but not of moonrise or sunrise. A glow, such as white tree held so told long ago. The voice is clear as if Lorien himself had spoken." Faramir shivered below his warm embrace though the summer's night air was warm. "It is hope. Boromir..it is hope. Urgent aye, but there is balance: bane and its doom, light over all, a token."

The Captain-General shook his head. They were the ones who faced a host upon the morrow. All too soon the streets of the city would ring with the thunder of orc feet, the sound of war, relentless, like some great and evil machine grinding down the once fair colonnades and halls.

Boromir let go and rose unsteadily to his feet. He could think of naught more to explain the words, but they sent a sliver of fear, sharp as a nail, down through his soul. As ever, he hid his dismay in action, reached down a hand to pull his brother up. "Come, you must sleep a bit. Whatever else happens we will speak of this with Father when we may."

When the two fell back to sleep that early morn, flank to flank, like the little boys they had once been, neither dreamed that the foe who should assail them next, who would come in dread and flame upon the morrow, would be so great, so very fell. Nor did they dream that by his defeat they would swim together, one last time, cold Anduin and that by her waters they would be forever sundered.

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Faramir stilled for a longer moment, let the sharpness in his hip subside before he strode, quickly as he dared, through the archive's ancient and usually welcoming front door.

He stepped stiffly but with care, hoping to hide the pain and debility from a schrewd grey gaze. It would not help for Father to think him weak.

Cahil's message to meet his Lord in the library had waited for him in the morning room. For once Faramir had not woken before his brother but found himself breaking his fast alone. He had gulped two cups of scalding tea and a piece of toast, chewed carefully around the split beside his lip. Valar, even now it seemed there was not enough tea to warm him up again, to chase away the shock of the river's icy grip.
It was he knew, the veriest miracle any of them on the bridge had survived. Amidst the flames, the reek, the clamour of the enemy, voice and arrows nearly spent, he had yelled encouragement, given cover to the last exhausted men to cross. Heart in mouth, he had heard the urgent blast of brother’s horn, the deep roiling thunder of the rock as the charges blew, ere the ground gave beneath his feet. Battered and bruised, hip on fire, he had clawed his way onto the muddy river bank and flipped onto his back, coughed out what felt half the river's worth of green, weedy water.

With the profound sense of relief that he had come to expect every one of the past few days, he spied his brother in the room. Too many long anxious moments had passed before he had found the familiar helm, the mark of the Captain-General, not merely bobbing, but moving purposefully amidst the burning wrack. Boromir too had been injured, sported a livid bruise on one side his face and shifted uncomfortably in a low leather chair. Their father did not comment on either son. It was too common an occurrence now to warrant special notice.

His brother was speaking, worrying even now how close they came to utter ruin.

"We were outnumbered. The enemy has swelled her ranks with the Easterlings and Haradrim as I had feared. By Tulkas, we have denied the greater share the crossing, but have paid most dearly for it." Boromir shook his head, wincing at the sudden pain the gesture gave. "I do not understand. The scouts report they have melted away again like so much morning mist. We may have bought some time but surely with so black and fell a captain they will try again."

The Lord and Steward of Gondor leaned across a broad table strewn with papers. The look on his stern and noble face was grim. Clearly he was not happy at his heir's brief and straightforward summation. "I have long known the one of whom you speak gathered all to him in Minas Morgul. This is but a feint, I deem. The Lord of Morgul strove but to test us. He will not be happy with what he has found."

Faramir watched his brother open his mouth to frame a swift retort but then, noticing his brother's stiffened stance, close it up once more, the hard lines of his face softening.

"Good morning, sleepy-head. Are you better today?" he asked worriedly. Faramir had come out of the fray the worse of the two, with one long cut down his flank and hip and too many bruises to count. Varan, the chief healer of the houses, had expressed the opinion it was a miracle there had been nothing broken.

"Yes, thank you brother. Merely stiff and sore is all."

Their father glanced sharply up, took in his youngest's awkward stance and curtly nodded by way of greeting. "You may sit, if you prefer."

Faramir bowed and gratefully but gingerly took a seat, drawn by instinct to peruse the yellowed parchments upon the table. They looked to be old maps and from the earliest days of the kingdom if he were any judge. *Minas Anor* read the fading script beside the slope of Mindolluin. Knowing his father to be of the one of learned men in Minas Tirith Faramir had asked him the meaning of the riddling words. Surely if anyone could make sense of them would be Gondor's Steward, a man who, liked his younger son, had spent many hours in the City's vast and dusty archive, drinking in the lore and history of the land he loved.

"I have gleaned all that I can about your queries, Faramir. All that can be found in the little time to spare." Denethor shoved the sleeves of his sable robe up above his elbows and tapped impatiently at worn folio before him. "There are two swords of great legend that were broken: Turin's and Elendil's. Both broke below them, the one as he slew himself, the other even as he was lost in victory. But Imladris, that was of old the name among the Elves of a northern dale. Where Elrond the
Halfelven, a master of lore and healing, was said to dwell."

Hope surged through Faramir's breast. Surely it was the latter, from a great king of Men, they were meant to seek? "And Isildur's Bane? Do you know aught of that?"

"Some weapon of the Enemy?" Boromir asked, leaning forward now with interest as far as his battered body would allow.

For the barest moment something dark flickered in his father's deep grey gaze. "There are many perils far greater than a weapon." Faramir waited but he did not explain.

It was clear his father knew something more, knew more of it but would not say. His son, with bitter experience of pressing him in this mood of late, forebore to ask. "Are the Halfing's naught but legend?" Faramir asked.

"Nay..." Denethor replied, pulling out a sheaf of coloured plates. "They are a little people. Stout but gentle to all account. At one time they could be found along the marshlands of Anduin, but that was many long years ago, when Dior was Steward of the City."

Faramir smiled. The painting to which his father pointed showed a curious image of a little mannish creature, shorter than a dwarf but with slightly pointed ears and furry feet. Rather incongruous for a symbol of great hope.

"Imladris is not on any map I have searched but it is said to lie o the north and west. It must lie beyond the further reaches of the Greyflood. I note that among the vales of the Bruinen, this one alone is not named."

Denethor tapped near an open space, oddly blank, where many names were shown. That was odd, odd indeed. Faramir peered more closely at the manuscript. Rhudar the land around was called. The name was unfamiliar. 'Remaining East' it meant, if his Sindarin was correct. T'was odd to be so named for a place west of the Misty Mountains. When he mentioned it his father snorted impatiently.

"You are thinking too much of the land today. That name comes from much farther back in the First Age, before the drowning of Beleriand. All that lay beyond the Ered Luin, beyond where now lie the Grey Havens of Mithland, was of the east."

"Then I must seek answers there." Faramir exclaimed, a sense of excitement building in his chest. For what other purpose could this dream have come? It had returned so often it felt urgent, with all the force of a command. "I must seek this sword and counsel as the riddle says." He did not want to think of the implication of his father's words. If the Enemy's attack had been a feint and by it they were already overmatched.... What other hope had they against the force that threatened Gondor now? Boromir's tortured words came back to him from years ago... Orcs..more than there are blades of grass upon the wold..

His father made a quiet noise of disgust, disdain deepening the creases on his brow. " I knew some in this family laboured under disillusion. I was not aware until this moment that illusion was full upon us. You? Searching after fabled elven lords? Mooning after a vision. I thank the Valar I have one son without wool in his head."

Denethor's scorn bit deep. There had been at least one vision he had had that his father had taken for the truth. Before Faramir had a chance to protest, he turned a shocked grey gaze at the sound of his brother's deeper voice.

"Father, give me leave to go."
"You?!" The Lord of Gondor looked up, as surprised as if his son had just announced that he could fly.

"Yea." Boromir replied. "I have had the vision too. It came to me yestereve. The riddle, the summons was the same. I believe that we must heed it."

Swiftly their father's anger fell on what he saw as its source. "The same as your brother? Your rooms must be too close. Now his puerile imaginings are seeping into your mind."

From the firm resolve set upon his eldest's face, it was clear that Denethor's words had little impact. The Steward tried again. "I need you to stay here. To be the Captain-General I have trained you to be. Not off puzzling a riddle, some fantasy of your brother's."

"It is no fantasy." Boromir argued, but his father raised his hand in warning.

"Enough. I have entertained this conversation far too long."

Faramir stood on suddenly shaking legs. He felt as he had in the river some the days before, caught in a current, in an undertow that he could not see but must surely fight.

"You cannot mean to ignore this?" he cried, incredulous. "We must heed it. It could be our only hope. Gondor's need is great…." This was, he knew, something he was meant to do. Not born to it perhaps, but certain none the less. Scribed now inside so hard it was a physical pain to argue more.

"Gondor's need? What do you know of Gondor's need?" Denethor spat. Neither the Steward nor the father suffered to be challenged so. "Once again I see you trust your faulty visions more than your father. If you believe by this heroic quest that you would gain some crumb of my regard, jealous of your brother, seeking to supplant him in my favour, think again!"

"My lord, no!. Not ever…"

Faramir looked up at the hoarse sound that came from across the room. For a second the careful mask on Boromir's face was gone. Below it he was so raw, so hurt and open – like the wounds he'd seen on his own hip, hit by piece of stone as they tumbled down. With a sharp pain in his chest Faramir realised his brother was as much, or maybe more, troubled by the vision than he was. As shocked and grieved by their father's lack of trust. Then the moment passed and Boromir's face was merely grim and set.

Slowly his brother rose, pulled himself up to his full height. "My Lord, you must let me do this. Valour needs first strength and then a weapon. We have sufficient of the first but not the second. If there is something in this vale, some thing that will help us not be over matched..we must seek it, though the way be long and perilous."

The forceful words must have pierced some shell that had enraped his father for at last he hesitated, the hard grey gaze smoldering so darkly surely it must burn a hole in the precious map. "You may be right."

Then, just as swiftly as he had refused, Denethor came to judgement. "Let it be so. Boromir you will depart in two months time. Not before. We need still to marshall the defenses here. It will give you time to collect all that you need and settle orders with your commanders."

"What?! Faramir looked between both men with anger and disbelief. "But I am the one to whom the summons came!" His father would send Boromir before him? The sense of rejection in that moment was so intense it took his breath. Though he knew it to be absurd to feel that way (for did not always Denethor favor Boromi), by its very absurdity it hurt the more.
"Silence!" roared his father. The Steward had made up his mind. He would not suffer to be gainsaid now. "You will obey me in this as in all else. Captain."

The lash of his rank bit hard. What was there now to do but as he was bid?

"I am yours to command my Lord." Faramir answered, the words flat and very hard. His father's gaze lingered for a long minute, taking their measure before he nodded.

They were dismissed. Both men bowed correctly, made to walk stiffly toward the door, but to only one did the Steward offer up his ring to kiss.

Faramir bent, choked on the bile that rose, pressed dry lips to the cool smooth opalescence of the stone. It shimmered, all colours of the rainbow. How could he resent so intently so rare and beautiful a thing?

As they left the audience behind neither man spoke, each lost to their troubled thoughts: the older son of what he had yet to do; the younger of what he had done.

Not for the first did Faramir wonder sadly how many times you must tell a lie before you believe it for yourself?

The months that followed passed in a blur. All too soon Boromir was packed. He had maps and his kit, been instructed well and long in the art of solo trekking by his anxious little brother.

When the last saddle bag was tied securely Boromir looked around the forecourt. There was no big crowd of well-wishers, this was an unofficial mission. He had hugged his father in his study one last time, bid farewell to his lieutenants at the barracks and kissed a blushing Nera as soundly as he dared. All that remained was to take leave of his little brother who stood quietly to one side, smiling his encouragement.

Boromir was not fooled. There was a determined look to Faramir's gaze that gave away how much he hated this, how much he wished that he were the one to go.

There was nothing left to do. "Come here brother..." He reached to grab the slighter man in a bone-crushing hug. His throat had closed. The words he would have said were gone.

Faramir pulled back and roughly cleared his own throat, fingered teasingly the fabric of his sleeve. Boromir had eschewed armour for the lightness of a leather jerkin but not his embroidered shirt.

"I have never seen you look so spare, so lowly in your dress."

He snorted. This from the one who barely noticed what he wore and looked faintly rumpled at the best of times. "Aye well I durst not look too ripe a target on the road. But I am going to meet with an Elven Lord. I need at least to be presentable."

He fingered his silver collar hidden below his shirt. With its moonstone and sigil of the White Tower it should be enough to gain admittance though he carried no papers from the Steward. "Which reminds me." He quickly twisted off the silver moonstone ring of his office and handed it to a startled Faramir. Twin to his collar, it was ancient and like the Steward's ring a symbol of their house. It would be hard to hide.
"Take it and keep it safe." Before the younger man could protest Boromir swung up onto his stallion's back, settled his sword and buckler comfortably. "You shall be a fine Captain-General. By the time I am back Father will not let give it back."

Faramir shooked his head, reached up and clasped his brother's forearm, eyes pleading for but a moment more. "Nay, there is none other to replace you. But I shall do my best."

Boromir kept still, let the weight and warmth of that welcome grip sink in. Found the words that needed to be said. "I need to do this. You must let me. This is something I can do for him."

Faramir nodded and Boromir smiled in grateful thanks. He dared not explain himself the more. The fear he knew these days, the one unleashed by his brother's words, was hard to untangle. There were so many threads: Father's rapid aging and displeasure. The bleak, unending worry in people's eyes. His own duty to be heir, to be Steward himself one day and preside over a proud land's fall. It mattered not which was the keenest, they were all sharp, like shards of glass he could not hope to pull from beneath his skin.

The days' hot, dry wind gusted, snapped at the pennants riding high on the crystal pinnacle of Etchelion's tower. With start, Boromir looked up. The standard of the Stewards, white and unadorned since the days of Meneldil, broke and fluttered from the battlements in the morning breeze.

He remembered. A soft voice from so long ago. Murmured words of comfort. A rasping breath and a gentle hand on sleep-damp locks. The day that is your happiest.

With a gasp, a flash of pure and liquid pain. He knew. The second son was not the only one to have shared his mother's dreams.

Perhaps…perhaps now it would not hurt so very much. Neither of them could please the man their Father had become. It was the veriest relief to stop trying.

Boromir reached down with one great hand and pulled his brother forward, ruffled Faramir's hair as he a done as a boy. Leaned down and planted kiss upon his brow.

His brother smiled at the touch and raised his gentle hand to hold his own. The elder strove to imprint it on his mind: the last smile from his 'little one' he would ever see.

Almost he spoke of it, but he could not. Would not torture his beloved brother so.

He said, at last, only what he needed. 

"I love you little one. Try to take care of Father for me. Don't strangle him."

A laugh lit the light grey eyes but then just as quickly stilled. Faramir was too good at reading him by half, at reading everyone, but even he could not see everything.

Boromir also had a little skill in hiding uncomfortable truths from their all too-knowing father. His elder brother had learned a great many things by dint of time and practice.

Faramir searched anxiously his brother's eyes. "Why, why are you saying this?"

"Someone has to pay my gambling debts."

The laughter broke the tension as he had hoped. Better still it gifted him another of his brother's shining smiles. He drank it in, greedily.
That smile. *You are the best of us. I love you beyond all reasoning.*

Boromir gathered up the reins and wheeled his horse around, looked skyward once again.

He understood: the heights…his happiest day, the ruined city, a faded glory that could not be again.

He knew not how or why, but suddenly his heart felt oddly light. The struggle was being laid down. At that moment he felt it so familiar it was a release as fierce as any he had known.

The path was set. Qalvanda, the Road of Destiny and of Fate. From the first step it led directly and only to Namo's Hall.

*This is my road.*

Boromir spurred his stallion, pressed his knees quickly to his flanks, and did not look back beyond the gate.

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.Minas Tirith, 2987 T.A.

Black hair tousled, a sleepy crease from the pillow on one side of his face, a young Boromir stood, eyes blinking blearily in the wan light of the hallway torch.

Oh my bear… He looked so adorable, so young and vulnerable, Finduilas' arms ached to pull him in and hug but she held them carefully to her side.

A mother's cossetting was not so easily welcomed now he was a lofty ten.

"*Get your hugs in early.*" Her Aunt Ivrenna had had the right of it, the veteran mother of five grown sons. Now well past her chin, her eldest was already tall. Sturdy and strong and so like his grandfather Ecthelion at times it made her wonder what of Dol Amroth she had shared. Even so he had something of Adrahil: a sense of fairness, an unflinching honesty, with himself and others that already made other boys look to him to lead.

"Is Fara well? I heard him cry out." The anxiety in his features made her heart clench a little more. *He had his father's eyes...*

"Yes love..he is. It was just a dream." Just..such a simple word, so inadequate to this instant. She placed a hand to the tired stitch in her side. "Should we get you back? You have practice early in the morning do you not?" Her breath rasped, thin and airy as a ghost. She had talked too much and still had far to walk.

Time.. she had no time. But there in a pair of storm grey eyes was longing, love marked in the still soft face, the fierce proud planes of manhood still years away.

"Would you like me to tuck you in?"

The boy nodded and the hand that reached for hers was warm. Its sure steadiness soothed her faltering heart as together they slipped back into his room.

Boromir climbed back into his bunk and laid his head upon the pillow but did not close his eyes, the crease of worry had not left. "Is Faramir asleep again? Did you sing for him? That usually works."
With a start she wondered: how many nights her eldest had been the one to soothe his little brother while she, exhausted from simply drawing breath, had obliviously slept on?

"No love. I told him a story."

"What story?" Nienna, merciful one. he wanted to know it too. So that he could tell it should the need arise. What could she say that would not frighten even so fierce and bold a warrior as he? They had too few words these days for her to waste them with a lie.

"What I have seen for him my love. A day of pure, bright happiness with his sons and little daughter." Finduilas smiled and wondered fleetingly at the image in her minds eye. Blond. The boys were blond. She did not know from where that colouring should come. Would never know and the knowledge for a moment pierced her heart.

"Oh."

She smiled fondly down at the disappointed frown. Her eldest was that age. Girls and children held no allure for him. Not yet. Wanting nothing more than to see his smile again, she offered another glimpse. "What settled him the best my Bear was the vision I gave of you."

"Me?" Her vision swarm, the smoke from the single candle widened, became hazy in the gloom. Surely there is no harm?

"Triumphant, with your grandfather’s great sword raised high and all around the men shouting your name in jubilation. Osgiliath is yours. It is your greatest victory. The day that is your happiest."

The lad smiled and snuggled down once more beneath the covers. His mother bent swiftly as she could, dropped a gentle kiss on the straight black locks before he could protest the move.

She rose but at the door Finduilas paused; watched the peace of sleep begin to blur his features but not take the gentle smile from off his lips. Holding her skirts in shaking hands, Finduilas began the slow, tortured process of making it back to her own room.

She had not planned to share so much, but his smile, poised on the cusp between boy and man, so like the one that once graced his father’s handsome face, had quirked. He was her blithe and sunny boy. The one so present, so in the moment and untroubled by any eldritch gift.

She never thought that he would come to understand in time what the vision truly meant….

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In a far, fair hall, on the storied loom of time and fate a thread has slipped and come in time will break.

A new thread the Weaver sets upon the weft, bright gold and twinning with another, a double strand, strong as mithril steel. This will not ever break.

That night for the first time in many days Faramir slept and did not dream of Rivendell.

He slept and dreamed instead of a woman.

Her hair was golden and her hands were white. Small, yet strong, with fingers cold and tipped by
silver frost. Her words formed hard and jagged angles upon the air. A shield, a bulwark for the trembling spirit that lay behind.

He offered his own hands such as they were: wrists raw from the scrape of iron, skin dry as paper, alive with flames that licked but did not burn.

Bound by duty, held fast within the flame, he forced words past lips become cracked and parched with heat.

"Take my heart and I will lay down my weapons. Break my shackles and set me free."

She reached. The touch of her biting, bitter rime was cool. Welcome as a scented cloth upon a fevered brow.

The Weaver smiled, sent the weft of moon and sun threading lightly across her loom.

They each shall assuage the other.

Chapter End Notes

I have taken a little liberty with canon timelines..compressed a bit the likely time between the first vision and when Boromir had his. And deliberately I have shied away from the 'how' of the breaking of the bridge. I picture mini black powder charges blowing up the arch keystones and perhaps a bit of Numenorian magic.

As ever grateful thanks to Annafan, Wheelrider, Thanwen and Klose for their encouragement, very helpful suggestions and wrangling my verb tenses into shape
A/N: We have reached the point in the timeline of events where this chapter inevitably deals with the death of two major characters.

In which two Captains are sacrificed and the black bishop is checked.

February, T.A. 3019

Rain fell in hard sheeting sprays. The drops pelted on his face and trickled down his neck, soaked the bright gold hair not covered by the helm. It washed the dirt from his clean shaven cheek, so much that oddly all around him smelled fresh: there was no tang of blood, no stench of Orc. As if he were just out for a moment's quiet ride on a bright spring day and had decided to lay down, to feel for himself the earth below burgeoning with new life.

There was in truth, some pain. Two arrows, both through the gut; not so very hard so long as he did not move, for even at close range, meaning to destroy the Prince of the 'Tarks', the swarming Uruk-hai had been lousy shots. Once their target had been taken down they had retreated, mistaken, thinking him well and truly dead.

Not yet you vile and rapacious traitor.

He cursed the Wizard long and well. It was little reassurance to have been right, to have discerned where Saruman would attack for in the end he was not right enough. Not one, but two armies had issued from Isengard.

Eomer must know.

Dizzy and oddly numb, Theodred, simply lay and focused on each breath. He had no thought to try to stand. His fingers would not obey and he could not make them move, still less his legs and feet.

From far away there came a high and ringing peal: clear and true, but dim. Was that a horn? Surely it was not the raucous blast of the Uruk-hai but their own battle-call? Could it be but a trick of the rushing in his hearing? Of the tide of life beating ever more slowly in his blood?

It came again. Less faint this time, a double note. Elfhelm! Oh Bema it was Elfhelm's call and with it he heard the words: Eorlingas!

He could not see but felt the thunder through the sand of the river's small eyot. With a great wrenching, wavering cry of fear the army of Isengard turned on the shore to face their newfound foes.
Stout hearts! May they prevail. He steeled himself for the crash of steel and horse and blade. It came, rumbled through his chest, but just as quickly dimmed. The harsh sounds of battle, the ugly snarls and shouts, the clang of blade and the screams of man and horse receded. Once again all beside was quiet, but for the groans of wounded men and the soft patter of the rain.

Theodred closed his eyes and imagined the pain away.

He must have drifted then for a time for the next sound he heard was a hoarse gasp and an urgent, ragged cry.

"My Prince! Marshal! Marshal over here!"

There came a pounding and the bright eyes of a young Rider were replaced by the grizzled features of an older man. He was weeping. The tracks of tears made silver rivulets through the grime as surely as the rain.

"My Prince…Theodred." Elfhelm's words were choked, his voice spent from the cry of battle and dismay at what he saw.

Do not worry, he wished to say. It was just a pair of crude-made, black Orc arrows. Not so very terrible.

And at times he did not feel a thing.

"Elfhelm," Theodred whispered, coughing a little as his breath would not catch. "Your timing has always been terrible. You missed the worst of the fight."

The weatherbeaten features spread into a grin and then another face swam into view: the long chin and clear blue gaze of his stoutest captain. "Grimbold."

There was an ugly gash upon the mud-splattered cheek but he was safe. "Do not speak my Prince, save your breath. Praise Este, we had thought you dead."

"The filth?" he asked, desperate to know were the people safe? His heart quavered at the thought of the stinking host pillaging the fair golden fields of West Emnet.

It was Elfhelm who replied. "They have retreated to the north. We drove them back, though they could have had the day had they pressed harder here." Both men exchanged a look of puzzlement. Retreated? And in good order? It seemed the Wizard's goal was not invasion. At least not yet.

He tried to say this but his breath would not behave.

Grimbold patted soothingly at his arm. "Do not fret, my lord. For now, we must get you off this island." Strong arms reached down to raise him up. "On three. Ān, Tpegaen, Þrēo."

He could not bite back the cry as white hot agony pierced through his very core.

"Sweet Eru, he is pinned!" Grimbold blanched and quickly laid him down again.

The Marshal swore low and long, turned to shout an order to ring of men standing sentinel silently beside. "Quickly! Get me a dirk!"

Bema did they not know how much it hurt? Theodred panted, wild with the pain, and batted weakly at an arm.

"No more, old friend." His voice shook in his own ears. "Let me lie here - to keep the Fords 'till
Eomer comes...

A large hand, slick with sweat and blood, carefully pulled off his helm and stroked the soaked, matted hair from off his face. "Lie still, my Prince. Do not move. We will free you as quickly as we can."

_Free_. Yes he wished to be free. Not tied to the land he fought to protect so very long.

_I tried. Father, Wyn, I tried._ The words were too faint. They came out as a trembling breath and none could hear. Perhaps it did not matter. They knew he loved them. Knew he had given his heart and soul and, eventually, all would be well. Eomer would come.

He would be sad to miss the look on the Worm's putrid face when he learned his master had not won the day.

They raised his torso once again and a cry tore from his throat. _Bema, such torture._ The pain as the arrows slid took all his breath but then in their wake there came a lightness. A blessed sense of relief.

In Elfhelm's hand a dagger shone with single drop of blood. He watched it fall; to nurture the soil and bless the land.

It drizzled harder.

At first the holes filled with a great aching emptiness. He had expected it but not the chill, the sense of fading warmth that set him shivering. His vision swam. He felt cool and wet and light, as if he were spray upon the foaming falls that ran down from Halifirien.

He blinked the wet out of his eyes. Another knelt in the driving rain. His grim Captain brushed aside a wet lock that had plastered to his cheeks, oblivious. How could he not see?

The newcomer was arrayed in silver mail. His shining helm was crowned by two great horns and in his hand was a silver bow. Liquid eyes, full of the moon's soft light, shone as pure argent as his silver hair.

"Come Theodred, son of Theoden, son of Thengel." The words were low, the voice fair as the brightest glade, rich as a stag's deep bell. "There are months yet to come and hard times yet to be, before the end. War is loosed upon the land. There can be no feasting now but you need not fear. My master has bade me set you safely on your road. _Namo_ awaits to feast you in his halls."

The figure bent, cradled the prince in his sinewed arms and raised him up lightly as a feather. Theodred gripped the silver mail. It was warm and a moon-kissed light seeped through.

He could not have said quite how, but all at once, he _knew_. Tilion. The Shining One. Herald of the Hunter, of Bema himself, had come for him.

_Oh but these were days indeed of wonder._

The Maia smiled his encouragement, placed a gentle kiss of benediction upon his brow. Silver light like gossamer ran down and filled his veins. Its warmth and strength chased away the aching pain and emptiness…

The Prince of the Mark smiled and closed his eyes.
As the hall of Meduseld glowed golden in the setting sun the fire of Anor's lingering swept down from burnished eaves to play, to scribe a bright checkerboard on the rune-filled stones culled from the gentle hills.

About the tables the folk of Edoras sat at meat. One who sat white-clad glowed golden as the sun. Her hair burned bright as late summer-corn. Her heart inside burned bright with rage and pain.

Two letters twisted within Eowyn's small, strong hands.

The first to come, from her brother to the east, had been grief enough.

"Wyn my scouts have warned that a host, branded by the wizard's hand, gathers upon the Eastern Wall. Emyn Muil has hidden them for long but now they move. This is grievous news indeed and I fear, as Theodred long has, that Orthanc allies herself with Barad-dur. We ready ourselves for battle. I have sent the herds and folk to Edoras. Guard them well. They are my charge and you will know best to succor them."

The other, in Elfhelm's ragged script, the scrawl of one who learned to write but late in life, had been the greater blow.

"Fair lady I have but little time to write but fear how ill news needs but idle tongues to fly faster than a steed. I would not have you learn the evil news that way. Bema grant him peace. Your cousin fell this day."

The pain of it. That he had no mother to wash his broken body. No barrow in the line of Kings. No funeral feast with song and horns of heavy mead.

One by one the silent tears had stained the page. Tucked inside had been another for Godwyn and Malina, Theodred's concubine and daughter. The rain-creased pages were still here, still held at Meduseld, as was, to her dismay, another for her brother.

The messenger had come but not Elfhelm nor Grimbold. They might have acted but the young Rider was not so bold. While she had implored him go east to Eomer, her uncle sat, hesistent and silent, shrinking with grief before her very eyes. Grima beside shook and moaned extravagantly at the tragic news, flailing like a willow in a storm.

That had been nigh a day ago and still her brother did not know his beloved cousin, the bright lodestone of their days, was dead.

"Sister-Daughter."

Her uncle's quavering voice made her look up at last. About the hall the Riders sat, hands on horns, ready to make a toast. Their golden hair lay braided on their shoulders. The golden beards their Prince had eschewed shone just as bright.

"Sire."

Theoden turned kindly eyes upon her. "Would you prefer to be excused?"
With a pang she understood what he meant. The insult. That he, so frail, so bent with age that he seemed almost as a dwarf would think her weak, too cowed by grief to sing. It made her blood roar but then she looked upon the guileless shadowed face, on the snow-white braids held by a thin golden band and held her tongue.

He, shorn of wife and son too soon, deserved more than the sharpness of her tongue.

"No, thank you, my Lord. I will abide." Eowyn sat straighter then, reached as steadily as she was able for her silver cup.

At his liege's nod away beside the great long hearth the *scop* plucked three somber notes upon his *crwth*. Almost, in the hushed expectant silence, one could hear a single indrawn breath and then, the music, as dozens of voices rose in song. It was strong and deep, swelled in the cadence of the words. They wound upward with the crackling fire's smoke to twine around the carven golden pillars and waft outward to the sky.

They sang. Not what should have been; not a new song for his bright self, his courage and his fire. Not proud words for all his days and glories that should have been, nor teasing rhymes for his temper and his beardless face. They sang the formal lament for any fallen warrior. Nameless. Soulless. Less than a Prince of the Mark deserved.

The words, mouthed well by rote, shamed her lips as they slipped past.

A muffled sob made her look down the room. There sat Grima, cheeks shining with two wet tracks that reflected the ruddy glow of torchlight.

Like a torch, she burned.

The Worm's lizard tears made her angrier than any other single thing that he had done.

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He lay, still.

More to save his failing breath than to avoid the jostling of the shafts. The pain was an animal that clawed rabidly at his chest. It would not let go but it was truly as nothing next to the anguish that clawed hungrily at his heart.

What had he done?

*Forgive me, Great One. I did not see.*

No tears. Truly he must not. He had too little time and all too little breath for that.

*Oh my Brother.* Faramir's pained, weary face at Osgiliath swam before his eyes and then another: wizened, red and tiny, sheltered in their mother's arm. It was sharper than he had thought, now at the test to leave him. To leave the father he could not please and the people he could not protect.

*I have failed. Even when I thought to do but one selfless thing.*
Perhaps then it was fitting to be alone, here where the tree's great roots cradled him at last.

There came a rustle, a sound of running steps and then he was there.

Aragorn's familiar grim countenance appeared, streaked with grime and blood, lined anew with grief and care. "Boromir."

They spoke a little. A few words of fiercest need but his time had come and his shallow rasps could not encompass all he had to say. A face of grace and love filled all his fading sight, as words of shining promise filled his troubled mind.

When gentle hands reached down to heal, to take away the pain, all unknowing they brought with them something more.

* A wound is the place where the light can enter… 

Hope, sharper and more piercing than any arrow shaft, ran in. It filled him. Suffused his very soul and washed clean the dark stain of despair.

Ai..the fierce ache of it. To be filled after so very long. To be warm and replete where before he had been a chill and empty vale. It was almost more than he could bear.

A sigh of purest joy took all his breath.

He smiled. Looked with wonder on the gaze of the man he would have followed all of his days. Who knew that a heart when full could welcome more?

At last, at peace, he laid his lashes down.

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Anduin was a river of many moods.

In the north she ran low and slow: her fenlands and broad meads let the ever-streaming water glide languidly, untroubled by her flood. Farther south, at the once-fair City that strode her narrowed banks, the water swelled her unquiet breast and cut the verge more sharply back. It was there, where the water's rush made a straight and roiling course, that the greatest danger lay, where much could be hidden upon the troubled water.

The Steward, prudently, set men to watch.

Upon this night, a young pale moon shone down upon the river's whirling eddies. It was late winter yet. The wind was from the north: its dry, cool gusts set the sad reeds to rustling and lifted the black locks and cape of the young captain who stood watch beside the colonnade.

He shifted, uncomfortably, pulled the cloak more tightly about his shoulders. Somehow the blackened stone and the ruins of the bridge had made Faramir ill at ease, made his thoughts turn unceasingly to the brother he sorely missed.

Most times, all he needed was to bring to mind Boromir's blazing smile and his mood would lift. But not tonight. He felt restless, untethered, as if some ill was yet to come and he could not hold it back.
Heart shying from the spaces they had walked, he picked his way farther down past broken stone, seeking something green and comforting, some space that could assuage.

Once upon the river bank Faramir nodded to the other guard, waved to Terrell farther down and peered silently across to the dark brooding stands of ilex and laurel upon the farther shore.

Ungoverned, the forest was slowly making the city green again, devouring each stone inch by inch, spreading Yavanna's glossy cloak across the fading works of Men. It made all too good a screen for the Enemy, but this night, at least to his eye, nothing moved. The world and all within it slept. He should be pleased, yet somehow the young man could not shake the sense of heaviness. The moon was high and bright yet the air felt close and thick, as if a sudden storm was yet to break.

It was when he knelt to cup his hands and drink that he heard the sound. Clear and high, from the north it came: faint as but an echo in the mind. Three peals, clarion and rolling sharply with a note of urgency.

He turned toward the sound. The rising breeze brushed his cheeks and dried the damp of tears he had not felt.

Faramir's dreams those days had been formless, ever shifting, as if the very warp and weft of fate was skeining and unskeining day to day. This had been oddly comforting: that all was not yet set, not lost. To be taken now, high moon above, by a dream so sharp and bright, mute witness, was more frightening than any shadow, any vision of an enemy.

Suspended in the dream-crossed twilight between the birth and dying of the day, the vision held him fast. Beside the night-kissed river Varda's stars glimmered on the foam. Silver as the precious dew from Telperion they glimmered also in the tears that could not fall. Pain choked his breast as images rushed full on to his sight.

A boat, high-prowed and shining white. A beloved face, pain-filled and weary. Blood gathered in his mouth and on his collar. Breath rasping. Stolen. A fading gaze filled with love and reverence, blazing once like a meteor and then falling- still.

He knew it deep inside: a tide had turned. This was an alteration in the flowing of his life. The river that churned within him had suddenly burst its banks and was diverted: for so long it had flowed to the east but now it rushed toward the sea. With him.

Somehow he was on his knees and the night's rising dew had soaked through his breeches. The cool of it brought him to himself. Desperately Faramir shook his head, trying to dislodge the vision but there was no denying. It burned, took all his sight: but then, a sound.

First came a voice that he did not know. It spoke of honour kept and brave deeds done, of hope and strength and peace. It made his heart yearn to follow, not south where his soul now speed, crying for what it saw and what it missed, but some other where. North, south, east or west. Where ever this man should go, his heart was his.

Then, above all came the voice he knew. His brother. Clear as the ring of a fabled horn, speaking the words that he would hear always in the quiet spaces of the night…

Do not grieve for me, little one. I shall be always with you. Always near. Under your soles. In the bracken. In the stone. I am Gondor.
It would be said in later years, when history had time to reflect, that they were much alike the two Captains lost that day.

Bold and blithe, full of heart and merriness, two of the same summers on Arda's turf; there were many who saw that the Son of Gondor was more like to the Prince of the Mark than his own stern and grave-faced people. Proud. Indomitable. Neither pleasing a father much changed by time.

Two horns were blown and both were sacrificed: to the yawning need of a Wizard's prideful greed, to the greater, deeper, darker desire of the Wizard's Lord.

One was barrowed and one not.

For both, comrades raised their voices in song. Amidst the sharper, piercing grief of a brother and one like a brother, there were memories, and smile, and tears.

It was one of the mysteries of Yavanna's grace that ever after symbelmynë grew where both Captains fell. For Ages more, like countless snow-white stars it blazed upon the eyot and underneath the tree, blessed by the rays of westering sun that fell full and warm in the heady afternoons of lasting peace.

Both found hope, like a petal, is a fragile thing. In both, almost at the last, it managed to take root.

Chapter End Notes

A/N:
I first came across the idea that simbelmynë grew below Boromir's tree in Cruisedirector's wonderful "Middle-Earth in Brief." That idea is reproduced, and expanded on, here with her permission.

Note that for the purpose of Faramir's premonition I have shifted the time of his hearing of the horn to eve.. just perhaps it took the sound a fair while to pass about the land. I have also changed the mode of Theod'red's death to arrows for the obvious parallels with Boromir

I am pleasantly shocked to find there are only four more chapters to go before the Houses of Healing. Time will slow down then and we will go one chapter a day between the Battle of the Pelennor and 'the kiss on the walls'. I am v excited to get there. After the emotional density of this chapter and the next few I think I need a little romance to write :)

Thank you to Caroline and cloudyhead for their reviews and all who kudo'd. It is so very much appreciated.

Grateful thanks go out once again to the ladies of the Garden for helpful niggles, discussions and encouragement. Thanks to Annafan, Artura, Gwynnyd and Thanwen in particular this month.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Eowyn's thoughts after Theoden speaks are precis'd from the original in the Two Towers. I always hated that Theoden and Eomer passed the fords and no one mentioned Theodred in the book...

Sorry for the slow update this month..RL has been rather fraught of late. The next will be much quicker

Comments and critters by Annafan and Thanwen this month were very helpful and gratefully appreciated. As always the remaining sloppy punctuation and typos are my own

Chapter 19: T.A. 3019, Nínui 27-30

Retreat, regroup, pawns can take but one single step

'Farewell sister-daughter!' said Theoden, pausing upon the stair's top step. 'Dark is the hour, yet maybe we shall return to the Golden Hall."

'Dark indeed' thought Éowyn, standing before its great carven doors, sword upright and hands were laid upon the hilt, 'for I shall endure a year for every lingering day minding those who shelter while you fight."

The maiden did not speak her thoughts aloud. She had her pride, but even as she nodded and lifted her chin high her gaze followed the men who rushed down the many steps after their new-born King.

Aragorn alone of them looked back as they neared the gate and she trembled as a tall thin birch quaking in the wind.

Oh faithless, foolish heart. She was no blushing, simpering maid to sing like a harp for just a smile. And yet…there was still something to be done.

As the young woman rushed down the stair the mail of her corselet flashed and the bright gold of her flaxen hair flashed even brighter.

The host had assembled below the steps of Meduseld. The horses were ready: buckles worked to strap on packs, shields and spears slung behind. She pushed through the throng and found the bright blond horsetail easily enough.

Eomer stood ready to mount with the dwarf and the elven prince beside him. Firefoot's reins were held loosely in his hands and the dwarf was frowning mightily. From the look on the small warrior's face he did not seem best pleased with the thought of riding.

Heedless of the interruption she strode quickly to her brother's side and placed a hand upon his heavy gauntlet. "Eomer…we must speak."
"Wyn!" He looked surprised. "What are you doing here? We are set and about to ride."

At the look of grim entreaty upon her face Gimli and Legolas moved away. "Please, I would you grant me a small boon."

The shining helm and horsetail bent as the Marshal checked the tightness of the girth one last time. The big grey danced in excited agitation. A large mailed hand patted lightly at his neck. "Make haste sister dear. I have deeds to do."

At his brusque words the fury that she would be left while they marched away once more welled up. What was Éowyn, daughter of Eomund, good for but to organize the hurried retreat of the people? The ignominy of it burned.

Eomer must have seen the flash of anger in her steel grey eyes for all at once her brother's frown line softened. "Éowyn, is all well with you ..? "

She shook off his cautious hand. "I am ready to do my duty just as you." For a moment she paused, let the anger drain away. If she riled his temper he would leave without hearing and the words had simply to be said. "Greyhame spoke of Isengard…"

"Aye." Eomer blinked in surprise. "But it will be a long way ere we come to battle there. First we must go west for many days. It is not certain what first we must confront."

"You go to Helm's Deep first?" At his quick nod she took the letters from her pocket and a heavy golden torc from off her arm. The time for fear had past. Grima had been a magpie like his master and many things were found that had been missed.

"Find Godwyn and Malina. Give them these." The coolness of her regard wavered for just an instat.. "As Theodred would have done."

Her brother's mouth was set but the face of readiness softened at her words. He doffed his helm, held it tight under his arm. The blue-grey eyes so alike to hers beheld her with a aching sadness. He reached and took her cool fingers in his larger ones.

"You shame me sister by the gentleness of your words. All my thoughts are on the looming dark, the battle that is to come." She watched him swallow hard around a sudden lump in his throat. "I too miss him when I dare to look. There will, I hope, be time yet to do him proper honour."

He bent his forehead down to rest gently against her own. His battle-braided hair brushed across her cheek. Oh brother.

"Not shame" she whispered low. "I know it is in your heart where it beats as faithfully as mine." Before she could lose her courage Éowyn pulled out her dagger. The one that would never now be drawn against a man with heavy-lidded eyes.

"If you pass the Fords when you come to Isengard, will you lay this there? As offering for his rest?"

His fair features creased. 'Nay it was for you…to keep you safe." He did not say but both heard the phrase… you may yet need it…

Seeing the fleeting pain upon her face, Eomer dropped her hand and reached across to unstrap a saddle bag. He slipped in the torc and parchment, took out a small golden clasp. Several others were wound about his battle-braids, but none so fine as this. "He gifted me this in Dol Amroth, 'Wyn. Shall I lay it there?"
She nodded, heart so full she dared not speak. Carefully, Eomer buckled the strap closed once more and pressed a quick kiss upon her brow. "Be well and do not fear. I vow I will do him honour as we pass."

It would be enough. Éowyn stepped back and settled her shoulders straight again while Eomer quickly swung up into the saddle. "Farewell my Lady." The dwarf saluted smartly as he was pulled up behind.

With the barest press to Firefoot's gleaming flanks the pair moved beside the Elf who sat bareback on his own light and restive mount. For the briefest moment Éowyn looked to his distaff side. The Dunadan, relaxed and ready on his great grey, caught her gaze and inclined his head.

Farewell.

Her heart thudded painfully in her chest but she kept her smile just as correct as his. All at once the lady turned and paced with as much dignity as she could muster up to the long stone flight and to the terrace beyond the gates.

With the sound of high clear horns the host moved out.

Far over the plain Éowyn watched the glitter of their spears. She stood still, alone before the doors of the silent house, a statue of white and wheaten-gold. None could tell the tenor of her thoughts. A daughter of Eorl, just as a son, does not lightly show her hurt.

When the sun no longer struck flashes from the shield-backs of the last eored, she turned with a quiet sigh. Made ready to prepare an orderly removal to her exile.

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The lady hastened, picked up her skirts to tread more quickly across the cobblestones and bit her lip, tried not to let clamouring dismay, the raw emotion of the crowd slow her down. She had to get to him. Much of the City was on the move and twice she had to shoulder aside a black-livered monolith who blocked her path.

My pardon, Duchess, I did not see you there.

No, no they did not. No blue-clad guard of Lebinnin cleared the way. She wore no rings. No hairpiece sparkled in the watery morning sun. This had not been exactly official business and she had wanted to be at least discrete.

Shaking her head at her own carelessness, she tried not to see: the pinched faces on the women, grim and worried expressions on the men.

Word had spread like wildfire. Damn the young stablehand who saw her precious cargo, too smart by half, and understanding what it meant. Ridiculous of her to have thought any man of Gondor could have kept such news to himself. Damn to Angbad her own carelessness. The city, dessicated by lack of news, tense and watchfully uneasy these days at the best of times, had positively leapt alight: the news had run, faster than any mounted messenger from the sixth down to the first even as Cahil was announcing her unexpected audience. Damn.

Guards clustered in the doorways of the Citadel as she passed. Some whispered, some wiped hastily
at their cheeks. The worry that had clutched the city now blossomed, became a dark-bloomed, twining vine of outright fear. *Lord Boromir is gone.*

Any hope to control the spread was lost and with it the chance to assuage the blow.

Amerith hurried on.

She had until that very moment held straight and strong. Through all their talk, the first debrief, the nightmare of the last day. But now, passing his door with the sound of muffled weeping from the servant's corridor still strong in mind, it more than she could bear. If her steps were yet uneven of course it was just the speed. Not her sight veiled by a sudden stream of tears.

In public the Duchess of Lossarnach did not cry.

She turned a final corner and all at once Faramir's door was there. Their rooms were not side-by-side, some accident of available space as young boys grew she supposed, but still she could have found him blindfolded, the intensity of grief that leaked out into the hall was nigh a signal beacon. It pulled her on, filled all her mind until she simply had to be there.

At the simple oaken door she paused. Trembling fingers traced the rough tengwar rune cut into its face. 'F' for Faramir. A little boy must have carved it long ago. 'F' for Faramir but with a shiver Amerith realized also 'F' for Finduilas. She was not sure she would have had the courage to bring her news to the woman who had borne that sunny boy. It seemed a mercy that his mother did not have to know.

*But the father did...* Unbidden, an image of dark sleeves like wings arose. *Oh Denethor.*

Though she and the Steward were more at odds again (when were they ever not these days?) she had found both men in Denethor's study bent over a great map of Gondor. Carven pieces were being moved to and fro and her heart had had to lurch at the sudden thought: *they are my men and pawns just as surely as his sons.*

She had watched Denethor's lined, aged fingers fly across the board for a longer moment before she had cleared her throat. The son looked up and she could see.

The emptiness of wide world was etched in every sinew, every muscle of the tense figure who stood calmly discussing the disposition of their strength as if the world had not just split asunder. Somehow he knew. She had searched the beloved, familiar face intently, striving to understand, trying to not let her falling words flay the Father harder than necessity.

*It had been futile.*

At her knock the door opened and swung away, a shadow of a man drifting slowly backward. Faramir's mud-splattered leather jerkin lay haphazardly on the floor, the ties of his linen shirt were undone. His feet were bare and long hair loose, the ends ragged as if some one had barbered them with a dagger. It occurred to her they probably had.

Through the stubble his face, as ever, looked so young but when she found the courage to hold his red-rimmed gaze his eyes were older than she had ever seen.

He was startled and surprised to find he had a visitor. Perhaps he had thought it would be Denethor, but… no. They both knew that he would never come.

She had flinched and had to look away.
It was something Amerith had never done, visit his rooms, and so she took refuge in pointless nosiness. The space was just as she expected. Cluttered. Full of curiosity and enthusiasm. Every surface laid with parchment, cups and quills, poems and books in not one but two full bookcases. A feadan and sheets upon a music stand. And in the corner a battered hobby horse.

The careless and careful collection of a lifetime. So much of him and yet not one piece of it was what he needed in that moment.

Her heart lurched. "Oh love…I—I am so sorry for the news I bore." She found, surprisingly, it did not make her any happier that the word had come from her.

He looked…lost.

Arms ached to hug the little boy but this was a man who stood, bow-shaped mouth quirking with the barest semblance of his better self. "My brother always said I had no sense of timing. I thought I brought new tidings but Lady your network made it quickly moot…"

His laugh was short, bitter as vinegar and just as sharp. Something of it, hard and unyielding, was akin to the sound Denethor had made. Iron will it seemed could clamp securely on a maelstrom of shock and love and fear. Who knew it would make a sound like nails upon a broken slate.

"How did you know?"

Faramir turned, knelt and with shaking hands took a fagot from the hearth. The room was cold: the fire had not been lit. They had not expected him to ride in that morn.

As he struck a light and coaxed the wood to catch she saw what to the Father had been veiled. He had ridden, heart heavy with grief and fear, the sound of a ringing horn pursuing him down every mile.

"I saw him…the only thing I missed was his horn."

Oh dear heart.

It was a new feeling these days for the son to pity the father. The grief would be all the sharper for that he had not had the comfort of a vision.

"I tried to tell him but he brooks no tales of dreams these days."

The rising flames cast odd shadows about Faramir's face, made the charcoal smudges below his eyes darker still. "He would not willingly give it up."

"No."

"It was his most precious talisman…"

Next to you…

She could not say the words aloud but he heard. Amerith felt the brief bloom of happiness in his chest and watched his features fall.

Morgoth take propriety. In four quick strides she had crossed the deep red carpet and gathered the breaking pieces in her arms, put up both hands to hold the fair exhausted face. He shook with the overwhelming weight but still the damn did not burst.

Damn Denethor. It should be him comforting his boy. She knew he could do it. Had even seen it
once, so very long ago. A garden party, Finduilas taken to her sickbed, skinned knees and a wail that brought young Boromir running fast across the terrace. For once not needed. The father held the boy and hugged, murmured soothing words (no kiss better..no never that) and dried the tears.

Now the gulf was as wide as it had ever been. She had tried to tell him once. The why. That when you are so far shorn of what you need there is less energy left to do what must be done. Boromir was simply easier for their Father to love…not better, not more loveable, just easy.

None of it helped the hurt right now, breached the wall between them. She hung on, hands now around his waist. The stillness was too great, the dam had not burst. This was but a minor rush before the flood. He could not let go and do what yet must be done.

It broke her heart.

Warmth and need seeped through his shirt. She forced the ghost back down and hugged him harder. That door was long closed and whatever he had thought, it was not the best for either of them, to love or be a ghost. Now, when she would give her right arm to see him whole she knew she would give the left to see him love, truly, deeply as was in his nature. Nienna, in your mercy let that day come.

The shaking had stopped and now a muscle worked high upon Faramir's cheek. She stepped back and gave him space to speak.

He took a breath and like a little boy wiped the salty-wet across his sleeve. "The other half?"

"We shall find it, do not fear.. I have men scouring length and breadth Anduin for news. It will be found."

That brought a spate of words tumbling. Remember his wild stories of its origin… An ancient thing from Volondil's time and still he would joke…wrestling a beast with his bare hands, carving tengwar that he could always barely read.

The smile was forced and sad. All at once, the soldier came back, fingered the Captain-General's ring upon the chain around his neck. "We must send hawks out to call up the fiefs. To tell Uncle of the news."

"What will you do?" she asked.

"Go back to Ithilien." he replied. "It is clear a new stage is set. Too many of the Enemy are gathering for just a feint."

She did not say it. It is your responsibility to be Captain-General now. "Who commands Osgiliath?"

"Torin. He knows the men." The veteran was Boromir's First Captain, a worthy man but not a general. Not him. "We must stop them mustering at all costs."

She nodded, watched Faramir retrieved his discarded sword belt from the floor and sat wearily on the bed. Grief had drained him. He had to try three times before the buckle's prong would slip through the belt's customary hole.

"Will you not come? To the house at least. Your rooms will be warmer there."

"No." Faramir shook his head. It would be both a pain and benediction to near his brother's room right now and there was much he had to do.
"If you need...." Anything...

He smiled weakly to show his thanks. They both knew she was expert at carrying a flame of memory down through the many years. There would be time to help if they made it beyond the storm.

Amerith bent, left the barest kiss upon his brow, let him lie back and hold what he could together.

She closed the door. Left a piece of her heart behind in case the darkness, the sadness and the sweetness became too much.

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"My Lord...Is there anything you need?"

Still and silent, shadowed by the deep embrasure, Denethor touched the cool glass pane but gave no other outward sign that he had heard. Outside, the whirling wind scattered the winter-fallen leaves. It matched his frantic thoughts, the storm of emotion that swelled inside.

And must be contained at all costs.

Cahill, long used to waiting on his lord's pleasure, let the weight of silence fill the study before he cleared his throat and tried again. "My Lord..."

An aged hand, the one adorned with a blood red ring, waved imperiously, cut off the flow words at once, like a blade slicing an Orc's pathetic head. What in all of Arda did the fool expect that he would say?

The truth?

My son. I need my son.

Control was a dear bought thing. Hands clasped to stop the shaking, the hunched, bowed shoulders straightened as they always did. Denethor turned and raised his gaze.

His chamberlain's eyes were not struck upon his lord but some random square of golden scrolling within the carpet's weave.

The sense of relief was quite profound. His faithful Cahill would guard his Lord's dignity as if it were were his own. To look up would be to see the red rims on the Steward's eyes, to acknowledge there was aught of so much ill. ...

He found he had to swallow before he could find the strength to speak. "No. No I need nothing."

"Some food and wine at least." The man's voice was pleading. Cahill needed to be of service but the Lord of the realm had not felt the need to eat or sleep. Grief had stayed his hunger and sapped him of any peacefulness.

"No. See to it I am not disturbed. Thank... you.' The last-an afterthought. But likely necessary. Even Denethor knew he would need his allies in the dark days that were to come.

The chamberlain opened his mouth to protest but at once the tired eyes flared to life, irritation
crackled like summer lightening in the air. Perhaps it was better to retreat and try again. Not all battles were won in the first sortie after all and truly what could he know? He had no children of his own, did not know in his bones the weight of such a loss.

His practiced eye noticed the barest tremble of the sable robes.

"As my Lord commands." Cahill bowed himself smoothly backward and softly closed the study door.

At the lock's quiet click the tall, proud figure slumped, threw out a shaking hand in desperation. It grasped the only anchor: a padded chair back and Denethor fell more than sat in the dark velvet space.

A brief choking moan was bit sharply back. Unbidden, the gruesome fruit of his imagination rose before his eyes. His handsome, smiling son. Bloodied, maimed, broken in some far off field or vale. Faramir's exposition of yet another of his fervid, facile dreams had been well meaning but in the end but another knife. He could not have listened another second more.

A pair of shaking hands raised up to his face. Hid the emotion from himself.

How could he survive this time? Striped bare and plunged down into the depths of that endless pain. He was a widower, a man who had lost his wife, but what was he now? There was no word for when a parent lost a child. No word to encompass the depth of pain. That weakness, the hollow need for comfort in face of something too overwhelming had allowed him to be all too briefly to be tempted.

His youngest had ever been a child to want to please. Faramir was needy and the elder who was gone had been ever happy to provide. The father had turned and looked across the icy space of grief. Her eyes, their soft and soulful gaze, had looked back, filled with pain. A moan, a sound like a blizzard wind across his soul, had escaped and even as it threatened to pull back the dusty curtain and show the puppet theatre that lay behind, he had stiffened.

How could he resist? Not clasp the boy roughly to his chest, let unshed tears well and share the lancing pain?

But… no…

He had watched the raised arms fall back to his (now only) son's side and murmured something appropriately sympathetic. Someday. Someday the boy must learn. *The happiness of a man consists in the mastery of his passions.*

In the face of certain outside threat, to show oneself as vulnerable or indecisive—that would only cost lives in the longer run. Faramir was just too sensitive. Boromir had understood it yet still he had shielded his brother out of some misplaced sense of loyalty, a poor substitute for the mother they did not have.

Suddenly unable to sit a second more Denethor thrust up and paced across the room.

Distraction was what he needed most. Work, there was work to be done and no time to waste on his own woes. It had served him well after Finduilas passed and would serve him well again.

With a moment's pause to stretch out his arms and resettle the trailing robes, he sat in the well-worn leather chair, took the first sheet from off the neatly tidied stack.

For many minutes the only sound was the scratching of quill on parchment and the faint snap of
dying embers. But all too soon the first stab came.

Torin, Captain of Osgiliath, bids the Steward well and begs his indulgence for the tardiness of his query. In light of the Captain-General's ongoing absence, would the Steward kindly consider inspecting the new recruits Anarya next? …

Oh Gods.

Denethor held his arms tight about his chest, desperate to keep the great hollow ache from leaking out. It was not enough. The sobs, quiet ones (for no one must ever know) took over…

Oh my son. The chubby toddler. The proud, sparkling youth who took his oath. The laughing, great-hearted man who was everything of ease that he was not. They all clamored for attention.

He picked up the Rod from off the desk. White, bearing no charge or device, symbol of his office. Had he need of it? To cling to? Bright argent, like snow in the sun. Her tomb was also white. Should there not be another carved of marble along Rath Dinen?

But I have no body and no bones…

Rage boiled up. With a strength that would have surprised even his son he flung away the Rod. It smashed hard against a full and unsteady bookcase and broke its glass. Books and tablets, withered parchments, leaves of silver and gold in many characters fell to the floor.

Drunkenly, he stumbled forward and knelt amongst the wreck. What have I done? The shattered glass did not cut through the mail but the sound and the motion did. It left him broken, blazing with the hurt.

Denethor stayed on his knees, on the pile of glass and pain, aged hands gathering up the pieces and the parchment for no one should see.

The price of strength after all was to be strong. But my boy is the one who paid.

This time a keening cry escaped and the guards stiffened outside the door. The high wail of agony rolled on and on.

The men obeyed their orders.

The Steward of Gondor was not disturbed.

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Later, heavy footfalls echoed dully on the stone as the Lord of the realm lifted his leaden legs to mount the White Tower's steps and climb steadily to the topmost door.

Through the many years the secret room above had been little changed. Now against the barren walls there was a chair, cloaks and furs for the colder months, some provision to keep him going through the long taxing hours but it was still spare. Still dominated by the black stone and its marble plinth. Knowledge and need as ever so filled the high and hidden space it could take nothing more.

With an iron will Denethor made his aching body move. Walked around to the north side of the
stone and bent to call it to account. Just perhaps the boy had truly seen.

The jumbled vision cleared. He looked south. Toward the wide, flat expanse of river past Pelargir’s docks, toward the Bay and its long rolling shore.

Never a man to trust in much other than his own intellect, this time he prayed.

To find a high-prowed little boat…
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At last a gambit fails; a captain finds a pawn; the White Queen makes a play

T.A. 3019, March 6-8.

In a time of wonders and aching shadow many strange things came to pass. A wizard, seeing only the parts of the board his master would allow found his plots begin to fail, crumbled to dust like the pages of some long forgotten tome. In a great and ancient wood the Eldest of living things was moved to act, while at the gates of a dark and fabled tower the erstwhile wardens sat and smoked. One who might be saved let pride reject the hand that reached, while one who was not yet lost sent an arrow dipped in blood. In a refuge hidden well a vision long foretold came to pass at last.

War had been loosed upon the land.

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The dark-haired man blessed with his mother's light grey eyes and deeper sight, sat upon a wooden chair, face limned by the yellow torchlight that flickered across the glistening old stone walls.

All around the murmur of tired, sated men gave quiet voice to the day's events. To the rush of battle, the pursuit yet still to come and thanks that they had been little scathed. They knew this was but the opening move. Soon the One-they-did-not-Name would know of their deed and his retribution would be swift. With grim determination weapons were repaired while grave-faced men pondered their luck and the surprise that walked from under Ithilien's boughs. They did not pry about their guests but the tallest of them cocked an ear, turned ever busy hands to the haft of a broken spear.

Madril worried and watched the Steward's now only son from out of the corner of his eye. Two tiny legends had walked out of the darkened north where fell the Captain-General. He liked it not. They seemed too poor a recompense for the halves of a broken horn. Though Madril had argued against it, the Captain had made up his mind to bring them here, at great risk to all and great risk of censure, knowing well the cost of disobeying his Lord and father. Faramir had made such choices in the past. They had supported him and with never any cause to doubt his judgement. But these were strange and trying times. The strain of losing Boromir was surely great and Frodo had not been honest about their errand. That much was clear even to the big lieutenant.

Suddenly a stool fell back and clattered on the stone. The sound was over loud in the company's quiet space; breaking the customary hush of the night meal's afterglow. The stool lay upturned like some trapped animal vulnerable to its foes.

'...here in the wild I have you: two halflings, and a host of men at my call, and the Ring of Rings...'
The men of Ithilien, attuned, as ever, to their beloved Captain, looked up and a wary hush descended.

The perian, the twain, stood with backs to the heavy walls, faces stiff and set while the Captain loomed above, sad eyes glinting in the light. The men looked on in puzzlement. They had not heard his words but the Captain's very stance made them anxious with uncertainty. Over by the trestles Mablung rose and casually grasped his new-oiled sword. Damrod nodded at his companion's glance and felt a sudden need to stretch and walk.

Madril clasped the binding of his spear a little tighter, eyes narrowed, alert for any threat and absently tying off the new smooth leather. A prickling had crept up his nape just as it did before an Orc burst through the underbrush. Something was ill but he was hard pressed to say exactly what.

Time widened for a longer moment. The whole company held its breath and the only sound to be heard was the eternal chiming of the waterfall.

Just when the big Tolfalas man was minded to rise himself the Captain's shoulders relaxed the barest bit. The older perian smiled warily as the Captain bent and righted the tumbled stool. They sat back down and Faramir followed suit. Soon enough his quiet chuckle could be heard in the watchful lull.

Madril let out a shaky breath and lay the spear beside his seat. Perhaps it had all been some jest, some joke that did not translate to the little people's world? There had been precious little laughter from Faramir these days, still less a smile. He could thank Eru at least for that.

He reached for his tankard of late winter ale and drained it to the dregs. Strange times. Strange times indeed, and as his old mam used to say 'Smooth seas never made for skilful sailors.'

Sometimes, he thought, listening as the customary quiet noise of the refuge filtered back, he could just wish they were not all so skilled at what they did.

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A twist, a turn, an unexpected play and fate moved on, set new pieces on the board and turned thoughts to yet another move.

The lieutenant need not have worried so. In the heart of the two travellers there was resolve and quiet dignity. In the heart of his Captain there was weariness and grace.

Dark is a way and light is a path. It leads ever to the west...

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Sam awoke with a start, heart pounding heavily, alert to any sense of looming danger. As he lay and gripped his dagger the world and where he was came gradually back. Ithilien, he was in Ithilien and had had his finest meal in months. His master was peacefully asleep (at least as peacefully as he was able) and they were safe and in the company of brave and honourable Men.
Beyond his pallet a grim-faced, grey-eyed young man picked up the bench that he had dropped. It was that sudden thud that had awakened Sam but not his Master who slept more like the dead. Neither hobbit had had a proper sleep in long.

"Your pardon, little master." was the whispered word of the Ranger who quickly bent to lift his load again.

Around there was a quiet clatter of tables being removed and stacked, men readying pallets on the floor. It was clearly time for all to rest and so Sam lay back and tried to settle again but this time, with the first wave of fatigue fresh blunted, peace would not come. He should sleep but it all felt so odd. The soft felt of the pallet was unfamiliar and somehow he felt nervous, jittery almost, with so many men around.

He forced himself to close his eyes but when he did the near disaster of his error, his revelation to Faramir of the Ring, came back around and taunted. Bless him for no better than a youngling, blurring out whatever was in his head. It could have been a right disaster, but for some strange reason all was well that ended well. Though he could not quite believe Faramir that it was meant to be, perhaps it could be for best.

Untangling his twisted blanket from his knees, the young hobbit sat up and cast his eye upon his Master. The least he could do was sit watch over Mr. Frodo, exhausted as he was. Carefully, Sam reached and pulled the older hobbit's blanket a little higher. It would not do for Frodo to catch a chill and a last lingering wariness made Sam tuck Frodo's collar down, to keep even the golden chain out of sight.

"Faithful servant Samwise, to watch your master's rest when you have need of your own."

Faramir's quiet voice came from just beyond his elbow. The man crouched, one corner of his mouth lifted in a wry half grin. "Have no fear Master Samwise. You are safe and honoured well. At least til the morn there is peace and safety here." It appeared that the Captain had paused in the midst was readying himself for bed for the ties of his linen shirt were loosed and the last of some warm drink steamed gently from a goblet in his hand.

"Begging your pardon sir, I am not sure we will be ever quite safe again." Faramir frowned as Sam turned and looked upon Frodo's lined and careworn face. The face he knew so well was now thin, with dark shadows below his eyes. "He is carrying wounds, suffering and all I can do is ease his way a little."

Faramir nodded, gravely. "For now all that we can offer is a guarded rest. Come." he said, gesturing to a nearby curtain, in front of which sat a desk and chair. "If you will not sleep yourself at least sit at ease. Lord Irmo will watch Frodo's dreams."

"Oh no Captain, I should not like to keep you from your bed." Sam looked across to the opening in the curtain. Inside a small oil lamp sputtered on a low, wooden table and beside there lay a rumpled pallet surrounded by piles of books and papers. He smiled. It was quite a contrast to the tidy space of the main refuge.

"Nay," said Faramir, "I am not ready quite as of yet."

He may not have been ready but something about the softer set of the man's grim features suggested he was about to take a moment's break. It would not be right to take up what little time he had.

As if he caught the unspoken thought Faramir demurred. "Tis no intrusion, Sam. I should be glad of the company. Bide with me a while."
Knowing there would be little chance again upon the road and heartened by the man's gentle manner, the hobbit took a seat upon the chair. Faramir walked to a nearby iron brasier that rested on a metal stand. It was stuffed with red-glowing coals that gave off a welcome heat but little smoke. The man dipped a small earthen cup into pot keeping warm upon the grate.

Faramir returned and handed Sam a pale and softly steaming tea. "Try this Sam. Many find it hard to rest after the tenor of our day."

The cup was small and neat and around its rim ran a pattern of leaping stags. He wondered if it had been made for a human child, dwarfed as it was by Faramir's much larger hands.

Sam took a cautious sniff. The herbs smelled almost musky but in a homey, wholesome way. More warm earth in the summer sun than damp leaf litter in the dark: the scent reminded him a little of one of Elrond's brews. Perhaps it would help with sleep. The young Hobbit took a sip and found the taste more pleasant than he expected. The captain held back his smile and, in a move surprisingly graceful for one so tall, folded his long legs underneath himself and sat upon the floor.

'Tell me a little of your people.' Faramir asked when he had settled and so Sam did: of Hobbiton and smials and the party tree, of Merry and Pippin (but not their part in the Fellowship), of Tooks and Baggins and Brandybucks.

As the quiet words wound out the Captain leaned back and clasped his hand around his knee. The sight made him oddly sad and then with a start Sam realized why.

Boromir. Boromir had sat just that way, hand laced about his knee. Sorrowing anew for the loss of the big, brave warrior he had so admired, Sam felt it was also oddly comforting to be with another man who was so alike, as if Boromir was not truly gone. It was uncanny, the similarities the brothers: their mannerisms, their hair and chins and noses so similar. Even their voice at times held a familiar timbre, though Boromir's was the louder. Watching Faramir's face in the lamplight Sam fancied he also saw something of another dark-haired, grey-eyed person he had met: Elladan, Elrond's son. The clear grey eyes, wise and kind, in a narrow, elegant face had a distinctly Elvish air.

The thought of Elves made him suddenly remember the Lady's gift. Where had it got to? In the rush to march from the battle ground he could not remember where it had been stowed. If he had forgotten it he would never forgive himself.

"'Cuse me a minute Sir." And so Faramir watched curiously as Sam reached for his kit and rummaged urgently. With heartfelt sigh of relief the hobbit sat back on his heels. He had found the plain grey box with its silver rune tucked inside the coney pot. Thankfully it seemed no worse for wear.

"What is it Sam?" The quiet question came when the hobbit had sat down again, stubby fingers tracing the tengwar on the lid.

"Something good, unsullied you might say. 'Tis not but a box of earth, but one from Lothlorien, from the Lady herself. She said it would help my garden grow, bloom like Lorien of old."

"That is a gift indeed!"

Faramir's wide eyes turned wistful. "I would see your Shire one day, with golden boughs amidst the green. This was the Garden of Gondor once. I dream of seeing it so again. A garden of green and growing things, living at ease and peace."

A gentle smile quirked again. "And perhaps a garden of verse will sprout besides."
It was then that Sam noticed the man had set a book upon the table. It was open. Clearly Faramir had planned to read, and with delight Sam thought he recognized in the faded ink the spidery flowing script of Elven runes. "Is that Elvish?" he asked, breathlessly.

"Yes. Yes it is." The gentle smile grew wider. "An ancient story, the Lay of Luthien and Beren. I am afraid I cannot do it justice if you have heard it spoken by the Fair folk of the Golden Wood."

"Aye, well you say you may not but I am afraid I would not rightly know." Sam explained. "Problem is I know it sounds right beautiful but I've no Elvish. I din't understand the words. Not a one for much book-learning such as yourself. I learn best by doing if you take my meaning."

The older man nodded as if he understood. "So each finds their way. I have had the fortune to study lore ere the world became a darker place. But soldiering, that is a different thing. That I also learned by dint of toil."

Sam set the box carefully back in his pack once more and looked back toward the laden pallet. His master slept, with only a few twitches and quiet mutters to betoken his cluttered dreams. Both of them were right muddling their way along.

He reached for the cup of tea and took a measured gulp. What was he in this adventure? Not a wise Captain like the man who sat beside nor brave like Frodo. Faramir looked on his discomfit curiously, turning his own goblet slowly round in his hands and allowing the hobbit the space to explain himself.

"I am not a soldier." Sam began. "Goodness knows I've not helped my master much thus far. Never had a right real adventure afore this. I'm just a gardener, learning on the road I am, and not easy in the world."

Faramir shook his head. "So are we all at first. For twenty years I have lived in the wilds most of the year. It is my duty but before my commission I knew little of this land." The man paused, wrapped long fingers around his cup and took a thoughtful sip.

"I have measured out my life in arrows as you have in spadefuls. Each is honourable in its way."

Sam frowned, embarrassed to be praised. "Seems to me Captain you contribution has been the more important."

"Nay, say not so. Fighting and holding back the Shadow is what we do because we must. Beauty and poetry, ballads and graceful gardens, that is what we do it for."

"That sounds like something Strider might say."

"Strider?" Faramir's black brows drawn together in puzzlement.

"Aragorn." Sam hastened to explain. "Like you, one of the big people easy in the wilds and ever so very brave."

"From my little experience on this surprising day, that is not only a quality of those with ample stature." Faramir replied. "Frodo carries a burden and unfathomable weight with rare courage and purpose though he is not a warrior."

A peaceful quiet descended as the two drained their nightcaps to the leaves. Suddenly Sam found he could not stop a yawn so great it felt sure to split his face.

"Excuse me…think I shall…” He did not quite get the words out before another yawn took hold.
Faramir arose and set the cups aside, steered the nearly stumbling hobbit to his little pallet and courteously held back the blanket.

"Thank you so sir.." Sam lay down. Suddenly to lie flat on a rough stone floor felt the best thing in the world.

"Good night Samwise. Sleep well."

Through half open lids the hobbit watched the man grasp his book and stride slowly about the room speaking with the few men awake and pausing for a quiet word with the sentries by the rushing curtain. Now the light had faded it was more a muted grey and many shades of lavender, no longer the gem-struck, elven decoration his heart had fancied. Together the water's ceaseless song and the soft drone of his Master's breaths made his lids heavy once again.

Sam closed his eyes.

In the last dream-like moment before peaceful rest stole down, a voice came to Sam: venerable and wise. Elrond's. *You may find friends along your way when you least look for it.* "Aye," he sighed contentedly, pulling a soft blanket to his chin. "that we have."

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Hours later, ere the full moon had set, a great wave rose up and the son of Dol Amroth's line found himself once more gasping awake out of green water.

The dream. Its darkness so wild, so raw and inescapable, it was as if water poured from the heavens and the deeps. Faramir sat up and ran a shaking hand through his sweat-slicked hair. The hammering of his heart within his breast began to ease. For much of his life the dream had been an irregular and unpredictable visitor, much like Mithrandir though more frequent and not nearly so very welcome. Now in the scant weeks since his vision of the boat the dream had been a near constant visitor-the surest signal of his disquiet and an unwelcome one, given how full were the ceaseless days.

He was tired. Bone-tired but by long experience he knew that to lay back down would be all too futile: the dream would not be exorcised so easily. He rose, pulled on a shirt and then wrapped his woolen blanket round. It was barely the start of spring in Ithilien and the night was still far colder than the day. He padded across the hushed and darkened space, toward the Window. Behind lay row on row of sleeping men, some turning restlessly and murmuring, others still as stone and just as silent. Damrod, as always, could be picked out above the quiet din. His snores they joked were a indeed a weapon. They kept even the Nameless One awake in Morgul Vale.

Faramir nodded to Toric who had the watch and, settling his blanket close, leaned back against the wall, far enough away to miss the sheeting spray but near enough to see the shadowed, sleeping land. It was moonset, his favourite time of night. Ithil's milky simmer washed across the still, brooding Forbidden Pool. Across the deep green of the pines and the hollows and the swales thick with glossy holly. It made a silver glow in a land hard beset and, here and there, a tiny white evenstar shone like a beacon in the dark. Niphredil bloomed. Despite the cold, the little sun of late, the rankness of the air.

As if the very land resists...

Satisfied that all seemed well beyond their door, he raised his gaze up to the stars. Mithrandir had
taught him the old names for all the constellations. Wilwarin, the Queen, set by Varda as a butterfly to fly forever bound for her great pride, danced above his head. To the left and low the bright bow of Telumendil, the Huntsman, glowed as he chased his quarry around the Sun. This night the brightest of them all was Valacirca, the Sickle of the Valar. A warning to Melkor and a sign of hope to the children of the One. In the blue-black arching vault of the winter night the stars in the Sickle's blade flickered hard and bright as diamond. He longed to ask an answer of them but the questions were too many.

A sudden gust of wind flicked wet drops across his front and into Toric's face. He watched the young man start and scan the sky for some unseen threat. The cold spray was almost welcome this time of night. The last watch before the dawn was always hardest. With a sigh Faramir realized that this might be his final chance to see this sight. In the days to come more Haradrim would take to the road and they must at last leave the refuge. The time for skirmishes was over. What little chance they had lay in concentration, strengthening the ring of Gondor's best defense. Some of company he would leave with Cair Andros but the rest, they would fall back to Osgiliath and support Boromir's company.

Boromir... The thought of his brother set a sharp bloom of pain within his chest. There were no tears to dry upon his face this eve but he scrubbed a hand wearily across regardless. 'Where is thy horn', his heart had cried? Both pieces now sat upon the lap of another who shed no tears, a man who was a husk. Dry and brittle and burned by grief to ash. His father's grief seemed all the sharper for that he had not had the vision and though he had tried to tell him of it, Denethor brooked no tales of dreams these days. And they were more at odds again... "Aragorn" The heir of Isildur Frodo had said. Could it be? Could there truly be a king again? And what would the Steward think of a claim out of the North?

A faint footfall broke his reverie. Madril, who walked just as silently as the rest for all his size, nodded as he strode past to have a quiet word with his guard. Faramir noted the grey settled bags below the older man's eyes and their thoughtful, worried gaze, glinting dark indigo in the light. The veterans and the younglings alike were weary of their days.

Toric saluted and Madril smiled, paced back to stand silently beside his Captain. How many nights now had they met on a watch not his? Too many but still Madril did not pry. They were his family and did not feel the need to speak of it, of the loss that clawed at his heart. They would not curry favour by showing they thought of him as some in the City had sought to do. He could just be as he was. Not whole. Struggling. So very tired of being not himself.

He could see the pity and grief in the men's eyes when they, like him, were too tired to hide all they felt. Did they understand how much he wished for duty to be released? At times the drumbeat of water on the rock was so sure and steady it called 'come this way'. At the window he could throw himself into the night's dark vault and soar. Away. Away from all that dragged, from duty and need and aching pain. He knew it to be an illusion, strong and siren, but at times so very tempting. There would be time to grieve but it was not now.

A warm large hand laid suddenly upon his shoulder, anchored him to the here and now, to the rock of the refuge with its welcome weight. Perhaps Madril understood.

The lieutenant was about to speak when Toric's low whistle made the grey head snap up. The sentry had seen something by the pool. Faramir shivered. A sudden feeling of dark and malice crept up. Below the Forbidden pool, on which only starlight was allowed to play, was dark, ink-black, shadowed by something from above. There was the faintest rush of wings and overhead a shadow passed, bat-like. Silently Madril and his
men unshouldered their great black bows and nocked. The few remaining lamps in the inner flickered ominously for a moment. Once, twice, thrice, light and shadow played across the pool and, then, was gone.

"What do you think, Sir?" Toric's hand upon his bow was trembling. He looked anxiously past his lieutenant to his Captain, fear clear upon his face.

"Some scout, hunting for sign of us." Some evil thing of His. Both he and his lieutenant glanced worriedly to the east. "You did right not to shoot. We dare not advertise our position." Tomorrow. Tomorrow they would muster and leave Henneth Annun to the water and the stars.

Commotion over, Madril turned back to his Captain, eyes narrowed and brow set. Faramir knew that look. It was what passed for insubordination in his friend.

"Faramir..Go. Sleep. We need you fit, not a wraith yourself." Toric flinched at his lieutenant's choice of phrase but Faramir knew what he meant. At times he felt like he was fading.

He bid good night to both men and walked silently back past the company, pulled the thin curtain on his private space and sat heavily on the bed. His feet had grown chill through his socks despite his care to keep them dry. The sheets felt cold like ice that would lie upon the Pool in the early morn. He had been gone longer than he had planned.

Lying back, pulling the blanket round, he turned and blew out the lamp. He tried to close his eyes but sleep would not come. It was not the wave that shimmered behind his sight but a blood red ring. The Steward's seal. However much Faramir wearied of duty's grip he would have to give his father an account of his actions soon enough. Twice over now his life was forfeit but he could not regret his choice. Spring's warm eastern wind had freed the mountains of their snow. The path Sam and Frodo sought was like to be open. There had to be some hope.

Oh my brother we served you ill. The thought came unbidden. Faramir had seen what was in Frodo's heart: Boromir unable to face Galadriel, his fearless and generous brother shorn of hope and dignity. The image made him shake, cling with desperate need to the vision of a boat, a peaceful mien upon a white and silent face. What did it mean?

He knew it was not what happened in the course of things: to recount so fresh, so sparely, something of such pain. And though some small part of him knew this was not grieving (how could he speak so calmly to the hobbits of losing the one who was his foundation?) because he loved Boromir so very much, needed his brother's death to count in the greater part to come, he held on tight, kept the dam of tears from bursting free.

With a pang as sharp as splintered glass he realized his life had been now quite neatly split. To the time before when his brother had lived and after when he had not. The former would never come again and the sense of not having him would never end. Could never end and with it had vanished his sense of what was certain.

It was not normal for second sons to become the Captain-General.

Had he thought on it before he would have said he knew the path his life should take. He would have been a soldier, but just a Captain. Fought battles with all his head and heart. Held a few men while their lives drained away. In time advised his brother. Loved. Married. Had children of his own. Written a little bit, though perhaps not well.

All of it. All that should have been had been swept away by the desperate, final ringing of a horn.
'Then our paths are sundered,' said Éomer. 'He is lost. We must ride without him, and our hope dwindles.'

Éowyn stumbled out of Dúnhere's modest hall into the evening dim, choked by sudden grief at her brother's words. Blindly she sought the fresher air out of doors, the green heath of Firienfeld and its fresh chill air, untainted by words she could no longer bear to hear. None had followed her. The men, so caught in their urgent council with Gondor's messenger, had not noticed yet another stricken face on yet another fearful woman. The dale was full of such and they had more urgent issues to consider.

She took a shaky breath but found it brought no respite from the tightness in her chest. Below lay the Snowbourne's ford and the grey stone Púkel-men who watched the lap of the White Mountains close behind. Starkhorn and the saw-toothed hulk of Irensaga, crowned by their everlasting snows, should have shone above, guarding the grim black wall of the Dwimorberg: the Haunted Mountain set between. But tonight no moonlight reflected off the running rapid nor the high, wind-crusted snows. Hope and light alike had been smothered in the brown fog rode over all and robbed the world of shadow.

Éowyn turned her back on the looming mass behind and the sudden rising wind. It was cold and in her haste she had left her wrap behind. Though the hall was but a few yards back she did not wish to turn, to see the path he had taken to the Gate. Was Aragorn truly lost, she wondered? The quailing of her heart said so and her Uncle's account of the dreaded Paths, well-meaning as it was, had done nothing to lift her already faltering spirit.

Without conscious thought her steps took her down past the hall's tiny alpine garden to the Lord of Harrowdale's neat thatch-roofed stables, seeking the comfort of one who would not demand beyond the withered apple in her pocket.

Windfola had been granted the honour of covered housing: not for him the open lines of pickets between row on row of tent and booth. Silently, she walked along the rough stone aisle that ran down between the double row of box stalls. The stallion was a ghostly smudge of grey in the gloom. He wickered gently at her approach.

"Westu hal." Her quiet greeting as she slid open the door and entered the warm, close space was met by an impatient toss of Windfola's great head and a furtive nuzzle at her waist. "Cupboard love my greedy lad?" she chided. Eager teeth reached carefully for the wrinkled windfall apple and his lips were soft against her palm. The first smile in days lit her eyes as the stallion crunched contentedly at his prize.

"My Lady? Lady Éowyn?" The unexpected query made her nearly jump out of her skin. Dunhere's elderly stable master stood just beyond the stall door, an expectant look on his weatherbeaten face. "I apologise for the intrusion. Do you need aid? I was about to head up to the Hall."

"Nay Waldruf. My thanks for your care." she answered. He was good man and sought only to help but the last thing she wanted in that moment was human company. "Do not let me keep you from your meal. I have neglected my friend in these past few days with so many deeds to settle all the folk."
A proud smile graced Waldruf's homey features as he gave a correct half-bow. "And the people honour you for your service my Lady. Good eve."

"Good eve."

Éowyn turned back and buried her face in the sweet hay scent and warmth of Windfola's neck. He tossed his head and shook, glossy mane tickling at her nose. As ever he could sense her unhappiness and so she stroked between his ears, seeking to soothe both their nerves.

She had thought she was through with weeping, had no more tears to fill the great yawning emptiness left from that morn, but a few drops of salty wet soaked into her friend's rough winter coat. Aragorn had ridden away without a backward glance, straight into the great maw of the Dwimorberg. The thought of what he sought to do still made her heart plummet to her feet. What did it mean that one so high and excellent would cast away the chance to lead his men to war, to help her brother and lift all their spirits with his skill? That he should go and seek certain death, truly it showed there was no hope for any of them now. Theodred was gone. Her Uncle was returned but now Rohan was beset from every side. Gondor was besieged. What was there but to try to find a brief moment's glory under the shadowed sun?

Aragorn had spoken of duty that troubled morn and though she could see it drove him hard, it drove him toward some good thing. It was a warrior's duty face death as steadfastly as they were able. And what of hers? Was her duty to ever help folk too weak to help themselves?

Small strong fingers clenched tightly in Windfola's mane. She had done this. Been nursemad, scribe and housekeeper to her uncle for ten long years. And though a small voice inside her head told her Aragorn was right, it was honourable, she could not help but burn at the baseness of her role. She, proud daughter of Kings, was made for more. Gladly would she give another who wished for elevation the authority of her people now.

Some prize it was, she thought bitterly. Even ruling in her uncle's stead she was not Lord, had been told she could not act beyond her apron strings without her brother or her uncle's leave.

A heartbeat was all it took to decide. She may not ride with the Dunadan but she would, will he nil he, with an eored. A corselet and sword had already been bestowed...they would do. She could find kit (had she not been the one to order where all such was stowed?) and had a horse.

Looking on Windfola she realized her first stumbling block. Her stallion, proud get of Snowmane, was well known and the men of the Mark knew their steeds. He would be recognized.

Before she could hesitate Éowyn drew out Theodred's dagger and began to cut at his long glossy strands of mane and tail.

After several minutes work Windfola looked at her reproachfully, shorn of his pride. She kicked the tumbled hair below the straw and stood, hands on hip, considering what else could be done. A star. She could give him darker markings.

In the deserted tack room she found a pail of tar such as the groomsmen used to dress dry hooves. She scooped up a double handful of the thick black stuff and hurried back. Apologizing all the while she smeared his forehead and then from his hooves up over his fetlocks, taking care to mark his off hind leg much higher for good measure.

Windfola stamped a little impatiently and Éowyn soothed him with a pat as she stood back to admire her handiwork. A gleam of silver in the stall caught the corner of her eye. Bema her saddle on its stand was covered in rich detailing and was far too fancy for a junior rider. Taking out the precious
dagger once again she methodically cut off all the silver and leather cantle bindings, cut off the tooled embossing on the skirt corners.

*There.* Her mount, at least, would be unrecognizable.

But what then of her? She would need clothes. Some could be taken with no one noticing but she would need a helm, one that would hide her hair. Her hair. A hand raised unconsciously to finger a lock fallen from her braid. Surely it would be easier without two long braids to wind under a heavy helm and if Windfola could suffer the indignity could not she?

Quickly she unbound her two long braids to hold them gleaming in the weak lamplight. She raised the dagger to her nape and began to saw the golden strands. Her hand was far from steady and when the dagger slipped a little, she drew it up. Her fingers shook. Was it fear or the excitement that made her hesitate? Or vanity? Her golden glossy hair was her one true pride. Perhaps she should not cut it now but later if it seemed necessary. Surely she could be allowed this one vanity. With a sigh Éowyn sheathed the dagger once again. Giving a last pat for her faithful friend, with a sterner heart she walked back out into the night.

Dawn the next morning found the air a deeper brown. Now all was shadowless or all were shadows. Éowyn could not tell.

She stood and shed no tears. Her uncle bid farewell within the hold with Dúnhere standing grimly by. Stern and dry-eyed she kissed Éomer, gave no sign that she had any other design. It was startling how quickly her plan came together once she was of a mind. None had challenged her in the storerooms or the barrack, she was the chatelaine of them all. In the great store of arms, spears piled like forests of new-planted trees, shields massed like turtles sunning in the morn, a helm was found to fit.

Bare hours later she waited behind the mustering men. A lie (but a needful one) that she had an errand in Edoras had reassured Dúnhere that he had her authority til her return.

Now she was but one young rider among many. One who kept his head down, tightening his girth and looking to his saddle, caressing his grey as he looked a little uneasily at the lowering sky. In a moment 'Dernhelm' would mount and place Meriadoc safe behind. Another truant who disobeyed their lord.

"*I should be ashamed to stay behind.*"

Merry's words to Theoden had cut her to the quick. Even the smallest of them knew that to be stern and resolute in the face of danger was to win renown.

The brown dusk deepened and strengthened her resolve as the host began to move.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you so very much to Caroline for her comments....

I am grateful to Annafan, Thanwen, Artura and Wheelrider who helped me with this tricky chapter. It is such an iconic part of the book I did not want to just rehash but also
Faramir had things to say, to work through, and their input helped me clarify how to do it justice. (and one day I will post a clean version the first time around :))

Next up: The muster takes a shortcut and the Steward's son readies for Osgiliath. 'A bitter winnowing' fits into the chronology here for those who may be wondering.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Enemy has the move, opens the fullness of his game.

March 10, 3019

Westward at the feet of the White Mountains Minas Anor had been set, gracious and strong; to
honour the fire-fruit of Laurelin on her daily arc. The Tower of the Setting Sun she had long been;
but now, for many lifetimes of Men, her sun-bleached stones of white were given all to guard. Minas
Tirith sat, tense and hushed, waiting for some sign as the cloaked and hidden sun began to set, on
this, yet another day in which the Red Arrow had not come.

Outside the Citadel sat another who waited for a sign: an impatient and, now slightly short-tempered
wizard; enduring the hours with hard won grace.

Gandalf paced the white stones about the courtyard's grassy sward of winter-brown. The Guards of
the citadel, robed in heavy black, paced in twos and threes, keeping a respectful distance from the
wizard on his dozenth round of the sweetly chiming fountain. The morning's dusky haze, the false
dawn that only weighted hearts, had given way to a twilight of murky dim: there was no light in
which the scattered water drops could play. They dripped forlornly from the barren, twisted branches
of the White tree that stood, ghostly, in the dark reflecting pool.

High above in the haze-shrouded Tower of Ecthelion, the sunset bell sounded high and loud. The
wizard stiffened and impatiently ground his teeth. What was the man playing at? An hour he had
paced while the Steward tended to matters of import. Kept one who was no mere Captain waiting on
his pleasure. While yet more threads spun inexorably on Vairë ever growing loom.

Damn the man's Hurin intransigence. Stubborn as were they all and Denethor, son of Ecthelion,
stubborner than some. 'I also am a steward' Gandalf had said, impatient with a view that saw all
through Gondor's eyes. But that was not strictly true. He had been sent to be more a shepherd. To
guide. To encourage. To give counsel.

But that he could only do if he had chance to speak.

Enough. With an effort Gandalf set his shoulders back and forced himself to pace patiently again. To
lose his temper, to be unsettled on meeting with the Steward would be folly. Denethor may think to
keep him on tenterhooks, may hope he would reveal more than his wont, but the wizard had the
patience of the Ages. The counsel he would gladly give was set.

"Lord Mithrandir." The grim-faced young guard's summons broke through his reverie. "The Steward
will see you know."

Relieved and in haste, Gandalf gathered up his staff, followed the man through the tall door of
polished metal and into the torchlit dim of the vaulted hall. It was late. The remains of a hasty meal
lay upon a low table by the dais. He found the Lord Gondor, not seated on his low black chair, but
standing, hands clasped behind his back/ Looking west for once, whence all their hopes might come.
The proud and aged face, beautiful even in its pale and kingly mein, turned at the sound of a staff's last tap.

"Tell me, Mithrandir," commanded Denethor, voice tinged with ready scorn, "since you so desire to counsel this ancient realm in her hour of greatest need, tell me what I need most to know. Why has the Enemy chosen to open his first move? Why now? For surely this sea of mist, the bleak shadow that gathers the East issues from that accursed vale, from Minas Morgul her very self."

The wizard paused, tugged with thoughtful fingers at his snowy beard and clenched a little tighter on his grip. He too had worried on that point. Where had Frodo reached? Had he made the borders of the Enemy's demesne? Was that the reason for this new and bolder move? It did not seem it could be so for it was too soon and there was another, surer and far sharper, goad: Aragorn. The Ranger had challenged Sauron. Gandalf had known at once: the subtle stretching and thrum of power in the web that bound all things could only come from true and rightful power. Did Denethor know of it too? By all the Valar Gandalf prayed he was far wrong yet there was something of the man's stance, a stiffness, an implacability that spoke not just of anxious waiting but of challenge. Of a brooding wariness that had he seen before. Long ago when two Captains vied for the Old Steward's love.

A cold finger of fear ran down his spine. Had Denethor used the Anor Stone, driven by pride and need to risk much in his thirst to know? Perhaps that was the reason the Steward knew so much that passed so far way, could read men better than any one these days, unless it were his younger son. Remaining son.

Gandalf closed his eyes briefly and pushed that thought away. There was no time to grieve and there were words that needed to be said. When and how were yet not clear. What had he said to Pippin? To not speak to the man who has just lost his heir of the coming of another who supplant him? Just so.

"Saruman's staff was broken four days ago even as one of the Nine wheeled, hunting, above Dol Baran. The Enemy cannot have missed that his pawn is held prisoner in his own desmesne by a power more ancient than the stone of his dark lair. Even a lord of a great and fell host can be made nervous by surprise."

Gandalf paused and in the heavy silence caught Denethor's barest nod. So too had he surmised. Relief felt sweet as spring, but it must not make him drop his guard. Denethor was too subtle and too shrewd for that.

"The Enemy has lost has an ally and foe at once. One that he yet thought to turn to his needs, though Saruman's lies twisted so tight and long no hand from the east will move to save him now. Even if he may yet unwittingly serve his master in some small and slighting way. I tried, but he would not be turned, not brought back into the light where he could yet do something of some use."

"You tried but failed?" Denethor's voice dripped with scorn. "Where lies your vaunted skill Mithrandir, the one that cajoled others, yea even my youngest son, to your hand? Has your power waned? Is all your art but puffs of smoke, illusion, to make others see what was not there?"

Gandalf's answer crackled in the gloom. "Do not claw at me because you cannot have the son you want Denethor! A Halfling might excuse a grieving father such poor behaviour but I do not. Your never did learn to trust your heart."

"Trust!" Denethor cried, flinging his arm wide in fury. "Bah! I trust none of you whose designs are not of this world. I was mistaken once. Saruman I brought into my house, gave favour to his plans, shared lore and counsel and what did he do? Strove to rob me of my sons! Faramir nearly he had more than once and now his foul minions have stolen my Boromir in the hour of greatest need. Both
of you sought knowledge in our deepest vaults. What you sought and I believe have found stirred many debts of old but only I have paid the price!"

"Do not think so!" Gandalf barked. "That is too self-centred even for you Denethor, however raw your grief. Many have and will pay a price, perhaps far greater than your own." A sorrowful frown then graced the old careworn face. "Boromir did not die in vain. We do not yet see all that his act accomplished. Now tell me where is Faramir? You have need of your best Captain to marshal the defense."

As Gandalf watched the proud Steward's hackles raised once more, but then, as if were too much effort for a man worn before his time, his shoulders drooped. Had he forgotten he had another son to love? Denethor paced to a low and nearby table set with a map. Rearranged some painted counters there, as if rearranging battalions in his mind. "He was due back this morn, from out beyond the River. There is little we can do but stop some parts of the Enemy's host from amassing on the farther shore. The red arrow has not returned…"

"The beacons have been lit. Theoden will come," said Gandalf, firmly. "He is not the dotard, bent and ill with age, that you had seen and will remember the oath his forefather made. At their fastest pace the Muster can not come yet for many days. I hope to see their bright spears the morning before the Enemy can move."

"Hope!" The Steward's laugh was cold and pitiless. A black figure with a Captain's helm was lifted sharply up then just as quickly set down again. It seemed there was no helpful move. "You put too much faith in hope, Mithrandir. I would rather count on men. And there may yet be many perils between Edoras and Forannest."

The wizard drew himself up to his full height, let power swell his voice. "A tree in the court beyond once died of plague that ravaged all the land. Now that plague is shadow..on the land and in Men's hearts. Hope rises Denethor. It comes. Even on the heels of the Rohirrim, though perhaps by another way. One who will renew the land and its spirit both."

"Hope? Do not make me laugh." replied Denethor. "I have long known of whom you speak. Hope in a distaff line long bereft of power and dignity?"

"The distaff line? Has Gondor's history been rewritten in these later days? Isildur was King of Gondor together with his brother, no matter if his son ruled Anor after him."

The cool grey gaze glittered dangerously and bright. "Isildur was the one who was too weak to do what must be done."

What?! Gandalf swiftly drew in a breath. Could Denethor have guessed what it was that was taken from the Enemy?

His startlement was not missed. A smile of triumph lit the Steward's proud, stern face. "I see I have surprised you! I know this thing that Isildur kept for himself. Not only wizards thirst for knowledge to help the land and spend hours locked inside with dusty scrolls. Nor do I foolishly deny the truth in Thorongil's blood." Denethor paused, let the ghost and the name coalesce. "No doubt he is who he is meant to be. But I rule in the name of Earmur, descendant of Meneldil who was son of Anarion. Let him take Arnor and I wish him well of it. Lord of a wasted, beaten people, sitting in capital of wattle and daub. That is his birthright. Not the city he abandoned once before."

Gandalf raised a white, heavy brow. "Then you, who revere history would repeat the mistakes of the near past? So said the council of Arvedui of Anor when the line of Gondor failed, when a young Prince named Faramir disobeyed his father's word and went to battle to his death. Arvedui and Firiel
could have reunited all the realms but instead the Lords got the pure Gondor blood they wished: the barren blood of Earnur. Which was the better choice? There has been near a thousand years of good stewardship but a King is needed to renew the land."

"That may be so," replied Denethor bitterly, "but I will not be Steward to such a one. Dispensing pennyfuls of advice that is further cheapened for it is not needed or desired ...."

What more the Stewrad might have said the wizard did not hear. Denethor's words were drowned by the clear high call of the Tower's trumpets. Ending on a high and rising note.

"My son!" Denethor turned at last back to the east, his face the softened the barest smile. "That is Faramir's sign. He is come."

The trumpets' volley came again but this time an evil descant could be heard. A shattering cry of poisonous despair rose and fell and rose again, drowned the hopeful ringing of a lower horn. The guards and courtiers in the hall shuddered at the sound but their lord did not quail.

"What is it?" demanded Denethor, striding fast along the stones. The polished door creaked open hastily to the evening gloom. "What fell creature has come to trouble this darker day?"

"I know that cry," declared Gandalf, shouldering next the Steward. "Your son is beset by a foe even he cannot overmatch. And we will have need of his courage and every man in the coming storm. I must go down. Find Shadowfax again."

The wizard whirled, left a much troubled Steward in his wake and went to help.


A weary figure wound down the tunnel's many winding steps, obscured by a thick long cloak and heavy hood. It was still early in the eve. The sun had set, though none could truly tell. The City's twilight air had been as dark and thick at noon as any winter's eve, cast a pall about its denizens so that all walked silently and slow, as though with sleepiness.

The warrior moved on. He approached the guard before the door, nearly stumbled to be challenged.

"Who goes?"

With one smooth gesture the man pulled back his hood. "Faramir, Captain of..."

"My Lord!" The young guard stuttered in embarrassment and hastily stepped aside. "Forgive me..I could not see your face."

"'Tis all right, do not apologize." Clear grey eyes shone briefly, lightened for a moment the pale and hollow countenance. "Your vigilance is only praiseworthy – the City is already under threat and, in any case, I did not wish to be recognized on my way.. I have come to see my men."

"Of course, Sir." The beardless cheek below the helm flushed pink. A gauntleted hand raised up but dropped again. One should not touch, however much one wanted to give help. "Captain...I am sorry for your loss."

A quiet sigh rushed out and mingled with the heavy air. The Captain's grave gaze twisted once, fell from the earnest plea to a place of refuge yet lower still. The stones of the forecourt were easier to
confront. They held no answers but neither did they ask.

"Thank you. I am sorry too," Faramir replied, tone blank and yet somehow tight; as if the words were so hard they needed to be reigned. "The Master is?"

"In the treatment rooms, my Lord. Or at least he was a candlemark ago."

Faramir nodded once and walked quickly into the hushed and peaceful air that pervaded the Healing House. He followed the quiet corridors, turning by instinct right and left until he came, quite by rote, to the rooms where the casualties were brought. They held a few poor souls but none were his cantankerous and mouthy first lieutenant or the Houses's tall and saturnine chief healer. Where could Damrod be?

Minutes of fruitless search brought him back to the central door again and a far too welcome looking bench. He sat down heavily, so tired that all at once he could barely stand. The little food he had et was not enough to revive his flagging strength but it had been all he could get down. He had no appetite these days: not for sustenance or conflict.

Both left him empty but hurt to fill the void.

Faramir rested his head against his hands and tried to close his eyes against the images. that swarmed like thirsty midges before his eyes. That thing… the creature that assailed them was uppermost. Fear, cold and merciless, had ripped from its scream; sent tendrils of doubt to his very core. Elbereth, how many times had he made Mithros stand, turned and loosed an arrow? Sounded his horn in faint hope of rallying the men? His hands by the end had been so numb he could hardly pull Damrod up. The man had been dazed, thrown to the ground by his wildly plunging mount and retching with it, though for fear or injury Faramir had not been sure.

This was the reason for his present errand. One last duty ere he sought his welcome bed and the merciful oblivion of sleep. He had swayed with weariness and been dismissed, thankfully in truth, for he wished for more no more verbal sparring that tumultuous eve. There were things he could not, must not, say and he was not quite sure that in his state his Father would not see. And things he would rather not hear again…not a Nazgul's evil cry nor the biting words that cut as deeply as a sharpened claw.

Instinctively his mind shied from the hurt. Tomorrow's need is sterner.. As usual his Lord father was not wrong but respite would be hard won.

He dropped his eyelids down. Surely it would not hurt to rest for but a minute.

"Faramir! Thank the Valar you are back!"

A light voice, a woman's voice, had hailed him. How could this be? The last of the City's women and children had been sent away the day before. Could he dreaming already though he had not reached his bed?

Bleary eyes raised up. Lothiriel's sweet, heart-shaped face smiled back. She was bent over, one hand upon his arm, her dark cascade of hair bound up and hidden by a veil. But very clearly real.

"Cousin! I never thought to see you here. You are another marvel to walk out of the mind and into this uncommon day."

A slow smile spread along a pair of bow-shaped lips. "I assure you I am no shade. We were all so worried. Are you quite well?"
"Yes. I am a bit fatigued is all." *Is all.* How much those two words had to encompass, surely they would break. "And you are sight to light my day, dear heart."

Soft and gentle arms fell about his shoulders and squeezed hard around his chest. "You do not think I would let Elphir and 'Rothos have all the fun? Aunt Rini and I have come to offer our service to your Father. You will have need of healers here."

"Uncle is come? With his knights and men?" Faramir wanted to ask how many men-at-arms but he did not think his brain could tally properly in this state. The morrow was soon enough.

"Yes, Dol Amroth will help in any way. There was no need to leave us all at home, though I do admit he tried." Her grin quirked wryly. Faramir smiled back. He could imagine how easily his feisty little cousin dispensed that thought.

"Mareth can administer the town brilliantly in her quiet way, can handle the drunken mates who need stitching from connecting with the docks." Lothiriel's sea grey eyes twinkled mischievously for a moment. "And Chiron now commands the fleet. He is insufferable Fara. Puffed up and proud and too eager to admit that he is as anxious as a new recruit. How any of us will live with him afterward I cannot say."

Blessed, blessed Thiri. Fresh and light as a sea's calm breeze, she sat down beside him but did not remove her arm. Its weight felt welcome. Like a connection to a wider world of light and happiness he must not lose.

She glanced up and in her eyes he saw the first clouds reflected upon the ever churning waves.

"It is all too strangely quiet there, Faramir. Spring has come already. The first blooms are on the apricots and the air is sweet with scent and the song of returning birds. One would not think there are so many perils in the world." A single tear glistened on a long, raven lash. "Fara, I …"

"No…" His larger hand enfolded her smaller one and gave it an urgent squeeze. Her sorrow added to his own was something he could not hold.

"No, please. Do not. I have not the strength right now. There will be time later for us to hug and cry and say what must be said," Gandalf had spoken of it once. "*You can built a fence to protect yourself, but cannot keep the world from creeping in.*" Please gods…I need this fence to hold for just for a little while.

Lothiriel nodded, lip trembling, smiling bravely and little wan. She sniffed once and then the Princess he knew was back, regal and composed, gazing steadily into his eyes. "I forgot to ask: did you have an errand here?"

He laced tired fingers through her own and rose, pulled both of them to their feet. "I came to check on Damrod, my first lieutenant, but I could not find him. Can you help?"

"Damrod? Is he the Ranger with a dislocated shoulder?"

"Could be. I do not know exactly what they found." A black eyebrow raised. "He is grey-haired and craggy-featured. A little opinionated. He would not take easily to being nursed."

"I thought so! I walked into the ward to find Aunt Ivriniel arguing with a wounded man. He was insisting on getting straight up out of his bed though they suspect he has a concussion too." She quirked a smile in memory. "You should have seen it Faramir. Aunt Rini, bristling like a cat, demanding to know who was responsible for the man and he insisting he'd had hardly but a knock."
Faramir groaned and shook his head. That sounded exactly like the grizzled veteran. Too bad he had missed the choice display. He would have liked to see the man take on his tiny but indefatigable Aunt. "Yes that is most certainly him." At the sudden blush on Lothiriel's cheek he asked, intrigued, "There is more?"

Lothiriel giggled. "Oh yes. Aunt Rini was pointing out that seeing double was not a healthy sign when his eyes raked me up and down, said he was happy to see two of me!"

"What did she say?" Faramir asked, appalled but fascinated all the same. An unfamiliar but welcome lightness was slowly spreading in his chest.

"That if he didn't watch his mouth with Prince's Imrahil's cherished daughter she'd wash it out for him herself."

_Gods._ He had to laugh at that. The image of bird-like Ivriniel, bar of soap in hand, threatening a chastened Damrod was too much to resist. He tucked Lothiriel's hand through his arm and began to stride the corridor. "I had better find him before he says something he truly will regret. Will you lead the way?"

She did.

And he, long used to hoarding memories of truth and beauty as talismans against the dark, buoyed by that crystal fleeting moment, kept it safe and warm; sheltered for a little longer the flame of hope within his battered heart.

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Elfhelm watched the Riders gathered round the evening's sluggish willow fire, voices talking low, one grizzled oldster with a mouth-harp out doing his best to leaven the somber mood with song. There were few takers. On the morrow they would leave Rohan's plains behind. These were Eastfolde men and all had heard the news: orc-hosts were now marching through their home. "Ride on" Eomer had said and so they did, though none liked that it would be the Entwash and not their arms that defended hearth and home. It made them a quiet lot. The babble of the brook rose easily on the oddly warm night air.

He took another bite of the passably good mutton stew and watched one knot of men a little to his left. Aldric, good Captain that he was, had had a quiet word with his Marshall and now he too watched thoughtfully from under bushy brows. Neither he nor his second in command knew the young Rider added at the last minute to their eored but so far what he'd seen he'd liked. Derhelm followed orders, kept his kit and horse in shape, helped with the unofficial 'baggage' of a King's squire they somehow had acquired. Shame Eomer hadn't warned him of the twain, but then again, with them riding hard and fast there had been no time. So long as the lad kept out of trouble Elfhelm could not complain.

Therein was the rub.

The Marshall sighed and fished a particularly juicy morsel out, chewed thoughtfully for a while. The young blond Rider had been too quiet. Too quiet by half. Had not spoken a word that he could tell to anyone. And now Aldric had pointed out not once in the last two days had the lad stood back to the firelight, pissing a golden stream in imaginary privacy like all the other men. It was a Marshall's job
to know the condition of his men. A lad running for the trees meant he had a problem.

Elfhelm had just slopped up the last of the cooling gravy with a final piece of bread when the moment he patiently waited for arrived. Dernhelm rose, brushed the dust from his breeches and glanced furtively around the ring. Two quick paces and the small, slight Rider had slipped beyond the firelight. Vana's precious tits. Aldric was right. What was that? Fourth time today he'd seen the lad head for a copse of trees, the only cover in the willow thickets that gathered by low Sherbourne. Poor bugger. If it kept on like this by the time they reached Mundberg he'd be so weak he'd be tied onto his saddle.

Time he had a quiet word. Elfhelm laid aside his meal and caught his Captain's eye. At the younger man's quick nod he gave a gusty sigh and rose.

The last thing the company had need of was a greenhorn so sick with fear he could not fight, guts turned to water by the very thought of battle. He had seen it many, many times, but still he found he was surprised: had not taken this one for such. Something about Dernhelm's steely gaze below the helm said the young man had a reason to be there. Some score he had to settle or an ache that could only allayed by relieving a few dozen Orcs of their ugly, stupid mugs.

He'd seemed determined, not afraid.

Elfhelm walked quietly through the dark, heading straight for the darkened thicket where the young man crouched. For all his bulk, the Marshall could move quietly when he wished. He'd reached about twenty paces back without alerting anyone when he stopped. Elfhelm had no desire to turn voyeur: let the lad be done and he'd catch him on the return.

Through the trembling grey-green leaves he could just make out slim shoulders and boyish hips under the stiffer leather jerkin. They made the lad looked even younger than he'd first thought, averting his eyes hastily as slim fingers reached to pull the breeches down.

Bloody hell!

His turn was not quite quick enough. A flash of white and shapely backside caught Elfhelm's eye and with it realization dawned. Too round and broad by half. That was no man's scrawny ass.

It was a lass.

"Lady..?!" His quiet call was out before he had chance to think. The figure started but did not turned around.

"A moment." The woman hastily pulled her breeches up and moved farther into the trees.

It was the voice that gave Elfhelm the second shock. He knew it well. How in all of Morgoth's seven hells had she got here? "Eowyn!"

A branch bent low as the object of his startled scrutiny turned and walked back into the pale ochre light. At least thank the gods for that. The shadow that darkened all the land kept some things better hid.

"I did not get to thank you for your letter." she quietly began.

He cut off her words with a low impatient growl. "Aye, well you need not have come all this way just to let me know." Bema's balls. What did she think? That this was time for the harmless chit-chat of old friends at the supper board? This was no game. They were bound for war and she had just handed him an impossible complication. One that he could not just ignore.
"My Lady…why?" he asked, counting slowly in his head. He had to let his temper cool before he did something he would regret. "Why are you here?"

"Why are you?!" she retorted, all vinegar in the tone. "Old man, you too could be by your fireside yet you are here, protecting what you love. Why should I not have a chance to raise my sword?"

He snorted. Old man. That was rich. She was baiting him, for though he had the weatherbeaten, craggy face from a life lived long outdoors, he was still young: barely thirty-five and winters enough to know the pile of manure she'd put him in.

The conflict whirling through his brain must have showed upon his face.

Her father's stubborn chin raised just slightly up. "You cannot stop me."

Proud, defiant, wrapped in mail and leather, Eowyn looked just like a young Eomer. It nearly made him laugh. Both just as mule-headed and as stubborn as their sire, both passionate and impetuous. But stop her? Oh yes he could. He and Aldric could truss her up and send her packing her back to Edoras. It was so very tempting. But now also utterly impossible. The King's niece could not ride back the fifteen leagues unguarded and alone. Not with Orcs within the Folde and every man needed for the fight.

Damn. Damn. Now what was he to do? "Your brother and the King will have my hide for this." he growled, seeing the brief flash of worry cross her face. She had not thought of that. A quickly bitten lip was all the apology that he got. What did she think? That Eomer would be so reasonable as to assign all the blame to her? He would be lucky to survive with parts intact. Elfhelm was about to open his mouth and chastise her once again when the wavering grey gaze below the helm made his heart clench within his chest. Hair covered and helm on, he could not help but focus on the pale smooth cheek, on the long blond lashes fringing a stormy flash of grey. When had a face so young gained eyes that looked so old?

Years ago. Watching her back as a putrid worm watched her.

He reached to take her hand but Eowyn stepped back and quickly shook her head. She was in no mood to take the thoughts he had to offer: not comfort nor heartfelt common sense.

"Have they ordered you to send me back?"

"You know that they have not." His voice sounded remarkably level even to himself. "They do not even know that you are here. You are safe and far away in Harrowdale. Fulfilling the post that you have not yet deserted."

At least she had the grace to blush at that. The stubborn chin rose again. "I did not desert. I delegated it."

"What?!" Both meaty hands ran through his barely grey-flecked hair in purest exasperation. They were riding to certain doom and she pawned him off with pretty technicalities that would make a Mundberg lawyer smile?

"They thought it was but for an afternoon perhaps?" Bema, pity the poor sod when Eomer caught up with him. "Who?" he asked, but then just as quickly put up a hand to stop her words. "No..no do not tell me. I do not want to know. The less I know the fewer charges when the courtmartial comes."

A look of triumph briefly lit her face. She had seen him hesitate, and just like her fabled father, showed no mercy when weakness bubbled up. "You have to let me come."
"They will be out of their minds with worry to have you on the battlefield."

"Then do not tell them."

He raised an eyebrow high. "Oh so it will be much better to tell them when your body is carried, arrow-shot, to lay among the honoured dead? If so much as a scratch mars your pretty face my life will not be worth a mark."

"I do not intend to die."

Of course. No youngling did. They all believed that they would be the one to parry every stroke. That no horse miss-stepped or threw a rider to the cold, unforgiving ground. Trampled their own master in the mud. Elfhelm drew breath to call her out when of a sudden he could see. It was the way she squirmed. The way the small white fingers plucked at a loose thread upon her tunic hem. Just like a small child ready for a scold.

It was lie.

The clear grey eyes he had first thought bottomless, a deep well of pure courage and resolve, were merely empty. They held no hope nor wanted it.

To die was exactly what she had planned.

The realization nearly made him sick. Had somehow the years of fear and care driven her to despair? Had her grief for Theodred overmatched her wits? But no. It was not the face of unreason that coolly watched him now. This was clear and present choice.

A stiff breeze rushed through the grass and Eowyn shivered once. She had left her cloak by the fireside not expecting to leave for long. He reached up and unbuckled the knotwork clasp that bound his own,

This at least was something he could do: keep her warm… and safe… for few days more. If he sent her back, even if she made it through the hazards that lay behind, in this mind she would only slip away again. Better to keep her back in the line where less harm might come. Trust to their training and her pluck. Hope like a youngling after all.

*Though I will be out of my mind with worry too.*

A shrill yipping howl rose from the longer grass. Somewhere along the sandy bank a red fox was lurking, waiting for its chance to hunt. *And so are we.*

Horse tackle jangled nervously and a few soft voices uttered soothed words from close beside.

He turned unerringly to where a blur of dark tethered shapes blew great gusty huffs of warm moist air and raised his voice to carry a little far. "Dernhelm. Come eat and rest. The ride will be long upon the morrow."

Dernhelm stood a little higher and nodded once. 'Gea.' The dark green cloth was laid across shoulders far too narrow to keep it from the muck. He did not care. It was but a cloak.

He steered the company's newest Rider back toward the ruddy firelight with a heavy arm.

And a far too heavy heart.
Sorry this has taken so long. Updates will be much quicker from here on in. Am hoping for every 2 weeks. Thank you so much to everyone who has kudo'd and to Caroline for being such a wonderful faithful commenter. You keep me going!
A huge thanks to Annafan and Artura for their help getting these tricky chapters right.
Must a Captain always be a pawn? The White Bishop shows his hand but perhaps too late

March 10/11

'Much must be risked in war.'

With his father’s goading words ringing like a passing-bell, Faramir walked out of the shrouded hall and into the brown twilight of that false and dreadful day.

The Tower guard saluted as he passed. He nodded once, forced his shoulders to face the east and stood at the topmost step, looking out across the Pelennor. The town-lands were quiet and empty, shorn of their usual industry and brown for it was not yet truly spring. In the distance Anduin lay shrouded in the mist, Osgiliath’s fair ruined spires and graceful dome rose as spectres looming in the night. The sigh set a deeper chill within his bones: not of the body nor Mindolluin’s famous fogs but of remembrance.

A broken bridge. A bloodied moonstone. A high-prowed little boat. Moments in time he would not get back again, had not the leisure to think about, for all about him was rushing forward, inexorably, to its end. Could it be that by the end of that fateful day he would walk another hall beyond their shores? See his brother once again?

No….that way lay only a sickness of the heart and he had no time.

A sweet silver bell chimed the early morning hour from within the Tower and Faramir looked up. There was much yet to do, to organize the men and he needed to think, to move, to devise some strategy that would not see them tumbled like shells before a black and writhing wave. And so he passed down through the city’s circles, stopping first to see him men in the wards then at the barracks to speak to his Captains. There the sea of half-familiar faces were already scurrying to and fro.

Toric, Boromir’s Captain in Osgiliath, as he expected, had swiftly organized the men directly the order had come down. Madrill of course had grumbled loudly (and to his satisfaction blushed) about his swift promotion to Captain of their company. It was long overdue and was the one note of pleasure, the one good thing, that dispelled the taste like ashes in his mouth.
He carried his friend’s rare smile with him throughout the busy morning hours.

The eleventh bell found him down upon the second circle: the market street, now strangely quiet for all was to be cleared by noon that day and already the wains with the old, the sick, the women and children were on their way. He needed to speak with Duinhir and Hirluin, to discern what of their footmen might join his companies, and so focused was he on his present errand that he nearly missed the proud bones and skin like ivory, the bright auburn hair above the dusty, simple gown.

“Amerith?!”

The lady was the plainest dressed that Faramir had ever seen. Her dress was simple linen, her face had no paint or powder and a quill was tucked behind her ear. Streaks of dirt dusted one pale cheek.

“Darling. What a welcome sight.” As Amerith turned, parchment scroll in hand, her sudden smile lit the darkened day.

Heedless of the watching guards, Faramir scooped her into a swift, sure hug. “What are you doing here?” he asked. “I did not see you in the morning’s council?”

The lady pulled back, just enough to tilt her head and catch his gaze. The green eyes he knew so well flashed briefly, part annoyance and part amusement. “Denethor has at last tired of my dulcet tones. He has barred me from the hall.”

Faramir laughed, knowing there was a wild bitterness in the undertone. “Then you will not know that my censure is complete. That I am to do what even my brother failed to do. Re-take Osgiliath. With half the force and ten times the enemy.”

Her eyes widened, round and white with shock. “But that is impossible!”

“Indeed,” he replied, glancing around and suddenly remembering they stood within the street. He dropped low his voice for just the two of them. “Even now I go down to our fiefs and conscript more stalwart souls to what seems an exchange we can only rue.” He heaved a quiet sigh and tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “I must obey. But it is with a very heavy heart. Not least for what I may not live to see again.”
“Do not speak so!” Amerith cried, placing her dusty fingers across his lips to stop the words from tumbling out. He did not need to read her thoughts to know she was aghast at the bleak tenor of his words. “Tulkas might hear.”

“My lady, if we are relying on superstition to keep us whole then we are well and truly sunk,” He nodded to the detritus all around. The stalls of the market were being dismantled all around. Perched outside the stone walls of the Inns and stable-houses they were vulnerable. Well within range of the Enemy’s catapults and a hazard that must go. “I see that the City has made plans in the unlikely case we fail?”

She chose to ignore the irony in his voice. “Yes and first among them remove what ever we can that is flammable from the lower circles. We shall succeed if I can get these youngsters to pull in harness.” She nodded, mouth quirking slightly, at the team of young boys carrying spars of wood and heavy sacks to load a cart. “It should be no more difficult than spreading rumours at a ball, but I find I keep having to be somewhat more direct.”

This time his laugh was free of taint. “I have total faith you can coax any male to your whim.”

“Present company excluded.” The light grey eyes lit briefly at her retort but all too quickly turned serious again. “Fewer came from the outlands than we had wished. Word of the fleet from Umbar had sped before them.”

She nodded. “Yes I have had word from Lennart’s men. My nephew keeps a force to defend Lebinin’s fields and towns, though I suspect he would fainer see action here. He is young enough to see glory in the fight.”

“My Lord?” a young voice interrupted. One of her charges had paused beside and tugged lightly at his sleeve, shifting his feet nervously but waiting politely for attention.

“Yes lad?” he replied, eyeing the tall boy who stood, all bony limbs and thin, high cheekbones, dark hair hidden by a woollen cap. Something about him was familiar, but at that moment he could not think quite what.

“Begging your pardon, sir. I’m Bergil, Beregond of the Tower Guard’s son. My mam asked Father to bid ‘Valar guard and guide you’ Sir. But I thought, in case that he forgot…” The words that had poured in a rush drifted off.
Faramir smiled and out of the corner of his eye saw Amerith’s mouth twitch beside. Beregond most certainly had other things on his mind than greetings for his Lord. But the thought and gesture were very kind in day that had precious little kindliness about it.

“Thank you lad for your blessing and your toil.” Faramir placed one large hand upon a thin shoulder as the boy beamed with pleasure. “I should imagine your mother would have preferred you left with her. But we are grateful that you also work to keep the City safe.”

“Oh no sir. I wouldn’t hear of leaving. I’m nearly tall as da’s shoulder now. I can…”

What more Bergil would have said they never heard. Just then a shuddering cry arose. A winged shadow, a Nazgul, circled like some hideous hunting eagle high above and suddenly swooped low over the City just out of bowshot. Folk around cried out in terror or were struck dumb even as they stood. By instinct Faramir reached for the boy but Bergil only started hard: the brave lad held his ground where grown men quailed at the sight. Amerith, trembling, clutched his hand and together for a moment they watched the foul thing turn above, before, with a screech of poisonous despair, it broke off and wheeled away.

They were being watched and nothing could be kept secret very long.

“Quickly now,” Amerith finally found her voice and started her young charges out of their frozen state. “Load the carts and then away yourselves, back to the barracks.” Around, there was a flurry of coltish limbs and the lads redoubled their efforts, keen to be safe and out from evil prying eyes.

Faramir shivered, rubbed his hands along his sleeves, but did not break his gaze until the creature was the barest smudge of black above the dark brooding Ephel Duath. “The enemy too has need of intelligence but his methods are rather more direct. Praise be the thing is gone. The very warmth of my blood seems stolen away.”

Amerith nestled against his chest, willing a lightness she did not feel to seep into his clammy skin. “The days have darkened dear heart and you are a shadow of yourself.”

She raised up a hand and held his cheek in comfort. They both knew it was as much for her as him. “Get some rest if you can before you go.”

But he was already shaking his weary head, pulling her hands away, setting a distance between to ease the pain of separation. “We are in haste. They must know that we are coming.”
There will be no rest for any of us now but in the grave…

Of course Amerith read his thought. It was careless of him not to shield her from his weakness and now the tears began to fall, to rain hot salt through the dust upon her cheeks.

Valar. He did not want to leave her this way, heart-sick and believing he had no hope. “Do not mind me, I am not myself and weariness makes the world darker than it is.”

He had followed the heart’s bitter truth that he would have her think a lie with something not quite a falsehood and not quite real. She nodded, accepted it for all her due and raised her shoulders once again, every inch the proud duchess who also knew the bonds of duty.

“Those are my men that you lead Faramir of Gondor. Bring them home. Bring yourself home.”

“I will try.”

He walked on, down past the preparations for a siege he could not stop, trying his hardest not to shudder when a metal pole dragged across the cobblestone and sounded exactly like a sharpened claw.

Imrahil, Prince of Dol Amroth knew instinctively where he might find his nephew in that time. All was held in readiness below the Citadel. The companies armed and briefed. All that remained was for their acting Captain-General to lead them out, to desperately throw the dice and pray the coin was not too dear. He did not envy Faramir this command, and though the brandy bottle and glasses in
his hand were the excuse, there were things that needed to be said, some words of comfort given before it was too late.

It was all he could think to do.

As expected his nephew’s door was not locked. The older man slipped through and into the hushed and haphazard space, methodically picking up discarded clothes and scrolls as he made his way to the open terrace door and walked out into his sister’s winter garden.

The green and usually sunlit space looked south toward the sea (*not east, not ever east*) and held still echoes of her artist’s eye throughout. The flowers had been chosen for their winter cloak and colour, shrubs to stay green throughout the year, seed pods to attract the hungry birds. Over by the great cedar tree there would be the first croci of the spring. It was a lovely space but one that made his heart clench every time.

Spurred boots crunched softly on the torch-lit gravel path as the world fell away, back to a day when they had picked winter aconite and roses to lay about her feet. A day when his larger hand had gripped a little one, when his eyes had seen that there was another who understood all too well.

Now at least there was some semblance of a moment’s peace. The lofty helm of Mount Mindolluin lifted high above even if its snowy cloak was dimmed and the lost little boy of long ago sat, alone, upon the bench beneath the cedar tree. Now a man, full grown and with a man’s duty and his cares, the wise little boy still had uncommon wisdom for his years. And a heart to try to be what his proud father wanted.

Though neither of them always knew what that was.

Idly, lost in thought, Faramir shredded leaves from off a laurel switch: unheeding that the glossy bits now scattered across the perfect tidy stones. Imrahil smiled at the sight, reminded of the room through which he had just passed. Boromir had been tidy, had inherited the Hurin looks and need for order in his space. Faramir, though like him in looks, was the opposite in personality, was truly their mother’s son. He could picture Finduilas’s dressing table as girl: its scent bottles, creams, combs, and hair slides all a perfect jumble of enthusiasm. Just like her studio, that wild riot of colour and threads and pots and brushes. Too many ideas to contain their medium to a settled space.

How, he wondered, had the discord between his brother-on-law and nephew become so fundamental that the characteristic Denethor had seen in his love as endearing in his youngest son was became a personal affront? The father felt that for the son to be naturally untidy was a sign of weakness and a deliberate one at that. A failing to accept an important lesson, influenced perhaps by a slightly disheveled wizard.
He shook his head, regretfully. There was nothing to be gained by gathering wool. It was time to do what little he could to help.

“I thought I might find you here.”

Not waiting for the young man’s response Imrahil set the glasses on the bench, pulled the cork and poured two large measures out. Faramir accepted the amber liquid but did not wait for a toast or a benediction. He nodded and drank it down in one quick gulp, held out the cut crystal glass for a second round.

“It is my private stash.”

“I have no doubt,” he watched Faramir grimace as another large swallow burned fire through his throat. “It is very smooth for something so very strong.”

“That way you will remember it.” mused Imharhil, willing that for once it would help. He polished off his own and sat, arranging his swordbelt within his robes. “Mithrandir would scold me if he knew I was keeping you from some solitude. He is yet about the City, marshalling the defences.”

A small smile spread slowly across his nephews’s lips but he did not speak. The green withering pile at his feet held all the importance in the world, was toed silently with a scuffed and dusty boot.

“The City is emptied,” observed Imrahil, as if it were truly news, “Everything is in readiness. The Warden of the Keys assures me the Gates will be shut soon. Supplies and arms have been already stowed beyond Rath Dinen’s secret door.” He knew he was chattering, filling the weighty space of unhappiness and emptiness with words but he could not stop himself. It was not like him but he too was furious and in shock at what had happened in the hall. That Denethor had not given him leave to speak. Would not hear him defend the son he had just criticized.

The frustration bubbled up like a sulphurous spring.

“Sometimes I think he does not deserve a son like you.”

His sister’s sea grey eyes lifted quickly up, caught the glow of a torch lit against the evil twilight, and
in their bright, smiling light of gratitude something sharp and darker coalesced.

Imrahil knew he had the Gift. It was most often a painful thing: a sword without a hilt, as liable to cut the wielder as the foe and rarely clear.

He gasped, for he had thought the darker dreams were all behind.

A boy, pale faced and silent, lying limp within in his arms; raven-dark hair splayed across his shoulder. Dol Amroth’s pink petals of apricot fluttering in the breeze. Fear squeezing hard his heart within his chest as he strides quicky as he dares, calling for aid. The boy has jumped too many steps and landed badly. His sister’s smile of relief when he awakens in the morn.

The fragrant air dissolves. Fume and fear seep into his lungs and this time the hair splayed across his shoulder is streaked with grime and blood. Long limbs drape across his lap. He holds them tight for the steel that encloses them is not proof at every joint, blood from the arrows trickles down, makes rivulets in the dust.

“Your son has returned..”

When sound and light returned again Imrahil found his nephew, white-faced, staring at his shaking hands. The sight of a vision unnerved him too. The older man swallowed hard, clenched his hands tight together and declined the offer of another shot of brandy.

“What?” Faramir began, but he swiftly shook his head, did not wish to think right then what the vision meant.

“I wish that Boromir were here.”

The young man’s quiet words were not a statement of fear, of needing one who made one brave. Imrahil knew, for he felt it too, that it was but a simple statement of the heart’s need, of the need to name the name, to hear it free upon the air. For a moment it brought a memory of lightness, of the big, bold man who was keeper of his sister’s merry laugh. But then the hurt sank in, the sound cut and perhaps they needed to feel that too…

He raised a hand to squeeze hard a still linen-covered shoulder. It felt indistinct though he knew the steel inside. “So do we all. The world is greyer for his loss.”
A simple nod was all that time could give. “I cannot rest. I devise and discard tactics endlessly round in circles. How can I keep them whole Uncle? None of us is so foolish to think we can beat such greater odds. The retreat of those that we put out past the Forts will be perilous.”

“I can only surmise you simply must hold off as long as you are able…”

The younger man scrubbed a hand wearily across his face. The darkness smudged the shadows below his eyes a deeper tone of grey. “This fume, this storm of the Enemy, will make conditions dark and difficult.”

Imrahil’s lips twitched irresistably. “No darker than those within the hall.”

Faramir’s laugh was short and sharp. “It is a wonder they can work in there at all. Father’s scorn is so thick I am surprised the Council can breathe or see.”

Valar be praised. Perhaps the jest had helped, had brought a quiet breath before the plunge. He let the silence stretch, not too long for he knew his nephew was resolute as any man of war. “I know there will be little time after this. I have heard the rest of his plan, Faramir. Denethor will hold us abeyance, seven hundred men and horse, should the need for a sortie come.”

Faramir only nodded tiredly, rubbed a now trembling hand through his hair, a gesture so like Boromir’s his uncle almost gasped. The bottle and a glass were passed quickly back.

Imrahil opened his mouth to speak but hesitated, watched an uncommon third shot go down. He had been shushed by the Lord of the realm and had obeyed; felt keenly that to have kept his silence had let down the man who sat before him now. Whom he loved as if he were is own.

What could he say to help?

“I know, “ he began, voice a little rough, “it is our nature to not know our own beauty or our worth until reflected back by the mirror of another. Fara, he knows your courage…”

“Does he?” Something just a little fey glinted in the clear grey gaze. “Just yesterday, even as I sat trembling after Shadow, I let my fatigue overtake me for a minute. I asked a foolish question and got the answer I deserved.”
“Which was?”

“That he rathered that I had died and Boromir had lived.”

A sharp, shocked gasp rushed out and with it his sense of surety. “He did not!” Imrahil stared wide-eyed as the raven locks waved, nodding. “Nay, lad, none deserved that answer. I can only hope that he is overset by grief and black despair. He did not mean it Faramir, Not in his heart.” But even as Imrahil wanted Denethor’s words to be misconstrued but he knew it to be the biting pain of truth. Damn the man. Damn him to give so few and thin words of benediction yet heap scorn as though it had no weight. Must he undermine his son at every turn? What could possess the Steward to speak so and on the verge of battle?

“‘How can he not see that I have done all I could, that he asked, even against my better self?’ Faramir asked but then snorted wryly. “Another son of Hurin to disappoint their father. Prophetic name was it not? But he, I understand, was the one to choose it. Though I, unlike my namesake, will be loyal and obey my father’s orders for the battle.”

At that rejoinder Imrahil could not leave off the magnitude of what must be done. “‘Is this madness or genius? I do not know. Mayhap both. A little of each is needed when all is dark.”

“How should I accept it Uncle? From a regard so evidently warped? Perhaps he is truly mad with need.”

Imrahil quickly shook his head. “I know his thirst for knowledge, his endless hours in the Tower, and now his grief, have sucked the very life from him. He is old and worn before his time. But mad. I hope not for all our sakes. If Ecthelion were here he would say respect strength not power. That strength comes from conviction. If he is truly mad there is no longer conviction left within him. But I do not think so. Truly I do not.”

Imrahil meant every word, yet they did not stop him feeling sick at the thought of what Faramir and the men must do. He leaned over and clapped a steadying hand for both of them upon the younger man’s knee. “You lad have always had the luck of someone dipped in the Singing River. You will come through it.”

From high the Tower the hour bell sounded once again.
“I must go…..”

Both men rose and then reflexively looked to the east, to the blood red haze, the ever-growing
carmine thunder on the horizon

Silent words of strength were given through a handclasp.

“We will be ready. Listen for our horns when you have need.” And then, because one did not say
good luck to either a sailor or a soldier before the fight the Prince hugged his nephew hard and
wished him what he truly hoped would come.

“Be at peace,”

“I will try.”

It was the second time that day Faramir had said those words.

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The barrack’s stable was dim in the bleak false night of that darkened day, shrouded by the same
creeping gloom that hid the enemy, and with the muster of the men, quite empty.

Faramir was the last man to saddle up. He was late to find Mithros having rushed to ensure all the
captains had their orders and that every detail was in place.

He stepped cautiously around a discarded piece of tack and whistled to his mount. All through the
morning the gloom had deepened. Now, the only lights were the torches in the city and the myriad
red fires that dotted Anduin’s fair far shore. The thought of that once beautiful, rose-strewn,
colonnaded bank fouled by a thousand Orc-feet clenched in his heart. A thousand. If only it could
be that. The scouts who had bravely pierced the gloom had counted more than twenty thousand swarming like beetles on the shore. They were a black and heartless wave that would pour across the river, climbing over each other’s backs in their slavering haste to kill.

Hopeless, it was hopeless and well he knew it.

Mithros, catching his master’s bleak disquiet, shook his great grey head and whinneying nervously. The breeze was yet from the east, and a taint of smoke rode upon the wind and unnerved him as it did his rider.

“Shh..old friend,” he soothed, striving to put a tone of wry amusement in place of resignation and patting the stallion’s heavy winter coat. It had lightened with the years, was now more white than dabble-grey, and glowed ghostly in the gloom.

“The breeze is foul but no fouler than Renil’s hangover tonic. We both need to find our hearts in this.” He scratched lingeringly at the exact spot on the stallion’s poll that itched in the drying air of winter, grinned for a moment as Mithros’s warm huffing sigh rose in the cooler air.

At least there was one soul he could make happy in the world.

Faramir bent, tightened the girth carefully and straightened up, pulling at his collar with one heavy gauntlet. He had been ranging for so long that the weight of the heavy armor was uncomfortable, unfamiliar, and an unwelcome reminder of the last time he had fought in Osgiliath’s ruined streets. With his brother at his side.

For a moment he rested his forehead against Mithros’s warm musky flank, trying to gather his whirling thoughts.

As much as his father’s words had hurt, in his heart of hearts Faramir knew they were more agreed than not. He too wished to turn back that year, to be even now in some far flung valley while Boromir led the men, not wishing futilely that their last words had been ones of hope, or love or sweetness. For some it would have been a little thing, quite automatic, but for a father who held their crumbling world too tightly in his hands, it was, of course, too much. He might fail, might stain the river red with his blood, but history could not be turned.

You were just like me with one who was disappointed in you.

Faramir looked down, impulsively scuffed a toe against the dusty stones. “Nothing that men make is fated to last forever.” So Mithrandir had said. It was a silly impulse to wish to leave a mark behind.
His raised his heel again but before he could quickly erase the smudge he heard another scrape of boot.

A long black cloak hovered in the gloom. He had not expected a visitor and for an instant he thought it might be Imrahil again but the figure was too tall, too plainly dressed and the hand that reached to pull back the hood was older, lined by care and struggle of which he would not speak.

*Valar* not again.

His stomach sank. Had the morning’s words not been enough? In no mood to be followed by his father’s lashing tongue he turned to pointlessly to adjust Mithros’ cantle once again.

The startling soft touch of a hand upon his face drew all his attention up.

Denethor did not let go his cheek, the thumb that stroked once along his jaw was dry and calloused, caught in the stubble of the beard he had not had time to shave. Where and how were the first word’s that ridiculously came to mind. Denethor had not swung a weapon in many years but there was no mistaking the source of the roughened patch of skin. It was a sword callous. When in all the over-taxed hours of the Steward’s day had his father found time to train?

His father coughed and quietly cleared his throat. The light of a torch reflected in the inch of mail glimmered below his throat. Faramir looked up from that light to hold the shining silver gaze.

“I did not mean it to come out so…”

Hope bloomed at his father’s hoarse, low words. The son looked upon a face both familiar and unknown at once, searching for a sign, some augur of the truth. For the first time in many weeks the aged, noble brow he had bowed to looked smoother, somehow less set, as if an emotion other than desperate need and grief had crept in and ironed out the furrows. Could Imrahil, in his wisdom have the right of it? His father, known for his careful circumspection, had spoken untimely, had not meant what he had said?

“I could not speak before the council, could not reveal all that I knew, “ explained Denethor, eyes blazing like a meteor in the winter’s sky. “We must risk a move.. We need time, Faramir. If you can delay the attack by but hours we may survive. Even hours count. I have seen…. something.”
“What?” he asked, wonderingly, images of sails and kings and white-winged crowns flitting like motes of sunlit dust across his mind.

“I cannot say.” His father shook his head, raised his hands to grip like iron bars across his arms. “I do not ask this lightly, Faramir. I know the price that must be paid but I have Seen the Muster gathering. Rohan will come but there is so little time. You must do this. You are our House now.”

_Our house._

For a moment Faramir closed his eyes to ease the swift, aching pain. He was a fool. So wanted the touch, the words, to mean something more but here, even now on the brink of death, he was to his father but the House of Hurin. Not Denethor’s son. Here in the gathering darkness those fathomless eyes did not see _him_, only a pawn that had still to move. It would not have mattered had it been high noon on a cloudless summer day. No light could change the warp of his father’s poor regard. So much of a gulf now lay between that no word or act could bridge the gap.

Roughly he shook off his father’s grip, gathered Mithros’ reins into his hands.

Denethor stood unmoving, watched coolly while he backed the great warhorse out of the stall. The ring of Mithros’ heavier war shoes on the cobblestones echoed loudly off the walls.

Faramir moved a pace, led the stallion toward the faint light of the stable door, but paused. The quiet of expectation stretched. The silent void, the emptiness inside had set, hard as stone and nigh as chill. It was a salvation, could not matter where he was bound to go.

He bent his head, sighed and turned at last to hold the dark grey eyes, hard and glittering, in his lighter ones.
Spoke then because the numbness in his heart had spread and more than anything in that moment he needed to feel. Even if it all it was....was bitterness.

"I will do it Father. But not for you.

I will do it because I believe it may be right."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Knowing that the relevant chapter was a while back I thought I'd remind everyone of what Faramir refers to in the last scene. "You were just like me with one disappointed in you" refers to the conversation Ivrenna and Denethor had at Adrahil's funeral. That Echthelion mistrusted and resented Denethor because of his mother's actions, and now Denethor mistrusts and resents Faramir because of his mother's death and their similarities. Sometimes history repeats despite our best efforts.

Thank you so much to Caroline who commented last month and everyone who kudo'd. Your encouragement and comments are just a thrill.

Once again my thanks go out to the ladies of the Garden of Ithilien. To Annafan for beginning beta'ing my chronic comma problem (grin) and to her and Artura and Thanwen for their helpful comments and encouragement.

Next up:
Ch 23: Madril ponders their options as they wait for the assault, Gandalf counsels Faramir and Gondor's Captain finds a way to give hope to the men

Ch 24: Pawns of the Outcome: the retreat across the Pelennor and Denethor finally learns the truth...

and then...*bounces excitedly*

Ch 25: The Houses of Healing
Chapter 23

When you had lived with a man and fought beside him for time out of mind you knew the signs. The tense set of normally easy shoulders, the restlessness, the wary glances east when no one should be looking. The little details that another would not notice, Twenty years and countless battles, long hours of endless boredom and stark minutes of naked fear together had imprinted a knowledge of the man few others had.

Faramir hid it well.

He had learned, of course, at the feet of a master. A father and a Lord who seemingly felt nothing that troubled a lesser man. Could take news of utter ruin and unlooked-for victory with equal equanimity. It was, perhaps a family trait.

Madril stood below a beautiful ruined colonnade, watched their Captain-General so seemingly untroubled by the coming dawn lay a comforting hand on young Eldrin's shoulder and smile and jest with the new recruit. And knew.

Even Faramir in his heart of hearts had little hope.

"The Black Captain leads them once again."

The scout's fearful words had run through the garrison like wildfire through a steppe. The big newly-minted Captain cursed the need for ill-news to fly on wings and peered through the soupy dusk. Osgiliath's barracks-the long abandoned palaces and mansions of the city's once elite-had swelled to hold their allies too: bowmen of Anfalas and Pinnath Gelin, infantry of Lossarnach and Lebinin. So many of the faces in the gloom around were so very young; more mewling, earnest babes than hardened veterans, though all, he knew, were frightened. The only difference was the way it showed. The men of Osgiliath and Ithilien, already cursed by a taste of that black and vital dread, could not hold the horror back.

It was sheer madness what they sought to do. Too few to hold back the Black Captain's company, let alone his host. Would that they had half those who had last fought the Enemy at Dagorlad. Here on different, far greener, windswept plain they made scarcely half the van.

An image of Tolfalas, in spring, the cress and sea holly green and blue against warm golden rock swam unbidden before his eye. Born a fisherman, Madril had never taken to it, and now years of training had made him burly and strong, solid and confident in himself in woods and tumbled palisades that were once wholly unfamiliar.

A cup of thin and watered cider was raised to his lips and a wry smile replaced the standard frown. He knew himself still quiet as most Belfalas men were, more quiet than Annwn would like sometimes, but there it was. She and the girls would be there by now: to their childhood home, though they both had been so long upon the rock of Minas Tirith the island's flat grey shingle would seem foreign still. Home was the Refuge first and the White City next, not a lazy, salt-bleached, sun-baked isle. The Captain had told him the Steward had evacuated all the women and children, knowing a siege might come. Would even Dol Amroth be safe if they did not achieve what they set to do? He doubted it. The little distance to the island brought little comfort.

Eldrin's sudden laugh and booming jest rang out. Madril watched the lad's grey eyes, too bright and eager, and felt a pang. His old weathered heart clenched painfully to remember the bonny, tearful smile on his daughter's face as he had waved them all goodbye. Could it really be a scant six weeks
ago? Eldrin was a good and steady lad. A man could be proud to call him son-in-law and he would, he knew, make Eliane very happy. Just as he and Annwn had been in their own comfortable, familiar way. A slow smile spread along chapped lips, creased the laughter lines that gathered like crow's feet corner of his eyes. Well, not too comfortable for all that. Annwn's nut brown and open, merry face swam before him. He flushed and smiled as other, more private, memories swirled like scattered leaves.

Faramir moved on. There were too many things to do, too many demands for the Captain-General's precious time to spend too much of it with a single lad, however preferable it was to briefings.

Madril watched Eldrin thoughtfully in his wake. The Ranger Captain knew he knew his job. Knew his men and all their mounts. Knew to watch for the fear that took the younger ones. The smooth boyish face before him was taut and grim: eyes white-ringed and staring. The exuberance of youth had swiftly given way to the nameless fear. The one that could make even veterans break and run. Throw arms away and run madly from that thing.

"The fewer men the greater share of honour" That had been Eldrin's keen response to Faramir, but Madril shook his shaggy head. Nay. That was a young man's fancy. Perhaps he had become too much the grizzled oldster, but how much more of war had he seen? Nigh forty years. Each battle and each skirmish he could still recall. The useless waste and waste of life.

Courage. Was it standing here, the eve before a battle and putting blinders on? Honing and sharpening one's kit, ignoring with keen attention the rising risk? Or was it to go against a superstition so ingrained it had become a soldier's second nature?

One did not speak aloud of death before a battle.

That night Madril, with Eliane's sweet and shining face swimming before his eyes, found courage in the waiting dark to utter a fervent prayer. Lips moving, head bowed and eyes shut tight.

A pledge. A trade. Life for a life.

It was all that he could think to do. Make sure the whispered words ascended to be heard by one eternally steadfast and valiant.

Tulkas, Lord of laugh and golden light…. hear my prayer… Bring him home.

~~~000~~~

The darkness had reached its full with the setting of the moon. Gloom and dread weighed heavier on men's hearts: it could be heard in a fitful, futile shuffling of blankets, in the faint scrape of boot on stone as the sentries on the ramparts paced restlessly at their watch.

It was already a more dangerous world than the night before. Away in the murky dim the host from Minas Morgul had gathered and was drawing nigh to Osgiliath's eastern shore. Swelled by ranks of Haradrim, it had not been a silent assignation. The sentries knew full well what lay in wait and the night had been punctuated by restless anxious twangs as another archer saw fit to a test his bow. But not too many. The morrow's need would be harder still.

Faramir sat upon a tumbled block, gazed past the cold stone of a merlon and out over the river he knew so well. Blearily, he rubbed a hand across his face, wiped the stubborn remains of sleep out of his eyes, and forced himself to take another bite. Madril's fierce admonitions still rang guiltily in his
ears. The cider and the hunk of bread had been all he could accept gracefully and now the crust turned leaden as he chewed and the cider burned like the worst of Anborn's still. Better that the extra morsels had gone to a more eager hand he thought, wondering where his appetite had fled. Nerves or tiredness it seemed, could chase hunger like a wolf a wounded stag.

The sky above was lightening to just pre-dawn, the barest tint of less black to a murky grey, enough to see the shape of the city coming back. A few songbirds saluted the morning that would not come and he listened, amazed, to the delicate trilling from a nearby climbing rose. Abandoned by Men but not Manwë's capricious airs, Osgiliath was half-clad in green, like some regal cloak for an ancient dowager. In another time and place the rising chorus from the pale green buds presaged the spring. Perhaps yet it did.

Sauron might command the stinking clouds from Orodruin's vent but not yet the turn of Arda's seasons.

Already the companies had begun to rouse and the empty courtyards were filling with quiet fortitude. The breath of men and horses rose up in the still, chill air to form gusty clouds that could not be disguised. Breathing alone should not be so very hard but for them all there was no deep steadying breath before the plunge, the brown air was too thick with fume and did not give. It mattered not. The Enemy knew full well where they were, had overwhelming strength of numbers and the luxury of time. They had not even bothered to irritate their foes. No stray arrows strove to pick off Men upon the wall. The disdain was almost as thick as the foetid air.

Gondor's reluctant Captain-General stayed where he was because for one pure liquid moment nobody needed him. To be alone had become as unfamiliar as the weight of the heavy armor and Faramir savored it: watched a busy chickadee poke a twig into an unused arrow slit.

Tried to decide at last what he felt about the city more, anxiety or longing.

Osgiliath would be the site of battle once again. Would be lost, again, and though it would fall, though that eventuality could not know be stopped, some small part of Faramir's heart hoped that it would not be impossible to regain. That imagining her ruined dome remade once more, the symbol of their struggle, was not a fever dream.

He had touched its western wall of grey weathered stone the eve before and seen her proud and high. Was it but his yearning for the city to not be a symbol; of a foothold in two kingdoms: the one fading and the one already lost that made her so hard to lose? Ruined wonder, a memory of beauty, showing merely how far they were to fall not an emblem of greatness to hold against the dark?

Now, in his mind's eye Faramir saw only the tiered stone looming high, bright sun casting shadows between the now dark columns, and wondered painfully if there ever would be somewhere that did not hold a memory of the one who rode away.

He sent his own heavy sigh into the dark and as on so many other still watches of late let thoughts of Boromir steal in to fill the silence and reflection. Crystal and clear, pure and cutting, he remembered the water shining in the little boat. The glimmer of hope and light and peace. What bare weeks before had felt an image of sharpened glass now seemed a balm for none of them would be treated so should they fall in the city's ruined streets.

"My Lord." Toric had approached so silently Faramir was startled out of his reverie, had not heard the man until he cleared his throat, waiting patiently to be noticed. The veteran captain's mouth was set in a grim, hard line. He knew what it meant but Faramir was reluctant to give up his vision and the boat. To give up a hard won solace, painful though it might be.
Just a moment more brother, please.

He looked east. The light was still unchanged, it dragged at them all, but now the wind was rising. The dark grey was become grey-brown. Dawn, such as it was, had come. Farther away the mulish clouds obscured the slopes of Ephel Duath. His heart contracted for a moment for he could no longer remember what they looked like uncloaked in shadow.

"Mountains should be beautiful Toric, do you not think?" He managed, just, to keep the weariness from his voice.

"My Lord?" The man sounded puzzled, uncertain where his commander's thoughts could go. "The scouts report the sound of oars upon the water. The men are ready for your order."

Faramir could only nod. So it is begun. Soon the blessed quiet would fill with a storm of sound: of many many thousands of marching feet, of pounding hooves and ragged cries, the clash of steel. It would be the sound of the ending of their world.

Reluctantly he drained his cup, looked for a moment at the dregs and set it down upon the stone. "I will come down directly. Tell the archers to hold fire until my call."

Toric saluted and strode quickly back to the rampart stair. It would not take the flotilla long to reach the range of arrow-shot and Faramir yet had a some hope they could reduce the wave of filth a little bit.

Before they organized a retreat.

He rose, bent to pick up his heavy gauntlets that lay beside and from the corner of his sight caught of the Dome of Stars again. It had taken a plague of fever to rid the once grand city of her people. By that eve a plague of the Enemy would have it overrun, would deface the grand marble walls with filth and gore and soot.

By the Valar's grace he would never have to imagine Minas Tirith so.

Osgiliath was lost.

They had known it should be so and yet it hurt, felt like a death on all their watch, and then, as if that pain was not enough, not sufficient grief lying heavy on their hearts, more ill news ran on swifter feet.

Cair Andros had fallen, too.

The Causeway Forts were filled with exhausted, battered men. Behind, for now, lay the noise of the day's interminable, futile battle: the terror-filled cries of man and beast, the ring of steel, the snap of flame. Ahead rose the sound of desperate effort: the scrape of stone as the last flammable material was moved out of arrow-shot, the hammering and crash as the main bolts of the great gates were driven home.

The air was rank with the scent of blood and sweat, fatigue and fear. The men were drained. They had covered, step by backward step, scarcely more than a league but it felt surely like ten.

How ironic it had taken the entire day to lose so little ground.
And near three hundred men.

In the guardhouse's makeshift surgery Renil paused; from long habit used his elbow to sweep a lock of hair out of his eyes, and bent again over the gash in the young soldier's calf. The wound was deep but not too long; an Orc sword most-like; not from one of the curved blades of the Haradrim, but still it took a bit of work to close. Silently he thanked Este that the lad (a long way from Lebenin's soft fields judging by his green and gold livery) had swooned at the first bite of the needle. There was no jerking as he stitched neat and quickly, bound the wound and moved on to the next. And the next. And the next after that. Too many fresh-faced and pained faces to be counted. Hour after hour he patched those he could with every scrap of thread to be had and when that was gone stripped the bows of broken bowstrings and boiled them clean.

"You let me know if your fingers become too cold," the healer told the latest case, a green-eyed pikeman from Nimrais whose forearm had been smashed. Renil tied off the bandage tight as he dared, checked his patient's fingers (warm enough) and rose, stretching tired, stiffened muscles. The cup of water passed by a runner boy was a grateful boon. He sipped and surveyed the scene: tried not to let the biting rats of doubt nip hard at his tired brain.

The sea of wounded stretched out the door and spilled over the once sunny forecourt.

There were at least as many as there had been lost upon the road. Hundreds. They had only gained the Rammas and already a few hundred men were lost by his rough count. It was too many to be borne. The Enemy had toyed with them as a cat would a mouse, lapped at their heels and made them pay in blood and pain for every step to safety.

Sighing, he drained the cup and leaned against the wall's rough stone, closed his eyes for a moment and tried hard not to see again the faces of the ones he had had to leave. It made him angry, made a fury bubble up that set his fingers shaking and that surely would not do.

Grimly, he tried to breathe, to steady his fraying nerves and focus on the only consolation: the filth had been made to pay in kind. The courage of Gondor's men and their Captain had been something to behold. Not a man Renil knew had less then half a dozen kills, many had many more. He himself, had managed five.

They had been valiant and strong and still had barely held together. And had farther still to go to gain the City.

The thought made his stomach twist. It seemed an impossible, hopeless task, and yet, as Renil had watched his Captain-General earlier that eve, he knew there was none other whom he could imagine following through it. Faramir, surely more tired than any of them here, had not been still in all the hours since they passed the gate. He was everywhere at once, pressed by need to secure all that they still held, taking word from the scouts, laying a steadying hand the shoulder of a man still white-faced from a Nazgul's cry.

His lieutenant, from long experience, kept half an eye on their commander (even now in the late eve still calmly barking orders) for though Faramir sported a slash across his brow, (and who knew what other hurts) seeing to it would be the last chore that he would attend to, something to be handled after every other need had been set to rights.

From the looks of things that would be just before he mounted and led a charge again at dawn.

Renil pushed off the wall, passed his cup to another boy and gave word to the head surgeon he would be back in a trice. He was due a break, had been offered one just an hour past and so now he walked quickly out of a room hazy with muffled pain and into the torchlit courtyard. Or walked as
quickly his own hurts would allow—a desperately parried blow from a mace, long hours in the saddle and working crouched upon the ground had made him feel like six and eighty not thirty-six.

Rubbing disconsolately at his side he pushed gingerly past a knot of men in the livery of the Tower guard and spied a familiar grey-haired form in mottled green and grey. Madril had refused the heavy armour offered in Minas Tirith claiming they had nothing in his size. Renil suspected he had merely let it go to some other younger man.

"Mad have you seen Faramir?" he asked, glancing round quickly and lowering his voice. They were with the bulk of the army now and belatedly he remembered the easy familiarity of the Refuge was worlds away.

"What?" The big Captain frowned and shook his head, gestured to his ear "Can't hear you lad. Damn ears still ringing from t'heathen's bursting dart."

"Have you had that looked at?" Renil asked, speaking louder and stretching on tiptoe to peer at Madril's head. Worryingly, there was a trail of crusted blood below his offside ear though no outer damage that he could see.

Madril gingerly shook his head. "Not yet."

"Be sure you do." He hoped the admonishment and stern frown would have some effect on Madril's stubborn self but in truth there was not much that could be done if his ear had burst. Still it was Renil's rule that any injury should not be ignored unless they were actively under attack (and sometimes not even then) and that brought him back to the immediate errand at hand. "Have you seen the Captain-General? I need to see to his hurts."

"Evading you, is he?" A low chuckle rumbled in the burly chest. They both knew Faramir's impatience with weakness was focused only on himself. Madril gestured upward toward the north tower's parapet. "Up on the ramparts with Anborn, gauging the state of things behind."

Renil clapped a hand on a leather clad shoulder in thanks and turned to mount the tower stair. The twin towers of the Forts were manned by the keenest-eyed of the men, mostly Rangers that he knew, peering out into the dark and alert for the closing of the Enemy's long claws. How long before the filth breached the Rammas wall and poured in around, caged them in their grip? He hoped it would be at least some hours yet: the work of loading the wains with injured had not yet begun and even an hour or so of sleep would keep the men stronger on their feet.

With a quiet nod here and there Renil made his way along the narrow walkway until the familiar tall but lanky form came into view. Faramir had left off the hated armour plate but was still clad in the black and silver surcoat and gambeson. In the eerie dark the moonstone of the Captain-General's signet ring shimmered faintly, lying still on a chain against the heavy fabric. Their beloved Captain may have assumed the mantle of the command but not the trappings: he had eschewed the ring, the sable cloak and the heavy, fulled-winged helm.

And they loved him for it.

"My Lord?"

He watched, lips twitching in amusement, as Faramir turned and his hand went to his brow. As if just noticing he had been cut. As if the healer would be fooled.

"Ren…I."

"Was coming, yes I know." Eventually. It was no lie. Faramir did not lie but sometimes he needed to
be held still long enough to see the truth. The cut, small but deep had been bound crudely, had not fully knitted shut. The bandage was red and soon it would fully soaked.

"Let me take care of it. It will be a distraction on the morrow." Renil explained. "Drip down into your eyes. Obscure your view and the helm is bad enough."

A quiet chuckle met his observation but Faramir did not resist as the healer directed him to sit against the wall. He leaned back and rested placidly enough as clean bandage and needle and thread were readied; gasped softly as Renil brushed the sweat-soaked hair out of his eyes and wiped clean around the cut.

It was telling that it was not the bite of the needle that drew the first gasp but another human's touch. After several moments work the lieutenant was about to conclude the man was worryingly numb when a harder pull of the thread made Faramir flinch and curse.

"My Lord, keep still."

"Shall I swoon?" asked Faramir, forgoing a raised eyebrow in light of the quiet request.

"What, like Damrod earlier when I stitched a slash across his groin?"

Blessed Este it was a thrill to see a grin light that tired face. "Thank you, lieutenant. I shall keep that bit of intelligence until it is of most worth."

Renil tied off a third stitch and wound a clean bandage carefully around. He sat back on his heels and caught his friend's grey gaze. "Any other ailments you'd like to report?"

"Other than an irritating tendency to need to close my eyes?"

Renil inclined his head and shrugged expressively. "Only one remedy for that."

The resulting snort was disdainful of his prescription. They both knew how likely it was that the Captain-General would seek a bed. The circles below his eyes would just blend into the night.

"What word from Osgiliath?"

Faramir's gaze flicked warily into the distance. Loud booms from tumbling stone and raucous cries carried on the night air. "They seem to like what they have found. They could have pounced by now but instead are remodelling their new home." He sighed and accepted the proffered hand to rise.

Renil tidied his materials needlessly in his pouch while the drooping shoulders were straightened once again. By the time he looked up Faramir had settled and tied his rough-cut hair back out of his face. They were neither of them as young as they once were, but only Renil's dark locks had streaked with grey since the day they met on a muddy field of battle not far from where they stood.

"Lieutenant I would like you to go with the wains." The quiet request was unexpected; the protest automatic.

"But you need medics…"

"No." Faramir's careworn face became ineffably sad. "Tomorrow when they win the Forts and take the Rammas those who still need healers will be back within the city."

Because the tide of the enemy will be too great. The unspoken words made Renil's stomach churn sickly but he accepted the candor for the precious trust it was. A lie which was half a truth was the
There were those who would not survive the night much less the wains, and those who could not be moved... Poppy would be a mercy. No disabled man would be left to face the nightmare of thirsty swords.

"Will you go, find out how much poppy we do have?" The lips were set in flat and hard line but Faramir's eyes were pained.

Renil was about to give a quiet yea when a tall, ghostly figure separated itself from the turret's shadow.

"No. You need not take on that burden too, my young friend."

"Mithrandir!"

He gazed in awe had at the fabled wizard, glowing softly moon-white in the murky dark. His eyes were like two stars twinkling brightly, bravely, in a night of storm and cloud, and his small, enigmatic smile made the man's heart lighten for the barest moment.

Even the Captain-General stood a little straighter as a gnarled hand was clasped upon his forearm. "You are come..."

"Yes... and it seems I am just in time." The lines of exhaustion carved sharp and deep in Faramir's face softened the barest bit. "There is much to be done ere this long night is through but not that. Not yet." He turned to the healer and raised a long white brow in query. "Lieutenant, would you bear a message for me?"

"Of course, my Lord. Anything."

"Tell your Warden, the chief in care of the wounded, that I will come down to tend with all when the Captain-General and I have taken council?"

"I will. And gladly milord!"

As Renil, light of limb for the first time in all that day, hastened to do the wizard's bidding, he marveled at their luck. Bless Nienna for her mercy. Some men said he was ever a harbinger of ill but in the young healer's brief experience Mithrandir always appeared when there was most need.

The bleak words, spoken low so that the guardsmen did not hear, were the wizard's first troubling clue. A shadow had spread to even Faramir's steady heart.

"We cannot hold them more," he murmured, scrubbing a hand wearily across his face. "By tomorrow's eve, if not sooner still, the host will be at the City's gates. It is too far."

Mithrandir took in with concern the lines of fatigue, the grey, waxy pallor to the young man's cheeks. They both knew he did not mean the distance across the Pelennor. Ninety leagues lay between Minas Tirith and Edoras: the distance was great and the time they had was a noose, slowly shrinking around the City's neck, but hope was not lost. Not yet.

"That may be my friend," he said, mildly as he could, striving for the studied reason that swayed his
pupil in the past, "but Minas Tirith has been readied well. It can withstand some days of siege. And I will guard the wains. They will be untroubled by evils from the air."

"We lost more this day than even I dared to fear. We are too few. I cannot hold them the whole way. And when…He… comes" a shudder wracked the trembling frame "….the Gate might as well be hundred leagues away."

Mithrandir narrowed his gaze as the dark head shook in denial and drooped again. For Faramir to be so..defeated... was something he had not seen before. What words had passed between the Steward and his younger son? Though the father brooked no advice from wizards this was most unlike the man he knew.

"It is indeed a cruel irony of Sauron's design that the pale, grasping king, he who in life instilled so little in his men, neither loyalty nor admiration, instills such nameless dread in mortal men. But He is not omnipotent Faramir. The Witch-King does not send all hearts flying before his sight."

"Not all…but far too many. They are afraid Mithrandir and I do not know what to do to help them."

"You give them hope, Faramir, and courage just by your resilience and your heart."

"I cannot give them what I doubt I have myself."

The wizard started at the unexpected words. What had transpired that long day to render his young friend so? Faramir had been grieved but resolute when he set out. Cautiously, he placed a hand upon the bowed shoulder, ready to shake sense into the man but then saw something that gave him pause. Faramir had lowered his head, close to tears, and was struggling for control. It was the exhaustion. It must be. Or was it? The light grey eyes were fever bright and the Steward's son shivered in the gloom. How long had the Rangers been under Shadow? How many times had the Wraiths hunted overhead?

'You taught me well Mithrandir," Faramir went on bitterly, "I know my lore. What hope do mortals have? We are trapped this side of the Sundering Sea. The Eldar can retreat to the utter west should all go ill. But we? We are barred save from Namo's halls and must suffer here. Our people are the ones who will fail and be lost to the knowledge of the world."

What was there to say to that? The wizard shook his head, dismayed. Never more than now had his Master's charge seemed so important. Thou shalt rekindle hearts to the valour of old in a world that grows chill.

"That is not foreordained, Faramir, and I think that you will find that those who followed Gil-galad once will not abandon Men even now." For the barest of moments one who had learned pity at Nienna's feet, in a garden washed by her crystal tears, let the light of Valinor, its white and pure fire, kindle in his eyes.

"You are not forsaken Dunadan. Despair and darkness exist only in relation to the light. Without one there cannot be the other. The light will not end and Arda will turn ever in the music though it be marred; though it changed from the first."

"Have you heard it?" The grey gaze raised up to his and the tiniest tinge of eager energy crept into the Captain's weary voice.

"Yes…" Of course a Maia, born into the beginning of the world, had heard. It was his most cherished memory: the sound of pure joy and light unmarred by the hand of jealousy. "It is beautiful. Though none can understand truly what it means in these Years of the Sun. Those who hear an echo
of it best are they who seek joy in the saddest places. Seek hope within the dark….

Faramir nodded slowly, allowed himself to be clasped in Mithrandir's rough embrace, suffused with warmth and the hopefulness of another time. The young face, for the nonce, was less strained and his body no longer shook like a leaf in a heavy wind.

"I will try…"

"And the music be in your heart."

That night the cloud and shadowed cover broke: let the waxing moon dance with the brilliant stars, slow and stately in Tilion's shining arms. What followed did not become the stuff of legend like the White Lady and the Witch King. Or the Ringbearer and his gardener. No one tells legends of retreats, however hard they are fought, however bitter and difficult the march.

Those whose lived it, step by blood-soaked step, remembered many things. For some it was the horror of the black-tide that swept inexorably on. For some it was the maddening, hate-soaked cry as the Nazgul stooped to strike again. For a Steward's younger son it was the unexpected beauty in the dark. The endless flickering torch flames of the Enemy, glowing red, unending little rivers of light that were beautiful even if one knew whence they came.

Faramir's hands gripped tighter on the parapet as he pressed his forehead against cool stone, sucked in a deep and steadying breath. Below in the courtyard the men waited, silent, bows and spears in hand, swords heavy at the hip, ready for his command. Madril stood, tall and patient as a tor. And like a tor, disinclined to rush. For once it did not help. It was time: he could delay no more, but there was, perhaps, one last thing that he could do.

In the quiet of the night he had seen the swiftly stifled fear. Heard the whispers. Heard clearer still the thoughts of pain, dismay and panic, for he was so very very tired and shielding all the time was a luxury of energy he could not afford. It did not take his gift to be aware, to see what was in their hearts. It was in his too, however resolutely he shoved it down.

But to hear it, openly, from Damrod, that was what had filled him most with dismay.

"The days of Gondor are numbered, and the walls of Minas Tirith are doomed."

He had done all he could in the early morning muster, moving among them with an arm-clasp here, grasp on the shoulder there, words of praise and encouragement for men whose lives, like his own, forfeit as pawns to a Steward's seeming whim.

(Not a whim. Please not, he thought, remembering a light flickering in black polished stone, spears tipped like fire by the Sun.)

They could not do this without some shred of hope. What could he give but what he already had himself? Though the Steward had not seen fit to tell any man, save his son, of his precious vision, it was time to not hoard it to himself.

His voice, at first, was thread-thin but soon gained in strength. All the men were silent, straining to hear their Captain-General one last time. Mithrandir stood to one side, not smiling but nodding gently and that in itself gave Faramir the heart.
“This is hard, aye. We are the gate where the hardest blow will fall. It is dark above us, yet the Enemy does not direct the circles of the world. Not Anor nor Ithil, they ride still above. Just so he does not direct us, men of Gondor: our hearts and swords are free.

You know of the errand my brother set out on, of the vision, the gathering darkness and thunder in the east, against which, in the west, a light was set. We are that light. The honour and hope within our hearts.

The Men of Rohan, who swore the Oath of Eorl to our longfathers of old, they will not fail us. We must not fail them—must make sure our fair City stands, even if on its knees, ere they come. Each step we take today, each hour that passes ere the Enemy reaches the City gate, they come closer.

We must prevail. We shall prevail. And there will come a king again.”

The sound of pikes on stone and sword on shield was deafening.
Chapter 24

Captains, kings and knights: all now are pawns in a match set long years before

March 13.

The night was still and heavy. No breeze jostled the stiff arms of the great dark pines, no starlight pierced the veil of the Enemy. Only the soft muted jangling of hobbled harnesses, the voices of men speaking low as they passed around cold rations, stirred the deepening mirek for no fires would be lit.

The host of the Rohirrim lay camped warily for the night. Unused to a deep green canopy overhead, man and beast alike were unsettled in their skin. Now and again a Rider would pause, cock an ear and shake his head. The dense litter underfoot was dusty and thick as a feather bed, it absorbed their rustling, but not so much that it blocked the faint drumming from the wooded hills and low shoulders of the mountain-steps. It would throb like a startled heart in one spot and then swiftly fly to another peak, surrounding them like watchful eyes of a chaperone upon a courting pair. The mounts shifted and stamped nervously on the uncertain undergrowth, raising a musk of horse and sweat and earth into the air.

They may have lacked light but not mud and for this Dernhelm, for one, was thankful. 'He' was busy- bent down slathering fresh camoflage on Windfola's fetlocks. The scrub on the plains and underbrush of the forest had scraped off quite a bit of the horse's disguise and though the forest was dim as the shade behind the Deeping Wall (and disguise would perhaps not matter now) still the Eored's newest Rider bent, running the dark sticky muck over Windfola's trembling hide.

"Be easy brave heart." The quiet words were soothing. Both of them were a little careworn and nervous in this new space, unused to dark branches and darker shadows. They were jittery and on edge, anticipating the fight to come and fatigued after four days in the saddle. Eowyn used the opportunity to run her hands up and down Windfola's legs, across each hock and cannon, searching for signs of heat or strain. She had exercised the great grey as much as her duties had allowed but it could not replace the long endurance runs practised by the other's Rider's mounts.

She scratched lightly across Windfola's lighter blaze, mumuring praise for her friend. "You are a wonder, carrying two of us," she whispered, though in truth the little hobbit really was no great burden. Between them they made just her brother's weight in armor and Firefoot bore him untiring for days. The thought of Meriadoc made her feel a little guilty for she had not spoken to him for days. He must feel lonely and at a loss, caught up in the swirling mass of the Eored and understanding little of the tongue of the Mark. It was unfortunate but she dared not speak. Especially when the soft night air could carry sound to many ears. Her voice was low and throaty for a woman and she knew many of Elfhelm's Riders. They were the King's household; would surely know her voice. And Elfhelm at least, had spoken to the 'bag' that 'Derhelm' carried in the common tongue and she was grateful for his effort.

For Eowyn to be silent for so many days had been surprisingly not so hard. There was now no need to endlessly cajole her Uncle. No need to joust with the Worm in words, no need to be on edge every moment of the day, running excuses in her head to have ready when the oily creature appeared, obsequiously bowing at her elbow.
It was a relief to mind only her own thoughts, to let go of cares and duties she had worn so long they had dug welts into her soul.

Even if it was to perhaps give up the life she knew.

Eowyn shivered a little in the chilly air. Time to move. She wished to hear a little of her Uncle's councils and for that she needed an errand to get a little closer. Silently she led Windfola over to a stand of woody hawthorn and hobbled him. It was the perfect spot: behind Theoden's back but within earshot. It was dark enough in the dim that with her helm and hair tied up she had no fear of recognition. Plenty of the other Riders afterall were still dressed to ride.

Theoden's blessedly strong, deep voice carried easily, speaking of the scouts who had not returned and the host that camped near Amon Dîn. It was not good news. They had not the time to fight their way to the Forannest and already had been days upon the road.

Even as Eowyn stood and listened, heart in mouth, nervously plucking at the shrub's soft red bark, she heard another voice from beyond the dim torchlight.

'It is all dark, but it is not all night.'

Deep and guttural, the sound was a remnant from another time and stirred a half-forgotten memory: Eomund, smelling still of horse and sweat, handsome face lit by the fire's glow, telling her and Eomer tales before they sought their beds.

The Wild Men of the Wood were legends and fables come to life. It was the chief of the Drúedain who sat before Theoden now, black eyes sharp as obsidian, troubled by the Darkness that crept inexorably through the skies.

She listened, buoyed by his halting words. It seemed there was a long forgotten path, a wain track through Drúadan to Rimmon, forgotten by time but not by Wild Men. One that need not pass by the Enemy's blockade.

Eowyn stilled, now more eager to catch his meaning, for the little man had turned and the words carried not so well. Only a few snatches could she make out.

'Tall men came up out of the water,' he said as if it had occurred just yesterday. Her vision swam. The Exiles from Numenor had arrived so long ago and for a moment all she saw was a fleet, cresting a river's wave.

She shook her head and now the Wild man had raised his nose to scent the breeze. 'The Wind is changing.'

At once she looked up, past the high tree tops. The boughs were swaying gently and a few stars glimmered between the drifting haze. The sight of them made her shiver, as if they called to her. As if Vairë, the Weaver, had touched a thread on the tapestry of her life. Gondor and Numenor. The past nights she had been dreaming too. Of nebulous, jumbled images, half-glimpsed impressions that flitted like glowbugs in the dark. Of fire and heaviness. Of iron and a breath of wind, sharp with the salty tang of the sea.

Of strong bright words that caught on her tongue before they slipped away.

Her grandmother. Morwen, a daughter of Belfalas and Lossarnach both, had dreamed at times. They would sit together in the great carved bed and speak of how a true dream lingered bright and sharp, like crystal, so different from the muddied dreams caught in the nets of one's own imagining. Her dreams these days were more mere snatches, pictures that tumbled and left her troubled. Made her
think of Aragorn and how somewhere, south and west of them, the bravest man she knew was walking a mad and desperate path.

"Dernhelm."

At the sudden grip upon her arm she whipped around, dirk up.

'Peace, young stud." Elfhelm's gruff chuckle rumbled low. "I did not expect you to see me in this this devil's mirk,'

"I did not expect to feel anyone at my side," she chided quietly. The Marshal grinned. Unlike her, he had doffed his helm. A cloth was draped across his shoulder and the acrid scent of lye was mixed with herb. He had just come from his wash in the nearby stream. And just happened to walk back past the council space.

She huffed and slipped her blade back into her belt. "Do you know what the Wild Men have proposed?"

Elfhelm nodded toward the huddled group. Theoden sat straight-backed, listening intently to the Wild Men's chief while Eomer paced like a mountain lion, restlessly. beside. His sister recognized the prowl. It meant he was thinking hard.

"They have found a way to gain us precious time. Eomer has already sent word that we must set ourselves in readiness: orders may come for a sudden move."

Eowyn swallowed hard. It would be beyond all their hopes to reach Gondor before it fell but none of them fancied another night in the darkened wood.

"We take the trail?"

"Yes. Now things change. " Elfhelm turned, pressed a large hand upon her shoulder and gazed imploringly. "The Woses suffer Men at times. They might aid us. Might keep you safe if it were Theoden who asked."

How dare he? Eowyn stiffened, shrugged off the hand, insulted that he sought to break their bargain so. "You are grasping at straws, my friend."

"And should I not?" Elfhelm's protest was hoarse and low; the words that followed pleading still. "Should the thought of the King's neice cut down by black Orc swords not fill me with total dread?"

Not without remorse she saw the anguish that stained the dark blue gaze. Of course he should not be happy with what must be. Neither of them had suffered easily the long years of trial that led them to be standing, half hidden, eavesdropping on their King.

She sighed and softened the barest bit, forced an easiness she did not feel into her bones.

The seasoned warrior saw the change and pressed his luck again. "It is not too late to change your mind, my Lady. Stay back with the baggage horses at the very least."

She graced that plan with the derision it was due. "We have a deal. And I for one will honour it."

Elfhelm raised his hands as if to take her by the shoulders but then halted, dropped them once again, She was a woman and not some rider whom he wanted to shake sense into. He sighed and slowly shook his head.
"This is no game Eowyn. Our scouts and the Wild Men have reported that Mundburg is on fire. The lower levels are ablaze. The City is besieged. We ride straight into the teeth of war."

The proud chin raised. "I know and I am ready for it."

"Are you really?" The marshall pointed toward the east. Straight on, above the trees and the shoulder of Amon Din, there was a red glow, pulsing under the black vault of night.

It felt...sinister... and Eowyn could not help backing up a pace. Elfhelm searched her face.

She would not say it. Would not admit that she was afraid. It made him angry, impotent and she saw a muscle clench in his jaw.

"I stand here, irony souring in my gut that I would prefer yonder fire be from the accursed land and not the fair City that I once knew already fallen."

"You have been there?" she asked, surprised.

"Yes, as a young man I made the journey with the Prince. And to Osgiliath." A pained look creased the Marshal's wrinkled brow. It occurred to Eowyn that she was not the only one mourning Theodred. Silently. Bitterly. Elfhelm had served him from his first commission, been with him when he fell. He too was angry for the lack of ceremony to speed his Prince on the final ride to Namo's Halls.

"The Prince and I journeyed to Mundburg before the accursed wizard moved so openly. He had used his magic to give a Eorling's face and body to an Orc who attacked the Steward's younger son."

Eowyn gasped. The thought of such a spell used upon a man made her own stomach turn.

"You never met the Prince's swordbrother..Alfgrim?" Eowyn shook her head. No she had not. Alfgrim had died when she was still a little girl. Scarcely a year later her parents were gone and her own world had turned upside down. In her new home at Edoras she saw his widow and his dearest friend seek solace in each other's arms.

"Alfgrim's countenance that was stolen for the spell." Elfhelm explained. "The Prince tried to find evidence, some token to incriminate the wizard. But back then he hid his tracks too well."

With a pang she realized that Godwyn had now lost Theodred too- another husband of a sort. What point could there be to love she wondered hopelessly? Requited or spurned, it seemed to bring only pain and suffering.

Elfhelm was continuing. "Thank Bema for us all, the crafty one became too bold in time. It is mete that hubris brought Saruman down. He forgot to not rile his neighbors." The older man snorted and shook his head. "Ents. Who would have imagined that?" The thought brought a small smile to the craggy face, as if walking trees were more fantastical than placing a man's face on a filthy Orc.

"Did you like it? The City?" Eowyn asked, feeling a little ridiculous, but wondering what they would find at their journey's end. Her Uncle and Grandmother spoke of Minas Tirith as if it were the most beautiful place in Middle-Earth, but they had been raised in Gondor and would of course think so. She was her Father's daughter. She preferred the wold and stream and the songs of her people.

"It was impressive," Elfhelm replied, distracted, looking across her shoulder to the council. "Loud and large. White and heavy everywhere. I felt hemmed in to be honest. Towered over by so much stone.'
"Just like this forest. Give me open skies and room to run."

Eowyn waited while the Marshal nodded absently, watching the sudden flurry of movement at the little council. She held her breath, picked up Windfola's reins and waited while farewells were spoken and Eomer strode quickly back toward the men.

It was time.

When Elfhelm turned back his large blue eyes looked on her long and steadily. His mouth set in a flat and hard line and she waited until a rough oath and a last few words ground out.

"We will have that upon the Pelennor."

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"Every scion of a noble family learns, at an early age, of Dagorlad and Celebrant, Nirnaeth Arnoediad and the Gladden Fields. And when one is tutored in the great battles of the Ages, assembled lore speaks of terrain and tactic, bravery and steadfast line, of glorious effort expended in the hope of attaining something greater still. It rarely speaks of retreat except to consider a clean and orderly affair, one essayed for tactical advantage. Where the goal is to pull back and lick ones wounds; to preserve the force to face another day.

Faramir paused, chest heaving, fingers cramped onto Mithros' reins, and surveyed the scene of tumult all around. The latest press of Haradrim had pulled back again and for a moment he could almost catch his breath.

A wildly bitter bark of mirth escaped at what he saw.

No, no indeed this was not what he'd been taught.

He could still recall the gravelly voice of Ivanduil, his old tutor, explaining with sincere exactitude the points he wished retained.

One must always attack first. Throw back and confuse the enemy. Then retreat post-haste to build in needed time while the enemy re-establishes orderly command. Send back the weakest units first—the walking wounded, then the infantry. Saving the cavalry for the rear. At all costs avoid contact with the enemy. A fighting retreat soon becomes a rout—drains time and resource and loses too many men.

Oh gods. If only they had had any say in how this awful day progressed.

At the outset they did everything that they should. Under cover of the night Mithrandir had left with the ox-wains of injured men; the few guards that they could spare followed along beside. Every man who could hold a rein had been put upon a horse and at least the order of retreat was right. The walking wounded had marched out first, and then the infantry and last of the all their mounted force.

After the night-long sounds of tumbling stone from ransacked Osgiliath there had been a grim satisfaction in making a large noise of their own. They could not break the causeway but they could block the way—the twin towers of the Forts had been built to last but also to defend and that morn to defend meant to destroy. Terrell was the one who had knowledge of the dwarvish powder and after the hasty, heady blast the rubble and caltrops and metal spikes had been strewn upon the road.
Toric lead the foot out first, marching proudly in tight formation, hearts restored after the horrific booming thunder of the early morn. Cheers and jeers had greeted the first few bold orcs who dared to climb the causeway before Mablung and his archers taught them the folly of their ways. Faramir cheered along with his men though to him it felt like lying. They made scarce a score of hits and there was no time get more than one volley out.

They were scrambling. The Rammas had been breached too soon.

The morning hours went almost as well as they could hope. They retreated and they fought. Were pressed almost from the first by an Enemy that threatened to overwhelm their tiny force from every side. Each time Faramir and the men threw the vile wave back. Each time they turned and caught their breath again before forcing their tired mounts to charge, flanks heaving, into the thick acrid air.

At times they seemed to make some headway. The cavalry would, exultantly, surprise a regrouping file of Orcs, bring the fight to the line and scatter it, before feinting and galloping swiftly back. Little by little they made time and space for the foot to retreat farther and a little faster, always covered by mounted archers spread along the flanks.

The Orc companies had learned by rue their flying hooves and moved a little slower.

Ever and anon there was a thunderous flash and heavy rumbling shook the road. The filth worked quickly, clearing the wreck of the Causeway Forts and widening the breaches. All too soon they heard a shrieking evil cheer go up and the first Haradrim won through the empty gate. The ground shook with the strength of that first charge.

The futility of a few hastily dug ditches became all too clear not many minutes later.

There was a weird, dance-like repetition to those first fraught hours: hew and thrust, turn and ride bare half a league, turn again. By sheer dint of iron will Faramir and the men created a space for the tightly marching guards and Rangers, but they were hopelessly outnumbered. Could only pick at the Enemy and slow them down, throw back the assault and hope that behind them the men were drawing closer to their goal.

In the precious moments when he reined in Mithros Faramir grabbed a mouthful of tepid water and wiped futilely at the sweat that trickled beneath the blasted helm. As ever when pressed by the impossible his ridiculous sense of the absurd came to the fore. There was an eerie beauty in the lights of the trailing torches, a rough music in the happy cries of the men as they passed points they recognized. After one scattered sortie sent them hiding amidst the orchards and deserted steads he sheltered beneath a tree that with a start, recognized. It was a great oak that he had once climbed, inexpertly, at all of eight summers old. Boromir had sat patiently for hours in its deep welcome shade, whittling and waiting for his stubborn younger self to admit he needed help.

Another memory that might be swiftly swept away. He pressed a hand to the rough bark and prayed to Yavanna that the old sentinel might survive. Surely something of world he knew might be the same. Afterward. If.

Resolutely he thrust the thought away.

Hour by excruciating hour they picked their slow and tortuous way toward to the city gates. By midday Mablung’s archers had no arrows left but still made their mark- scavenging the black-fletched darts of the Enemy as they could. Damrod with his company and Toric’s foot now stretched too far ahead to hear his orders amidst the noise.

There was no time to process who had fallen and how, no time think how many were left behind.
Faramir had, by purest luck, stayed in hailing distance of Madril and kept an amused and wary eye on his erstwhile lieutenant. Madril still looked less than comfortable on a horse: the veteran Ranger hated them and the dislike was quite mutual. And though his bay gelding stamped and tossed its head when yanked inexpertly on its mouth, the pair fought with a ferocity he could only marvel at.

One thing else he did espy: Renil, carrying a wounded man across his saddlebow. The blasted, stubborn idiot had not gone with wains after all or else had doubled back. There would be words, or at least, he thought ruefully, he hoped there would be words later on that score.

At first they all dared to hope that the Enemy's wariness was in some way their own work. Lines of flame from many points converged upon the causeway road, but the Orcs, a flowing wave of black, still pressed lightly at the exhausted rank of men. The charges of mounted Haradrim became more frequent yet strangely held back the final killing strokes. They were harried, toyed with, but never in great force, always just enough to stop them reaching succor. And each time a few desperate men would break ranks and fly erratically for the City's walls.

The mirk of the day had turned to even darker twilight. They were past the abandoned farms and out on the wider plain, tantalisingly close enough to make out the men upon the City wall when a horrible realization dawned.

The walls that were now but a league away held an audience. How better to prepare for a seige than to break the hearts of those who manned the walls? How better to demoralize the City than by letting them think the troops might survive, only to crush them in sight of salvation?

Faramir could feel the moment the troops knew it too.

All that was left of the rear guard turned and faced, again and again, their harassers just as before, but now the men and mounts were spent. Dispirited, exhausted, they went down to strokes that would not have killed scare hours earlier. Their Captain-General's increasingly quiet bugle calls could not hold them all. For the foot at least the outer walls and safety were seemingly in reach. Toric did not need an order to march the men still in formation double time. The winged shadows of the Nazgul swept down with a piercing shrieks, stooping to the kill so swiftly men who had stoutly, beneath those cries, walked the ramp to the Forts the day before, now threw themselves down terror, broken open by the strain.

The retreat became a rout.

"Gondor to me! The gates are nigh!" Voice nigh gone, Faramir tried to rally the men once more. They were but two furlongs back, though for some poor souls crippled by the fear it might just as well be ten.

Bent low in the saddle, pleading inside for Mithros to keep his feet, Faramir swung around again.

The fire was now all afore: a foul breath heated by Orc's torches and the burning steads. It beat as a hot wind against his face yet it was still oddly pleasant at his back. He wished longingly for the cool white stone of the City beneath his hands not a hot, sweaty grip, slick with sweat and grime and black putrid blood.

His world had become ever smaller until it began and ended with the ten feet around Mithros' bloodied hooves. All was arm and gleaming sword, fingers numb upon the reins and the light extinguished from his foes' eyes. Again and again his sword rose and fell, cut at another red-clad, hollering Southron. It was mad and desperate, kill or be killed, but in awkward moment of lucidity he would catch a dark smudge of beard below a black keffiyah and wonder: what of Najir? What had happened to his friend? Was he dead upon the sands as the chieftain had expected, overrun by dark,
craven men who had kissed the Serpents feet? Had he somehow escaped? Was he even now hiding in some desert cave, hoping to free his emprisoned people? It seemed impossible. The wicked Southron swords were far too thirsty…

Then, once again, there no time to think. His vision was suddenly filled with a mass of black serpents upon red. A new company had swept up; a fresh one, dressed a little differently; there were flashes of blue beneath the red and gold, and with a sinking heart he noted their bright-eyed mounts were not lathered to the withers. They had clearly not fought hours on end, yelled exultantly with voices not yet ragged from the strain.

Faramir felt another surge of fury run through his veins. This was too cruel. They were so close. The Enemy must not be allowed to overrun the men.

He dug his heels into Mithros' flanks. The stallion charged, bugled his defiance: raised up and challenged another caparisoned in red and blue and gold. Faramir felt the shock, the crush as two mighty, heaving bodies collided. "Gondor!" he cried, raising a trembling arm to strike, holding firm at the sparking slide of steel and on steel.

Then suddenly, above the screams of horses and embattled men, the silver peel of trumpets sounded high and clear. Valar be praised. It was his Uncle's note. The sortie had been released.

The knowledge ran like liquid fire through his limbs. He steadied, heart soaring with hope, and looked up defiantly into his opponent's face.

Felt every nerve freeze in sudden shock.

Red-ochre whorls, the hennaed markings of a Qahtani chief, were splashed below his opponent's gaze.

Chapter End Notes

First I'd like to give a big thank you to all those who are reading…I am totally thrilled and shocked to find a T-rated angsty fic about a minor character (grin-I admit this) is being followed. I know you guys are out there and I appreciate it.

Borys, military consultant of ME, very kindly helped me with investigating proper conduct of a retreat and any and all applause on that score is owed to him.

I know I shifted the time of Gandalf taking the wains back to Minas Tirith but it made more sense to me. Given the Rammas was breached near dawn why would they wait til mid-day to have them lumbering barely ahead of the column? I think they would have set out under cover of darkness. For a glimpse of Gandalf with the men wounded from Osgiliath, including Anborn's young tracker Will, see my drabble collection- 'transporation'. For another view of Renil's exploits on this day (and sadly a vision of Damrod's fate) see "Surgery is battle not poetry".

Huge hugs and thanks for comments, encouragement and beta'ing where possible go to
Annafan, Wheelrider, Thanwen and Artura. Eternal thanks for battling my purple prose with a sharp sword.
"No!"

Faramir stared, horror-struck, at the tattoos he knew so well; the shock to recognize them crashed like a cold sea wave across his face.

How could this be? How could it be Najir who sat, fierce and unyielding, across bare yards of churned and bloody earth?

His words, spoken so many years and leagues ago, came back from the depths of memory:

\[ O \text{ my friend. Out beyond right and wrong there is a field of gray. I will meet you there.} \]

He had not known that he spoke True.

Luck, like strength, is needed in a battle yet it seemed then that all his had been spent. Poured out in the early hours of the morn, until at last across a chasm of regret stood the one man in Mordor's host he would not wish to harm.

A man met not on a field of grey uncertainty but one of desperate red…

He looked up and found Najir's dark liquid eyes looked just as shocked, even as the wicked sword recoiled from their blow. Could it be that the sheik had been enslaved? Traded his body for the safety of his tribe? The man he had once known would have done just that, would have seen it as the better part of honour.

Faramir felt just slightly sick. Had his father not had his way Najir would be at his back, helping Gondor to survive another day, not raising his sword to strike and seeking to strike it down.

\[ My \text{ friend we played you ill.} \]

A flash of light, a streak of shining black, caught at the corner of his sight. Torn from his reverie, instinct said to raise his sword but his body moved too slow.

Faramir cried out. There was a sharp, searing pain and a heavy thud and the force of the arrows' flight flung him back, took him out of the saddle and swept him across Mithros's dark-streaked rump.

He was flying for a moment, shocked and surprised, suspended in the air, before the ground rose up and took his breath.

Dazed, he coughed a little wetly and dragged the foul acrid air back into his lungs. It hurt. Spots
swam before his eyes and filled all his sight with black and white and red.

*Move. You must move.*

Experience said the hungry Southron swords would come and he was vulnerable down and on the turf. He tried to turn, to protect his body but the arrow jostled and a white hot pain lanced through. One arm hurt too much to move; the other he lifted, shaking, to protect his neck.

With a ragged, stifled cry of pain Faramir tried again, forced his shoulder round and at last he pressed his cheek to a patch of mud.

He had to pause, panting, to catch his breath for the effort took all his strength. When he opened his eyes he saw a tiny miracle: a small patch of grass lay beside his hand. It was sprinkled with his blood as if someone had scattered a handful of rubies or red rose petals down among the green. Ridiculous to think they were wrong colour for these fields but they were. The Pelennor in spring should be brushed with the white and yellow of anemone. Not red.

He clutched one gauntled hand across his neck and tried not to regret too hard. He was so very very tired. Tired of failing. Tired of duty. Too weary to get up, he lay and shivered and waited for the end. The mud was cold. For days he had felt chilled and now a dark and damp rose out of the earth and seeped far into his bones.

The pain around the arrow shaft was sharp, like ice held too long against one's heated skin.

*How much longer would it be?*

When no slashing pain bit into his back he blinked open his eyes again. The hated helm had flung right off and he could see. Dizzily Faramir forced his eyes to focus beyond his nose and took in a pair of mud and blood splattered legs and trailing broken rein.

*Mithros?!* Oh bless him. The stallion had not bolted but stood his ground, defending his master to the very end.

The air around them shimmered with an angry foetid heat and a thunder shook within his muddy bed. From far away there came the sound of silver trumpets, a high and ringing blast such as the Tower Guard would give when the Captain General rode out to war.

*Boromir!* The thought leapt like a deer within his chest.. but no. He had to choke back a sudden sob. His brother was gone and he has lost.

*Arrows for us both.* Regret coiled like bitter winter smoke below his ribs. It hurt to end this way. He thought he would have liked to have seen the King, the man Grandfather Adrahil had seen, *but then perhaps the dark-haired Ranger had only ever been a dream, just a taunting vision from the Enemy, intended to hinder and not to help.*

*He closed his eyes. It was too late.* The Rohirrim would not come and for Minas Tirith there was no hope…

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It was no solace to have been right.
He had told the Emperor to hold them to the last. The Qahtani were the finest horsemen in all Harad-no others could hold their mounts right under the Nazgul's wings-and now they flew as though winged themselves. The company of red and blue and black thundered through the country lanes, past the sunken roads, and ditches, leaping obstacles that others had to lead their horses through. The Pelennor was home to the enemy but Najir had at least seen it once. He led his men, skillfully and sure, through shortcuts none would dare to take, until the main road to the city spread before them straight and sure as any arrow.

There was of course no going back. Behind lay only ranks and ranks of red, the Emperor's terrible displeasure, and the all-consuming incandescent glow of the Lord of Fire's forge. As he wound his keffiyah once more (not nervously, oh no. It was purely to still his thoughts) Najir let out a steadying breath. Goran at least was safe. His nephew too saw red, but not the bloodied banners of Suladan. Somewhere, beyond the endless sand, Goran and their prophet lay safe; hidden by the red-ochre caves of Umbar's endless coast.

Sometimes it was only that knowledge that gave him the courage still to live.

Dark is a way and light is a path. Now there was no way but forward.

With a fierce defiant cry he touched heels to flanks, urged Nam'an onward to challenge a mounted Captain of the Gondorim.

The man turned, wearily, slowly, but with uncommon skill he forced his exhausted beast to stand his ground. Uncommon skill but not enough, after two days and nights of a tortured and torturous retreat. The Gondorim was spent. Around Najir his horseman scythed through the ranks of the enemy as if they were so much pale, churned butter,

Nam'an screamed once and raised up, challenged the grey afore and quickly Najir found the Captain had unexpected reserves of strength. His scimitar flashed and the man parried desperately, one hand on the reins, the other wavering on a bloodied grip. Their blades rang and sparked and even as he raised his sword to strike again he caught a bright glittering through the helm. Dark smudges of grime and fatigue hung below black lashes but the clear grey eyes below the silver wings were lit with inner fire,

Araw curse him for a fool.

He should have, of course, known the great grey mount but he did not. Not at first. Although something, a sense of recognition, niggled in his brain.

The man's eyes and movements, blurred though they were by a desperate need for sleep, seemed oddly familiar in a way. It took the voice, the bold challenge, to finally permeate his battle-fogged brain.

Faramir!

In that moment of startled clarity Najir held back a second strike.

Out beyond a field of right and wrong I will find you there my friend.

Eye to eye, both shocked, the world hung for an eternity and then came a flash and a sickly liquid sound as Faramir was hit.

The force of the dart swept the shocked Gondorim out of the saddle. He landed heavily on the muddied ground. Blood splattered as his helm came off and Najir found himself looking down upon familiar features beneath sweat-streaked, raven hair. He knew the brow, the great nose, the narrow
cheekbones. Only the dull grey, unfocused eyes and white, drawn features were not as he had known.

How could they be? Faramir had not been fighting for his world back then,

Had not been one stroke away from death.

Najr forced down a rising tide of bile and in its place a fierce anger boiled up in a tortured shout of rage.

Araw curse them all! Curse Faramir's unbending father for his intransigence. Curse Suladan for his avaricious might. Curse the oath that had betrayed his very soul and the pride that would not let him hide away, like a lizard amongst the desert's rocks.

He had broken a sacred vow. Had hewed a good and worthy man. A friend.

And now there would be none to call his name and give him courage at the last.

Nam'an, exquisitely trained to the lightest touch, stood still while a tremor, a fierce shaking of despair, ran through his master's veins. Najir cried out, touched hands to brow and lips and breast. Prayed to his merciful god for absolution but his voice was gone, shredded by the pain.

A flash of blue and silver swept up as the great scimitar dropped away.

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"Nay, young Dunadan."

Whence came the words? Faramir groggily tried to raise his head. There was roaring in his ears that no shaking would dislodge and a sweep of blue and silver filled his sight.

Uncle?

So he thought at first but the one who knelt beside his head had long golden hair and argent eyes. A circlet of pale green leaves enrobed the shining brow and the robes were a maze of pearly vines across a field of lapis blue.

They puddled in the mud but were not soiled with grime or dirt.

"Who?" Faramir hardly dared to breathe. The scent of yew wreathed him around and the Spirit gravely inclined his head.

"I am the brother of pity. Dreams and desire are my demesne. A great maze and garden is my hall."

"Lórien?"

Surely he was hallucinating? It could not be. The Master of Spirits come to men?

Faramir blinked sweat and dirt out of his eyes but the image was still the same. For a wild moment he wondered if his wound so very grave that already the lack of blood had befuddled his exhausted wits.
“Nay, you are correct. I am just as you see.”

A blinding smile shone through a silver mist. It felt like the purest shaft of golden sun that broke through storm clouds up on high. Handsome and fair, terrible and fey, the Vala chuckled and at once a trembling took Faramir's bruised and weary limbs.

“You know your lore Faramir... and now I will gift to you a little more.. The Prince's vision was no dream.”

“Aragorn?” The name Mithrandir had told him to forget that day so long ago breathed out in a painful rush. The dusty archive seemed like a blessed haven now. He shook, as an icy agony throbbed hard about his wound.

“Yes…” A gentle hand reached out and touched lightly at his wound. The fingers were soft and cool but dry; not callused like a warrior's and yet he knew here was one of power beyond which he had ever known.

"Hold the knowledge close, son of Gondor. Sleep now and when you dream remember your vision and the voice. Stay strong. Fight hard against the chill and in the days to come be not afraid. Though the way ahead is dark, as you told your men, the light of Telperion and Laurelin yet rides above. Sleep…”

Faramir wished to give a breath of thanks but his eyelids were too heavy to hold up. all He had no strength for speech. The sight of blue slipped away and he felt his heart hammer, wild like a bird.

A purest gold and liquid warmth flowed through the Valar's touch and chased the cold away.

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He burned.

His son burned as bright as the anger in his heart and there was nothing at all that that Denethor could do.

The Steward of Gondor sat silently by the low sickbed and felt at once impotent and enraged. It been bare hours since Imrahil bore Faramir's body back to him and already there was no moisture on the boy's once sweat-slick brow. The fever that wracked the spare limp body was drying him out swiftly, mercilessly as an unrelenting eastern wind. Faramir lay unmoving but for subtle spasms in his limbs or a few whispered ravings when he restlessly tossed his head.

When his father bent close to hear the words were all of war.

A lined and trembling hand reached up to brush the raven hair from off the fevered brow. When had his boy become so thin? When had the strain of the past few weeks become more than he could bear?

Denethor had sent his youngest out on a myriad clashes great and small but never before he felt this crushing sense of guilt. All his orders had been required, all necessary. Faramir had been hurt in his service many times but this day, this time, he felt responsible. As a father and not a Steward. It was a
parent's duty to protect their child but was it not his first to protect his land? Both of his sons had understood the price they that they all paid.

Perhaps, for all these years, he had not truly understood the cost.

Looking down on Faramir's flushed and haggard face, Denethor found he wished, yearned with all his heart, to take the hurt upon himself. It was maddening. There was no wizard's magic that could change their place, could put him upon the bed and Faramir sitting anxiously beside.

To be powerless was an unfamiliar feeling.

Denethor dipped a cloth in cold water once again and wrung it out, carefully, before pressing it to burning cheeks and brow and neck. He did it without the expectation of a change. Nothing had worked: no poultice or tonic made the fever abate in the least, but the motion helped him to hold the slender thread of hope.

He had waved Lothiriel and Ivriniel away.

"Denethor.. you must let us tend…" His sister-in-law's lips had been set in the thin determined line he knew so well. She had held a steaming vessel of some sort of febrifuge but he had refused.

"No..I have done that." He had. He had spooned nigh every potion in Varan's store past Faramir's parched lips himself. Had packed the snow from Mindolluin's slopes around his son's body but none of it so far had done any good. The fever rose only higher still.

Lothiriel's small white fingers had touched softly at his arm. "Uncle, please. This one is different. We do not know what ails him. One other may yet work."

Her clear grey eyes were wide and white-ringed, fearful and so like her cousin's that Denethor had to turn his face away.

He alone would tend his boy. He had taken the limp, too hot hand once more and sat dry eyed. A Hurin did not cry and all the tears that could be had were long since fallen in the dust. A few for his eldest who not come home again. An ocean, once, for her.

The Perian and his seneschal had implored him many times to rest and eat. The food they brought hoping to entice was sent away untouched for it would have choked him else.

Soft crumbs would be sharp as glass to a throat closed up by regret.

Only Amerith had had the temerity to push past the guards and berate him for his desertion.

Denethor looked up, face drawn with worry and fatigue, and flat out stopped her tongue. She held yet another pointless flask. None of it had worked. None of it would work.

"Can you heal him?" he spat, gesturing to the rows of vials and cups crowded beside the bed. "Can your accusations and imploring whisk away a fever better than the simples here?"

"No…." The duchess stood, hands clutched white in the folds of her skirt. He saw the frustration, the fear in her face, and the longing in her heart.

It was the same as his niece's and of course Ivriniel's, though the Princess hid it more.

"Let me sit with him Denethor, while you rest."

"No!" Jealousy flared, hot and acid in his chest. If someone was to fail the battle for his son it would
be him.

He did not let her even so much as kiss his fevered brow before she left.

In the long spaces between each of Faramir's slow, shallow breaths he found himself tallying the many small cuts and blemishes that marred the too hot skin. There were so many, the patchwork of days and weeks of unrelenting fight. And yet underneath there was still the pale smooth skin, the fine proud bones of their beautiful little boy.

Finduilas...oh my love... he is the last of the good things we have done...

An old Noldorin saying held that time alone was without flaw. Oh, but it was. It was.

Denethor had come to understand sitting there, hour after hour, helpless within his thoughts. How cruel a thing to have no time left to tell his son all that he would. The boy lay so very still. Could he hear? Could he feel his father's shaking hand stroke the damp black locks? No.

Lightly, as though stroking a downy feather, he reached out and brushed the surface of Faramir's dim and fevered thoughts. They were slow, images and impressions moving as though in treacle, stuck and slowing down. He had little strength left for the fight. The knowledge tore Denethor apart.

He had sent one son on an errand to his death, another lay one foot already upon the Road. He sat, unable to do a thing, while the spirit of his last remaining child crumbled into ash.

Men must endure their going hence even as their coming hither but this was beyond enduring.

Denethor rose stiffly, bent and pressed a kiss too long delayed to a heated cheek. Walked out of the room to the hushed hall that led to the Tower's winding stair.

The only thing he could do now was what he had ever done.

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"Cahil attend me."

"Yes my Lord." The older man rushed to obey, dark eyes widening as they walked quickly through the inky shadows that splayed like bruises on the white stone walls.

The few guards in Tower livery snapped to attention but most were out upon the walls or other errands. The space was quiet. Quiet as to death.

He ignored the panic that flared in Cahil's rheumy eyes at his gruff command. He should not need help but these past weeks his body did not feel his own. Each step upon the stair felt double it normal height: his legs leaden, mail dragging upon his body.

The chamberlain held the torch as they wound silently up and up. Denethor held the great ornate key: Calimehtar's whimsy of an iron bird, an eagle, clutching a black orb in its claws. It turned
smoothly now, no longer rusty with disuse.

They entered in. There was the faintest gasp from behind. It was the first time his retainer had seen the occupant of the tower room- the one long since become like a living, breathing thing. The stone at times seemed almost sentient, it took but the barest thought to turn it to his will, and often the images displayed before he thought, as if it understood what its master truly sought.

That was of course, how it should be. The Steward of Gondor was its rightful master…not some jumped up Captain from a rabble in the north.

Denethor gathered his thoughts back to himself with his cloak.

"Cahil leave the torch and bring me sustenance here in two hours time. I am not to be disturbed this night, save should my son awake."

A brief uncertainty flashed across Cahil's face. The older man bit his lip. His Lord had not said should the Enemy attack but Denethor had no patience for a servant who questioned his lord's command. He would know even before the scouts upon the battlements and saw no reason to let that secret out.

At his sharp gesture of dismissal the older man nodded curtly. He placed the sputtering torch in a black bracket beside the door and bowed quickly out.

The round Tower room was always dim but with the twilight black as night it was even darker than before. Echthelion's white stones seemed to shrink upon themselves as if afraid to light the images tumbling end over end upon the great black orb.

Denethor turned to face it, squaring his mail-clad shoulders, bracing for a fight. He had fled the sickroom for a space that was like a needle-thorn in the Houses of Healing far below.

Piercing but so very very necessary…

With a deep and steadying breath he focused his will upon the palantir. In the past days and weeks it had become a greater struggle, each time he thrust his will upon the stone it took more effort than before. Now he forced the stone to focus, made the images of the Enemy, rank on rank of marching Orcs diminishing forever in the distance, scatter like leaves before a gale. He brushed quickly past the seething Orc hive of Osgiliath, past Cair Andros of which he already knew. With relief he saw that the first of the two towers that he sought had not changed. Orthanc still smoldered about it base, the Ents of Fangorn had defeated Saruman and there was no further sign of his wizardry. That much brought the barest quirk of a smile.

Next he walked a little farther east, turned his gaze toward the Great West Road and felt his stomach plummet in dismay. The road beside the Rammas was near empty. The Red Arrow had not come, No column of dust churned with the passage of many men and horse and more disquieting yet, bands of Orcs moved freely near Anorien. Theoden and his Eoreds could not come, whether they wished to help or not.

Dismayed, but still resolute Denethor knew that next he must work quickly. He had to see all that he desired and quickly, for it would not be too long before he, the Eye, turned his terrible lens to the ripple of power that sang from stone to stone.

Steadying his mind as a sailor would brace upon the deck he followed the worn footsteps around the plinth, turned east and held out his arms, prepared for the onslaught. The faint glow in the stone's dark heart increased, and soon the shape of a wing-like sail, dark and ominous, filled all his field of
A corsair ship? This was grievous news but it was not what he sought or thought to see. No ships sailed Mordor's arid plains.

Through the force of his adamant will Denethor turned his eyes, looked away to the desultory smoking torch.

No. He would not be mastered by another. Gathering all his strength again the Steward placed his lined hands upon the stone, forced the images to still, forced an image of a smoking, shrouded plain to come. Sweat beaded on his brow and pooled at his nape as he wrested the images to his will, scanned the ranks left yet behind Ephel-Duath. Too many. As he had feared the Enemy had not sent all his force, but perhaps, just perhaps, the City could withstand a siege, if the greater numbers were out on the Pelennor.

"Fool!"

The dark plain and ochre sky, the twisted battlements before him dissolved and in their place the stone glowed, fire raging in its heart, raging and condensing, becoming a black slit and oval, flaming orb.

He cried out and stumbled almost to his knees. The Eye held fast his sight- he could not look away - and like a rat caught by a swiftly pouncing cat, he struggled futilely.

The sound of laughter seemed to echo from the walls.

'The mighty son of Ecthelion seeks to spy upon me now? You dare too greatly proud Denethor for one who has gambled a losing hand. Did you not realize all you had to lose?"

The body of Boromir pierced by many arrows, headless, desecrated, floated within the stone.

He cried out but even as Denethor gripped desperately at the orb another image came into view… Faramir, white and bloodless, naked, hands tied behind his back, body dragged through the cobbled streets by a slavering band of Orcs.

"No!" His voice became a wail. "Lies, these are lies…"

They were. Though the Enemy thought to use his fears against him Denethor was still strong. He was the true master of the Anor-stone. The stone had moaned when the images flashed past.

The heart of fire flared. "Then I shall show to you truth."

Pale and sweating, just like his son below, Denethor stood, battered as a tree before a storm, a wave of fresh imagery passing before his eyes. Dust ed, browned as if from the long dim past, the scenes hammered at his mind even as he tried to turn away.

The wizard has been more faithless then he knew.

Tears that he could not let fall blurred the images-Saruman, in white, speaking with a forked tongue and honeyed tone to a young man who was not a Steward yet. A phial of thick liquid red. His wife's ebony hair and light grey eyes that came not to carry the light of love, but an anger shut tight behind a wall. A wall that he had built with angry stubborn pride.

And last: the aching beauty of her stricken, poisoned face as she drank the potion back.
"No!" he cried, "Sound, damn you sound!", but the stone was stubbornly silent in the face of truth.

A harsh, choking sob clawed up as mocking laughter pounded his head. Denethor staggered back. Face grey and more bloodless than his son's, he raised quavering hands before his eyes, tried to stop the images that lashed but they tumbled still, a loop of misery, while the vile laughter echoed, mocking and assured.

*Oh gods. How could this be?*

Was he not a man who could judge other men? Could judge even wizards true? He knew. He always knew the best.

Except when he had not.

*I have killed them all…*

"No!" The anguished roar tore from his throat. Mad and unholy grief gave his mail clad arm a strength of ten as it crashed into the stone, swept it off the dais.

The ebony surface flared red with living tongues of flame but it was only the truth of the lower circle.

Burning. Everything was burning.

Weeping, tracks of tears burning hot salt across his cheeks, Denethor bent and picked up the palantir, cradled it gently to his chest so very like a child.

He had made a vow once on another threshold, the door to the other circles of the world, when he had cheated Namo of this prize,

And Steward of Gondor did not lie.

*I will never let them take my son...*

He knew what he would do.

Set a pyre. Set pyre and burn away in its cleansing fire the pain of his complicity.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so so much everyone for their kudos this month and to Caroline and Phoenix for their lovely comments.

To Annafan, Thanwen and Artura, my faithful slayers of typo, plot consistency and form over at the Garden of Ithilien..hugs as always.

Lastly, by no means least, a grateful and surprised thanks to the anon who nominated Captains and Pawns for the Fanatics Fanfic Awards this year in the category Best LOTR fic. Wow. I am as ever amazed and thrilled at the reception for this story.

Next stop..Faramir awakens in the Houses... (relieved sigh...romance here we come)
After days and days of dark, brooding heaviness the first thin shafts of dawning sun hit the green coolness of Minas Tirith's Healing House like a welcome, warm caress. The ornate archways and quiet gravel paths were empty at this time. After tumult and grief, an unlooked-for victory and even more unexpected King, the Houses' weary souls had finally found some rest.

In one large and airy space the few motes of dust were set to dancing languidly in the golden beams. The air still smelled of athelas, fresh and sparkling, as if the now western wind had brought it straight down from the mountain's upper slopes. Even for a mostly hale but tired King the scent was welcome. A few shreds of herb lingered on Eowyn's pale sword arm and the deep green leaves were tucked into the bindings of her cast. The broken arm would heal but time alone would show how well her maimed right would fare.

A quietly as he could, Eomer shifted into a more comfortable position and laced her white, cool fingers through his thicker ones. The straight-backed chair was hard. He held his side stiffly and tried not to jostle the spectacular sphaleritic bloom of bruising that spread across one whole flank.

His own wounds were of no consequence. She was here and alive and he would deal with his later-just sitting was, after all, a luxury. There was so much to be done. So much that the young King had to do before the Captains of the West would meet and only a few precious moments to spend with his sister before the demands of the day fell like magpies on a pretty scrap of cloth.

Eomer breathed deep. He let the scent and warmth chase the chill that still lingered in his bones-the one that had set in when he had found her, white and still as death, upon the battlefield. Reflexively he counted each rise and fall of her breast. Aragorn had healed her, had brought her back to life, and he knew he should rejoice, should not worry that all could still come to ill, but the habit of a lifetime was hard to break.

When one has lost everyone close and dear, it is very hard to trust to fate.

With a shake of his head, he sat back. Bema, he was becoming maudlin. He was tired. That was it. His beautiful, maddening, valiant spirit of a sister would thrive in the Houses' care and he could leave in good conscience and do what must be done.

If that was so, why was he so anxious at the thought?

One scratched, but mercifully clean, finger brushed a lock of hair from off her brow. Eowyn was so like to their mother, so like Theodwyn- fair and with a pale, beyond weary face-it almost stopped his heart. The similarity cut so deep. He had to remind his weary (and yes frightened) brain that she was not fever wracked; was not willing herself to death. Lay not stricken by unholy grief but merely an unrequited love….

This thought was startling. His little 'Wyn. Aragorn was of course a worthy man, the worthiest that he knew, and had dealt with his sister honourably. There was no fault for his actions or for her pining as she did, and yet in the guarded chambers of his own heart Eomer had long thought that the boundless love his parents shared was not desirable at all. Was a curse and not a blessing. To pine, to throw away one’s life when love was hopeless seemed an utterly pointless, useless waste. .
Best to avoid love entirely at all.

The evidence slumbered before his eyes.

Once more he brushed gently at a damp strand of cornsilk hair. They had bathed her and the thick, shining fall took ages in the air to try. It was their grandfather's hair, Theodred's hair as well (his own was more the ruddy gold of Eomund) and she had also their cousin's upturned nose. He pushed that hollow thought away—now was not the time to think on souls he could not help—there would be a place to mourn when the hours no longer grabbed so jealously.

And so he sat. Held her hand and did his best to not disturb her rest, silently willing Eowyn to wake so that he could be certain of her mood. It was selfish and yet so necessary. The sand fell desultorily through the hourglass while the silent minutes passed. The warm candleglow gave way to a clear rosy flush that began to fill the window. He caressed her hand and soothed her troubled rest when, once, a black shadow passed high over the ragged field.

His own muzzy head had just begun to droop when a soft voice broke his reverie.

'You are here.'

Eomer looked up, beyond grateful to see his sister's clear grey eyes. "Of course. There is nowhere else that I would be." He smiled, and leaned closer to catch her hand. The dawn had not erased the dark smudges that hung below her eyes like faded, frost-bit blooms. Some part of memory, of ill dreams or the shadow that had passed had not left her wholly.

"Where am I? What time is it?" Eowyn looked around confusedly and blinked off the fog of sleep.

"Early. Daybreak," he explained, half-standing now, scanning her sleepy face. "You are in your room in the Healing Houses. I am sorry but I did not wish you to awake alone and there little time this morn."

Eowyn's mouth sagged into the barest thin line. "Of course, I remember now. You must be very busy. Please call for a servant to help me and go now if you need."

Bema's balls that was not what he had meant! Eomer ground his teeth and tried not to let frustration show upon his face. Could he not simply talk to his sister plainly as he should? This was awkward, speaking of emotion was never something he did easily, and so he hesitated, trying to decide what tack to take. She would not appreciate a fuss but neither should she think she was not the centre of his world.

Carefully, he squeezed the small limp hand. "I mean to say that is why I am here with the birds, dear one. I can stay for another hour yet. How are you 'Wyn? Really?"

The line softened to a thoughtful frown, Eowyn pressed the bound fingers of her broken arm gently along the right. "My sword arm is a little numb."

"Aragorn did say that it would linger."

At his words a brief flash pain swept across her face. Eomer groaned inside. Of course he had to mention him.

"Do you wish to break your fast?" he asked, filling the sudden, heavy pause. "I can call someone for food and drink."

"Nay. I am not hungry."
Eowyn struggled to sit farther up. She could not push with the broken arm and the other was clearly weak and so he gallantly offered up his own, knowing better than to help without asking.

It was accepted graciously and he vigorously stuffed an extra pillow behind her back. "You need to eat for strength," he chided gently.

"Mayhap later." The excuse sounded hollow to his own ears but he let it go. Perhaps this was to be expected? Her malady, the Black Breath, had strange effects that would linger still a while. Had not Aragorn said she should stay abed ten days yet?

"You slept most of the night?"

"Yes, but you did not."

At first he flushed and scrubbed at his face tiredly, worried of a sudden that she thought him out carousing while she had lain barely returned from death's door. But then he caught the small, quirked half smile and mustered one in return. "Nay, I left Eothain in charge of merriment, grumbling about the thinness of their ale. I did catch a few hours rest."

"Surely not in that chair…"

He chuckled at the thought. "Not possible. In an even gaudier space than this this if you can credit it." Eomer glanced around at the carved wooden dresser, the arched and mullioned windows and heavy carpet on the floor. Even a simple utilitarian healing room was embellished more than in Edoras. "Prince Imrahil of Dol Amroth has generously offered me a room. We met years ago at his father's funeral. He is a noble man. Generous and a doughty fighter. I must admit some of these Gondorians are not quite what they seem."

Eowyn's eyebrow raised, "Not poofs?"

He laughed a little cautiously. If she was teasing him with his own words than she must feel somewhat renewed. "No, but they are over fond of ceremony and station. I keep reaching for things myself only to find them held by the gaggle of servants who follow me around. I had to growl at one to leave off and let me dress."

Eowyn of course did not have that luxury. He eyed the fine velvet nightrail with amusement. They had bathed her, the grime and blood of the fateful field were gone, and someone had bound her hair into a loose plait. The cloth's pale ivory only made her skin tawnier in contrast. A smattering of freckles stood out across her cheeks, bespeaking eloquently her days in the saddle and defying the heavy haze that had hung over all of them. He wondered what the Gondorians and their milk-white skin made of the sight. Unbecoming for a well-bred lady at the very least.

"They are very fond of baths, Imrahil's own townhome has a stone pool heated by a hypocaust."

Eowyn grinned, "Then we will not you get out of here."

"True." It was the one thing in which he was more like his grandfather Thengel than his father's people of Aldburg. Eomer loved the water. His little sister on the other hand decidedly did not. Getting Eowyn to plunge into the Snowbourne's turbid, glacier-fed water was like trying to immerse a spitting cat. "And I very much doubt they will get you in, although there are no fish. At least that I recognized."

A small pink tongue stuck out and gave him heart. "The servants did not try to shave you?" Eowyn enquired.
His hands flew up in mock defence. He was not fooled by the innocence of the tone. "They wouldn't dare!"

Oh this was heaven. Bantering lightly as of old. Before they all had to guard their hearts and tongues. Before that loathsome creature with overlarge ears and eyes had been everywhere and they knew not who he had suborned.

Over the next half-turn of the glass the two of them talked and talked, an unusual explosion of wit and words, gentle and almost meaningless, for Eomer was still mindful Gandalf's dictum: do not speak yet of war or woe until she is made whole again.

He was about to ask again if she could eat when Eowyn stretched out a hand and tugged curiously at the hem of his borrowed shirt. He was clad in plain breeches but the shirt was bright blue and a little too high-necked for comfort. He fingered ruefully the silver thread along the neck. "It is Prince Imrahil's elder son's. The blue of his house, said to mimic the colour of Belfalas Bay. He is quite Gondorian in that: rather fond of decoration."

"You are the King.." Eowyn said quietly, shivering a little and touching the band of mourning black someone had stitched onto the upper arm. It was a gesture so like the Prince in his experience – thoughtful and detailed-but not his custom, though he would not be so churlish as to say it.

Eomer reached forward and clasped her hand, again. "I am." The simple admission hung between them. He wanted to speak of Theoden's valiant end, of her bravery and his remorse but he dared not. The twining dark vines of her sickness might take hold and he could not leave her in such straights.

He tried to banter once again. "With a King's newfound responsibilities. Including remounts, and camps, and functioning latrines."

That brought a skeptical small smile. "I doubt brother that they have you bothering with such."

'I fear soon that they might. No detail of judgement seems deemed too small."

With a sigh, Eowyn turned her face to the pillow. Suddenly she would not meet his gaze. "Including deserters?"

Blast and damn. How had he blundered into this? Exactly a topic he did not wish to broach but, once out, one he could no more avoid than manure in a stable. Best to stick to the least troubling of her acts.

He cleared his throat awkwardly. "Ah..how did you leave things in Dunharrow? Who is taking care of the good folk?"

"Hilde," she replied, raising her chin a little defiantly, "and Lord Dunhere."

This was good. Elfhelm's wife was formidably efficient and Dunhere knew well how to lead. At least when he knew that he was in charge. "Did you… tell them… that you would be gone?" he asked, carefully.

Grey eyes flashed a little brighter in the gaining light. "Give me credit for more sense than that."

They both fell silent and he reflected unhappily that at least she had technically not deserted. Strictly speaking, she had delegated her authority, but she had disobeyed the order of the King. No trivial misdemeanour, but perhaps one that he had begun to understand. Were they were wrong, he and Theodred, to have focused on keeping her safe from Wormtongue's hands? To have not realized the danger of his tongue and that she had suffered so to be left behind?
Eomer was trying to understand, had come to see he had been busy with his own demands, too
captured in coming war to notice the ignominy of her state and now cursed himself for a fool.
Theodred, perhaps, had seen a little bit. In his own way their cousin had tried to lighten her dark days
but all too soon he had been lost and Eomer himself had been imprisoned.

He could not be angry with her and so had turned the polluted rush of feeling upon unfortunate
Elfhelm. "You did not look beyond your horse's nose!" he had accused the Marshal angrily the night
before. Honest and calm and steady, Elfhelm had merely nodded and offered up his command. They
both knew that he could not take it. "Punish me how you will, Sire" was the response, but what
could he really do?

Mithrandir had told him, in the hushed space of yet another sick room, how Faramir, on pain of
death, had disobeyed his own father, had let Frodo go. Who knew what would have happened to
them all if he had not. Sometimes when one did the wrong thing but for the right reason good did
come of it. How could he find his sister guilty of treason, any more than Faramir, given the outcome
of her acts?

He brushed a cautious thumb across her cheek to get her attention back. "If you will act as a soldier
than you must also stand by that code. As your commander I decree that your punishment shall be to
stay in your bed and heal."

The dictum was, predictably, ignored. "And Elfhelm's?" Trust Eowyn to thrust quickly and get
inside his guard. It was not a subject that he was comfortable discussing. "He was answerable to
Uncle, but now he must answer to me."

"It is not his fault that I deceived him."

True, but also true that the Marshal clearly expected, and the Riders also, there should be
punishment. Eomer sighed heavily. There was simplicity dealing with just an Eored, and no mattered
how much he wished it true, it was up to him to mete out justice.

Fortunately there was another king in the City who must dispense justice to one who had done the
wrong thing for a reason none could rue.

"No, but I have told him that like Beregond, who committed treason yesterday for the love of his
Captain, he must serve the one he broke the rules to help. Elfhelm will stay behind, serve you here
and command the eored." It was not exactly Beregond's predicament, nor his sentence in point of
fact, for the Captain was being allowed to go with the greater host, but it seemed fitting in the
circumstance.

Eowyn face brightened a little at the news. "How did he take this?"

"He grumbled. But not so audibly that I needed raise Guthwine."

Eowyn chuckled at the relief upon his face and suddenly she choked, coughing hard to clear her
throat. Eomer rose. There was a pitcher on the dresser. He retrieved it and poured out a glass, held it
out for her to take. A suspicious frown was directed at the cup. "Just water, I think. Nothing fancy in
it."

Watching it wobble slightly in her grip, he steadied the glass below as she took a cautious sip. "It
tastes hard."

"This is a city of heavy stone."

A faint smile was his reward. Eowyn cleared her throat and lay tiredly back again. "You were not
"No. He thought I would tear a strip off his hide but I merely blistered his hairy ears," admitted Eomer, grinning once again. He had. And yelled sufficiently to assuage his frightened heart. "I did impugn his eyesight. It was a wonder he could scythe the enemy if he could not recognize Windfola in his line."

"To see once must truly look." Now the few tears pricked at the corners of his sister's eyes. "He is gone and he carried both Merry and I through it all.

How like a Rider to grieve most openly for a mount. "No 'Wyn, do not fear so. Windfola survived. He was found running lose upon the field. Elfhelm recognized his socks."

A flush of hope tinged her face and he took courage at the sight. Perhaps the feeling would take root. He clasped both of her hands lightly, earnestly, as he could. The roughness from a sword callus could be plainly felt.

"Eowyn, both of you have survived. Your name now is sung with all honour and renown. Is that not enough? You must stay here, become stronger, find healing as you may."

The moment stretched. Outside the walls, the first trills of morning birdsong belied the heaviness of his heart. It leapt but then crashed back down as she turned her face away.

"I do not desire healing."

A chill coursed through his heart. Was this the malady? Was she yet unwell? The thought that he would now ride, fearing that she would fade, pierced hard. It made the hard dampened fear and nagging remorse bubble up like a bitter spring in a darkened pit.

"Do you love him so very much?!"

His sister gasped at the bluntness of the hoarse, hasty words and suddenly they were on loose ground. Despite his best intentions, despite knowing how to manoeuvre somewhere other than a battle field, he had blundered into quicksand. The only recourse was to ride farther on.

"Would you truly throw your life away because you cannot have the man you want?"

She did not answer, merely hung her pallid face and frowned, and now the cold fury that had assailed him the day before took hold. It rose sharply and grabbed at his breast, demanded answers and perhaps a certainly she could not give. Silently he stalked to the wooden wardrobe, pulled her dirty armour out and shook it once.

"Are you disappointed that you did not succeed? Here, let me help you. With a broken arm you will quite certainly fail to smite every single foe!"

"Eomer!" Her face was white and set with shock. Damn his temper but he needed to explain and the thought of her giving up was beyond what than could bear. Again.

"What did you think?" he choked. "That all you are to me is a chatelaine, someone to nurse the sick and tend the house? You are my sister. We are all each other has within this world!"

And now the hurt was stuck within his throat, the words cutting him as they rushed out, the fear and grief that had set him to shaking at awkward times throughout the night raw and naked in his voice. "I am sorry, but I...I thought that I had lost you too. Lost everyone."
A muscle jumped high on her pale and trembling cheek. He wanted to reach out and smooth it with
his palm but he had, quite likely, said and done enough. He took a breath to steady his pounding
heart and tried for some solace in his words. "I am sorry, so sorry 'Wyn. I did not see how dark it
might be for you. That you felt you were set within in a many-sided trap."

The grey eyes grew ever slightly harder. "You did not ask. He did."

Eomer flinched. It was true, he had not asked. As usual, he had focused on the obvious-the threat
before them and not noticed the emotion that lay behind, the depth of her misery. But Aragorn had.
For a few needed moments in the dark, unending years, a noble and perceptive man had brought
solace and something rare in her experience. Understanding. Perhaps now he could understand what
led her to this pass.

The pain of rejection was not the thing. But it was last little thing piled too high upon the rest.

"Forgive me." His hoarse whisper got through where nothing could. The brief softening in her eyes
and tiniest of nods nearly made him limp with heartsick relief. "I know it is bitter to be left behind
again.."

She bit her lip at that. It made her look so young and vulnerable, so like a white pinched face another
lifetime ago. He bent and brushed his lips across her brow. "Rest now. Rest and take hope in the
victory we have made. And please eat a little bit. I will be back before this eve."

She made no promises, but this time she turned his way and left a kiss to linger on his cheek.

Chapter End Notes

Grateful thanks go to Annafan for detailed and oh-so-helpful comments and being the
cheerleader who really keeps me going.
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Lothiriel tries to hide the truth of her Uncle's death from her cousin. When it comes out, as it must, how will the young Steward react? Imrahil finds himself needing Amerith's support to break the news.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

A new game begins. One Queen must feint, a Knight's strategy does not work, a new King ponders his attack.

The feeling that huddled, cat-like, purring and quietly surreptitious, below her ribs was not one Lothiriel of Dol Amroth was much accustomed to. A sense of contented selfishness had settled underneath her skin and, try as she might, she could not bring herself to feel guilty for the fact.

Her cousin had survived. It had been far far too near a thing losing her aunt's family all at once; and now to simply sit and watch over him was a blessing beyond price.

She had come to the room where Faramir was housed as soon as she could get away. The last bed pan of her roster had been changed; another groaning, barely conscious soldier had been stripped of his bloody bandages and checked for suppuration. She had fetched and carried, bandaged, washed and fetched again. Endless hurts that needed endless acts of (sometimes futile) kindness and when that failed simply reassured anxious or pain-wracked men. She had no official training but years of helping Aunt Ivriniel and her own keen intelligence had taught her what she could and should not do. It was a skill (quite unlike that of other noble ladies who liked to 'help') that garnered more than one grateful smile from Varan, the Houses' senior healer.

Long past the first clear, ink-blue nightfall in far too many days Varan had taken one look at her red-rimmed, swollen eyes and known. She was dead on her feet, wearied as were they all by the unceasing stream of wounded men, but more than that; she was heartsick. It had not seemed possible that Faramir could die, could simply burn away, and yet when she had asked Ioreth for news the old woman had teared up and turned away.

Each candlemark had found her looking toward that room, anxious for report of any change, lips bitten red with worry. Each time the silent headshakes came she turned back to her tasks.

"My lord, you called me. I come. What does the king command?"

Her cousin's fateful words had raced through the wards like a golden flame set to the torches on Mettare night.

Praise Este. Faramir had survived and at Varan's nod she had raced too, lifted up her stained and rumpled skirts and simply ran along the corridor (unladylike and unconcerned), dodging servants, rolling chairs and (more carefully) the walking wounded.

By the time she had squeezed herself into the little room and found his tired eyes (exhausted, dark-
smudged, but certifiably awake) shining up at a scruffy, but somehow oddly noble Dunadan she cried openly with relief.

Peregrin, the valiant Halfling was by his kinsman's side. Mithrandir had left with her father to see to the defense of a city without a gate. The King and his foster brothers were yet among the wards, ministering to those struck down by the Black Breath. The homely space was now quieter. It was early morn and what cocks had not been sent away had yet to crow. The sky beyond the shuttered window was just lightening to a greyer blue and the dark strain of interminable yesterday was, if not a distant memory, at least a page that might be turned.

The Princess, self-appointed guard and nurse, watched the deeper rise and fall of the fresh-scented sheet above pale but unfevered skin. Sometime about the last evening bell fatigue had overtaken Faramir again and he had slept. Beregond (elated beyond words to find his lord survived) kept watch for most of the night but had just excused himself to change and rest. The young guardsmen certainly needed it. How he had still stood after days of fear and interminable strain she hardly knew.

Lothiriel sat silently in the little chair beside the narrow bed (too tired herself to change) and reflected on how it felt selfish but so necessary to do this one and easy thing. There were other men in the Houses now more seriously ill, horribly wounded, needing to be watched, but in the hours after Bergil had come running with the startling news of Faramir's recovery, she not been able to tear herself from her cousin's side for long. A small part of her heart could not quite believe he would not succumb again.

Methodically, she wound the fresh bandages in the flat wicker basket on her knee, so focused on a chore that she could do almost without thought that she did notice the lightly stirring limbs.

"Thiri…" A quiet, raspy voice intruded from beyond her little world. She looked up and found her patient awake again.

"Faramir!"

At her startled exclamation, tired eyes focused on her face, blinking heavily as if sleep and morn were yet a heavy weight. They were so welcome and so familiar- the clear grey that all her brothers and her father also had.

"Just a moment, let me help." His left arm was bound up in a sling to ease the weight on wounded muscles that had just begun to heal. She laid the basket down and slipped one surprisingly strong arm behind his back, stilling her face to a smile despite the shock of finding bones protruding out. Days of fever and weeks of unyielding strain had melted flesh away. She set a pillow to prop him up a bit and sat back down, leaned forward to check his gaze. There was no lingering fever that she could see.

"How do you feel?"

Faramir frowned, shifted uncomfortably and put his free hand up to the bandage on his shoulder as if surprised to find it there. "Stiff. Sore. Weary beyond words. So parched I think I could drink the Anduin near dry." His voice, unused for days, was steady but reed thin.

"That is the fever," she explained, pouring a cup of water from the beaker by the bed and lifting his shoulders once more to help him take a sip. "You will need to take more fluids in the days ahead. And eat to regain your strength. Are you hungry? Can I send for some breakfast now?"

That brought a sudden grimace. "No thank you. Not quite yet." But then as if he felt it churlish to refuse, Faramir smiled apologetically. "What did I do to merit so skillful a nighttime nurse?"
The protest was automatic. "Hardly so. I volunteered to watch over you. Aunt Rini is helping with the more difficult cases per her greater skill."

The barest of smiles quirked. "Excellent news. Then they shall not dare to not recover."

"Faramir!" Lothiriel huffed out a breath and mock frowned, though his assessment of the most formidable of their family was quite correct. Iviriniel waslegendarily determined and a highly accomplished healer. That he could joke a little bit after all that had come to pass was certainly a good sign.

Reassured, she slipped her own small hand into his larger, calloused one. It felt right to anchor him just a little but even as she did she felt a subtle greasiness upon his palm. Oil? Or sweat? At first she was unsure but then she looked down to the bandages across his collarbone. They too were streaked by a smear of darker honey-gold. Lamp oil. Nienna. Denethor had soaked Faramir's clothes in the heavy oil and it had clearly not been suitable to bathe him in warm water whilst the fever raged.

A small shudder wracked through her chest. She must not think, could not, think of that.

"If you won't eat now the least I can do is clean you up." She rose and sought an errand boy out in the hall. The dark-haired youth who lingered just outside looked familiar.

"Bergil!" she exclaimed, smiling at the correctness of the hasty bow.

"Yes m'lady?"

"Would you please bring some hot water and soap and soft cloths from the station down the hall? And please let Master Varan know that Captain Faramir is awake? I believe both he and my Father wished to see him sometime this morn."

"Right away my Lady.."

Back inside, she refilled his water cup and sat back down again, noticing the telltale gleam in his black locks. They too were greasy to the touch. "You are something of a mess. I expect you will feel better for a wash."

Faramir nodded and shifted a little uncomfortably. She found herself longing to brush away the sudden furrow of worry on his brow. "Did much of the city burn?"

Burn? Why ever should he ask that now? Lothiriel clasped her hands together to stop an inconvenient tremor and schooled her face to a suitable hopefulness. She must not think of burning things. "Parts of the first circle. Thank heaven the preparations stopped the flames from advancing any farther."

"Amerith and her teams worked very hard," Faramir ran his free right hand worriedly through his hair and sighed. The gesture was achingly familiar. Boromir had done it too. "It saddens my heart to think of the City badly damaged. I can smell it."

Smell it? Lothiriel's heart tripped unsteadily. Her cousin had always had a remarkable sense of smell: her brothers' had jokingly suggested he knew the Enemy's movements not by intelligence but by the stench upon the wind. Gandalf had rescued him before Denethor could set fire to the faggots, but now that the wind had turned to westward the smoke from ruined Rath Dinen was drifting by. She sniffed, noting the faint acrid taint for the first time in all the hours she had sat through the stronger smells of blood and unguents that permeated the Healing House.

Lothiriel rose and closed the window shutters, stayed a moment with fingers resting on the latch,
feeling oddly battered and praying for Bergil's quick return. Mithrandir had requested that none tell Faramir of the manner of Denethor's passing until he was quite healed. That was starting to look to be quite a chore. He was undoubtedly going to ask her about his father and she was not sure she could hold him off for long.

Lothiriel grimaced. It was a sometimes unhelpful Dol Amroth family trait to be quite unable to frame a convincing lie.

"My lady?"

Praise Este Bergil was back. She flashed him a quick smile of gratitude and took the proffered supplies; set about arranging them on the little painted dresser. The ewer of water was blessedly warm. With soap and some careful scrubbing the oil should come off quite easily.

Faramir eyed her ministrations warily. "You are not going to bathe me here..?"

"You are weak as a kitten after days of fever, Fara. You cannot do it for yourself." He did not protest more, merely made a face and lay back deeper in the pillows. She smiled fondly. He was as much of a baby when indisposed as Erchiron or Elphir. Briskly, she set to the business of cleaning him with the same gentle but impersonal efficiency as she had used on others many times in the past few days, sponging the sweat and oil from off his chest and neck and careful not to jostle his wounded shoulder too very much. Twice she changed the basin and began again. Finally, content to let her work, Faramir closed his eyes, smiling faintly at some stray thought.

"What is so funny?" she asked, wringing the cloth out and dabbing on more soap.

"This. That you should be washing me. Do you not remember that the last time I washed you we both got into trouble?"

Her tinkling laugh lit the quiet room. "Stars, yes! I am afraid we must explain."

Bergil, solemnly standing guard by the heavy oaken door coughed once. "Begging your pardon Princess but what is said here stays here. I have not heard a thing."

"Cheeky lad. He has already learned the first duty of a guard." Faramir winked and Bergil blushed bright as the sunrise that was soon to come. "It has become part of family lore. I was just back from manoeuvres near the Poros; teaching Lothiriel how to skulk like a proper Ranger."

"And I was not quite so steady as you thought."

Her cousin chuckled at the memory. "Sadly, no. You fell head first out of the hayloft into the stable muck. It took me ages to clean you up."

"Aunt Rini’s face when she found us both….""

"Oh yes, " Faramir grinned. "You were naked as the day you were born and I was soaked from all the squirming as I washed your hair. "Inappropriate behaviour from a young man who should know better" was the phrase she used.

I was nineteen and she was five," he added helpfully for Bergil's benefit.

Lothiriel, by now reduced to helpless giggling, pitched her voice to Rini’s bird-like, cut-crystal tones. "One must always behave with proper decorum."

"Well Boromir missed that dispatch…" They both chimed in in perfect unison with Faramir's original
riposte, laughing and gasping at the memory of Ivriniel's reaction. Neither had ever been quite sure what had startled their Aunt the most; Faramir talking back or her own inability to keep a grin off of her face.

"Oh I love that story," Lothiriel sighed happily. Yavanna's blessing it felt good to laugh. She set the basin aside and started to run a soft toweling cloth across her cousin's chest. By the door even Bergil was grinning shyly, but if she had hoped to lighten Faramir's grieving heart for long it not work. Just as she wrung the last of the damp out of his hair his lips pursed thoughtfully.

"Father was most displeased."

Oh Valar, the last thing she wanted to do was to remind him of her Uncle. The memory had seemingly made him quieten more and so she let Faramir lay still, finishing her work, all the while wracking her brain for a more neutral topic.

"Thank you,' he said finally, struggling to sit straighter up when she had folded the sheet and blanket back up to his chest. "Have I missed much? Beregond explained last night that Uncle brought me back and the cavalry is mostly safe. What of my men? There is surely a meeting of the Captains. Father I expect is too busy to visit, but could Imrahil brief me when they are done? Or perhaps Madril or Damrod could go in my stead?"

Lothiriel blanched. Nienna, how could she admit that every man he had just named save her own father was actually dead? She laid a none too steady hand on his unbound arm and pressed carefully for emphasis; willed a certainty into her voice she did not feel.

"Your men are all well taken care of. You brought them back when none thought any could survive." Sudden tears pricked at the corners of her eyes. Dol Amroth had been so very lucky. Her father and her brothers were virtually untouched. It seemed unfair, in the face of so much suffering, to have been so fortunate.

A well of sadness darkened his light grey gaze. "Not all."

"More than any other could," she replied, as firmly as she could. This topic felt like sailing in uncharted shallows. What could she say to redirect him back? "Your only duty now is to rest. Do you not remember the directions from the King?"

Yes. Yes, thankfully he did. A brilliant smile suddenly lit the pale and haggard face. "I cannot quite believe he is truly real and not some figment of my evil dreams. Elbereth, Thiri, we are so blessed to have snatched victory from defeat."

"We are."

For a moment she breathed easier, certain that the rocky shoals had passed but then the dark brows furrowed once again. "Father I suspect was his usual self and visited well past any civil time. He will not be pleased that the King here. Is he being civil?"

Lothiriel bit her lip at his frighteningly sharp regard. Denethor of course had not visited Faramir at all. He had been already dead. What could she say? Ignored the first issue and focused on the second.

"Lord Aragorn is camping outside the city.." she began, swallowing hard past the lump in her throat.

A deeper frown creased Faramir's pallid face. "He does not wish to come?" Lothiriel was forced to clutch her skirts to keep her fingers still. "Thiri maybe you could you ask him? I know I ask a lot, but I must speak to him."
Valar, what could she say to that? She was not lying but was certainly omitting almost all of the truth. He already seemed to sense that she was upset but mistook the cause, thinking it due to conflict between two rival lords. She had no wish to lie and it was foolish to try at any rate. The father and his son were not so very different in their acuity. She had to steer him from this line of questioning.

"Fara I…"

"Is he refusing..?" a strained voice, thick with emotion, cut across her words. "Is he very angry about the rout? I held them together as long as I was able…"

"Of course you did," she replied, stricken that he should doubt himself. "No one can doubt your courage."

"He did." The retort was flat and hard. The pale face turned away upon the pillow. "And then…we…we parted badly."

Oh gods! Despair welled up. Her beloved cousin wished to repair the strain with a father he could never see again. How horrible was that thought? What could she say now that was not crueler than the truth? To string him along, to give him hope of reconciliation, would only cause deeper pain.

Swaying just a little, feeling suddenly beyond exhausted and afraid to blurt out the truth, Lothiriel put up a hand to shield her face. Damn, damn her eyes, but they seemed to be leaking once again.

"I am sure that he knows you love him," she finished faintly, picking up the basin of dirty water like a shield. A greasy slick of wet splashed upon her dress. "I have to bring the basin back." She didn't. But their unwitting game of cat and mouse was all too much.

"Thiri…"

She was a coward. She simply fled.

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"Ohhh!"

The sudden cry of startlement rang out just a moment before the tepid water hit.

Eomer-King stood, stunned and blinking, water dripping from his nose and chin, holding the forearms of his assailant in an effort to keep her from falling to the floor.

"Oh my Lord! Forgive me…"

The grey-clad healer's breathless apology cut off as quickly as it began. "I am so sorry. So sorry, my Lord. I.I was distracted. I did not see you there." Before he could protest, a handkerchief emerged and was wiped efficiently across Eomer's tunic front. It did not do too much to help the mess. The large basin had been full.

He wiped his hand across his dripping beard, flinging the wet away and trying to smile in a somewhat reassuring manner. The young woman did not look up, having discarded the rather fine, but now soaked handkerchief in favour of a drier corner of her apron. He hoped the substance was mostly water. The lingering greasiness on his fingertips did not bode well.
Eomer grasped her small and rather delicate-looking hands in his larger ones and tried to gently halt her efforts. "Please, no harm done mistress. It is the least noxious thing I have had splashed upon me since coming from the battle front and the pyres."

"Ohhhh!"

His words were meant in jest but clearly they did not help for as soon as they were out the poor creature dissolved. Tears that had before merely glinted in (rather pretty) long dark lashes now spilled out to stain her cheeks. Whatever had he said? Aghast, contrite, and suddenly afraid that he had hurt her in some way Eomer found himself pulling the woman closer into his arms. She was slender and taller than most women here yet her head fit comfortably below his chin.

"Shh.. No really mistress, all is well. It was an accident. Though I fear your basin is beyond repair." That brought a fresh storm of weeping and, much alarmed, he looked farther down.

The broad earthenware bowl lay smashed upon the floor: it had been fairly heavy (as his toe had certain cause to know) and he briefly wondered if she was cut? The small white hands that gripped both the sodden handkerchief and apron end were trembling but there were no cuts that he could see. Perhaps he had trod hard upon her toes? All he could see of those were a pair of red-tinged and water-stained leather shoes. "Are you injured? You are not hurt?" he asked.

The grey headrail shook lightly against his chest. That at least was a relief. Eomer freed a hand from upon her back and tipped up the tear-stained face. The pretty heart-shaped features were white and dark smudges shadowed a pair of luminous bright grey eyes. She was obviously exhausted from her work. Her wary glance toward the room she had just exited suggested she was worried about some charge.

"No, I am not hurt. And I am so very sorry. It is just that we nearly lost them all! And he is asking questions. And I could not stop it anymore."

Her mournful rush of words confirmed his fears. Poor thing. Probably a guard who was the last of his small company. The Steward's younger son had lost a third of his men in an utterly hopeless charge and the thought made him shift uncomfortably, shuddering at how near a thing was their rescue, and then he felt it. A potshard crunch underfoot. Blast. On top of such strain the girl would probably worry the Warden would dock her wages too. Eomer fished out his own handkerchief from inside his tunic and handed it silently across. "I should have paid better attention where I was bound, mistress. I can pay for the broken pot."

The fine linen square was folded neatly and dabbed delicately at her eyes. The stream of tears had stopped and only a faint hiccuping came out. "Oh. That is so kind of you but there is no need." The young woman took deeper breath and the sudden warmth that crept into his chest. Focus, Eomer. Tumbling a pretty lass should be the furthest thing from his head. "I have ruined your tunic. My brother has one very like it. Perhaps if you tell me where to find you I could arrange for a new one to be delivered."

Arrange? Ah, now he understood. The fine dark hair beneath the headrail and elegant high cheekbones were those of a noblewoman; one who had stayed behind to help the denizens of the city. Oh Bema. She was a high born Gondorian lady, He was not her relative and he just had touched her skin.

Eomer abruptly dropped his arms and took a careful full pace back.

"Forgive me, I only meant to console, my Lady…?"
"Lothiriel."

Lothiriel?! As in Princess Lothiriel? Tulkas' rod he had inadvertently touched the Prince of Dol Amroth's only daughter! How many Gondorian rules of etiquette he had broken in five minutes flat? Appalled that he might have insulted the kind and gracious man who was his host, he hastened to apologize.

"Princess, it is an honour to meet you. My sincerest apologies. I can only excuse my … familiarity… as a result of surprise and lingering fatigue." And lingering distraction, although he did not speak of that. He felt a little white and weary himself, more troubled by the discussion with Eowyn than he really cared to admit.

He bowed low in the Gondorian fashion his grandmother had sometimes favoured and took her hand. "Eomer. Eomer of Ald… Rohan," His smile nearly became a grimace when his traitorous tongue slipped on the final word. Aldburg was his home. It was automatic to say so but now he was the King. He just as surely belonged to all of Rohan now.

"Your grace." If she noticed his subtle slip she was too well bred to comment. He was met with the startling sight of a rather wobbly but still impressively executed curtsy nigh to the floor. Swiftly, he extended his hand to raise her up. "Now I understand the tunic. You are, I think, staying with Father at the townhouse. That tunic might well belong to Erchirion."

"Elphir, actually." He found himself replying to empty air. The Princess was crouched down at his feet, clearing the broken pieces from the grey flagstones and quite expertly using her stained apron as a sling.

What the? Well obviously this princess was not shy of doing basic labour.

Stifling a pleased grin (and wondering in all the Wold he should care how practical she was…), he knelt down, ignoring the protest in his still aching, battered side and began to help sweep up the wet oily mess.

Together it took them but a few minutes to complete.

"Would you like me to escort you to your home?" he asked politely, when they had stood up again. "Surely you need to change your kirtle too?" Was it is his imagination or did a shadow yet linger in her unusual sea-grey eyes?

The Princess's tired face shook a little sadly. "No, no thank you, my Lord. I have a change of clothing in my bunk here. I have to get back to my cousin's side."

"Cousin?" Grandmother Morwen had schooled him in both Dol Amroth's and the Steward's family trees but for a moment, distracted by the thought of coaxing a smile from her rather sad, but distracting lips, he could not picture root or branch.

"Faramir. Lord Denethor's youngest son. His mother was my Aunt. We…we nearly lost them both." The dark head drooped a bit and a fresh tear glistened but did not fall.

Nienna, he had heard how the strain of wrestling with the Enemy's dark will had driven the former Steward mad. Eomer glanced across the corridor to the door Lothiriel had left ajar. He knew how brave and valiant a commander was the Steward's second son. Now the poor man would wake to find his entire family gone. Did he even know that he was Steward now? That his father had tried to burn him too? No wonder his cousin was upset by his questioning. Eomer swallowed and offered such words of solace as he could.
"Lord Denethor was a noble man who had two brave and noble sons. Soon, when this war is over, we will have time to honour those who fell."

"Do you think so?" The small proud chin rose up. Her voice, that had been soft and sorrowful, grew stronger, like a wind chime that brightened in the breeze.

"I do," he replied, honestly. For no reason that he could put his finger on, Eomer truly was hopeful for their plight. Aragorn had achieved a miracle. Fortune favoured the warrior who dared and he had dared as no other in a thousand years. Surely the halfling would find favour too?

"Lothiriel!"

A ringing call echoed down the corridor and brought both their attentions up. The young Princess bit her lip again and flushed.

"I must go. That is my aunt and with the dawn there will be yet more chores to do." She bobbed a hasty curtsey. "I thank you again for your help, Eomer-King."

Surprised and no little startled by a form of address he had yet to grow accustomed to, Eomer had only an instant to bow in return before Lothiriel scurried off. He watched, nonplussed (and, yes, intrigued) until the grey skirts turned a farther corner and vanished out of sight.

Ruefully, he squeezed the hem of his tunic, wondering if he could attend the morning’s conclave without first stopping back and changing. His undershirt was dry. Aragorn would not raise his eyes, nor Gandalf, but Lord Hurin whom he knew not well just might. And Imrahil.

He watched as a stream of oily wet dripped accusingly down to the floor. That settled it.

Eomer left the Houses and swept through the sixth circle gate. Distracted by an odd and unfamiliar feeling of anxiousness in his chest the young King completely failed to notice one important point. Dolor Amroth's pretty and accomplished young Princess was still clutching his sodden handkerchief.

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Like a sea, defeated men in muddied red and gold parted before the Prince, but Imrahil of Dol Amroth did not see them.

As was the case sometimes, the visions chose inconvenient moments to crowd in close. Minas Tirith’s temporary Lord and Master paused and swayed a beat no longer than a breath, while his lieutenant, a Swan Knight well used to his Prince’s quixotic birthright, held back the curious of the camp perched on the Pelennor's dark-churned mud.

Imrahil's eyes were open but they did not see the blue-grey smoke from cooking fires nor the dark faces etched with resignation. He did not smell sweat or horse or refuse or even the sweet, heady scent of a lone, much-traveled apricot that had precipitated the event. His sight was filled with flashing hooves and blood-slicked swords; with black shadows of death that swooped and fell about a figure gleaming white upon a hill.

And a mountain spewing fire all around.
"Tears. I see tears of stone," he whispered, "They fall like rain upon the riven earth."

"My Lord?" the young lieutenant looked up, puzzled, but the Prince did not reply.

Imrahil shivered and shook his dark head, ran a shaky hand across his face and blinked up into the mid-day sun. "'Sterek, I apologize. Do not mind me. The moment has quickly passed.'

It had: clear grey leaked back into a gaze that had briefly been all black. Imrahil drew in a careful steadying breath and tried to ease the beating of his heart. In a few minutes all that would be left was a subtle pounding in his head and a sense of unreality. It was, as always, difficult to know what part of any dream was true, if indeed any part at all. Time and experience had taught him that if a vision were important it would stay; linger in his mind's eye and underneath his skin until he had held his nephew in his arms, still as death and bleeding in the mire. The pain to have Seen true was cruel. He looking down on his kinsman's face he had rued the Valar's gift.

_Oh lad. If only you were twelve again._

Shaken but resolved Imrahil resumed his errand and walked quickly on.

In the end, it proved quite easy to find the one he sought. The Duchess's bright red hair stood out amongst the sea of dark. He found her conversing in the Southron's quick, sibilant tongue with a shorter man bearing the heavy gold collar and cheek tattoos of a Captain. What was being said he could not tell but it was clear the man was much agitated. Repeatedly, the Southron raised supplicating hands in the air and pointed towards the battle field, while Amerith nodded and replied with similarly sharp words. The urgent debate wore on. Imrahil waited patiently under the welcome spring sun until she glanced over and caught his eye, nodding briefly and pointing his way. A final-sounding pronouncement was intoned. She folded both her hands across her breast and inclined her head respectfully, holding the warrior's black gaze for a longer moment. At last he too grunted and bowed in kind.

"I thank you, Imrahil," Amerith sighing heavily as she slipped a linen-clad arm through his. "Your timing is impeccable. That was growing tedious." They turned to walk back toward the city gate. Around them swarthy faces stared curiously and a murmur started up. Sterek and Amerith's own guards gathered more closely round. It occurred to Imrahil that his own blue and silver livery was likely memorable from the day before.

"Willen said I could find you here. That was?"

"The highest ranking of their Captains. A man named Hegog. Your arrival allowed me to make an apt analogy."

"Indeed? I am intrigued. You clearly understand the nuance of the language. I am afraid my vocabulary is composed entirely of sailing terms."

The lady grinned coquettishly and an auburn eyebrow raised. "'Prepare to be boarded' would not work both on land and deck?"

He coughed weakly, hastily glancing around and feeling a sudden flush run up to his cheeks. None of those nearby seemed to have caught wind of what Amerith had said. "I did visit Umbar in my youth. Unofficially, of course."

"Of course," The reply was quite blandly innocent.
He held Amerith's hand tightly, steadying her as she lifted her skirts to step across a deep furrow in the turf. It was the exact depth and width to have been made by a Nazgul's claw. She tightened her fingers in appreciation.

"Haradi has many dialects but all speak the language of the traders. I am here because we have a serious problem of provision. The City must find food for three thousand more hungry souls, prisoners and men, and a dead Mumak is a tempting source. We nearly had an insurrection this morn when the Guard began to butcher one and pass the meat around. I was able to help them understand that it was as if we asked a Rohir to eat his horse."

Imrahil's brows shot up at that. "Having spoken at some length with Marshal Elfhelm this morn I rather suspect they might be so practical. And how did I help?"

"I pointed out that swan is a delicacy served to the Emperor himself and it is the emblem of your house."

Imrahil threw back his head and laughed. Oh the lady was shameless in what information she would use. "Did you also mention that it was my father's favourite dish?"

"No. How of unusual of me to forget that fact." A pair of lips twitched mischievously. "Nevermind. Hegog has agreed to let the carcasses be butchered so long as they are served at other people's tables. I am told it makes a rather tasty stew."

They had nearly reached the great broken City gate. The twisted bands of iron and black Lebrethon had been hastily pulled to one side and now all that guarded Gondor's step was a small forest of pikemen in somewhat battered, black and silver livery. Imrahil paused to salute. The guards snapped to attention before parting and letting them both through.

When they had reached the start of Lampwright's street Amerith paused and halted him with a hand upon his arm. "You have not come down here just to inquire about a menu…" She spread her hands and regarded him with curiosity. They both knew he did little on a whim.

How could he explain? How to admit that the supposedly valiant Prince of the Swan Knights had come to the Southron camp to find courage for what he had to do.

He turned and took both her small white hands in his. "My Lady…Amerith…. I… I find myself in need of reinforcements."

"Reinforcements? Is there another battle of which I am unaware?"

"No," he admitted. "Although if the city runs short of ale before we leave things could get ugly in the fourth."

Green eyes danced a little at his evident discomfiture. "You are stalling, my Lord."

He was. Imrahil allowed himself a small and wry half-smile before steeling himself again. *Ulmo's ulumur* this was not going to become an easier tack for waiting any longer on the reach.

He sighed and looked down to hold her gaze more steadily. "My nephew must be told of his father's death."

A wash of sadness ran quickly down to erase the teasing sparkle. "And it will not do to hide it from him for very long."

"Just so."
Imrahil cleared his throat awkwardly. It was a little indelicate to speak of an unofficial liaison and they had come to the embarrassing part. "Forgive me for my forwardness Duchess but I am assuming that you might bring him comfort at this dark time."

Beringed fingers squeezed gently on his arm. "Perhaps. As much as any true and caring friend."

"Friend?" he repeated, surprised that that was word that she should choose. Was Amerith just being her famously circumspect self or was there an essential point that he had missed? He had admittedly not kept up with such nonessential news in years.

"Are you not especially… close? Not that I listen to court gossip you understand but Denethor has accepted it for years. He told me so." The unhelpful, telltale flush crept up again. "I thought the whole city was under the impression that you are lovers?"

Amerith bit her lip. He could not decide if were from amusement or chagrin. "Be easy, Imrahil. We are great friends, Others once made assumptions from our actions and of course human nature being what it was the assumption was that we were lovers."

"But everyone assumed, nay expected that once the war was over you two might wed."

Amerith took in his flabbergasted look and smiled wistfully. "As much as I hope and pray that they are right about this war, that tidbit is sadly out of date and I am far far too used to my freedom for marriage now. As for Faramir, not all are as wise as you my Prince. You, and your father before you, have always let your family follow their own hearts. Denethor ever tried to force both his sons to be something they were not. The façade has served its purpose. It stopped Denethor from imposing a match upon your nephew with someone he did not love.

Imrahil frowned thoughtfully. Boromir had stood up to his father on that issue and their relationship had never been the same. What would Faramir, who had always craved his father's good regard, have done presented with such a match? Probably taken it, fulfilling a sense of duty to Steward and father both. He looked upon Amerith with new found admiration. Her solution had been ingenious, if a little risky as far as reputation.

"My Lady you are full of surprises today."

"Flattery will get you everywhere." He smiled wanly and they both looked up towards a green smudge on the rampart of the sixth. The greensward of the House of Healing's gardens was the largest patch of nature in the city and a welcome respite from its unrelenting stone. Somehow he doubted it would be sufficient balm for the dreadful news they had to bear.

Amerith sighed and brought her hand up to his cheek. "Este grant that he finds healing in this space and has a long life ahead to find a woman with whom he can forge a lasting bond."

"The Valar make it so. Will you join me now in the Houses to break the news? This will be a heavy blow." He proffered his arm more formally and she clasped his wrist lightly, a perfect correct one inch above his braided cuff.

Together they walked in apprehensive silence through a city preparing once again for war.

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Faramir lay in the muted quiet of the night and waited for disintegration to finally come.

He was patient. Of course it was impossible for him to now stay sane and whole. This was too much. There was no way to weather this new shock. It was quite simply beyond enduring. His mother. His brother. And now his father too. All of them, all of his family in what felt a single blow, for as surely as he had just lost his father now, he had lost his brother and his mother once again. Boromir and Denethor had always been the keepers of his memories— for the boy who had been too little to remember much of a mother beyond soft hands in the firelight and soft words when the night crowded all too close.

Silent tears slipped down while energy drained away. He did not dissolve although of course it would surely come. Perhaps he was simply yet too weary for the process to take root…

"Your father is now gone."

Imrahil's words had been spoken with an ocean of regret.

Faramir had sat, enwrapped by the arms of both his Uncle and Amerith, a sense of heavy compassion like a mantle across his thoughts. Her skirts rustled quietly while Imrahil's rough callused thumb stroked across his hand. His heart, stone-like and then shattered like a crystal glass, had known the ill news that would finally come.

Sometimes it happened that way...the premonitions. They lay and waited until just before the act to spring. This felt as such and yet at once it was so familiar, as if known for long and long. As if he had dreamed some part of it in the night terrors of the past and not recognized for true all it forebode…

Amerith's fingers stroked lightly along his nape, put into touch the depth of her leaden grief. Her voice was soft and yet held so much regret he thought that it must surely burst open like a hornbeam seed.

He fell while the battle raged"

"How?"

Green eyes and seastorm grey met once. How?" he sent again.

"Fire..." Imrahil's cultured baritone broke a little on that word and then images of horror, imagined catapults and siege engines throwing flaming pitch onto the battlements, arrows drenched in oil finding targets higher up reeled through Faramir's mind's eye. Denethor have left his chair at last, directed personally the defense from the city walls.

Imrahil hugged him hard. "Faramir...? Your father loved you. It what was never easy for him to show but his grief at that thought of losing you was too great."

"They are all gone..." His words were faint, as if too large to comprehend and worried looks were exchanged above his head.

"I should have gone in my brother's stead..."

"No. Amerith hugged him close and dropped the barest of lips onto his brow. "It is not given to each of us to direct of all that comes to be. You cannot know the music of the One. Do not go there."

"I want to go to him..."
A faint shudder wracked his shoulders as both sets of arms held tighter still. "It is not possible Faramir, not until you are full healed and released from the Houses' care."

He had heard his Uncle's words but the sense of unreality was too great, as if he were watching the scene from somewhere outside his body, from some great height and they all were merely actors on a stage. At any moment he would wake up and find it all a dream, a horrible, terrible mistake. Having longed to howl for his brother, his mind in desperate defense pulled away so that pain would not overmatch the body upon the bed.

Alarmed by the quiet, seeming incomprehension, they did not let him be alone. Amerith had been the first, touching gently to his hand or face each time he awoke, speaking softly of need or want or silently holding on. Mithrandir was next. His uncle had come last, greatly worried, gnarled but soothing hand gripping his and dimly heard them speak. The words were faint as through a dark and murky tunnel.

Mithrandir had the right of it. "He is strong Imrahil. He has always had to be but there comes a time when strength alone will not do. Even the mightiest warrior can be too tired to take a step. Time, give him time. He will accept."

Lothiriel and Erchirion came next, then Ivriniel and Elphir. Around all the watches of the night they sat, weeping or dry-eyed, heart-sick but above all holding on to him. As if with touch they could anchor him to the world he had to accept.

The dam burst when Amrothos had the watch.

He had slept again, mind descending to a depth where fear and reality rode bareback in harried flight. The creature, the terror that hunted, eager and merciless, through his exhausted dreams was steadily ripping him limb from limb.

The screams as he awoke (faithless. ungrateful one) were blood-curdling.

Amrothos, aghast, sent for both his father and his king.

Sleep became something sought only under the blanket of calming drugs. Even then the nightmares did not entirely abate and he woke repeatedly through that long night, shaking hands reaching for the contact that was always there. Touch became the lodestone of the world. He needed to not fly away, to not let his mind float flee. The bonds left in Middle-Earth must do.

It did not make it right. But for a time it kept him whole…

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so so much to Caroline and cloudyhead for your comments. They really mean so much and keep me going. Thank you also to those who have kudo's this past month...its like juice for my writing battery :)

Cheers and hugs and thanks go to Annafan and Artura for casting discerning eyes on this and to Wynja2007's NaNoWriMo cabin for being a comfy space in which to write. Updating should be faster now again.. I actually have much of the forthcoming chapters
Next up... Aragorn and Faramir have a heart to heart and Eomer-King says goodbye to his sister at the gates. Gondor's new steward finds there is something familiar about the Shieldmaiden with the golden hair
Then, as so many other nights, it was thoughts of Boromir that first stole into the moments of silence and reflection.

Crystal and clear, pure as the water that had filled the little boat, memories of his smile poured past: the boy, pudgy cheeked and proud, reading a bedtime story when momma was too ill; the youth, breathless and grinning wide as the river’s plain, excited for his first command; the man, strong and fearless, head thrown back and a palm across his chest, nearly crying with mirth at word of his brother’s irreverence.

The ghosts of needed sleep reached out.

Valar no. This time he would not let them win. He must not let them take his precious memories, twist and sully them, drag him down to swim in fathomless pools of grief.

He fought the lingering heaviness as long as he could but soon his body’s own need and the drug’s relentless grip took hold. Sharp grasping fingers reached out and hooked a warm smile triumphantly. At their cackles of ill-hidden glee, he stilled, knowing what was to come.

Cherished, painful, the last smile from before his brother went away, dissolved.

The air around became close and green. He had walked far and it had taken all his breath, but this time, blessedly, he flew quickly past the field of nightmare, past the mist where he could not see what was battle and what was subterfuge.

Each time he was surprised to find not stiff grey plate but his leather jerkin on his back.

Then as now he walked; he and many, many men, though it was no longer the retreat. Some turned back quickly, afraid of the world that lay ahead. Some move swiftly on, driven by fear or pain or even hope. He wanted to weep at the blessed certainty shining in those eyes and wondered fleetingly what another would see upon his face? Fatigue? Resignation? Or purely relief to have simply given up?

The Road beneath his feet was a path through a forest glade and he kept his eyes upon the loam, hoping to trace his brother’s steps. As he strode, the trees thinned and the land grew more impermanent, the road paled and became whiter with every league.

Something cool trickled down his face. He reached up and muddied fingers came away stained in black. Ah, this was the turning point. He no longer bled hope or innocence but hard and bitten experience.

The shore ahead became a haze of white and with an effort he forced his legs to move.

At the steps to the marble hall, he eagerly raised each battered boot. Beside, the wide avenue was thronged with steel and hide and battered skin, the feet of many others, some in rapture and some in trepidation. One man, with petals of spring flowers of the Pelennor crushed upon his back, had turned back and knelt at the haven’s shore, washed the blood from off his hands. Faramir had followed suit. He knew not joy or grief but something of them both, each footfall gained in steadiness what it lacked in permanence.
He turned and mounted to the topmost step.

There was a crepuscular light inside the Halls and above a vault of glittering stars. He felt that his heart could burst at the beauty all around. Those he loved he knew would be waiting below the shining ivory arch. At first the faces were indistinct but then they cleared as if a veil had been drawn back. Boromir, hale and whole, at peace and untroubled by any shadow, smiled and laid a upon their mother’s shoulder. Finduilas, young and fresh, clear-eyed and blooming, stood by his side wrapped in a mantle of Dol Amroth blue. Denethor was not there and that was good. His father was safe, had survived the assault upon the city.

His mother stretched out her hands, beaconing, tears of shining crystal upon her flushed and lovely cheeks. They dropped as rain to the step of stone that shone whiter than his path. The rock received them and he rejoiced. Now they could be together at long last.

H is own hands reached…

“Faramir!”

The voice of command cracked like a whip. “Do not! This is not right…None of this is real.”

He staggered back, stepped down from the brink and in the shredded leather of his boot a crystal tear embedded.

It cut. Sharper than any blade it bit into his flesh and from the wound a storm-grey mist began to seep.

The air dissolved. Pain spun and swirled, billowing like wood smoke before devouring eagerly the bright scene of happiness before. He coughed, sputtering and choking with the weight of it, desperately dragging at his tunic collar but he could not catch his breath.

The world he knew turned to ashes in his mouth.

“Faramir. Faramir!”

The young man started up out of his dream, heart hammering in fear and pale face lined with sweat. It felt as if the centre could not hold. He choked and coughed, the lingering scent and grit of ash was so intense he felt surely that he must suffocate.

“Na ú erui. Na ú erui.” Murmured words of soft Sindarin broke through his tumbling thoughts. “You are not alone. You are not alone…”

Was he not? But no, as the room became the real he realized there was someone there. A healer perhaps? The blessedly solid weight of a pewter cup was pressed to his parched lips.

“Drink.”

He obeyed and sipped slowly at the cool clear water. A callused gentle hand steadied his shaking fingers and another braced him at his back. Faramir was shaking like a leaf and the blankets around lay twisted and in disarray.
His back was stroked slowly back and forth as one would gentle a frightened horse. “Easy now.”
He took a deep shuddering breath and then another. At last the dregs of nightmare began to lose
their hold.

Praise Lorien. It was nightmare and not some flash of foresight.

“Thank you,” he said thickly when words untangled from his tongue. “Can you please tell me …
what is the time?” It would be a blessing if he had slept a little longer before the ill dreams had taken
hold. He could not see the sandglass or his helper through the veil of tears that blurred his pained
grey eyes.

“Early. Not yet dawn.” The deep, yet achingly familiar voice held the barest note of amusement.
He moved to raise a hand and clear his sight but found his left, his sword hand, was held tightly in a
sling. His wound. How could he possibly forget that?

The man reached and obligingly took away the cup, set it down nearby before helping him to sit
straighter up.

Weary fingers at last rubbed away the lingering mist. The sight he found made his tripping heart
nearly burst from his chest.

“Sire!? Forgive me….”

A wry half-smile quirked sideways. “There is nothing to forgive. I was afraid to disturb your rest
but perhaps it was just as well.”

It was indeed early. No light from the window made strips of bright and shade across the floor and a
half-shuttered torch burned low beside the door.

The King, despite the hour, was already clad for battle. His tunic and light trews held the telltale
wear from a gambeson and a heavy sword in its belt and sheath stood upright by the door. The
Enemy must still await and yet his liege was spending time with an invalid shaking in the aftermath
of nightmare?

Faramir flushed and tried to stammer out another apology but the coughing took hold again. The
King rose, retrieved and refilled the cup before placing it in easy reach. Faramir drank and this time
felt some of the rawness that coated his throat like tar ease off. The torchlight sputtered briefly
brighter as the air stirred within the room.

“Thank you.”

“You are welcome.” The King hooked a worn boot around one chair leg, pulled it closer and sat
back down. He studied Faramir intently before a swift shadow passed across his handsome face.
“We do not yet know each other well but I marvel. You are so very like him.”

There could be only one him. Faramir nodded. He did indeed favour his brother in his looks, both
of them were stamped by brow and nose as sons of Denethor. It did not surprise him to be
recognized. Nor did it to know the face of the one who sat with easy grace beside the bed. His
King was just as familiar from the long years of hopeful dreams.

“Excuse my weakness, Sire. I am not yet…. quite whole. Do not let me take you from your
duties.”

The dark head shook slowly. “Nothing now is more important to me than to be here. I have some
time. We leave at midday and there are a few hands to help.” Long legs were tucked back below
the wooden chair as he leaned forward and offered a broad hand to shake. “We did not have the chance for a proper introduction. I am Aragorn, son of Arathorn. Chieftain of the Dúnedain of the North. Aragorn will do.” He smiled. “I am not King. Not officially, quite yet.”

Not King?! When Faramir himself had felt the warmth of healing flow from the very selfsame hand? When a long awaited six-pointed star glinted from its purchase on a long grey cloak? “But Sire!?” he protested, so shocked by the statement he forget to take his hand.

A dark eyebrow raised sardonically. “No buts. There will be time enough for that. If we are so lucky.” Aragorn gestured to the bandage across his chest. “Indulge me. Professional curiosity. May I see?”

“Of course.”

Faramir lay back against the pillows and let deft fingers probe lightly at the wound. It pained, but only dully, and he tried to answer the few questions as honestly as he could.

After an encouraging survey the King…no Aragorn… reached out and tilted his patient’s face toward the light, frowning slightly at what he found.

“You’re skin is shrunken still. You are dehydrated from the fever. I expect they have told you drink more.”

“Yes, my Lord,” he sighed, “and to eat. Although, I am afraid I have little appetite.”

Aragorn pursed his lips thoughtfully. “Those who suffer under the Shadow are often taken so. Have they let you have any air at all?”

Faramir shook his head, brightening at the thought. “No, the healers have not let me up.”

“If Rangers of Gondor are at all like those of my acquaintance being out of doors helps them to more quickly heal.” Aragorn arose, grasped his sword and cloak and took a spare robe from a hook upon the wall. “Fresh air helps with appetite. This is a need we most certainly can remedy.”

They were going to go out? “Now?” he asked, bewildered and amazed at his good fortune.

“Indeed.”

Before too long a Faramir found himself clad and supported by a strong arm. He was helped down the still dim hall to a low flight of steps and out into the healing garden. Beyond the white stone walls the sun was only the barest flush below blue-grey dark: the dawn bell had yet to ring but already a few grey-clad assistants were scuttling to and fro.

If any recognized who it was that aided the day’s first halting patient they did not let it show.

Faramir sank down gratefully when they reached the first stone bench. He drooped his head a little and tried to rub the muscles of one shaking thigh with his hand. It was frustrating to have so little stamina. They had barely made to the central fountain but after three days of blazing fever his legs felt as if they had turned to mush. How long before he would be fit to fight again?

As if he understood the young man’s anxiety, Aragorn settled himself to lend a shoulder for support. “Do not fret. I marvel at the speed of your recovery.”

“Truly?” Faramir looked up. Ioreth and Varan the Houses’ Master Healer had both mentioned several times their admiration for King’s skills as a healer. If this was his informed assessment of
swift Valar protect them for he was nowhere near able to dress himself much less lift a sword! He touched to the bandage at his shoulder. “But the wound was not so very great.”

Dark brows narrowed thoughtfully. “Not all wounds are of the flesh. You and your company were under Shadow long before Osgiliath. A man would be a fool to not recognize your strength.”

Faramir flushed. Praise, particularly from his superior, was an unfamiliar experience of late. “Strength my Lord? Some would call it stubbornness.”

The wry smile quirked again. “I expect that serves you just as well.”

After that the two men sat companionably and watched as the first signs of morn gathered slowly all about. The King seemed content to simply pause and Gondor’s young Captain needed time to rest. The dew came down to grace the garden beds and the white flowers glowed ghostly in the barest bit of light. No birds yet sang but there was an expectant hush and sense of waiting that Faramir could feel. In the slowly dawning light the shapes of shrubs and flowers came back again and it made him smile for although this was not his garden favourite garden in the city (that honour belonged to his mother’s oasis of vivid Dol Amroth showiness) it was a green and restful space.

His eye roved over the gravel paths, amazed that a harried servant had found time to rake them out. Beside another nearby bench a tiny flash of yellow caught his eye. A miniature spire of tiny stars peeked out from a tuft of longer grass.

“Asphodel? Here and out of season?” he said, wonderingly. “It is as if the very land resists…”

Aragorn gave him a sharp look and a long slow nod. “You see it also? We had the wind at our backs all the way up to Harlond.”

He did, all the company of Ithilien had noted the uncommon signs of spring despite the dark winds coming from the east. It had been of things to give them heart. “There are already lilacs blooming near Anduin’s far shore.”

“Then we shall look for them as we pass.” Aragorn’s smile faded as he turned his gaze toward the east. Away in the distance the fence of Ephel Duath brooded below a long roiling mass of cloud. “We ride today with seven thousands, scarce the vanguard of the army in its days of power. But still it must be enough.”

“I should be there.” Though the tone was bitter, Aragorn did not chide him or do him the disservice of misunderstanding what he meant. When one’s men are asked to make another sacrifice it sits ill to not partake in the risk.

“You have done enough, young Steward,” he commented firmly. “You kept the City standing until we could come to her aid. And you may yet do your part. It is a bitter thing to be left behind but you must and when you are well rule the City come what may. Should our venture come to ill your steady hand will be needed here.”

Faramir winced, pricked by both the title and the vision. Aragorn was not the first to use that address but it felt sharper somehow this morn. “Please… I am not yet Steward. I am still a simple Captain.”

“Turn about is fair play is it not?”

Faramir groaned as he realized what he had said. For a moment he worried he had offended the other man but then Aragorn chuckled and shook his good shoulder gently. “I hope that I may tease you just a little.”
Faramir nodded shyly. Of course he could, it was just slightly expected from a King. He sighed deeply and tilted his face up to first rays of warming sun. Oh yes, simplicity was a good thing right now when too much had changed too quickly. Both of them knew it could not last but it felt right to hold on a little more.

Aragorn sighed. “Faramir I can do no more to help you heal in body but I- I find I cannot go without leaving you what little comfort I have to give.”

The younger man closed his eyes. He knew instinctively of what Aragorn wished to speak- the moment he had been torn from his moorings, the moment of his brother’s death. To know more from one who had been there would be a gift beyond all price and yet it pierced, swift and fine like glass, like a bright light from which one cannot look away.

He yearned for its sharpness even as he shuddered at the thought.

“Please…”

The sun rose higher and while its glow warmed the shadowed snows of Mindolluin’s face, Aragorn told his tale.

At first his words were all of steadfastness on the journey, of strength and wit and a great, big-hearted laugh; of bravery and many, many Orcs. He did not speak of pride or suspicion or claims unproven. Of those Faramir could guess and all too soon they passed from Gandalf’s fall to Lorien and his brother’s troubles there.

"It was then that I began to understand what I had not seen before.” Aragorn noted sadly. “That his hope had been long failing. That he feared to fail your father and his people both. He stumbled in that darkness and finally succumbed to the Ring’s insidious voice. It was have been a steady torment though what it promised him I know not.”

“I would know.”

He did. And how much more did it make him yearn to have argued harder with Denethor. At Aragorn’s questioning look Faramir drew breath and tried once to explain.

“Ease. Eloquence. A gift of tongues and memory for points of rule and lore. To lift a burden and have Gondor shining proud and fertile once again and he its lauded Steward.”

The dark head shook sadly. “I regret that I came to him too late. He did reject it Faramir. He did and begged forgiveness. His end was not long nor was it very hard; his breath was robbed quite swiftly. Though he had not words or time for all that was in his heart, I saw and he knew. I promised him to do my best for his people and the kingdom. And his ‘little one’. ” He was very used to looking out for a little brother, was he not?

Faramir reached up and clasped the Captain-General’s ring that still hung on a chain around his neck. Tears pricked at the corners of his eyes. He had spent many sleepless nights wondering what more he could have done. If he had done enough to be worthy of that boundless love. “I know some of what came to pass. That he found hope. That you honoured his sacrifice. It was a grace I think he did not expect. I thank you for it.”

Aragorn seemed quite unsurprised to find how he much knew. He clasped a hand to Faramir’s knee and at once the tightness that had built within his chest released. “Then that is well and I am content. I am sorry for your loss.”

Faramir nodded and when the tears glimmered but did not fall Aragorn continued on. “May I ask a
question?"

"Of course."

"How were they? Sam and Frodo when you saw them?"

It occurred to Faramir that it would have been many weeks since Aragorn had seen his friends. "Exhausted. Worried. But determined still. We gave them such respite as we could. I have great faith in Sam," he added, guessing that the older man was concerned about their quest. The young hobbit’s unflappable nature and devotion to his Master would serve them well.

Aragorn let a small smile half quirk. He also understood economy of expression.

"With Sam at his side Frodo can venture anywhere."

It seemed then that man was lost in thought, fingers tracing the pattern of veining in the polished marble of the bench. When he spoke again it was a wholly unexpected question.

"Was it hard to refuse the Ring?"

Ah. He thought he understood. The King was seeking a measure of his future servant, wished to unravel an enigma. How it was he, an unassuming Ranger, had done what no other had. "I did not trust myself."

Faramir laughed painfully and a little wildly. What could he say? How to explain? In the quiet space the short hard burst was startling. His voice was raw with little use.

"No. I had made my promise. I would keep it. I knew my life was forfeit. Though I could not see the ripples left by dear bought fish upon the Forbidden Pool. Or know exactly how I should be made to pay."

Aragorn shook his head in sadness. "Nay, do think so. Your father's fate was scribed upon time's groove long ere you made that choice Faramir. The moment he looked eastward in the Palantir I should think that he was lost."

The older Ranger studied his face thoughtfully again. "Did the Ring not whisper to you in the dark? Did it not promise your every heart's desire in return? I expected its pull and lure would grow stronger the closer it came to Barad-dûr. That it would call to Frodo in greater earnest."

"No. It did not try." The dark cascade of raven hair that had fallen to shroud Faramir’s face now parted in startled understanding. "It was but days since my brother fell. Even the Enemy could not promise me the only thing I wished. Nothing in Middle Earth had the power to give me my brother back.

"Then Boromir's sacrifice is even more steeped in honour if it aided you at the moment all our fates were intertwined."

At last the long fought tears tracked silently down his cheeks. Aragorn squeezed a thin and now shivering shoulder. "Only when the heart has grieved over what is has lost can then the spirit rejoice over what it has left. It is hard to accept that those who wiped our tears and healed our hurts are gone."

Faramir silently wiped at the tears with a corner of his sleeve. It was Boromir who had done that for him. Been brother and mother both.

"I know what it is to lose them all Faramir," continued Aragorn. "My father died so very young, my mother I lost as young man. I love my foster father and brothers dearly but it is not exactly the same
thing. Give yourself the time to grieve.” He shifted and for a moment Faramir’s gaze flickered to the cloak that now lay now across his lap. Its rough wool smelled heavy with musk and sweat but above was a bright and wholeness greenness that he could not place. The scent and the heartfelt words eased his heart a little bit.

Faramir found himself rubbing at aching eyes. “We should get back,” Aragorn sighed. The first bell of morning had not yet rung from the Tower of Ecthelion but noon would come soon enough. “You are tiring and I sadly have much to do.”

Aragorn stood and as Faramir looked up time blurred. He was once again kneeling before his lord, his father, speaking ancient words of fealty. “I have no sword to give my oath.”

The noble face that had forged an everlasting bond in a single bright moment of pure light looked down. “There is no need of an oath. I know you recognize your king.”

He did. How could any man not recognize the worthiness held in strong sinew and steel will? With a pang of grief he remembered well that one man not accepted this Dunadan for what he was.

Aragorn picked up his cloak and fingered the many-point star. Understanding glimmered in his eyes. “I think you know the Eagle of the Star.” He nodded. He did. That Thorongil might be the kingdom’s hope was a dream that had long sustained a princess and her son. “I grieve for you and your father both. That one so learned, so steadfast against the dark could fail. We were never easy with each other, Faramir, but there are good memories I would share of him and your lady mother too.”

For not the first time that morn Faramir had the uncanny feeling that Aragorn had read his thoughts. It was oddly comforting. He was tired, swaying now after many candlemarks of sitting up, forming words was becoming difficult, but there were none who had spoken of his father in the days just past. He needed to. If nothing less than to touch the memories before they faded like a falling star.

“I pray that we will see each other once again.” Aragorn avowed when he had placed a hand below the young man’s elbow and helped him to rise up. Faramir grimaced. They had to pause before walking on. It took some effort to find his feet. “I cannot replace the memories your brother or your father held but I knew your mother well. She taught a strange young man the dances of this land.”

“You will come back Sire.”

The words were said with utmost certainly. Aragorn looked over surprised by the words and their vehemence. In his urgency to speak Faramir had found some forgotten reserve of strength. The younger man’s grip on his forearm was so hard it was almost painful. “How can you know that?”

“You will. My mother. Finduilas. She saw you. She saw us. At your coronation.”

After his unexpected and tiring dawn adventure Faramir found the King’s assessment was quite true. Between the fresh air and exercise he was fatigued enough to sleep, closed his eyes and soon dropped off again. For once Faramir slept peacefully and without dreams.

A servant bearing an amply (and rather ambitiously) laden breakfast tray woke him at the second bell, and after a hasty and admittedly desultory effort at eating at least a scone his respite proved short-lived.
There came (to use Bergil’s term) ‘a whole parade’ of visitors.

First to visit come were the Prince of Dol Amroth and both his sons. They bid goodbye with fierce quick hugs and words of hopefulness, steadfastly ignoring the look of wistfulness on their kinsman’s face and entreating him to keep an eye on Lothiriel.

“There are still a few thousand Rohirrim about.” Elphir remarked with a growl but Faramir merely laughed and shook his head. “Have you seen your sister recently? Thiri can more than mind herself.”

Next came Pippin and Beregond. The young hobbit could barely contain his excitement at having a chance to “do his bit”. He was clad in a short mail coat and black livery of the Tower with his Barrow-blade slung at his hip. Its red and gold inlaid detail received such extravagant compliments that the young hobbit almost knocked a candlestick from the dresser in his exuberance to show its worth.

After all was set to rights Faramir gravely thanked the squire for his faithful service to his father and out of the corner of his eye he caught a swift glance from the hobbit to the guard. If he detected something in their manner that told of words withheld he did not let it show. In another time and space he might have tried to understand but fatigue and an inexplicable apprehension held him back. Better to stay cocooned in ignorance for a little while.

Next, to his great delight, Renil bashfully poked his head around the door and looked surprised and pleased to find his Captain sitting up in bed.

“Ren! Come in, come in.” Faramir beckoned and when the medic hesitated, he sighed and made a face. “Honestly. It is well. Word of my demise was premature.”

The young Ranger grinned and gingerly took a seat. “I promise to not keep you long Captain. I came yesterday after rounds but you were still asleep and I am afraid now there is little time.”

“And much to do for a newly minted Captain?” he teased. Word of the young man’s bravery had already made rounds. With the host mustering Faramir could well imagine the tasks that had yet had to be accomplished.

Renil blushed to the roots of his dark hair. “Anborn told on me.”

“Can you doubt it?” asked Faramir, incredulous. Their usually silent marksman was also a denizen of the wards. It was he who had chosen to give Faramir what he termed the ‘important news’ and his Captain was still marveled at how the boredom of captivity had affected the man’s need for speech. “His shoulder was injured not his tongue. They are all very proud of what you accomplished on the field.”

“Sir I…” Renil began, but his words trailed off. He had, of course, disobeyed an order and could well expect a ticking off. Faramir sighed and shook his head. Who was he to criticize his friend when he too had ignored direction he had been given?
“Anborn told me how you tried to save poor Damrod, may he rest well.”

Renil rubbed a hand anxiously along his thigh. “Mablung is beyond heartbroken, Sir.”

Faramir looked down, thinking sadly of the old lieutenant’s canny eye for Orcs and his canny nose for a bet. Of course his partner would be crushed. They had served together for so long, in the wilds and with little chance to visit hearth and kin, men who otherwise would never get along became brothers more in truth. “They bickered like a pair of old fishwives at times but underneath they were the best of friends. We will all miss him terribly.”

That brought a hesitant nod from Renil and a swiftly stilled look of pain. “There were too many of them.”

Dark brows furrowed into deeper line. “Tell me.”

Renil’s protest was automatic. He looked chagrined that he had said anything at all. “No. You are just recovering from….”

“A wound and yet another loss.” Faramir finished quietly. “Yes, but I need to know. I wish no more surprises. I find I cannot face the idea of daily finding that another friend and comrade is gone.”

The Ranger paled and rubbed nervously at his brow. “Well Anborn’s shoulder was near cleaved in half. Eldrin’s hand is smashed. Loic has a broken nose.”

“Ren.” Faramir’s flat look made the young man sigh. Mournfully he began to recite a list of names.


Faramir gasped. “Not Madril…” He closed his eyes against the aching pain. All of them were keenly felt but Madril had been his lieutenant almost from the first. The intensity of the hurt near took away his breath. “I must write Annwn,” he murmured when he could speak again.

“Sir, surely that can wait.”

He shook his head. “I will have time, captive in these Houses, while the rest of you go to Cormallen. It is the least that I can do.” With an effort he turned his thoughts back to the living men. “Who commands the Rangers now?” he asked, worriedly. None of the regular command save Mablung were set to go. Anborn had been promoted to lieutenant on the field but was confined. Loic’s status sounded unclear at best. Renil would be needed more for his medical skills than ability with a sword.

“Eradan,” Renil nodded at his commander’s shocked expression. “Though we all feel it will not the same without you, the men were that pleased to see at least a familiar face they forgot to tease him about his snow-white mane. I heard him grumble that if he heard any comment about his age he’d have them repeat it to the Prince’s face.”
Faramir smiled grimly. He could imagine his former Captain taking no guff from any of them, especially the young recruits. He shook his head, wondering if Imrahil had had a say in the assignment, shuddering at the thought of a formally trained Swan Knight trying to corral such an independent lot. At least Eradan understood how Rangers think. “I should be there. It seems unfair to ask a man who served so long to come out of well-earned retirement.”

“But saving yourself Sir there is none other they could want more and they know that they cannot have. You are the Lord Steward now. They know you are no longer theirs…”

Faramir grey eyes darkened sadly. “There you are wrong, my friend. I am theirs, first and always. I will always be a Ranger in my heart. As for other, it is not real. Not yet. Allow me the illusion for yet a while.”

After that there was too much to be said, too many memories of brave men to share and precious little time to speak. Soon enough the next bell sounded and Renil had to take his leave.

The two men clasped arms and Faramir gripped the young man’s shoulder tightly as he could. “Take good care of yourself and them.”

“I will, my Lord. ” At the threshold Renil hesitated before raising his right hand to his chest. It was a curiously archaic gesture but suited the gravity of the day. “Valar guard and guide you.”

“And you.”

Faramir saluted smartly back. He forebore to note that nothing would ever be the same again.

With Beregond’s imminent departure Faramir soon found he had a new self-appointed guard: Anborn. The young lieutenant was not fit to ride out of course, but he, like his Captain, was used to daily activity. The enforced idleness was already driving him a little mad and the healers had been notably unsuccessful in keeping him in bed.

“Captain, “ the younger man suggested cheerily when the first fanfare to assemble had been blown, “what do you say we try to find a better view of the host? It may be too much to go down to the gate but the view from just below the 6th should be clear enough.”

Faramir, who had just been feeling a little despondent after the excitement of the morn, perked up a bit. “I should like that very much! If we take breaks as we go I think I should manage to get that far.”

Neither of them saw fit to ask if they should be up at all. Moving quietly and with as much stealth as can be accomplished on less than steady legs, they had made it almost to the Houses’ central door when a familiar high pitched voice stopped them in their tracks.
“Bless me, where do you gentlemen think that you are going?”

Dame Ioreth stood just inside the door, arms akimbo and glaring at the miscreants.

Anborn stood a little straighter while an embarrassed flush crossed his bearded face. “Just to the sixth gate, Mistress. I thought as how the Captain’d be climbing the walls right now. He needs to see the Men head off.” He was supporting Faramir on his right side and trying to keep his own splinted arm from jostling.

“Needs to see…?!” Ioreth sputtered with indignation. “The Lord Steward is but two days back from death’s door! And Lieutenant with your shoulder you should not be supporting anyone. That arm was nearly ripped from off your body. Este, Master Varan warned me to watch the Rangers especially carefully and Valar know he’s had enough experience of them. ‘They have more guts sometimes than sense and seemingly no capacity for rest.’ I am sure he said and here is the living proof!”

Faramir began to make apologies but Anborn hurriedly changed position, used his arm to support Faramir’s and not the main weight of his upper chest. “There, is that better Mistress? It just so happens we have one good arm on each side. Between us we have full wings.

Ioreth was not mollified. “No that is not better. I will not have the Lord Steward collapsing when the King himself taxed his strength to bring him back.”

An appropriately abashed hopefulness was plastered to the young man’s face. “But the Captain must go down. I am quite certain he will take a bad turn if he does not.”

The Captain in question nearly choked with laughter at the blatant attempt at manipulation. He watched with well-hidden glee as Ioreth snorted skeptically and put a work-worn finger to her lips. She looked up and down the hall.

“Where is Bergil to help? We have so few lads to run errands these busy days. I am sure I do not know how we are managing to cope at all. There are few souls to spare and help with a chair.”

“He is seeing his father off, “ explained Faramir, eyes crinkling with amusement. He and Anborn could both sense victory was at hand despite the frown on the good-wife’s face. “Lord Hurin has given Beregond leave to go to Cormallen.”

“And I can still push a rolling chair,” Anborn volunteered. “My left side is strong enough. And I understand the Perian Meriadoc has been allowed up.”

At Ioreth’s huff of indignation Faramir was unsure if the Lieutenant’s observation had hurt or helped. “That’s as may be, young man, but they are an unusually tough folk. Hardier than you, by all accounts.” The older woman pointed to the direction of the Masters’ room. “If either of you came to ill and the Master knew I had let you out I would never hear the end of it.”

“Beginning your pardon Mistress, “Anborn cheekily replied, “it all depends on what you put in your report.”

“Well I nev…” The men were then treated to a rare and wondrous sight: the normally garrulous
Dame Ioreth reduced to speechlessness.

“Stay there!” she finally ordered before ducking into a storage room just down the hall.

A moment later Ioreth had returned and sat Faramir down in one of the Houses’ rolling chairs. “Go,” she said, fixing Anborn with a glare, “but mind you find somewhere to sit yourself. And both of you will have to wait until an assistant is free to bring you back.” Thanking the woman profusely and assuring her of their willingness to wait, Anborn pushed his Captain quickly out into the courtyard before there was time for her to change her mind.

Once past the Healing Houses’ lane they found the windy colonnade of the sixth was quite empty. All those who could were down by the Great Gate, all those who could not were otherwise occupied. The lieutenant steered them to a spot just before the next level’s tiered worn steps. The carved creamy stone of the high archway sparkled in the bright sun that hung overhead. It faced southeast, just enough that they could see the Pelennor below and the ranks of men and horse that stood ready to depart.

True to Anborn’s words Faramir found it lightened his heart to see the bright pennants and steady carriage of his men. Much of the Tower Guard had been held back to defend the City. Their black and silver lined the final avenue before the Gate and just beyond massed thousands of mounted Rohirrim. Faramir, starved for reports, had asked Anborn to find out how they did and the enterprising young lieutenant had promptly quizzed every Westron-speaking Rider in the ward. It was good news. Marshal Elfhelm had been victorious; Anorien was secure but the threat to the City still remained and so underneath the bright green field with its white horse Rohan’s young King assembled with just half his force. Beside them Imrahil’s blue and white swan fluttered gaily in the breeze and above all flew the King’s White Tree. It made a wondrous sight- sunlight glinting from snow-white jewels and threads of mithril. He found himself wishing even more that he was well enough go.

Anborn, sensing his Captain’s turn of mood, tried to revive his smile by using his eagle-tracking eyes to point out friends and fellows that they knew. Amerith of course stood out by the colour of her hair. She was dressed richly once again, bidding farewell to her cousin Forlong who led the footman from Lossarnach. The Rangers were arrayed under their temporary Captain in front of the main mass of Gondor’s troops. They would be called upon to secure the route ahead: already the Host knew that the way to the Crossroads of the King was clear but there a force of Enemy lay in wait. An ambush would ambush them and the then army would head farther north.

There would fall the harder test.

Anborn elbowed Faramir and pointed to a tiny figure standing forlornly beside the Gate. Sure enough Meriadal was there in Bergil’s company. As they heard the orders passed along the lines they also noted several laden horses out beyond the City Gate. One mount appeared to have two passengers. The other carried a man in the green cloak and leather of a Ranger of Ithilien.

“Who is that?” Faramir asked, confused, for even at this distance he thought the man’s chestnut horse looked familiar.

Anborn squinted and shook his head. “’Tis young Eldrin. Now there is a good bit of gossip. Loran
told me that he tried to head out with the Company. Said his body was hale and fine for all that his one hand is nearly smashed. Claimed he could still swing a sword with his left. Now Rilla is a fine beast but apparently even she knew not to take him. Balked at the tremor on the reins to all accounts. Prince Imrahil himself ordered him out of the line. More enthusiasm than sense, eh Sir?”

“I don’t blame him. I know exactly how he feels,” remarked Faramir, grimly. Part of his heart also wished to mount up and ride away, join the desperate feint and ignore the weakness that his body felt. It was a futile but seductive fantasy. He sighed. Already he was growing tired and the wound on his shoulder pained him fiercely once again.

The ringing peal of silver trumpets sounded from the Tower’s height. Cries of ‘Gondor!’ and “Eorlingas!” rang out and the main mass of the host began to move in earnest. Sun glinted on spears and helms and swords: the bright ribbon of light and joyous noise began to snake across the mud towards grey bulk of once-fair Osgiliath in the distance. It was a glorious and stirring sight and yet Faramir found it a little sobering. He had Seen and he had hope, but they were so few. How could they prevail?

The two men waited solemnly, hearts heavy, as troop after troop and company after company marched out. The host may not have been the strength of old but still it took many minutes for them to pass off to the east. By the time last wagon brought up the rear Faramir was drooping and Anborn had sat unceremoniously on the carved seat of the sentry box. It was only after the orderly, Bran, had hustled down, (full of apologies and an energy that made Faramir yearn for his bed) that the Captain turned for one last look. What he hoped to see he did not know: the host had quickly become but a smudge of indigo and grey against the muddied greens of the ruined Townlands. Here and there the sunlight caught the errant tip of a spear but these flashes were few and indistinct. All too soon even they were gone.

With a last shake of his raven head, Faramir nodded to Bran and braced his hands upon the chair. The strong man grasped the handles and gave a heavy push. He felt ridiculous but such was the price of short-lived parole. He must resign himself to healing well and steadily, help Hurin and Marshal Elfhelm ready the City for possibly another wave of battle. The thought was dispiriting but then he shook himself. How selfish. He was surely not the only person left behind who wished to follow the glorious host.

Eowyn of Rohan stood, tall and proud before Minas Tirith’s shattered gate and silently ground her teeth.

She could hardly hear Eomer’s last orders to his Marshal for all the restless whinnying of horses and muttering of impatient Riders. The host was ready, anxious to head out. All were assembled: the three thousand foot and horse of Eomer-King’s command in neat columns on the road; the several thousands of travel-stained and weary Riders of Elfhelm’s command making up the honour guard. She was proud of them—the Eored had been victorious in Anorien but the day before- and mindful of their sacrifice she kept the frown that better suited her present mood from off her face.
It was not easy. They were leaving her behind again.

By custom and by courtesy, it was her role to hold the parting cup for the King. Varan, the Houses’ senior healer had been most unwilling to let her leave. She was supposed to be ten days yet a abed but it was important to the men to see portents for good fortune upheld. Elfhelm (who may have met his in Varan’s stubborn resolution) had argued long and without success until Princess Ivriinil, most anxious to avoid a diplomatic scene, had sensibly proffered a solution. The Prince of Dol Amroth had kept a litter in the city for his wife, Princess Leylin. It was unused now and could be carried by six strong men. The perfect solution or so she thought.

“Do you still wish to go?” Elfhelm had asked, brows rising skeptically as Eowyn regarded the padded and pillowed interior with a jaundiced eye. It was painted a rather startling shade of peacock blue. “Having put you in danger I am charged with keeping you safe from all things now. Including…” he gestured to one gilded sconce, “ridiculous Gondorian contraptions.”

Eowyn thanked Bema Ivriinil had not seen fit to see them off. The six Riders from Elfhelm’s own Eored judiciously held their smirks.

“If this is the price of my attendance. So be it.” She shrugged and entered with her head held high, holding the rather cumbersome overskirts of her borrowed dress awkwardly in her undamaged hand. Marrit, the Houses more than efficient housekeeper had kindly found her something other to wear than the standard issue grey healing robes. To her chagrin Gondorian women prized layer after layer of ornament and detail: both the chemise of fine lawn and kirtle of creamy silk were embroidered with heavy matching threads; the gown of pale grass green had sleeves so sheer she could not imagine what task one could accomplish without tearing them apart; the bodice and overskirt were of dark green velvet and silver lace, tied by dark green cord. Eowyn wondered if the colour was purely happenstance.

After an uncomfortable and bumpy trip she alighted and found herself waiting for her chance to bid farewell. Eomer sat Firefoot looking rested and ready for a fight. The bruises and dark circles of the several days before were mostly gone. He was clad in clean armour and silvered helm, his loyal mount was white and mostly spotless—only one poulticed gash attested to the battle they had fought.

The bright horsetail on the new King’s helm swept back and forth as Eomer turned and shouted orders to the Marshals and commanders of each Eored.

Eowyn steadied the silver cup with its dark red wine and tilted her head proudly up. She swayed only the slightest bit. It was taking longer to get to her part than she had hoped but nothing in Arda could induce her to sit down in the chair her brother had so thoughtfully provided. The deep fluted cup was heavy but not overly awkward for her to hold. Her splinted arm did not hurt. Her right was tiring a little but not too much. She was the King’s sister, a Shieldmaiden and proud daughter of Eomund.

She would not show any outward sign of weakness. When at last Elfhelm dropped back to stand beside, Eomer wheeled Firefoot in place with a clatter of hooves on the cobblestones.

“‘Wyn…” Her brother’s smile was bright and suspiciously a little broad. The use of her childhood name she knew was meant to cajol—he looked hopeful but yet uncertain that she would not make a
They had already quarreled once that early morn.

She bit her lip, endeavouring to keep her temper firmly in check. Eomer had tried to apologize again, to set all to rights, but though she loved him dearly for it, it did not change the fact that he was mounted and she was not. Foolishly, hopelessly she now realized that the thought that with her energy much improved she would be allowed to ride had been a fantasy.

Eomer had gently but firmly pointed out her limitations. That they would ride for hours at a time. That they could be overrun and her safety be in doubt. That she was his heir and needed to be kept secure at all costs. None of it was wrong but in the privacy of her chamber she had not spared him the frustration that had bubbled up.

“So I, the brood mare, get to exchange a cage of timber for one made of stone?”

At least Eomer had had the grace to flush at that.

As calmly as she could Eowyn drew breath and raised her voice so those thronged nearby could hear. “‘Ferthu Eomer hâl!’ Receive now this cup and drink. Good fortune and victory ride with thee at thy going and thy coming!”

Her brother’s shoulders dropped slightly with relief. Eomer took the cup that she lifted steadily into his hand and raising the flagon high, drained it in one long draught. “Good fortune bide with thee, sister dear. May the days pass swiftly till all return.”

Eowyn flushed at his formal words. Was he trying to rub salt into her wounds? Pass swiftly?! No indeed that they would not. She opened her mouth to bite an answer back but before the words tumbled out she looked up into his face. Pained. Brows knitted hopefully. She held her tongue. He was, after all just trying to buoy her up.

The cup was placed solemnly back in her hands and Eomer bent low from the saddle, preparing to give her the formal farewell kiss.

A capricious need to show her frustration one last time made her step back a pace.

“Wyn.” She watched, guilt pricking at her thumbs, as her brother’s handsome face fell a little bit and Firefoot shifted nervously below. “I thought we had spoken of all this before…”

They had but what did he expect? That she would be a lapdog and accept the misfortune of her state without dismay? That she would swallow bile and not feel the injustice of his decree? There were other Riders in the line with splinted broken arms. She and any other of the men could ride a horse and fight one-handed. She deserved to ride to war, to victory or at least to an honourable death. But because he had no wife she was forced to stay behind?

Eowyn held her head high, heart battering at her ribs. A flash of real unease moved across her brother's face. The same grief and hope that she remembered on first awakening was plainly there for all to see.

It quenched her anger more swiftly than one of Irensaga’s icy waterfalls. To speak words of woe to a man facing the jaws of an impenetrable foe would be the most unpardonable ill luck.
“Nay brother,” she answered softly, quiet words pitched for just them both. “I know of no disagreements between us. All is well as you can see.” She tilted her chin and turned her other cheek, ready to accept his kiss but it did not come. Eomer’s tight grip on the reins eased up. Blue-grey eyes cast down, pained and thoughtful, and clearly fretting. He hated when they did not agree, seemed to be silently weighing the wisdom of another word when he shifted the pressure subtly on his offside leg and Firefoot sidled near.

What happened next took her completely unawares.

Eomer thrust his spear into the hands of his startled squire and bent low again, placed a pair of broad strong hands on either side of her waist and lifted her straight up. He set her, startled, billowing skirts and all, before him on the saddle, mindful of her arm and steadying her against his chest.

“Eomer!” What was he doing?

“Hold tight,” he whispered and encircled one muscled arm about her waist. Firefoot wheeled around and faced eastward through the gate. The throng had hushed. They stood watching, rapt, to see what would happen next.

Eomer dropped his rein and raised his arm.

“Riders of the Riddermark,” he cried, voice carrying far over the quiet hush. “you see before me the Lady Eowyn, slayer of the Dwimmerlaik, bane of the Witch-King, brave warrior who defended Theoden-King almost unto death. Stand and do her honour now. Cry her name, loud as Valaróma so that Bema shall know her name and the Enemy shall quake with fear.”

With those words Eomer urged the great war-horse forward to a gallop. Down past the Gate and the long line of Elfhelm’s honour guard they rode, past the cheering Riders and out onto the Pelennor. At the rear of Rohan’s host the companies began to part before them like a wave, man after man moving aside to let them through, chanting the name of the woman they honoured with their song.

Beside her flushed and wind-blown cheek she could feel her brother’s smile. “Can you doubt it ‘Wyn? Can you still doubt that our house, your name and your deeds will be honoured long after this day?”

The wind was whipping her hair around them like little flames. Her heart was racing and it felt wondrous to be moving once again. All at once they thundered to a stop and the sounds of “E-o-wyn” faded into a quiet din.

He stood there- Aragorn- surrounded by Dol Amroth’s Prince, Mithrandir and noble Shadowfax and Legolas with Gimli on their faithful steed. He looked, if anything, more noble in that moment- a star bound to his brow and a great green stone upon his chest - then when they had first met. Aragorn bowed low from the saddle and the Lords assembled followed suit.

“Great lady, your deeds have made this day possible. We all owe you every honour and wish you nothing but good fortune and good health.” Eowyn breathed, ready to feel a stab of pain but found oddly there was no sting within his words.
She swallowed and boldly held his gaze. “My Lord, I thank you for all that you have done.”

Aragorn inclined his head and at the gesture Eomer saluted and turned Firefoot away. Elfhelm, grinning and chest bursting with ill-hidden pride, stood waiting on his stallion just behind.

Eomer stilled Firefoot with the slightest touch and raised up a mailed hand to brush her cheek. “It pains me so to leave you here, sister-dear. But I must and you must stay. At least now you have ridden with us a ways and received the honour that you are due. Can you go back and rest and think a little fondly of your sometimes thick-headed, stubborn brother?”

“Yea…” She replied, heart in mouth and throat was too clogged with sudden tears to speak. It was a very lordly thing to do. She loved him for it but how could she explain that this helped but for all too short a time?

She pressed a swift kiss of luck to the tanned skin above his beard. Eomer smiled proudly and gently kissed her back. “Be well, little one.”

With that Elfhelm rode close and she steadied herself as his great hands plucked her lightly as a feather from off her brother’s seat. The sea of Riders parted once more and before long Elfhelm had stopped them beside the high vault of the City’s gate. The honour guard turned and faced toward the east. Trumpets sounded and the Host of the West began its long journey to the Morannon.

Eowyn waited, watching them go, her heart still heavy and yet lighter than in many days. It was a gesture worthy of a King and a loving brother both. Just not exactly the one that she would choose.

As the last sounds of the host died away Elfhelm turned his great Bay and they began the long slow walk on cobblestones up through the City streets.

“You are well?” Elfhelm asked quietly, as they wended their way past the ruined streets toward the southern second gate.

“As I can be,” she replied, twisting in the saddle to look at his craggy face. It was not entirely a lie. She knew that Elfhelm had worried too. Blamed himself more than he should for her malady and wound. “Thank you.”

He nodded and a high flush stained his weatherbeaten cheek. “Thank your brother. All I did was try to follow when he abruptly decided to lead you in a dance.”

She looked up to the southward walls. A pair of swooping kestrels had caught her eye and she followed their dizzying flight, up and up until they hovered above a lone patch of green amidst the walls’ blinding white. The colour drew her. It was the new green of the fields of Rohan before the wheat ripened in the summer sun, the soft gentleness of the laurel woods that graced the Mountains’ shoulders. She squinted. It was a garden and a greensward with soaring trees, the only such place that she could see on the south side the City. Near the Healing Houses se thought but from their angle she was unsure.

There she must be something that she could do to ease the ache of idleness.
Perhaps upon the morrow she would ask to be taken there.

Chapter End Notes

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Thanks so much to Caroline and cloudyhead for being such wonderful readers.

Anyone who interested come find me on tumblr..I am sian22redux

A few different threads have been coming together here. The vision of Aragorn was first introduced in detail in Chapter 13-Adrahil’s funeral. For another view of Finduilas’ vision of Aragorn see my 100 drabble-plants. A pregnant Finduilas sits on May Day eve in Dol Amroth’s garden and a lonely Thorongil keeps her company.

I am sad to say that Madril did paid a price for Eldrin as was alluded to. Never fear, Faramir will find out Najir’s (and Goran’s) fate..just not quite yet.

Thank you to my friends at the Garden of Ithilien and particularly Wheelrider, Thanwen, Artura and Annafan who provided comments and critters this month. They saved Mablung from a possibly unfortunate fate :). 
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was the noise that the last men of the retreat would take with them to the end of their long days.

Oldsters by blessed luck, settled warmly if not completely comfortably by a fireside, they would sigh and shake their heads, rub gnarled hands on trouser legs and recount the terror of each shriek and shout. The bone-shaking boom of the breech and the pounding, rolling roar of a black wave they could not hope to stop.

Quiet, such as the Houses' healing garden held, was for them all a blessed boon.

This early morn Faramir found he could not handle the ever present patter in the Houses' halls. He had retreated to the solitude of the healing garden. Only the low tinkle of the fountain and the soft crunch of gravel disturbed his thoughts—made a gentle music that calmed the soul—and an island of repose within the storm of war.

*That is what this space has become and I within her*, he thought sadly, looking out across the battlement to the wreck of his beloved Pelennor. Faramir suffered no illusion as to the City's safety: Minas Tirith may still be standing, the broken gate guarded by the Marshall's stout Rohirrim, but away eastward war would soon rage. Anborn (as ever his best source of news) spoke of Orcs harrying the woods of Lorien and without a shred of doubt he knew that Ithilien still crawled with the Enemy.

It was folly to think that they would be unassailed for long.

A sudden stiffer gust made Faramir shiver for a moment. Somewhere in high in the dark and desolate passes of Ephel Duath two small hobbits still carried all their hopes. The host, the bait (for such it was) moved more slowly than his own company but by now they should be passing through the pines and slopes of north Ithilien. Soon the army would reach the spot he judged the most perilous before their final goal: a deep cut in the Harad Road, near to where he and his men had ambushed the Enemy a scant two weeks before. Blind and vulnerable in its depth, used by the Rangers for that very reason. Mab would know of it. He trusted his lieutenant's hard won skill and judgement…but still it was hard to wait for news.

Faramir turned and sat heavily upon a near stone bench, pushed aside the book he had tried futilely to read. The sun beat warmly on his face and the morning breeze lifted his long hair. The wind was warmer and alive with the scent of spring but still his heart was heavy. No matter how idle he made his days the fatigue frustratingly would not abate. The little wooden lapdesk that Bergil has so obligingly carried all the way from his rooms lay untouched upon the bench and he felt guilty not to put it to good use. Varan had just the day before pronounced himself happy with his patient's progress-the Master less alarmed by his lack of energy than by his lack of appetite-though the patient himself found it far more disconcerting that he could not bring himself to write.

Perhaps Faramir should have expected the answer to his most recent pressing question. "Not yet," had been the Master Healer's pained, almost withering reply when he asked how soon he might take up his sword.

A quill, he snorted ruefully to himself, a quill at least he could manage. Putting act to deed he settled down with parchment and a newly trimmed tip and paused to gather his thoughts. Lothiriel had
reminded him that only a letter from his own hand would convince Erchirion all was well and so slowly and deliberately he began to recount the days before, how he planned to take up his sword in his shield hand should all go ill and how brave and skillful both Thiri and Ivriniel were in the face of the appalling injuries they had to treat. The writing was slow going. His right hand was unused to penmanship but he dared not move his wounded shoulder too very much; on that point Varan had been most firm.

A quarter candlemark's hard work found him so engrossed on forming letters that he did not hear he had company until Anborn cleared his throat.

"Ah Captain here you are. Convalescing yet hunched over reports already. Hand me a soggy cloak and I could swear 'tis as if we'd not left Henneth Annun."

Faramir looked up. The Ranger's mobile face was plastered with a cocky grin. He sighed in not altogether feigned irritation and leveled he best semi-sober stare.

"Lieutenant, this is a letter not a report. And I am obeying all of Master Varan's orders."

"Ah well that makes a happy change then," Anborn replied with a wink. "Look who I brought for you to see, Sir," he added, stepping to one side. "Thought you might want to bollock him yourself."

Eldrin, the Ranger's youngest surviving recruit, stood awkwardly to attention, his shattered hand bound and resting in sling, mouth hanging open in something akin to shock.

Obviously, he'd not had time to become used to the rude familiarity amongst Faramir's long-serving men. Or the tenor of Anborn's deadpan teasing.

"My Lord."

The stammered apology was waved away while Faramir shook his head. Anborn, once famed for his reticence in all but arrowcraft, seemed to be making up for lost time. Who could credit that a broken shoulder could also loose a tongue?

"Private I assure you whatever this reprobate says all I am is very pleased to hear that you are hale enough to try to ride out with the men." He nodded toward the sling. "How is your hand?"

The young man shrugged with enviable ease. "Not too bad a bother Sir." His smooth face broke into a wide and sunny smile below a dark curly mop. "I was treated by an Elf. Can you imagine it? I expect that makes it fair to heal a mite faster."

Faramir's dark eyebrows flew up, not failing to take in the distinct grin on his lieutenant's face. This was why the young man had been brought to call. Anborn and Amerith, Lothiriel and Aunt Ivriniel were all finding sudden, spontaneous reasons to make him smile. It was so kindly and lightly done a less suspicious man might not even notice. Faramir smiled. His admiration and knowledge of the Eldar had been a source of amusement and awe amongst the men.

But he had yet to meet one in the flesh.

For good measure he put an extra tone of enthusiasm into his voice. "An elf? Truly?"

Eldrin nodded eagerly. "The King's brother, sir. Or I should say foster brother. Lord Elladan. The healers thought thand too far gone to ever knit, thought they'd need to take it off, but the Lord just argued with them, insisted he try to set it. He was ever so gentle, my Lord. I hardly felt a thing. He was done and I was bounded and poulticed before I had time to yelp."
His superiors exchanged a look. 'Hardly felt a thing' likely meant the poor lad had fainted from the pain. It was a mercy that he didn't remember after all. "I have not had the pleasure to make Elladan's acquaintance but I have heard much of the healing arts of Rivendell. He is actually half-elven I believe. Was he dark of hair and very tall?" There was one book in Minas Tirith's library with the likenesses of the princes of the Noldor, and Elrond, son of Earendil and Elwing, in his youth.

"Oh yes. Ever so tall. Like yourself Sir. Though I fancy he looked a bit about the face like Prince Imrahil. Narrow cheekbones but very fair. And he spoke Westron and Sindarin."

Faramir's mouth twitched. Such gushing enthusiasm for the new King's wider 'foreign' family boded well for the temperature on Aragorn's return. "I daresay over a few millenia one has time to study languages a bit."

"Wouldn't that thrill you Sir.."

He chuckled outright at that. Anborn's expression said for him it would be nothing short of torture. For Faramir it would be a dream.

He shifted awkwardly, trying to sit a little straighter up. His back was tired- the sling pulled on his neck and his shoulder muscles ached-he had been sitting in the garden since near dawn, too restless to stay in bed and now a bit too fatigued to sit much more. With a start he realized he was being rude- both men were convalescing, too. He shifted the desk and a small box to make a little space. "Won't you sit down?"

They did. Anborn peered curiously down into the open box. "Captain. are those mallant…?"

"They are indeed. Please help yourself." He proffered the tissue filled, velvet-covered square. How like Amerith to try to tempt him with something as pretty to look at as to eat. The treats from her cook were one of his favourites but somehow after the first few bites the moist almond cake had tasted like sweepings from a stable. He'd broken the rest into crumbs and left it for a greedy finch.

The younger men quite happily tucked in. When Eldrin reached to take a second Anborn rapped him lightly on the wrist. "Save some for the t'Captain. We're in flamin' Minas Tirith not Osgiliath lad. Mind your manners."

"Me,,,?" Eldrin flushed, embarrassed but a little mutinous. For Anborn had already snared two for himself.

"No, the other filthy Ranger behind you, Of course you, you twat."

The private's sudden stiffening should have been a giveaway but Anborn prattled on, oblivious to the shadow that had arrived. He did not notice his mistake until Faramir gave a pointed cough.

"Oh begging your pardon Captain."

Faramir's lips twisted in amusement. The man was becoming almost dangerously loquacious. Something might have to be done. It was not actually his pardon that needed to be begged. "Good morning Aunt Ivriniel."

Anborn's brown eyes widened in shock. His swift half bow was impressive given the tightness of the bandaging. "Your highness. Please forgive my rat-arsed tongue."

The Princess of Dol Amroth, long used to tangling with far ruder stuff than a pair of Ithilien Rangers, ignored both the verbage and the address in favour of fixing an elegant eyebrow and a stern frown on her nephew. Perfectly erect and bright of eye, clad for convenience in the grey habit of the
House's healers, she looked like a particularly fierce but tiny sparrowhawk.

"Good morning Faramir. I see you have not eaten yet."

With a sinking heart he followed the direction of her gaze. Oh Valar he had forgotten to hide his laden breakfast tray. It sat, in full view of all, untouched, on another bench not three feet away.

An embarrassed flush stained his pale cheeks. "Aunt Rini, I…"

Aunt Rini sniffed her disapproval and began to pull an ominous flask-shaped item from her robe. Morgoth's balls it couldn't be….

"Never mind dear," she chirped brightly as he forced back a groan. "I have something far more appealing if you find it hard to eat. I have brought your morning tonic."

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"My Lady you are awake!"

A young woman in the simple linen dress and apron of a servant smiled shyly above a groaning breakfast tray, bobbed up and down in a remarkably steady curtsey and nudge the oaken door a little wider with her hip.

Crockery and jars clattered musically in the hush as with practiced ease she set her load upon a waiting stand. Over in the rumpled bed the Houses of Healing's most illustrious and impatient, (if sleepy) patient regarded the repast with frank dismay.

Bema take Varan if he expected her to eat all of that.

Éowyn did her best to stifle a quiet groan and pressed cautiously on her unbroken arm to push a little up. It was awkward, ridiculous really to be so weak; she could not lean on the splint and her sword arm felt wobbly as a new foal's legs, as if the stroke at the Nazgul had drained her strength away.

She set her teeth and tried again.

"Here my lady, let me…" Swiftly, a small strong hand was placed below her elbow and helped her to sit up. Éowyn straightened the tangled folds of her nightgown as best she could, blinked the last vestiges of sleep out of her eyes and studied the woman's fawn brown eyes. She did not look familiar.

"Thank you…?"

"Kira, my lady," came the muffled response as goosedown pillows were plumped into submission behind her back. An extra laid below her cast "Tis Annelise's rest day. I am to help you and the Steward too." The girl (for she was younger than she first looked) beamed, pleased and proud at her assignment, and clearly anxious to do each task correctly. "And how do you feel this morning? Would you break your fast now or do you need to get up first?"

Éowyn frowned, considering the question. Strangely, even if her arm was still quite numb, she had to allow she felt more refreshed that morning. Somewhat less like butter spread too thin. The edges of her dreams had receded and for once they had not been phantoms, not the dark shapes that left her
unsettled and with nameless dread. She felt a little lighter, more ready to face the day.

Breakfasting could always wait.

At her cautious nod toward the garderobe, Kira stepped back and waited while her charge swung both legs over to the floor. With grim determination Éowyn tensed her muscles, pushed up and stood a little unsteadily, waiting for the disconcerting weakness to pass off. She was of no mind to suffer the ignominy of a fall.

It was the fifth day since the battle and still she found herself annoyingly unsettled. However was she to manage on her own? It rankled to need help to wash and dress, to complete the most basic of tasks she would rather fulfill herself, and with a pang of sorrow she thought of Theoden. All his long years of illness, how many times she had helped him in his debility. And the glorious sight of bright Herugrim, high in the dawn, honouring a wall of steadfast spears.

She too must find a way to overcome.

Pushing aside the worry, Éowyn walked slowly and haltingly toward the little alcove, set her lips in concentration and waved off Kira's hovering form. She would do things this day more for herself. With that in mind she completed her ablutions quickly as she could, made her way back to the bed and sank down onto the mattress once again.

Good. There had been no need of a helping hand this time.

Buoyed by this small victory, she perused the light wicker tray soon set across her lap. It held a dizzying array of food given the city had been under siege. Breads and cheese, jam and smoked fish were piled onto delicate china plates. And a rather frightening looking fruit that she first took for a nut. As he put aside the prickly sphere and nibbled cautiously at a slice of hard gold cheese, Kira left off the fire and pulled back the shutters to let in the morning sun. The view of the gardens through the curiously delicate stone arches of the window was beguiling, the fragrance wafting on the breeze even more so. It was lily-of-the-valley-Grandmother Morwen's favourite perfume- and its light, sweet scent made her suddenly homesick for Edoras. Somewhere in a shady corner of the garden there must a blooming patch.

Perhaps if the blasted healers ever let her up she'd have a chance to see them.

Every morning Éowyn had asked to rise and every morning she had been refused. It was infuriating. She was trapped between four admittedly elegant walls (for as the King of Rohan's sister she was housed in the choicest room) and no amount of firm rephrasing engendered any change.

At first Éowyn had assumed that the nurses and orderlies were simply spineless, would not risk a decision without a direct order from above, but on deeper questioning it transpired there was an order to the opposite. Aragorn himself had given directions as to her care: she was to lie abed ten days and so far as the Gondorians were concerned, crowned or not, the King's order was immutable. She was dismayed. To comply was impossible. She needed freedom. A chance to regain her strength. To get news of the Host and how they fared. And a chance to find a horse.

(In her darker moments she suspected the King of guessing her intent. And Master Healer Varan too. There was something of the man's quiet, dark intensity, the sheer imperturbability of his face, that made her want to hide. As if he could see aught other than her wounds; had confined her for fear she'd follow on. It little mattered that they were quite right.)

After several minutes of listless picking at a piece of bread (all white and soft and with nothing like a proper crumb) Éowyn gave up and reached for the gently steaming cup. It was far heavier than she
expected, the contents not clear tea but something brown and thick. She sipped very, very carefully. It was delicious. Rich and dense and sweet.

"What is this drink?" she asked.

Kira turned and placed a pale folded shawl upon the bed. "Chocolate my lady. Most well-bred ladies have it of a morning. I believe it is thought to warm the blood. Tis made of the seed of plant from near Harad. The Lady of Lebennin brings it in."

Whatever its purported properties it was a pleasant way to wake. Éowyn steadied her right hand and poured another measure from a little silver pot.

"Oh my lady, bless my memory-I almost forgot." Kira paused in the act of refilling a water pitcher by the bed and pulled several squares of parchment from the pocket of her apron. "The young lad who runs errands for Marshal Elfhelm left these for you. Said they came with messenger yestereve."

Éowyn set the cup aside and reached with eager fingers for the letters. The first she recognized with a twinge of guilt. It was from Éomer, his haphazard scrawl she would know anywhere, and the thought of him, how she had lost her temper made her meagre meal twist sourly in her stomach. It had been churlish of her to step back and deny his kiss; the brief flash of hurt in his eyes was still upsetting to remember. How by Nahar's silver hooves had she let her pride get the better of her in public? And in front of the Éored no less. She, daughter of Eomund, niece and now sister to the King, did not lose her iron control like that.

Abashed, she set his letter aside for a moment when she felt more composed and picked up the second one. The elegant script was unfamiliar, all curlicues and loops, penned, she thought, by some over enthusiastic scribe.

Slipping a fingernail below the seal, she unfolded the stiff parchment and began to read.

It quickly became evident the letter not dictated. Nor was it from one she ever expected would write.

Dear Éowyn:

Forgive my hasty missive but I find myself quite literally at the Crossroads and henceforth will not have time to set words down. My heart was beyond heavy to leave you so distressed at Dunharrow and since that day the thought of what ill might befall you has pained me, never more than to find you, white and silent, upon a bier. Praise Este that image has been replaced by one of you, flushed and proud, astride your brother's horse, receiving the accolades your valiant heart is due. I know it will be hard for you to wait and watch others take up the call. I implore you to not underestimate your foe. Do not take lightly the need to convalesce. It is well earned and quite truthfully required. It is a sharp sorrow that we must leave you behind again and most keenly I regret that I have had no time to speak more of our last discourse. I would have you know that it was a great sorrow to have to abjure a lady so brave and beautiful. It is not for that you are not worthy—you are fair and true, a queen among flowers, one that any man would cherish—but my heart has been given to another for many long decades now. For her I have wandered and will wander a little farther yet. Our test is not complete and though I hope all our strength suffices for the hardest blow, I am relieved that yours is past, that you have prevailed and now can rest. Allow me, on that point, the liberty to make an observation, one formed across many years and through many lands of this Middle Earth. I do not share it flippantly, although it might seem an airy thought for these dark and shadowed times.

Éowyn I say to you that love oft times comes upon us when we least it expect it. Swift and unlooked for, sharp as an arrow, fierce and all-consuming as a summer storm. So it was for me. And so, I
hope, it shall be for you. Do not be afraid to open your heart again. The gain will be beyond all price.

My lady I wish you nothing but joy. May you find strength and peace in which to heal.

Yours, in haste

Aragorn

Éowyn slumped back into the shelter of the cushions, for the nonce feeling anything but at peace. Even though Aragorn had meant to reassure, to be kind and considerate, it had not worked for the words (however well-intentioned) simply made her emotions roil the more. The pain of remembering her plea, her anguish as she had put aside her pride and poured out her heart, was quickly roused and slow to cool. He had ridden to paths of certain doom and she, despairing, had looked for an honourable death, believing him all but lost. She had not found it. What now? Oddly though relieved to find him whole and unhurt, her heart was curiously unmoved. It was the embarrassment that pricked her, not love. She had sat Firefoot with Éomer's broad chest at her back, looked upon the man she thought she cleaved to and felt only admiration for his noble deeds. It was as if rejection, and a bitter battle, had burned out the fire's glowing coals.

Pretty words did not change the emotion's fickle inconstancy. A sham and a shackle she must avoid.

With a heavy sigh Éowyn dropped the letter down on the soft coverlet and plucked restlessly at its print. Despite the light streaming in the she felt as if the walls of the room pressed closely in. The city was carved out of living rock and its stone hung, forbidding and heavy, over all. She longed for free sun sparkling on a waving sea of dewy grass, for the burble of snow-fed water on Sherbourne's gravelly bed That must be the cause of the tears that pricked the corners of her eyes.

"Is there naught that I can do? Are there no tidings of war?" she asked finally, seeking to focus once again. Emotion must be set aside. It would only distract her from her goal.

Kira started to be addressed and carefully laid the pewter pitcher back in its tray. "No my lady. No tidings of which I have heard. My uncle and cousins stand with the City Guard. If they'd heard aught I would surely know." The young woman frowned, fiddling worriedly with a corner of her apron. "By now they will be marching through Ithilien, east of Anduin. What number of the Enemy they will find I do not know. It has been long since those wilds were overrun, however hard Lord Faramir and his men strove to give the Enemy some grief."

Unconsciously Éowyn glanced away toward the east. The dark brooding shadow and red fume that in the Riddermark hung over the far far horizon was here perilously close. "What is it like?" she asked. The Host was too great to keep its movements hid. Once beyond the River and closer to the Black Land surely they risked a trap.

"It is a wild and wooded country my lady. Hilly beyond the river flats and riddled with steep defiles. The only passage is the old north-south road. My Uncle said they're not like to see much action before Cair Andros at the least."

Cair Andros? That was south and east of the Entwash was it not? Éowyn breathed deep with relief, though the tight tendril of worry would not completely leave her chest. Éomer and Eothain and even Meriadoc’s cousin were safe for some days yet.

She had a little time—but not too much.
Quickly draining her cup, she pushed the half-eaten meal away. "Please, will you take the tray? I am finished." As Kira doubtfully lifted the still laden wicker off her lap she considered her options. This time she would not ask the nearest healer if she could leave. She would appeal to a higher authority. Somewhere in the City there must be a true warrior who understood her plight.

First issue she needed clothing. Her ceremonial robes of the day before took too much work and her riding clothes to be rent beyond repair. The day robe that Kira now laid upon the chair was thin, easy to handle for a patient staying abed, but hardly suitable for a ride. Windfola may be safe but the whereabouts of her pack and spare clothing were a mystery. A cursory search had not found them in her room.

Making up her mind, Éowyn gestured to the light cotton nightrail. "Might I have something to wear that is not a healing robe? I wish to rise."

The younger woman frowned and chewed uncertainly at her lower lip. "I could ask if something can be found, my lady, but…"

"Do so, please. Whatever the orders, I will rise."

The firm tone seemed to work. Éowyn sat patiently as she could after Kira's hasty curtsey and retreat. She picked up a brush laid in easy reach and began to work on the night tangles in her hair, yanking in frustration for here was another task she'd need help with to be ready for the fight. It was nigh impossible to braid. Even harder to twine up with the fingers of one hand.

The well-oiled hinges of the door whined softly once more, swinging wide to let in a tall, dark-haired young woman dressed in healer's robes. She followed Kira through, came to rest close beside the bed. Éowyn regarded her thoughtfully. She was nearly Éowyn's own height, but slender, and more delicately boned. And quite startlingly beautiful.

With a polite tilt of her head the woman gestured to the gowns laid carefully across her arm. "Lady Éowyn. I am very pleased to meet you. My name is Lothiriel of Dol Amroth. I understand you have need of some day time clothes."

Éowyn could not have been more surprised had she been addressed in Meriadoc's own tongue. The greeting was delivered in almost perfectly unaccented Rohirric. She peered closely at her visitor. Lothiriel was of her age or perhaps a little younger, with fine features and smooth hands that spoke of noble birth. She was, it seemed, the Lothiriel of Dol Amroth. A Princess. And her own distant cousin.

"Well met indeed, Princess. I did not know that you were in the City. I am greatly honoured that you should trouble yourself to come." Éowyn was all too conscious that her own Sindarin would not sound so smooth. She had practiced with Theodred and her Uncle when she could, but that was little enough with Theo gone always on patrol "And delighted and surprised to find Rohirric so well spoken about the Bay."

"Please, just Lothiriel." A bright smile and tinkling laugh lit the quiet space. "My father would say there are more languages spoken in our market than anywhere else in Middle-Earth. I am fortunate that he felt it as important for me to know when I am being fleeced as how to speak with my farther kin." She laid one gown across the bed and eyed Éowyn's own shift critically. "Kira tells me you need suitable clothes to go out. I have brought several of my day gowns though I fear the shoulders may be a little tight." Éowyn was indeed broader of frame. She sincerely doubted the Princess had swung a sword.

Lothiriel held up the first gown. It was cut in Gondorian fashion, flowing and billowy, with wide
drooping sleeves that were most awkward for any sort of chore but thankfully need not be slit to slip over her bulky cast. The colour was palest lilac, of a shade that would be wonderful against Lothiriel's jet black hair and milk-white skin but insipid against Éowyn's fairer, golden colouring. The second was of simpler cut and white. Éowyn nodded to it immediately, wondering if Lothiriel also knew something of her home's rituals. White was the colour of mourning. If so, the choice was very kindly done. She began to like the young Princess even more.

After Kira helped her dress and slip on a pair of soft doeskin slippers (the shoulders were indeed a little tight, the shoes more than a little. She sincerely hoped the hide would not stretch) Lothiriel held forth a simple triangle of linen. Clearly if the patient were to be up and about the healers required her to wear a sling. It seemed unnecessary but Éowyn acquiesced with as much grace as she could. Not every battle needed to be fought. As she turned her neck to let Lothiriel tie the knot she caught sight of herself in the small mirror on the low wood dresser. Her hair was a tangled mess. It would be simplest if it were out of her way until she finally she found her pack.

"Would you help me braid?"

At the quiet request the maid flushed and reached for the brush. "My lady, are you married? I apologize. We did not know."

Married? A woman was to wear her hair to suit her status? Rather than practicality or choice? It seemed so for the servants had left her hair down the days before. She had thought was that it was for ease of care. "Nay, I am not wed. But I wish it out of reach."

Kira frowned, brows drawn tight in obvious consternation, casting a glance over Lothiriel's waist-length fall of enviably shiny black. It was covered by a filmy scarf. "Oh but my lady we should not braid it. Someone might get the wrong idea. I can certainly pull it back from off your face."

Someone. Meaning a man, of course. What should she care? She had no need for a suitor. Éowyn opened her mouth to argue but then thnoted the faintest of pleading looks in Lothiriel's grey eyes. Perhaps there was some other it politically incorrect to announce she was married when she was not? She did not know but she might need this woman's help, it would not do to antagonize her and truthfully- the thought of arguing was suddenly too tiring to consider. She turned her shoulders resignedly.

After several moments of dextrous attention Kira stepped back. Two long thin strands of Éowyn's hair were twisted at the temple, twined back and bound with plain grey ribbon. It would do. At least in this guise she could see. She gave a grateful nod. "Thank you also Lothiriel for the dress. I must speak with the Warden and could hardly wander in a nightrail and bare feet."

"The Warden... why?" Lothiriel cocked her head quizzically.

Éowyn took a careful step, minding the swish of the full skirt "I have spent long enough at rest. It is time that I left and found where I may help my brethren."

Lothiriel stifled a little gasp. The idea clearly sat as well with her as it had the nurse the day before. "I am quite certain such a course would be ill-adviseable in your present state. You have only been abed five days. The King's orders called for full rest"

Tulkas take the King's orders. Only five days. Éowyn had never been abed so long in her entire life. She silently ground her teeth, noting the grey robes and few telltale stains on the young woman's apron. Who was she to say? "Are you here as a nurse?" she challenged.

"No." Lothiriel allowed, "not formally. But I do have some experience..."
"That should tell you my patient most certainly should not be getting up."

The tall and lanky, somewhat intimidating, figure of the Houses' chief healer slipped into the room Lothiriel started at his unexpected deep bass tones.

"My rounds this morning appear to be opportune…"

A flush of embarrassment crept up the young Princess's cheeks. "Master Varan… I only thought to let…"

A dark head only slightly flecked with grey shook back and forth. "Peace Lothiriel. I am not vexed, merely concerned." Varan turned toward his patient who stood quite still in the centre of the room. Éowyn's chin was raised and braced for her defense- she would not suffer a scolding like a child.

"How are you this morning Lady Éowyn? I see your appetite has not improved."

Nonplussed to not receive so much as word of warning she glanced guiltily toward the breakfast tray. How like a Gondorian to be oblique, to not engage directly with the point. Not her. She had neither the time or inclination to dance around the truth. "I am well as I can be Master. Well enough to rise and begin to plan my departure. I will follow my brother to battle as soon as I can sit a horse."

A pair of craggy brows flew straight up. "How well you are is for me to judge, my Lady. If you will let me examine you forthwith, I can ascertain your condition for the journey."

Éowyn huffed but nodded warily, unwilling to call the man a liar in front of the others yet certain that somehow he had outsmarted her plans by simply appearing to agree. His keen dark gaze held neither challenge nor celebration but she was not fooled.

Varan she expected would rather eat nails then let her out of his care before ten days were up. And she was going to give up on her quest. Stalemate. For now. In the meantime there was nothing to do but be patient while due process was observed.

Mindful of her privacy, Varan ushered Kira and Lothiriel from the room and proceeded to calmly and yet rather gently test the state of Éowyn's health. Her breathing, heart, limbs, all were assessed and found to be unchanged. Her steadiness on her feet was noted as 'within tolerance of the day before' – which was to say less steady than she would like, but perhaps a little better. Her weakened right arm was put through a complicated set of drills that included guessing with eyes closed when and where he touched her skin. She found she had to concentrate quite hard to follow even the simplest counter-pressure exercise. The speed and accuracy of her response was soberingly poor, and although she pushed hard as she could with her muscles against his grip it was disconcerting to find that she could not hold his large hand back.

"I am better am I not?" she challenged, unwilling to admit defeat. If only the faint smile of victory could be wiped from off his face with a particularly hard kick. Sadly that was a fantasy- she felt tired just from her feeble efforts, although nothing would induce her to admit the fact. The dress's long and flowing sleeves were helpful to hide the sudden shaking of her fingers.

The healer pressed both hands together and studied her curiously. "You are a little improved, that I will allow. But still far from strong enough to control a mount. If you cannot hold with one hand against me how do you expect to hold an animal three times my size?"

"Training," came her flat reply.

He snorted and let out a long slow breath. "Lady Éowyn it is not a whim that has me following the King's instructions to the letter. If you overwork yourself too soon you could suffer a relapse of the
major symptoms." One by one he checked each off on a long bony finger. "Fatigue. Chill. Inability
to eat. Disorientation. Depression. All of these, if left untreated, could lead to an outcome more dire
still."

Éowyn did her best to ignore his pointed look toward her tray. "You are, I deem well enough to be
up and partake of the baths if you keep the cast from getting wet. Will that suffice?"

"No. I need leave to be released from this prison you keep me in."

Varan's crossed his arms upon his chest. The ring upon his smallest finger, the symbol of his mastery,
winked in the light. "If you will not heed my instructions you must appeal to the Warden. You may
find he thinks otherwise but I doubt it very much His is the ultimate authority."

Drat these Gondorians and their protocol. Another layer of bureaucracy to fight. At least this was the
last.

Éowyn stood and found that her tart reply was pitched toward his back. Varan crossed quickly to the
door, opened it and bowed low, gesturing gallantly for her to go through. Her mouth dropped open
and his dark eyes danced, amused at her hesitation.

"Surely now is as good a time as any for you to ask?" He might not take well to being crossed but
neither was he delaying a decision.

Éowyn gathered up her skirts with the fingers of one hand as regally as she could and walked,
mostly steadily, underneath the carved stone lintel and out into the hall.

She turned left at Varan's silent gesture and tried not the let a sinking feeling settle like a fog over her
chest. Hallas could not be so stubborn as his esteemed lieutenant could he? Or, hopefully, so smug?

Frustrated, outmaneuvered, far from certain of her reception, she readied herself for battle once
again.

For all their apparent softness, the people of Minas Tirith could be as unmoving as the stone for
which their City was justly famous.

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In the event the Houses' Warden- one Hallas, an older man with the quiet authority and
preternaturally calm serenity of one who has seen too much- was also unmoved by her words.

Éowyn held her temper while she followed his sturdy form down a bustling hall and out into the
healing gardens. There was another layer to consult: one who was the ultimate authority yet
conveniently also Hallas' prisoner. She had the dizzying sense that this was all a child's party game,
she was to find another chair, another person each time the music stopped but with no idea where she
would wind up or when all was said and done.

For several minutes the Warden trod placidly down the white gravel paths, glancing back and forth
across the greens, searching for a face he plainly knew amongst those gathered on seemingly every
bench. It was near mid-day and already the space was full of convalescents. Against the low hum of
quiet chatter Eowyn could hear the twitter of chickadees drinking from a pool, the quiet crunch of
many careful steps and somewhere amidst the green, the brief trill of a feadan played haltingly.

All were a welcome respite from the Houses other constant: the low rustle and pained moans of
wounded men.
She followed as steadily as she could, minding her own feet, oblivious to the masses of green and pale spring blossom, to the welcome scents and warm spring sun, so focused on her errand she nearly missed an overjoyed Westu hal from one young Rider leaning precariously on a crutch.

"Godne morgen," she nodded, abashed to not take the time to stop and speak, but the Warden was moving on.

When Hallas finally paused and enquired of the Steward's whereabouts from a passing grey-clad form, Eowyn could have wept, the relief was acute. From their vantage the view of the sun sparkling on the high snows of Mindolluin quite took her breath. As did the unaccustomed exercise. It was beyond belief to have so have lost so much strength and energy from so little time abed. And all the more reason to be sprung from her corral of wool and featherdown.

Finally, in the lee of the southern wall, the Warden found whom he sought. Three men, swathed to varying degrees in bandages and bruises, sat engaged in quiet conversation, looking beyond the fields toward a cluster of black sails at harbour on the river bank. One was sable-haired and of her own age, another was a youngster with no suggestion of a beard at all, and the third was a little older, with the brow and nose that marked him surely as Lord Denethor's second son. Grandmother had tutored her in Gondor's ruling family. A name came after a little searching—Faramir—Lord Boromir's younger brother.

Hallas cleared his throat and stepped forward gain their notice. "My Lord Steward."

The man jolted sharply and stiffened as if struck.

As one the three began to rise courteously and turn to face their guests. She saw the Steward square his shoulders and pull awkwardly up, murmuring a grateful thanks to the bearded soldier who reached down to help him up. He moved more stiffly and slowly than the rest, as if dragged by some unseen leaden weight. Belatedly she remembered he too had been taken by the Black Breath: the grey malaise that dragged at her still, and at the thought, a sliver of pained chagrin crept into her breast. Here was a man not yet recovered from his own wounds, who had just lost his brother and his sire both, who almost certainly never expected to be Steward and was unused to being addressed as such. Her errand seemed suddenly unutterably rude, selfish even, an intrusion on his privacy.

But it was too late to take it back.

Faramir bowed and placed his free hand upon his breast to do her a formal courtesy. As his downcast eyes looked up, the black curtain of hair fell away and a grave gaze held her own.

The shock ran through Éowyn like a thunderbolt.

She had once seen a young tree so struck, cracked open by the force, its soft heartwood spilling out. Looking into eyes of a curious lucid grey, she felt just so, almost naked, exposed, as if this man could see into her very soul. It was unnerving and yet there was nothing outwardly about him to suggest such intensity- his face was calm and composed. A paradox of strong edges and softness, sharp intelligence and a sort of wry compassionate restraint.

It was a face that any man, any warrior, would follow. And many a woman too, her traitorous heart added, for the young Steward was tall and undeniably handsome, with the look of his brother but set in a wiry, slimmer frame and gentler face. His dark hair fell, a little ragged and untrimmed, almost to his shoulders and a skiff of short black beard only served to highlight the lingering dark smudges beneath those startling eyes. He looked like, and yet unlike, every other Gondorian she had seen: dark, saturnine but somehow at once more noble, thoughtful. Perhaps this was the stamp of the house of Hurin's ancient line.
Éowyn flushed, unable to look away and yet aware that to stare was rude.

She had the oddest impression that she had seen him once before.

Whatever the tenor of his private thoughts, Lord Faramir's face showed only polite concern. "Warden?" he asked, coughing slightly as if speaking were yet difficult.

Hallas clasped both hands before him and bowed formally. "My Lord, gentlemen. I apologize for the interruption. The Lady Éowyn wishes to address a higher arbiter than I. Lord Hurin commands the Guard but Lord Faramir by right yours is the authority."

If he was surprised at this request the Gondorian was too mannerly to show it. Faramir set his lips and respectfully inclined his head. "Lady Éowyn it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance." Beside him the smooth-cheeked youth, mouth agape, dug an elbow into the other soldier's ribs. Word of her deeds appeared to have traveled even amongst the 'captive' men. A corner of Faramir's mouth twitched. "Lieutenant Anborn, Private Eldrin this is indeed the slayer of the Dwimmerlaik. All our thanks brave lady. Your valor saved us from our most grievous foe."

Éowyn flushed. It was a pretty compliment, but more than that, it was high praise from one she knew to be of rare courage.: Éomer had told her of Faramir's efforts to hold back the Enemy at Osgiliath. Without that steadfast and tortuous retreat there would have been no City left for the Rohirrim to save. One who deserved courtesy in return. "My Lord, please understand it is not lack of care that grieves me. I simply cannot lie idle while my brothers-in-arms have ridden off to War. I wish to be released. I am a Shieldmaiden and looked for death in battle. Though the care here is of the best for those who desire to be healed, that is not my wish. I must ride to war and find honour where I can."

The man's gaze lit briefly on the Warden. Hallas shook his head and gave a little shrug; he did not agree with her request but diplomatically would leave it to the City's new ruler to decide. At Faramir's signal and brief murmur of thanks, the older man and young soldiers retreated to give them peace. He gestured for her to sit, moving a little paper box aside, and when she had alighted, settled himself again.

"What would you have me do my Lady?" Faramir asked, a little tiredly. He too had one arm in a sling. A livid bruise marked the skin above the open throat of his shirt and his skin was pale beneath a fading tan.

She gathered her courage and spoke firmly as she could. "I would have you command the Warden to let me go."

Faramir brow's furrowed and in his eyes she caught the briefest flash: yearning replaced concern but then just as swiftly it was gone. He raised the thin linen sling that bound his arm. "I well understand your desire, it is also mine, but truthfully I know not what else you expect me to, in honour, say. As you see, I myself am in the Warden's care. Even if I wished to wield my authority I would still counsel you to listen to him. He knows his craft, even as you and I know ours."

Éowyn fought to steady the drumbeat of hooves pounding in her chest. It would little matter if Gondor's healers had Este's own touch. Somehow she had to help this man understand her need was more than childish whim; nor was she a haughty courtier, simply unused to being crossed. "But I do not desire healing,' she explained. 'I wish to ride to war like my brother and his men, or better still like my uncle Théoden, for he has died, wreathed in glory, and has found both renown and peace."

"Peace?" Faramir asked, his grave face at once sorrowful and wondering. "Is there no peace for you to be had among the living lady? It is ever thus-- that we who have been left must seek joy in the saddest places. Even in the space between the beats of a faltering heart there can be strength."
Éowyn clenched her fists, shaking and white, in the folds of her skirts, as a tide of anger and embarrassment washed in. Who was this man, this Numenorean to challenge her own view? She did not want pity. Aid was what she asked for and here again was a man turning her pleas down. It was infuriating but even as she opened her mouth to frame a withering reply—she hesitated. A grey shadow, a thin veil of deeper anguish, had descended in Faramir's clear gaze. This man, who knew sorrow like to her own, spoke not to condescend but as one whose own heart was heavy, for whom beauty in the world, however small, must be a balm.

She found herself curiously unwilling to burden him more.

Éowyn breathed deeply, once, twice, and carefully unclenched her hands. What words would resonate with a fellow soldier? Duty. Duty and sacrifice. "I cannot lie in sloth while brave men risk all and I do naught but rest abed."

The disconcerting gaze held hers until she felt she had to squirm. Sorrowfully, Faramir shook his head. "Lady Éowyn, by the Valar, I say to you I too know this wish. I also am caged by my injury. Nor do I recommend waiting lightly. Had we both the strength to gird ourselves, and that is doubtful, the Host has left and the chance to follow them is gone. But battle may yet return and our task now is to rest and heal, to become hale as possible to face what is yet to come."

The soft planes of his face hardened and suddenly Éowyn felt her proud words must sound shrill, for this man too was a warrior, had fought bravely in the face of certain death and was now forced to wait. He understood, he did, but not how much it galled. How many years had she been tied to a sick room by Theoden's debility? Waiting in doubt and dread. And now she was a prisoner of her own body's frailty?

It felt too very much to bear.

"But I am caged again."

She had not thought to speak aloud but his strangely clear sight at once softened, lit like a sparkling mist of grey on a warming morn. "Is there naught else that I might do?"

She hid her face, dashed a hand roughly across her cheek, abashed to find fingers wet by a tear she could not hold back. The frustration had become too much. All her hopes were fading. Without the Steward's permission she would not be able to escape. A few discreet questions of the servants had quickly ascertained that not only were the entrances to the Houses guarded, each of the seven Gates had passwords that one must give. She could not get free from this pile of forbidding stone even were she, by some miracle, to sneak undiscovered into the streets beyond.

She was not free nor would she be.

"But I am told to lie abed for still another week. . ." she murmured mournfully, "and my room does not look east. . ."

"Whither all our cares have gone." At that Faramir sighed and nodded, ran his free hand unhappily through his hair, lips pursed in thought. "I expect there are no spare rooms to be had my lady. The Houses are over full with wounded and I should imagine they gave you your room because the view is onto this very garden."

Éowyn's heart fell farther to her feet. Of course there would be little room: she had passed doors that showed glimpses of cots pressed cheek by jowl, like salmon jostling in a stream. She began to take her leave but then Faramir's face brightened, a sudden look of hope smoothing the frown of care. "You would look east..? My room faces so. We are across the hall, although mine is not so large. The east-facing rooms are meant for officers, not for the sister of a king, but to exchange rooms should be no great travail, I have little enough to move beyond some simples and a book or two. I
would gladly trade with you. Would you have me request it of the Warden?"

"I would." She lifted up her gaze and nodding once. It was a courteous and thoughtful solution, one that had not occurred to her, and in that moment some thing that had been hard inside Éowyn shifted a little bit. This was a victory, albeit a tiny one, but which counted still the more. She could look toward her goal, catch the sunrise that touched the Host for what days remained to them. "I thank you my Lord. I have no need of views of fountains or green lawn."

The barest of wry smiles quirked. "A shieldmaiden indeed. I also have no need of views but will attempt to enjoy them for your sake." He turned then toward her, lifting his left arm out of its sling to spread his hands in supplication. "We are settled then. If it also pleases you I will ask that you be given leave of the gardens. We must wait with patience you and I. For a warrior, walking surely eases the long slow drag of hours. I should assume if you are well enough to sit here and speak with me you need not be confined to your bed."

Her steady threading pulse leapt at the thought. The morning's warming breeze was fresh upon her face and to have sun was a blessed thing. To be paroled, at least to an open space, would be a welcome boon. "That would be most welcome. I need to train."

A dark brow arched up thoughtfully. "Then you will find me here training also, for I have ranged the woods for many years and am more used to being out of doors. The light and beauty of this space eases my heart a little. As would your company if you would walk at whiles with me."

He smiled and she felt a blush of warmth stain her cheek. "My lord, I thank you for my liberty, but I wonder at how my company should ease your care?"

"Lady Éowyn we have shared something few others have in this darkened time: We have both passed under the wing of deepest Shadow. And the same hand drew us back."

"Alas, not me, my lord! Shadow lies on me still." she cried, starting up, pulling her skirts back with a trembling hand. The words stung (must she be reminded of Aragorn at every turn?) and now they pricked slumbering grief to life. "Do not look not to me for ease! I am a shieldmaiden and my hand is ungentle."

Faramir hastened to rise, concern and confusion creasing at his brow. "Still I would be glad of your company lady Éowyn, for you are beautiful, and brave, and sorrowful. And my own hands have been ungentle with the Enemy for many years. I know well a burden shared can bring comfort to fretful watches of the night."

Éowyn stood shivering, struggling to unwind her tongue and hold her bolting pride. She did not need flowery words for comfort. Grima's daily showers of petalled lies had inured her to their spell. Suddenly she wished nothing more than to be away.

Eowyn began to turn but from the corner of her eye could not help but catch the expression on her companion's face. This gentle man, more soldier than courtier, yet schooled in Gondor's layered etiquette, was frowning. Perhaps she had insulted him. He had spoken courteously and she had rebuffed an offer made, she assumed, in innocent civility. Bema's horn the King of Rohan's sister might have caused a diplomatic incident but suddenly she felt all too tired to really care. Her splinted arm throbbed dully and her sword arm felt chilled, as if it alone had been caressed by an evil breeze. She shivered again. Perhaps Varan was correct. Her symptoms redoubled when she did too much.

"My Lady are you well?"
Blast the man. There was now a look of doubtful pity in his eyes – he had read her weakness all too well. It was beyond past time to get away but the very least she must try to politely take her leave. "I thank you for your courtesy, my Lord," she managed with enviable restraint.

Not trusting to further speech Éowyn dropped a too awkward, shallow curtsy and turned before he could call her out. She strode away as quickly as she dared. Beside a rose-covered trellis her unhelpfully swirling skirts caught upon a thorn. She yanked, hard, grimacing at the tearing sound but then rushing on, head down, uncaring of her route. It mattered not: she did not wish to see, still less acknowledge, another along the way.

Sadly, precious minutes were lost before she realized she had passed the same urn of ridiculously delicate carved stone roses not once, but twice. She had nearly doubled back upon the path and lengthened her retreat. By the time she found her room and sank gratefully onto into the many bland and useless pillows upon the bed the air felt touched by an ill-omened planter's frost.

Kira banked the fire and worriedly laid on another coverlet.

Chapter End Notes

Firstly, thank you everyone for your patience. I have been ill and off work for several months and this was an oddly hard chapter to produce. My apologies for the long delay.

Of necessity some parts of the scene might sound a little familiar..I tried to integrate familiar canon imagery and a phrase or two from The Steward and the King. Planter's frost is local term here for the inevitable unhelpful cold snap that hits in late spring..right when we are trying to get our annuals put in.

Grateful thanks as always to the ladies of the Garden and in particular to Annafan, Thanwen and Artura for their helpful comments and encouragement. And thank you also to Lady Lindariel and Wynja2007 for their thoughtfulness and care these past three months. The friendship of all these wonderful women, in and outside the Garden, have been such a balm.
Faramir arose at first light after another night of heavy, drugged and dreamless sleep. Outside his eastern window, dawn's blush was just fading from the Tower's white and gleaming spire; gilding it like a ray of Anor leapt from the bones of earth. He sighed forlornly, taking a moment to rest his elbows on the stone, and bask in the glorious sight. The splendour of the morning never failed to thrill, but now who of them knew how many more dawns they should see if Frodo failed his quest? Not even the Valar mayhap. It was an all too sobering thought; one that suited the restlessness of his mood and all the more reason to pay attention to Eru's unexpected gifts.

Impatient to do something other than just rest, he decided to let Bergil sleep. Beregond's young lad, Faramir's self-appointed aide and shadow, had made sure to arrive by the breakfast bell each day, but that would be an hour yet. He was loathe to wake him and surely one grown man could manage to dress himself with a little care?

Faramir took the challenge slowly, laughing at the awkward dance of pulling on breeches one-handed. He cheated only once. A cuff would not slide free and required the persuasion of a harder tug. Valar. This was exactly what Varan had told him not to do and in retrospect, something of a mistake.

The sharp jolt of shoulder pain was more than passingly unpleasant.

Chagrined, he approached the tunic more warily. Lacing was impossible, and so he slipped his arms through the sleeves gingerly, one by one, leaving the ties to fall open at the neck. It would not matter. Though the gardens would not be warm before mid-morn (the steady west wind from off Mindolluin's snowcapped fields brought steel blue skies but also a decided tinge of frost) he had his familiar green Ranger cloak. Last, but not least, he slipped on a pair of soft suede boots liberated by Nera from his rooms.

Ready. To face whatever the day might bring.

Ignoring the inconvenient rumble in his stomach, Faramir made his way through the arched colonnade with its benches and soft cushions to the near courtyard. Close in to the Houses the paths were wide and the flower beds raised - a space for those in rolling chairs or needing help with walking. He followed by instinct, picking his way past the few fellow patients making their own slower progress, pausing beside the main fountain to take in a stand of croci. This early in spring the garden was painted white and palest gold and blue; all the tones of hardy flowers that thrived in cooler soil.

It was a balm. And a welcome contrast to the somber colour of the ruined fields below.

At a fork in the path Faramir paused to choose his way. Beyond the central courtyard there were two loops: a nearer, shorter path for those with less stamina, and a longer outer arc that wound toward the west, meeting the Sixth Circle's high curtain wall where it rose up to meet Mindolluin's bed. With only a little hesitation he stepped onto the outer arc. He would not regain his stamina by ease, and to walk a quiet path might settle the clamoring inside his head: it was proving taxing to shield so many other's thoughts. A little tranquility was a more than agreeable proposition.

He strode along quickly as he dared; the Ranger that lay never far below the surface cataloging his
environment. White moonflowers, tightly closed and their scent tucked away for the evening's gentler breeze, nodded beside stone baths in which the bold robins played. By an arbored bench he smiled and laid a hand on a large and nodding cypress's rough string-like bark. His memory was clear: Father admonishing him not to run, and he, released from Nera's charge and excited to be visiting Mother, skipping away down the path, gazing up in awe at the large umbrella-like canopy. Like his mother, the tree too was an exotic—hardier in Dol Amroth's warmer clime, but protected by the lee of the curtain wall. It had been his childish mistaken fancy that they should both withstand the winds of life.

As he pushed on, the character of the garden changed: neat order and light scent gave way to a blowsy expanse of white flowers that would smell and shine strongest under the moon. Like Ithilien of the lower slopes, and without thinking he instinctively followed the sound of trickling water. A wall fountain nestled by the outer curve, burbling merrily, its stone hellebores nodding forever downward above a little pool that was cool, but far more welcoming than the one he knew. There were no knives below its placid surface.

On impulse he dipped two fingers into the spray. The shock of the chill made him gasp but that too was welcome— it helped him focus on the subject that had driven him mercilessly from his bed.

The night before he and Meriadoc had sat long under a thin quarter moon and talked. It had been a delight to speak with Pippin's cousin, to discover that he loved boats and ponies and also maps; had the same cheerful exuberance of his cousin, if not the slightly scattered focus. Faramir smiled fondly. Perhaps it was experience that made Merry more mature beyond his years? The young Hobbit clearly grieved Theoden's loss most keenly—had spoken movingly and personally of a man Faramir knew only by reputation. It was also clear that Merry was deeply worried for his "Dernhelm". The King had been released from Wormtongue's loathsome grip, but his niece was still dogged by memory—by hot breath and lingering footfalls of ill intent.

Faramir sighed and looked towards the Houses' eastern wing, running his free hand through his hair, more troubled than he cared to admit by the unexpected discoveries of a tiring and eventful day. How had the Lady Éowyn received his hasty, awkward words?

For him the whole meeting had been surreal: there had been an uncomfortable air of unreality to speak with someone from outside himself, to accept an address as Steward. Not an hour before he had leaned against the balcony, chatted with the men as if he were just a Captain, come to shoot the breeze and ponder the suitability of the new recruits. They had humoured him, but then with a few quick words the illusion had been torn. He had had to pause and push aside the ache of that salutation, startled by the pain that was greatest. Not his shoulder or cracked rib or the quilt of blue bruising down his flank from the fall but a phantom: the limb ripped away by loss. He could feel it, the sense of amputation was frighteningly strong, as if he stood in a scene of green and beauty bleeding on the leaves. The illusion was a powerful one. And sadly also partly true, for then rattled by the event he had bled verbally all over the poor startled lady. 'Flowers fair and maidens fairer.' Morgoth's balls, what had possessed him? His brain must have been addled, mesmerized by the lady or some fey spirit of old who had taken hold his tongue.

Thankfully, he had stopped just short of twittering utter nonsense.

He kicked desultorily at a loose stone beside the path. The whole conversation had been ridiculous. Too forward and awkward on his part, and yet he could not entirely regret it. For a moment, gazing into eyes as blue-grey as new-formed ice on a winter stream, he had thought of nothing but the issue right before him. What a boon. Was it that she was fair? Certainly the Lady Éowyn was that—hair like a river of gold and so unlike any other woman he had seen, cool and remote in a long white robe but little paler than her grave and beautiful face. He had drunk in her loveliness, dizzy from a sudden
roaring in his ears and sense of shock. That low and lilting voice - the rolling accent of the open plains was to his ears almost musical next to the careful, mannered speech of Gondor. The soft purr that rolled over her rs and vs, set a shiver inside his bones.

And was quite startlingly familiar. I have heard it in my dreams.

Surely not? It was all too fanciful…and yet…

Faramir shook his head and forced himself to move again. When faced with a problem he had always found that his mind could sort it best when his body was occupied. And it would not hurt to explore his range: become reacquainted with the paths. He strode a little quicker, swinging his free arm for the little exercise it gave, passing a small copse of trembling birch and another of hawthorn before his troubled thoughts intruded once again.

The White Lady (for that was now how he thought of her) was a puzzle and a troubling one. The boy who had thirsted for every detail of lands and races, drank in as much lore as Ivanduil could give, knew a little of Shieldmaiden. They were a proud and ancient order, founded when the forefathers of Eorl lived along the Anduin; gifted warriors and rightly admired; held in as much honour as the Rangers or Swan Knights. Strong. Fearless. Why should she, honourably wounded and discharged, still desire to die in battle?

He bit his lip, worrying the threads of knowledge that he had. There had to be something more.

Merry had spoken of a proud young girl, waiting long years, restless and helpless, bound by duty to watch as a man she revered and loved slowly faded into decay. For a fleeting moment he thought of another lady, lovely and sorrowful, hemmed in by stone. Finduilas. Like his lady mother Éowyn was a daughter of kings, a princess in all but name, with a princess's pride to match. What should he say to her? He was used to dealing with one who was proud, even arrogant, but the stiffness with which Éowyn stood was not arrogance. Not his father's stubborn pride that could not be teased apart from power. Behind the White Lady there lay history. Tradition. Rohan was steeped in these; home to the strongest line in the latter days save the Dunadan of the North. It made her diffident, not hopeless—and strong as the snowdrops he had found beneath the snow growing defiant of the Shadow amidst Ithilien's pines. She too was beautiful and brave; strong and stern in the face of the world's inclement air. Faramir smiled at the analogy. There was nothing tiny about her—tall and high-hearted-she was more like the white camas Ivanduil (as much naturalist as historian) had once shown him in a botantical. Long petals and stiff spiky leaves waving elegantly in the oat grasses of the Wold.

Lost in thought, he looked up, startled, when his cheek was brushed by a heavy curtain of new green. The great cypress. Ruefully he shook his head, tugging at one heavy dangling frond and reflecting that he was not ready for combat yet if he was taken so easily unawares. The White lady was proving a distraction and a puzzle: one that a short morning's ramble would not solve. But perhaps some understanding had been gleaned. What of them did not have a longing to be free? Of fear. Of worry. Of grave dishonour. Éowyn had been caged in truth and now, like a caged bird, she struggled. Her trammeled wings beat against the bars until she lay, exhausted, without hope but not the fierce need to fly.

He knew she would test the bars again and there perchance he best understood.

Denethor's youngest knew all too well the iron bars of duty.

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The echo of the morning's waning second bell found Éowyn of Rohan also negotiating the garden's white gravel paths, no less troubled in mind than Gondor's newest Steward, but a good deal less confident of her destination.

Her day had not begun auspiciously. Waking tense and out of sorts, by some mischance Éowyn had slept part of the night upon her splinted arm. Hours of unwelcome pressure made the bone throb incessantly, protesting everything: the firm binding of wood stay and linen that stopped the sharper jolts, the sling that kept it up and above the level of her heart. It was as if her arm had been jammed into an ill-fitting vambrace, measured in haste and now repented on a long and particularly difficult patrol.

Kira took one look at her lady, white and pinched of face, pacing restlessly like a cornered badger, and called for Mistress Ioreth. The dose of willowbark tea had helped alleviate the pain. The rambling monologue that accompanied it had not.

When the room was blessedly quiet once more Éowyn forced herself to settle, to leave off picking pointlessly at the breakfast tray and find a more productive use of time. Lothiriel had very kindly dropped off a selection of books from Prince Imrahil's own library. Reading would help the slow morning's hours pass. The prospect was appealing. She had had little leisure to read for herself since her Uncle's illness; the inventories and stores orders that had filled her days were hardly riveting-she could not think when she had last picked up a piece of prose or poetry. Pulling the first slim volume from off the pile, she sat back upon the bed and propped a feather pillow below her splint. 'Mithrellas and Imrazor: Bright Wood and Rolling Wave." This rather fanciful title was scribed in elegant gold leaf across a watery blue leather. She thumbed the fine vellum pages carefully. The legend of Dol Amroth's first Prince was new to her and though it took effort to read Sindarin (a language she spoke with her Uncle but had not read since putting her dolls and tutor both away) for a while the story held her. An hour later, Galador, Lothiriel's many times great-grandfather, had just been born but a dull pounding had begun to spread behind her eyes. She shook her head. It only seemed to make matters worse. The words began to slide right off the page and she could not catch them no matter hard she tried. The room felt stuffy and her head filled with damp cotton wool.

With an exasperated sigh, Éowyn set the book back upon the coverlet and stretched out her sword hand, wriggling her fingers and wrist to ease a nagging cramp. Both were still slightly numb. This was troubling, but worse, holding one position for a length of time was something of a mistake. However was she going to get back her strength if her muscles had no stamina? Certainly not by sitting idle, and so she swung her legs over the edge of the bed and stood, gritting her teeth, ignoring her traitorous body's feeble complaint.

Once up, she turned and searched the room's pale, yet entirely unsoothing space for inspiration. The idea of calling for more willowbark appealed less than nursing an untimely ache. Back home in Edoras she would have saddled Windfola and ridden to chase the pain away. Exercise often helped when she was ill. With a pang, she thought of Theoden, so long confined to bed. How much had his lack of condition made his malady worse? Possibly significantly, and though it was clear the Gondorian Healers ascribed to such, she had no illusion that her tall and lugubrious jailor, Master Varan, would accept that argument. He seemed unlikely to allow her anywhere outside the Houses' walls, much less astride.

Craving a distraction, she set about collecting what few personal items were scattered on the dresser top. The Steward had promised her an east-facing window. No point in leaving the little packing to be done. There were no baskets to fill but the least she could do was gather and sort her things upon the bed. They made a meagre pile: of her hurriedly packed kit only what she actually wore to fight
was saved. Her jerkin and riding breeches hung in the wardrobe, laundered and mended where an Orc's pike had come uncomfortably close. Her mail and boots were there, obligingly clean of any mud, but her helm was missing. As was her sword. Like her saddlepack they must be out somewhere on the Pelennor, trampled into the straw and muck. She regretted the loss but they were not her own—merely what fitted in the armoury. Easily replaced. Not so her knife. Her knife! It was the one thing she could not bear to lose, and with a sinking heart she grabbed for her belt. The leather sheath was empty. In vain she searched, increasingly desperate; rifling every drawer and struggling to pull the heavy wood knobs. There was no blade. Her last gift from Theodred was gone.

Fighting back a prick of tears, she was just pulling apart her work to check the jerkin's every pocket when Kira bustled in, fresh bed linens folded neatly across her arm. The girl dropped a hasty curtsy, her warm brown eyes warily taking in the jumble on the bed.

"My Lady? Have you lost something?"

Éowyn's shoulders drooped. "My knife. It is precious to me and I cannot find it anywhere."

Kira's frowned, laying the sheets across the footboard. "No weapons are allowed in the Healing Houses, but it is the custom to leave a note with the patient so they may be collected when they leave." The young woman shook her head in sympathy. "I confess I have not seen one. Was it jewelled? Could it have been given to your Marshall for safekeeping?"

"Jewelled? Of course not. It was for defense not for decoration." Thankfully it had never scored on its intended target. Éowyn shuddered, looking on Kira's soft, heart-shaped face, trying to remind herself that amongst these Gondorians she was an anomaly. It would never occur to them to arm a woman. Or at least not until every Man was lost.

Kira pulled a small notebook and charcoal from her apron. "I can at least ask the stores master if they have its like."

Éowyn blinked in surprise. The girl was well educated if she could read and write. "You have been tutored?"

"Yes my Lady. My father is a Guildsman here in the City. I had just apprenticed to the Houses but not yet begun my studies when word came that War would come."

That explained why Kira did more than simply fetch and carry—she was servant and assistant both—and was likely why she had been given the Houses' ‘royalty' for her charge. Hierarchy was observed in all things. Including servants.

Much relieved by the practical solution Éowyn described the knife as best she could before bending down to fold the jerkin's straps into a square. "Let me do that Lady Éowyn. " Kira hastened to pick up the rumpled tunic.

"Thank you but I can manage." But this was clearly not an acceptable response for Eowyn found herself somewhat neatly elbowed aside. Her gentle but firm enquiry as to when she could transfer her things to the other room was met with a puzzled frown.

"Late morning, Lady Éowyn. But there is no need for you to help."

"Why ever not? I have the time."

The answer - a lady did not shift her things for herself—only served to frustrate her more. Bema did they think Éowyn completely helpless? A daughter of a Princess of Rohan can and did whatever was needed to run a royal household. And the sickroom, in her experience. She was no stranger to rolling
up her sleeves; getting her arms dusty or bloody, or stuck with stable straw. Éowyn snorted derisively. What ever did the noblewomen in Minas Tirith do? Sit and embroider and eat sweetmeats all day long?

"My Lady it simply isn't done." Kira protested weakly. From the faintly pained expression on her face she realized her argument was not a welcome one. Éowyn had to give her credit for some steel along her spine: Kira did not give in, merely set her lips into a measured line and pointed to the blue sky outside. The new green tips of the glossy vine that clung to the window frame swayed and nodded gently in the breeze. "It is a fine morning. I daresay the prettiest in months. A walk in the gardens might do you good, your Highness."

Highness? How typically Gondorian to think elevating her status and plying her with flattery might sway her. Éowyn bristled, about to chide the girl, when the sight of a white bitten lip made her hesitate. Kira seemed genuinely concerned. Worried about her welfare. Perhaps the formality had been more to show respect than to cajole? And she was a little prickly from the pain.

With as much dignity as she could muster, Éowyn laid the tunic back in the centre of her pile. She had to admit the suggestion was actually a welcome one: some green and peace and open air away from endless smooth white walls could help.

"Very well."

Another quarter candlemark found her in the courtyard with the book tucked under her good elbow and a light white robe pulled around her shoulders against the breeze. Close in to the wards the Houses' garden was a busy place. The sight of so many men gathered about colonnade, nursing mostly silently a myriad hurts and lingering fear, made her suddenly thankful for her lot. At least she could walk a little farther, and so she tried to put her best self forward: nodding as she passed the quiet knots of stoic men in pain, pushing aside the oddly unsettling intimacy of every greeting.

Beyond the formal beds and broader gravel paths Éowyn found the space was actually what she considered a proper garden: the angled parterres and clipped box borders gave way to broad swathes of colour and a real greensward with trees blessedly higher than a man. It was, she understood, the only such place in the windy circles of the city. A welcome one. And though she did not know at all where the path might lead, on impulse she took the left hand fork. It looked less busy. Only once did she have to stop and step aside for a soldier limping slowly by. His low 'Westu Hal' came as a surprise: his cropped head and beardless jaw were swathed in bandage. The healers had felt it necessary to shave him and cut his hair. Poor bugger. She returned the greeting and smiled in sympathy as he slowly maneuvered on.

Through an allée of new-budded forsythia she spied a great cedar tree and the creamy white of a low stone bench. The sight was welcome: she had just begun to feel a little like a new foal trying out a pair of damp and wobbly legs. She picked up her pace but then stopped short just beyond the green canopy. Bema. Ill luck again. The bench was occupied. A man sat in a long green cloak, hood up against the chill.

Éowyn turned and began to search the path for another, hopefully close by, seat. From the hunched set of man's shoulders he likely, too, had little desire to chatter about the weather with a stranger.

She had barely moved two paces before a muffled voice spoke up.

"Lady Éowyn?"

He knew her? Reluctantly, she turned in place and inclined her head in what she hoped was an appropriately respectful nod. The green clad figure rose and doffed its hood, bowing a little stiffly,
but with remarkable grace for one hobbled by a sling.

_Vana's mercy_. Below the shock of slightly ragged long black hair, she caught the calm and thoughtful gaze of Gondor's Steward.

_Could this day become any more irksome?_ Unconsciously her hand raised to touch the cheek she had dampened the day before with shameful tears. It had not been her best audience. What should he think of her?

Embarrassed by the memory, she gathered her skirts to make a swift and respectful exit. "I am sorry to bother you Lord Faramir. I did not realize that this seat was taken."

"Wait," Faramir implored, gesturing with his free hand toward the bench's nearer side. A slant of sun through the cedar fronds warmed the creamy stone. "Please. Be my guest. It is not a bother, Lady Éowyn. Truly."

She hesitated. After her performance of yester noon the last thing she wished to do was disturb this man again. He clearly had sought out the empty space for peace and reflection of his own, but her legs were tired. And she did not wish a repeat of the exhaustion that sent her into last night's death-like sleep.

"Thank you. Your offer is welcome, Sir." She sat and barely managed not to groan in relief. It was utterly ridiculous that a stroll of such little distance could do her in.

Her fatigue must have shown upon her face for Faramir's next words were shrewd, if more than passingly annoying. "Have you had enough of your morning's training?"

"No," she replied stiffly, nonplussed by his uncanny memory. Those were the exact words of their first conversation—the Black Breath appeared not to harm one's faculties. "I wished to walk. And I am not yet done."

Faramir nodded toward the volume resting in her lap. "Did you wish also for a quiet space to read? That is a lovely tale and the illustrations are well worth savouring."

Her eyes flew upward in surprise. "You recognize it?" She had barely reached a quarter of the way through, reading solely for enjoyment. It was not in her plans to conduct an erudite discourse.

"I know all my uncle's library," Faramir remarked mildly. "That is the famous tale of Mithrellas and Dol Amroth's first Prince. I think you will find there is a stain upon the central plate."

"There is?"

He chuckled. "It is Lothiriel's favourite. Her elder brother Amrothos once used it to catch a frog."

Éowyn could not help herself-she let the book part naturally and there it was: a yellow-brown smudge across a picture of a tawny-haired elf maiden in a moss green dress. Her lips twitched a little up. "It seems that elder brothers in Gondor and Rohan are not so very different. Mine once filled my saddlebag."

Faramir grinned. "And mine once filled my bed." Above the sudden smile his eyes twinkled mischievously. "I got him back."

"You did?" She asked, meeting his gaze. His light grey eyes really were quite an unusual shade. "How?"
"I convinced one of his friends to sprinkle ants into his boots. Out on patrol. Where there was no chance of a replacement."

Eowyn laughed. Tricky man. The good Steward had hidden talents if he could charm people so easily to his will. And a pleasantly dry sense of humour, she thought, noting his wry half-smile. Who would have guessed that lurked beneath such a calm and quiet exterior? It was unexpected, as was the ease with which she shared such personal recollections.

His courteous manner was obviously a bit too dangerously disarming. She must try harder to keep on her guard.

After several moments sitting in companionable silence, Faramir stretched out his long legs, grimacing as some knotted muscle pulled. "I am afraid I am getting stiffer than this bench. I must get up." He pulled himself slowly to his feet and loomed above her, offering a calloused hand. "Would you care to rest or renew your walk my Lady?"

Drat. Of course he would offer to join her. And although his invitation was undoubtedly quite genuine, she really did wish for peace. Master Varan may have won the first round but not the war. She needed to plan, formulate a new strategy, not engage in idle chatter. She opened her mouth to demur politely but those were not the words that tumbled out.

"Yes, thank you. I think I will walk again."

Then followed an awkward and amusing several moments where Gondorian etiquette was put to the test. Obviously Faramir considered it a courtesy to help her rise, to offer up his arm to walk, but her left was broken and his was in a sling. It was an impasse. With no little amusement, she watched the frustration and consternation flit across his handsome features before he settled for standing respectfully whilst she stood and resettled her robe.

They turned back toward Houses; strolling slowly shoulder to shoulder with Faramir at a politely shortened pace, free hand placed behind his back, quite happy to walk in silence. Éowyn was relieved. He seemed disinclined to nervously fill the quietude with words but here and there he would point out a particularly rare specimen or hidden gem, surprising her with the depth of his garden lore. His keen eyes roved over every little detail. She knew he had been a captain of a Gondorian eored, Merry had told her so much, and yet here he was: a soldier speaking lightly of plants and flowers in the garden as if he were healer.

A soldier with gentle eyes and quiet words. An enigma.

They reached the farthest part of the curve, and at one narrower bend, Faramir paused to hold back a mass of overflowing pale yellow poppies. Despite the earliness of the season the beds were starting to fill out—they had been thoughtfully planned to bloom year round—and the sunnier colour made her smile.

Faramir noticed her appreciative gaze. "My great-grandmother designed this garden." he remarked, carefully laying the floppy stalks back.

"She did?" Éowyn was embarrassed to admit her knowledge of Hurin lineage was a little thin. Ecthelion was his grandfather but who was there farther back? No name came to mind and sadly the wives of the Ruling Stewards were a total blank. "Lady Hurin?"

"No. My mother's grandmother. Princess Fana of Dol Amroth. She was famous for her knowledge of horticulture and healing plants. The great walled gardens at the Palace were, I think, dearer to her than her many children."
It was surprising to consider proper mannered Gondorians passionate about anything, but, sadly, she could not agree with the Princess's taste. The many muted pastels were presumably considered restful. She found them merely numbing.

Eowyn wracked her brain for something positive to say. "It is… elegant."

Faramir's mouth quirked again. "But not to your taste?"

"I meant no disrespect," she replied hastily, settling her face into what she hoped was an appropriately apologetic smile. This man was far too sharp by half. "The lack of colour simply feels anemic."

"That is entirely understandable," he allowed. "In your homeland the landscape is famously bright, golden as the roof of the Golden Hall."

Éowyn flushed. Here was the diplomat who knew rather too much about her land and she was at a disadvantage. She sought for a different topic. "You seem to bear your confinement in this prison well."

He looked at her sharply and one black eyebrow raised. "For the moment there is little else that I can do. I try to not waste energy in fighting what I cannot change. Although I do fear I will wear the stone under foot away…"

This was her first hint that the passivity of his current demeanor was not a natural and steady state. So, they both knew the restlessness of waiting—he had said as much the day before but she had assumed it to be merely courtesy. "I will have ample time to explore," she added bitterly. Five days and still ten more to endure. Impossible. However pleasant the space. And perhaps even the company…

"I have not the distraction of surprise," Faramir remarked mildly. If her tone was bothersome he chose not to show it. "I have long since trod every path."

*Long since?* Whatever did he mean? She had not heard that Denethor's younger son had been a sickly child. "You were here often?"

"Only a little once I became a lad. It is more that my mother spent a great deal of time here before she died."

Éowyn bit her lip, abashed. Damn her importunate blunt speech. "I am sorry…"

"I was very young. And the Houses of Healing do not have the troubled memories for me they had for Boromir." He rubbed slowly at the dark stubble that rimmed his jaw. Belatedly, she realized he was speaking of the beloved brother whom he had just lost. "He would have never stayed here, save under great duress. He feared illness. It made him anxious, and although he was the one more often injured, I was the one more prone to the maladies all children share." A fond smile creased his lips. "He became rather overprotective of me. I once made the mistake of admitting in a letter I was a little under the weather and even as Captain General he came charging into Henneth Annun with half a squad."

"Henneth Annun?"

"An outpost. In Ithilien. The Rangers have a refuge there."

"The Rangers?"
"My former company. We harried the Enemy right up to Mordor's nearest slopes." She could not 
miss the hesitation on former. Curious. Not wanting to pry, Eowyn let it drop when no further detail 
was offered. The conversation died then for a little while until they came to an open vantage point.

She looked out across the white stone rampart, angling left to spy the reaches of the Anduin where 
they wound northward toward Ithilien. How far away was Éomer? Would they pass unhindered or 
battle toward their goal? Belatedly, she let out the breath she held and looked askance. Faramir was 
also looking east. There was tightness about his thoughtful face that said he, too, was greatly worried 
about the Host. Impatiently waiting for whatever stroke should fall.

"What is that sound?" she asked when the wind brought with it the sound of tinkling chimes. It was 
almost like a harp, although she doubted any one outside the City to have the leisure time to play.

"The ice is candling," Faramir replied almost to himself. He turned to squint up toward the west, 
searching the mountain's slopes and then looked back down. "Higher on Mindolluin the wind is 
breaking up the last ice on the tarns. It splinters into long candle-shaped spars that make a most 
musical tone when they jostle. My brother loved it."

The words and sound both cut. His cheek paled but before he could turn away Éowyn impulsively 
laid a hand upon his arm. The bleak look in Faramir's eyes had pierced at her resolve to keep her 
distance. Surely it was not weakness to offer solace to fellow warrior?

"Your brother and your father.. I extend my sympathy."

"Thank you," he smiled a little wanly. "Forgive me, I have done it again. My mind knows better 
than my heart. It eases me a little to speak of him."

At his quiet words Eowyn was overcome by a sudden need to remember Theodred. There had been 
no time since Theoden rode away to honour her cousin, and no one in the Houses to speak with, 
save Meriadoc. Elfhelm was away chasing Orcs from Anorien, and though the wounded Riders 
could of course regale her with their Prince's exploits, she doubted they would welcome silly 
childhood memories. At least this man who also mourned understood the need.

She opened her mouth to speak but then a sharper gust blew her hair across her face. She turned 
away, pulling the long strands out of her eyes and shivered-surely that wind came straight from the 
mountain's higher snows? Once again, she regretted the loss of the saddle pack; here was she without 
warm clothing of her own.

Faramir's black brows knitted in concern. "You are chilled. Have you no warmer mantle?"

She wrapped her arms around herself defiantly. "I am made of hardy stuff." But the brittle edge to 
her voice was belied but a sudden chattering of her teeth.

"I doubt it not," assured Faramir, placing his warm hand on her shoulder and turning her back into 
the lee of his body. Swiftly he doffed his own heavy cloak. "But you are convalescing. Chill is a 
symptom." He beckoned to a young lad she had not noticed hovering near by, and with a quiet 
word, sent him off back down the path.

They stood quite close for many minutes, she shivering, he with lips pursed in thought, shielding her 
from the stronger gusts with his much larger body. Up close she noticed that although Faramir was 
lean, he was still well muscled: the hand that rested on her shoulder was that of a warrior, not a 
scribe, however much he enjoyed a book. It was an odd but intriguing contrast.

The time passed quite quickly for just as Eowyn began to feel less chilled (and a little guilty that
Faramir was without a cover) Bergil came hastening back with a pile of deep blue in his arms.

Vana the cloak he brought was beautiful. She was proud of her own skills as a weaver (she was as deft with the shuttle as the sword) but the workmanship of the mantle Faramir unfurled was wholly different yet again. He took his own green wool back and settled the new about her shoulders. The rich velvet, lined in silk and embroidered at neck and hem in silver, was heavy, yet soft as a feather against her skin.

She felt as if he had arrayed her in deep blue night and Varda's shining stars

"I cannot. It is too fine.." she protested.

"It was my mother's." he explained, and though she was quite touched, Œowyn felt more chagrined. The piece was almost certainly the work of a master tradesman. Meant for the Lady of Gondor and not for common use.

"But this is no day cloak.. and an heirloom…"

"My Lady.. Œowyn.. you are chilled and this is the only certain spare I knew of." A look of wistfulness softened the angles of his face. "Should you not have something beautiful? You are the sister of a king.."

What could she say to that that would not seem churlish? It was far too fine a gift, but a thoughtful one, and she inclined her head in thanks, settling the silver clasp at her throat as she pulled up the deep hood. It was a pleasure to be so warm and likely would be of use again. More than one of the assistants had referred to Minas Tirith as 'the Windy City'. From the sharp snap of the pennants on Ecthelion's tower it came by the name honestly.

Together they walked on, each keeping to their thoughts, and just as they came back to the path's main fork the nagging heaviness began to creep back into Eowyn's legs. She would need to sit once more. Swiftly she stole a glance at Faramir's face. He had pushed back his hood. Away from the wall the wind had dropped and the air was warmer once again, but now even he, too, seemed to be tiring. His periodic commentary had all but stopped. And there was a decided darker smudge below his eyes.

At an opening in the green she spied a bench with a higher back. The perfect windbreak should an intemperate gust come up. "Here.." She found herself tugging at his sleeve and plopping down so fast it was more a fall than a controlled and settled landing. She shifted over so that Faramir could sit.

He lowered himself in a somewhat more measured flop. "Thank you. I was just beginning to doubt we would make it back."

"Then my assistance will be welcome for a change."

Œowyn jumped. The Houses' Master Healer appeared as if by magic, grey robes blending into a backdrop of silver melianthus, hands hidden by his long and voluminous sleeves. Blast the man. He looked like a ghost and the faintest of grins upon Varan's long face showed he was well pleased with his little trick. Appearing from nowhere without the slightest warning seemed to be his stock in trade.

Varan narrowed his eyes, peering from one patient to the other. Œowyn liked not at all the openly apprising look. It made her feel a child taking a scolding from a tutor, and, really, did the man expect to govern every moment of her day?

Mutinously, she sat straighter up.
Varan's cheek twitched. Almost as if he understood her thoughts, he shook his dark head slightly, bowing hand to heart in the Gondorian fashion. "Lady Éowyn. Captain. Forgive my intrusion. I am very glad to have found you both. And that you are sensibly taking rest."

Sensibly? 'Desperately' would be closer to the truth, although neither of them were going to admit it. A startled cough sounded to her left. She looked up and caught Faramir's gaze but he had already schooled his face into the sort of attentively bland expression honed by many years of boring briefings. Was she mistaken or did he really wink?

"I am told that neither of you have eaten this day or yester eve. I come to remedy that situation," Varan announced, apparently quite unperturbed by the tacit admission he had them watched. Yet another example of his sneaky nature, quite unjustified as part of examination.

Éowyn bristled. The only reason she had missed the evening meal was that she had fallen straight to sleep. She began to protest but Varan silenced her with an upraised hand.

"No, my Lady. I am afraid I must stop you there. Falling unconscious before you can take a bite is less than reassuring. I have apprentices researching all the scrolls we can find about this ancient malady and have taken counsel with the King and Lord Mithrandir and Lord Elladan. They all concur it will take time for the most pernicious symptoms to resolve. In the meantime, for both your sakes, you must eat."

Of course. Did her think her untutored? Every invalid needed sustenance. It was simply quite different when one's stomach twisted with every bite. She lifted up her chin. "I have tried. I simply have no appetite."

"Nor I." agreed Faramir, who shook his head vigorously.

Varan frowned, watching both patients fidget nervously. It was not as if they were being deliberately difficult, or at least not in Faramir's case. Was he surprised at the united the opposition? He clasped his hands before him, giving them a little shake. "Captain it is most important for you to nourish a body weakened by a wound and days of fever. Also for you Lady Éowyn so that the bone of your arm knits properly and you may wield a shield again." He waved forward two servants who had been patiently waiting just behind and Faramir groaned. The first man set up a folding table support, the second laid down a broad wooden tray.

It was filled with smaller plates.

"I am told you may fare better with more frequent smaller meals. Dishes that are easy to eat and take less effort. I had thought to set up in the courtyard but with you both captive here and the wind blocked somewhat you should be warm enough."

"Captive?" An infelicitous choice of words. "Varan, honestly, " Faramir argued, "you need not trouble to do this." Éowyn agreed: the thought of being followed round by servants cajoling her to eat was simply too off-putting. She smiled her reassurance. "Neither of us wishes to be a bother. I am quite well and Lady Éowyn has just walked right round the outer ring. You need not be so concerned about our progress. Just yesterday I managed to snack on a dried plum in the afternoon."

"And I an apple," Éowyn nodded eagerly. It had been withered and dry, obviously the last of the city's stores, but she had valiantly finished every last small slice.

The healer's craggy brows furrowed into one. Their tally did not impress. "I have observed myself that the Perian is well able to eat. Several times a day in fact. That rather puts you both behind."
"And how do you know he is not similarly afflicted?" asked Faramir. "We have no basis for comparison. There have never been Hobbits in Minas Tirith before now. His appetite could in fact be much depressed." Éowyn placed a hand over her mouth to smoother the giggle that bubbled up. Merry did indeed have the appetite of a starving Rider kept too long on shortened rations. At luncheon the day before, he put away nearly twice as much as she. "Do they not take something they call 'second breakfast'? Pippin has spoken quite wistfully of the event. For all we know Meriadoc could be missing an entire meal."

Varan rolled his eyes. "Captain I appreciate your efforts at precision but your supposition is incorrect. The young one appears to have an entirely healthy appetite." His spread his hands in a gesture of resignation and sighed. "I expected you might not be easily swayed. Come now, I will have Rygel and Bern follow you around if I must, but would rather not waste resources. Surely there is something here that appeals? Princess Lothiriel went to the trouble of asking a Captain of the Rohirrim what might tempt you Lady Éowyn."

Éowyn eyes widened as a cover was lifted off. *Frikadeller*—the tiny spiced meatballs that graced every board at Haglimond—lay in a moist and enticingly fragrant pile. They were an unorthodox breakfast food but something she truly loved. *Elfhelm*. He, she thought, was the most likely one to have given up her secret. His wife Hilde was famous for her *frikadeller*.

Varan lifted up a plate of small sweet breads. "And for the boy I once treated because he made himself sick on his mother's favourite pastry I have *sahrabas*. From Prince Imrahil's own chef." A faint smile spread across the healer's lips. Faramir had to practically sit on his hands to stop himself reaching for one of the golden treats. The good Master was enjoying himself entirely too much. "Alternatively I could consult with Ivriniel? I am quite certain she could create new a concoction to increase one's appetite."

"Varan. that is truly vicious threat..." Faramir exclaimed, mock-horrified. With alacrity he reached for one of the flaky crescents. "I yield."

"Well I do not." Éowyn eyed the board suspiciously. "This... food therapy... it will not work."

The Master Healer drummed fingers impatiently on his sleeve. "My Lady. I do not expect you to eat everything presented. Just enough of what appeals to keep you going until midday."

Éowyn had to admit that the array of small breads and cheeses and even tiny griddle-cakes looked enticing. All things that could be eaten easily with fingers. Perhaps it behooved her to at least make a try. She reached for a *frikadeller* and took a tiny bite. It was still warm; rich and moist and heady with the scent of clove.

Her stomach rumbled loudly.

"Aha.." exclaimed Varan, crossing his long arms as an unbecoming flush stained her cheeks. "I thought as much. I will leave you both to it. Perhaps a little competition and dining out of doors will spur you both to greater efforts. Bern will clear up when you are done." With that the Master Healer made nodded to his assistants and the trio left the flummoxed patients alone with the spread and the bright morning air.

Éowyn fumed. She was not quite certain what constituted 'done' but her stomach had absolutely handed Varan the present round. It felt like she had been betrayed.

Faramir, anxious to soothe her ruffled feathers, sat forward and lifted up a small metal pot. "Tea or kahva?"
"Neither."

A pair of black brows flew up. "It is not shameful to accept an honourable defeat my Lady."

No, but it certainly felt like colluding with the enemy. Worried that he might think her temper childish, Éowyn belatedly nodded to the tea, accepted a spoonful of honey and set several *frikadeller* on her plate. "There is too much here," she moaned. "However will we make a dent in it?"

"Perhaps we can ask Merry to hide the evidence?"

Éowyn laughed. Oh bless the man. She was starting to quite like the way his nimble mind worked. "That is not sporting…"

Faramir shrugged sheepishly and she eyed him conspiratorially over the rim of her cup. Was she mistaken or did she detect a glimmer of excitement in his eyes? Gondor's new Steward enjoyed a little subterfuge.

"I dare you, my Lord."

"Call me Faramir, please." he said, grinning. "And be careful what you ask. You might be surprised by what I might do."

She rather thought she might. He was proving to be rather less conventional than it first appeared. This was the second time that morning he had made her laugh: the feeling of lightness in her chest was really rather nice, like the first warm breeze after weeks of cold and damp. How long had it been since she had shared a jest?

"Please call me Éowyn."

Faramir tipped his cup of dark brown kahva in salute and took a sip. She found herself noticing his fingers. They were long and quite thin for a man, almost Elvish in a way, and covered at the pads by little calluses. He was a bowman. Merry had mentioned it. Reputedly the finest in all of Gondor. Somehow from keenness of his gaze she could imagine it.

Faramir set his drink back on the tray and picked up one of the little meat balls. "These are really rather good," he commented, having mastered the whole in a single a bite. "Now if you wished to wage a retaliatory strike …"

"Yes?" He had her undivided and full attention. She returned his wry half-smile.

"You might suggest to Varan that fresh air and exercise would increase your appetite."

"Well of course, but how would that accomplish our goal?"

"Explain that slashing Orcs with your fellows in Anorien is just the thing."

The rogue! She, a Shieldmaiden of Rohan, baiting the Master Healer? The idea was just too good. "Can you imagine the look on his face? When I suggest another 'therapy'."

It was Faramir's turn to double over, chuckling at his own joke. They must have made quite a sight, the pair of them giggling like children caught out in a naughty prank. She had to pause to catch her breath before continuing. "It is just too easy. Is he always so severe?"

"No," Faramir brushed some crumbs from off his lap. "He is, away from the weight of responsibility, actually rather fun. And a good mimic. He has an eidetic memory and can give you..."
every accent that passes through these Houses."

Éowyn snorted, waving off his offer of a griddlecake in favour of a piece of hard red cheese. That would have to be seen to be believed—the man she had tangled with looked like he constantly had a pickle in his mouth. Of course, that really was not a fair assessment. How would she look if she had hundreds of ill and injured men to worry for?

She sat back, momentarily chagrined, and eyed the table, considering what to sample next. Perhaps she should try to not tax Varan so. The plate of sahrabas did look awfully tempting.

Faramir followed the direction of her gaze and grinned. "Try one..they are very good. They are filled with chocolate."

"From Harad?" That was a treat. Traders sometimes brought the confection to Edoras for Yule but rarely at other times. Éowyn picked up the small flaky roll and began to nibble delicately. The inside was filled with the sweet soft paste. Delicious. "Are you sure you want to share? Are they not your particular favourite?"

It was Faramir's turn to flush. She was teasing, gently, and it almost seemed to make him shy. "They are.. but I have learned the art of moderation. As Varan alluded, I once made myself quite ill eating five of them in one go."

"Five!" He must have a seriously rotten sweet tooth.

Faramir shrugged and surreptitiously licked a smear of chocolate from off his thumb. "I was all of six. My brother panicked at my groans and ran to Houses straightaway, grabbing the first healer he could find. It was Varan. He was barely sixteen and starting on his apprenticeship."

"Boromir did not send for your father?"

"No. Father would have said it was my due for indulging in the first place."

Éowyn just barely stopped herself from a candid and caustic reply. Bema. What sort of father would let such a little child suffer to prove a point? It appeared her image of a somewhat imperious, cold-hearted former Steward was not likely to improve with time.

"You are friends? Is that why you call him by his name?"

Faramir nodded. "We are, but that is not the reason. I have agreed to not call him Master Healer if he does not call me Lord Steward."

Oh. Of course Faramir would not want to be constantly reminded of the father he had just lost so unexpectedly. Éowyn reached for an oddly threatening looking purple fruit to hide her discomfiture. It was clear that no matter Lord Denethor's faults, his younger son mourned him deeply. How cruel that he had not had a chance to say goodbye.

She awkwardly cleared her throat. "May I ask you something…?"

"Certainly."

"Who is this fearsome Ivriniel?"

The reaction this provoked was startling. Faramir choked; coughing and spluttering as the pastry went down the wrong way. She dropped the fruit and pounded him as solidly as she could upon his back, much relieved when he began to speak again.
"She is my aunt." Faramir answered, accepting gratefully the cup of water she pressed into his hand. "A most wonderful, knowledgeable woman. A herbalist and healer. Doyenne of the vast garden at Dol Amroth that harbours every bitter healing herb and leaf known to Middle Earth." He paused to take another sip. "She uses every last one of them in her tonics."

Éowyn grimaced. "That sounds unappetizing."

"Spectacularly. Although once one chokes them down they do seem to work. It is especially entertaining to watch troll-sized captains of the Swan Knights quake at the sight of my delicate and tiny aunt."

Éowyn's image of rather serious, rouged and painted Gondorian women intently embroidering the crests of long-dead ancestors was taking a beating in the face of the rather eclectic Princesses of Dol Amroth. "I shall look forward to meeting her," she announced, picking up the purple fruit once more, searching for a seam. Although she worked hard, no amount of prying with her close-cropped nails could split the tough and shiny hide.

She rummaged on the tray but spotted no sharper knife. An oversight. But one that wouldn't matter if she had her blade. She sighed heavily.

Faramir looked up from the detritus of his second sahrabas. "What do you lack?"

"A knife to cut with. Mine has disappeared."

"Here, take mine." Faramir slipped a slim, bone-handled dagger out of the belt at his tunic front. From the weight and span it was for throwing not just the table. She wondered how he had smuggled in the weapon: it's wickedly sharp blade soon made short work of the offending rind.

Éowyn cut a second large slice and bit straight in. It was wonderful, just slightly tart and quite soft. She eagerly cut another piece…

They ate in companionable silence until the clang of the midmorning bell sounded from the Tower. Time had flown. Most of the small plates had had at least cursory attention, and now that Éowyn looked down the path she saw that the young assistant, Bern, was hovering. Obviously he wished to clear their repast away.

She touched Faramir's arm and nodded in his direction. "Shall we hail him?"

"Absolutely, but just a moment."

She watched, perplexed, as he retrieved a silver flask they had not touched from the off tabletop and turned to the boxwood hedge.

"What are you doing?" she asked. With one quick flick of his wrist he dumped the vessel's pale green contents all over the hapless bush.

"Ignoring a standing order." Faramir's eyes sparkled with hidden mirth. "Discretion is the better part of valour in this case."

"What was that?"

"One of Aunt Rini's famous tonics." He reached down and shook the dripping bush. The mixture was so thick it did not seep into the soil. "Not to worry. I am certain that its restorative nature will help flora as well as fauna."
"Oh dear. Should you have done that?"

"Perhaps not. They may be suspicious that all of it is gone." He set the pot back between the tea and kahva and retrieved his napkin from the gravel. Turned to look her steadily in the eye.

"But then a bit of control when there is little in one's life is a welcome thing."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who has been so patient and commented and followed. Your feedback really keeps me going...and my apologies for the length of time before this update. I thought I was better but I was wrong. On the upswing again so I hope to find more energy to write.

Frikadeller is a real thing- type of German savoury meatball. Sahrabas is a made up name of my own.. for what is loosely a chocolatine. I head canon that one of Faramir's weaknesses is sweets.

Thank you to Borys for the comment about Orc therapy :) And to Annafan, Thanwen and Wheelrider for their encouragement and very helpful comments.

Merry Christmas everyone!
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to eschscholzia, iheartthehemingway and mcapps for their comments this past month and also to morvidia, McEron and leiareyjyn for kudo'ing. Those little alerts keep me going. We are so close—I am determined to finish this...but feel a bit like a runner flagging at the finish line.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The days then passed sedately for them all, slow and bitter-sweet: like the heavy amber syrup made of birch that Ivriniel espoused, and just as much a tonic for the body as the soul.

Éowyn found she most looked forward to the mornings. She and the Steward would stroll the paths and the broader grassy meadows, enjoying the warmth of sun on skin; silent, or at times sharing much of what came to their hearts. They accepted with as much grace as possible their confinement. The Master Healer's unconventional medication continued to arrive wherever they could be found—on the greensward for morning training walks or in the near courtyard after the (realistically) necessary naps. The lady obligingly tried the pebble and card games that Varan insisted would help the fingers of her sword hand and did her best not to grumble to find that he was right.

The days were sweet for the company was good. The Steward proved endlessly curious about everything, delighted at her own knowledge of politics and quite genuinely keen on her opinion. He gave her funny (but carefully edited) anecdotes from Ithilien's company. She bravely gave him odd and wry observations on the Houses' denizens and Gondor's customs. At his insistence. (Faramir claimed it would do the kingdom good to be shaken out of its stuffiness.)

The days were bitter, too, for when she tired they would sit silently while he haltingly scribed another of the endless letters to the families of his fallen men. The sombre little hillock piled up against the day a messenger went forth and no amount of remonstrance by Varan or his aunt or cousin would make him delay the awful duty. Éowyn sat, heart leaden, feeling that at least she could help by being there.

Quite why she felt the need to help she did not understand.

Hours passed and though the people of the City smiled little and looked often to the East, there was in the Houses a certain hopefulness, for there, at least, the signs of healing were clear to see. The paths, and even the far outer loop, were now busier at certain times of day and Éowyn found that she was a little stronger: one loop round, slowly, paced by an endlessly courteous, thoughtful fellow prisoner, became two and even three.

For this reason on the morning of the third day she shrugged on the deep blue mantle and ventured out into the suddenly chiller air. The bright high blue sky of the days before had turned to grey. Spring's heavy dew draped the paths and plants like a musty blanket—more a misty heaviness than outright fog, and Anor's rising warmth did little to pierce its mass.

Éowyn shivered, it was more humid than truly cool, but she forced herself to pick up her pace. The thought of the sheltered bench and shared breakfast was welcome and if was to her it would be to the many who ventured out that day. Hopeful healing also meant more crowded seats. She did not wish
to find their usual spot by the great cedar tree occupied.

Sighing with relief, she spied the now familiar green hood pulled up against the damp.

"Faramir!"

The figure started and turned to greet her hail. The sling was right but something of the man's carriage was a little broad.

"Oh…" she murmured, disappointed, as the shadows dropped from the too broad face, the ruddy cheeks and warm brown eyes. "Lieutenant, I apologize. I mistook you for the Steward"

Anborn snorted and gestured with his sling. "No offense, my Lady. We are right twins just now with our slings and cloaks. And in this gloom the light is flat as a goblin's tit." The Ranger, suddenly remembering to whom he spoke, blushed furiously. "Pardon my rough speech, my Lady. Tis not fit for the company of Princesses."

"No matter, Lieutenant," she tilted her head, striving for amused by his assumption, "for I am not a princess. And having ridden with an eored I can give you that and more."

The young man threw back his head and laughed, clutching his free hand against his breast. "Oh bless me-I can't—Can you imagine the Princess's face?" He spluttered and rocked, chuckling until even Éowyn had to grin. 'The' clearly meant Princess Ivriniel...no one else she had met in past few days demanded such authority. Not even Master Varan. "I do not doubt it, Lady," Anborn went on, shaking his head. "Your countrymen upon the wards are not shy with their ver-nac-ular."

"Vernacular?" Éowyn frowned as the man hastened to make space for them both upon the cool stone. She set herself down and carefully pulled a fold the blessedly warm velvet up to cover her splinted arm. It was a most annoying barometer. In the cool humidity it had begun to throb again.

"I am an idiot, I forget our language is not yours. Vernacular. 'Tis a word I learned from our good Captain." He smiled and scratched his temple. "Means our common speech—everyday like—a little less high if you get my drift."

'Less high' It was a curious turn of phrase. Did the people of Gondor grade themselves according to their words, to how close to some ideal of Numenor they came? She did not know where Anborn was born but his accent surely owed more to Blackroot Vale than Minas Tirith or Pelargir?

She nodded and he narrowed his eyes wistfully. "Captain used to rib Damrod 'bout his something fierce. Said it was particularly blue. Aye, and it was, Gods but I miss the old cussing bugger. Could strip paint off a croft with his tongue the Lieutenant could." Anborn's hand raised to rub roughly at a misty cheek. "I've his commission now."

"I am sorry."

The Ranger sniffed noisily and sat straighter up. "Thank you, my Lady. Aye, well, we all here have too many tears and not enough buckets in Minas Tirith to catch 'em. No point in flooding the City streets." He smiled wanly and gestured to her cloak. "What brings you out on this bedamned morning? Not so lovely for walking this day."

Éowyn turned her head and scanned the farther reaches of the path. They indeed looked less than inviting. Farther in the distance the bulk of the curtain wall hung heavily over all. "I had hoped to break my fast with Lord Faramir. We did so yesterday. He mentioned that he would be here."

She flushed a little. It was not that she expected to see Faramir everywhere but somehow she was
aware of him in a new way. It felt off to not start the day warmed by his lively speech. She missed it. More than she thought she would.

Anborn frowned, pulled thoughtfully at his lower lip, as if unsure what to say. "He had a…. bad night my lady. Princess Lothiriel mentioned it on her rounds. She hoped I might stop in mid-morn and see what I could do."

Éowyn's heart did an oddly awkward flip. "Oh! Is he ill again?" It had not occurred to her that the fever, once broken, could come back. Surely the King's healing touch would last…?

"Not fevered." Anborn quickly shook his head. "But troubled. He sometimes has dreams, my Lady. Damned unpleasant ones and Tulkas knows last night was foul enough to unsettle the steadiest soul."

It had been. A wind from the east had clattered on the glass, driving the clouds to shroud the moon. It had been black and ill-omened but something of Anborn's tone meant more than just a nightmare. She shivered—what if He- her foe -returned to her in dreams? The thought was truly terrifying yet, strangely, nothing of him had haunted her tired mind.

Only Theodred. And Theoden's peaceful face upon a field of ruin.

"Could...he..." she would not say the name, "be trying to sow harm?" From what Éomer had said the Enemy had spread such despair it had overmatched even Denethor's strong mind.

"Nay, my Lady. Captain Faramir has always had dreams, just like his poor lady mother, Namo rest her soul. We say that Lorien's works are clear only to the One I should not like to try to untangle what they mean, for good or ill. 'T was he first had the vision that sent the Captain General to his death." The young man sighed heavily and rubbed a hand nervously along his thigh. "From where I sit it's not much of a gift to have pure blood. Happier as a mongrel. We knew our luck was about to turn when he'd wake us all shouting in his sleep."

This 'gift' of Lorien sounded awful. In the Riddermark there were always rumours of wise women who 'saw' a crop blight before it happened or predicted the fouling of a well. Did they too, my chance, have the blood of Westernesse? It seemed far-fetched. "Perhaps I should go to him..." Éowyn rose up.

"Might be good," Anborn agreed, rising politely and giving a little bow. "If I know my Captain when he wakes he will be fretting that he let you down."

She would never be so churlish as to blame a man for being ill. "He is very considerate."

"That he is," Anborn nodded. "Comes naturally to him to be thoughtful to a lady. And animals. And men. Knowing that it is hard for him to be hard makes us respect him all the more when he does it."

Éowyn began to take her leave but then the distinctive sound of clattering pottery came around the nearest bend. Of course... it was the appointed time to break her fast—what Merry had decided to call her 'first little breakfast'. Kira and another older, shorter woman she did not recognize came down the path, each held the handle of much smaller breakfast tray. As they drew near and a wide, sunny smile graced the young servant's pretty face. The women curtseyed with only a little shifting of the plates.

"My Lady. Lieutenant Anborn."

Éowyn glanced sidelong; Anborn had risen hastily to his feet and bowed carefully, now an expert at keeping his shoulder still. She had the distinct impression that Kira's smile was meant for him. "You know each other?"
"Indeed we do." The Ranger's dark eyes twinkled. "The pleasure is all mine. Kira was ever so helpful when t'Captain and I toured the ward. We'd have never made it right round to all the men without her list." Éowyn was unsurprised. The overburdened healers had not the time to list all the men, their names and affiliations, but Faramir—he would want greet them by name if he could.

"It was nothing," Kira stammered, blushing as pink as the little starflowers beside the verge under the beam of Anborn's smile. "Marritt," she ordered, hiding her flustered state in doing, "let's lay it here..."

The older woman gave the bench a cursory swipe with a none-to-sparkling napkin before they set the tray down.

Anborn leaned across, inspecting the source of the enticing smells. "I see they are still chasing you with too much food."

"Sadly, yes..." Éowyn eyed the repast with a sinking heart. There were half the plates of dainties compared to the day before but still too much. Tea and kahva, and frikadeller once again, and a curious kind of flat, fruit-studded roll. But no sahrabas. The Steward was not expected to join her after all.

She swallowed around a sudden lump of disappointment. "I had hoped to have some help with the task."

Kira smiled, sympathetically. "Lord Faramir broke his fast in his room my Lady. Princess Lothiriel took in a tray for him and the Lady..." Abruptly her words trailed off. She began to lift the little metal lids off each dish and Éowyn had the distinct impression the young woman felt she had said too much. Kira unwrapped the napkin that covered a basket of sweetbreads and nodded to the now frowning young man. "Lieutenant there is nearly enough here should you feel the need to gallantly step up..."

Éowyn, not liking the feeling that she was missing something, twisted to look at each of them in turn. "'Lady.. ? Whom do you mean?"

Marrit sniffed and her mobile face turned sour as a bitter melon. "That Lady Amerith. His friend."

"Hush," chided Kira, angrily. "That is Duchess to the likes of you. And you are no better than you should be, repeating gossip like a fishwife at the corner stall..."

The older woman folded her arms across her chest. "Now I meant no disrespect. Nice change around here to have a Steward who is not a dried up husk."

"Marritt!" Kira was scandalized. It was rare for someone to speak ill of Lord Denethor. He may not have been loved but he had been respected. "That was long ago and done. Leave be."

Whatever did she mean? Marrit scowled, standing back as Kira fussed with a complicated looking cup and strainer. Éowyn looked to Anborn for some helpful illumination but he merely muttered "Nothing to trouble you, my Lady." He gestured with a callused finger to the larger of the two metal pots. "A cup of that Kahva wouldn't go amiss."

As decoy maneuvers went it was as good as any. Kira poured the dark brown, bitter liquid into the larger of the two prettily painted cups and the Ranger balanced it expertly on his lap.

Leave be. It was a particularly Gondorian expression. An image of grandmother Morwen, lips set in a flat thin line, grey eyes glinting with disapproval, swam before her sight. She, all of eight, had just asked her beloved mam what Theodred was doing in the far loose box. At night.
Obviously she would get no more….

Damn these stubborn, tight-lipped Gondorians.

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When the Steward finally appeared, just after the fourth bell but thankfully before she lost even her firstborn to Anborn's pocketful of dice, he was not alone. Two tall women—Lothiriel and another whom she did not recognize—walked on his either side. The princess's grey smock was rumpled and stained as if she had worked throughout the night; the woman, by contrast, was perfectly turned out, or as perfectly as one could be in a city just held under siege: her linen dress was plainly but perfectly cut yet also streaked here and there with dirt. Who was she? Not a healer for those were not the Houses' formal robes. Youngish, but not much older than Faramir, could she be another cousin? Éowyn doubted it, for there were no other children in the Dol Amroth brood so far as she knew, and Denethor had been an only child.

Éowyn took a last gulp of the now bitter, stone cold tea and set the cup upon the bench with a clatter, watching the unusual procession. The unknown woman's arm had slipped protectively behind Faramir's back as she hovered like a hawk with an errant fledgeling. He walked slowly, jaw-set, as if wearied but determined to fly the nest.

She could sympathize with the feeling.

"Éowyn?" Faramir smiled wanly as they drew close. "I had hoped I might still find you here…." He looked pleased and a little relieved to see her. She, in turn, was shocked. He looked terrible. Pale and haggard, with a bleak strain about his eyes that had not been there in the days before. What sort of nightmare vision could do this? she wondered, shoving down a hard lump of anxiety in her chest. Whatever he had seen and feared he had come through the shadows of the deepest night into morning. For the moment she would focus on that fact.

She lifted her chin and tried a brighter smile. "Good morning, Faramir…and welcome."

At the path's fork he shrugged off his handlers and made a slow but perfectly respectable bow, wincing as he straightened up. "Good morning to you, White Lady, and to you, Lieutenant," he added, nodding to Anborn. The lieutenant saluted smartly and gestured to the mist that swirled in waves about their feet. In the flower beds the buds appeared to float like lilies in a pond. "Captain, I am right pleased to see you out. It's scouting weather. Could snatch a haunch of deer right out from under an Uruk's nose in this."

"That you could Anborn, especially if it were you. Or Erchirion."

Lothiriel, who had been rather focused on her charge, like a satellite orbiting a sun, looked up. "My brother? Sneak up and steal cargo under a Corsair's watch?" She grinned and shook her head. The middle Prince of Dol Amroth had happily taken on the moniker his grandfather had left off: Sea Fox. More for raiding Umbar's storehouses than fleecing its merchants on the trading routes. "Hello Éowyn, Lovely to see you. Anborn, please scoot over and give space for Faramir. I was not entirely convinced a walk was such an advisable plan."

"Thiri.. Please." Faramir's wry half smile took some sting out of the retort. "Is this some sort of payback for my youthful inexpert babysitting? Fussing like a clucking hen only adds to the headache."
She bristled. "I don't cluck. And you were the one who insisted on walking this far."

"I am not about to fall down where I stand."

"As if any of us would let you...." chided the other woman gently. Éowyn watched as she turned, extending a manicured hand, but not quite holding onto his elbow. The trio made quite a sight: the women fussing as much as he would let them-which was to say not much-and the Steward between, like a rattled hedgehog with his prickles up, determined to settle on his own but just as clearly overtaxed. From the slate-dark smudges below his eyes he appeared to have not slept at all.

The sympathetic denizens of the bench looked away and pretended a sudden interest in horticulture.

Once Faramir was seated, Lothiriel spoke up. "Éowyn, Lady of Rohan may I introduce the Duchess of Lossarnach and Lebennin. I don't believe you have met before."

The tall woman inclined her head respectfully. "It is a pleasure, Lady. We owe you and your countrymen a debt of gratitude."

Éowyn's reply was interrupted by the arrival of a breathless and anxious looking Bern. "Begging your pardon, my Lord and Ladies, " he wheezed, from his hurried run. "Princess Lothiriel. Princess Ivriniel needs you right away! A boat has arrived from up the river. There are more casualties from Cair Andros."

"Cair Andros?!" Faramir exclaimed. "It hasn't fallen?"

Anborn looked grim. "It did, Sir, even as we came to t'Forts. It is now held by the Enemy."

"Nienna this is a day of evil omen! Why did no one tell me?"

Anborn fiddled with his sling while Lothiriel bit her lip. It fell to the Duchess to explain the lack.

"There has not been time, truly Faramir. And Mithrandir bade us let you heal before all the news of ill be put to you."

"I must go." Lothiriel hastily gathered up her skirts and dropped a quick kiss on her cousin's brow. "Fara please, do not fret. There will be time enough when you are well."

"I should hope that that is soon."

"Este grant it so." The princess bid them all goodbye and hurried after Bern. In her wake Éowyn was just beginning to wonder how to correctly open a conversation with this woman she had just met, when an elegant hand was extended.

"Lady Éowyn, pray allow me leave to clarify. I am Amerith of Lossarnach. We are cousins I believe. Steelsheen was my great aunt."

Amerith? So this was the woman who was Faramir's friend.. Now she understood why the name had been familiar-her grandmother and Amerith's had been sisters. Amarna, the elder, had inherited Lossamarch and Morwen, the younger, had made a match to a dashing, exiled Prince of a foreign land. Theoden had spoken of Amerith many times, always quite highly- as leader in her own right of one demesne and steward of another. A noblewoman and not someone to be trifled with.

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance cousin." Éowyn offered cautiously in her coolest, polite and 'high' Sindarin.
There was a pregnant pause as an elegant auburn eyebrow raised. "As I am yours. And that was very prettily done. I feel certain you will be a hit should anyone find the wherewithal to hold a formal dinner."

Eowyn's mouth dropped open. The duchess had spoken in almost perfectly accented Rohirric, more like a goodwife at Meduseld than Minas Tirith. She was shocked- and no little flummoxed—unable to guess the intent behind the frankly and uncomfortably apprising green gaze. Prettily? Was the woman amused? Insulting her? Chastising her for being formal to a kinsman?

She had the unnerving feeling she was being given some sort of test and had no idea what the purpose was.

Faramir, perhaps sensing her discomfiture, turned his attention from his friend. "Éowyn, I am sorry. It was rude of me to have not mentioned the connection." He began to pull himself from the now crowded bench. "Amerith you do not have a seat. Take mine."

"Of course not darling," the duchess replied in Sindarin once again. "Don't be ridiculous. I am perfectly fine."

Darling? She was the 'friend' Marrit had alluded to but was this not overly familiar? Éowyn looked, dumbfounded, at Faramir. He did not appear at all surprised by the epithet; either the lady was the type to be familiar with everybody or they were very close friends indeed. Captive in the Houses, with little opportunity to experience how Gondorians spoke with one another, had she missed some custom? Much of what she had seen and heard had so far only reinforced her impression of a certain stiffness, although Béma knew Boromir, whom she had met several times, had been loud and exuberant enough to rival even Éothain. Perhaps not all Gondorians were as dour as the redoubtable Master Varan?

Faramir, reassured, settled back down with a stifled sigh and Amerith smiled fondly back. "I shall see you later in the day. When Anborn has used the advantage of your indisposition to relieve you of every castar in the treasury."

"Duchess I would never.." the Ranger began... but the Duchess held up her hand and wagged a beringed finger.

"Really? That is not what I had heard. Beware the quiet ones. They are usually busy counting cards."

Anborn blushed to the roots of his dark sorrel hair. Before Éowyn could ponder this unusual exchange the more, Amerith had turned back to her and held out a green velvet clad elbow.

"Lady Éowyn there is another seat a little farther on. Shall we leave them to it?"

Éowyn hesitated. There was just enough steel under the light pleasant tone to convey that she was to move—she did not like it—to be pressed was a little unnerving but in this instance her curiosity outweighed the sting of the annoyance.

"Very well."

Accepting the proffered arm as graciously as she could, she rose and gathered her mantle about her. With no more than another elegant inclination of her head Amerith bid the men goodbye and set out on the path's western branch. As they walked she remarked brightly on several of the plants native to Lossamach's higher vales and Éowyn took the risk to glance aside. The duchess was undoubtedly beautiful, more interesting than pretty, with dark auburn hair falling in well-behaved and flowing
curls, an elegant neck and, regardless of the City's state, a discreet and flattering touch of paint. If next to Lothiriel's striking, petite features and fine raven hair Éowyn felt oddly heavy, beside this woman she felt decidedly rustic. Would her polished look appeal to a man such as Faramir? She would not have thought so, for she had the distinct impression he was most comfortable with natural things: casual camaraderie as opposed to studied manners; wild bird song as opposed to trained captive calls. He had remarked on it as they passed a small brown thrush in a filigree cage inside the colonnade. Kira had implied, quite strongly, that their 'friendship' was in the past. At the very least, from their easy familiarity Éowyn should have guessed them best of friends.

Béma, what did it matter? She shoved the palest green shoot of jealousy hastily back down. It was nothing to her what the man did with his time. Then or now. Her heart was given, quite pointlessly, to another.

A few strides more and another of the grey stone seats appeared, this one covered by new tendrils of a glossy vine she could not place. Éowyn sat and folded her hands in her lap, squaring her shoulders. There were questions she wished to ask, not least why the woman was taking an interest in her, but before she could organize her thoughts, Amerith had settled her skirts, smoothed a wayward crease and tapped her lightly on the arm. "Thank you for accepting my invitation," Amerith remarked. "I was most particularly keen to meet the Hero of the Pelennor to whom we owe so much. And the woman whose company can pull our young Steward from his bed. He swears it is your company that is therapeutic, not the treats."

He does? Éowyn had an awful feeling her mouth was agape like a gasping salmon dragged from the spawning run. What would possess Faramir to have said so of her? Certainly they had spent several pleasant days together, but 'therapeutic'? Surely the duchess was overstating his words for some intent she could not divine.

"Lady.. I.."

"Amerith, please, we are cousins."

Éowyn shook her head, vehemently. 'Amerith, I know not of what you speak. Faramir… I should say the Steward and I have been much together these past few days but that has been purely convenience. We are convalescing from a similar illness. It is the fresh air and exercise, the light, that has helped. Speaking with Meriadoc has served just as well."

Shrewd emerald eyes narrowed thoughtfully for a moment. "Perhaps so…yet rarely does he say that which he does not mean. More rarely does he do anything on a whim. Denethor's tutelage has had a hand in that."

Éowyn frowned. Of course Lord Denethor had been known as a stern and commanding man, hardened by grief, expecting as much from his sons as he did himself. She had not stopped to think of the impact of such an upbringing on a man. Her grandmother and uncle and Theodred had always made it clear she could speak her mind, encouraged her, loved her without condition.

It was Grima who taught her to stay her tongue least she give him words to twist into tangled skeins of ichor dark deceit.

She took a deeper breath and spoke, daring the question that dragged the hardest –for this was an audience and who knew how they should have? "Tell me..why do you care?"

There was a pause, just long enough for Éowyn to feel an odd sort of weight, before Amerith sat back, hand to her mouth, as if thinking better of what she planned to say. Far from offended at her bluntness, the woman seemed impressed. "Simply? I have cared since a green boy came to me for
advice a more sensitive parent should have given him. I have watched as the winds of life have buffeted him too hard and, though he is strong and withstood them all, I would build a screen to lessen them however, whenever I can. That includes understanding sudden currents in the wind."

Her eyes swept up and down the fall of Finduilas' heavy cloak, once, twice before she chose to speak again. "That colour is quite breathtaking on you my dear. Darkest midnight. It brings out the blue tones in your eyes and the brightness of your skin. Poor Finduilas only looked more ghostly white. But Denethor, like his younger son, loved his lore. Blue for the house of Dol Amroth. Silver stars for the namesake of Gil-galad's valiant sister."

Éowyn blinked. "You saw her in it?"

"Yes," Amerith went on, sadly, "I was a young girl newly arrived at court and in high excitement at my first formal ball. She was so very, very beautiful. Ethereal, like a moonflower, but almost as frail even then. It was well known that Faramir's birth weakened her but few expected she had so little time to live." That intense green gaze bored steadily for a moment. "Do not mistake the significance of this gift, daughter of Éomund. It is one of our young Steward's most cherished possessions. Bequeathed to him by his father and a memory of that brave and noble lady."

"But I would never expect to keep an heirloom such as this!" Éowyn was aghast. The woman could not think Faramir meant her to keep it in perpetuity? He was only being considerate and besides, soon enough Elfhelm and the eored would return and she could beg a spare one from the wains. "Once I am released and can make arrangements I plan to give it back."

"You do?" Amerith frowned and looked quickly back toward the other bench. Anborn had risen, was about to take his leave, clapping his one steady hand tightly on his Captain's unbandaged shoulder. For the barest moment her expression softened, like old winter snow in the springtime sun, but then was it gone again.

When she turned back, Éowyn had the strangest feeling that she was being read.

"I should think carefully before the event Lady Éowyn. Sometimes a kind gesture can heal a wound even a tincture cannot reach."

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A stiffening breeze in the afternoon chased the morning's mist away but drove also a little rain, birds and guards alike hunched shoulders against the wet. It set the pennants to flapping limply like trews on a washing line and chased even the hardiest of the garden's occupants indoors. Éowyn found Meriadoc in the Houses's little library settled by a stout fire with the remains of second lunch and the start of a satisfying pipe. 

He drew heavily on the thin steam and coaxed the sputtering leaves to life. "Will you have some?" he asked, gesturing to the one last untouched cake. Her stomach twisted sourly. One lunch had been enough.

"No thank you Merry, please go ahead."

He plucked the square from its plate with alacrity. "I shall never turn down an opportunity again, my Lady, having had Orc swill for many days." Was it her imagination or was Merry growing before her eyes? He had eaten enough, (including a few of her and Faramir's repasts) since the battle to fuel even Erkenbrand, that tree of a man, barrel-chested and nigh as tall as Éomer.
She sat down on a worn but soft hide ottoman and they kept each other company for a while. Here and there a sudden gust would drive the rain against the glass, clattering like pebbles, before subsiding once again. They talked of little of consequence: she, homesick, remembering the soft muffled hiss of rain on Meduseld's golden thatch, he asking all she could remember of Theoden before Grima's spells took hold. They talked long and easily until a surprised Hallas found them there, as intrigued as Theoden had been by Merry's exotic habit. The hobbit, allowing that Gandalf had once chastised him for ruminating on the habit when there was a Tower to be expunged, remarked that he hoped that there in Houses he would be allowed a little licence. "To be 'light-hearted at it where.'" Éowyn smiled. After the morning's travails Hallas seem quite happy to allow it, gave him what lore he had on the wild harvesting of galenas, another weed that he had thought had little use. The Warden, unable to resist a lecture, perched an arm upon the mantle and there followed a too-detailed and animated discourse on herblore.

Soon enough, warm and admittedly a little bored, she found her eyes began to droop. Perhaps she should go lie down? Rest a little, as indeed she had been instructed to.

Bidding the Hobbit and Man both good day, Éowyn rose and pulled the heavy door shut behind her, walking back down the busy corridors, now well versed enough to find her own way to the eastern wing, but distracted—puzzling still the morning's conversation that had left her tired, more unsettled than she cared to admit. Surely Faramir had just been being kind? She had had a few men compliment her on her beauty in her life—it was what men did- none of them meant any deeper sentiment by it. But however much she told herself to ignore Amerith's insistence he spoke only honestly— the part of her heart that wished, even craved, to trust another fluttered uncomfortably.

What would it be like to be certain of another man's aims? Their judgement. Their honesty? Éomer and Elfhelm of course she had, but that was not the same. They were family, even Elfhelm of a sort, self-appointed elder cousin in place of Theodred. The hollow ache in her heart where he should be had once been matched only by the one fruitlessly given to Aragorn. What she had taken for encouragement had been merely pity for her plight. To be spurnned she could abide. To be pitied she could not.

She clenched her fists, brushing a little too roughly past a serving a woman, and uttering a quick apology. Pity. Time and again she had seen it in the women's eyes when she turned down every offer of a dance to hold her Uncle's cup, in her brother's eyes when she was left, tearful, at Minas Tirith's gate. She was done with that imposter of an emotion and now supposedly another Ranger was offering her truth.

Did she believe it because she believed in him? Or merely because she yearned with all her heart to trust?

If only Námo could hear and judge.

She had almost reached her own door when she caught the first plaintive notes of a feadan. Soft, and then a little faster, as if the player were gaining in confidence, the tune tumbled like an rising brook in spring, repeating the main, ineffably sad refrain before sweeping on, gaining in hope, reaching for some beautiful fall just out of reach. It made her think of Sherbourne and the spring fete that would not be, of catching sun-warmed drops from melting icicles on her tongue.

The tune halted and then ran through once again. Whomever it was was practicing, searching for a certain flow or flight of notes and she could not help herself—she followed the tune to the farthest door on the right hand of the corridor.

It was ajar. And looked all too strikingly familiar.
"Faramir?"

She pushed the oaken door farther in. He sat upon the rumbled, unmade bed, back to the headboard, one leg up and the other braced carefully upon the floor. His sling hung empty and both hands were gripped about small redwood feedan, his elbow tucked a little awkwardly against his wounded side. He had obviously but recently come in; the dark blue tunic and green Ranger cloak lay discarded on a seat, steaming damply in the warmth of a small coal brazier. His light linen shirt was open, the laces of the cuffs were untied and also down the front; the bandages about his chest and shoulder looked fresh—perhaps they had just been changed. The room smelled herbal, sweet and fresh, of athelas, and sure enough on the brazier a little pot spat and bubbled, imbuing the air with its wholesome scent.

He was engrossed in the tune and quite oblivious of his guest. "That is lovely.." she exclaimed, suddenly fearing that she was being rude, spying on a private moment.

"Éowyn!" The frown of concentration on his handsome face lit into a small half-smile. "I hope I did not disturb you. I am trying to distract myself. None too successfully." He added with a snort.

"Nay..it is I who should apologize for intruding. I merely wondered at the song. It is unfamiliar but reminded me of something."

His sudden flush stood out against the whiteness of the bandages. "It is mine. Just a fragment I am working on…"

It was? That was something to be admired. In the Mark a Rider who fought but then serenaded his fellows around the campfire was valued as much as any lord.

She started to close the door. "I will leave you to it.."

"No!" he protested. "Please..stay.. I should be happy of the company." Determinedly, he set the reed pipe upon a little table and ran a hand through his dark locks. "Would you sit? Faramir, careful of his arm, leaned across the narrow bed and pushed stray papers and a wool blanket from off a little stool.

She hesitated. They had had little time to speak out in the garden and he seemed quite unconcerned to be seen half-dressed in front of anyone, much less a woman. Yet there was an obvious shadow of fatigue in his features. "I should go.."

"Please. I need help, "

"Pray, with what?"

A tiny corner of the wicked grin she had seen the day before crept back. He gestured to a second steaming pot. "The latest form of hot water torture. Guaranteed to calm a rampaging Mumak."

"Your's aunt's?" She grimaced, lifting its chased metal lid. It smelled like a linen press.

"Valar no, " he frowned, pulling his knees up. "Varan's. Nothing serious you understand. Lavender and camomile I think." He laid his head slowly back against the headboard, looking toward the ceiling and closely his eyes wearily. Although he smiled, making a valiant attempt at courtesy, she could tell he was in pain.

She had a sudden longing to smooth the crease between his brows. "You are unwell.."

The light grey eyes flew open. "No please. I should explain."

"You needn't explain anything on my account."
"No but I wish to.." He coughed, voice a little hoarse from playing and quickly she poured a cup, passed him the tea and poured another for herself. It felt as if to be polite was encouraging.

He blew on the steaming brew and took a sip. "I have for these last nights... since..." (he needn’t say the word, they both knew the day that changed everything) "slept drugged. At first, it was all too much, Varan judged it beneficial, needful for healing, but as the days have worn on I cannot stay so. Not and be ready to fight at need for it dulls the senses. He has begun to reduce the dose. One’s body craves it initially and so you do not sleep well without it. I am afraid, lying sleepless for hours under Ithil's light it opened up...other doors I had thought closed."

"Doors?" Anborn had mentioned something of a gift?

He sighed. "There were many things that the Faithful brought from the fall of Numenor Êowyn. Each of the seven faithful houses were given a gift, along with the white star the conveyed Aman's blessing on their line. It was, is, an ability, passed down, father or mother to son or daughter, not always truly in these latter days, but like my mother and uncle and grandfather I sometimes see."

His voice had dropped low, as if afraid to give strength to the fell things in his mind's eye or let them swirl, unchecked in the dark shadows that plagued a half-empty soul.

She knew, for she had felt them too. Each time the Dwimmerlaik's mocking sneer disturbed her waking mind.

"A Vision? From Lórien?" He nodded. Did he then wish to speak of it or keep it locked away?

She was unsure but some sense that, like a wound, it should be purged made her ask. "What did you see?"

With her heart in her mouth she watched his eye turn inward, and with it, a grim set deepen on his face. "Smoke..black as tar and thick with dust as sharp as shards of glass. Choked with a rain of hot, glowing cinders, acid and foul as any breath on Middle-Earth. Frodo is lying there, his head bleeding, cradled by a black tattered cloth but covered by his own grey cloak, eyes closed. All around him is a wide grey plain, pocked with great holes and jagged, fractured blocks of black and ochre rock. It is as if some giant had thrown whole mountainsides for play." He shuddered but went on. "The air shakes as if concussed, booming and hissing like a monstrous firework and in the distance a tongue of orange glowing fire snakes down a deeper, blacker slope."

Bleak, troubled eyes raised and caught her own. "I do not know if he is dead, but I know this: It is true. The vision will not leave my sight. My head throbs with the pain of the sound and noise, I feel like I too must dodge those volleys." He groaned and dug the heels of his hands into his streaming eyes. "Forgive me, but all I can think is that I should have followed them, given them greater help but I could not...what little that I did was heresy.. It is maddening. Is this ill and our last hope is gone or well and he draws near as we should have hoped?"

Èowyn hardly dared to breathe. From what little Èomer had said there was precious little hope at all. She reached out and his brushed the back of his hand with her thumb, grounding him with nothing so simple as her touch.

"Yet we must be ready. What do you think will come?"

Faramir shook himself, blinking the hateful images away. "I have talked a little to Lord Hurin about the defense of the City. There are passages should the need arise, hidden deep in the Mountain's base. I and a few others know." He sighed and squared his sagging shoulders. "Do not mistake me lady. I do not Fear...not for myself, not bodily. I fear for our people.. For those whose life and kin
have been ripped away, and could yet be swept away again. For what has been wrought in the Kingdom and may yet be lost."

"I do not fear." Yet even as Éowyn said the words she realized she was putting on a mask. She did fear. Very much. Uncertainty. Malice. Never knowing whether she would turn a corner and he would be there. Slavering with greed.

Faramir looked sadly at her defiant face, and the shadows thrown by guttering torches the crowded close. "I do. The bravest warrior struggles when the battle turns on some unseen thread. These visions are a dream I cannot catch, hold tight in a net to see what I have caught. I feel guilt, that somehow I have failed when the world spins on, away from our control. It is ever thus. I fear that it will always snatch what we love away."

"We have both learned that lesson to our cost." The bitter words were out before Éowyn could stop herself. "I am sorry," she apologized, looking away, unable to quite meet the unhappiness in his eyes. Outside the window, to westward down the valley the mists were lifting. "You are grieving and sorrowed too. I should have not spoken so."

"No, you are entitled." His hand fell to clasp something at his throat.

She could not see at first what it was but then he let it go, wincing and reaching to settle his left arm back in the sling. A large moonstone set in a heavy silver ring hung on a chain about his neck. Her heart clenched. She recognized it - twin to the one Boromir wore about his neck. It was all he had of those he lost; the Steward's rod was broken, as was his ring. She knew that memories of his brother and father were crowding close. What could she say? An odd cool silence hovered about them all, a mist like the one that morn, the dictate that no one should speak too much about his father. She was afraid to disturb its weight, for fear ice would form in his veins.

Faramir scrubbed tiredly at his eyes. "Forgive me, I am melancholy. I feel that in losing Father I have lost them all again, Boromir and mother both. It is as if I walk with an arm gone that no one sees. Ragged and bleeding, like a casualty still on the battlefield."

He shook himself and looked up aghast. "Valar. Éowyn that was uncalled for. A brutal image and I should have kept it to myself..."

She demurred. "I am a Shieldmaiden. It does not frighten me. And I know that ache. I too have lost nearly all of them. My mother, my father, a cousin dear as brother. At least my Uncle-King can now hold his head high in the Halls. I will bide until I, too, may ride and honour can be done."

"Can be done...?" He echoed her words, a stark comprehension dawning on his face. Béma, she had said more than she should and he was far too swift to not realize what it meant. "You cannot now still hope to walk the Road?!!"

She faced him steadily as she could, the thundering din of the Pelennor sounding in her ears. "Honour in a brave and glorious death is the best I can hope for now."

Faramir flinched as if he had been struck. "But surely there is honour in more than sacrifice!" he exclaimed. His sword hand, callused but still warm from the steaming cup, reached out and folded tenderly about her own chilled and trembling fingers. "Éowyn. I do not love the sword or bow yet I have fought with my body and all my being all my life to defend this land. Had I a choice I would have found deeds of greatness with some other tool."

"Then I envy you my lord, for I would have taken your fate and gladly."
He laughed bitterly. "To be a second son. A pawn to be moved where best judged by another?"

"Is that not what I have been?"

She saw the arrow hit its mark. "So have we both," he admitted sadly, bending his head and shaking it back and forth, before looking up again.

His light grey eyes pierced like a candle in the dim.

"What still sorrows you Éowyn?"

She swallowed. How could she explain? "I waited, patiently, on weary feet, doing my duty, day after day, as the men set out to find honour where they could. And when I would, by my own arm and action, look to help, to carve out my own shred of honour, I am denied and told wait some more." By the very man who threw it back in my face and told me to accept gratefully and with more patience.

Faramir's dark brows drew together. "The waiting you and I must endure together. But is there no honour to be had another way? Is the only renown of worth to be gained with a sword? Your people do not sing songs only of slaying."

"They tell no tales of goodwives sitting patiently at their looms!" she cried, incredulous.

His mouth twisted, bleakly. "That is true. And neither do we in Gondor sing songs of failed retreats."

He rubbed a thumb, worriedly across his forehead. "My aunt Leylin oft said that no songs are sung of women because they are the ones too busy doing to compose. Still I say to you there must be honour in other deeds else the line of Stewards be considered ill-favoured indeed. My forefathers have done another's job for thousands of years. Holding a lower, lesser seat for the one who was to come. Only my brother came to feel it was a dishonour."

"To do brave deeds is what calls Tilion from the halls," Eowyn insisted. Tilion, Béma's huntsman, who rode at his right hand. It was the greatest honour a warrior could receive: to be set upon the road to Mandos' halls by the Shining One.

Faramir shook his dark head, gripped tighter at her hand. It hurt but she would not pull away. "The bravest soul I know has taken, willing and unflinchingly, a burden of unimaginable weight. He holds a sword only for defense."

Theodred, speaking of their father's crippled brother, had once said something similar. Eorthold, twisted, misshapen, had quietly and without complaint endured a painful sickness for sixty years. She shifted uncomfortably, the chair was hard and beside her a burning coal collapsed, hissing in its iron cage. The scent of old wool began to overtake the healing herbs.

"What of Helm Hammerhand?" he asked.

"What of him?" she challenged. "There are many odes to his name. He was one of our bravest, most valiant leaders."

"That he was," agreed Faramir. "But Helm did not win a noble victory. He was defeated at the Crossings, withdrew to the Hornburg to stand a siege, succored his people through a long and brutal winter."

Éowyn bristled. That he, a wealh, a Gondorian, should give her, a daughter of Eorl, a lesson in her own history. The cheek! "I know that well!"
"I am certain of it," he went on, mildly. "His son Haleth was slain before the Golden Hall and his other son Hama perished in a blizzard. Grief-stricken, only after bitter starving months did he abandon the fort, battering the earth with his bare hands to forage and die, frozen in the unforgiving snows. Do you really pity him? He had no glorious death in battle yet your most famous fortress is honoured with his name."

Éowyn, blinked, surprised that he knew so much of her own people's lore. What was his point? Helm died and feasted gloriously in the Halls. "Of course I do not pity him! He died and kept his honour."

"But not in battle, not at the point of a Dunlending's wicked blade," he insisted. "Helm is remembered for his sacrifice to keep the people fed." After a longer pause he let go one hand and rolled his stiffened shoulder. "Lady, it is your choice, but I should grieve if you give up the gift of life you have if it is only honour that you seek."

He tilted his head, frowning thoughtfully. "Or is there something more?"

Béma take the man! Could he see into her very soul? She yanked her hand away and stood, glaring at him, chest heaving with emotion and knocking the little stool against the rug.

Faramir, face pained, seeing the fury on her brow, rose from the bed and spread his hands. "Forgive me. I have presumed too much. Tulkas take my running tongue. I meant to help…..."

"No….. I." But her words trailed off abruptly. Could she deny it? Was he wrong? It was what she wished to say but she knew that he was not. That would be a lie. What he said was truth and for the second time that day Éowyn found she had no answer.

Embarrassment warred with a sense of umbrage. "I should go."

Faramir crossed the space and reached courteously for the door handle. The crease of worry between his eyes had deepened; it made his thin tired face look old. Too old. We have all seen and fought too much.

"I am sorry. May I see you again tomorrow?" he asked plaintively.

Éowyn's heart clenched. How had the afternoon gone so far off tack? This man, who had lost everything, was trying to comfort her when she had thought to comfort him.

Deliberately she let her anger hiss out in a long steadying breath, rearranged her frown into the barest smile. What would it hurt to try to mend the breach? "Of course. Will you bring your feadan?"

"If you wish it."

"I do. Good night."

"Good night." He gave a half-bow, hand to breast and watched as she walked the few steps to her own door.

She let herself through, kicked off her slippers and dropped to the soft mattress with a groan. Kira had kindly left on folded blanket across the foot. She drew it over herself, wrapped up to keep out the sound of rain and the hounding of her unsettled thoughts.

It didn't work. Her mind came back, again and again, to the Deeping Wall, a causeway and a few thousand souls who had shivered in a long winter's dark.
Sometimes the bravest thing one could do was to live fight another day. Faramir had not said in those words but that was the gist of what he meant. She groaned and shifted the feather pillow, willing it to lie softer under her now aching head.

Is there something more? His question had been maddeningly perspicacious. Honour. Renown. Choice. All three were what she wanted. But only two seemed to be in reach.

The afternoon's fading light cast slanted shadows on the floor. She tossed and turned. Frustration chased puzzlement, and then, just as her drooping eyelids grew more burdensome than she could hold, another question dawned.

Why did he care? Why should this man argue so very hard to keep her from harm's way?

Chapter End Notes

Once again grateful thanks to my chorus this month at the Garden of Ithilien: Annafan, Thanwen and Wheelrider. Your insight and encouragement keep this sprawl true to itself and make it so much better
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

With a heartfelt sigh Faramir folded the small piece of parchment nestled against his sling and tucked it back into the pocket of his tunic. Already the square was a little ragged. Too much opening and closing, and one unsteady cup of kahva, had marred the white, but he could not bring himself to care. The single word 'yes' was still visible.

Almost he had not had the courage to slip the note below Éowyn's shuttered door. "One does not give up because the task is hard." So said a wizard once, a blue light floating in a dim archive room, inky shadows playing across his deep lined face. No, one does not give up but necessity does not make it any easier to admit how wide of the mark his awkward, if well-intentioned, words had fallen. The sight of her beautiful face, distraught, even angry, had chilled him utterly; so much that he had penned the apology and the invitation mere moments after her last footfall sounded in the hall.

He had had to force himself to not set off too early for the front gate.

Éowyn was new and strange, and yet familiar in a way he could not explain. So unexpected, but after a few short days in her company he had lived, laughed, shared more than in all these months of strife. She had come to mean so much, so quickly, it was quite startling.

As a warrior he thought he understood this. When the world darkened and death seemed like a certainty there was no time to hesitate. It became survival. The fall of a blade. The sharp snap of a trodden twig. The sighting of a tense drawn bow. All decisions taken in an instant; the world narrowed entirely to what had to be.

The world might collapse, Gondor might stand on the brink of ruin, but he, hemmed in by slow-paced, measured days, had lost his careful, measured heart.

Warrior or no, it was utterly unlike his normal self.

Of course there had been a few brief, aborted relationships. Young widows who wanted nothing more than companionship in the soft firelight. Brief affairs that did not survive his need to be gone for months. Though they had hurt, fleetingly, at each demise, he had never been consumed with the need to see them once again. Never spent every waking moment anticipating their next conversation. The newfound emotion made him marvel at Annwyn—how she and Madril had borne with grace the separations in their life that kept the other Rangers unattached- Anborn not for the lack of trying; busy Renil and Mablung folded into the arms of large and loving families; Damrod loudly sworn off the fairer sex, although Faramir rather suspected the older man's heart had been broken badly once, for all he'd claimed it was a lump of coal.

This was a heady feeling. He had to see her more…and above all else t see the bleak hopelessness, the frost in her blue-grey gaze erased.

It was this latter need that brought him to the errand that began their day, hovering near a worn carved bench beside the arched stone vines of the Houses' central gate and aching in a new and different way. The sun had yet to piece too far into the higher circles. There were few about, save the two Tower Guards standing, correct and erect beside Houses' entrance. Excited, beyond grateful to have this chance, he held his cloak and whistled (a tune, not a warning signal) to release a little
tension. What if she did not appreciate the surprise? What if she was still angered by his words?

"Am I suitable?"

Faramir whirled around at the hail and felt his ability to articulate vanish in face of a new sight. Éowyn stood on the dusty flagstones, an image of deep blue and white, crowned by gold, showing off her handiwork. Her long glossy locks were braided and pinned up, exposing the elegant lines of her long neck.

The sight did something untoward to his normally artful tongue.

"For?" he croaked out at last.

"Escape." Éowyn frowned, lifted the mantle's hem and pointed one foot forward. "You mentioned escape. I have no spurs but I have my stoutest slippers."

Valar be thanked. Until that moment he had not been entirely convinced of her forgiveness. He shook himself to loosen a fall of words. "You are perfect."

She smiled and he took his chance before his courage failed. "Éowyn…"

"No," The gold head shook and briskly a pair of stained riding gloves were pulled on. They looked borrowed and a little tight. "Yesterday was yesterday. A foul day and quite unlike this morning's sun…" She strode forward and looked pointedly out the gate. Tell me, Captain, here do we go...? Are we on the lam or have you cajoled the Master by some magic trick?"

"Neither," he replied, delighted by the hint of amusement and impatience in her eyes. Well then. Sometimes it was best to not look back. "We are both restless and need other paths to walk. I simply appealed to Varan's better sense. He has judiciously recognized that a little freedom will help speed our recovery."

"Then shall we?" Éowyn raised one elegant brow and gathered up her skirts.

"In a moment…" he explained. "It is a surprise. But not too far." he added, hastily/ It had not be, for neither of them were quite in shape to climb all up and down the city's steeper streets. Faramir worked to hide his grin. The lady was practically dancing with impatience. It was going to make the surprise even sweeter still.

"But we are going out?"

"We are."

"Where?"

"Not far." This time he shrugged, feigning a patience he did not feel and with effort dragged his gaze from her prettily flushed cheek back toward the Houses. Before too long a breathless young Bergil pelted up.

"Sorry my Lord, but Princess Lothiriel insisted you have these." The boy held out his own green leather gauntlets. "Said you must not catch a chill."

Faramir silently ground his teeth. Being treated like an invalid was infuriating. But if it was the price of adventure he would gladly spend the coin.

Éowyn tilted her head as he obliging pulled them on. "Our accomplice?"
"Our guard... Varan's one demand in allowing the change of scene..."

"How trusting of him," was the faintly acid reply. "But where?"

"You shall see." Oh ho, the lady's impatience was getting worse. Her pointed toe was vibrating like a harpstring in the wind. It was time to move. Faramir nodded to the lad. "Bergil please run ahead and tell Cahil we are on our way."

"Of course my Lord." The lad bowed, pushed wide the heavy door and vanished into the slanted sunlight of the street. Faramir pulled up his green hood and gestured for the lady to go first. With alacrity Éowyn settled her own fur-lined hood and swept on through.

They walked east, back toward the Citadel's winding stair, dodging the few others roaming the sixth circle's thoroughfare: a small troop in black and silver, a weary messenger leading an equally weary horse. They were not recognized. His own cloak afforded some anonymity, and although more than one glance doubled back to the striking blue clad figure at his side, he doubted there was anyone left in the City to know Finduilas' winter mantle. Forty years was a long time ago.

The door he sought was not far along. Soon enough he spied the narrow, pale oak plank and the spare, dark robes of Gondor's Chamberlain. Cahil stood waiting solemnly, well aware of how easy the alcove was to miss if one did not know where to look.

"My Lord," the man intoned when they drew up beside. Cahil, who would know the young master's walk anywhere, bowed correctly, slowed only a little by age-stiffened joints.

Faramir drew back his hood. "Cahil. It is blessing to see you." He found himself swallowing around a sudden lump in his throat. It was their first meeting since his father's passing and his own injury. Of all those in the Steward's household it was Cahil who would mourn hardest the master he had served faithfully for so many years. The familiar narrow face was sunken and aged with grief.

Impulsively, the new Steward reached out a steady hand and clasped a shoulder hard.

The servant blinked in surprise, nodding sadly his grey head. To be touched by the Steward, much less in sympathy, was an experience beyond his keen. "And you my Lord," Cahil coughed and surreptitiously wiped a tear away with the corner of his robe. "The Lord Hurin is most conscientious and I have endeavoured to serve him wel but it is....different."

"I have no doubt." Faramir did not. His father's loud and boisterous second cousin was a good soldier and a capable administrator, yet Denethor he was not. Hurin had to see a threat to know it coming. After years of silently anticipating every unspoken need to be boldly told "to not worry" must be jarring in the extreme.

He touched lightly at Éowyn's elbow. "Éowyn, may I introduce, Cahil, son of Cawdir. Chamberlain of the Steward's Palace. Master Cahil...the Lady Éowyn."

Another impossibly correct bow was served. "I am honoured to meet you, great lady."

Éowyn snorted but merely inclined her head, amused by this display of typical Gondorian etiquette. Once the proper pleasantries were exchanged Cahil pulled out a heavy iron key. The fob was worn, the metal smooth where a thumb would grip and a tengwa "F" adorned each side.

With some effort the key was fit into the lock and the mechanism turned. He pushed the door ajar. Its unoiled hinges creaked like an oldster's knees. "Directly you asked my lord, I ascertained Nera had in fact been keeping up the space. All else is assembled per your request. I took the liberty of leaving some refreshments."
"Has Varan agents everywhere?" Éowyn snickered, leaning forward in her excitement to catch a
glimpse past the heavy wood Faramir's eyes danced as he shifted to block the view. The lady most
definitely had a problem with surprises. However did her family keep Mettare gifts well hid?

"Ale or tea?" he asked over her head, ignoring her moue of distaste. They had finished many, many
cups of tea after their daily walks. Something different would be a refreshing change of pace.

"Both, my Lord. And scones. The best to be had from the morning commissary"

"Thank you." Faramir glanced one last time up and down the street. The sun was climbing and
already the shadows cast by the City's eastern prow were shrinking from deep indigo to paler grey.
Much of Minas Tirith would soon be about. He turned to a quiet, steady form, unobtrusively toying
with something in his pocket.

"Bergil, could you please stand guard by the door and see that we are not disturbed?" Faramir was
not taking any chances. Prying eyes were to be avoided on this special mission.

"Yes, sir." The lad stood straighter up, pleased and flushed, but Cahil looked nonplussed.

"There is no need, milord. I have kept safe all the other keys."

"Nevertheless. After you my lady." Without further ado Faramir nodded to Bergil and pushed the
door full wide, waiting politely while Éowyn swept on through.

"What is this place?"

At her wide-eyed exclamation Faramir could not help but beam. Nestled in the centre of a broad and
green oasis of formal planting beds, set to catch all the light, there stood an elegant, curved
glasshouse. Twice the height of a man, it had arched doors and two high spans on either end.
Arabesques of silvery lead sailed between panes cut in exquisite swirls of waves and shore. The
climbing sun scattered little rainbows off the neatly beveled facets and beyond, in one corner of the
garden, mist rose above the placid surface of a pond.

It was beautiful. And a work of art. And quiet as the Houses were surely not.

"My mother's private studio and garden," Faramir replied, proudly. "Our housekeeper has kept it
tended these many years. I thought that you might like to see it."

He led Éowyn forward along the pale gravel path toward the building. Beside the eastern door,
spring birds scattered from the branches of a sprawling lilac bush. Already the tight corollas were
bulging soft heather purple.

"You said you wove..." Faramir placed a hand on the delicate lever and pressed to door handle
down. A dusty scent, comprised of parchment and old wool and time, drifted out.

"Oh..." Éowyn stepped lightly through and turned around, taking in the hushed and airy space.
Ranks of empty bobbins stood arrayed upon a cupboard, shorn of their coloured coats. Racks of
heddles, which once would have been full of braided warp, hung overhead. A large horizontal loom
stood sentinel in a corner, its stool gone but clearly once well-used for its steel pins were worn at the
nub. Over on the far side, set to catch the southern sun, a single part-finished canvas leaned
drunkenly against an easel, while a row of cracked and dessicated paint pots, like withered petals,
marched across a shelf.

Once bright as a high midsummer border, now it felt forlorn.
Éowyn walked forward and ran her fingers reverently across pieces of parchment scattered on a scrubbed work table. "These are beautiful," she breathed.

They were, or so Faramir had always thought. The watercolours were faded with age but still they flowed with life, swaths of yellow and fuchsia and cerulean blue twining together to form graceful swirls. Pomegranetes, sunflowers, Ithil on its rising arc- circular patterns figured prominently. All plays on the mandala symbol that was life to long ago Westernesse.

"She could see a new design in everything." He smiled fondly at the memory. "Sun or rain, she would be here. I remember the smell of fresh cured yarn. And jasmine," he added. "She made her own dyes from the garden plants. Later, when she had not the strength to sit at even the little tapestry frame, she painted, still planning patterns. One of her works adorns the Houses' dining hall."

"I think I remember it." Éowyn spread out a few of the lower sheets. Even through the faded tones, the bold colours echoed, utterly unlike the muted pale designs that graced every arch in the City's stone. Faramir nodded at her curious glance. "She also tried to emulate designs from other halls. Meduseld. Lórien. She hated simple white."

"I had not assumed a Gondorian to prize another's proud designs," Éowyn murmured, delighted to find a model for a woven edge—all stallions and running knots.

Faramir's mouth quirked as he bent over his sling to look at a hint of gold upon a saddle. "She was not typical, no." In point of fact, Dol Amroth's youngest princess had defied convention at every turn. He liked to think it was her artist's eye that had allowed her to see differently. In her designs and in her choice of husband.

"Come, let me show you round."

For a pleasant half-candlemark they wandered amidst the neat square-laid paths, taking in another view of the river away off in the climbing sun and the variety of already-blooming plants. This would not be a pale space like the Houses—come Lothron it would be alive with colour. By a grape-covered arbor they paused. Cahil's tray of treats was welcome, and when at last Éowyn had pronounced the ale acceptably wet and the scones entirely satisfactory, she touched his hand in thanks.

"This is lovely. And I am most grateful to have somewhere else to walk. I made it four times around the far loop yestereve. If I see that droopy poppy again I may have to kick it down."

Faramir nodded in agreement, working hard to keep a smirk from off his face. Of course she would assume this was simply yet another garden to take walks in. Anticipation beat like a message drum within his chest, but he would not spoil the surprise.

"Did you bring your feadan?"

"No." He set down his now empty flagon and brushed a few stray crumbs from off his lap, laying the simple linen cloth back across the pastry basket. "Before we leave there is another sight that I must show you."

"There is?" Éowyn arose, alight with curiosity again and he led the way, striding purposefully but slowly along the outer square, pausing every now and again to move aside some heavier fall of green. Pointedly he refused to acknowledge his guest's puzzled frown and repeated entreaties for enlightenment.

On impulse, hoping to distract, he plucked a stray primose and offered it silently across.
Two spots of pale colour stained Éowyn's cheeks. "Should you be doing that?"

He shrugged a little sheepishly. "It is mine now." He watched her accept the bloom and sniffed at the golden petals. They were brighter than her hair but not so soft. Once again he found the need to speak fire his tongue before his careful sense.

"It is lovely but does not compare to you…"

"Hardly," she scoffed but still the faint blush deepened. "I am surprised that you, a scion of Numenor, should think so. Compared to the beauties of Gondor my hair is brass and my skin is far from milk."

"My brother would have said I have always loved the rare and the unusual."

"Faramir!"

Valar help him, she had actually laughed.

Wildly for a moment he wondered if the wound in his heart had marred his tongue the way the one in his shoulder marred with aim. Again he was stupidly blurt out the truth. Boromir had long teased him for his love of the exotic. In Minas Tirith women might wash their skin in lemon water to chase away the sun-kissed colour of skin darkened by a day's ride, but not Éowyn. Next to her, raven-hair and cream-white skin seemed insipid. Devoid of life. Mixed with her fiery and frank disposition, well… it seemed that he was quite lost.

To hide his discomfiture he hustled on ahead. "Bear with me a minute while I find the spot."

"What spot?"

Just as the lady started to sound more frustrated than perplexed, with relief he caught the sheen of blue steel below a sprawling mass of sumac.

"Aha!"

One sweep of his good arm and the prize lay exposed in all its forbidden glory: two practise swords and a light riding bow glinted against the dirt.

He looked up and cocked a dark arching brow. Every prick of cringe-worthy verbal miscue was worth it to see the look of shock and admiration upon Éowyn's lovely face.

"You sneaked these in?" Éowyn asked, incredulous, nearly dumbstruck at the sight. Weapons were expressly forbidden in the Houses. She had resigned herself to waiting days, weeks, under her admittedly gentle confinement until she could properly train again, Béma's horn, the relief of not waiting so very long almost made her nearly faint.

She watched Faramir's wry half-quirk broaden to a full on grin. "I did. Or rather I had them sneaked in. You did say you wished to train. To get your sword arm back."

She had. Éowyn took in the swords and two sets of padded armor, and essayed a small smile of her own, wondering again if she had underestimated Gondor's quiet, thoughtful Captain. Misjudged thoughtful patience for overcaution

A cautious man did not find creative ways around inconvenient orders. Especially when they were supposed to be convalescing.
"However did you manage it?" she asked, shaking her head at the daring.

Light grey eyes glinted with amusement. "Cahil is anxious to be service and Private Eldrin has been released on his own recognizance. And I am his commanding officer. The men do have a tendency to do things when I ask."

They did. Even when he was asking them to complete a hopeless quest.

She paused so long not knowing how to reply that his features softened, conspiracy giving over to concern. "It matters greatly to you Lady to have the means to defend yourself. Even here."

An unfamiliar rush of emotion made her voice low and almost rough. "It does." For a second time in as many days he had understood her well without need of words. Guessed or gleaned her heart. She tilted her head and eyed her companion quizzically. Was he such a good judge of men as to gauge so much from just their visage? Or did he somehow instinctively understand what made her comfortable? It felt strange and overwhelming yet also oddly comforting.

She might longer watch for stray hands in the corridor that did not mean allies were unimportant. Especially on unfamiliar ground. "You are a most surprising man, Faramir of Gondor."

"Let us say.. practical," He bent down to pick up one of the blades with his right hand. It was not full size, a sparring blade for a youth. Neither of them had full strength yet and therefore a practical and considerate choice. "We both wish to be ready come what way."

Come what may. She wondered for a moment if he had had other dreams. Seen something of Aragorn's feint to come. Perhaps.. but if so he was not minded to speak them in the open air and on this morn at least the darker shadows that had plagued him seemed lifted with the sun.

Pleased by both the neat solution to a change of view and a secret sparring space, Éowyn accepted the sword as he passed it carefully by the hilt. The grip was wound in black-dyed leather, worn and stained from use. The scribed image of a tree and stars ran across both sides of the pommel. It was rather elaborate for a practice piece. Was it his, forged just for the Steward's son? She opened her mouth to ask but then just as quickly shut it again.

There were two blades…and the Steward had had two sons.

An experimental half swing established the weapon had exquisite balance but yet a bit too heavy for her weakened hand. She let it droop, point down, into the gravel, frowning thoughtfully. "Varan will not like it."

Faramir's mouth quirked again into a faintly teasing smile. "Tell me it does not give you a small sense of satisfaction to confound him? I should have thought that a point in its favour."

She chuckled inwardly at the thought. Oh she just imagine the Master's rather lugubrious face frowning with displeasure. A measure of independence and almost, as it were, right under his long nose. "More than is seemly.." she allowed.

Faramir grinned back and bent pick up the second blade. He struck an active stance, wincing as he held his bound arm farther outward for better balance. "Varan need not know. He believes us merely changing the scenery for our walk."

A half-hearted attack succeeded in shearing the sumac of a dried spent flowerhead. He grimaced, lifting the blade again and pushing forward with a quicker feint. Another flower fell, as did a muffled oath. He rolled his stiffened left shoulder cautiously. Both of them were unaccustomed to much more than an easy stroll. "Of course, if he asks I shall have to answer truthfully."
Éowyn pursed her lips, watching the performance. His blade had been far from steady. Either the right was not his normal hand or he was weaker than he let on. Mayhap both.

She pointed back to the garden door. "Hence the effort to keep down the number of confidants?"

"Exactly," Faramir nodded for emphasis. "But I trust to your common sense. It will do neither of us good to overtax."

No, but she had been beyond frustrated with the slow pace of therapy under the Master's care. So far Éowyn had only been allowed a small iron grip to hold. Improve her proprioception first, Varan had said. She snorted derisely. It was as if he believed her ready to relapse at any point. *Ridiculous.*

Hesitantly she raised the blade again and took another swing, careful this time to keep it to just a quarter arc. She could control it both on the ascent and descent. Just.

"I have been working to regain my strength," she announced, wondering whom she was trying to convince.

"Then that is well. You shall find it easier practising a little more each day." Faramir looked relieved as he lowered his own blade and glanced up to catch the angle of the climbing sun. "We should cache these in the glasshouse for when there is more free time. My aunt wished to see me by mid-morn."

"More tonic?"

Faramir's scowl could have dug a hole into the ground. *Valar no. She has threatened to place me in the market scales if I do not gain more weight. I believe she intends to monitor the increase.* He leaned forward and retrieved a light chain shirt. It was not so bright as mithril steel, yet obviously finely wrought. "It comes of having taken a rather studious approach to both garden and healing lore down through the years. She loves to measure things."

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Together they gathered as much of the small horde as their two good arms could hold and shifted all into the little studio. It took two trips. A remnant of paint-splattered canvas was pressed into service as disguise and by the time Éowyn felt the weight of a person's gaze upon her back Faramir was turning the final latch.

Behind them a nervous triple whistle sounded softly.

Faramir stiffened but did not glance back. He took his time, setting the key back into a pocket of his tunic, resettling his cloak about his sling. When he finally turned to their visitor, his hand was rubbing thoughtfully back and forth across his jaw.

Bergil stood, cloak askew and dragging in in the dirt, shifting from one foot to foot another, obviously anxious to impart his news but also obviously unhappy to intrude.

"Lad," Faramir observed drily into the sudden quiet, "if that was meant to be 'sentry here' the two second notes lacked in pitch." Only the faintest twitch of his mouth betrayed the effort it took to keep from smiling broadly.

The boy's shoulders sagged. "Oh sorry sir, I did not want to shout."

Faramir's mouth twitched again. Éowyn wondered if he was not minded of some private joke. "It is nothing we can't remedy. With a little training."
The young face snapped up and suffused with happiness. "Really?"

"Absolutely," Faramir assured. "Come to me after supper and I will instruct you on the basic calls. You have made your oath. I see no reason why not."

"My lord!" After a moment's dazed silence he remembered his errand. "Master Cahil sends word that Princess Ivriniel is looking for you."

"Ah. I expected so. Would you go ahead and let her know that we are coming?"

"Sir." With a quick pull of his leather cap and another excited 'thank you' Bergil hurried off.

Watching his retreating back Êowyn could not resist. "What did he actually call?"

"Kine"

"Kine?" She bit her lip. "As in the ox?"

Faramir nodded slowly. "It is also the name of the guard's favourite pub. I had to stop and think a moment if he really mean it."

They were both still giggling at the image of boy with an illicit pint when they reached the garden's narrow door. The Chamberlain stood patiently waiting once again.

"I shall tidy up milord?"

"Please, Cahil. And my thanks. Everything was perfect."

The man flushed happily at the praise. He fumbled in his robes before producing another key. This one was fobbed more simply in turned dark oak.

"You wished a second key my Lord," Cahil observed. "The Steward's..." He paused, turning a deeper, more unbecoming red. "Your father's, " he began again, "is here. I have, of course, a spare."

"Thank you," replied Faramir gravely. As he turned to pass the extra key into Êowyn's hand, she caught the barest flicker of sadness in his darkened gaze before it vanished like a minnow darting in a sudden current. What would it be like for her to be home in Edoras with so many reminders of Theoden around? Hard, she imagined, like dodging obstacles in a field blindfolded and never knowing when another might rear up.

She gripped the key, pressed her fingers lightly against his longer ones and felt Faramir jolt at sudden the touch. Had she transgressed? Gone beyond the bounds of Gondor's rather staid propriety? Êowyn hastily dropped her hand and looked up to find his expression unreadable. It was not anger or affront. Looking closely, she could see something moved in the still churning depths but could not glean quite what.

Faramir awkwardly cleared his throat and turned back to the Chamberlain. "Cahil I wish Lady Êowyn to have the run of this space. She may well come on her own at times."

"Of course."

Êowyn crossed the threshold into the now much more busy street. Guards in the formal livery of the Citadel thronged the thoroughfare, making their way up to the Seventh Gate. A row of smaller
wains, such as were used to move heavy cargo between the circles, clattered toward the next lower gate, pulled by a dozen, dusty, tired men. A porter with a load of heavy jars looked back and apologized when he brushed roughly by. She held her splinted arm a little closer. It was remarkably full for a city evacuated and under siege. She had not thought they might be jostled. Or recognized.

Faramir had forgotten to draw his hood.

"Make way for the Lord Steward!"

The cry rang loudly from one soul who perhaps remembered a more formal overlord. Instantly, every man, liveried or not, all those left to hold Minas Tirith’s safety, stood to hasty and obedient attention, saluted and placed hands to breast. And exactly because a glimpse of the Steward’s robes and ring had become so rare a sight those days, the throng parted like a stream about a jutting rock.

Faramir blanched white as the pennants on the Tower.

People, of course, were curious. Every gaze was solicitous, many sympathetic. In another time and space the noble man in a simple Ranger cloak, walking with fingers tightly clenched, might have stopped and shaken the people’s hands, accepted wishes or condolences, offered encouragement of his own. Then, a bare month after his brother fell and six since he had learned of his father’s death, the regard was more than just disconcerting—it was upsetting. Faramir had not had time to accept a role he never imagined should be his. Éowyn could feel it—how the words and reaction had taken him unawares—it was shock that made him stride stiffly, nodding and returning the salutes, a tic jumping high upon his cheek.

Sudden pity for his plight made Éowyn reach out, grab his free hand and squeeze hard as she dared.

"Lady?" Faramir tore his gaze from the street. Through the thin fabric of her glove Éowyn could feel the slight trembling of his hand.

"You do have an ally on your flank," she murmured.

"I do?" His voice was strained and thick, but the dark pained look had lightened briefly, like storm clouds rising after they have spent their rain.

She nodded. "I find I need all your focus to explain the intricacies of Minas Tirith’s …plumbing," she explained. It was not a brilliant ruse but was the first thing to come to mind. The pavement was not entirely even underfoot and she had just stepped across an iron grate.

"Plumbing?" Faramir, wide-eyed in surprise, searched her face.

"Yes, how does the City handle the Spring rains? I really must know right now…there is no time to look up."

Ahead the carved sigil of the Houses’ gate was visible: two hands cupped, ready to offer aid. Their goal was not too much farther up ahead. In his clear grey gaze comprehension dawned. "Well then…"

Boldly, Éowyn lengthened her stride as much as she dared, lifted a corner of the mantle to focus on avoiding a large loose slab. They hurried along, ignoring the audience, she asking rudimentary, ridiculously un-urgent questions and Faramir answering them with no trace of irony. Slowly, step by step, she felt his tenseness bleed away. Below her glove the trembling had begun to fade but still she did not let go. Somehow the touch was grounding, needful for both of them; the warmth of his body
seeping through the thin kid leather, felt—right, reassuring, but alive in a way she could not describe.

And most assuredly like nothing she had felt before.

They had almost reached the gate when Faramir held her hand taut, frowning and casting a searching look beyond the white spire of the Tower. Engrossed in her part in their little tableau, Éowyn had not noticed that the few silver clouds of the days before had fattened and begun to block the sun, darkened to an angry grey. He, familiar with every nuance of the White Mountains' shifting winds, had felt the storm's sudden shift.

"Lady I think we shall have to run."

The first giant drops splattered on to the cobblestones just as they reached the safety of the sheltered courtyard. Éowyn, winded from the exercise, rushed up under the eaves, stepping aside to make way for Faramir. Between a column and the rapidly drenching stones there just enough room for two. They huddled, a little winded, chests heaving in unison, cloaks dripping, watching as the clouds opened up and rainwater began to pour off the overhang. It rushed along a sloping gutter, forming a swollen stream for several feet before disappearing into a cistern.

As the grey sheets thinned to a steady drizzle Faramir gave a quiet sigh. "Éowyn, you are a marvel."

She raised a startled eyebrow. "Because I am ignorant of waterworks?"

His laugh was low but loud in cloistered space. "Is not our fair City's intimate architecture the focus of every schoolroom in Middle-Earth?"

*Intimate.* The word burned her ears. The wry, dry-as-summer-chaff humour she had noticed in the days before had bubbled up again and made her almost dizzy.

"No." Faramir now stood so very close she could feel the warmth of his breath against her brow, almost count the lines that years of sun had gathered round his eyes. The air smelled of fresh green and muddy stone and *him*. They had not walked far but her pulse was racing, her legs wobbling unsteadily as she tried to set a little distance between their chests.

Unbidden, his right hand reached up, tucked a loose wet strand of her hair back into place. "Why ever not?"

*What was the question?* She could not remember. Éowyn gripped at the column behind her back. In the pit of her stomach a kaleidoscope of butterflies turned a graceless flip.

"I don't know."

It was the truth—the correct reply to whatever the query was. Heart pounding, she stayed very still as Faramir frowned, searched her face for some answer only he could see. He must have found it for he nodded and stepped back a pace, folding his hand across his chest and giving a short careful bow. "My lady. I thank you. That was kindly done."

The spare words were no less heartfelt for their simplicity _It was nothing_, she wanted to reply but really it was not. The sight of him upset had twisted an unnamed something in her chest. Now the warmth of his normal baritone was back. She was relieved.

By some stroke of luck, she managed a halfway composed response. "You are welcome. I am always happy to help a friend." Were they friends? The words had tumbled out but now they surprised. She, who had held herself apart so long, was claiming friendship after not even a sennight of acquaintance?
If he sensed her discomfiture he did deign to let it show. Faramir studied the wetted stones afore. Where before the courtyard had been quite empty, now it was packed with carts, and bales, and sodden, blood-soaked blankets.

He sighed unhappily. "I should escort you to your room but am afraid that I must leave you now. I must go find my Aunt. There has been surely been some news."

*And ill tidings fly faster than a goodwife's tongue.* However much she wished to know, she would surely find out soon enough. "I can manage on my own."

"Of course." The gentle half-smile she was coming to recognize as yearning spreadly slowly along his lips. "But I would rather walk with you."

He would? The revelation set little flames of heat amidst the butterflies.

Faramir took his leave. She watched all the way, almost until his dark green cloak passed under the farthest arch and disappeared amongst the sea of grey clad healers and assistants. The welcome rain that before had seemed fresh and new felt leaden. Bema's horn, what was *wrong* with her?

Before she could quite understand, the young woman who had already done something unusual, twice, that morn, opened her mouth to speak.

"Faramir, wait!"

Whether it was the unique timbre of her voice or some other madness on the sodden wind, he was attuned, *sensitive* to her. Picked up her words from even across the crowded hall.

Faramir swung on his heel, looked up immediately though she had not spoken very loud. "Éowyn?"

"I should like to meet this Ivriniel."

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In the event, Ivriniel of Dol Amroth was not free.

Faramir's guess of trouble had been correct. Two barges had come down Anduin from farther north, laden to bursting with hollowed-eyed, bloodied but silent men.

At the doorway to one open ward he stopped a limping soldier with a private's stripes who bore the green eyes of Lebennin and far too young a face.

"Cair Andros has been assailed again?" he asked, dark brows furrowed in concern. It had to be the fortress isle. What little news had the reached the City told of successes in Anorien, Elfhelm and his men were having an easy time chasing routed Orcs across the fens and fields.

The young man blinked, passed a tired hand across his face and smiled through a row of broken teeth. The mottled red splashed across his cheek had yet to darken to a brooding plum. "Nay, my lord. 'Tis good news for once. These are the hostages we retrieved."

"Hostages?" Faramir paled. Cair Andros had fallen almost ten days before. How much agony could the jubilant filth visit on their prisoners in that time? "It is free?"

"Aye," the private nodded, stood a little straighter in his pride. "Lord Aragorn bid some of us retake the fort." He rubbed his neck as if still surprised at what they had done. "Easy in the end. The creatures may know sommat of storming but they don't know how to hold."
A flush of hopeful colour seeped into the Captain's cheeks. "The tunnels?"

"The same. Old Steward Turgon was a canny one."

"That he was." Faramir clapped a steadying hand upon the soldier's shoulder. "Tulkas bless you man. Go find your rest."

They wended their way through the now bursting wards, Éowyn keeping close, for though she had thought herself somewhat inured to suffering—she had tended injured in Edoras after all—this was quite another scale. She was aghast. While she and Faramir had been ambling around a sunlit garden, blissfully caught in another world, wagons had been lumbering up from the port.

Ones filled with maimed and tortured men.

It was horrifying and quite beyond anything she could have imagined. Ten days was quite sufficient time for Orcs to vent their evil selves upon their prisoners. 'I am a daughter of Eorl.' she whispered to herself for strength, swallowing down the bile that rose. She wanted to avert her eyes but it felt a dishonour to their suffering.

"Éowyn." Faramir drew close, holding her elbow and trying to shield her sight with his larger frame. "I know that you have fought and valiantly. War is terrible and we all know it so. But this is something else again. Truly unspeakable." His bleak gaze was sympathetic. "Do you wish to go?"

She took a deeper breath and mutely shook her head. A few of those lying on the pallets were Rohirrim, men who had served with the Gondorian regiments, looking to help strike the first blows at the Enemy. Their heads were shorn of their golden locks even as their mouths were shorn of their tongues.

Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes. Wordlessly Faramir offered over his own handkerchief. She sniffed and dabbed at the wet before it could streak her face like drops racing down a windowpane. "I can manage."

Never more had the sound of rain upon the roof breaking a quiet hush been so very welcome.

Inside the second ward they found his cousin.

"Lothiriel!" Faramir hailed quietly and she looked up, waving distractedly, apron stained, lines of worry on her pretty face. A large pillow was set upon her hip. As they watched, she bent down and gently propped up a wounded man's bloody bandaged knee, finding a word and brief, gentle smile. He had no lower leg.

When she straightened Faramir drew near and held her hand. "Are you well?" He pressed gentle kiss to her brow below the grey headrail.

She sighed heavily and bit at her lip. "I will be. There is really so little that I can do. I am not versed in surgery. And so few of these men have simple wounds."

"But you are here and that is gift enough," he said. "Do you know where I can find Aunt Ivriniel? Bergil said she sent for me? He was supposed to explain that we were coming"

Lothiriel frowned. "That was nigh a candlemark ago. I am afraid he was waylaid to help offload at the front. Your intelligence is old." She turned to scan the wider room. "I would expect she is by now outside the surgery."

"Where?"
Lothiriel pointed through to a farther corridor.

After Faramir gave the soldier a few quiet words of encouragement and his cousin (to Éowyn's surprise) hugged them both, they departed. Another quarter candlemark saw them in an open space the far end of which was cordoned off. Rows of neat pallets were laid across the floor, tended by the grey-clad healers and assistants. In their standard garb they looked like a flock of peculiarly attentive doves huddled over remnants of spilled grain.

Éowyn's first sight of Dol Amroth's elder princess would stay forever in her mind. Tiny, doll-like, but with a carriage that spoke tellingly of the steel wrapped along her spine, her bright head (for she eschewed the grey in favour of sea blue) hovered over a mercifully unconscious man, barking commands to those around with all the experience of a general on a battlefield; cajoling, ordering, prodding grown men twice her size to do her bidding.

As they watched her tiny fingers stripped away day's worth of rotting bandage from a half-healed, grey-skinned stump. The soldier's forearm was gone. Another part would need to be taken off if it were to heal properly at all.

"Faramir!" They had been spied. Ivriniel straightened up and with a practiced throw, hurled the bloody mass into a waiting wicker basket. It landed with a sickly plop.

"Aunt Rini." A tight muscle working in his jaw was all that showed that even Faramir had to steel himself to that sight.

"Nephew." The princess's deft hands did not cease to move as she worked to rebandage the ugly wound. "I appreciate you coming but am afraid there is no time now. I had meant to cover Varan's morning shift. Let him get a lick of rest. But there is nothing for it now. I will not be free for many hours yet." She glanced up and blinked, as if just noticing he was not alone. "Lady Éowyn?"

Incongruously, Éowyn felt the need to bob a curtsey. "Princess."

"Ivriniel," the woman corrected firmly. With a quick twist of long practice she tied off the length of muslin, gently set the limb back down and nodded to a young assistant hovering beside. "Beru see that the Master knows this soul is amongst the next." She plunged her hands in a waiting bowl and towelled them on a proffered cloth, bright eyes darting to their sodden cloaks. A small pool of wet now graced the floor

Éowyn felt acutely she was in the way. "What can we do?" she implored.

"Do?"

"To help," she explained. "Surely there is something. I have nursed a little in Edoras."

Ivriniel's look of initial skeptical surprise faded with a tired sigh. "You are supposed to be recuperating. And are not to heft anything of any weight. Both of you," she added, pointedly. "That rather limits your usefulness."

Faramir and Eowyn exchanged a guilty glance. Hefting weight was exactly what they wished to do. She was about to explain that a lightened load should be sufficient when the princess set her hands on hips, frowning a nearly empty wicker basket.

"Cortin! Drat the man. Where are my bandages? Cortin!"

Her startling bellow carried easily across the hall. A grey-haired porter waved in acknowledgement and perched a heavy basket upon his brawny shoulder. "Here you are your highness. where should I
"Beside me here." Ivriniel pointed to the next adjacent pallet. No sooner had the new pile of white had been settled down than her delicate features screwed up into a frown. "I can't use these!" Indeed she could not. The cloth appeared to be whole, clean and laundered, but not yet torn into ready strips. "Get the other basket please," she ordered crisply, shoving the offending pile with a tiny foot.

Faramir coughed once. Ivriniel's sharp gaze took in two hopeful expectant faces.

A black eyebrow raised in almost perfect imitation of her nephew.

"Well then. Need drives. Perhaps you can be useful after all." Ivriniel nodded to a farther corner of the hall. "Since you have a single working pair of hands between you I will have you tear all this into bandages. Mind you wash your hands thoroughly first, and keep the fabric off the floor," she admonished. The princess abruptly turned her back and bent to inspect the remains of another soldier's ruined face.

Éowyn glanced sidelong. Faramir looked just as shocked as she.

Well then indeed.

They were dismissed.

~~~000~~~

When both had washed and found the sharp, biting smell of lye soap almost covered the stench of blood and sweat and fear, Faramir and Éowyn made a quick survey of the far corner benches. They would not serve—every flat was far from clean enough for the task and already commandeered by exhausted denizens.

They stood flummoxed for a moment.

Lothiriel once again came to their rescue, halting mid-flight as she breezed past.

"Through there..., " she gestured with an elbow to a side corridor. "The Healer's hall. Este knows none of them will have time to pause."

One handle grasped awkwardly between each of them, the pair retreated to the relative quiet of Houses's staff space. It was a functional, if spartan, room: trestle tables and bench arrayed before a desultorily drawing fire. High windows set into the outer wall bringing in the wan light of the now flat grey day. Several types of tea, forgotten in the rush, steeped upon a low coal brasier while over the hearth a pot of a fragrant soup bubbled quietly. Importantly, it was spotless.

They laid both cloaks to dry across a chair and Éowyn set her end of the basket on top of the nearest tabletop, stripping off her gloves. "How should we do this?" she frowned, lifting up one limp piece of white. It was cotton, quite fine in fact, and not the stuff of bandages Faramir had in his own Ranger kit. It appeared the City was low on many things.

"Standing I think..", he ventured. They each held an end and on his signal pulled hard. There was a most satisfying rip.

Éowyn surveyed the long split in what clearly was a tablecloth. "This works. Faster than shears."

She was surprised. Faramir, who had had experience shredding shirts to staunch wounds after Orcs’ dirty work, took it in his stride. "It does. And makes a remarkably softer binding," he remarked, fingering the soft stuff. Renil would give much to have something that did not abrade a fellow’s skin.
like sandpaper.

Sobered by the morning's sight they worked mostly silently, picking out lengths that sported tiny embroidered stars and dainty flowers, working arm and shoulder muscles in a most unorthodox exercise. Halfway down the pile the pieces they unearthed looked decidedly fancier than the fabled covers of Dol Amroth’s dining hall.

"Why these are petticoats!" Éowyn exclaimed, shaking out a long fall of cloth. Sure enough, yards of white lawn dotted with pale pink rosebuds fell to a gathered waist just above the floor.

Faramir’s mouth quirked as they yanked through the delicate embroidery.. "They are. It has been a feature of late for ladies of the court to wear double petticoats. I daresay they can afford to lose a few. If the kingdom survives we may have single handedly changed its style. No more double petticoats."

"Double petticoats?" He did his best not to laugh at his assistant's incredulous expression. "Why would any sensible woman waste cloth on wearing two?" The practical Shieldmaiden was bewildered. "Surely it is not so cold."

"No. Fashion," he answered with more authority than he felt.

"Fashion!" The sound of tearing cloth was shrill. "What possible benefit could a double petticoat convey?" Éowyn huffed, skeptically. "Your ridiculous sidesaddles are already almost impossible to ride. How can any woman hold her seat in this?"

He shook his head and reached for another, flouncy, frilly piece. "It is a skill. You will have to ask Lothiriel. She is the noted horsewoman of the family. Just as her father is the noted peacock." He wondered if Dol Amroth had adopted the convention yet. Imrahil's sense of style was legendary. Faramir, by contrast, found all the standing waiting to be fitted a horrendous chore—it was beyond him how anyone could put up with all the tugging and fussing more than once or twice a year, especially for elaborate underthings. He must ask Amerith if she had contributed to their present windfall when next he had the chance. Her own closet could have replenished most of the House's stock.

The enjoyable, destructive part of the chore passed quickly. Together they made quick work of shredding the longer lengths and laying them flat upon a clean spare cloth. The table was soon covered. Then came the merely tedious. Winding the long thin strips into bundled bandages. In practice Faramir found this rather harder with one hand. After several tries and a muffled curse they each gave up and agreed to co-operate. Sitting beside each other on the long low bench, Faramir held up his good hand up while Éowyn wound a strip about it, pulling off the finished fat skein and forming a slip not to keep the whole together.

It was to his mind a quite enjoyable solution. It allowed him to watch her work.

Of course Éowyn was beautiful—he had thought so from the first-fair of face and crowned by that glorious hair, but now he what he noticed were her hands. Small but strong. With nimble fingers and pale oval nails. And quite intriguing calluses to match his own. They were mesmerizing—they had felt warm and firm upon his own and now imagined picking up her wrist, turning her palm over to plant the gentlest of kisses on the soft skin of the underside. The daring declaration of a suitor's intent to court. Sitting, they were not so very different in height: she was long of body and he long-legged—he had not noticed this before and now the thought made him quite inordinately pleased. It would be easy to slip an arm about her shoulders, pull her close, brush her lips with his own.....

"Faramir! Pay attention!" His hand was pulled sharply up, the lady’s fair brows set in consternation. The current piece of focus, a lightest blue piece of fine Haradi silk, had slid apart and now lay
dangling in haphazard loops. He steadied his arm and held his palm straight flat, waiting, chagrined, while Êowyn rewound the jumbled strip. It took three tries- the very softness of the fabric made it harder to keep quite tight. She frowned and her pink tongue poked out in concentration. It looked adorable.

Setting the precious parcel aside Êowyn selected a simpler strip of whitework and began the process of winding once again. Shrewdly, this time she gave him something to focus on.

"Your aunt. She is quite formidable. Is she very like your mother?"

"In looks," he explained, shifting to ease ache in his now tired shoulder. "But not in temperament. My aunt is more studious. The love for detail that in Rini is for lore in my mother went to colour. Though both were headstrong." He flushed, sitting straighter up. She was eyeing him quite strangely. Had she picked up the reason for his untoward inattention?

"But Ivriiel never married?"

"No. Her fiance died."

The winding paused, blue-grey eyes darkened in sympathy. "I am sorry."

He shrugged. It was an old sadness long past and reckoned with. Others now crowded close. "In time, she was foster mother to me and all the Dol Amroth brood but nursing came most naturally to her. It is her vocation and her love."

As her sons and art were to mother whatever little time she had, Faramir thought sadly. If Boromir's account were to be believed (and he had no cause to doubt it) she had loved her youngest son deeply, perhaps even a little madly, and their father never understood. He had tightened his grip, trying to pry them apart, taking more of Finduilas for himself but had only loosened his hold on her. It was an uncomfortable thought, his part in their separation. No one yet had explained entirely the why of it.

Another tug of his hand drew him out of his reverie. "Sorry. Was your calling always to be a shieldmaiden?" he asked, the question taking both of them by surprise.

"No one has ever asked me that before." Êowyn tied off another knot before reaching slowly for a palest peach coloured strip. She paused so long he felt the question might have been rude but then she went on. "There were no girl children in the household in Edoras when Eomer and I arrived. We played, my brother and I and my cousin Theodred when he was home: forts, wooden swords, riding. All the things that boy children do. I suppose it was a natural progression. I was good at it. It mattered. It was a skill of which I could be proud and kept me out of doors. Unlike this needlework." she added ruefully. "My stitches were never so very fine. I always wished to be outside. And you?"

She looked quickly up. "Did you plan to be a Captain of a ranging company?"

Faramir shifted awkwardly again. Had he? Planned anything? It had always been more that he would follow in Boromir's footsteps. Do what needed to be done. "It is what I trained for," he explained, "and more to point, what Father wanted. "And what the Steward of Gondor wanted he always got. Or almost always. ‘Be true and remember always what I dreamed.” He had made a choice- been true to her in that-- and with it had failed to do all his duty to his lord.

And could not let himself regret it. Too very much.

The sudden bitterness in his tone caught Êowyn unawares. "Then what would you do if given your choice?"
Her question in turn was fair enough. He looked away, watching tendrils of smoke rise above the fire. What would he? He had not often thought of it. No one save Mithrandir had ever asked and there had been no time in long and long for boyish dreams. They lay in the past, locked away behind need’s iron bars. "Lady I do not know," he admitted, intending to leave it there, but then, because it was a pleasant dream and he found it easy to share with her things he had never shared with another, he dug down and found the startling truth.

"Lay down my sword. Journey and see for my own eyes every kingdom of Middle-Earth. See Rivendell and Lorien, for they were where Boromir went last." His words trailed off. The winding paused. Éowyn had held her breath in sympathy. He sounded melancholy again and that was not what he wanted.

Faramir shook himself and smiled, striving for a lighter note. "I am not sure if it is my grandmother Fana's blood but I find I also wish to build another garden. A piece of Ithilien as it was. Before the Clearance. There are hills in sight of City where I have a piece of land. Emyn Arnen it is called."

If this admission of lack of martial feeling was unwelcome to a proud Shieldmaiden Éowyn did not show it. She reached for another broad ruffled piece, bit her lip, adjusting the cotton to lie flat.

On impulse he asked the same of her. "What have you wished for…?"

Éowyn’s hand stilled upon the cotton, frozen by the sudden tumult of emotion his words unleashed. She swallowed hard and he cursed himself for a fool, daring to presume the same intimacy back. He began to abjectly apologize when the slow winding began again.

"I also have never truly thought, “ she said, haltingly. “I had a vague expectation once that I should settle down but then Uncle became ill. Since Yule it has only to been to ride to war, to no longer face waiting endlessly by the hearth." Her voice dropped low. "Certainty, I suppose. That there would be an end to the mean rudeness of Uncle's existence."

Neither of them added how that wish had in fact tragically come true. Even Lorien could not see the myriad paths ahead.

"And now?" His eyes were dark.

"Certainty still. Honour. Freedom." She shrugged. "If we were to come through these fearful times I suppose that I must wed."

"You do not sound as if you look forward to it."

"No. I do not relish being someone's prize."

Faramir winced at her choice of words but could understand something of what she said. There had never been any question that the Steward’s sons should marry-part of their duty to Gondor and their noble house-but one neither was entirely at peace with. Every ball and feast that passed he and Boromir had been oogled like prize bulls at a fair. Fawned over. Flattered. After Denethor's aborted attempts to find Boromir a wife the frenzy had died down somewhat and they both had been relieved. If Gondor, beyond all hope, survived the coming storm, what then? It would be a new order would it not?

It occurred to him the choice was now entirely his. Hopefully it was the same for her. "As the heroine of the Pelennor surely you will be free to choose as your heart decrees."

Éowyn shook her head. "Free will in love and life, it is a phantasm. We will still be bound. By duty. And circumstance. I moreso, because I will be not just a noblewomen.. I will be a pawn to
diplomacy. The King of Rohan's sister."

He protested. "Surely no brother who loves and knows you would insult you so…treat you as a thing."

"My brother has never been king before. I expect he has not thought what to do."

Her cynicism pricked him to the core. "But surely women are the finer sex! Stronger in themselves. Wise men do well to remember it. Listen carefully and cherish their good counsel. Had I an entire company of Shieldmaidens I can guarantee a good deal less grumbling and ten times the industry."

That drew the ghost of a fleeting smile. "We have a saying in the Riddermark about the strength of women. "A wægn stigrâp of æghwilc stedeheard gâstberend wýscan stearc wîf" At the stigrâp of every strong man stands a strong woman."

"stigrâp?" The word was unfamiliar. "Side? Shoulder?"

"No.. it hangs on a saddle." Éowyn rubbed at her brow, searching futilely for a word that would not come. "Shit, I am tired. I can't remember the Sindarin word for that." Immediately she clapped one small hand across her mouth, blushing scarlet as a robin's breast. The one thing a noblewoman in Gondor did not do was swear. Faramir, delighted by this turn, threw back his head and laughed. Only the more interesting women in his experience, like Amerith, or Lothiriel, were particularly proficient at that skill. Daring. Wit. And beauty. The White Lady was turning out to be quite much more than he had first guessed.

"Actually we say gorn for that…" he offered, quite enjoying that the rosy tinge to her skin ran all the way from her long neck to the tip of her pert nose. It was, assuredly, most impertinent to point that out. And improper to wonder how far down it went…

"Gorn? For stirrup? That's the word I wanted," she crowed.

Faramir laughed at himself. Surely he could have guessed it to be equine-related. Stirrup. Stigrâp. The word was nearly the same in Westron as Rohirric. "No," he corrected, "Gorn is 'shit'."

Éowyn's mouth dropped open. "You swear? I have never yet heard an oath pass your lips!"

"Of course I swear!" he protested indignantly. Why did people always assume he was too prudish to use the words? "I am a soldier. I swear. Just not that often. My father said it displayed a lack of imagination." And Valar knew the habit of pleasing him died hard.

Éowyn looked relieved to not be alone in the transgression, "Swearing is less creative yes but sometimes it is absolutely the more satisfying…."

"I assure you that I do know more." He stood, stretching his stiffened back and coaxing the blood back into his fingers, warming to the subject. "I can give you the westron 'shit' in four other languages. There is the Quenya: muk; the Orcish: bagronk. Albiraz in Haradi; and muzkhgrum in Khuzdul."

Éowyn shook her head. "I knew you were a learned man but…"

"And I can give you 'pintel' in all of them."

"No!" She broke out in a storm of altogether infectious giggles. "This is an surprisingly edifying conversation, Faramir. You are most educated for a soldier."
The giggles amplified but he found he did not mind. Humour was a balm for all the suffering around. That made it easy to be the subject of the joke.

He hastened to explain. "It was part of what helped convince my brother that learning was of some use. That and the anatomy. I was trying to motivate him, I can give you all sorts of other naughty bits."

Éowyn was now snorting with laughter, her beguiling cat-grey eyes, dancing in a most distracting way. "What about Hobbitish? You could ask Merry."

It was his turn to be shocked, incredulous at the thought. "You want me to ask Meriadoc what his pintel is!? You are the one who knows him far more than I!"

They both broke down, doubled over, spluttering and guffawing inelegantly. Somehow the day's tension had to be released and had found an outlet neither could have seen.

Faramir wheezed, pulling the tea-scented air back into his lungs, wondering, as he watched Éowyn pull tumbled wet strands of golden hair out of her mouth, what spells she wove. How could this woman make him want to admit the most unlikely things? To show his thoughts and damn the consequences. Even stranger, how could she so naturally, without condition, accept the ridiculous fruits of his imagination?

The thought that here was another with whom he need not constantly guard his tongue was heady, exhilarating. Like traversing across a high sharp ridge or how he imagined it to be drunk. Thoughtfully, he watched Éowyn master her mirth.

"I have not thanked you yet. For everything. Today. " she said, producing his handkerchief from a pocket of her skirt. It was one embroidered by Leylin. A reminder of a now distant, happy time. He closed her fingers back around the simple square. And kept them there.

"No. It is I who should be thanking you."

"What for?"

Once breached, the damn began to crumble. He had resigned himself to slow, anguished healing. Now, somehow, he could enjoy happiness where he found it. Let the hurt recede, like a chorus, into the background and take the fleeting joys for the gifts they were. All because of her.

"I have felt low these last few days. But not now. Éowyn you are a wonderful influence."

"Because I make you want to swear?" she chuckled. It was another thing they shared. The urge to self-deprecate.

"No."

His eyes shone as his thumb ran a slow circle across the back of her hand. It was trembling. He was utterly certain it was not fear.

"Because you make me want to be myself."

Chapter End Notes
Pintel is of course a part of male anatomy ^_^

The other languages quoted here are mostly cobbled..., some drawn from Hisweloke’s excellent dictionary. The more colourful words are from this helpful reference. http://www.silmarnillionwritersguild.org/reference/references/pf22_words.php. Éowyn’s expression is courtesy the translator at www.oldenglishtranslator.co.uk.

Thank you so much to Annafan, Thanwen and Wheelrider for very helpful comments on this chapter (No she can’t touch his beard quite yet!!). And giant hugs to all the ladies at the Garden, to andartha and weirdlet at tumblr, and to many friends at fanfic and livejournal for helping me get through a rather difficult month. One foot forward at a time.
The second time Éowyn of Rohan found Gondor's Steward flouting Master Varan's rules she was paying an unannounced and most impulsive visit to Finduilas' secret garden.

It was afternoon. The warming sun had reached its zenith and heated the torpid air; settled its heaviness like a blanket-dense and thick and nap-inducing-across an impatient City that fretted, quietly, at the lack of news.

The sense of hopeful waiting of the days before had turned to anxiousness—only Yavanna's creatures (the wrens, resolutely and blithely gathering supplies to nest) seemed minded to sing out loud. Their trill had been broken once abruptly that morn by the peal of a single trumpet from the ruined gate. Soon enough a group of outriders, mounts lathered and blowing foam, had clattered up the twisting streets, bound for the Citadel's main stair. For a moment all hearts had lifted. Perhaps, just perhaps, there was news of victory. But the grizzled veterans had only shaken their heads and mumbled that even were the Host to have flown on winged feet they would only just then have reached the vast black rampart of the Morannon.

In all the hours since, no word had come. Officially or otherwise, and so the Tower Guard, helmets gleaming bright as Anduin's eddies in the sun, had griped their weapons harder and cast their gazes still resolutely east.

Inside the prized east-facing chamber Éowyn found herself equally unsettled; frustrated, oddly jumpy under her skin, but unlike her fellow patients disinclined to spend another single moment lying flat. Sleep had not come, and although for once it had not been her splinted arm that irritated, it was still pointless, futile to waste another moment hoping for her gritty, tired eyes to close.

With a sigh she threw off the coverlet and arose; pulled a warm shawl about her shoulders for insurance, took up her makeshift weapon and hastened out the Houses' central gate. The Sixth Circle's cobblestones were hushed—she had the street quite to herself and in only a few moments she was beside the little garden's oaken door, greeting Bergil softly, pleased to realize she would have company. If the lad stood sentry that meant her fellow patient-prisoner was already at work on his skills.

She turned the key in the lock and strode quietly through, making her way past the shuttered glasshouse, admiring the first of the daffodils to nod along the garden paths. It was an uncommonly lovely day, warmer and brighter than the ones before, with little wind and quite perfect for a little surreptitious practicing.

She had planned her sojourn carefully. Lothiriel had been cajoled into braiding her hair and setting it into a loose messy bun. Dernhelm's trews and shirt and boots had been retrieved from the garderobe. Nothing wayward would be let to interfere in her working with a sword. She was ready, lighter of heart than she had been since Edoras, and most eager to begin.

From around a mass of budding shrub, she heard Faramir before she saw him: a bowstring twanged and there came a muffled 'blast'.

The green fletching of an arrow arced away. It sailed smartly (but far below battle force) across the gravel to cluster with its fellows in a makeshift butt. She rounded the corner and there Faramir stood.
with his back to her, quiver slung low at his hip and rough cotton shirt untucked against the warmth. His left arm was obviously relieved of its sling and fully involved in the mechanics of subterfuge.

She watched him pause in the act of critically examining his result, wincing and rolling his injured shoulder awkwardly. Four arrows stood but a handspan apart on either side of a blue inked circle. Very good. Except perhaps if you were Gondor's most famous archer.

Béma. Even she should have imagined he would wait a day or two before trying the harsh pulling weight of a bow.

Another imprecation was uttered low and Faramir turned, reaching for a shaft, his loose dark hair flashing black as a raven's wing against the sky's hard brilliant blue. Below his eyes dark smudges of fatigue still lingered, his mouth was set thin with pain but a look of fierce determination was anchored firmly between his brows.

It was this face that lead good men out into hopeless battle. Steadfast. Fair. And quite beautiful, noted a certain faithless section of her heart.

Also quite devoid of hair.

"You have no beard!"

"Pardon?!"

Startled by the sudden exclamation, Faramir whirled around, shoulders sagging back in relief when he saw her puzzled face. "Éowyn! It is only you. Thank the Valar. My skills are clearly not what they were. I did not notice you standing there."

Only? Her mouth twitched in amusement. Either his skills were lessening or she was a better soldier than he thought. Or both, although it would be far from gracious to point that out. "I fear we are making a habit of this, my lord. Accosting each other on garden paths."

He ran a hand sheepishly across his jaw and quirked a wry half-smile. "So it would seem. I begin to suspect you have had Mithrandir's tutelage. You bewitched my sentry's tongue—there was no warning call."

Éowyn held up the crude ash staff she held in her sword hand. "Is it so hard to glean my intent? The lad is quite observant. You shaved," she added, pointedly, still not quite recovered from the shock. Why should it seem so strange? Faramir was a Gondorian nobleman. They were known to be quixotically proud of their prow-shaped noses and clean shaven, chiselled jaws.

He glanced across and gave a little shrug. "I thought it time. I wish to feel more like myself and a bit less like I am hiding." A black brow arched. "You do not like it?"

Her earlier unsettledness now found its outlet in a round of satisfying bluntness. "You look like a boy," she said, for he did. Much younger than he had the day before and younger still when he grinned and uttered: "I assure you that I am not."

So Éowyn could see. His loose cotton shirt was remarkably ineffective at hiding the grace of the muscles below his sleeves. He-far from embarrassed at being caught deshabille by a woman—went about the business of slipping back on the sling, laying his bow down against a high back carved seat and settling his left arm again.

Through the sun-lit fabric she could just make out the darker white of the bandage above his stomach. Her mouth ran a little dry. "No Rider would ever forgo his beard. One cannot be a warrior
without it."

"I beg to differ." Faramir's grey eyes sparkled mischievously as he methodically pulled off his shooting glove and tucked it in his belt. "You haven't one and your courage is unmatched…"

_Drat the man!_ For a moment Éowyn sputtered. Once again he was too quick by half. Rebuttal _and_ a compliment. She stood, hands on hips, teeth grinding, pondering a satisfying verbal riposte. One that would place him on defense.

She toed the quiver with her foot. "Is this wise?"

Faramir squinted up into the sun and grinned, "Almost certainly not; but it is all too beautiful a day and the bow feels right underneath my skin."

"Varan will scold."

"And I shall happily ignore him."

Carefully and unhurriedly, Faramir walked toward the target, grasped each arrow in his right hand and pulled them out, refilling the half-empty quiver before returning to his mark. She watched him fumble with the strap that buckled the quiver to his belt.

He looked relieved. Was he more concerned about censure or being stopped? The latter, she supposed; although drawing a bow the very first day of practice was forward even for a man who made his own rules when necessary. A fine sheen of sweat lay upon his brow and darkened the back of his shirt. He was, like her, deconditioned from ten days of idleness.

He alit on the nearby seat, closed his eyes and let the spring warmth course down. She watched the sun play about his face, casting enigmatic little shadows that made his cheekbones hollow out. This face-_relaxed_-was not a face she recognized. When had either of them just enjoyed the world purely for what it was? Had the leisure of sober, timely thought? Months? Years? Too long, certainly, for this idle moment to not be a gift.

One eye cracked open, feeling the intensity of her gaze. "Please…. sit." He slid across the stone, pushed a soft leather satchel aside and gestured for her take a place.

She did. Cahill was otherwise engaged and so, in lieu of a small feast, there was rather simpler snack: fruit and cheese and bread. He plucked a withered apple from the bag and took a hefty bite. Her stomach rumbled, loudly. Faramir offered a wedge of hard gold cheese which she accepted, and then a wineskin to which she shook her head. "This is perfect." she sighed happily, when she could speak again.

He upended the skin, held it expertly with one hand, not letting a drop of dark red wine miss his lips. "To what do you refer? The sheep cheese or the faintly fermented fruit?"

"Both," she chuckled. "All of it. This quiet space and the chance to digest in peace. If I have to smile while Bern or Rygel watch me finish every bite one more day I might snap and cause a diplomatic incident. Marshal Elfhelm would have to apologize. He does not do that well."

Faramir snorted and leaned back against the stone of the seat, closed his eyes and stretched out his long legs, ankles crossed in a picture of easy repose. "My Grandfather Adrahil always said that courage is the form of every virtue at the testing point. That includes patience I dare say."

The urge to thump his shoulder was almost irresistible. If Éomer had so smugly teased her, or worse still Theodred, she would not have pulled the punch. Especially if sheltered from prying eyes. But
here, already likely breaking umpteem Gondorian court rules, she hesitated. What did it mean that she so lightly considered touching him? Had noticed his form?

A little distance was perhaps circumspect.

She rummaged in the open bag, pulled another piece of bread from a tied cotton cloth and poked curiously at a little carven box tucked beside. It was well worn and obviously well travelled for the clasp was battered and the woodwork scuffed. It was quite beautiful, inlaid with golden and redwood swirls in a pattern she could not place.

"Do you wish to write?"

She shook her head but still Faramir sat up. The hand with its curious bow calluses reached past and plucked out the box, sprung the clasp and lifted the lid. Inside was a neat coil of parchment and a silver-topped bottle of writing ink. Éowyn watched, fascinated, as he set the bottle on the stone and pressed a hidden button. The lid flipped up. He inked a quill and began to slowly scribe a few letters on an already half-filled note.

"Do you find it difficult?" she asked. "Are you not cack-handed?" Despite the sling, the fingers of his left hand held the stiff parchment lightly to his lap.

"I am, but I can actually just manage." He bent to his task, tongue out in concentration, grimacing at a imperfectly formed loop. "As a child I used to write and draw almost equally with either hand but over time I lost some agility in the right. I used my left just to be different. It annoyed my father."

There seemed to be many things about his younger son that annoyed Denethor of Gondor. "To whom do you write today?" she asked, raising her hand to tuck up a braid that had begun to loosen out.

He had paused to dip the nib with care. "Merilen. Lieutenant Mablung's sister. She will be anxious without news and I want to put her mind at ease."

Éowyn's heart gave a funny little leap of relief. She had braced herself to hear him say he wrote to yet another widow: thank Bêma this chore was more prosaic. And that it was also not a note to his friend. That woman. The one who may or may not have been 'special' to him. Who had maddeningly interrogated her motives and intentions.

She looked down quickly. The wish to ask more questions about her burned suddenly in her chest but she forced herself sit and study the steady flow of words, Faramir's lettering was not exactly neat, not perfect like a scribe's, but still economical. She wondered how many times in battle he had been injured in the past. Had he had reason to have practiced with his right before?

"Is there someone to whom you wish to write?"

His quiet question broke her reverie. She blinked. Was there? Elfhelm had already sent word of her whereabouts to Dunhere, and so she had no need of messages to Edoras. Éomer of course she would like to reach but a message rider would go so far. She shook her head and narrowed her gaze thoughtfully. His words had the faintest emphasis on 'wish'. Was Faramir being courteous or curious in turn?

"No. Thank you, " she answered. "Those whom I must contact have had news already."

Was it her imagination or did he look pleased? The faint wry smile was back. She glanced sidelong, from the slowly growing letters up to his face. Had he meant something else? Was this his way of delicately probing at her state?
"I...am not affianced. There is no one in particular to whom I wish to write."

Her cheeks flamed. Whatever had possessed her to answer *that*? "And you?" she asked, hastily, before she could lose her nerve. Turnabout was fair play was it not?

His dark brows flew straight up and the quill immediately stilled. "No." he stated slowly. At her look of surprise he cleared his throat and a flush blossomed up his throat. "Well...I did love someone once; or thought I did, But it was impossible....for both our houses, In time I came to realize it was not truly love but infatuation. Youthful adoration for someone whom I found truly admirable."

Éowyn stiffened as if struck. *Yavanna's grace*, had he just described what she felt for Aragorn? A crush? Such as the giggling serving girls had each moon over the newest stable lad? Surely not. She was a woman, not an impressionable young thing, had never been one to fawn over clear blue eyes or a set of well-muscled shoulders. There had been no time for romance--no Rider had caught her eye and none had ever dare speak for her. She was the King's niece, his nurse and none had had the audacity to aim so high.

Save Grima. She shuddered inwardly. That was not love. It was greed and lust-nothing that any noble man should offer to a woman. With Aragorn she had wished to fight by his side. Be an equal, a partner to a man who was valiant and worthy of her regard. For too long all she had felt had been subsumed in caring for her Uncle, worrying for Éomer and Theodred; so much that her own feelings had become an afterthought. Held back behind a dam of icy resolve; high as Halifirien and just as cold.

Until a man with a jewel upon his breast had swept it down./

Her heart gave a sudden, painful thump. The ignominy of rejection pierced.

"Did you grieve the loss?" she asked, when she could keep her voice from wavering.

"For a time. It stung and I felt embarrassed—chagrined- even though I had no reason. I had shown my hand and it was painful to realize I had been blind to reality."

He bent his head and began to tidy up. The long dark hair hid his face and she bit her tongue, giving him space but curious to know for certain of whom he meant. Surely this was the Lady Amerith. How, despite everything, had they had kept as friends? It was confusing. She could not imagine staying such easy company with one to whom she had poured her heart. Especially if she had been spurned.

Unable to sit with the roiling in her gut, Éowyn started up, grasped the makeshift staff and swung it experimentally. One end was ragged. It was a foot too short, but the smooth ash was light and her hand did not ache to wield it. The sudden movement caught Faramir's attention.

"What have you there?"

Éowyn lifted her chin. "I desired a weapon for my room." She had, for there had been no formal discussion of defense with the Houses' patients and she wanted, even needed, to know what to expect. Would they be made to evacuate at the first sign of sails or spears? Would some of the guard block the Houses' door? With no knife she felt beyond vulnerable.

Faramir frowned. "A staff is difficult against a sword..."

"So I have understood. But any item to hand must be serviceable in a woman's house."

He did not comment more but merely stood and nodded; came to her side, ran a finger questioningly
across the broken end. "Where did you purloin yours?"

"Kira's broom. She left it in my room. It broke. Conveniently."

He laughed. "When you hit it over the embrasure?"

"The footboard."

Faramir's dark head shook and he gave a little bow. "My Lady.. Your determination and ingenuity have my utmost admiration."

Éowyn let out a breath she did not realize she had been holding. He had not condescendingly told her not to worry or not to bother her pretty head. Had not tried to change her mind. What a relief to be spoken to as an equal. With respect. Her opinion and feelings taken seriously.

She put down the staff and hefted one of the practice swords. It was light but perfectly weighted. Comfortable under her hand. She lunged half-heartedly toward a willow bush. The sword tip wavered slightly but she kept a steady line.

Catching up the second blade she offered it across. "What ever is to come I wish to be ready for it. Will you?"

"With pleasure." He took the hilt, smiled faintly at the stylized Sindarin "F", twin to the "B" on hers. How often had these two swords sparred in the past? From what she knew of his brother it was unlikely hers had lost a round.

"You do not normally fight with that hand? Perhaps I should take it easy."

Faramir adjusted the sling's knot at his nape, held his left arm more tightly to his chest, frowning at his altered balance. "I am aware I have not quite mastered one arm press ups. But you must also be careful Éowyn. Your grip may yet be somewhat compromised."

She swung again, assessing the veracity of his words. Her shield arm felt heavy but she could still hold it out. Her fingers were no longer numb. Only fatigue would be the enemy. "I think it likely that I will cope/"

"Then let us start. Even if it is only to lead refugees to safety, we will stand together. And be ready come what may."

Faramir nodded once and raised his blade, Something of the intensity in his grey gaze set an awkward thrumming in her blood. It was unsettling. And thrilling. But quite why that should be so she did not understand.

*Stand together. Béma grant that it be so.*

She assumed a fighting crouch.

"Come then Captain. Let me test your mettle."

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As the evening shadows began to lengthen and the first hints of a chiller breeze lifted the Tower's drooping pennants Minas Tirith's Master Healer walked out into the healing garden.

He was concerned. No overly so, for as a man blessed with a naturally ample supply of empathy he well understood the possibility of mistake: a patient like the Captain had much to process. Grieving
and healing all together could certainly cause a man to forget something otherwise of import—to miss an appointment; even one scheduled at the exact same time each eve.

It was more that this particular man did not forget—anything—and, in light of the intelligence Varan had come to have in his possession, might actually be avoiding him.

_Swords._

_And a bow._

Ridiculous.

Even for a too-independent, resourceful and stubborn Ranger.

Varan sighed and clasped his hands behind his back, padded softly in his light duty boots, nodded silently to those patients and staff he knew; closed in on his chosen quarry remarkably quietly for a man of impressive, nigh Numenorean, height. Moving silently was second nature. Born below the last of Gondor's warning beacons, he had spent his youth fleeing the heat of his father's choking, stifling forge into the green and cool of Firien's old oaks; scrounging every healing plant and leaf his old grandmother could describe, been rewarded on occasion with that most precious of rare sightings: the Druadan.

He had, in the long years since, found stealth to be an important skill in a Healer… at least when overseeing naughty children.

Or those that sometimes acted as if they were…

He found his goal sitting, sans cloak or cape, beside the far garden's outer wall.

"Captain…"

Faramir startled violently.

"Varan!"

The younger man bolted up from his seat, mouth dropped open in surprise. It was not often that one caught a Ranger completely unawares, even one who obviously thinking hard.

"A little bird told me I would find you here."

"One the size of a tall lad…?" Guilt flickered like a wind-blown candle flame through Faramir's hastily shuttered gaze

"No. A remarkably perspicacious tiny princess. You missed our appointment in your room. She mentioned she saw you come this way to Lothiriel."

Faramir rubbed his free hand across his nape. "My apologies, Master. I quite…"

"Forgot." Varan finished, smiling faintly to take away the sting. "You appear to have other things on your mind."

Faramir nodded but no other explanation was immediately offered up. The Captain's glance slid south, then east. Away hither in the distance, grey mists had begun to thicken about Ephel Duath's grim and shadowed slopes. Above, dark trails of fume arose and dissipated, belched like the effluent of some unseen, giant maw.
All were made anxious by the sinister changes beyond the mountains' jagged teeth. But that did not mean he would ignore his patient's present welfare. "You have ceased to have need of my ministrations, my Lord?"

Faramir shivered, but whether from sudden chill or foreboding Varan could not tell. "What? Oh. no..." With difficulty Faramir dragged his gaze away from the roiling in the distance, focused back on the greenery around. It seemed to anchor him and Varan took the pause to peer closely at the lines of strain about his mouth and brow.

Unquestionably, there were more than had been there the day before.

With a quiet sigh Varan tightened his grasp behind his back. There was no point in loud remonstrance—that particular technique had been lost on the Steward's second son by the time he'd first swung a blade.

"I am glad to hear it, "he remarked mildly as he could, rocking impatiently on his toes. "I was worried that perhaps you, like Lady Éowyn, had some alternate therapy to espouse?"

A sudden smile quirked his patient's lips. "A visit to the fabled library of Rivendell?"

*There.* If the fatigue had not driven away all Faramir's ready wit matters were not quite so dire as he feared. At least as regard physically. Well pleased with the result, Varan could not hold back a smile. "That would prove therapeutic for you and beyond diverting for myself. When Orome's winged mount arrives be sure to let me know."

The second bell of evening sounded from the Tower. Varan bowed and pointed back toward the Houses' eastern wing. It was time to see quite what a hash the Captain had made of his recovery. "Come. Let us adjourn. I must see your progress for myself and am quite prepared to do the needed examination here..."

The threat worked. Once they were ensconced in Faramir's room and his friend had toed off his boots and sat, somewhat meekly, on the very edge of the bed. Varan tested his pulse and breathing rate; noted happily that the wound showed no sign of fever and Faramir's eyes and skin retained no lingering signs of dehydration. When he moved on to the standard tests of sensitivity and reflex, he held up his own hands and had Faramir touch them back in a successively harder and more complicated sequence.

All he could see was encouraging, except that the man was still far too thin.

"Nothing is different than from yestereve." Faramir grumbled, as Varan held his elbow and began to pull the sling.

"You were not so impatient a patient as a boy."

"There was not then so very much at stake."

What was he to say to that? No, there had not been. They had both been younger and idealistic. Believed that Gondor and its Steward were invincible. That its Captain-General could not lose a fight.

Age was a hard and exacting tutor: it taught you that you were wrong.

Silently he slid his friend's arm out from its sleeve, ran gentle fingers across his palm, noting critically that the reflexes were improved. This too was a welcome sign. The lassitude of the Black breath was wearing off. Nerves and tendons behaved more as they should.
Varan waited while the rest of the shirt was shrugged onto the bed, stooped automatically to retrieve a discarded belt as it clattered to the floor. In this world of constant and taxing change it was reassuring to see some things did not change: the Captain was famously untidy in his own personal affects.

He set the belt on a nearby chair and began before pressing his fingers into the long muscle that ran down the shoulder across the back, alarmed to feel a tightness that hadn't been there before. The Captain was not his brother; he had never run to bulk, would never produce muscles that were large and ostentatious even if they had more strength than most broader men. His lips pressed thin with concern. Between the clavicle and the scapula there was the slightest of indents.

"Eldrin, whose arm was more seriously hurt than mine, has already taken up a watch. Why am I not allowed to go?"

Varan hesitated, ignored the comment for a moment in favour of probing the pale skin and muscles around the wound. The site should no longer be so very sensitive, unless it had been imprudently overworked.

Faramir's jaw immediately clenched.

"The waiting is interminable and Hurin has need of hands to help."

"The private did not lie for days at death's door, fever burning the life out of his flesh," Varan explained. "Nor is he currently substantially underweight. If you wish to return duty you must nourish yourself so that your body can sustain the effort."

Faramir gripped his fingers into the coverlet. "I am eating nearly everything your send my way."

Varan snorted. 'Nearly' appeared to have a somewhat sliding definition.

"There will be need for someone to organize a retreat," Faramir went on. "I am greatly appreciative of my cousin's efforts but Father held many things too close. Some of them I know. And will be needed for the defense."

Varan looked down puzzled. To what did he refer? A weapons store? Some hidden way out of the City? There were rumours of such although he paid them little attention down through the years. That Lord Denethor had taken secrets to his end he could well believe, but that was a discussion he did not wish to broach. Nothing in Middle-Earth would right then make him upset his patient with untimely discussion of his father's end.

There would be time enough for deeper griefs when the Enemy was not poised to sweep down the Vale and straight in the ruined door.

"Please raise your arm as far as you are able."

Faramir complied, grimacing as he tried and failed to to bring his hand above his head. The knuckles of his shield hand went white were they clenched the coverlet.

"You are very quiet. Does that pain you?"

"No."

Varan's eyebrows flew up. The reply had come through gritted teeth. To what shaved thin slice of logic was his friend truthfully replying? Not his shoulder muscles that was quite clear. They were obviously strained and overworked. Tightened and in pain.
He pulled Faramir's left elbow back, stretching the shoulder gently as he dared. There came a muffled grunt of pain.

Varan pursed his lips and considered the intransigence of Men. There was no need for Faramir to tax himself. Lord Hurin, a doughty fighter for all his years, had briefed Warden Hallas the day before. All knew what they had to do for what ever was to come.

He thanked Este he had also perfected the art of dressing down his charges exquisitely politely. "It is remarkable how much exertion the left arm receives from gentle strolling."

His observation received only a half-hearted shrug. "Is there something you wish to share?" he went on. "You cannot expect to be yet well enough to pull a bow."

Faramir bent his head and looked down at the bandage on his chest, turned over his hands to gaze lingeringly at his palms. The calluses on his left finger pads were clear. Ten days and they had softened yet. "I must try for I cannot fight like this; weak and lightheaded in the day. The poppy makes me sluggish, too slow to swing. I must get off it before the Enemy accosts the Host at his accursed gate and we face his minions here."

Varan sighed heavily. Should the Captains fail they would be besieged again: that was clear as Valacirca's blade twinkling up above. "I do not dispute the need. And yet you cannot go off the medication quickly. Your body takes time to become used to a lesser dose. Should you quit it immediately you will not sleep at all."

Faramir gingerly pulled the nightshirt he offered over. "The nightmares are not so fearsome now."

"That is good to hear." Varan moved a pitcher of water from the dresser to the brasier to heat and put willowbark from his pouch into an earthen cup. Pain relief he could affect. Changing his friend's mind—that would take some doing. Faramir was stubborn and not easily swayed unless faced with a stronger counter argument. In the face of present reality that was not something that he had.

When the tea had steeped, and its sharp scent filled the room he handed the cup across.

An obediently large gulp went down.

"Faramir, please try to do it as I instruct. Work slowly and steadily on your strength. At least promise you will not pull a bow. There are archers enough on the walls."

"Only because the Rohirrim help defend them. We have too few men."

"And only one Steward to lead them. Drink!"

He ignored the sudden sour face. Willowbark was bitter and if he nothing else to help he could be blunt. "If you will not see sense I will say it straight out loud. You will do little good for the City and your subjects falling, weakened and unprepared, to an Orc's stray blade."

Faramir flushed but the mutinous set faded from his mouth. Varan set about preparing the sleeping draught, mixing honey and the heated water with the precious poppy syrup.

This time the cup was pointedly ignored. Varan sighed, inwardly damning the hard earned tenaciousness of the Steward's sons. He turned his back, tidying his few implements away, considering how the raise the final but most delicate issue.

It was one thing that the Captain made poor choices for himself. Quite another that he had a partner in the crime.
He turned, crossed his arms against his chest and stared down his proud, long nose, looking pointedly at the second cup. "I trust you will finish the dose at your leisure but before I depart perhaps you can shed some light on another problem. Do you have intelligence on how the Lady of Rohan obtained a scratch? She has been singularly unforthcoming."

Two spots of colour deepened on Faramir's narrow cheeks. "Éowyn and I…"

"Yes," he encouraged. Now they were getting somewhere

"We sparred a little."

"Sparred?"

"Éowyn wished to try a staff against a sword. A practice sword," Faramir added hastily when a look of momentary thunder settled between Varan's brows. "We did not take full swings, merely blocked out the proper moves. I did try to go very very gently, but her grip slipped a little at the final one."

"A little?" said Varan, incredulously. Valar save him from this pair of imbeciles. They were just alike. Too stubborn for their own good.

"Are you aware of how stupidly lucky you have been? You could have cut her arm!"

"I know!" An agonized, pained look darkened Faramir's tired eyes. "When I saw how close I came I felt terrible. She insisted it was an accident but I have already said I will not essay it again."

"I should hope not, else I will be forced to confine you both to bed!"

It was not an idle threat. Faramir fell quiet as Varan picked up his wrist. However angry he was with his erstwhile patient he must focus on proper care. His pulse had been too rapid. Pain jolted one's circulation and as the willowbark worked quite rapidly, it should already have lessened somewhat, but quite markedly it had not.

Curious.

With a final wish for healing sleep he bid Faramir good night, watched him lay back against the headboard and sullenly pick up a book. He was clearly settling himself for sleep although the second cup lay still untouched.

Feeling a little as if he had won a battle but lost the war, Varan closed the door and gazed thoughtfully across the hall. The Lady of Rohan's door was also shut but a wan yellow light glistened through the gap. He rubbed one long finger thoughtfully across his lip.

There were several reasons why his patient's pulse should have raised again. Anger. Frustration. Upset. Or concern that had he hurt, however slightly, someone for whom he cared.

Most interesting.

The Master Healer smiled. Those who thought his careful, detached exterior covered an unfeeling heart might be surprised. He had, for many years, been a quiet and particularly astute observer of human interaction—he knew that love, and the fright that followed from it, could be a better deterrent than any admonition he could give.

Perhaps he needn't have them followed on the morrow after all.

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With the rising of Ithil, Lorien claimed the night.

The slumbering City dreamed. Above: the sky, like a moat of darkened sapphire hung in a fountain of coruscating stars. Below: the ghostly bulk of Mindolluin. Immovable and eternal. Shimmering and holding at his feet the banks of a spring-swollen River.

It was cold. The day's unseasonable warmth had been swept out by a rising evening wind. It blew steadily from the North, brushed the few high clouds across the many constellations and blocked the White Mountains' soaring peaks.

Éowyn, sitting alone in the front courtyard’s colonade, pulled her mantle closer, unsure whether to be comforted or anxious by the imposing ceiling. The City and its rocky bed weighed on her. Edoras was high, an island in an endless sea of waving gold and green, but here the sun went down so early. The shadows deepened until the weight of the range above blocked out the light, darkening Minas Tirith's gracious marble face into ribbons of hard flat grey. She missed the soft tawny wood and wattle of her home. The intensity of the ache, here, surrounded by a harshly faded elegance, was almost frightening.

She had slept. Beyond tired from her exertions, unable to keep her eyes open despite Merry's entertaining storytelling, she had retired after the evening meal, falling into a deep slumber before Kira had even closed the door.

Sometime about the mid-watch of the night a noise had awakened her. Perhaps a bird, or voices; sound travelled far on the clear night air, but whatever the cause, once aroused, Éowyn could not go back to sleep. The same unsettledness of the day took hold and she found herself wandering the halls, meeting only night nurses and prowling, sentry, cats.

Finally, wilted and worried, uncertain of what she was searching for, she draped herself onto a yet another of the Houses' marble seats.

The stone roses of the entablature above were most unhelpful. They could not tell her a single thing.

The light bandage on her wrist began to itch. Gingerly, she rubbed around the scratch, shaking her head at the memory of Faramir's anxiously tender treatment—she had had far worse cuts from mundane household chores— but he had insisted on binding it himself.

She undid the knot, unwound the linen and flexed her wrist. The red seam was scabbed already. It felt fine. Of course it did—it was only a scratch, but that had not stopped the maddening man from acting guilty.

Éowyn drew her hood up against a sharp, chill gust and sighed. Faramir.

She did not know what to make of him. Grave, but no more than she would expect one who was bereaved; a warrior and yet a scholar; interested in simply everything. Utterly annoying in his perceptiveness, but with a quiet confidence that was far from passive.

(And most attractive.

Where in Arda had that thought sprung from?)

It was all most disconcerting. Somehow, without her noticing, she had begun to see him as a friend. She liked his dry sense of humour that was mapped out by laughter-lines about a mouth that more often quirked at some odd or surprising observation. She liked that he kept his counsel and did not pry. She liked that he defied convention at almost every step but made her feel completely safe.
He understood her. Better, perhaps, than any other and this last admission was the most particularly unsettling. She had only ever felt so completely easy with Éomer or Theodred (never Aragorn) and that made him, quixotically, all the more impossible to ignore.

And their escapade of the afternoon the more confusing.

The broom handle had broken. This was likely predictable, and she had stood, heart thudding from exertion, close enough to Faramir to catch a scent of athelas; and clean bandage; and earthy, heady, spice. His dark head had bent over her arm, one hand winding a strip torn from his shirt, the other steady under her palm. Mist-grey eyes looking up once or twice to check her face.

Dizzy, beguiled by his kindness and something she could not name, she had almost reached out and stroked the sun-warmed skin upon his neck.

What did this mean? How could she have such a strong—awareness- for a simple friend? Had the strain of war and illness turned her careful, considered feelings hysterical? How was she to know?

Amidst her ruminations a shadow separated itself from the stones.

She gave a little shriek.

"Eowyn!"

A familiar baritone sounded low out of the dark before her. Faramir knelt, a hand on her arm and his warm chest pressed up against the velvet on her knees. After the fright it felt safe. Substantial. She let an almost steady breath.

"I did not see you there." Eorl's spear, it was unlike her to start so hard. Was she jumping at shadows now? Imagining foes to have climbed so far?

Faramir's eye softened in dismay. "My apologies. I am glad I am not so great a threat that I can sneak up on you unawares, but I am not glad to have startled you. What are you doing out here so late?"

"I could not sleep. I came out for air and found my thoughts drifting on.." To you. she did not add. The very person I was reflecting on. This was embarrassing. Thankfully the dimness of the colonnade concealed her blush. "And I could ask the same of you. From whence have you come?"

He pointed upward to the Seventh's winding stair. "The citadel."

Her voice made a cracked china sound. "Is there news? From the King?"

Faramir shook his head and shrugged off a small pack, setting it onto the cold flagstones. He had no cloak but a thicker woolen tunic. Worn boots and once again the sling. Not the clothing a Steward received his messenger in. Unless it were an emergency. "No, not to my knowledge. And I know not whether that is a worry or a balm."

A worry most assuredly. "Where are they now?" she asked. "The Captains and the Host?"

Faramir glanced up. "They were pressing the men and horse quite hard. From the day the King sent men to Cair Andros I should judge that they have just reached the Morannon. The planned feint is underway."

"And Frodo?" she whispered. Could it be that Aragorn's plan could work? That too small to notice, the Hobbits were creeping right under the Enemy's red gaze?
His hand tightened on her cloak. "Do not be afeared. He and Sam are there, amidst the dark smoking pits of Gorgoroth, inching forward with each candlemark. This much have I Seen."

*And so this eve could mark the turning of all their fortunes.* Éowyn shivered at the thought. Her hood fell back. She left it, let the moon’s silver light spill across her face.

"What will come with morn?"

Faramir shook his head, reached out and pulled the mantle's edge farther across her lap. "I know not. But I am certain that we have done all we could. I have harried the Enemy for many years. I can do so again if need be. We will be ready …"

"And in light of that…" he announced, letting her go and producing a dusty bottle from within the pack. The edge of a chased silver cup winked just inside. "My errand up above."

"You are celebrating?" she asked, incredulous.

"No…inebriating." A bleak fortitude swept his voice. "After I … awoke…violent terrors stole my rest. I have slept drugged all the nights since that first."

*When he awoke to find his family gone.* Her heart clenched. Below Faramir's eyes lay deep smudges of exhaustion. "You have been through a great trial,…"

"We have all suffered, Éowyn. But I thank you." His free hand swept his hair back from his face. "Tonight I tried to go without the dose. Varan warned me the body craves it—that I might feel ill, ache in my bones and possibly not sleep at all. I am afraid that he is right."

Her eyes narrowed in disdain. Some men were lucky and some were right. The Master Healer was annoyingly often both.

Faramir reached down and hefted the bottle up. "I walked up to my rooms in the Citadel in search of an alternate sleep inducer."

Éowyn nodded slowly. "Many a Rider seeking oblivion has drunk himself insensible on mead."

"As my own brother did many times in your cousin's company." Faramir's mouth twisted wryly. "There is only one problem with my brilliant plan. The bottle is very old and I inconveniently have not two strong hands. I cannot get it open."

He? Gondor's Steward. Unable to get a simple bottle open. Éowyn did her best not to giggle: it was a relief to find her fingers were not the only ones uncooperative at times.

But that did not help their current predicament.

"Perhaps if you brace it? Between your knees?"

Faramir arose and sat upon the bench, frowning thoughtfully and setting aside the cup. It was an ungainly maneuver but worth a try. He nestled the bottle between his knees, pulling hard on the stopper with his free hand, grimacing with the effort. The cork did not budge. Not on the first try or the second. He gave an exasperated sigh, shaking out fingers aching from the effort.

"I am afraid I rather overdid it this afternoon. Both arms are weaker than is usual and my shoulder hurts the blazes to pull too hard. I shall have to give in and seek Varan out."

"Béma, no. We have surely not come to that." Éowyn looked from his tired face down to the
perfectly innocuous flask, trying not to laugh. So easy a chore. But not so easy when it was the
wounded helping the wounded. He had one arm bound in a sling and she a splint. "This is quite
ridiculous. Let me help you this time. Between us we have a pair of hands."

He blinked, realizing she was right. "We do!"

They did. Éowyn reached for the juncture of the bottle's neck and base, began to wrap her sword
fingers about the cool amber glass but suddenly jerked them back.

She had almost touched him. Her fingers had been so close to his thigh she could have brushed their
tips across the twill of his leather trews. "I am sorry, "she stammered, cheeks flaming bright as a coal
within a brazier. "I did not think." They were alone. In Gondor this was presumably not just beyond
inappropriate, it was scandalous.

Faramir's mouth quirked. She had the distinct impression he was amused by her discomfiture. "My
Lady, I assure you your honour is perfectly safe from an invalid such as me. All I want to do is
sleep."

"And I assure you all I want to do is help." Her honour safe from him? What of his from her? She
had been the one reaching dangerously close to… she didn't know the Sindarin word. Éowyn
uncertainly bit her lip. What if he thought she was being deliberately forward? "I do not make it a
habit of reaching this way for men."

He chuckled, shaking his dark head. "Nay, I understand well that war puts us in unaccustomed
situations." Grey eyes twinkled merrily above a teasing grin. He clearly relished the ridiculousness of
their state. "Your reach *has* won fame as something rather to be feared."

Shameless flatterer! Éowyn tossed her hair back over her shoulder and gave him a pointed glare.
"Perhaps if I try the cork."

This time Faramir braced the bottle's base tightly and held its neck while she twisted hard upon the
top. It did not move. Not the second time. Or the third.

"It is a stubborn one." She braced her feet and twisted again with all her might but there was no
movement. Frustrated, Éowyn shrugged back the mantle and wiped the dust on her fingers on the
thin lawn of her night-rail. The potential for failure loomed large. It irked her pride. Surely they, both
warriors of renown, were not to be defeated by a simple flask?

Faramir sighed and stared dejectedly at the cup. "I have been known to have sleepless nights before."

"Nonsense. I am also known to not give up easily, my Lord. Let us try again."

Still no success. She bent her head and peered closely at remains of the seal. It did look old. The wax
was faded and presumably the stopper had expanded over time.

"If I cannot pull a cork I would usually use my teeth..." she murmured, half to herself. She bent
lower to catch a closer look.

"Valar No! Else I truly will not sleep!"

Éowyn started up in shock.

*What had happened?* Startled words had rung in her head over an image of cascading golden hair.
Had she imagined it? Had she truly heard his disconcerted cry?
An embarrassed flush stained Faramir's face and throat. He carefully moved bottle an inch or two nearer to his knees. "Éowyn, I think we needn't resort to that. Surely it is loosened a little more by now? Perhaps if I am the one pull?"

It was a reasonable suggestion. His uninjured arm was likely stronger than hers that had struck the Dwimmerlaik's fatal blow. She placed the fingers of her sword hand higher on the bottle's neck. "Ready?"

At her nod they both braced and gripped as tightly as they could. The cork came with a defiantly squeaking pop.

"There!" She tossed back her head triumphantly. "I knew it could not defeat us!"

Faramir's shoulders shook as he brandished the errant top. "Thank the Valar, two was enough."

They both broke down, laughing hard in quiet helpless, winded gasps that punctuated the quiet of the night. This was quite ridiculous. It had taken both of them, all their breath and all their able hands to achieve one simple task. How could two such pathetic souls be of use in defending a beleagured City?

The thought sent Éowyn into another fit of giggles.

Distracted, she relaxed her grip and at once her fingers slid down the glass, came to rest upon Faramir's. A jolt of awareness flared like a spark from a striking steel. Frustration, great weariness and amusement, and longing, washed over her. Open. Unbound. Like a bird that hovers and then flits away.

_How?_

She dared look up. Faramir's gaze slid away, found focus on a fire-fly that danced drunkenly above the courtyard's silent stones. Did he realize? Did she imagine what she felt. Surely not. This was no fevered dream. The bench's pitted stone was rough and cold beneath her palm. The breeze for a moment lifted a strand of her hair and blew across her face.

"My lady." Faramir roughly cleared his throat. He picked up the cup and tilted it toward her. "Would you consider sharing? I only brought the one."

"Of course."

He slopped in some of the dark gold spirit and passed it to her. She took a sniff. The vapours twinned up and practically slapped her nose. "What is it?"

"I am not exactly sure. It is no fine vintage. Something that Boromir gave me years ago before patrol. I am afraid it was born in someone's still."

"What else would Riders share around a fire?" She raised the cup in a toast and sipped. It was brandy of a sort. The fruit fire burned the entire journey down. "Rotgut. I like it well."

They drank together. She took measured sips while he gulped the stuff like water. Worrying images of Riders blind with drink, passed out and nearly choked with spew, made her stay his hand the next time that it raised.

"Faramir. Pace yourself." Her own head was already buzzing.
He looked at her quizzically. A slight veil of incomprehension clouded his usually sharp gaze. "Oh. Of course. You don't understand. My gift. I assure you, it will not be that way. It merely makes me sleepy."

His gift? Well certainly some men had a prodigious head for drink but with three quarters of the bottle already gone they were well past any man's normal tolerance. Especially imbibed so fast. And there was exhaustion to factor in. If he passed out how would she get him to his bed?

The cup clattered to the stones. And a sudden weight settled on her shoulder.

Now what was she to do? Faramir was insensible, a dead weight well beyond her to lift up. Calling for a porter was the obvious solution but it was late and there would be questions; and a part of her wished to avoid the need for explanations.

He was a Ranger. Well used to sleeping out of doors.

Éowyn slipped off the seat and laid him down; on his right so that his injured shoulder would not bear weight. She swung his legs up and folded them so that they did not hang off the end.

A further sense of caution made her grab the bottle and the cup. Setting the one atop the other, she turned and started for the door.

Past the main arch a little tendril of concern sprouted up. She glanced back. In those few moments Faramir had resettled. He lay curled up in the middle of the bench, one arm used as a pillow and the other pulled protectively against his chest. Bearing another face she had not seen. Free of care. Childlike, bare cheeks smoothed and the ever present worry line wiped from his brow.

She hesitated. The shoulder of his tunic had dropped down. He would be cold come morn: the night was chill and with few clouds for cover, it would become colder still.

On impulse, she strode quickly back; pulled the mantle's clasp, swung its heavy warmth from off her shoulders and draped it over his prone form.

Faramir's head was tucked down so that only the raven of his hair and a sliver of neck showed above the blue. The silver stars about the hem winked in the pale moonlight.

*What was it that had passed between them?* She did not know but for certain it was real; not a figment of a dream. The morrow would come and she must find a way to ask.

Éowyn closed her eyes in weariness. She, too, must find her bed and leave him to sleep; blanketed by stars.

*Elentári's* up above and his mother's down below.

"Sleep well." she whispered and reached out to smooth a fold of the mantle upon his shoulder.

Faramir did not stir. The Master of Dreams did not trouble to set his nets.

She smiled and slipped away.

Chapter End Notes
At last! A chapter…. I have decided to no longer give apologies because after assuring everyone that things would go faster now, Fate leaped in to spike our wheels. Our son (the one who inspires Faramir and Êowyn's son Theomund) had his own health scare. This time, along with the ladies of the Garden of Ithilien, I must thank all our many friends and family who helped out during the weeks he was in hospital and at home recuperating. Without all the hands and casseroles we simply would not have coped. And I would not have been sane enough to get this chapter out.

Thank you so much for the comments and kudos..they really keep me going.

Easter hugs and chocolate rabbits to Thanwen and Eschscholzia for wondrously helpful critiques and comments. And to Willow, Gwynnyd, Wheelrider, and Sulriel for their comments and encouragement. Truly a group effort this time.
"Faramir! Faramir come, wake up."

With a startled groan and decidedly half-hearted bat at the hand that shook his shoulder, Gondor's Steward pried open one gritty eye and found all his vision filled by a fresh faced Lothiriel. She stood, head bent sideways, smock and headrail neatly starched, sporting a puzzled frown and looking a little ominously like their aunt.

"Thiri, leave me be," he grumbled. "It is not dawn yet."

Not dawn and far too early to face the shining countenance of his little cousin. Although why ever it should be she to wake him up, he did not understand. With a grimace at the twinge in his stiffened shoulder, he tried to yank the coverlet higher up. He really should not think of Lothiriel as little anymore: she was a woman grown and had a correspondingly strong grip.

That was annoyingly not letting go. "Faramir, honestly. You cannot sleep here."

The shaking intensified. It was most uncomfortable and to make matters worse the bed was suddenly hard as rock and the room too chill. The fire must have gone out. Thinking he must ask Bergil to lay in more wood, Faramir tucked his head back down, blocking the wan torch light.

"Peace, cousin. I need to rest."

That brought a derisive snort. "You need to move. And wash. You smell like Erchhiron after a night at the Broken Spar."

Smell? Both Faramir's eyes cracked open in surprise. Before him Lothiriel stood, arms akimbo and nose wrinkled in distaste, quite plainly not in his bedroom and not beside his bed. He levered up and sat, the blue mantle puddling at his waist, blinking in the muddy grey of dawn.

This was the Houses' forecourt. A silent inventory ascertained that his head felt thick and his tongue felt as if he had licked a cat. Success! He had slept without the blasted drug and Morgoth's balls, he hadn't dreamt it! The brandy had knocked him out eventually. It simply took an entire bottle to do the trick.

His face broke into a grin. "Valar Thiri, you have no idea how relieved I am it was you that found me."

"And not Aunt Rini?" Her slight moue of consternation spread into a grin. "You are a lucky man Faramir, she would have blistered your ears and then tied you to your bed. She is just instructing Arran for the day and actually not that far behind My lips are sealed."

A black eyebrow raised as she eyed the relief on his face quite thoughtfully. "Missing someone?"

Valar, Lothiriel was too smart by half. He turned and scanned the court quickly but there was no lily-fair co-conspirator to be found. Or bottle for that matter. He flexed his fingers and ran them back through his tousled hair. Bless you Éowyn. She clearly understood the need for circumspection. ' 

"No," Faramir said. "I seem to be quite alone."
"Yes and the only patient to choose a bench over a perfectly good bed." Lothiriel tsked as she stooped to get a hand under his good elbow. Reluctantly, he unfolded his long legs and began to rise, finding himself stiff as a dray's front yoke. The help was welcome.

"I…" What should he say? He did not expect that Éowyn wished it known that she had seen Ithil set. Nor did he really wish to admit his unauthorized expedition to the Citadel. He cocked his head and turned on his best pleading puppy eyes.

"Never mind. Please Thiri?"

He endured another skeptical but silent eyebrow and followed Lothiriel into the Houses, kissing her cheek goodbye and searching out his room to wash and change. On impulse, once dressed as well as he could manage, he took his brother's signet ring off its chain and slipped it onto his middle finger. The piece was too loose-Boromir's fingers had been larger than is own-the heavy silver was large and unwieldy next to his own finer ones. He clenched them and studied the pale moonstone. How strange that that something so small felt heavy due to the weight of its implication? Captain-General: the first of two offices he never thought to claim but the fight might come to the City and he would be a part of it whatever the good Master Healer thought.

The Steward's Ring and Rod could wait. In the days to come they would be of lesser use.

Ducking back out into the hall, Faramir laid his mother's cloak neatly across his arm and tucked the fine-worked Rohirric dagger into his belt. Both he had to return to Lady Éowyn and the thought chilled a little his anxious heart. He had not misled her. The vision of the dreadful eve showed where Frodo was but not how he fared. The hobbits crept ever closer to Mount Doom—none knew if it were to unmake the weapon the Enemy or stir more the hornet's nest and the thought that she might find herself in the chill of the mountains fleeing for her life or standing ground while foul Orcs overran the Houses' green made his blood run cold.

This day, the fifth of waiting without word, had dawned cold and lowering: only a grey-tinged gold crept over the hither fields while beneath the stiffening north breeze Guards set their teeth and clasped tighter at their spears. It was little comfort to know from which direction the Enemy would appear but time was contracting. The knowledge of it twisted Faramir's stomach into a knot, made worry spur his steps. There were too many things to be done but first he needed to find Éowyn. She was not in her room, nor in the wards, he had asked but neither Ivriniel nor Anborn had seen her.

Instinct took him out into the garden and proved him right. At his quiet query a grey robed attendant directed him left of the central fountain towards the eastern wall. He took the path, brushed past the new leafing plants, striding quickly for a flickering sense of dread pulled him on. Like moonlight on a windy clouded night he caught it in snatches; barely glimpsed but no less real. Was she in pain? Afraid? He did not know but one thing was certain: the nameless worry that stalked his breast was for Eowyn.

White hands and silver frost. Ineffable sadness and piercing beauty. Gold and raven black mingling in the air.

The memory of those too bright images in his mind made him stop dead in the middle of the path.

He knew her! She was the maiden of his long forgotten dream. A balm and a solace. The welcome cool to assuage the fire-pain.

His keen eyes searched the parapet as he clutched at both precious talismans. A flash of purest white showed against the creamy polished stone. Thank the Valar she was there!
He began to hurry on but then hesitated. What had happened? He felt her. Not in the way of reading another when he had need; not a deliberate reaching out. This was finer. Essential. As if a silken cord linked them both, twined about and joined thoughts as naturally as if they both breathed together.

The pretty words of flowers and admiration showered when they first met were genuine—Éowyn was the most beautiful woman he had ever met but now those words felt inadequate. Beneath her cool, restless beauty he had found a whole new world: a spark of warmth and humour, a banked fire that told of passion and resolve. A heady mix, one that was beguiling and utterly unlike any woman that he had known.

Faramir was lost. He knew it now. Utterly. Truly. It seemed ridiculously alltoo fast and yet how else to explain this feeling that made his heart hurt and sing wildly all at once. Love for so long had been merely for poems in a book; the world was too unsteady for promises, but now, here, possibly at the end of things, he found he did not care.

He had to speak to her.

To find out how she felt.

And if the cloak had been a message."

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Eowyn looked across a land that for days had trembled and tossed uneasily in its bed, clutching harder at the stone of the parapet as another small tremor shook the City’s base.

Away to the east Mt Doom was not visible but its dark spew was too clear. Above the red glow of Mordor a huge grey cloud of ash spread out, anvil-like and brooding, smothering all the sky.

Lightening crackled in its upper story, joined each new burst of fume like some malevolent firework. She found she could not take her eyes away—it was beautiful and terrifying, yet filled her with a gnawing dread. She had fled the stifling silence of her room for the freshness of the open air but it had not helped. Like Minas Tirith's weary walls, she glanced warily to the east in the quiet hush that descended after each new shake. Were there more to come? Was the earth shaking a portent of the Enemy's building wrath? Even the birds fell silent afterward. All Arda was on edge and held its breath.

She wrapped her arms protectively about her body, shielding from the wind and the anxiousness that sank into her bones. Back to the gardens. the footfall on the grave, : the quiet steadiness of a warrior used to moving anonymously, was barely audible and for an instant she simply froze. Surprise and worry made her tense but then: she knew.

Faramir. Without looking. she felt it to be him.

With the barest flip of heart she turned.

He hesitated. As if his words had taken wing in the face of seeing her at the wall. his handsome face creased with worry, his eyes like his hands, full of light and dark. They were silver grey and deep; like stars on a Mettare night. How had she not noticed so before?

"What do you look for, Éowyn?" he asked after the moment stretched too thin.

"I." She cleared her throat. The intensity of his gaze made honesty a need. "Some sign. You said they should be there.. Does not the Black Gate lie beyond the last darkened crag? Must the host not
now be come there? It is seven days since he rode away.'

The barest frown narrowed on Faramir's brow. "Seven days, that is so and in this last day the unsettledness of the land has increased. I do believe that they are there." He shook himself as if throwing lose the vision. "We all wait but I would not have you think it ill of me to speak of this world when all our minds are elsewhere." He hesitated, then proffered an armful of fine blue velvet. "I would offer what hope I can. I have two things to return. If you want them?"

Somehow, oddly, she saw the anxious tremor run through his skin yet there was not another shake. Eowyn closed her eyes, knowing not what to say.

"Faramir, I…"

She looked away to northward. above the grey hither lands, into the eye of the cold wind where far away the sky was hard and smudged with ash. Elsewhere. Oh yes. Her heart was elsewhere and yet it was also here. It was confusing. She did not understand, but then, should it matter? When doom was about to fall on them all?

The full north breeze lifted the tendrils of her unbound hair as her hands plucked weakly at the light linen of her kirtle. They could not make a purchase: her wind stiffened fingers would not bend.

How long had she been standing without a cloak? She did not know. Too long, for now her hands felt like ice.

"My lady it is biting cold and you are chilled!" Faramir reached out. His own warm fingers enclosed her trembling ones, thawed a little of their frigid hurt. In a single heavy sweep, the blue mantle was draped about her shoulders.

It's warm weight and queenly beauty were welcome. They wrapped her round yet still she shivered, shoulders and knees trembling hard. It was warmth not cold that made her so. His touch. She was shaking like a leaf; for herself and for that he was near.

How could this be? What had passed between them the eve before? Her intent to know was strong but she could not get her faithless tongue to ask. She was a coward. Only one fear at time could she face.

"Éowyn? " Faramir drew beside, his voice threaded with concern.

His own dark hair was wipped by the rising wind. He was so close she felt it brush against her cheek but she could not tear her eyes away from the long cloud that flashed and rumbled in the distance .

_Dark and light._ She was a coward. Perhaps he could understand.

"I thought that I had courage for this wait," she began, "to be patient while the stroke of doom descends but now I find my heart fails me. I stand on the brink of some dark abyss. All is black. There is a chasm before my feet and whether there is light behind I cannot tell. I cannot turn. I fear to take a step."

Ashamed. She felt ashamed and with it kept her face turned away. She felt Faramir move, felt a pair of warm hands settle on her shoulders even as his warm breath brushed past her ear.

"Yes, we wait, perhaps for defeat. To flee the city and fight from the mountains, it is an easy choice, I can harry the Enemy again but still my heart cries out in hope. We yet live and we cannot live in misery. Doubt swirls but there is always hopefulness."
"I." she began again but the words were stopped up in her throat. The shadows would not shrink back. Eowyn shook her head. It was impossible. The world was dark. To hope was far too hard and the abyss was far too deep.

His hands on her shoulders squeezed a little harder. "Faith is taking the step even when you do not see. Turn Eowyn. Take my hand and do not fear. Turn your face toward the sun and the shadows shall fall behind you."

"The sun?" she whispered hoarsely. "I cannot see the sun."

Indeed she could not for the cold wind had brought more clouds to shroud the City. It was noon. The sun should be overhead but there was no yellow glow to light the sudden darkness of the day. Anor's face was hidden. All she could spy was a dirty lighter smudge.

She shrank a little deeper into the solid sureness of Faramir's broad back. He lifted his hand, pointed upward through the gloom to past Mindolluin's peak. "There...it is there," he said, turning her gently in his arms and holding her gaze, grey eyes sparkling with conviction. "And it is here. I know it in my heart. I do not believe any darkness can endure."

She swallowed back fear, nodding shakily and letting the surety he felt sink in. If he could trust then so should she not?

Ever so slowly Faramir drew closer, placed both hands upon her shoulders and kissed her forehead once.

His faint half-smile was certain. It made her pulse flutter wildly at her throat even though the clouds nestled lower and the darkness deepened still. She hardly dared now to breathe. About them all sounds of the City and the Land fell quiet. The keening of the stinking, writhing wind dropped back. The birds ceased to chirp and the people stood even as they did: hushed, hearts slow but resolute, waiting for time to begin again.

Éowyn huddled in the lee of Faramir's splinted shoulder. His sling hung loose. Both arms wrapped her round and she set her broken arm up against his chest, felt the roughness of his woolen cloak against her cheek. It felt to standing so, there at the end of things.

"Will you hold me?" she asked wonderingly, finding she needed no courage for the coming dark but catching another, harder boldness hidden in a corner of her heart.

She felt a smile against her hair.

"As long as I have breath."

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The unreality of that moment would last in Faramir's memory forever.

As he spoke of Numenor, and the Wave, and the hope that dimmed never in his heart, another greater shake took the City like a terrier with a rat between its teeth.

A low rumbling sigh went up, the land roiled n waves even as a great wind arose and made their hair, streamers of raven and of wheat gold, mingle in the air.

The sun came out and the Great River sparkled. The Eagles came to wheel overhead and rejoice that
the Shadow had at last departed.

He gave his own voice to the shouts of exaltation.

Mithrandir had once explained to an entirely too curious young boy that in Eru's song despair and darkness only existed in relation to the light. Without one there could not be the other. Faramir had not understood; he had had no reference then, but now, bloodied, bowed, yet still standing on the walls, he did.

Life was joy and pain. Both were necessary. And both were wound inextricably into the slender form of the woman who stood at his side.

He looked down into Eowyn's shining eyes and hugged her gently once again. "I am afraid I must find Hurin soon. And my family. And my men. The City and all will rejoice. As will I but.." he swallowed thickly "I have no reason to not be Steward now."

Eowyn raised her chin, sighed and nodded with a certainty that felt exactly like a gift.

"Take me with you."

He smiled and laced the fingers of his sword hand through her own. They were warm and firm. He remembered their touch in a bustling street and the healing that they brought.

*Dark and Light. Ice and Fire. Hard rock and evergreen.*

All so very different yet so very central to each other.

He stepped back, bowed low, and brushed the barest of forbidden kisses across the fineness of her knuckles.

"As my lady commands...."

Chapter End Notes

A few lines in this chapter of necessity parallel the Return of the King. I just couldn't write this time period without them...and romance, for which I apologize to Borys and Irene. Those shocked at how short this is...never fear..I still can't write short. it was originally part of a chapter of 5 sections..the reality of how long it would take to get done stood up and shook me. I have broken it up but the good news is the second 'half' is well advanced..and you should see it rather sooner.

Heartfelt thanks to the ladies of the Garden for their encouragement. I was so impatient, and travelling, so they have not had at it yet. the resulting likely mess is entirely not their fault. Expect some updates, corrections in the days to come :)
"As my lady commands...."

Years hence, the Lady of Ithilien would recollect, sitting under Emyn Arnen's prized Mallorn tree, eager little ones rapt at her feet ("Tell us about the Eagles..." asked Finduilas; "and the singing and the dancing..." added Theomund), that the first hours after her husband's blindingly grateful smile were something of a blur.

All of Minas Tirith seemed in motion.

Alive with energy and delirious with joy, soldiers and citizens alike rejoiced at the tidings the Eagles brought. Wards burst open. Garden paths thronged with patients singing and praising the Host's unlooked for victory.

It took nigh a candlemark for Êowyn and Faramir to make their way to the stone front gate. Every soldier wished to clap the Steward on the back and every assistant had wildly indecorous handshakes for the Hero of Pelennor. The bravest of them (perhaps drunk on relief) swung Êowyn right around in his arms to set her, startled and laughing so hard she had begun to hiccup, into the arms of an amused and confusingly animated Master Healer.

Only mildly disheveled, Êowyn forebore this unexpected familiarity with perfect grace. Varan, prizing his manhood despite his rumoured vow of chastity (incorrect in point of fact), took no liberties and perspicaciously set her gently back on her feet. In the aftermath she blinked and he bowed so low his ponytail nearly brushed the flagstones.

It proved impossible to ignore Faramir's provoking grin.

In the largest ward they found Lothiriel dabbing at her bright eyes with the corner of her apron. The young princess had been soundly kissed, her kerchief was askew and several strands of onyx hair tumbled to her shoulder. Beside her, Aunt Ivriniel (a little more composed after Bern's exuberant attention) knelt at the cot of a young City guard and continued her ministrations. She was poised as the Lady of the Wood despite the bedlam of singing, whooping men.

"Oh Fara..I cannot believe that it is true!" Lothiriel exclaimed. She had spotted his tall form weaving through the noisy crowd of walking wounded and set her tray of medicaments aside.

"It is and blessed be the One..." he replied, sweeping her and a protesting Ivriniel up at once into a long and bone-crushing, one-handed hug. "The King is returned. The Black Gate thrown down. And beyond all hope we have the victory!"

Êowyn watched, hanging back a little for these women were his family, but amused to note that he had used both arms just a ward away, beyond Ivriniel's eagle eye. He set them both lightly down and reached for her free hand, drawing her near, and though she felt it not her place to interrupt so momentous a celebration any doubt of her reception vanished when Lothiriel planted on each of her cheeks the uniquely Gondorian double kiss of friendship.

"Êowyn, is it not the most wonderful news?!"
Oh it was. Out of fear and dread, they had snatched a most glorious victory, Éowyn felt suddenly grateful this spontaneous, genuine young noblewoman who had brought her friendship in a darkened time. She hugged her back shyly before she spoke. "Lothíriel, it is indeed. A day that shall be sung of by the bards with pride. Alongside the most noble of our feats."

"All who sing will honour the memory of those who struggled long." Faramir remarked. "But I hope to have the good fortune to hear your countrymen rejoice the more. They are as famous for their voices as their courage on the battlefield."

Éowyn inclined her head but did not speak. The comment was gracious: already they had caught the sound of a small chorus from the Rohirrim's ward but it had been restrained—the Riders were ill after all—and the sudden need to be in Meduseld, feasting and singing long into the night, hit home like a perfect arrowshot. She must find Elfhelm and his Riders who had assailed Anorien, for there there would be songs of slaying and praise to Béma ringing out over the muddy plain where they encamped.

Faramir eyed her thoughtfully before stepping back, turning his gaze to the spontaneous party that had erupted in the ward. "Cousin, where will you be this eve?" he asked. "When are you free? We must raise a glass and speak more when I have news. I should hope there will be word from the Morannon before tomorrow. We are all anxious to know about Uncle, Elphir and Amrothos. And the King. And Éomer-King and the Éored. And Pippin and the Hobbits, " he added, mouth quirking. "T'll be a heavy message for the poor pigeon."

"The townhouse, after supper has been served," answered Ivriniel firmly when Lothíriel's throat had proved suddenly too thick to speak.

_How curious_? Was it Éowyn's imagination or did the young woman's porcelain complexion brighten when the Morannon was named?

She peered more closely. A distinct rosy glow indeed lingered on Lothíriel's cheeks—the Princess pined for someone, but who? One of Dol Amroth's fabled Swan Knights? Éowyn had seen them in their matching bright livery across the Pelennor: majestic and elaborately resplendent—quite the antithesis of the Éohere.

She glanced sidelong and caught a swiftly stilled frown on Ivriniel's narrow face. _How curious_. No one had mentioned that Lothíriel was affianced; if the younger princess was enamoured of a knight it was certainly news to her aunt.

The tiny woman shrugged and turned to wag a thin finger pointedly at her nephew's chest. "Mind you aren't too late. There will be days ahead for celebration. No need to overtax yourself...."

He threw up his hands in mock surrender. "I wouldn't dream of it, Aunt Rini."

"I would!" Éowyn protested. Truly, Ivriniel was well-meaning, but did she really expect them to bed down early on the most momentous night of their lives?! And did Faramir actually plan to obey? She silently ground her teeth, fuming to be treated like a child. Beside her the forgotten guardsman sat with mouth agape, astonished at the unlikely spectacle of a warrior disagreeing outright with the tiny Princess of Dol Amroth.

Lothíriel, not in the least perturbed, looked between the protagonists and broke into a fit of merry giggles. "Then you, my dear cousin, must sacrifice yourself and play the gracious host."

"And it is a price I am prepared to pay for the betterment of our two kingdoms." Faramir bowed _almost_ soberly over his arm, mouth quirking and eyes aglint.
Éowyn let out a smallest sigh of relief. Thank Béma. He had no intention of following through but then she looked on the elder woman's face uncertainly. From Ivriniel's upright, rather formidable air of authority, Éowyn had assumed that she was serious—expected to be obeyed—and for a moment she worried that she had offended. Looking closer, there was just a very slight indulgent gleam in the pale grey eyes that so matched her nephew's.

Was it possible Ivriniel assumed her order would be belayed?

A pregnant pause stretched uncomfortably before Ivriniel snorted and rolled her eyes.

"So very selfless of you, young man. A bare two dozen females in the City to several thousand men and you volunteer to play diplomat." The grey headrail shook resignedly. "Away with you both. Lothiriel and I have a dozen more wounds to check and clean before we can enjoy the festivities."

"And the sooner you are done, the sooner the patients can celebrate," Faramir winked to the startled guard and offered his elbow to Éowyn. "Come my lady. Let us escape before she has time to change her mind and puts a halt to our impromptu mission."

After a last round of farewells they were off on their erratic procession once again.

In the sun of the forecourt they found Meriadoc with wounded Riders of Eothain's eored.

"Do you think…?" the halfling asked Faramir anxiously, having accepted Éowyn's tightest hug.

"I do." Faramir nodded slowly, smiling gravely and setting a solid hand on Merry's shoulder. "We shall find all of them are well, Merry. I do not doubt that we owe the tidings of this day to Frodo and to Sam, and that beyond all hope they have been brought back out of that shadowed land."

At the hall of Merethrond they did not find Lord Hurin—only a rumour of his anticipated presence. The commander, anxious about the repercussion of another breach, had been out on the mountain's flank personally inspecting now superfluous escape routes. Faramir's message to meet upon the morrow was left in the hands of a black-clad, dazed lieutenant who could barely hear over the sound of excited, singing folk. The Court of the Fountain was so stuffed with noisy celebrants that Éowyn felt certain had the Eagles come again, their cries would have gone unheeded above the din.

Inside the Steward's Palace the first cup of wine was pressed into Éowyn's sword hand by a thin and pretty matron with long steel-streaked hair. From her ruddy complexion it was evident she'd had already more than a cup.

"Oh leave off lad!" Nera batted ineffectually at Faramir's arm as he kissed her cheek and engulfed her in an exuberant hug. This was obviously his nursemaid from when he was a boy—the affection between them was evident—and in due course Éowyn nodded to be introduced to her and others of the household. She sipped at a dark ruby wine, sweet and far stronger than what she was accustomed to and thus she tried to pace herself. The night was young and certain as snow on Starkhorn to be a long one: she had no wish to discover the sort of headache Éothain endured after vying with her brother for the deepest horn.

A dizzying but joyous candlemark amongst the Steward's staff passed far too fast. There were many, many thanks for her and her countrymen's valiant service from far too many names to recall. Proud of her correct half bow to Cahil (a marvel of balance and precision executed even as he pressed sweetmeats into her grasp and ordered her chased silver cup refilled), she was swept along on a tide of joyous energy; oddly not feeling the need to sit at all. Éowyn drifted happily through the group, let herself float on the high good humour, laughing (sometimes correctly) at the swift jokes and unbothered by so many strange faces after days of isolation.
It was reassuring to have the sight of Faramir's dark head across the room or just out of reach; but now and again, when she began to hesitate or feel flustered by the attention, he would pull her by the arm into a different little group, turn the focus to another soul and squeeze her hand. Then his eyes would swim back to her, shining and wistful, as if he, too, found the clamour all too much. Éowyn bit her lip. She was touched by his attention. Did he also remember fondly the perfect quiet of inexpertly winding bandages? Did he long to be back upon a stone bench in a secluded corner of the garden, alone and easy in each other's company?

Startled by her own thoughts, Éowyn hid her jumbled emotions for a moment in the cup.

Throughout the eve she had been unable to keep her eyes from him; could not stop being aware of Faramir's presence even through the press of people. How very odd. What was it that bound them? Held her attention as lightly if joined by a silken thread?

Confused, she fingered a frieze of ships about the goblet's rim. How could this be? Aragorn was her lodestone. It was he, the King, whom she wanted to follow to the Black Gate., not this maddeningly present Captain who, a bare seven days since they had known each other, distracted her like a dizzy girl.

Impossible. Incredible. And yet emotions were said to ripen quickly when the fear of death lay over all…. 

Éowyn took another gulp of the heady wine. It was fortified, hit her head quite swiftly and certain to be lethal if she did not sip. Hesitantly she raised her chin. Faramir's gaze was still upon her. A slow smile spread across his lips before he inclined his dark head, saluting with his cup.

_Yavanna_, there it was again. The beautiful smile from when the Eagles had arrived—the one that lit all his high proud face from eyes to chin. Unfettered. Easy. And all too rare.

Her heart gave a sudden flip and a warmth that had nothing to do with dark red liquid stole across her chest.

_Béma_, but he was a handsome man. And brave. And thoughtful and wryly funny. But a scholar, nothing like the loud, boastful Riders she had known.

At a burst of laughter he turned back to the group. Éowyn stood and watched the Steward's staff (at their ease and many well-gone in their cups). They sang and talked and jested, following their lord's every word but also sharing their solemn tears. One man, a young page in the livery of the Tower, stood with streaks of grief running down his cheeks, asking quietly if were seemly to celebrate when there were those who would not come home.

"Aye," came the rough, choked response, "With all the heart that we still have."

And then Éowyn knew that Faramir reminded her most of Théodred. One who also understood that a gentle heart did not diminish a brave man's worth. One with whom she need never fear.

She let his memory wash over, sweet and bitter all at once, draining the cup's dregs in honour, turning it over to let the last drop fall to the floor in silent offering.

"Are you well?"

Faramir had pushed his way back to her and laid a worried hand on her forearm. She smiled and nodded through a sheen of tears. "I am. Whither now are we bound?"

"The barracks."
"Is it far?" she asked, beginning to wonder about the advisedness of visiting the promised
townhouse. Her feet were a little sore. This was much farther than she had walked in days and the
soft moccasins she had worn to slip out of her bed were not made for traipsing across cobblestones.

Faramir shot her a concerned frown. "Not far. Should we rest a bit?"

They did.

For a time they perched like errant children on the top of the Seventh Circle's steps, shoulder to
shoulder, quite unconcerned at the odd sight they made. Once headed back down again, they made
slow progress on the winding stair; stopped for a word by nearly every soul who headed the other
way. Of course the City's Guard would know their new Steward but Éowyn shook her head,
wondering at how Faramir remembered so many names.

"Statistics," he replied, when she voiced the question. "There is a nearly even chance that any one of
them will called Halias or Turgon or even Hurin. It is tradition to use the Steward's family's names. I
pity the poor lad with Hyarmendacil."

The stair wound down through the dark jut of the City's eastern prow and seemed to go on forever.
By the time they reached the lower circle Éowyn began to feel a little frayed and thankful to hear the
barrack before they spied its well-worn, iron-banded door.

Song and stomping and a lively jig oozed out with the light between the jamb.

Faramir pushed the heavy wood panel wide to find a thicket of tanned, weatherbeaten men—clad not
in the black and silver of the City but the green and grey and brown of Ithilien's remaining guard.
They sat carousing in a long oblong space. Rough wooden tables and benches, rubbed smooth by
long years of use, graced the rush strewn floor. Low chairs and chests crowded round a great
hearthside above which gleamed assorted drinking horns and racks. Much prized windows were set
high into the farther wall.

It was homely and warm and already filled with the fug of sweat and beer.

Faramir grinned and stepped into a pool of amber torchlight.

The music stopped and to a man they stood.

He nodded gravely once into the ringing quiet, swallowing hard before smartly saluting back.

With a few, spare words of gratitude and a brief but heartfelt standing silence, he let himself be
mobbed.

"Three cheers for t'Captain!" came the cry from somewhere near the back. The applause was
deafening. Éowyn hung back beside the threshold, noting that every dark or tawny soul was
bandaged in some way—these were the men of the company too injured to follow Mablung. They
had earned their merriment and release.

By the fire a grizzled, grey whiskered sergeant with a crutch nestled a fiddle into his shoulder while a
ginger-haired lad with one bandaged hand tapped on a small tambor. The music and the dancing
recommenced, and as she scanned the room, (noting more than one young servant from the Houses'
wards: Varan had obviously relieved a few young women of their chores), Éowyn smiled to spot one
particular soldier's homely face.

Anborn had a mug in hand and a blushing Kira on his knee.
"My Lady, you found us and high time! Where have you been?" He took a large gulp of ale and wiped his foam-covered upper lip with the back of his good hand. The other was out of its sling and perched lightly on Kira's hip. She did not seem to mind. "The party's been going hours now."

From the press arout the tall figure by the door, Faramir might yet be a while. Éowyn dropped gratefully down onto the bench. "I believe we have walked right round the City, Lieutenant, and spoken to nigh every soul. The Citadel and the Court. The wards. I am lost, I think. I know this is the barracks and this is the sixth of seven circles, but I would not know how to find the Houses now."

Kira raised her hand and unerringly pointed past the firegrate. "Away around the south side of the spur, m'lady, I am sure the Lord Steward will see you safely home," she added shyly. "Mind you set out for your bed before the changing of the guard. They shut the Houses' gate at the starting of the middle watch."

Would that be full midnight? Éowyn was unsure but then the thought sped away as a mug of something encouragingly foamy was thrust into her hand. She took a cautious sip. It was lighter than the beer she brewed at home, thin and pale, only mildly hoppy, and it took her then that memories of colour stick from childhood. Beer to Éowyn was a brighter, deeper gold. Dark like the barley of Aldburg's heavy fields, not this poor butter yellow. It made her long for Hilde's famous honeyed brew or a horn of stronger mead.

Anborn noticed her hesitation and leaned across. "Would you prefer wine? I planned ahead and borrowed some Dorwinion from the officer's mess." He pointed to a leather wineskin tucked safely below the table top.

'Borrowed'? She briefly wondered what other 'neighbourly' skills the Ranger had but shook her head. "Thank you, Anborn. This will do well enough." It would. Such thin ale would not addle her tired head and although it might not be ill to lose a little of her hard-earned self-control, the habit was hard to break.

Éowyn took a deeper draught. The noise of this smaller, almost intimate, celebration buzzed around. Torches flickered and music swirled. Tables were pushed back for dancing and platters of dried fruits and strong cheese were passed to hungry revelers. At Anborn's encouragement she burned a finger eating fresh roasted chestnuts out of a curiously heavy leaf.

Between sets of tipsy reels, when the dancers were winded and needed a short rest, yet another tall thin, black-haired Gondorian, distinguishable only by the wicked scar from eye to chin, took the floor. He sang a ballad in a high clear tenor lumbered by the heavier accent of Pelargir's docks; she could not follow all the Sindarin words but the emotion needed no translation. Pride. Honour. Love of country. After that came requests. The man, Hirlin by name, gamely picking out each favourite until faltering at what sounded from the rhythm to be a southern shanty.

"Let the Captain have a go!" someone hollered and the crowd all clapped.

"He always knows every word," Anborn whispered, and Faramir flushed at the attention, a slight smile playing about his lips. It was clear they all expected him to agree. In the face of concerted clapping and a little shoving he shrugged good-naturedly, raised his own goblet to his lips for a bracing gulp, then pushed out into the open space.

The rich baritone that picked up the tune was nowhere as striking as the first, but it was absolutely unabashed. Faramir sang easily, with confidence, imbuing what she soon realized was a rather ribald song (about Uinen and Ossë and just how the Lady of the Sea distracted her lover long enough to calm the waves) with a dignity it perhaps did not quite deserve. She clapped delightedly with all the rest. That Faramir sang was a welcome surprise. It was a much vaunted skill among her people: to be
accomplished at performing the many teaching ballads was a point of honour and she herself had sung many times before the Golden Hall; as the King's Sister-Daughter it was her duty to sing to rest their bravest warriors. When would there be time to honour Théoden and Théodred? How many more times would she sing in the days and weeks to come?

With a quick sign to ward off ill luck from her maudlin thoughts, she turned her attention back again. Faramir had nearly finished. By the time he waved away more offers and ducked back beside her at the bench, his face was flushed and free of care. The fiddle struck up again and the floor soon filled with whooping men and a few swirling skirts, even a man or two paired off and dancing with each other as they did out on patrol.

"Do you know this dance?" he asked, gesturing to the floor.

She shook her head. "I do not."

The piece had an odd, almost restricted motion; part jig in place, part half-hearted reel. She supposed it would be economical with space and mayhap that was the point. From what little Faramir had said of the refuges in Ithilien, the company were quite used to confined, close quarters.

"It surprises me," she admitted.

"How so?"

She nodded to a laughing Kira who was steering a none-too steady private through the steps. "It is not the least bit fussy or complicated, if yon man's success is to be judged."

Faramir laid a hand across his breast and laughed. "No indeed. This is not a full dress ball in Merethrond complete with formal kit and gloves and major to call the several thousand steps." He looked askance and grinned. "I daresay, we have something of a reputation."

"We or I?" Éowyn blurted before she could stop herself.

A black eyebrow rose. "Which would you prefer?"

Abashed she dropped her gaze into her lap and played uncertainly with the threads on her bandaged arm. Was this flirting? Was she expected to keep up? And more to the point did she wish to?

It was she who had boldly asked to accompany him. It never served to half jump a fence.

Éowyn lifted her eyes up and boldly held his gaze. "Neither Gondor nor her steward are quite what I imagined."

The second eyebrow rose. "Really?" Faramir drawled slowly.

"I did not expect Gondor's highest noble to blurt 'Morgoth's Balls' on the practice field. Nor quite so easily buck all the rules. Stoningland has a reputation of order and protocol to uphold."

Faramir chuckled and saluted with his cup. "You have me there. A reputation that this crew will surely wipe out this night." He leaned back, stretched out his long legs and glanced across to the now woefully wobbling private. Kira had abandoned him for Anborn's steadier arms but it had not stopped the man from bouncing haphazardly to the tune.

"He's listing to starboard."

'Pardon?"
"Drunk." Faramir explained. "I apologize. My Uncle and Grandfather were both steeped in sailing terms. What would you say in Edoras?"

Éowyn giggled and covered her mouth. "'He's 'on the wrong hoof', like a horse that can't find the lead." She downed the last of her ale and made a face. "A state I am sure to avoid if I have to down much more of this yellow water."

Faramir straightened up immediately. "'We can't have that." His long arm reached across the tabletop to a forest of dark-filled bottles. "Let me find you something more to your taste. It is not likely to be the best but surely better than what I served you the other night."

"Nay." She stopped his rise with a light hand upon his arm and he frowned quizzically.

How to explain? All day she had felt on the edge of some great precipice, perched between light and dark, and though they celebrated, though she had taken his hand and turned to face the light, she still had a sense of disquiet underneath. As if events were spinning faster that she could catch.

Losing her head (and tongue) to drink would only give them more control.

The flagon thudded softly on the scarred tabletop. "Faramir, before you ask, I have no intention of listing to any compass point. This is not the night to show I can imbibe, intelligently or otherwise. I would not have you carry me home 'off hoof' yourself and injured."

An embarrassed flush swept upwards from the hollow of his throat. "I beg to differ. You need not fear being dumped unceremoniously on the stones, Éowyn. Not with my so-called gift."

Ah. How ever had she forgotten? That he had not suffered unduly from the unorthodox sedative was welcome. Faramir had spoken truly of its affect and while that thought reassured, it disconcerted.

The sudden sharp reminder of their odd exchange felt like an unexpected dousing in the frigid Snowbourn. By what magic had she heard his thoughts? He spoke of a gift as if it were a real ability; like a sense, natural and innate. The idea was strange and seemingly impossible, yet that part of her heart that wanted to trust another, craved it even, wished it to be true.

To 'see' another, to know that they could be trusted- that would be a gift.

The night before, mind whirling hard, Eowyn had not slept. No amount of tossing and turning settled her fractious thoughts and so she had arisen; sought the garden wall as questions chased their tails like hounds stuck full of burrs.

Did he know that she had heard? It seemed likely not—he would have been far more embarrassed in the moment- but what did that signify? Was her 'hearing' not deliberate? Had she 'eavesdropped' on him herself? She longed to ask, to know more about this strange affinity that they shared, but did not know how to begin. There had been no time, no proper place and now answers must wait for another day.

Her mind could not be trusted yet to be cogent with her words.

Faramir sat back down and if he found her sudden quiet puzzling it did not show. He left her to her musings, sat at ease quietly watching the revelers with interest, fingers tapping in time to the beat. At length he rose and excused himself, made his slow way across the sea of Men, gaining at last the threshold of a low stone lintel that lead to another hall. From the contrast traffic she guessed it must gain the privy.

Éowyn was about to rise and ask where she might find a skin of water when Private Eldrin, blushing
furiously, cleared his throat and shyly bowed over her proffered hand.

"My lady, would you care for this next dance?"

She hesitated. The music was lively, pleasingly so; a pipe had been added to the mix and it was a fast reeling tune but a Gondorian reel, she could not forget that. There would absolutely be no vying to lift lasses above one's waist and the steps were certain to be twisted as a tunnel snake.

And she had little hope of following.

"Private...I…"

She could not avoid a quick look down. Her doeskin shoes peeked out from below her hem. They looked a wreck. Stained and split near the toe, smudged beyond all hope of cleaning but miraculously still together. The thought of further abuse was unappealing and it was a long walk back.

Eldrin, smart and gallant lad, must have guessed the source of her temporizing for he followed her gaze for the just barest moment, astoundingly sank even lower in his bow.

"I assure you, my lady I will do my utmost to not trod upon your toes."

"Five castars says he does!"

Anborn's tenor boomed across from the bar where he and another Ranger were tipping over a large cask of ale. The cheek! Éowyn opened her mouth to protest but then paused and bit her lip. Were there prohibitions on betting in Minas Tirith? She had no idea. There certainly were none in the Riddermark: every Eorling loved a horse race and betting made it only sweeter. Not wanting to embarrass Faramir in front of his men, she took note of the reassuring smiles of anticipation that raced full speed around the room.

Man after none-too-sober man searched his pockets for spare coin. This was evidently routine and what happened next neatly reinforced that fact.

"Ten says she dumps him before the second set!" someone called raucously above the music.

*Béma.* That did it! Such nerve from a smooth-cheeked Stonging boy!

A daughter of the Royal House of Eorl never quit.

To loud hoots and whistles she rose with all the icy dignity that she could muster, set her shoulders back, swept her unbound golden hair straight back out of the way and placed her good hand in Eldrin's right.

Her splinted arm settled comfortably at his elbow. "Twenty says he won't Lieutenant!" she shot back to thunderous applause.

By her next breath Eldrin had whisked her out into the tune. The reel was fast, as fast as she feared and quite intricate. To the sound of stamping, clapping Rangers and their guests they made two turns of the oaken floor, skipping and spinning back and forth; once or twice turning entirely the wrong way round and needing Eldrin to affect a hasty rescue.

It was fun and fervid and by their second turn she was laughing and whooping at each corner with all the rest, enjoying herself so much that she almost forgot the wager. She craned her neck across Eldrin's shoulder to catch a very satisfying amount indeed of coin changing hands.
As she suspected, the lanky Private was a sure bet.

"Do you have a sweetheart?" Éowyn asked when they reached the head of the row again, pausing long enough to catch their breath. Unlike many of the younger men he had behaved with strict decorum. Not once had he sought to steal a kiss from any of the blushing girls nor had his hands wandered on her waist.

A sudden flush ran straight up to his sandy brow. "I do, my lady. My fiancé. Eliane. Annwn and Madril's eldest girl. She's gone with her mam to Tolfaías Isle. I hope that they will be back before the King arrives."

"I hope so, too." said Éowyn and meant it. He was a kind young man, working valiantly to lead her in the dance and too mannerly to let on that she, so unfamiliar with the steps, had squashed his toes. Keeping her feet moving without tripping had become oddly difficult.

As they swept into the new measure Éowyn found herself challenged by the effort to make her mind and mouth work all at once. It should not be this hard.

And the anemic unworthy ale could not possibly be the culprit.

"May I cut in?"

A cultured voice from just beyond her elbow gave her a sudden start.

The music had slowed, the dancers now coupled off and Faramir had snuck back quietly as a cat. He stood, dark head inclined in query, looking from Eldrin back to her with a decided twinkle in his eyes and twist of humour to his lips.

"Private?" She glanced up to the younger man. Eldrin still smiled, genuinely it appeared, but perhaps it was time to give his light boots a rest from target practise.

She dropped her sword hand and curtseyed briefly. "You may."

At her regal nod Faramir swept her up in a pair of long strong arms. Unlike Eldrin, he held her waist quite firmly, subtly guiding her with little shifts of steady fingers.

It felt safe and at once exciting; floating across the floor and pressed so very close. His chest was warm and solid, his long hair brushed her cheek and the heat of his hand seeped through the fabric of her dress.

Éowyn forgot herself in the enjoyment, no longer worried where to put her feet,

"What was so amusing?" she asked at last, leaning in to whisper next his ear.

He smiled and turned them quickly, pressing her so close she felt the rumble of his amusement.

"I cannot have Anborn with too swelled a head and purse. They were getting ready to lay bets again."

She pulled back to better see his face. "Whatever do you mean? His steps were perfect. I still win. It was not Eldrin on my toes!"

His mouth quirked. "Should I have noticed?"

"You are a Ranger. If no I must entertain grave doubts about your ability to even spot an Orc!"
Faramir glanced down, incredulous. "Do you expect my men can see straight enough to properly adjudicate? You have more faith in them than I!"

Éowyn felt a laugh bubble up. Of course he had been watching her. With a coiling thrill of happiness unwinding in her chest she leaned into his warmth and gave herself to the lilting of the fiddle.

Round and round they spun and somehow the sand in the hourglass ceased to fall—it was magical and suddenly so effortless. The hand that clasped in hers was solid, the bicep below her left hard and wiry, trained to fight, not soft like some of Gondor's nobles who toured the wards and the sense of it sent a melting languidness to her core.

They turned again. Callused fingers hugged at her waist and laced tighter with her own. Her skin prickled from the contact. What would it feel like to have their rough strength touch her nape?

"Have you noticed there are no bets now…?"

"Pardon?"

Faramir's sudden words started Éowyn out of her guilty reverie. She tripped, almost losing purchase before he quickly clasped her harder, steadying her firmly until she settled once again.

"No." Éowyn's cheeks flamed in embarrassment. She had noticed little outside the ring of him. "Are they afraid of retribution from the chief?"

"No. They know my reputation. I love to dance. One of my favourite parts of ending a patrol is being back for the barracks ball. My feet are as smooth as my cheek."

The rogue! Now Faramir was teasing. She had not quite forgiven him for shaving off his beard but his chuckle was low, pitched just for the two of them, and between the sound and the scent of musk and herb that clung Éowyn found her knees became oddly weak.

It was hard to keep composure.

When she tripped a second time he stopped still in the middle of the floor and frowned. "Are you tired?"

"A little." She was. The music had moved on to yet another song and she had missed the shift. "What time is it?"

His mouth quirked. "Past due we should have left but late enough to hold our heads up high."

"But the townhouse?"

"Will still be there come morning. I confess to feeling a little like a limp wet rag myself." Faramir rolled his injured shoulder awkwardly. "I am starting to ache in my bones. Shall we go?"

"We?"

The torchlight swam as Éowyn stood blearily and sighed. It would be blissful to lose herself in the pure joy of good company but it had been a long and extremely trying day.

She was tired and did not know the way.

And had no doubt Elfhelm and the Riders could welcome Anor's rise without her.

Shyly, slowly, Éowyn slipped her arm through his. "Lead me home, good Captain."
They snuck back through a world made dim and mysterious; the moon's light casting shadows of indigo and grey on the white sleeping stone.

Éowyn told herself his hand about her arm was simple consideration but it did not feel quite so. Neither of them it seemed wished to lose the thread, the feeling of connection but a stronger feeling of relief stole up when they spied the carved archway with its stone shield and Este's sigil of somber grey.

"Of course." Faramir muttered to the high dark space as Éowyn came abruptly to a halt.

"Oh…"

The gate was tightly shut and barred. They could not get in without raising the night porter and likely half the staff.

Éowyn felt her shoulders droop. "We are too late."

Reluctantly she turned down slope. Imrahil's townhouse in the was who knew farther on but at least she could hope that Lothíriel would offer them a bed.

Faramir tugged on her arm. "This way. North, not south."

"Where?" she groaned, too bleary eyed to tell which way was up, let alone direction by only Varda's stars. Faramir's tall back retreated in the gloom. Her tired limbs did not wish to turn but she forced herself, uncertain of where was he going. North was where-back to the barracks? Was not the gate for the Fifth back the way they came? As she came abreast Faramir explained the source of her confusion.

"There is another entrance…"

"There is?!"

He led her along the hushed thoroughfare to what at first looked merely like another section of the Houses' dust-covered wall. Faramir ran his fingers across the stone, probing at a thin dark line and then Éowyn could see it: a narrow shortish wooden door. White-washed and cunningly painted with fake veins and mottled patches to match the White Mountain's fabled marble.

It had no discernible handle or hinge and none would take it for an opening.

"This leads inside the Houses?" she asked, brows furrowed in a line.

"Eventually," Faramir explained. "It is meant as a way for the occupants to flee should the inner court be taken. I have not been in it since I was a boy but Father had the old passages unbarred and stocked after we lost Osgiliath." He frowned and placed a hand upon the wood. "We should come out by the eastern garden wall."

The door yielded to his push. Inside was dark as pitch, the low tunnel's ceiling was roughly rounded and the space was barely wide enough for a litter to be carried.

Faramir bent, offered a word of thanks to the City Guard for the clean lantern and fresh tinder and
struck a light.

Its glow showed a long disused, dusty but mercifully empty space.

"It might have been easier to rouse the porter," she said uncertainly.

"And face the wagging of Ioreth's tongue?" Faramir shook his head. "Not likely. She was to be in charge of the wards tonight after Aunt Rini finished up."

Ah. "I see your point." If they were to spend many minutes being 'spoken to' by the loquacious nurse it would be cock crow before they found their beds.

They picked their way slowly, twisting round corners with care, Faramir taking her good hand and steadying her on the worn stone underfoot. She was thankful for it, the tunnel was dry but sloped: short flights of a few crude steps came upon them suddenly and she had to concentrate. The lantern helped but cast angled shadows that in the curve made seeing too far ahead impossible.

At one sloping stretch Faramir yelped and bumped his head.

"It seemed higher when I was four," he said, sheepishly, dropping her hand to rub at his offended scalp.

"It was," Éowyn remarked, running a finger over the rough stone wall. The surface was not smooth like the planed City walls: three thousand years after Minas Tirith's founding the ridges and grooves of hammer blows could still be felt. To one used to wattle and daub it was an amazing feat. "This would have been heavy work to excavate."

"It was." Faramir raised his hand to his eyes and peered into the gloom ahead. "The Houses and the Barracks, the Palace and the Citadel all have hidden tunnels. The last time these passages were used for other than childish pranks was in the time of the usurper Castamir." He glanced back and flashed her a sudden smile. "I still cannot quite believe they won't be needed. Only this morning I awoke worrying how quickly folk could be moved. To be here, and free, the Shadow lifted, seems verily like a dream."

Several more minutes of travelling reached another wooden door. This one looked more aged, its rough wood was warped and split but though Éowyn braced herself for disappointment, the oiled hinges turned perfectly smoothly.

_Bema's blessed horn._ She hadn't fancied the idea of traversing the space again.

At the verge she followed Faramir out, jumping down a step to find her feet on the turf below the garden wall. Ahead the shuttered windows of the eastern sleeping wing hung like dark eyes in the bright white of the wall. All the lights were out but one: the third from the south. Hers. A servant must have a left a lamp waiting for her return. She gathered up her hem and picked her way between the flower beds. Almost home. The thought of flopping down fully clothed on her bed and sleeping the next day round put a new spring in her step.

On the gravel below her faintly glowing window they paused.

"Do you fancy sneaking down the hall under Varan's nose or should I boost you up?" Faramir asked, eyeing the height of the sill. It was low, waist high and meant to let in the morning breeze in heat of the summer months.

"You would? You could?" As much as the idea of so directly flouting the Master Healer did appeal, Éowyn was done. Not another step. She desired to be inside now.
"I would."

He seemed quite certain, and so she reached for the shutter's base. It would not budge. The wood was wedged tight against the stone–the shutter must be locked.

She was about to brace herself for Ioreth when a quick twist of Faramir's dagger undid the inside latch.

"Boromir," was all the comment her surprise received.

She shook her head. A most unconventional lesson to pass to a little brother. How many bedrooms had the hard-living Captain-General bolted out of? Dozens? Hundreds, if the legends of a grinning bear of a man with an appetite for wine and life to match were to be believed. One day they would sit by a fire and remember him. She would look forward to it.

Faramir neatly sheathed the dagger once more but now stilled, brow furrowed, fumbling with something on his belt.

"Valar," came the quiet oath. "I am an idiot. I nearly forgot. The reason I came to find you earlier this morn."

Éowyn swayed a little, reminding herself he meant yesterday. *Must they do this now?* "What is it?" His hands were working an unfamiliar toggle rather more clumsily than the window.

"Your dagger."

A stained leather sheath was slipped from off his belt and a blade emerged. Chased in gold. With running steeds and stags chasing across the open wold.

She hardly dared to breathe. "How?" she began but could not form the words. Théodred's dagger. The one lost after the Pelennor. Her last piece of him. She had thought it gone, mourned at its loss.

Cool steel was pressed by light fingers into her palm. It was, as a gesture, thoughtful and caring and considerate.

And all too much.

For the second time that night that Éowyn felt herself near to tears. *Damn the man. Shieldmaiden's do not cry.*

Against her will a pair of tears streaked across her now dusty cheeks. Gallantly Faramir pulled out a kerchief, passed it across and said not a word at the display.

"We are not to have weapons in the Houses," he explained as she scrubbed at the evidence. "It was taken from you but not mislaid. I had a word with Loic. The haft was tagged incorrectly with your brother's name."

She stared dumbfoundedly at the little square of parchment hanging down. *Of course. Éomer had been there when her wound was tended by Aragorn. Likely it was he who had given the dagger over to a servant. The mistake was easy enough to make–one who spoke Sindarin might not catch the different sounds with the similarity of their names."

"I…"

Faramir shrugged. "It mattered to you. It was little enough to do."
Little enough but meant so very much. He stood patiently while she tucked the precious talisman into her belt, wiped her cheeks again. Strands of her long blond hair stuck to her cheek where it was wet. Gently, skittish as a colt, he reached out to tuck a stray piece behind her ear. It was sticky with spider silk, as much a mess as the rest of her but she could not bring herself to care.

"Thank you," Éowyn murmured. Her heart was so full. How it had not blocked up all her breath? "You are…"

His half-smile smile was wry. "Hopeless? Oblivious? Messy? All have been said before."

She wanted to laugh and cry at once. The disarming and self-deprecating charm that had attracted her would not let him accept a compliment. "Kind." she finished.

"Oh dear." His mouth twisted briefly in a grimace. "The endearment every suitor dreads. But that I am."

What did he mean? It was so clearly not what he had hoped. Éowyn searched his face. "Are you?"

"Am I what?"

Without her noticing they had closed the little space between.

The hand that had touched her hair now held her wrist. She tried to quell the sudden thudding of her heart.

Once, she would have doubted her newborn feelings as sane and true, but now, this night, they seemed no more impossible than salvation.

They had suffered together; grieved; worked. Found an ease and affinity that must be more than passing fancy.

Between them a wall had come tumbling down and she must choose the path to take.

Had not Théoden-King spoken boldly on a windy step?

_The time for fear is past._

Shaking like a leaf before a sudden storm Éowyn looked into his clear grey eyes and answered.

"A suitor."

Elation and surprise flashed across Faramir's handsome face. "Truly?! You would have my answer?"

Éowyn felt oddly light yet rooted to the spot. Her words now would change her life. Could she do this? Could she follow her heart beyond the last edge of bitter rime? Let go a vision for the flesh and blood Man who stood before?

She took a deeper breath.

And nodded.

"I would. You used the word. I ask you to speak plain."

"Yes! Yes, Éowyn!" Faramir cried delightedly. They had stood transfixed, gazing wonderingly at each other as the moment stretched, tremulous and full of possibility; and now she found her feet so light she could float above the mountain's peak. He smiled and raised her hand. "Oh my lady, when
first we met I said that you were beautiful, and though my tongue ran before my heart I say that it spoke true. You are beautiful. And brave. And I am beyond blessed to have this chance."

His eyes, once uncertain and full of mirrored starlight, now stirred with darker fire.

Cool, light fingers held her wrist and turned it upward to the sky.

"May I?"

"Oh yes."

Faramir bent his raven head; brushed lips across the soft skin below her palm. The kiss was gentle, just the slightest press of surer warmth melting across her skin, but still it set her cheeks aflame; sent a singing fire all through her veins. A promise. Of more. And she understood then what her head had failed to convince her heart for days.

_Yavanna, I am lost._

They drew apart. Faramir laid down her hand and looked up through the swaying leaves. Tilion had sailed Ithil as high as he would go. A stronger breeze now danced in the branches; set the moonlight to glimmering on Theo's blade and the metal of the lamp.

"I must go," he sighed. "The watch will change and there will be healers about quite soon."

She hesitated, wanting the magic of that night to never end, but he was right. They would both be better in the morn for hours of needed sleep. "Rest well," she murmured.

"And you."

He dropped his hand and his good arm slid about her waist. In one quick move she was up and over the window sill and beyond the shutters he was gone. Even the quiet crunch of gravel soon faded and she was left, still trembling, not quite sure that it had not all been a fevered dream.

No.

Éowyn closed the window, shed her slippers wearily, wriggled her cramped toes and left the ruined doeskin blithely in the middle of the floor. By the bedside she did not undress: the ties were too hard with her bandaged arm and truly, she was quite happy to fall down upon the coverlet. The night was warm. Her hair would be a bird’s nest but she did not care. Kira would help her on the morrow.

 Undoing the simple clasp of her girdle, she set it with Théodred's dagger upon the low dresser, let her leaden body sink down onto the neat expanse of feather bed, and gratefully laid her head upon the pillow.

Éowyn closed her eyes. Sleep would take its time to come; her limbs ached, not with the sharp heaviness of injury but with the prickling energy of too much use. She considered ringing the bell, asking for a posset but nothing could induce her to lift her arm so far. Better to settle on her own.

After too many minutes of restless stretching, twisting this way and that, she finally found some comfort; crossed her faintly throbbing arm across her stomach for support and willed her body to uneasy peace.

_There._

At first she thought it better-nothing now need impede her dreams, but soon she found it was not so.
Her sword hand felt unsettled. Too light. Oddly untethered to the world and all at once it struck her
why that should be.

_The garden wall. The ward. The Citadel and barracks. Her window._

In dread or happiness it had not changed.

At every place her fingers had been laced with his. They had held hands almost the entire day.

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Chapter End Notes

We have, as you may have noticed, *grin*, apparently diverted a teensy bit from canon here. We are now in the days that Tolkien spoke of as 'golden' but gave us no detail. How do we get from this chapter to the 'Kiss on the walls" where Faramir is uncertain of his reception? Well, as noted by the Bard in a certain summer's frolic: "the course of true love never did run smooth." Stay tuned…there are some rocky shoals to navigate ahead—wherein green-eyed monsters lurk.

Please do check out Mythlorn’s wonderful art at tumblr here: http://www.mythlorn.tumblr.com

Big thank yous for beta'ing go to Eschiziola and Wheelrider this month, and to Annafan, Thanwen and Artura for comments and encouragement.
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

At last! This still counts as coming in August, doesn't it? Please be warned, I really wanted to get this out, so the second half is unbeta'd. I have gone over it twice but am certifiably blind to the typos. Expect an update in the days to come once I have time to have another whack.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sometimes punctuality brings rewards.

This was the conclusion of a certain Princess of Dol Amroth as she paused on the threshold of her brother's elegant, east-facing breakfast room.

The morning sun had reached just the perfect angle. It streamed through arched panes of cut and coloured glass, set brilliant diamonds of blue and green to dance upon the wall; hazy and just slightly indistinct like the canvases her little sister had loved to paint.

Ivriniel smiled at the ship and swan and the bright cerulean of Cobas' shallow shore. The theme, of course, was not unusual. Dol Amroth's sigil adorned many houses in their demesne, but this particular ship was unique. High prowed and sleek, a trader for another more peaceful time, it was the Alphros, her grandfather's fabled ship—its colours still glorious, bright and vibrant forty years after his passing; after her grandmother Fana had convinced Maenas, that most famous of Elven artists, to come south and create windows that so captivated the White City's court.

She walked into the sunlit space, rested a hand on a pale carved chair and looked about. Blue and green and sun. So little and yet so much had changed. The young woman of thirty springs who first saw the new-made work had been already then devoted to her craft; had turned aside all offers for her hand. At first this choice had pained her parents—the severity of their petite and fiercely proud eldest's path was unusual. It was not common for a princess to hold herself apart—to spurn a life of children and companionship—but then, in time, they understood.

Sometimes a heart, once wounded, can only scar.

Ivriniel worked hard to hide the signs. She delighted quietly in her work. Doted on (and bossed) her siblings' children. Watched for the myriad small joys of life. There were always spring's new buds, a nephew's hug and the beauty of a room. Around her carefully constructed, ordered world—the ward, its stillroom, the ever growing healing herbs—the years passed, fell like faded blossoms as Arda began to darken.

In time the once bustling docks at Amroth's hill saw little of his kinfolk, of Lórien or the Greenwood; the Elder race retreated as a shadow grew, and Ivriniel, hair greying swiftly until it took on the hue of her healer's head-rail, mourned the change. As she watched her sister fade and her fiercely honourable little brother grow into his strength without his beloved wife quiet tears of helplessness were shed. In private. Where none could see them water a growing theory of which her father would disapprove…
Life was spent all too easily. The Edain were doomed.

If Minas Tirith's Master Healer understood his assistant to harbor this gravest heresy it did not show. The quite un-Dol Amroth sentiment paradoxically made Ivriniel only fight the harder. Every wound and mangled limb was a battle to be won. Each man who rose to fight another day was a minor victory. Her doubt worked in harness to his hope... slowly, inexorably turning a tide of human misery that she, pessimist at heart, never thought to crest.

It felt oddly unmooring on this unlooked for morning to be proven wrong...

Ridiculous woman.. there is too much to be done to drift.

With a sigh, Ivriniel shook off her melancholy and sat down at the damask covered table. The basic spread arrayed -butter and sweet rolls and cheese-was simple but nourishing. Enough to slake a stomach already growling after an early visit to the ward. She had wanted to reassure herself on their latest patient and now needed fortifying.

Neat fingers reached out to begin with the elegant enamelled Kahva pot just as quick light steps outside the door announced her young niece was finally up.

"Good morning Aunt Rini!"

Lothíriel's sunny face breezed into the room. Ivriniel tilted her cheek to receive the customary welcome kiss "Good morning my dear. Did you sleep well?"

"I did..." The girl smiled wanly, pulling out a chair and sinking gratefully into a faded velvet seat. "Like a log. I hardly moved at all."

Her aunt could well credit it. A telltale crease on Lothíriel's left cheek bore witness to this fact, while below dark and heavy lashes there were also dark but fainter bags. Obviously her niece's deep discussion with Rohan's Marshal had lasted long into the night.

Ivriniel quickly poured a second softly steaming cup. "You could rest in the afternoon,"

Lothíriel looked over the hard gold cheese and plate of precious early pears from their little greenhouse. Her dark head shook. "I am not tired."

Ah, the resilience and energy of youth. Ivriniel doubted the statement but not the sentiment that lay behind. The cock had just crowed when Ivriniel heard Elfhelm's polite good-morn at the townhouse's covered door. Who of the young ones would sleep when the world was made new again? Certainly not her brother's children. Or her sister's son for that matter and that brought to mind the intriguing fact that Faramir had not made it back to the house.

She had checked. The rooms customarily set aside for the Steward's sons were untouched.

"Did you see your cousin last night at all?"

Lothíriel paused in the midst of her tidy bite of fruit and frowned thoughtfully. "No," she said at last. "Not hide nor hair. Nor of Eowyn. The Marshal remarked upon it. He came to bring her down to join the Riders on the flats."

And did not find her? So Faramir and Eowyn had vanished. Ivriniel hid a small, pleased smile. From behind her stern grey gaze, she had watched the pair, seemingly joined at the hip; thriving and improving swiftly despite the shadow of the Black Breath. Her nephew was a grown and thoughtful man: the Lady of Rohan's virtue was entirely safe in his company but she, an ardent student of
horticulture, knew full well how swiftly dormant seeds ripened in parched and fallow earth.

Especially when they were offered the water of attention.

"I expect they were intelligent and turned in to their beds before the Houses barred the gate."

"This time." Lothíriel shared a wry smile with her aunt, not the only one to have noticed the Steward's unorthodox resting place. She brushed a few crumbs from her fingers and held out her cup to be refilled again "Is there any news from Father?"

"Not yet. Kale was so anxious to hear himself he has already left to ask at the Citadel."

"Oh…"

Lothíriel's narrow shoulders sagged a little but Ivriniel was not fooled. Her niece was far more concerned than she let on. The perennial target of three elder brothers' teasing, Lothíriel was quite adept at hiding the strong emotions of a great and courageous heart.

To wait for word from far-flung battle, this was a new and unpleasant experience.

"Do not fret. Ill news flies faster than the lords of air who graced us yesternoon. There will be word. And they are well."

This last was said with an air of such finality it made Lothíriel tilt her head, raise one brow in question. Ivriniel—surprised and oddly pleased,— snorted at the thought. She, the practical mind of the family, had had no vision; had never been the dreamer her younger siblings were. "No my dear, Lórien has not seen fit to visit me. I am simply quite certain of your father's skill and your brothers' strength and steadiness."

"Well Elphir's anyway. It is likely a good thing Erchirion was left behind… "

"Lothíriel! That is not quite fair!" Ivriniel exclaimed, but then wondered at her own protest. Imrahil's youngest boys had earned, deservedly, something of a reputation for pranks and jests. Amrothos, in particular, from a tender age had found it hard to keep still. His restless energy often found itself immersed in foolery. Her brother had worked hard to instill focus in the boy. It worked, most of the time, and danger could focus the mind like nothing else. "Someone has to oversee the fleet and Amrothos is the better rider."

"And father is a master strategist." Lothíriel giggled. "It is quite wonderfully convenient they have to be separated. I expect they'd have not reached their destination else."

"Thiri!"

Ivriniel's tone was chiding but she could not help returning the girl's teasing smile. It did feel good to turn ones nerves to humour. Years of waiting by the fire had taught her that news came swiftly or not at all; yet that day, most unlike herself, she felt entirely certain of a happy outcome. All that was needed to make the victory complete was to hear that their family was unscathed.

They finished their quiet meal, speaking mostly of the Houses' rounds before a discrete cough sounded from outside the door.

"Princess?"

Kale, Imrahil's young second Seneschal stood, blinking in the room's brighter light, a most intriguingly hopeful look upon his face. He was new to his position, and had helpfully not yet
acquired a long tenured servant's mask of unobtrusiveness. It seemed there was happy news.

"Come," she gestured and he obligingly shut the half open door, strode into the room with a seaman's rolling gait, carefully balancing a small silver tray in his one hand. A Corsair's blade had taken his left arm off just above the elbow.

It still irked her that she could not have saved the upper half.

Kale bowed admirably correctly and offered the tray across. "Pardon me my Lady, Princess Lothíriel. You have a note from Lord Faramir, and letters from the field with Lord Hurin compliments."

Letters? From the north? So soon? The messenger would have had to have taken oars down Anduin and near ruined a horse to get so far. Her fine grey brows shot up silently as she plucked the first two folded parchments off the tray. One bore the scrawling loops of her brother's hand but the second, addressed to Lothíriel, was in an unfamiliar blocky style.

She passed it across, forced herself to put Imrahil's aside in favour of reading her nephew's note. "Faramir sends his apologizes," she announced aloud. "He will meet Lord Hurin and the Marshal after noon and before that Bergil will know how to find him. He promises he will not miss us for dinner this eve."

"Oh.. that is nice.." Lothíriel replied absently. Her attention entirely taken by the parchment in her lap.

Ivriniel paused and waited for further comment, studiously finished the last sip of her kahva but nothing was volunteered. How very odd. A moment before the girl had been desperate for a word. Ignoring the lapse, she broke the blue swan seal. "This is from your father!" she announced, scanning the pages without looking up. "All are safe. He has hardly a scratch. Elphir is a little bruised but only lightly battered. Amrothos is insufferably proud of a broken wrist."

Lothíriel's grey eyes snapped up. "He is hurt?!"

"Yes. A mace. It broke his shield."

Thankfully, this was not the wrist the boy had broken twice before. For a moment she silently pitied those tasked with dosing him, by far, her most reluctant patient.

"The King is unharmed but the Perian Pippin is hurt," she went on, "he will mend quite soon, but the ones, Frodo and Samwise," the unfamiliar names rolled around her tongue, "who journeyed to Mount Doom will need many weeks to heal. They will stay at Cormallen field until then."

There was no reply, just a faint sound of parchment rustling. Ivriniel coughed and Lothíriel looked up, flushing faintly from throat to cheeks.

"Aunt Rini, will there be healers going to Cormallen? I could go and help with 'Rothos. With your permission of course," she added. "And Master Hallas'. I do not wish him to think me ungrateful for his support."

Ivriniel sat back, eyeing her niece, skeptically. Nursing 'Rothos? Whatever fancy had got into the young woman's pretty head?

While she had no doubt of Lothíriel's genuine desire to be of help, this was her next eldest brother.
The one who prided himself on being her chief irritant...

"He will be surly."

Lothíriel replied quite steadily. "And I shall be polite and firm and not let him get away with anything."

"As well you should." Ivriniel pursed her lips and frowned, thoughtfully. If the girl was keen to go what harm would it do? "In that case you need not ask for my permission, my dear. I am not babysitting you, merely chaperoning you at your chosen post. I will ask Warden Hallas to release you if that is your wish. The need here is no longer so very great but it would be prudent to ask your father first."

Lothíriel nodded eagerly. "And if he agrees?"

"Then you may go."

That seemed to satisfy Lothíriel for she picked up her pear and finished it quickly in a larger bite. "Do you know, Aunt Rini, how soon will be the service of Thanksgiving?"

Faramir had said something of this the day before. A gathering in Merethrond to give thanks for their salvation. It would be his first official act as Steward.

"A few days from now I should assume. The gates are still destroyed. All hands are on the deck working to shore them up."

Excitement lit a pair of dove grey eyes. "If there is a service.. can there be a ball? As Uncle used to hold?"

Ivriniel frowned, warningly. "The City is evacuated." It seemed hardly the time to think of grand festivities when there was a King to be welcomed back. Any many dead to be honoured. But still Lothíriel pressed her case.

"There are folk amongst the Riders and the Guard who play. And people will start to trickle back…"

That last point was certainly quite true. Ivriniel shrugged lightly. "I will let you ask your cousin that, I should think he has enough to do without organizing an entirely superfluous party," she added, not unkindly. "Either way, there will be a need for more supplies. I must ask Faramir to send a note to Erchirion. There will be no spring planting on the Pelennor whilst at home we have ample in the winter stores. 'Chirion should prepare send the fleet to meet barges at the river's mouth.'"

"Lothíriel..?" she asked, when there was no reply. Parchment rustled suspiciously again below the table top.

"What? Oh. Yes…of course. 'Chiron will be happy to help…"

"What does your brother say? I presume 'Rothos is ordered to rest and does write himself?"

"What?" Lothíriel's answer was not quite a squeak. She flushed again. ",Rothos? Um no."

Not a letter from Amrothos? How odd that Lothíriel did not share her news, but Ivriniel would not pry. Time was on her side. Her brother's children were much like him. Whatever was on his mind eventually came out.

"Is there a reply my Lady?" The manservant had begun to clear the dishes from the sideboard,
balancing a small tower of plates and porcelain cups upon the now empty tray.

"No thank you Kale, there no need."

He inclined his head politely, "And if there are enquiries?"

"I will go back to the wards. I want to watch Ranulf myself; the lad took an Orc's spear in Anorien. Varan's new compound has worked so far."

And she hoped it would continue to do well. Laying her napkin beside her place she rose, just as the tower bell rang out three times.

Kale bowed low beside his younger charge. "Princess Lothíriel?"

"Mhm…"

"My Lady?"

Lothíriel looked up, surprised, as if she had not heard Kale's soft words at all. Two spots of colour were still high upon her cheek.

"Princess, pardon my interruption, But did you not say you were to meet Lady Éowyn before the mid-morning bell."

"Oh blast. I quite forgot." She began to rise, hastily folding the letter and shoving a last morsel of roll into her mouth. "My apologies Aunt Rini. I must go. This was planned days ago, before the victory."

Ivriniel tried not to bristle at the profanity, and waved toward the door. "Off you go, Do not keep her waiting any more."

Lothíriel breezed out, as Ivriniel shook her head, resignedly. That child's mouth. It came of traipsing around after her elder brothers and their friends, let to run wild too young; truly a child of Leylin for whom promptness never got in the way of a good conversation. Her sociable and energetic sister-in-law, the bright and endlessly curious center of Dol Amroth's court, had passed on those talents to her only daughter.

Normally, Lothíriel was a very good conversationalist. Normally.

Ivriniel bent to pick up her headrail from the closest chair and began to round the large table's corner. It was time to get back to the wards and the morning was slipping past, but as she moved a flash of white against the deep indigo of the carpet caught her eye.

It was the letter. Dropped by Lothíriel in her haste to leave. Fallen face down. And open.

Ivriniel lifted the parchment up and smiled to herself. Lothíriel was pining. That much was clear, and it certainly was not a man about the wards. She, as chaperone, had watched her niece like a hawk. It must be the young soldier who penned the letter. Ivriniel glanced down, not really reading but neither much bothered if she caught a stray word or two.

Below the first sentence of greeting the letter held but a few spare lines. Written in the blocky, tight tengwar of one who has had little practice.

"My lady I find myself without a handkerchief. Is there possibility it could be returned in person?

-Eomer-King"
"Are you tired Éowyn? I am afraid there are no horses for a carriage and I suspect Varan would not want to risk your arm should you fell from a startled horse."

The White Lady of Rohan paused as she wrestled with her shoes, looked up and regarded her companion in something akin to shock.

*Fall from a walking horse?! Impossible. No Rider or Shieldmaiden could conceive of such a thing!* 

Slowly and deliberately Éowyn turned and set her shoulders back, raised her chin, prepared to take umbrage at the slight.

The young Princess of Dol Amroth stood by her open bedroom door, biting her lip uncertainly, pretty grey eyes anxious and darkly smudged by tiredness. One long hand rested against the jamb and the other nervously smoothed fine flyaway strands of dark hair that had been disturbed by her hasty and unexpected run up the Sixth Circle's stairs.

Lothíriel looked flushed and flustered. She had arrived near a half candlemark late for their rendezvous while Éowyn, unexpectedly, was still getting dressed. A woefully tardy Kira hovered just behind, hands still fumbling with the undone laces at her back.

"My lady, please."

Éowyn let out a breath, forced herself to still as a barely-concealed impatience furrowed on her brow. She was letting her temper get the better of her and well knew whyfor.

Nothing about the day had gone as planned. She had slept too late, rushed her breakfast and ablutions, waited ages for some help, unable to lace her bodice with her splinted arm. It was frustrating. And aggravating. Especially so as she was long used to her independence; had run the household at Meduseld and cared for her ailing Uncle since was but a stripling.

To have to wait to be ready for the daily was infuriating—but was also not the young maidservant's fault. She alone had put herself in harm's way and gained a wound.

And without Kira Éowyn would have been meeting Lothíriel in her shift.

Pardon," she replied, abashed that she nearly been so rude. With an effort Éowyn she tamped down her emotions and counted slowly in her head. Ān, Twegen, Prēo. It was unfair to be upset. Lothíriel most likely thought she was being considerate and Kira, of course, deserved to celebrate the victory just as much as she.

Half the City was surely late that morn.

At her back, nimble fingers tied off the last and lowest lace before Kira quickly bent, took up one of the slippers that had dried in an awkward shape and held the heel out wide.

The girl's dark eyes looked up imploringly. "Let me help my lady."

Éowyn sighed and did her best to accept the offer with easy grace. Was that not the point of their
morning's errand to find clothing she could manage by herself? Béma make it so. If Amerith owned as many garments as were reputed there should be something she could use.

She wiggled her toes in the stiffened doeskin slipper as Kira slowly straightened up. "There. Now you are almost ready."

"Thank you, Kira." Éowyn eyed the girl's decidedly pale complexion and reminded herself to smile. Good manners can be heard by the Lord of Air himself, grandmother Morwen always said, and it was clear that Kira was suffering.

Anborn had been pouring entire goblets full of a 'special' Dol Amorth wine. Thank the Valar she had tried only one. Her head was only very slightly throbbing.

Eowyn took up the blue mantle that the young woman offered in case of stiffer wind and glanced back to the open door. "Thank you also Lothíriel but I am happy to walk. I slept quite well."

She had in fact. For all the lateness of the evening, Éowyn had awoken feeling light and rested, almost buoyant before the daily frustration of getting dressed and so she set on a more placid face, followed Lothíriel out of the Houses into the City.

The Duchess of Lossarnach's townhouse stood on the sunny southern side of the next lower circle, a location that was convenient and expedient: there was only one gate to pass and no need to traverse the tunnel of the Spire. The two women made their way along the unusually empty street to the high stone tower at the top of the Sixth Circle's long stair. At the guard post they paused. Two soldiers in the livery of the Tower stood with eyes cast resolutely east and hands clenched on spears.

They saluted smartly but not perhaps quite as swiftly as the days before.

"Good morning, Jorn. I trust I need not give you the password yet again?"

The taller of the two saluted and replied to Lothíriel's sunny smile. "Of course not Princess. And good morning to you, my Lady."

"Good morning," Éowyn politely inclined her head. The man's eyes were red-rimmed and day's growth of short black stubble covered his square chin. She was amused. Obviously Jorn had eschewed the Gondorian's love for shaving for timeliness at his post.

The shorter guard looked up and raised his mailed left fist, making a turning motion to the gate warden high above. There came a heavy clanking as the wood and iron portcullis slowly raised, and Eowyn, noting this second man also looked a little peaked, wondered if what Anborn had said the night before was true. Did Gondorians actually eat raw eel to cure a hangover? It sounded horrible. Especially on an already queasy stomach.

Lothíriel answered her careful whisper. "It is absolutely true. I have seen Elphir and Erchirion downing an entire plate. And also warm milk with soot. I should imagine it tastes quite vile."

Éowyn grimaced and shook her head. Soot! No man of the Riddermark would bother with such a thing.

The only solution was obviously to start the day with ale again.

The rattle of the heavy chains soon ceased and Jorn gestured down the slope. "Go on Princess and good day to you both."

"Fair winds to you," Lothíriel replied and they began their long journey down.
At this time of the morning the gate tower above set part of the steps in shade, so they began with care. The steps were steep, their treads worn smooth as river stones by the feet of countless men. Eowyn held tightly to the right-hand rail for though she had a good head for heights, and loved to climb on the mountain slopes about Edoras, she was determined not to set her healing forearm back. It would not do to slip.

Once out of the shadow, Lothíriel stopped abruptly, peering out over the tiers of the city to the land beyond. Across the sparkling blue ribbon of Anduin the low brooding cloud that had hung perpetually on Ephel Duath's higher slopes was gone. Her ebony peaks stood fang-like and oddly exposed; almost benign without their wreath of red-black menace. It was a marvel. The rain that had washed the City anew before the dawn had dusted the peaks with a skiff of snow and left the jagged clefts sparkling in the sun.

"It is like another world." Lothíriel exclaimed in wonder.

Éowyn halted on the stair above and drew in a breath of the fresh westering breeze. With the tang of snow and dusty pine she thought she caught the scent of athelas. Green and soothing. Entirely free of the choking fume of the weeks before. She sighed, happily. "It does. Everything seems new and wholesome."

Lothíriel nodded. "And yet somehow it all feels unreal. The City is still on a defensive footing. Just days ago we were certain of disaster. How can we be truly celebrating?"

She lifted the hem of her skirt a little higher and took a step, ready to start down again. Éowyn, following with one eye on the stair and another on the view, found she did not disagree. The odds had been impossible. To snatch victory when so overmatched was glorious. Songs would be sung and many tales written of these days. It was far more than they had hoped and all the more blessed for it.

"Thank Béma," she murmured.

Lothíriel looked back and smiled. "And hobbits."

"Especially Meriadoc and his kin." Éowyn smiled. It was an entirely strange thing to be grateful to a folk she had not known existed, much less held a bravery unsurpassed by many men.

Truly the world was wider than she knew.

They made their slow way down. It was the longest staircase Éowyn had ever walked, steeper but more direct than the City's long winding thoroughfare. It should be faster but with each circle wall ten times the height of a man and horse, it took many minutes of careful concentration to descend.

Lothíriel, more used to the steepness of the stones, went more quickly down.

When Eowyn next came abreast she smiled sidelong. "We missed you and Fara at the townhouse?"

Éowyn blinked, surprised. Fara. It sounded childish but somehow also oddly intimate. As if she was part of the family now. A sudden blush crept up her cheeks. "Fara? That is the second time I have heard you use that name. Do you always call your cousin so?"

Lothíriel nodded. ""Yes. That has been his name since he lived with us for most of one whole year." She grinned. "Amrothos was only five and far too impatient to bother with saying an entire name. Did you and Fara have a lovely evening?"

The moment stretched. Eowyn did not immediately reply and Lothíriel regarded her quizzically,
obviously waiting for a response. Éowyn's instinct, strangely untroubled by an admittedly precipitous decision, was to trust Lothíriel, to confide the exciting news (the younger woman was his family after all) but therein lay the problem: would it be proper for her to speak of what had passed between them? If Hilde had been standing before her Éowyn would not have hesitated, but this was Gondor. Custom and propriety were laced through every part of life so hard it could not be more tangled than the traces of a carriage-team.

She ran her hand nervously up and down her faintly aching arm, wondering What to say. Faramir would hardly have had the chance to tell his Aunt and cousin yet: the news really should come from him and, moreover, in the clear light of day the events of the night before did not seem quite real. The revelry, the journey home, but most of all the kiss, felt like some fevered dream; as if she and Faramir had been ensnared by the excitement of the night. Would he still feel the same? It seemed likely so, for that morning he had left a note underneath her door asking to take the evening meal together. Her heart thudded quickly in her chest. For so long she had given no thought to her own future, had assumed she would remain a maid, caring for her uncle and tied to his household, that to have a man pay suit was startling. And thrilling.

She would look forward to the evening bell. Eagerly.

"We did, thank you," Éowyn answered finally, doing her best to ignore her friend's curious small smile. "The Ranger barracks were very welcoming. We danced," she added, offering up a crumb of detail.

Lothíriel's grey eyes held her gaze but she said nothing, merely nodding before turning aside to watch a laden porter pass. She looked amused. As if she knew more lay behind the spareness of the words. "Well, I am glad. That is lovely. And you may get a chance for more. I do hope that there will be dance after the service of thanksgiving. It is good timing that we visit Amerith today for I brought only a few extra things."

Éowyn picked up a fold of her slightly too-short linen underdress. It, like the brown bodice she could not lace, were on loan from the slimmer shorter Princess. A better fit would be most welcome. She would be representing her brother-King after all. "I have been very grateful for your generosity Lothíriel, as I hope to be to the Duchess after this morning's visit."

"Oh I am certain of it. Amerith's closet is famously quite large, you are bound to find pieces that will work. And for the service. I have nothing extra that is suitable for a such a grand event."

Éowyn frowned. Grand event? She had only thought of the service in the hall. Amerith had promised several dresses in an unusual Elven style: with cotes that buttoned in the front. She wondered if they would be suitable for evening.

"Grand? How grand?"

Lothíriel eyes lit with excitement. "Wonderfully. It used to be that there was always a ball after a victory. Food and wine and the most marvelous music. Pennants everywhere. I remember beautiful ones when I was little, when Uncle was not so severe. He would always save a dance for me and gave me my first circlet."

Éowyn blinked, struggling to merge the image of Lothíriel's generous uncle with the forbidding Steward of Gondor. A man whose name was only whispered in the Houses and had reputedly dispensed praise for his son by the thimbelful. It defied belief.

"I never met Lord Denethor," she noted carefully, but Lothíriel as always was too sharp- she caught the slight space of hesitation.
Fine fingers twisted in her skirt as a glimmer of tears shone on her raven lashes. Éowyn began to apologize. "I am sorry, I did not mean..." but the younger woman sadly shook her head.

"Please. Forgive me," murmured Lothíriel. "I feel oddly now as if a dam has let go. I should be happy, I *am* happy, but Uncle Denethor is gone and he was good to me. I know he was stern and hard, not always good to Faramir, but to me that came not from a streak of cruelty, but from too deep a hurt. My cousin reminded him too much of what he had lost."

On impulse Éowyn reached out and clasped Lothíriel's hand in sympathy. She had caught the pitying glances that followed the young Captain's back; the whispered words that the Steward did not value his second son. In his place she would find it hard to take.

"It says much about how he loved his wife. My Uncle lost his Elfhild at my cousin Theodred's birth but his reaction was the opposite. He cherished the son he had for it was all he had of her."

Lothíriel's mouth twisted sadly. "For Uncle Denethor that was Boromir. His eldest. Captain-General and the bravest man in Gondor. He did love both his sons, he did, but he oft showed it in other ways." She wiped away a tear that had silently tracked down her pale cheek. "I feel so sorry for Faramir. Boromir was always his closest friend. I suppose Amerith is that now that he is gone."

*Amerith? The woman that he had once loved? Or thought he did...*

Éowyn's eyebrows shot straight up. She did not deign to comment, merely bent and hugged Lothíriel a little shyly. Whatever Faramir had once imagined there was no mistaking the ardor of last night's kiss upon her wrist. The memory of a soft press of warm lips against her skin again made her shiver, made her limbs feel alight again. Evening felt too long away. As if the hourglass was stuck with honey.

The princess smiled and sniffed. "I am sorry. This is supposed to be a happy morning."

"It is. That we remember with sadness does not make it not so."

They started down again and at last reached the bottom of the stair. For the first time since she had awakened in Minas Tirith Éowyn saw with her own eyes the heart of the White City's faded grandeur—the graceful townhouses that crowded the Sixth Circle like forgotten debutants. High and ornate, each unique and elegantly adorned, they were also oddly quiet; most empty on order of the Steward. Here and there, a crumbling swirl of plaster arabesque made her wonder if some had been abandoned well before the fight.

Lothíriel stopped in front of a door with an awning of green and gold and rapped the rose-shaped door knocker. An elderly man with quite startling white brows opened the door. He was clad in a neatly cut uniform of darker green and black and boots polished so highly that Éowyn doubted he had ever ventured out into the City's dusty streets.

"Welcome Princess, Lady Éowyn. Her ladyship has been expecting you."

Lothíriel acknowledged the greeting with a nod and wry quirk of her lips. "And waiting patiently, no doubt. Thank you Willen. I apologize that we are late."

"No trouble at all, my lady."

Willen bowed smoothly back and politely gestured for Éowyn to enter first. From the old, pale scar that curved across the man's wrinkled cheek to the corner of his eye, she assumed he was a veteran of Gondor's wars. Perhaps one of Thorongil's fabled raids for his hair was now snow white.
She stepped across the threshold. The man closed the heavy door behind Lothíriel before pointing along a hushed and oddly expectant hall. "This way. The duchess awaits you in the day salon."

This was Éowyn's first look inside a Minas Tirith home and she found it oddly reassuring. Instead of severe stone walls and chilly formality, the house was warm and elegant, even opulent, with rich redwood paneling and thick silk draperies, entire cases full of gilded, painted pottery. It felt a bit like a set from one of the travelling puppet shows- everything to make a point or impression. Again and again the sigil of a ship and sword appeared. From her geography lessons with Theodred she knew it must be for Lebinnin: the duchess's dead husband's fief that lay at the mouth of Anduin. No wonder the house was grand. Lebinnin held, after Minas Tirith and Dol Amroth, the richest lands of Gondor.

She followed Lothíriel up a curving flight of white stone steps to the second floor, along a corridor only a little less ornate than the one below and into an antechamber. It was bright and light, with tall sashed windows that looked out over the ruined fields to the port of Harlond where a fleet of black and bleached cotton sails rippled in the wind. Two dark mahogany doors gave onto adjacent rooms: one shut and the other just ajar.

A white stone mantel graced the large fireplace and to one side there stood a heavy carved wooden desk piled high with books.

It was elegant and imposing but not half as imposing as the woman who sat on a low velvet settee in the center of the room.

"Ah there you are."

Amerith, straight-backed and poised, hands clasped lightly in her lap, was so beautifully turned out that Éowyn could not help but stare. This was the duchess's morning dress?! Her long organdy dress fell in a sweep of gauzy lavender so smooth it could have been poured from a bottle of coloured ink. The unusual long fitted sleeves were capped by small snowy folds that hugged her shoulders and her long auburn hair was bound up halfway in braids and small enameled clasps of freesia and lilac. They looked real and delicate that Éowyn could almost imagine they would have scent.

It was exquisitely lovely and far fancier than anything Éowyn had ever owned.

"The Princess and Lady Éowyn," Willen intoned.

Amerith arose. "Thank you Willen. Welcome, welcome," she said, smiling and stretching out her hands to greet both her guests. Her nails were very small and round, as polished as her style and quite different from Éowyn's own. The woman had obviously never held a sword. She clasped a white, soft hand and resisted the urge to hide her calluses.

"What a treat this is," Amerith remarked, sitting back down and motioning toward a pair of waiting carven chairs. "Please sit and take refreshment if you wish. I am afraid we are making do with tea, there is no chocolate to be had. You must excuse the informal. I have kept only the barest staff. I am doing for myself."

"Thank you Amerith, this is lovely," Lothíriel replied smoothly once they were settled down.

Éowyn lowered herself onto a rose damask cover chair and mutely nodded her agreement. She accepted a delicate white cup filled with a fragrant, pink spiced tea and a freshly made almond cake. She took a bite. It was warm and smelled of orange. Making do in Minas Tirith appeared to have a different definition here.
For several minutes the group spoke easily of many things: the progress of the Houses' patients, the brightened skies, the celebration the night before; but before long, with the pleasantries dispensed, Amerith arose in a swish of lilac perfume and gestured to the part open door.

"Shall we see what we can find?"

"You are very kind," Éowyn murmured.

Amerith scooped up her tea cup and smiled. "It is my pleasure. Managing each day must be a bore and you can hardly be expected to still wear the Houses' garb. It is practical but hardly comfortable. And hardly suitable now that you can go farther about the City."

Éowyn and Lothíriel set aside their now empty cups and followed the older woman to the right hand, smaller door. Amerith pushed it wide. Inside was a smaller side room, about as long as the salon, but narrower across and with the same wide, light-giving windows. It was filled to bursting. Dressers and shelves in the same red wood as the houses' paneling were mounted against the walls. An entire precious full length mirror stood by the window. Cupboard after cupboard was open, dresses and robes in every colour of the rainbow spilling out.

Éowyn just barely hid the shock on her face. It was outrageous. Organized as precisely as any armory and absolutely unnecessary. How could any one person need so much?

Hallway along one long wall Amerith paused, reached into a heavy wardrobe and took out a wine-coloured gown. She held it up against her own shoulders, green eyes looking up and down Éowyn apprisingly and back to the length of the dress. "This closes in the front."

It did but it also had the most odd assortment of ruffles in the back. Utterly impractical if one were to ride.

Before Éowyn could reply Amerith frowned thoughtfully, held the piece out below and looked her up and down again. She stood stock still, flushed and embarrassed, feeling suddenly like a filly at spring action sized up for her conformation.

Ridiculous. There was no reason to feel acutely aware of her own far simpler borrowed dress. The fancy furbelows were hideous.

She tossed her unbound hair proudly back across her shoulder.

Amerith, focused on the cloth, did not appear to notice. "Hmmm, a bit too severe a tone, although the length is nearly right." She put the garment back.

Time and again there was a rustle of fine silk as the duchess pulled gowns out, considered their cut and colour before putting them back again. Lothíriel examined each selection critically. There were opinions expressed about the tightness of the sleeves, the height of the decolletage and the ease of the fastenings. Several moments considered work saw three in paler tones hung on a set of waiting hooks.

"These should be far simpler to manage, " Amerith smoothed the dresses' drape and showed off the front fastenings. All three had braided loops and curious three-sided toggles set on the front of light overcoats made of fine-spun cotton.

Éowyn reached and found she could undo them easily with one hand: the oddly shaped fastenings slipped into the loop with hardly any effort.

"Why these are much much easier! What design is this?"
Amerith explained. "They are in the style of ancient Edhelond. Made for Lady Gelin's summer hunting party."

_Clothes made just for a single party? To wear only once? Éowyn could not conceive of such extravagance. Lothíriel's amused observation hid her sudden cough. "And I thought Father has a lot of robes!"

A beringed hand was waved dismissively. "A journeyman, I assure you. Although I do allow that Dol Amroth's artistic streak comes out admirably in his choices."

Éowyn's stared in astonishment. The woman saw it as a compliment!? A trait of which to be proud? She shook her head. How would she never understand the Gondorim? To a woman of the Riddermark gluttony in any form, food, gold or frippery, was a mark of shame.

Fengel's reign of cruel excess lingered long in memory.

She glanced across but Lothíriel, busy with placing the rejects carefully back, looked quite unperturbed. "Father is a bit of a peacock. He always says that the clothes make the man, that a good turnout shows discipline and pride." She grinned. "His sense of style is almost as legendary as cousin Faramir's total lack. He wears black every chance he gets—never bothers with what he wears."

Éowyn looked from one noblewoman to another, lips flattened in a frown. Was Faramir poorly dressed? In the Houses of Healing she had only ever seen him clad in the simple linen tunics and breeches that they supplied; neat as one could expect when cooped up and recuperating. His arm was in a sling—or had been—and he could not be expected to handle elaborate fastenings. If he eschewed fancy dress at other times, to her it made a certain sense. He was a soldier. One used to the wilds where survival could be thread thin and thus appreciated the practical, the essential, all the more.

It was almost Rohirric in a way.

She was about to object when Amerith replied. "Ah but there I disagree, Lothíriel. It is not that he has no sense of style. He has. It is simply that oftentimes he has other issues top of mind."

"Like books," Lothíriel grinned, holding up a hanger as Amerith draped a sheath of cloth about the chosen robes. "He does look very well in his dress uniform. Or at the balls when he picks tunics other than plain black."

Amerith inclined her head and placed her hand upon her chest. "Thank you my dear. Sometimes I do have influence."

Whatever did she mean? The duchess could hardly be there to pick clothes from his closet? Éowyn eyed her small, bemused smile and wondered what lay behind the words. It felt as if there was another meaning hidden amongst the syllables, tucked just out of reach where she could not see.

And she was far from certain she wished to dig.

"Do you wish to try these on, Éowyn, or will you take them as they are?" Amerith's question was slightly muffled. She had turned her back, was looking through a section of bright designs, heavy with silk and decoration.

"As they are, thank you."

"As you wish. And do you need something also for the service?" Her hand stopped on a cascade of embroidered cream and white. It was square necked, loose-sleeved but not so loose that they would
catch on every little thing. Fitted at the waist with a silver belt of linked lily petals.

Eowyn could not help but sigh.

"Oh it is beautiful!" Lothíriel exclaimed.

Amerith looked over and smiled, pulling the hanger of the rod and twisting it for her to see the back. "Do you like it? It is from last year's shorter style but still suitably elegant for the sister of a king. White, as I understand is correct. You need not use a hand to hold your skirts and the sleeves will easily go over your splinted arm."

They would. The sheer sleeves were loose and slashed below the elbow, made of a silky fine voile far finer than any veil that Éowyn had seen. She touched the end. It felt like gossamer. "I like it very much," she nodded quickly. Éomer would tease her for her vanity, but in that moment she did not care. She had never wanted to wearing something more.

"Excellent. Then you must take it. You will still need help to dress but it will suit you very well I think. All eyes will be upon the Hero of the Pelennor. You must look your best." Amerith laid the gown across a padded chair before turning to looked over a section of watery blue. Dol Amroth blue, as Éowyn was coming to understand.

"Lothíriel, do you have a gown to wear?"

The young princess politely inclined her head. "Thank you, Amerith but I do. I brought one good gown. After service I hope to go to Cormallen to see my brothers. There will be little need for much formal there."

Her eyebrow raised up in surprise. "Have you heard from your father?"

"This morning. All is well. Or as well as can be. My youngest brother has been wounded but it is not serious. Father and Elphir are unhurt. I hope to join them if the Warden gives me leave."

"Praise Este. It has been good news for the Captain of my guard reports my men have had little casualty." Amerith glanced quickly to Éowyn. "And you, my dear? Have you had word from your brother?"

"Yes, I did. A letter just this morning. He is unhurt."

"I am relieved to hear it. Will you also go?"

Éowyn hesitated. Éomer had asked for her to come but she was still torn. To be with him and the Riders of his eored would be a joy but to leave right then—that felt not right. Varan would laugh. Her heart still stubbornly cleaved to the Houses's grounds. For a reason she did not want to admit.

"I have not decided yet, " she temporized. "But I will stay and be present for the Service. Do honour for my Uncle-King."

"To whom we owe so much."

She bowed her head, surprised and grateful for the duchess's kind words. Gondor, too, had lost its leader. That he was admired more than loved did not lesson his years of selfless toil. Mindful of Lothíriel's words that morn, she added hastily "And to honour the Steward who was also lost."

Lothíriel smiled wanly. She reached for Éowyn's hand and gave it a silent, grateful squeeze. Her grey eyes were bright with unshed tears but she did not cry. "Amerith will you go?" she asked, a
little hoarsely. "The King is there."

The older woman did immediately reply. Amerith was frowning, tapping one hand against her recovered tea cup, seemingly lost in thought. "Hmmm. To Cormallen? No. There is yet so much to do. The City is not yet in a state to receive her liege. There is a service to arrange and perhaps there will be a dance."

Lothíriel brightened at that thought. "I told Aunt Ivriniel so this morning. It would be lovely. A lift to all our spirits. Even if the City is quite empty."

Amerith snorted in amusement. "An unmarried Steward and, eventually, an unmarried King? The City will not stay empty for very long. If a ball is organized it will bring the court swarming back like bees to honey. Tripping over each other's heels in their haste to return."

"But Aragorn-the King- is affianced." Éowyn blurted the words before she could stop herself.

She flushed, embarrassed at the slip. Damn her unruly tongue. But it was quite true. Aragorn's heart was taken and the nobles of Gondor would soon discover that inconvenient fact.

The duchess's bright green gaze snapped up. "Is that so?"

"It is," she answered as steadily as she could, as remembered shame burned high on her cheeks "To a maiden of the north. Where lies his heart.

Blessedly. Amerith did not notice her reaction for she had begun to pace, tooled leather shoes drumming on the floor just as swiftly as the gears of thought that turned in her head. She stopped and put a hand aside her cheek. "Worse and worse. Faramir will now be the most eligible man in Gondor. The skies will be thronged with pigeons calling their dear Miriels back to roost."

Lothíriel covered her mouth, giggling at the image. "And you think little of them?"

"I do," Amerith nodded sharply. "They are, on balance, empty headed chits who expect a man to tell them what their opinions are"

The young princess laughed and shook her head. "That is not my cousin. He loves a good argument."

So Éowyn had seen. Was that part of her attraction? she wondered, keeping the thought to herself Did Faramir appreciate that she spoke her mind to him? Béma, make it so, for she would not keep silent to appease a man anymore. Even one so honourable and true.

Amerith regarded Lothíriel thoughtfully, pursed her lips in silence before setting her cup down decidedly a little hard. "He does indeed but they are far more dangerous than he understands. They will be merciless. Stop at nothing to show their sympathy." She began to pace again. "I like it not. There are things he does not know..."

Know? "What things?" Éowyn began to ask when Lothíriel blanched white as the silk laid across the nearby seat. She sank abruptly down onto its arm, drained of all colour, eyes wide with horror. "The pyre…" she whispered.

Éowyn looked on aghast. They had held that horrific detail back? And now he would find out? Her stomach fell nearly to her feet. "He does not know?"

Amerith clenched her long fingers in the folds of her skirt, so tight her knuckles turned to white. "No. Mithrandir and the King bade us not to speak of it until he had duties to attend. Grief needs work.
Busy hands keep the mind at peace."

"So too do we say in the Riddemark," Éowyn looked from Lothíriel back to Amerith. Both of them were upset, but the older woman held herself apart. Straight and tall; jaw tight and eyes intent, focused now far away, as if with will alone she could master the emotion.

She nodded, absently. "The Service. He must be told before. There is nothing so pretty as sympathetic tears. One of them will tell him. Hoping to show the depth of her consideration."

"But that would be impossibly rude!" Éowyn protested. "Surely they would not speak of something so personal and horrific!"

"You think that will stop them?" An auburn eyebrow raised again. "Absolutely not. The marriage market is the fiercest battle they will fight. The blessed nimwits will seek to exploit his every vulnerability."

"You make it sound like he is the foe. An adversary!"

A tinkling laugh rose up. "My dear lady of Rohan that comes much later. When they are wedded, bedded and bored. And cannot stand each other." Her rings clattered against the saucer as she picked up the teacup again. "I must see him."

Lothíriel, still visibly distressed, silently gathered up the gowns. Amerith followed her out into the salon. Beside the door she reached for and pulled on a long length of tasselled rope.

Éowyn sank dispiritedly into the chair beside the desk, uncertain if it was time to speak of his suit. Such a charming portrait of the married game Amerith painted. She understood that most matches in Gondor were arranged, political contracts for the benefit of all parties involved, but surely the court was not so cutthroat? If Amerith were to be believed it was some sort of contest-with winners and losers across a human field. She frowned and shuddered at the thought. Faramir might pay suit to her but that did not stop other women from vying to change his mind. And blithely hurting him in the process.

A double knock sounded on the outer door. They all looked up as Willen's grey head appeared.

"My lady? You rang?"

"Willen. Gracious. That was remarkably swift even for you."

He gave a short half bow. "I was already on my way. There is a young man here to see you. He is says it is most urgent."

Amerith's upset evidently did not forestall the urge to flirt. "Really? And I thought my days of youthful suitors had long passed. How delightful. Where have you left him?"

"On the front stoop, my lady. Bergil, Captain Beregond's young lad. He will not come in but insists on seeing you right away."

Some sixth sense of urgency had Amerith out the door and sweeping down the staircase before Willen had finished his explanation. Éowyn and Lothíriel followed quickly close behind. They found the boy, hopping foot to foot. Face flushed and a bit breathless from his run.

He pulled off his cap and twisted it in his hands. "Princess. Your grace. My lady." He bobbed his head. "He.. I.." The boy was stammering in his haste to speak and could not get his words to come.
Amerith reached out to draw him in, set a steadying hand on his shoulder. "Slow down. Bergil. Take a deeper breath. You have run the whole way down from the Citadel?"

He nodded quickly. "I have. I came straight away. Cahill said I should let you know." He flushed and took a breath, began again as Amerith nodded approvingly.

"I was helping Lord Faramir in his rooms. I mean in the Lord Steward's rooms. He plans to go to the Hall of Waiting, my lady. To take up his responsibilities. But first he wants to see his father's bier…"

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so very very much to Thanwen, Artura, CarawynO and Wheelrider who provided comments on part 1. Their enthusiasm for Eomer's letter reminded me that there is the sequel to Bride Price to finish. It will be first up once this is done. Just a few chapters more. Happy back to school everyone!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

With a last fond pat on the old hobby horse's balding head, the new Steward of Gondor gathered up his writing kit from his battered, cluttered desk, took a last look round his quarters, and walked out into the palace corridor.

It was mid-morn, the day after a momentous night before, and although there was realistically little chance of an encounter (most souls were still sleeping off the effects of celebration), Faramir's soft day-boots were a quite deliberate and considered choice. Their doeskin soles (stitched with sinew and softened by some fetid concoction known only to Damrod's Ethring kin) made little noise on the forest floor, much less the Citadel's polished flagstones.

A most helpful feature when one did not wish to attract the notice of the few servants in the family wing.

He stepped lightly, silently, weight forward and ears alert for any creak of iron latch or whine of hinge; almost skulking in a pose that after many years of Ranging was entirely automatic, but also quite ridiculous given his location, and so he slowed, forced himself to straighten up. How Boromir would laugh. Denethor had drummed polite acknowledgement for every servant and Tower guard into his sons' stubborn heads, but the fact remained: the guards of the patrol had spent many years ignoring the illicit (and mostly innocuous) movements of the two 'young masters.' If Faramir did not wish to be addressed they wouldn't bat an eye.

He took a strong and steadying breath to calm his capricious nerves.

This was not his first visit back- that was not the source of his trepidation. The visit, two nights before, to raid his elder brother's secret stash of brandy, had been a desperate but surprisingly easy expedition. It was oddly comforting in its way, and a theft of which Boromir certainly would have approved. How many times had he wasted coppers in the Kine trying to get his 'little one' sotted to the gills? Too many to recall, and most had ended with Faramir himself supporting a singing, three-sheets-to-the-wind Boromir up the palace steps, hurriedly shushing him as they passed the candle glow leaking from behind their father's study door.

He shook his head and smiled wistfully at the memory. The study door: most often shut, weighty with authority and the focus of many an anxious childish knock, it was, of course, the focus of his problem.

The time had come to take up his father's responsibilities.

At the end of the long curving hall, Faramir's feet turned south then west, seemingly of their own accord, until just beyond the morning room close to the Tower stair, he stopped, straightened his cuffs and turned toward an imposing heavy door. Like the livery of the Tower guard, it was graced with the steward's sigil: Nimloth the Fair, Seven Stars, and a King's crown above set in lebethron against white oak.

Above the crown's high swept wings was inscribed: R-ND-R.

Arandur. 'Servant of the king.' His father's title that now was his.

The symbolism had never felt so apt.
For nigh a thousand years the Ruling Stewards had guided Gondor and now he, Faramir, the second son of Denethor, would have his name carved beside his forefathers' on the black obsidian of the Steward's seat: the youngest occupant since Hador seven hundred years before, but also the last and briefest. In just six weeks, he would gratefully, nay, joyously, surrender his rod of office to Aragorn: healer, Captain of the Host of the West, leader of a most miraculous victory, King foretold and soon to return.

He looked up to the polished wood and traced a finger across the ancient runes. There was much work to be done and little time to stand woolgathering outside the door. With a sharp shake of his dark head, he threw off the swirling memories, set his hand upon the latch and pushed.

The door swung wide. Sunlight poured through the open terrace doors and a warm breeze, redolent of rose and honeysuckle, lifted the curtains' silken tassels.

Someone was in the room.

"Cahill?!

"Milord!"

The seneschal started violently, barely kept his grip upon a heavily laden tray. The china rattled musically. It slid sideways but thankfully did not fall as Cahill abruptly set it upon a small oval table. "My Lord Steward! Please, please come in. Shall I put these on the desk?" he asked, turning to relieve his master of the burden in his arms.

Faramir, dumbstruck, gave up the implements and stood blinking on the threshold. Poor man, he had been almost startled straight out of his skin. "I am sorry, Cahill," he began, but a quick half-bow cut him off.

"Do not apologize, milord, the fault is mine. I did not hear you."

Faramir chagrined, looked down at his boots. Cahill had not heard because a Ranger had snuck up on him. So much for his wish to avoid awkward interactions. "Cahill how did you know I would be here?"

When I did not know myself?

Faramir rubbed awkwardly at his brow. He had long suspected the seneschal read his father's moods, but he never imagined the man to be prescient. The room was freshly aired and polished. A few faggots had been lit to chase the last lingering chill of nighttime from the room and the mantlepiece held a pretty celadon vase filled with early anemones. Nera, that last was surely Nera.

Cahill laid the writing implements gently down on the gleaming surface of the desk and waited, wide-eyed, clearly puzzled by his response. "Milord?" His thin lips had begun to droop a little mournfully and his dark eyes looked concerned. As if he worried that he had somehow erred.

"Never mind.: Faramir sighed. The day, despite its glorious, golden sun and lingering elation, was not starting well. First he had missed Éowyn at breakfast, and now the space where he hoped to work in peace was occupied. Perhaps, like her, he should have lain in bed, but that would have only put off that which he had to do. And dreaded.

He forced himself to quirk the semblance of a smile. "Thank you. For the refreshments and taking care of my father's affects. I can see that all is perfectly in order."

Or as ordered as could be when the City had been under siege. A bookcase stood in the far right
corner, oddly naked with broken panes in its tall door. How had that come to pass? Surely no catapult of the Enemy could reach so high and there had been no damage to the palace that Hurin had spoken of. A mystery, but one that could wait for another day.

The seneschal's long wrinkled fingers resumed tidying already meticulously tidy piles and so Faramir stepped hesitantly into the room, ran his hand lightly across the back of a deep wing chair. The space smelled the same: of ink and yellowed parchment, of wood polish and the old leather of tomes that marched, row on row, upward to the coffered ceiling. It looked almost the same as well; although his heart told him that it should not—as if, with its master gone, even the furniture should have shrunk without Denethor's force of personality.

"May I be of service, milord?" Cahill enquired, as the silence stretched. "Your father's most recent notes, such as they are, are here." He tapped a sheaf of papers held down by a round glass weight.

It was a masterpiece: An almost perfect replica of the City Faramir was now to rule.

For six whole weeks.

When his master did not immediately reply Cahill straightened up, hands wringing slowly, surveying the space with furrowed brows, as if searching for some defect. After a moment's searching, he found it over by the terrace doors.

"I apologize, Lord Faramir. The Table has not been updated in many days."

"The Table?"

Faramir glanced a little blankly across the room. The map of Gondor in relief stood where it had since his grandfather Echthelion's time- beside a tall window that gave excellent late day sunlight. It had been Denethor's habit to update the pieces as he enjoyed a suitably modest, solitary brandy before the evening meal, but in recent years the process had been markedly less relaxed: Boromir and he, Toric and Eradan, had often huddled grimly with the Steward about its redwood edge, devising stratagems on the fly.

He crossed the deep gold and carmine carpet in a few halting strides. Rangers and infantry, mounted horse and a few larger Captains were placed about Osgiliath, with dozens of small squat black painted blocks (Orc squadrons in name if not recognizable shape) clustered on the farther shore. This was the night before the retreat. He swallowed hard, at random plucking a soldier from the closest gate. Chipped. Well used. Clad in the black and green livery of far Morthond, Toric's home. He wondered where the indomitable lieutenant was now, Cormallen or Cair Andros? He must find the time to ask. His last memory was of a straight back and a frightened column of still marching men.

Behind him, Cahill cleared his throat. "My Lord Steward, is there correspondence I may help you with?"

Faramir looked up. The man's long face was nodding toward the quill that was already placed efficiently and precisely upon the desk. On the left. Opposite to what he had done for almost thirty years.

He set the wooden soldier back down with care and slowly shook his head. "Thank you Cahill, but no. I have sent a note to Princess Ivriniel at Dol Amroth House and had one in return from Lord Hurin. He has kindly passed on the news from Cormallen. I thought to ..." he began, but his voice trailed quickly off. What should he say? That he had come to his father's room not to work, but for diversion? That the long, if sometimes pleasant, incarceration in the Houses had made a convenient excuse to not venture very far, but it was past time that he visited his father's bier? The King's-
Aragorn's letter spoke of a service of thanksgiving in Merethrond. He could not, in conscience, conduct it without having done Denethor, and Theoden-King, proper honour.

"Make a few personal notes to my men," he finished finally, running a mercifully steady hand through his hair. That was true enough; Mablung and Renil were both safe and well, but their reports had been necessarily very brief. He wanted more news of how Ithilien's company fared.

"Very well, my lord." The seneschal walked over to the tray, poured a cup of kahva and added just one sugar lump (exactly as Faramir preferred) before gliding smoothly back and laying the cup a handsbreadth from the blotter on the desk.

There was no avoiding the moment now. Slowly but steadily, Faramir rounded the massive expanse of darkened oak, lowered himself into the deep leather seat and laid his fingers on the worn smooth edge. It felt too large, awkward, but it was futile to wish for the light lap desk he used within the gardens. Like the role, he would have to grow accustomed to it.

He picked up the delicate cup and took a long, appreciative sip. The kahva was rich and dark and a far cry from the bilge water that the men brewed while on the move. He smiled. "Thank you, for this. Please tell Nerinel that it is excellent."

"Certainly," Cahill replied, voice low and retiring, hands clasping and unclasping inside the heavy brocade of his sleeves. "Is there anything else that I can do?"

A sharp pang of sympathy settled in his chest. This was unsettling for both of them. It could not be easy for Cahill to serve another man in that chair. "No. No thank you. The work will not take long. Afterward I will walk over to Rath Dinen, and then meet with Lord Hurin in the hall. There will be a Service of Thanksgiving in the coming days. I wish to pay my respects beforehand."

Cahill blanched white as Mindolluin's peak. "Rath Dinen?" he repeated faintly. A warm gust of wind ruffled the papers on the desk. He reached quickly, almost absently, across; realigning their edges and adding another weight. "Shall I attend you there?"

Faramir gently shook his head. This morning was proving difficult. Releasing Cahill to another task was perhaps the kindest thing to do. "No. There is no need."

There was no immediate response. Faramir waited patiently, absorbing himself in deciphering his father's distinctive tiny, embellished tengwar that covered the first of several notes, but as the silence stretched to become an uncomfortably weighty pause, he glanced askance.

A nervous tic had begun to jump silently, high on Cahill's cheek.

He about to speak, to commiserate delicately as he could, when the man abruptly folded his hands back into his sleeves and bowed. "Very good, my lord. Shall I leave you to it then?"

"With my thanks,"

The long formal robes bowed out through the door and Faramir sat back, relieved to have avoided more awkwardness but also (guiltily) pleased to be left alone. This would be all too soon a luxury: much of the City would desire a piece of the Steward's time. He must make the most of it and so he bent to the task, starting with a more detailed survey of the desk. Reports and notes, orders and letters, were all accounted for. The deep and heavy drawers (once an undiscovered country intriguing to a little boy) were filled with keys and spare writing bits, ledgers and even a sheet or two of music.

Sifting through this debris of his father's strictly mannered life, he found himself amazed that even in
his last dark days Denethor had kept his world exactly as in his prime: neatly delegated into piles based on import. This made it easy to ascertain what was essential and what was not, and so there followed a surprisingly restful half candlemark. He found fresh sheets of parchment, took up and inked his quill, and began an appropriately semi-official reply to Mablung's hasty scrawl. After several minutes' concerted writing he tapped the shaker of sand and set aside the letter, rolling his wounded shoulder experimentally, pleased to find not even the slightest twinge of pain. Perhaps now Varan would let him leave off the sling for good.

By the time a second and more formally worded letter to Aragorn had been set carefully down to dry, the sun had retreated across the carpet to the terrace doors and he was surprised to find his stomach growling. Another propitious sign. His hasty breakfast had been but a few hours past.

He reached for a tempting nut-dusted cake and was about to try it when a knock sounded on the door.

"Come in!"

The old oak door swung wide and Cahill's voice rang out. "My lord, the Duchess of Lossarnach."

He hastily pushed back the chair and stood. "Amerith! Welcome," he said, surprised and pleased, but also more than a little taken aback by her appearance. Amerith was, for her, dishevelled: without gloves or cloak, missing the usual silk hair veil. An enamelled hair clasp had slid down two thin loops of braid and let strands of red trail out. What was so important that she had to rush?

Before he could frame thought to ask a billowing sail of lilac skirt swept around the desk.

"Faramir, is this wise?" Amerith chided, leaning in to accept a kiss on each powdered cheek. "Has Varan actually given you leave to work? Or have you escaped again?"

"Again?!!" He held her out at arm's length. Surely Varan was immune to Amerith's wily charms; would not have divulged the truth about their training jaunt? He shook his head ruefully. "And how did you know about that?"

She tilted her head and wagged her finger underneath his nose. "A woman never tells. And besides, I believe the more interesting question is why you would have a need to keep secrets from me?"

He rolled his eyes. "Am I to have no privacy? Can you ever leave off this game? Truly, Amerith, I think you must be part Umaiari, like a Great Spider of the First Age. We are all simply playthings caught in your web."

She beamed. "Ooh. I rather like that image. Me, hovered over my catch while the delectable morsel struggles helplessly, bound and waiting for me to suck….""

"Amerith! Behave! Someone might overhear," he sent quickly, picturing Cahill walking in.

She gave a mental blush. "Oh. Yes. Young Bergil is outside the door."

He is?! "You should know better," he scolded aloud.

She pouted, reached to brush an imaginary speck of lint from off his tunic and absurdly, he felt suddenly thankful that he had changed. The more formal dress—including his best belt engraved with the selfsame tree and stars—had been a whim. As if dressed with a sense of occasion, he could steel himself for the day.

"You are not answering my question."
"I have been given leave," he replied stonily, pointedly lifting his unbound left hand as he clasped her own to lead her to a faded damask armchair. She sat and settled her skirts, surreptitiously tidying the drooping braid. He went on: "I am considerably better. So much so, that I can now take up my duties. You needn't worry like a mother hen that the slightest effort will set me back."

Her elegant patrician nose tilted up. "I do not call pulling that beast of a bow you use, a slight or easy effort."

"Well no, not that. I may be determined but I am not reckless. I used a training bow."

She feigned wide-eyed surprise. "How very sagacious of you. Now what of my second question?"

A corner of his mouth quirked wryly. Like a wolfhound with a particularly juicy bone, his duchess. Or a spider in her web, voracious for every bit of news.

"Why did I not tell you, oh great and curious lady, about my trips to Mother's garden? Discretion. The less who know about an activity, the less likelihood of discovery."

"Hmmh." She tossed her head, displeased with an answer both knew she could not fault.

He narrowed his eyes and regarded her thoughtfully. "Why are you so interested?"

"No reason, darling. Other than your welfare."

That was a fib. Something was up but he had no shred of an idea what it could be. A gentle, respectful mental probing was met immediately with an impenetrable wall of will. How…odd? It was most unlike Amerith to shut him out and he did not have time this day for roundabout games of cat and mouse.

"Amerith, it is wonderful to see you but I am curious, how did you find me here?"

The answer was offered readily enough. "Bergil. The lad continues to be a wonder."

"He is indeed." Faramir eyed her suspiciously. The duchess was a night owl. This time of day she would have barely had her second cup of chocolate, let alone been up and about the Houses. He wondered where their paths had crossed. "I sent him to deliver orders to Anborn."

"Did you? Is his shoulder healing well?"

"Yes, thanks to Ivriniel."

As expected, she made a face. "Ah yes. Such superior character is enough to drive any man quickly from her tender care."

That was unfair and both they knew it. He frowned, folded his arms across his chest and leaned back in the chair, watching her watch him. One embroidered slipper, dust-covered from the street, was tapped quickly on the carpet. Too quickly. She was not just rushed, but agitated. And utterly unprepared to give a fulsome answer.

"I told Bergil to go take a rest when he was done. He was up late with the men," he pointed out but leading comment got him nowhere.

"Adopted by the Rangers so very soon?" she quipped. "Next, you will have him hefting a bow that is taller than he is."

"I did at his age."
"You were a prodigy."

He snorted. "Hardly. I simply practised every waking minute."

"Determined to match your brother's prowess on some field?"

He helplessly shook his head, amused in spite of his suspicions. There had been the subtlest emphasis on 'some' and no doubt in his mind as to which field she meant. The bedroom. Boromir was only slightly less famous for his wenching than his soldiering. He drummed his fingers on his arm. Amerith was bantering, being blithely frivolous and slightly outrageous by turns, as she did when confronted with any foe. Or when trying to sluice some inconvenient feeling down a drain.

Deliberately, he let an uncomfortable silence fall. She fidgeted and finally roused herself to twitter on.

"Were you very late last night? I thought I might see you at the Houses?"

"Quite late. We went from the Citadel to the barracks."

An auburn eyebrow arched. "We?"

*Tulkas* rod. It was careless of him to have left an opening for he was still reticent to share his news. Éowyn's question, and his giddy, joyous answer, had happened so suddenly, so unexpectedly, and he had had no chance to speak to her that morn. More than anything, he wished to see her once again; to look on her beautiful, proud face and see that her heart had not changed; that she had not been hasty in accepting or thought better of it in the light of day.

"None of your business, my dear friend," he replied at last, feeling delicate tendrils of thought push harder at his shield. Now Amerith was doing the probing and he was the one hiding away. What was up with her that morn?

Annoyed by her persistence, he sent an image of a child getting its knuckles rapped.

She chuckled and slowly shook her head. "Touched a nerve have I? That does not, perchance, have any relevance as to why Eowyn and Lothíriel were late to our rendezvous this morn?"

"I wouldn't know. I had to miss breakfast with Éowyn. She was yet asleep when I knocked upon her door." He set his jaw. Valar, this was becoming tedious. She was on the hunt, like a hound with a fox's scent. It was time to change the subject.

"How did you celebrate?" he asked. "I assume Anor had risen before you sought your bed?"

She made a tiny moue of distaste. "I was not so fortunate. The Courtyard of the Fountain was gay, but Langstrand as usual was a bore. With so few young skirts to chase he was altogether too persistent. I had to tread on his foot quite hard the second time he swooped in for a peck."

Faramir grimaced. The old reprobate was famous, both for his skirt-chasing and his gaggle of dim-witted daughters. The war wounds that prevented him from taking the field, seemingly did not affect other parts.

He laid a hand across his chest and gave her the briefest of sardonic bows. "The City thanks you Duchess for your selfless service."

"Quite." She rolled her eyes and sat back deeper in the chair. "And now? What are your plans?"
Faramir ground his teeth. The mental probing had redoubled with greater force and from outside, the deep clanging of the Tower bell began. It was the last hour before midday. His sense of impatience was growing with each fall of sand through the glass, anxious to close out this game of hers. The errands, good and bad, that must be addressed were there, and he hoped to hoard a little time later in the day for an errand all of his own: the Archive. Surely somewhere on its dust-filled, groaning shelves there was a volume that spoke of how one wooed in the Riddermark.

To just sit and lose himself in research for a little while after what he had to do would be a balm.

Pushing against the carved vines and leaves that graced the arms of the chair, he abruptly stood, walked over to the door, and set his hand upon the latch. Amerith arose. She did not need to read him to understand the tension in his face. A headache was growing steadily behind his eyes.

"I am sorry, but I must go. I must see Hurin. And Hirlas, who is now the Captain of the Guard. And likely the Marshal, too, for it is time I took up the Steward's duties. At least as many as Varan deems suitable. And," he took a deeper breath, "there is a king who fell. And father. I must go to Rath Dinen to honour them."

He open the door full wide, prepared to bow and wave her out when the space was abruptly blocked by a familiar, but most worried looking, lad.

"Bergil!" he exclaimed, "what is this about? Please make way."

The boy did not so much as flinch a muscle. Perplexed, beginning to be a bit alarmed, he turned at a sudden swish of silken lavender.

Amerith, quick as a cat, had moved up close behind. Her green eyes were ineffably sad.

"Faramir you must not go."

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Eowyn had not set out to deceive Lothíriel.

At least, not consciously; but as she found herself setting foot upon the curving, sloping ramp that lead up to the Citadel, she wondered: what would the young princess make of her change of plans?

They had bid goodbye at the top of the Sixth's long stair. Lothíriel, eyes brimming, had pressed her pale cheek to Éowyn's own and hugged her swiftly. "Where are you bound?"

"The Houses," Éowyn had replied and she had meant it, agreed to tell Ivriniel she was needed at the Steward's house and started to turn back west before the first wave of uneasiness rippled, sharp and darkly anxious, across her heart.

Something with Faramir was amiss.

Béma. What was this? How could she....? But then the wave washed in again and she remembered: the courtyard. Where they had touched and Éowyn knew, nay, felt his weariness and thoughts. This feeling was akin but far, far stronger, a sense of green, and loss, and hurt that stopped her, swaying, in her tracks; almost dizzy with the hammering her chest. How was this possible? By what rough magic did she hear him from afar?
Éowyn shook her head, trying to clear the sense but like an ache before a thunderstorm it did not go, merely strengthened, until it stopped her breath. She had to get to him. To help.

And Lothíriel would find her aunt.

That need and knowledge sent Éowyn hurrying—skirts hiked and clenched in her one good hand—the other way through the growing morning throng. She dodged startled yeomen, craned her neck to see around yet another tall Gondorian, flushed and hair flying out behind, certain only that she needed to venture up.

Below the weathered grandeur of the stone King above the Seventh gate she was stopped by a startled guard in black and silver.

"My Lady!" he exclaimed, eyes wide with surprise as he took in her splinted arm. "You are…!"

She brushed a sweat damp lock from off her forehead. "Éowyn. Yes, I am Eowyn of Rohan. And you?"

He bowed his head, hand to heart, and spear tilted to her in salute. "Cador, my Lady. It is a great honour to meet you. How may I be of service?"

"Well met Cador. I pray you tell me where may I find the Steward's palace? I do not know the layout of the Citadel and must find the Steward at once. Please open the gate."

"Certainly. If you would give to me the password."

Bema.. The password. Faramir had spoken it the night before but her fevered brain did not remember. Regrettfully, she shook her head. "I am afraid I do not have it."

Young Cador bit his lip and glanced warily at his guard-mate then back to her. "I am sorry, my lady. No one is to enter the Citadel without the password. I can send to Lord Hurin for permission or perhaps if you found the Marshal or his second?"

That would assuredly take too long. Elfhelm could be anywhere; in their makeshift barracks in the Fourth or out on the Pelennor in the Riders' paddock. She held out her hand imploringly. "I am in great haste. I need to be there and as I am already inside the walls, surely you can let me pass this once?"

The man's boots shuffled uneasily on the stones. "I am sorry I cannot."

She ground her teeth. Damn these Gondorians and their many layered City. She had to get to Faramir. Must find some way to convince the man. She drew breath and raised her chin.

"Cador of the Tower guard, you know full well who I am and that I mean Gondor no ill. I came through this very gate last eve. In the company of your own Lord and Steward. By Tulkas's eternal strength and Ulmo's undying seas let me pass!"

Later, alone and safely in her bed, she would wonder at what fierceness had shone on her face for the young man blanched, nodded sharply once and motioned the gate to raise.

Béma's blessed horn.

She darted through the cool shade of the tower and out into the Citadel; felt a growing trepidation spur her feet across the white-paved court to the edge of a long azure pool. By the sweet patter of its fountain, she paused to ask direction of a guardsman in a helm of silver mithril wings.
"The Steward's Palace, I pray you, where is it?"

"There, my lady, beside the Hall of Feasts."

She followed his outstretched arm to a tier of steps that graced a much smaller hall, swept up and through its imposing doors. Inside, she moved by instinct. The space was not quite a maze but still foreign to her experience-no hall in Edoras was quite so great- and so she sought its heart, darting one way or the next with each cue from the few startled servants she chanced to meet, her footfalls become more urgent as her heart felt a stronger pull. In one long passage just as cool, and white, and echoing as the last, she found a face she recognized. Nera. Faramir's housekeeper. With a bundle of linen over her arm and a pleased and surprised smile upon her ruddy face.

"Lady Éowyn! This is a pleasure. What brings you here?"

"The Steward. Can you tell me where to find him?"

"In the study down the next corridor," Nera replied, with only the slightest furrow of her brow to acknowledge Éowyn's anxious tone. "There is a sigil on the door. The tenth. Mînae" she added, and Éowyn nodded, thankful that this was one Gondorian word she had come to know. Mînae was inward, toward the city's heart, osae was outward-toward the city's foot.

"My thanks!" she called back, turning inward at the junction, counting swiftly as the portals passed and almost stumbling as another wave, fathomless as the sea, rose up and tossed upon her shore.

*He was here. Near.* In something more and less than pain, Éowyn ran on until she stopped, heart in mouth, before a door adorned with a branching tree and stars. The runes she was surprised to find familiar: the same letters were stamped on her grandfather's favourite saddle, a gift from Ecthelion for Thengel's years of service to the realm.

Praise Vána ever young. She had the found the spot.

Almost weak with relief and quite uncaring of polite decorum, Éowyn pushed the handle and slipped inside, emboldened by another wave of sorrow that washed over, hard and unyielding, a rising tide that would not turn. It drew her on through a room of dark wood and more books than she had ever seen to arrive at a pair of open terrace doors through which shone a space of gold and emerald and alabaster.

She halted, gazing wonderingly at the sight, thinking Elfhelm, who oft decried the hardness of Stoningland, might be surprised at all the hidden spots of green. This was the family's private garden. Wide, and long enough that it opened to several other rooms, draped by living curtains of myrtle green that hung, heavy with blossom, along the walls and about the balustrades, it was paved in white stone and soft fescue. In one corner a tall stately willow swayed gently in the breeze and pots of a curious small tree with nodding trumpets of creamy white graced each corner. Before her feet, shafts of bright morning sun slanted between column after column; made a pattern of light and shade, umber and gold upon the stone.

It was perfect. And dream-like. And occupied.

The two friends sat upon a low curved bench, utterly still and silent, or so Éowyn thought at first. Faramir had shed his simple shirt and breeches for a black uniform, much like the guards' but far more richly made, a dark void against the sparkling field of white. His hands were clasped with Amerith's, his clear grey eyes raised to hers, and though he did not weep Amerith held her hands hard and steady about his larger ones, as if she alone kept him from falling, steadying him to master something terrible that he could not.
Éowyn, almost ill at the rawness of his hurt, bewildered by what she saw and felt, stood frozen with her hand upon the latch. Faramir shook his head, at first short and sharp, then urgently; trying to rid himself of a sight he would not see and she had to close her eyes. Felt grief and a smoke-dark sense of horror tumble down into a whirlpool of regret.

"...dragged me there, fought with Mithrandir to...."

" No. That was not the man we knew."

Amerith's cry of dismay was faint, but Faramir's reply was even lower, almost ragged, fragmented by the verdant curtain.

"...then why? What caused....?"

Éowyn's heart clenched. Merciful Valar. It was as she had feared. They were speaking of Denethor's demise. Faramir was learning the truth, all too terrible. Knuckles clenched white on the iron scroll below her fingertips, she ached to help. To say something that might ease his pain, but how could she? Standing there, all but eavesdropping on their whispers like a tattle-telling goodwife at the market well?

Now was not the moment.

She watched Amerith sag forward, place her forehead against his own. "Please.... so cruel a loss, That a man so proud could lose himself so utterly. His mood had been beyond strange since you were brought to him. Made mad by the images in the Palantír."

Palantír? The word was unfamiliar. She knew not what it meant but the strange sense of dark foreboding was all too clear. Faramir drew a shaky breath. "At last I understand."

"His mood?"

His dark head shook. "looks. .. silences. ... grieved a ghost. King would...his name."

Éowyn strained to catch the words but they flowed sluggishly and thin, like a creek in summer heat. Did he speak of people shying to talk of the mad? She was unsure. In Rohan that was not the rule, but Gondor, where so much came from what was left unsaid? It seemed quite possible, and that was a sorrow that would be hard to bear.

She took a step to nestle closer to the column. Long dangling fronds of green brushed against her face: they smelled cool and light, fresh like athelas, and she took a calming breath before peering out from the new vantage point. They were lit by warm shafts of sun, bent together, touching at head and hand and knee. It looked intimate and oblivious. As if they two were a world and for a moment Éowyn felt as if she were also stone. A part of the scenery itself.

Amerith looked up and sighed, dropped one hand to her lap, and though her voice began again it was thread thin.

"Do you remember when you were recovering from the wizard's foul attack?"

' Of course."

" That was the father that I knew he could be. He was stricken, Faramir; terrified that he might lose you. ... from Cair Andros ....tirelessly ....standing guard."

"But that was you?!!"
Faramir's burst of surprise drew her up. It was strong and unmistakeable. Amerith must have felt it too, for she winced and pressed her long fingers above her eyes.

"Darling, please. There is no need to shout."

Shout? But they were whispering? Éowyn watched, mystified, as Faramir shook his head again.

"I am sorry.. I am so very very tired."

Amerith squeezed his hand and nodded. "It is too much to shield. There is no need tax yourself."

She caught his gaze and tenderly tucked a dark lock back behind his ear. "Better?" she asked, and Éowyn stood in shock. The band of pain that squeezed her chest let go. Amerith's word rang out clear and loud, somehow warmer and much deeper and at Faramir's answering heartfelt 'yes' she knew.

They had not been whispering after all.

Blindly, Éowyn reached out, seeking purchase. Felt cool smooth stone below her fingertips—its solidness helped her still her tumbling thoughts. The thin, half-heard speech was otherwise. So much was now strangely clear. It had been thoughts, impressions. Meant for each other and somehow spilled out for her to 'hear'. Was this wizardry? Faramir had said he had learned much of Grayhame. But how then did Amerith know it too? Was it some elvish magic of Lórien? A long hidden spell of Westernesse? She shook her head. It was astonishing. Eerie, but oddly, not frightening.

The fearful pattering of her heart was for his sake, not her own.

She pulled the draping green a little farther, for now they spoke aloud again.

"Did you truly think it was only through my nosiness you had a shadow when you were out from underneath Ithilien's bows?" Amerith asked, voice soft as rain. "It was his idea, Faramir, even if my men continued long past the time he thought the threat had gone. Denethor loved you. In his own way. Do not let this darken your heart."

This seemed to help, for he shook himself and looked up to her green gaze. "I know not whether it makes it harder that we parted ill. I threw his orders back in his face."

Sighing, Amerith pressed her lips together and laced her fingers into his free hand. "Darling, the day you would rebel—and openly—was long in coming but the man who sent you out again—I say that was not him. Already when you first returned from Henneth Annun he was not himself. He was done with listening. No man or wizard could give him counsel. The long struggle with the Enemy, too long alone, overmatched him. He believed only what suited Minas Morgul—the fell story shown in the Palantír. Each contact must have sent him farther in its grip."

There was the word again. It must be a sort of tool, an object, used by the Enemy for great ill, for at Amerith's words Faramir's pale face drained to a stark bone white.

"Boromir touched it too."

His handsome features began to crumble. He bent slowly forward, hands across his face, silent but shuddering, and Éowyn knew that this thing was also somehow his brother's undoing. Had led a brave and noble warrior to fall, hopelessly, tragically, in sight of the land of his beloved home.

Slowly, Amerith enfolded Faramir with her arms. She laid her head upon his shoulder stroked her hand along his back and murmured soft soothing words as silver tracks streaked across her cheeks.
Eyes brimming, Éowyn reached to find there was a dampness on her own neck, although she knew not if it were for Faramir, or Boromir, or Théodred: cold and still, barrowed by the washed, smooth slate of the Isern's restless bed.

Suddenly beyond weariness, she rested her head against the stone. The day, that had begun bright and blithe, was now all of shadow. Her heart felt heavy. For Faramir and the father he had lost. For Lothíriel and Ivriniel who grieved for him, but also for what mysteriously had passed between the two old friends. It seemed right and wrong at once. She would not deny him comfort but their-communion-seemed deeper, more essential, and though Éowyn longed to be the one to hold him, here was something she could not give.

So be it. She roughly scrubbed a hand across her face, drew back beyond the terrace doors. Perhaps it was best to leave them be.

Gathering her hem and her dignity, she turned away and sought the solace of her rooms.

Just as an auburn head looked up.

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Ithil was riding high beneath a cloak of stars when Faramir at last clutched his precious cargo to his chest, pulled shut the hidden garden door, and turned wearily toward the Houses.

It was quite late. He knew Éowyn could already be abed, but their weeks together suggested otherwise. She had oft walked later in the evening before settling herself to sleep; breathing in the night scent of stocks and primrose and tuberose; gazing again across Anduin and finding him by the wall, for patrolling his perimeter was a habit long ingrained.

He needed to see her. At the end of this interminable day, it was an ache that echoed hollowly within his bones.

There had been as of yet no chance. In all the hours since, Amerith and Lothíriel and Aunt Ivriniel had not let him be; had swept him, numb and unprotesting, into the warmth of Dol Amroth House. Kept the vultures of work at bay while the first hot brand of shock had muted; been smothered by a colder, essential fury that left in its wake a leaden weariness, and a need to touch and feel the truth.

After hours of argument they had relented. Gone down to the Silent Street where he had sung, halting and low, a few bars of rest for Rohan's King and laid a hand on the cool smooth beauty of his mother's tomb. And knew.

_Blessed Vairë they were wrong. There is a part of Father here._

Sometimes, one needed to be blinded by tears to see.

At the front courtyard door he bid "Good evening" to the night porter, took the hushed and dim-lit hall to their wing, nodded to the few servants clearing the last detritus of the night's ablutions.

By Éowyn's bedroom door he paused, raised his hand to knock gingerly on the wood, and tried not too hard to hope.

It cracked ajar. She, barefoot and bleary, clad only in her nightrail and thin dressing gown, peered
up. The thick rope of her braided hair draped aside her breast and a book was in her hand. "My lord?"

His heart clenched at the sight. She was impossibly lovely so simply dressed. "Forgive me, my lady. I missed you at supper as I did promise. I…."

"I know." She stopped his words with the barest touch on his arm. Her lips were pressed together and her eyes were soft with sympathy, yet somehow the old hollowness flitted at the edges. Had he disturbed her rest? "I am so very, very sorry. Will you be well?" she asked.

"As I can be." He sighed. Her words were comforting but that was not the topic of which he wished to speak. He held out the ceramic pot that had hid, half covered by his cloak. "Forgive me. I do not know the custom in the Riddermark, but here in Gondor when a suitor first seeks a bride he brings a gift of something green and growing. To show that they might flourish. There are no merchants in the market and so I took the liberty…"

"Oh." Éowyn brushed her small strong fingers across the bundle of glossy dark green leaves and white star flowers, breathing deeply as the sweet scent gently wafted up. A pair of blond eyebrow raised in recognition. "It is…"

"Mother's jasmine, yes. From her conservatory. In this fashion, Aunt Rini tells me it should thrive for months until it can be set within the ground. It felt best not to wait until the morrow."

She smiled a little wistfully. "It is beautiful."

He pressed the pot into her hands and took a breath. Of all those he knew, he thought that she would not take his next question ill for it was she who had showed his chary self that it was best to go with a heart unchecked.

"I know that in the days to come my time will often not be my own, but I find myself looking fondly back on the days of our incarceration. Now that I have disturbed your rest, will you walk with me? Just once. About the garden path?"

"Now?" She searched his face.

He nodded gravely. "Yes. It would ease my heart. There is nothing this day I have missed so much as you."

Something indefinable then passed across her face; an expression that Faramir had no code to decipher. It gave him pause, a worry that there was something more to her hesitation than just fatigue, but then, like a fish darting back down into the depths, it vanished. Was shoved hard back down as she pushed the door full wide and nodded.

"I will. Let me get my cloak."
Yay, a chapter! First, to help everyone reading piecemeal, the scene in the courtyard with the brandy bottle where Eowyn first hears Faramir's thoughts (if briefly) is in chapter 33, a bit of a ways back, if you want to check again. And the background/nature of 'reading the hearts of men' as it is shown here is from chapter 5, where Faramir and Amerith first discuss it. That was a loooong way back-grin.

As you can see mythlorn has done a beautiful illustration for this chapter. Please check out his tumblr (https://mythlorn.tumblr.com/) for other lovely things..

Most importantly at huge thank you to Annafan, Eschscholzia and Wheelrider for help with this chapter. The second half needed a complete redo from the early draft to make it work properly and their brainstorming made all the difference. And also grateful thanks to Thanwen, Artura and Gwynnyd for their comments and pickies and encouragement. As always it is a huge huge help.

Unfortunately, once again, I have to thank all my friends, in the Garden of Ithilien, on Tumblr, and in RL at home, for helping us get through yet another round of surgery for our son. The encouragment, pots of pasta on the boil and many many casseroles helped so much. May our lives be boring from now on.
“Rise then, free folk of the West, people of Gondor and Rohan. Rise and we shall stand silent for those we carry in our hearts. May the memory of their toil and sacrifice and triumph endure long with these golden days!”

At the Steward’s ringing words a hush descended. The assembled throng arose, row upon row, from the steps of Merethrond to the courtyard beyond the shining fountain. Proud, hearts full, and silent, they stood twice the length of the standing silence. The birds held their song and the wind dared not play as it stretched, full and heavy, until at last a silver trumpet sang from the Tower-top and the butts of many spears drummed upon the stone.

Éowyn opened her eyes again, and let the beauty of the late day’s perfect waning light take her breath away. The Citadel and all around were bathed in a wash of rose gold over white. It struck fire to the spear points, and gilded the simple splendour of the hall’s embellishments, for each door and bench was crowned with garlands of hawthorn, juniper, and blooming dogwood. Underfoot bunches of tiny hyacinths and blue-veined white starflowers from Mindolluin’s slopes made a sweet scented carpet. Even the White Tree seemed almost noble in its stillness, and as the joyous clapping of many, many hands filled her ears, she looked up to the hall’s top step.

Faramir stood on the steps alone, without rod or heavy robes but with an authority unmistakable to all. His black surcoat bore the sigil of the Steward picked out in silver thread, his mail glistened in the sun and one hand rested on the hilt of a great sword inlaid with a curious blue jewel. He looked grave, and proud, and for the first time in her experience, every inch a warrior.

It was entirely unsettling.

“My lady, are you ready?”

“Pardon?” Startled out of her reverie, Éowyn felt a blush heat her cheeks as she looked askance at her commander. Elfhelm stood placidly beside, himself resplendent in clean armour and battle cloak, his long blond braids bound by silver beads.

There was a puzzled furrow on his brow

“My lady?” One gauntleted hand gestured for her to join those beginning to file out from the first rows of seats. He cocked his head, waiting for her acknowledgement.

Éowyn glanced quickly up toward the steps. There was the barest flash of black and silver before Faramir vanished into the hall. He had gone, but not the unsettled feeling that had lingered since the night they walked in the Houses’ garden. Damn her cowardly heart. They had had so little time to speak. And she had not found words to ask about what still felt almost as a waking dream.

Elfhelm’s voice, this time, became a little sharper. “Éowyn?”

*Enough.* She shook herself, gave one last lingering look before slipping her hand into the crook of Elfhelm’s arm. “Géa, Marshal. My thanks,” she murmured, and they stepped forward, following the line of celebrants waiting to enter into the hall.

The crowd was mostly quiet, patiently following as they trod the tiny flowers underfoot, and she was
content to follow in like fashion. As they mounted the first step Elfhelm looked down, caught her gaze, the furrow yet between his brows, for no matter the Worm was most likely scrabbling in some flea bitten barn, he worried about her still. He had made an oath to his Prince and he would keep it.

“Eowyn are you well? You have been very quiet all this day.”

*Had she?* Perhaps, although it had been a solemn service, bittersweet and not filled between the formal words with much chattering. There had been words of praise for the Ringbearers, songs of rejoicing, grateful thanks to the fiefs and kingdoms that had come to Gondor’s aid. The Captains of the White Tower, Gondor’s new Steward and her Warden, Ivriniel for her brother and the Marshal for Êomer-king had all stood on the white marble steps and been saluted. Elfhelm, normally a man of few words, had led the Riders in lament and song and Êowyn had been content. Her brother’s gesture had been enough.

She lightly squeezed his arm to reassure. “I am a little tired, that is all.” It was just this edge of a falsehood, but necessary. How could she explain what she did not entirely understand herself? Gondor’s Steward was so much upon her mind.

Elfhelm frowned, clearly wanting to say more, but settled for his customary grunt. “Then that is well.”

Minutes of silent shuffling saw them reach the top step and pass underneath the great arched door. Inside, the hall was a delight for one expecting a cool expanse of smooth and white. Crafted of many tones of marble; alabaster and ivory, ebony and a lustrous silver-grey, it was lit by torches and candles in the deep windows beyond the aisles at either side. Garlands of green wound around the tall pillars and softened the weight of stone. Most surprising of all was the roof. Above the high frieze of stern and silent kings, the vaulting gleamed gold and jade, carnelian and sapphire, as if a cloth of silk had been shot through with many coloured threads.

Êowyn stood in awe, wondering at the artisans; if they were men of Númenor or perhaps Elves of the north, for it was said many folk had had a hand in building the long ago new realm.

She followed Elfhelm’s broad back into the milling crowd. About the long walls were set groups of high backed chairs and many tables laden with food and drink. The dance and repast to come were to be the social part of the event and so the faint strains of harp and viol and gitar lifted about the excited chatter.

She was just about to enquire if there were rules about where they might be placed when a small delighted shriek rose up.

“Êowyn, there you are!”

Lothíriel waved excitedly, wending her way through the crush of revelers, with Ivriniel and Varan in tow. Êowyn looked on in frank amazement. Lothíriel, always beautiful no matter the drabness of her healer’s garb, now looked positively ethereal. Her raven hair was set with small stars of argent and iolite that sparkled as she moved and she was clad in a shimmering gown of palest blue and silver. Stunning--like a twilight night set above an iridescent sea--but it was, in truth, Ivriniel who most surprised. Why, she was handsome?! Even pretty, with just the barest touch of paint glistening above her mist-grey eyes, shading the same fine cheekbones that lent her nephew an air of grace. Her gown was of midnight blue and her dark hair fell in a curtain of perfectly straight strands well past her waist. Two glossy braids were held back by an intricate silver circlet so bright it must surely be mithril.

In the face of such elegance, Êowyn felt suddenly grateful she had made an effort with her own
attire.

“Your highness, Princess, Master Healer.” She dipped her head in greeting.

“My Lady of Rohan.”

Varan’s lips twitched sardonically, most amused by her formal address, but Ivriniel was having none of it. She laid her hand on Éowyn’s unbound arm. “My dear, the formal ceremony is now ended. We can go back to our given names.”

*Thank Béma,* Éowyn thought, watching the Marshal bend over Lothíriel’s small neat hand and wishing her *Westu hal.* He had an almost stunned expression on his craggy face that spoke volumes of the Princess’s effect on men.

“*Westu Elfhelm hal,*” Lothiriel replied, two spots of colour high on her cheeks. She had pronounced it properly: with the ‘thu’ of the Riddermark, not the ‘tu’ heard in Gondor’s own Sindarin. The Marshal beamed. His pupil, the one who had ‘interrogated’ him on proper Rohirric speech, was proving a quick and ready study.

“Is not this delightful!?” Lothíriel sighed happily, turning to survey the crowd after greetings had been exchanged all round.

Éowyn smiled at her exuberance. “It is. Although I confess I am unsure where to start.”

“With a toast of course!” declared Varan, pointing to a table fairly groaning under the weight of a heavy cask. He smiled in turn at each of them around the group. “May I fetch you all a goblet? I am told that even Prince Imrahil’s priceless cellar has been raided in the zeal to provide for thirsty soldiers.”

Ivriniel snorted. “It can stand to lose a dozen casks or two. My brother collects wine the way dragons collect gold.” She inclined her head. “Please. I would love a glass as I am not on the wards until the morrow.

“And I am, but can manage one draught without ill effect.” Varan declared, and turned to catch Elfhelm’s eye. “Marshal will you lend a hand?”

“With pleasure.”

And with that the two men departed, Varan’s long grey sleeves and cloak flapping around his tall thin frame like the wings of some great grey heron. Éowyn resisted the urge to laugh. What did it mean that both healers she knew had something bird-like about them? Persistence? Detail in handiwork? Craftiness? That the Master Healer certainly had, but as she looked about the crowd she noticed how many owed a debt of gratitude to his skill. And Ivriniel’s. Amongst the Riders of Elfhelm’s muster, the tall black clad Tower Guard, and even the small knot of leather-armoured Rangers there were those still bandaged but well enough to be on their feet. Here and there were ones she knew--Private Eldrin’s short-shorn locks stood out amongst a group of plainer folk—and Anborn, of course, held court amidst the laughing men.

They were quite strategically placed beside the bright plumage of the few young noblewomen.

Ivriniel followed the direction of her gaze. “I see that ladies of the City have begun to trickle back. Ceridwen has her youngest two in tow. And Lady Celos has her three.”

Lothíriel’s eyes twinkled mischievously. “Amerith was right. They have been rushed back like heifers bound for the spring market. Much good it will do them. None of them can compare to you,
Éowyn. You look absolutely perfect: a golden lily amidst a sea of dark painted pansies.”

Éowyn felt a flush creep up her cheeks. She was unused to being the recipient of compliments, particularly from other women. “Thank you,” she murmured, touched that her friend would trouble herself to speak. “It was important to do credit in my brother’s absence.”

The two women exchanged a glance. “And so you have,” Ivriniel declared. “More than done him credit. All eyes will be upon you.”

There was a slight emphasis on all. What did she mean? Someone in particular? Éowyn again wondered if Faramir had said anything of his suit. It seemed unlikely, or else would she not comment far more plainly? Had Ivriniel guessed? Had Lothíriel?

Puzzled, she let the two women chatter on, relieved when at last the men returned. After the toast was drunk they drifted to the tables to peruse the offerings: savouries and sweets, fruit that Edoras would not see for months and even a few Rohirric specialties. The chefs had outdone themselves and she was pleased to find she could balance a small plate with her bandaged arm.

Taking her goblet and standing to one side, Éowyn focused on enjoying the spectacle, the wine and food, the candleglow.

She was not at all scanning the crowd for a particular tall dark head. Nor at all disappointed when the music for dancing started up.

The tune was bright, lively and lilting to set the hall abuzz. Lothíriel allowed Elfhelm to draw her into the dancing and Varan led Ivriniel to the front of the set but Éowyn hung back, refusing even Anborn’s entreaty to take the floor. A few moments of (hopefully) unobtrusive searching found Faramir across the hall, near another entrance. He stood taller than even the tall Gondorians, had divested his cape and armour for a silk tunic of soft blue-grey that shimmered in the light. Hair bound by silver circlet, he looked lordly and noble, very much the noble Steward: speaking to the revelers, dancing for a turn or two with several of the young things who batted their eyes at him.

Éowyn silently ground her teeth. What was it Amerith had called them? Empty headed chits. But still decorum demanded some attention be paid.

She sipped her wine and tried a little patience. He was slowly making his way across the floor, partner to partner, heading toward her, but then just as he might come close enough to see her a distinctive trilling laugh rose up.

Amerith. In a scandalously low cut gown of emerald trimmed with lace of gold. Now they were dancing, near hands clasped, auburn and dark heads bent together, laughing at some jest.

Like a flock of magpies, the crowd around were leaning forward, heads turning back and forth, following the spectacle of their every move.

A spike of something green and hot, and entirely unworthy, shot through her breast.

They were just dear friends who once had been in love. And whom all the city had to watch.

A quick glance askance at Ivriniel and Lothíriel mollified a little of the anger. Those who knew him best were also watching, but, in contrast, were quite unconcerned; simply admiring and waiting for him to head their way.

Perhaps she was being unfairly shrewish.
“My dear Lady of the Shield-arm. Would you honour me with a turn?”

Éowyn blinked, with an effort pulled her gaze from the dancers and found at her elbow the august figure of Minas Tirith’s Warden of the Keys. His grey eyes were kind and he looked on her with neither pity nor consolation.

Regretfully, she shook her head. Though she loved to dance, her feet strangely rooted to the spot. “I am sorry my Lord Hurin. Perhaps a little later.” But the tall and urbane Gondorian was not to be put off. Instead of leaving for another dancing partner Hurin stayed for conversation. He delighted her with the knowledge that it was his branch of the family (second cousins, once removed) who bred Gondor’s famed small but swift messenger horses. They were well into details of lineage and tack, of how the farriers fashioned special shoes to grip the slick pavers of the streets when she felt a sudden prickling at her nape.

There was a sense of excited energy, like lightning soaking into earth.

“Éowyn! I…”

She turned and looked up to find Faramir standing there, a little harried and relieved to be at liberty, lips slowly curving into the softest smile she had ever seen.

“You look… beautiful.”

A flight of tiny butterflies cavorted in her stomach. For a moment she knew not if she was on her head or heels. Faramir, always so well versed in words, was standing there, nearly stricken dumb, a light of awe shining in his eyes.

“Thank you,” she acknowledged, and he bowed over her hand, pressed a decorous kiss to its heated skin. When he straightened up, his gaze alit upon her hair.

“You wore them.”

Them? “Oh!” She put her hands up to carefully touch Kira’s handiwork. The sprigs of white jasmine flowers were still there, tied and pinned cleverly so as not to fall. She flushed. Even her vanity had decreed something more than just the belt of linked silver leaves was needed to complete her look for all its shine and pleasing drape.

“I did. I have no jewellery. I rode with none.” And I would not play dressing up with another woman’s frippery, she wanted to add, but held that back. The gown with its diaphanous sleeves was loan enough.

His curious fingers reached out, so close they almost brushed against her skin. “And this?” The silver medallion stamped with the mark of Rohan’s running steed hung on a chain in the hollow of her throat.

She swallowed. “It is Elfhelm’s bridle boss. I needed something of the kingdom I represent upon my person. I was just telling Lord Hurin of it.” Lord Hurin!! She had completely forgot that he was there! Cheeks flaming with embarrassment, she turned to find that the gentleman was gone. “But he was just here?!” Béma. How horribly impolite had she been! Hurin had been considerate and welcoming and she had treated him like a piece of furniture!

Faramir’s lips twitched. “Very perspicacious, my cousin. He judges well when to leave the field.”

“But…I have been inexcusably rude.”
“My lady, there is no need to be concerned.” Faramir turned, stepped out of the way of a passing guardsman and inclined his head in greeting. The hall was filling up. More folk had taken to the dance floor and she wondered if he wished another set, but for the nonce he seemed most happy to stay with her.

“Éowyn, once more I applaud your ingenuity,” he remarked, when they had both availed themselves of a proffered tray laden with small fried pastries. They were filled with meat and spiced with cinnamon and clove. Delicious and nearly like a half-moon shaped pie she loved at Yule.

“I could hardly have done otherwise,” she explained, around a mouthful of pastry. “I was thankful enough to borrow a gown suitable to the night.”

“And it is absolutely lovely. Although had you eschewed that too, there is something of a tradition to be ingenious with one’s garb.”

“How so?”

Faramir’s eyes glinted mischievously. “My grandmother Eleanna first met my grandfather Echthelion at a country ball at his aunt’s estate. He was a Captain then and she was one of the last refugees from south Ithilien, her father’s demesne having been quickly overrun. Of course she had no fancy dress in which to meet with the future Steward.”

“What did she do?”

“Wore the most elaborate thing she had to hand.”

“Which was?”

“A nightgown.”

Éowyn giggled. “You are joking!”

“I am not,” Faramir objected, grinning wryly. “No one dared to make a fuss and Grandfather was absolutely smitten. I once dared Boromir to repeat the feat.”

“You didn’t!”

“I did,” Faramir hastened to protest, “He turned up to Cair Andros’s yearly mess dinner in a black velvet bedrobe and cap. I think the new recruits were worried it was official. That they’d need to purchase something similar!”

With that the two of them simply fell apart, laughing until tears pricked at the corner of their eyes. Oh but it felt good. To be free with each other as they had been. Intimate. Easy. As if they had known each other three years not scarce three weeks. Éowyn’s heart thudded hard and Faramir grinned, held her hand again and looking more carefree than he had in weeks.

Sadly it was not to last.

Reluctantly, he raised up his dark head and scanned the hall again. There were far too many curious heads turned their way. A group of painted and perfumed, imposing ladies frowned behind their fans but most ominously of all, a slightly flustered looking Cahil hovered beside the nearest group of Guards.

He looked down into her eyes and heaved a heavy sigh. “I am sorry. My time this night is not all my own, though were my heart to choose I would spend every moment of it with you.” Grey eyes
darkened briefly. “I hope that you can forgive me? I have had duties to attend, and more flocking now. Being with you will be my reward for playing the diplomat.”

“I understand,” she said quietly, and she did. A daughter of Aldburg and Edoras knew well that duty came first, yet she could not resist something of the urge to tease. “I have watched you pay court to the young ladies vying for your attention. You do it well. The Steward seems most fair in his attentions.

His mouth quirked to one side. “I have had much practice.”

“Entertaining or avoiding them?”

“Both!”

They laughed again. Accepted cup of Dol Amroth’s light frothy wine passed by a servant and watched as a complicated rondel began.

Faramir pointed to a petite young thing whose hand was clasped with a rather imposing Swan Knight. Her black hair was piled into a swooping nest of curls so well trained, they looked as if they would not move from wind or passion. “Do you see that one?”

Éowyn stared, trying to imagine how she avoided grazing her dancing partner. “Yes?”

He took a gulp of wine. “Lady Ceridwen’s youngest. I suffered through one dance with her already. Unless my skills are entirely dulled, I believe she is about to claim another one.”

The music stopped and right on cue, the lady curtseyed and whirled around, standing on tiptoe to search the crowd.

“Oh Valar. Quick!” Faramir exclaimed, reaching for her hand, setting both goblets on a passing tray so fast the precious liquid sloshed. He placed an arm about her waist and searched her eyes. “Are you sufficiently provisioned?”

“For what?” she asked, bemused.

“Why, to test how high I can swing your beautiful skirts!”

The music started up, faster and with a steady drum behind the tune. She laughed, giddy with anticipation and warmth that coiled underneath her heart, tilting her head and holding his gaze. This was more like to the Rohirric dances that she loved. “With your shoulder barely healed? Will Varan not disapprove of such unorthodox exercise?

“With certainty.”

“Then yes!”

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Beyond the next towering onyx pillar, another wallflower smiled and sipped thoughtfully at her drink, watching a dashing, newly commissioned Swan knight lead the disappointed ingénue off the dance floor.
Her object was quite delightfully broad of shoulder, handsome in his dress tunic of silver and blue, and proudly bearing the sign of his first injury: a well healed slash just barely visible in his hairline.

It should not, mused the Duchess of Lossarnach to herself, pose too great an impediment.

Given the vigor of his dancing.

“Amerith, you look like the cat that got the cream.”

“Oh!” The Duchess gave the tiniest of startled squeaks and turned to find the Princess of Dol Amroth at her side. “Ivriniel! That was most unfair. Were you any quieter, you could be mistaken for a mouse.”

“But never one caught poaching something that they should not.” The older woman snorted and followed an emerald gaze across the hall, “You should be ashamed of yourself, Amerith. That young man could almost be your son.”

A hand laden with sparkling jewels flew to the Duchess’s breast. “I am shocked! Even wounded. that you should think I would look on any fair young man that way.”

“Like a ripe peach from which you wish take a juicy bite?”

“An utterly scandalous assertion. These days I am far more interested in the length of a man’s wit.”

“Then I daresay you are using the wrong yardstick,” Ivriniel observed a little smugly. “Haldan is pretty as his horse’s barding. But only slightly more informed.”

“About manouvers?” Amerith asked as innocently as she dared. “I thought your brother commissioned only well educated men.”

The Princess flushed scarlet and began to choke, having just raised her goblet to her lips. Amerith reached out to obligingly held her cup. “I thank you for that bit of intelligence, my dear. I may have to change my mind.”

“Only ‘may’?” Ivriniel shot back, once she had cleared her throat.

Amerith grinned and silently handed the heavy silver vessel back, inclining her auburn head.

Ivriniel, clearly not minded to argue more, took a cautious sip and turned back to the spectacle.

The line of dancers was sweeping across the floor, watched by an entire Age of silent carven Kings. Beneath Meneldil’s ever youthful visage, before the empty dais and its honour guard.

The black carved seat of the Stewards was still there. Empty and forlorn.

“My aunt Ivrenna will be sad to have missed this day,” The Princess sighed quietly. “But Tolfalas has been too occupied with Corsairs to come. The last, I understand, has just been found and sunk, trying to outrun Galathon out in the Bay. They will celebrate when he comes into port.”

Amerith nodded. “And there is time yet to come for a coronation. The other one whom I understand to be put out is your younger nephew. Lothíriel says Erchirion hates to miss a ball.”

“Erchirion will be drunk once his official duties are set down. He will have to admirably lead the more unofficial celebrations.” Ivriniel noted with a sardonic grin. “The price of wanting to hold office.”
From what Amerith had experienced of Imrahil’s second son, she could well believe it. He was a high-hearted, good-natured man, as enamoured of wine and jests as he was of ships and sailing. “Too true.”

With that, both women fell silent, let themselves enjoy the music and the warmth of good food and drink. The set dance ended. A pavanne began and Lothíriel, this time, took the hand of a blushing Haldan. She looked poised and regal. He looked as if he might truly faint at his good fortune.

Amerith, watched them closely, biting a tiny iced rosebud from the top of a small square cake. “Lothíriel is made for greater things than a simple knight in your brother’s retinue,” she observed. “Perhaps now that the Shadow is eradicated, the young things will think more to the future.”

Ivriniel nodded. “She reminds me of my grandmother. Plucked from a hoyden life in Lossarnach’s groaning orchards to be a princess on a jut of rock. She was fearless. And thrilled with all new things.”

“Fana? I was too young to know her. My mother spoke of her with such fondness.”

“Gardens were her love,” smiled the Princess. “All of us have a little of her heart but it was Finduilas who had her wit. And her love for beauty. My sister adored parties. The flowers, the banners and decoration.” She sighed and her gaze followed Lothíriel’s dark head again. “Imrahil and his children are cut from cloth of another kind. They have my father’s steady shrewdness but some of his mother’s outspokenness.”

“And you?” asked Amerith, intrigued. “Do you not have her success with plants? A green thumb where others cultivate only dirt?”

Ivriniel’s response was swift and dry as browned November leaves. “Be careful Duchess. Any nicer and people will mistake that we are friends.”

“Heavens, have I gone too far?” Amerith hid behind her goblet and allowed herself the luxury of a private smile. Who would have guessed that Ivriniel could be so enjoyable? Quick at conversation and observant at the world beyond her bedpans. It was startling, even surprising, coming from the sober cuckoo in the Dol Amroth nest.

“Allies, surely” she replied, watching Ivriniel accept another tall goblet of rich dark wine, and thinking peace bought as a temporary purchase was not too costly. It would certainly have its benefits. Another respected voice to wield common sense where it was due. Help shepherd a generation who knew only war into a glittering and, hopefully less cautious Age. “Together we can be so much more effective.”

The Princess regarded her a longer moment before she nodded slowly. “Agreed.”

“Excellent,” Amerith finished her tidbit and brushed her hands. “Our first campaign shall have to be keeping watch upon the matriarchs. They are plotting rather shamelessly to snare an unexpected Steward.”

“As always.” Ivriniel gestured to the lamplit recesses of the hall with her cup. “But now with more coordination. There is an intruder in their midst. Mother calling to mother, like mumak bellowing to mumak across Umbar’s teeming swamps.”

Amerith chuckled at the perfect image. And every last one of them lumbering about the hall, seeking to improve their daughters fortunes. She turned her head to follow a certain striking couple in blue and silver-white. Éowyn was frowning, looking anxiously at her feet and Faramir was...
grinning, holding her firmly about the waist. In lieu of gripping her broken hand. “Have you noticed which way the wind is blowing?”

“Of course I have. I am the daughter of a seaman,” sniffed Ivriniel. “But I also know he did not spend the night with us.”

The Princess’s fine dark eyebrows quirked but Amerith, long used to being the object of overblown and baseless gossip, did not rise to the bait. “I simply refused to let him rattle in the palace quarters. He slept alone in a deep feather bed, had company to break his fast and now has on a tunic that, thank the Valar, does not make him look as if he was just dragged from his sickbed. Right up until we left there were questions from Hurin concerning seating. He was somewhat flummoxed as to precedence. Lady Éowyn was a puzzle. She is injured foreign nobility but has no official title.”

“She is a King’s sister, Where else would she be but with the council and dignitaries?

Amerith gave a little shrug. “He was worried to insult her with a farther row.”

“If she was not happy, I daresay she will let him know.”

True. The woman quite clearly knew her own mind. And had the spine to speak it.

Amerith watched the promenade reach the nearer entry of the hall and wheel as one. Only one knot failed to the execute the turn. Gold and Raven. Laughing delightedly together and quite uncaring of the slip.

“Exactly as Boromir predicted,” she whispered, almost to herself.

“Pardon?”

Amerith flushed. How careless to speak so aloud. She was slipping. To thrilled to she him happy once again. “I once danced with his brother and discussed how Faramir would be should he fall in love. He would shine, said Boromir, and I believe that he was right.”

Ivriniel smiled a little sadly. “He usually was, where his brother was concerned. And they are both shining, simply breathtaking together. Such contrast and yet so similar in a way.”

The Duchess glanced at her companion, impressed again, pleased that another had noticed it too. Very interesting. She was not the only one to have seen the change in his demeanor. Nienna, lady of mercy, this was something so hoped for so long, but now it was true it was a little disconcerting. “I expect he simply cannot help himself, like metal to a lodestone. The Steward’s desk is reportedly sprouting poetry. Three pages in Quenya with quite good alliteration.

Ivriniel nodded but did not add more. The two women watched the dance floor and sipped their drinks. The music had stopped. The dancers had done each other a courtesy and now the White Lady was shaking her head at another prospective dancing partner, the Steward’s hand firmly clasped in hers.

“That is their third dance in a row.” The Princess was not the only one keeping count. A small shower of frowns fell about the hall. “They are monopolizing each other scandalously.

“Then we shall have to step in and relieve the pressure.”

Ivriniel turned and looked perplexed. Amerith silently saluted with her goblet and drained it to the dregs. “How better than to keep the swains occupied? Haldan, was that his name?”
The Princess’s tone, when she answered, was mostly exquisitely noncommittal. “Yes…”

Amerith set aside her cup and picked up the hem of her gown.

“Excellent. Then perhaps you will introduce us?”

Chapter End Notes

and here is the gorgeous illustration Mythlorn made for this chapter.

Thank you so so much to Arizona Poppy, Carawyn and Thanwen for their comments and corrections!!!
Merry Christmas everyone!
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Faramir was relieved.

In all the small, oddly important details, it transpired that being Steward was not so very different from being the Steward's son. He had not tripped upon Merethrond's wide stone steps, no councillor had taken offense at the order of the service, he had not forgotten the names of pretty and pallid young things who vied for his attention. There were even a few benefits. The Steward could, it transpired, ignore the grumbling of the court, the looks, the whispers, and every faintly disgruntled glance, to do exactly as he chose. It had been glorious. Below the warm glow of the hall's mellow candlelight, he had held Éowyn in his arms and let his heart sing with happiness. Dance until the music, the bursts of happy laughter, the whole world fell away before the shine of carefree joy on Éowyn's lovely face.

The feeling had lingered- like the soft spring's warmth after the sun dipped behind a cloud- for a little while before reality settled in.

A Steward, especially one preparing for the new King's return, had little time to himself.

The days following the service had passed in something of a blur. Minas Tirith might no longer be under threat but she was certainly besieged- by half the kingdom. With three short weeks before Aragorn arrived there were endless meetings and reparations, concerns of food and housing for the folk flooding through the ruined gate. No detail was too small for the Steward to consider and Faramir had truthfully begun to feel a bit stretched out, like a piece of taffy pulled six different ways. Varan, grumbling at their brief consult, threatened him with tonics, and observed that his healing shoulder needed more exercise than scribing. So when Amerith suggested going for a ride, he leapt at the chance. The Marshal's men warned of a problem in the Haradi camp south of the City's walls, and while it did not strictly need the Steward to oversee, the change and air and sun would do him good.

They set out in the late afternoon with a small contingent of the White Tower guard, far after he had hoped, but at least while the golden haze of westering sun still lingered on the mountain tops. Amerith rode her pretty white mare and sported a modest (for her) riding habit. Faramir sat an exuberantly jouncy Mithros and wore his Ranger uniform and uncle's sword. It felt almost normal, and blessedly so; for a while they chatted of nothing more serious than Spring's gentle air and the shoots of green that rose up amidst the ruined fields.

Fortunately, the distance was just enough to give the stallion some proper exercise.

Unfortunately once the conversation flagged it was also enough for Faramir to begin to brood.

He was concerned about Éowyn.

In the scant days since the ball Rohan's White Lady had not been herself. She had become noticeably quieter and more distant. Cool almost, and even Lothíriel had worriedly remarked upon the fact; it was as if a sudden spring storm had brought unwanted snow and left the land both somber and fretting- so much that a tight ache of unsettledness had nestled in his chest, uninvited and reluctantly ignored. He could not shake a pang of guilt. His time was consumed for every moment of the day: a sparse lunch eaten at his desk, dinner in consult with various lords and captains. Their time together
had become a mere trickle compared to what it had been before. Two brief but cherished meetings were all that could be managed, for under pressure from Ivriniel he had moved his things to Dol Amroth House. It made sense, for company and planning, but now he regretted the decision. It also meant they had no chance for walks in the calm and quiet of the evening.

"You are being very quiet," observed Amerith pointedly, when he fell soberly silent for the second time. "Are you tiring?"

Faramir laughed. "Not likely! This is far less taxing than arguing with Harlond's harbourmaster over barge tariffs. The man is beyond pedantic. He does not seem to understand waiving tariffs will speed the traffic up!"

Amerith raised an auburn eyebrow. "Forlin? My butler's wooden leg has more imagination than he does. That man must see and touch something before he can appreciate it. You have your work cut out there." She looked across with a sharp apprising gaze. "Then pray tell me why you are being so unlike yourself. A goshawk just darted past and I swear you hardly noticed."

He blushed, knowing she was right. He had not noticed the hawk or the prey it chased and Mithros, sensing his unsettled mood, tossed his head. Faramir patted the stallion's dappled wither. Something would have to be said for he knew that look: Amerith would not give up.

"Éowyn has been unusually quiet since the ball. She hardly replies to my messages and Lothíriel says she has declined all offers to dine or visit."

"Ah." Amerith, seemingly unsurprised, dropped her voice a little lower, just loud enough for him to hear but no so loud their entourage need know of what they spoke. "Could she have overtaxed herself? Could the Black Breath be stealing back?"

"Nay. I enquired. Neither Aunt Rini nor Varan are concerned."

"Then this listlessness is more of the heart than body?"

Faramir frowned. Trust his friend to get straight to the point. Shrewdly, she had plucked the thread that lead to an uncomfortable core. "I worry that she is lonely left in the Houses," he admitted.

"Quite possible, but then would she not accept offers of company instead of declining them? When exactly did this start?"

He cast his mind back to the evening of the ball. There had been a glimpse across the hall of an ashen face and blue-grey eyes darkly smudged from fatigue. Or so he had assumed, as Marshal Elfhelm escorted her through the door. "After the midnight on the service," he answered finally. "My note the next morning was returned with an admonition to not trouble myself over her."

A pair of green eyes widened. "Well, that certainly is a change. Although I would not say it is for lack of attention at the dance itself." She grinned at the wry quirk he could not hide. "I thought the night went rather swimmingly up until that point."

"It did! But then she suddenly excused herself and insisted on retiring. I don't know why." Faramir dropped a rein and ran a hand worriedly through his hair. "She did not even stop to take her drink."

Amerith tapped her cheek thoughtfully. "Hmm. I remember glimpsing her when Marshal Elfhelm escorted her through the door. She looked pale and wan. From fatigue, or so I had assumed. She briefly glanced askance. "I had not thought to connect it to the gossip making rounds with the canapes."
His fingers tightened on the rein. "Gossip? What gossip?"

"Well, of course the court noticed how much you danced together. How could they not? You both shone like stars, sable and silver-white; it would take a blind-man to not see how happy you both were. Most were delighted to see their Steward returned to health and thriving, but some I believe were discomfited that their precious Chloes were not good enough for him." Her mouth bunched in a moue of distaste. "A 'barbarian Shieldmaiden' is less acceptable as a mate than an inbred, simpering ninny."

"Damn them!" Faramir smacked his spare hand upon his thigh, making the unflappable Mithros twitch an ear. "That they would be so ungracious as to speak her that way!"

"Yes! It is not beyond the realm of possibility that she overheard something unpleasant. Those who were disgruntled were not being particularly discreet."

Faramir let fly a string of less than pretty words. As Steward he was appalled that citizens would be rude to an honoured guest. As Eowyn's friend and suitor he was enraged she might have been so hurt.

He shot Amerith a worried glance. Rohan's proud and self-contained shieldmaiden was not one to share such insults. "If 'tis true Éowyn would not wish to speak of it. To me, or any other."

Amerith nodded, looking southward, past the sprawling camp now in view toward Anduin's first great west bend. "You shall have to read the undercurrents." she remarked. "Like a barge captain coming up the River."

Indeed. Faramir sat and silently ground his teeth, wondering how to best to draw her out. Reading her feelings on the matter was tempting, but also the rudest of intrusions in someone so very close. A proper discussion, carefully framed to avoid more arrows of mortification on her part, required time, the one thing he did not have, but was truly the best approach. He sighed, knowing that for now all that he could do would be to tackle the duties that flocked liked noisy starlings as quickly as he could. Make more time to see her and hope that they could find their way back to where they were. It was unsatisfying but he could see no other option.

After these rather frustrating ruminations there was no chance Faramir to plan, for soon enough they were upon the camp and its stockade of Riders. Faramir drew rein and passed Mithros to a young blond bearded man he did not recognize, knowing the grey would be well watched. Amerith joined him. After a few short words with the tall, grizzled captain of Rohan who stood guard, they wended their way into the maze of small tents and cooking fires. The reek of smoke and sweat and mud was strong and though he approved of Hurin's instinct to keep the prisoners outside the City gates, what he saw was disheartening. Though most of the prisoners were men: hard-eyed and marked with tattoos of their rank, nursing injuries or waiting sullenly for the King to mete out their fates, some were women. Followers of the camps, abandoned when their men melted like ghosts back across the river. Some were pregnant. A few had babies at their breasts.

He frowned, watching Amerith converse with a dark veiled, wizened woman in who seemed to speak for the rest. The makeshift city of canvas set on straw pallets kept rain off and was just warm enough in the night's lingering chill but not for all. The woman's bracelets chimed musically as she gestured to two women who had recently given birth.

The new mothers sat hunched, swaddled babes clutched to their breasts, huddled beside a fire for its warmth. One babe mewed and rooted eagerly. The other, smaller and too poorly to suckle, had not the strength to cry.
Praise the Valar, for once the decision he had to make was a simple one. "Take them to the Houses," he ordered. "Ask Master Varan for the best Healer-midwives, who can help them." Several carts were quickly found. He watched one young guard lay a woman and her infant tenderly on blankets on the boards. Her thick black hair was streaked with grey but her eyes were young, no older than the guard's. Hardship, not age, had silvered her locks and lined her face, yet still there was gratitude in her warm dark eyes.

"Araw smiles upon you," Faramir murmured, pleased to find the benediction came easily again, but then another language came to his ear: Rohirric. In the gruffly lyrical tones of Marshal Elfhelm.

He turned in time to see the Rohir reach down to clap the troop's captain approvingly on the shoulder. And offer his companion a small half smile.

It was Éowyn! Blessed Valar! She sat tall and straight backed as an arrow upon a strong war horse; a fine light grey, bright-eyed and bearing a healed slash across his rump. What a wonderful surprise! He had not thought to see her for hours or days more!

Faramir nodded to the guard to move on their way, took Mithros's reins again, and swung up into the saddle. A short amble brought him into earshot.

"Westu Elfhelm hal," he hailed. "And my lady! This is a happy and unlooked-for reunion."

The older Rider bowed low from the saddle. "Lord Steward, well met on this good afternoon. And to you Duchess," Elfhelm added, for now Amerith had now joined them.

She adjusted her riding gloves and smiled most enigmatically. "Thank you Marshal. What a most pleasant surprise. And Lady Éowyn, it is indeed a good omen to see you on horseback once again. Do you not think so, Faramir?"

"Of course!" It was a very good sign if Varan had let his patient ride; his heart leapt like a deer to hear her name and see the breeze shift her golden hair.

Faramir smiled, wide and encouraging, but Éowyn did not react. She sat unmoving, stiffly formal and with grey eyes guarded. "Lord Steward," she finally replied in a tone so curt it could cut glass.

Nienna's mercy! Faramir stared, shocked and grieved, while Amerith frowned and bit her lip and Elfhelm stared bleakly across the rustling tents. There were bare acquaintances he would not greet so! Was she truly angered so very much? Had she judged his busyness as a lack of caring? Frantically he cast his mind back to her messages of the past few days. Yes they had been but a few bare words on tiny notes of parchment, but nothing to suggest this—this cold fury?

A moment's awkward silence ensued. Finally Amerith gave a little cough and spoke in a tone both overbright and forced. "Marshal would you be so good as to come a ways? I am afraid I could not quite catch young Sorjen's point about the rushes."

Faramir narrowed his eyes. She had used the tone employed when cajoling particularly stubborn councilors. This was obviously an excuse to absent them both and the Marshal was only too happy to oblige.

"Certainly my lady," Elfhelm replied, looking vastly relieved as he kneed his mount forward. Amerith swung her mare around and for a longer moment Faramir watched their two retreating backs, more than a niggle of suspicion creeping in. She had been most insistent that they set out after the mid-afternoon watch had changed. Did she know the Marshal would also be visiting his Men?

He cleared the hoarseness in his throat. No point in avoiding the obvious implication. "We seem to
have been maneuvered by a pair of deft old hands. They wanted us to meet this day."

Éowyn pulled her glance back to his face. "They are not subtle."

"No, this is most unlike her. Normally she is not so blunt."

Was it his imagination or did Éowyn grip her reins suddenly a little tighter? The big grey stallion stamped once, too well trained to object more.

"You are well?" Faramir asked, hoping for a simple pleasantry to thaw the cool air between.

"Yes."

Again a stilted answer. Where had their former ease vanished to? Éowyn sat, lips pressed together, too much the proud daughter of a king to be outright rude but clearly wishing she had other company.

It hurt. Her glance that came out of a depth of stony silence pierced him like a dart.

"Éowyn?" Her chin tilted a little more his way and the tight band in his chest lessened to a duller throb. What could he say to show how he regretted the past few days? "Is it so very bad a thing? To meet, even if they have arranged it? Forgive me. I know I have been too chained to duty, but I have missed you so terribly. Can we not begin again?"

There was no answer, just the jangling of the horses' tack and the rustling of the dying wind through the ravaged grass. Was she so angry that there was nothing he could say? With a sinking heart he tried again.

"We have yet a little time before Lothíriel takes ship soon for Cormallen. She said your brother called for you."

That received more of a reaction but not the one he hoped. Her nostrils flared, like a horse readying to bell a challenge. "I am not a saddle bag to be shipped to and fro," she answered bluntly. "Nor do I appreciate being thought a pawn to be moved where others will."

"I did not mean…." He sadly shook his head and let his shoulders fall. They were speaking at cross purposes and not for anything would he risk the gulf between them getting worse. Sometimes time healed, where words only pricked. Perhaps it was best to let her be. Apologize again—later, when they had not been thrown together by misguided but well-meaning friends.

He bowed low from the saddle. "My Lady, I will take your leave now and bid you well until the morrow." A gentle nudge at Mithros's flank set the stallion ready to turn but then a quiet voice piped up.

"Faramir?"

_Praise Este._ His name! Finally she had used his name. A little flame of hope flared up. Did she too regret the tangle they found themselves in?

Éowyn glanced briefly to the carts that lumbered slowly back north toward the City gate before looking back. "It is…. _good_ of you to help them. It is not always required to succor the children of the enemy."

He looked up, surprised. What did she mean? That Gondor, proud and victorious, would turn away those that needed aid? That she had not expected them to be merciful? Faramir backed Mithros up,
frustration colouring his next words darker than he meant.

"You think that we would not? Are we so very different? Some of them were conquered. Are we to blame them for their weakness? And," his jaw tightened convulsively, "we are not uncomplicit in their fate. Gondor could have supported them against the Serpent."

For a moment he thought her also grieved for something soft glimmered in her gaze but then she looked down and a grey wall fell back again, face set and white like a mask.

"No…I did not mean that Lord Steward."

_Damn Angband's halls!_ He had misunderstood her! Their leisurely conversations whilst strolling on pretty garden paths under Shadow suddenly seemed an Age away. This was a slog. Like walking through a swamp with logs and pitholes underneath. There must be more: this could be no simple spat. He could feel it. She was hurt. And frustrated. As aggrieved as he by the loss of easiness between them, but simply flinging words at each other could not see them through.

Deliberately Faramir took a breath and let the tension drain from his face, like water from an ewer. "Éowyn... I understand that you are upset, that I have not paid you the attention that I should, but please, tell me what else is here? What have I done to so wrong your heart?"

Éowyn leaned back in the saddle, stiff and defensive, turning to look at Amerith and Elfhelm gathered by the knot of fair haired men.

Her jaw clenched and her brow creased as she picked out the bright red hair amidst the black and gold.

Was that it? Was she somehow jealous? "Amerith is here because she is fluent in Haradi," he explained. "And the women will be easy to speak with her."

"Then why don't you go ask her!" He flinched at the hurt and angry tone, but it was her next words that truly left him floored. "She seems to have a surfeit of information. It should be easy. After all, you keep rooms there."

An uncomfortable understanding dawned. oh lord it was that and worse. Someone had told Éowyn of their unorthodox arrangement and she naturally had misunderstood. He kicked himself for not speaking of it sooner. Of course she would think it inappropriate.

Beyond relieved that at last he understood he hastily began to explain the situation. "Yes, I do, but they were only for times I needed to avoid my father's wrath. not because of any liaison. Éowyn, honestly you need not be jealous."

"Jealous?" Two spots of colour blazed high upon her cheeks. "Of a woman who held you in her arms?! Whom you once thought to marry? Whom the whole City thinks is your paramour? Of course not, my lord. Or did you think by telling half of the truth about your 'infatuation' it would convince me not to care?"

Faramir's cheeks flamed in embarrassment. "No... I didn't mean to. It is just that it was so very long ago. And the liaison was never real. It started as but a scheme."

"And that is supposed to make me feel less aggrieved?!!" she cried. "That you lied to all? People I heard at the ball certainly assumed it to be true."

Abashed, he looked down a moment before looking up to catch her gaze. Was it better that he saw fire there, where before there had been ice? Not to his sinking heart. "Éowyn, please. It was a
rumour created for a purpose. Not a falsehood. We let it run. It is not finest thing I have ever done and I did not correct a wrong impression but I did not lie."

She looked singularly unconvinced. "What is she to you? A dalliance to take up again once you are safely affianced to me?"

"No!" he cried, wondering what vile creature had put that in her head. "Not ever! Amerith and I are good friends. And yes when I was young, and nothing I did could please my father I felt hemmed in and wanted something for myself. She was open and carefree, absolutely utterly herself and everything that I thought I wanted at that time. The total opposite of what I had. And yes, I fancied myself in love but that was but an image of her in my head, not the real person that I saw. I do not know what you have been told, but there is nothing there! We are but good friends. You have my word. I have never cared for anyone as I care for you!"

"The word of a man who knowingly spread a lie." The knowledge of her scorn fell heavily as a blow. "I have my dignity and my pride. I will not battle for the court's entertainment. Nor will I be anyone's second best. And I do not need your pity or your charity."

Appalled, abashed and afraid that she would turn away, be forever lost, he reached out and quite unthinking placed a hand upon her arm.

"Éowyn, will you not see?"

She stiffened as if struck. Emotion flooded him. Upset. And grief. A futile longing and shards of white chill fury. Roughly she jerked her arm away. "Get out of my head!" she cried, and wheeled her mount, kneeling the grey hard. In an instant she was away and beyond the startled Riders.

"Éowyn! Éowyn!"

He called, but she did not look back. Rode stiff and swift across the endless flats as the dappled violet and gold and red of sunset painted the city walls all the colours of a bruise.

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"Béma, what was he thinking?"

Windfola's mistress kept up a steady stream of angry words but he merely cocked an ear, leaned into the unusually hard strokes of the curry comb and whickered happily. At least someone appreciated the force of her words, Éowyn thought to herself. The short teeth of the tool were perfect, loosening every patch of mud before the brush's stiff bristles swept away the dirt. She moved methodically-flank, barrel, and then down to his hocks. The Mearh blew out a gusty sigh, enjoying the attention, but too soon it stopped. Éowyn straightened up. She had just begun to set the brush and comb back in a waiting metal bucket when he whinnied and shook his plaited mane.

"Not enough for you, my friend?" She turned and pushed a drooping sleeve back up. "Let me see."

Her nimble fingers followed the ripple of muscle to an itchy spot, found yet another patch of pale clay dried into Windfola's sleek grey coat. "How did this get everywhere?" she muttered. The soil of Minas Tirith's southern flats was sticky and oddly fluid when churned up, not clumped and tawny like Edoras. She applied the brush with force, scrubbing in careful circles and flicking the specks into the straw. There, much better. "Hai over, Win." She lightly tapped the stallion's rump and obligingly he shuffled forward in the stall. The sound of contented chewing began. Éowyn balanced the brush
upon the wooden lip of the stall's side aisle and pulled a curved hoof pick from the pocket of her breeches. The space was narrower than she was used to, but she could manage. Bending and lifting his near pastern up, she cupped his hoof firmly in her hand.

"Interfering. High handed. Sāmwīs. Man!" At each word a clod of mud flung from Windfola's hoof to land with a satisfying plop on the hay-covered stones. Éowyn bent lower to her task and shoved her braid roughly back across her shoulder, keeping up the litany and the rhythm. Outside the stall the stable lads listened curiously but, adroit at knowing when not to interfere, sensibly left her to herself. The subject of her ire was most likely somewhere about, tending to Waltrun as any good Rider should, but still she fumed.

Elfhelm! Drat the man. He'd best keep well clear of this side of the block for she had half a mind to take the pick to him. The cheek of going behind her back like some conniving tūn frōwe. And with that woman!

Éowyn jerked the tine a little deeper as a sudden pang of hurt throbbed sharply in her chest. Béma, thinking of Amerith did not help. Somehow she must keep her mind off her, for that led to uncomfortable thoughts of him. Faramir. Looking so hurt and surprised (and impossibly easy on a horse) it almost ruined her resolve. Not one to give heed to the prattling of angry tongues, she found herself in a predicament. His hurt had poured across her once again and left her confused, beguiled. Unsure what to believe or not. It made her want to soothe his pain, but then how could she trust that feeling as her own? Born in some sorcerer's trick how could it be real?

No more.

She wiped the back of her hand across her forehead. It would not do to weaken, succumb to the heaviness that dragged at her chest like lead. They had played her for a fool and no matter that he explained (most convincingly, a little corner of her heart protested) she, Éowyn, daughter of Éomund, had learned her lesson.

Letting down one's guard to another soul always led to pain. Aragorn had taught her that.

The cleared-out hoof dropped back to the straw and she began again with the off hind one, so intent on mentally skewering her old friend that that she missed the sound of hooves clopping hollowly on the cobblesstones.

"Are you trying to carve a hole in his hoof?" came a cultured drawl from just beyond the arched stall door. "Your scowl could almost take the place of that pick."

Éowyn peered up and stifled a sudden curse. Morgoth's balls. it was the smug harpy herself. Here to gloat, no doubt, but she would not give her the satisfaction of a reaction. Éowyn bent quickly down, hiding the sudden flush of anger in the stall's half shadows.

"The mud of the ruined fields is sticky. The river at times floods even to the City walls," remarked Amerith smoothly. "It is part of why the Townlands are so fertile."

"Really?" Annoyed, barely holding her temper in, Éowyn slowly straightened up and crossed her arms against her chest. There was straw stuck to her cheek and manure on her boots but the duchess looked perfectly neat and tidy. The cow. She raised a brow skeptically. "And this is why you are here? To teach me about Gondor's agriculture?"

"Well, no." Amerith inclined her head and rested one gloved hand upon the door stile. "I wish to talk. But this is a far from private place." She frowned, turning around and peering into the filtered lamp light before spotting a tall, gangly boy who swept near the high wooden door.
A perfect, polished smile of entreaty was quickly plastered on her face. "Mor, is there somewhere where Lady Éowyn and I may sit?"

Whistling a low tune, the boy hustled over and Éowyn rolled her eyes. The woman had every male in the city at her beck and call.

Young Mor stopped and pulled at his sable forelock. "Of course, my lady. The storeroom has some chairs." He gestured deeper into the stable, around the corner to the darker shadow of a half open door. Amerith nodded and produced a copper from the pocket of her velvet coat.

"Perfect. And would you watch Yslin for me for a little while?"

"Certainly, my lady."

The lad took the reins and Amerith stood back, watching him lead the mare to an open stall before turning with an expectant look. Éowyn blew out a breath. To speak with the duchess was the last thing she wished to do but perhaps it would be best. It could be months yet before the Rohirrim would leave and both needed to understand were they stood.

Head high, boot heels scraping the cobblestones, she carefully set Win's latch and followed the older woman down the hall and to a low ceilinged room just off the stable's washing stall. The square space was filled with bales and water buckets, a table and, quite practically, a stash of pikes and halberds. While Amerith closed and bolted a door that was scarred by an Age of hoof marks, Éowyn, without ceremony, brushed aside the detritus on the table top and sat.

This was bound to be unpleasant but she would survive. Her fingers drummed a staccato beat against the wood. "Speak."

The duchess blinked but otherwise appeared unsurprised by the lack of convoluted opening. Amerith did not sit, but leaned, unconcerned about the dirt and dust, against a rough stone wall.

After a longish pause she spoke. "You alluded to a conversation at the ball. About my townhouse."

"Nienna's mercy! Was nothing private in this City of wagging tongues? Éowyn threw her hands up in exasperation. "So of course he has run, like a boy in leading strings, straight to you!"

"No." The torchlight winked on a bauble in that auburn hair as Amerith shook her head. "It is not like that. He has told me because he is greatly grieved and confused by your sudden change of heart. He wants to understand. Not tattle tale." The duchess settled her shoulders flatter against the wall as if digging in to a warrior's post. "Do you remember what was said?"

"Did she remember? Béma, Éowyn wanted to laugh. Every word, every moment was burned into her memory: Faramir drawn away from their alcove at his cousin's quiet word; the feel of his lips against her wrist and still burning in her palm; the heavy swish of skirts and cloying scent of pomade before two equally mocking tones shattered her happy world.

"Well well. From look of things on the dance floor our Steward looks ready to exchange a mature woman for a younger girl. Did you see them flirt outrageously with each other? In full view of every decently modest maid."

"What can you expect? A man that would take up with Lossarnach. He obviously has an attraction to the exotic and scandalous. At least the catfight should prove entertaining. It will be most amusing watching Amerith be ignored, but I wonder what is truly going on."

"Hmm. Ceri, you have a point. Obvious was never the case with the Duchess. And Denethor
would never have accepted her but he is not here now."

"Exactly. The Steward's line has all but failed and he needs a wife. The duchess was married four years and still Taras' nephew is his heir."

"The foreign chit is better breeding stock. Pretty but a handful. I hope that she is worth it. Once they are wedded and bedded, he can go on as he is accustomed. Did you hear? He has spent the night at the townhouse once again?"

Éowyn's blood ran cold as the Snowbourne once again. Every word had fallen like hot tar flung from a catapult. Painful. Searing. Battering the faith she had in a man she thought to love. How could she have been so stupid?! So trusting?! Let handsome words and a yearning for closeness overthrow her carefully cultivated distance from the world? Even now it was hard to imagine Faramir capable of such subterfuge, but yet he had not denied the truth of the vile women's words- he had slept the night at Amerith's own house. And there was the evidence of her own eyes. There was no doubting the depth of feeling between them in the Steward's courtyard.

She clenched her fists and drew back her shoulders. She would not repeat the slurs. Give this..this spider any satisfaction.

"I remember it exactly," she retorted. "He spends the night underneath your roof."

There was a green flash of understanding. "Did you do him the courtesy of letting him explain instead of listening to gossip?"

"How dare you!"

"I dare because contrary to what your bruised pride tells you I care for you both."

"You expect me to believe that?!" Hah! What nerve! The notion was simply ludicrous. What did the woman take her for? A child of the schoolroom yet? "At least I have enough pride and self-respect to not settle for another woman's cast off!" she spat. "Or do you have no plan to actually do that? You will crook your finger when it suits and he will run."

Bright eyes darkened with sudden fury and for a second Éowyn thought that she would shout, but Amerith did not erupt. Carefully and slowly, she took in a deep and measured breath, clasped her hands within the habit's heavy folds. "Of course a man his age, attractive and high born, was likely to have been attached. But there has been no one, not I nor any other, for many years. He has been wedded only to Gondor's safety and his duty. As you have been." Her brows narrowed thoughtfully. "I do not believe that that is all. You are too smart to simply take the slander of disgruntled courtiers for truth. There is more here is there not?"

"And that is not enough?!" Éowyn cried.

Amerith frowned. "No. Clearly for some reason you are truly jealous. Faramir was young and I was but a way to break the chain of duty. It served two purposes: he chafed under a father so difficult to please that just to be out of the hall was a respite. And I needed information. But he was never mine. The rumour of our dalliance was just that. A rumour. Uncorrected yes, embellished on, but you may interrogate my staff. You will find nothing untoward."

Éowyn lifted her chin defiantly. There was no gainsaying the thrust of what was said. "He lied. Played a ruse. Allowed a falsehood to be spread. I thought him more honourable than that."

There was a brief impatient snort. "Allowing specific people their assumptions is intelligence. Your own cousin played that game did he not? Let tongues wag about his concubine and bastard. When in
fact they were his wife and child."

Éowyn's mouth dropped open. "You knew!"

"Of course I knew." Amerith negligently brushed a piece of straw from off her elbow. "I make it my business, and Gondor's, to know. Knowledge is the most valuable coin in the realm. When Theodred's sword brother fell it was natural that both grieving souls found consolation in each other. But he was shrewd and knew Saruman could not be trusted. He watched Theoden's decline and kept what was most precious to him out of Grima's reach. Helm's Deep was far enough the lie could be made plausible, and with it his family less of a target." She grimaced. "It is assumed that men will not do rash things for just a concubine."

But not her Theo! Éowyn swallowed around a sudden hurtful lump in her throat. Min heorte. The Prince had so loved Godwyn and Malina that even her uncle had not known. Only she and Éomer knew the truth, the whereabouts of the seal and papers. How had the woman found that out? She wished to ask but held it back, for truly now it mattered not. Godwyn was widowed for a second time.

"He wanted me there, too, but Uncle would not hear of it."

Amerith spread both hands, palms up in a gesture of entreaty. "Theodred was a good and honourable man. Just like Faramir."

The first niggles of doubt began to chip at Éowyn's furious hurt. Was it so very different, one ruse from another? Could she have erred? Been too quick to judge? Could she actually trust what this woman said? That last in particular gave her pause. The duchess had disarmed her with kind, honourable words about her cousin, but the fact remained she seemed to do just as she pleased, when she pleased, regardless of anyone's else's tender feelings. But if that was so why was she troubling with a 'foreign chit' unless she actually cared?

Éowyn hesitated and Amerith took the chance to press her case. "I was the only loser in that play. I chose to let it sully my reputation because of the good it brought, but I have no design on him. Nor has he an eye for anyone but you."

Unsure if she believed because she simply wished it to be true or because there was more than a thread of truth Éowyn pushed off the table edge. Began to pace as doubts swarmed like locusts in her head. All the while watched by that shrewd green gaze. For many minutes the only sound in the stuffy warmth was the soft scuffing of her heels against the days-old straw.

At last Amerith spoke softly, gently, when Eowyn paused to stare unseeing at a carved tree and stars on a time-darkened post. "What did you mean when you said 'get out of my head'?"

"He told you," she breathed, fighting a tightness that bound her chest. As if a storm were about to break or a great wave about to crash upon the shore.

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She looked back across her shoulder and caught the knowing nod. "Because he thought he knew but was unsure." Amerith strode forward, set her hands flat upon the table top, letting her head fall down. When she looked up again a flicker of deep sadness lined her elegant features. "In the courtyard I sensed another pain, but when I searched, too late, all I saw was white. That was you, was it not?"

What would it profit to deny? She whispered, "Yes."

"And he was too focused on his own pain to see." Amerith shook her head sadly. "This has
happened more than once—you sensing him?"

Éowyn took a deeper breath, forced herself to let the mix of pain and green twining jealousy go. She
needed to think. Clearly. Not clouded by a haze of dark emotion. "Yes. And hearing. I heard his
voice though he did not speak."

Surprise jerked one auburn eyebrow up. "I think I begin to see at last how he has erred. It is
Faramir's greatest weakness to keep his counsel too much to himself. It was learned from the hard
taskmaster of his father's derisive tongue and difficult to let go. He did not query why you both so
quickly had a rapport."

A pregnant silence fell. Éowyn, both jittery and yet oddly calm at once, as if some new wonder was
about to open at her feet, felt her hands begin to tremble. Amerith regarded her with sympathy. "It
was frightening and unsettling was it not? To hear another person?"

She nodded, haltingly. "What is it?"

"A gift. Bestowed by the Valar upon the Lords of Andúnië and Romenna. From Irmo to Imrazôr
came the gift of foresight. From Ulmo to Galadar of Tolfalas came an affinity to read the sea. From
Manwê to Elendil and his heirs came the skill to read the hearts and minds of men. The houses of
Hurin and Lossarnach both claim it through Elendil's sister's sons, though in these latter days only
those in whom the blood of Númenor runs true have the gift. Faramir has it, though his brother did
not."

Éowyn could barely breathe. "But how could it come to me?"

"Your grandmother Morwen had the gift, for her foremother and mine was Nerilin, Elendil's
youngest sister," explained Amerith. "And your grandfather's mother was also of Gondor."

This was true, and something of it gave Éowyn heart. It was to his mother's people in Minas Tirith
that Thengel went when he could no longer stomach Fengel's greed and she had not thought on how
many times the ruling houses of Gondor and the Riddermark had joined. Grandmother. The great-
grandmother she knew only from a few old paintings. Both dark-haired and grey-eyed, with iron
wills and high cheekbones to match. Could she have inherited more from them than her curiously
mist-tinged eyes?

Amerith went on. "Sometimes the gift can out in stranger, smaller ways or lie dormant for many
years. It is a sense to master, just as your own ears and eyes."

Truly? A sense that she could trust? Éowyn bit her lip. Then she already had her answer? She felt
that she could trust Faramir and so should believe his entreaties of the afternoon? This was too
tempting an explanation. So much that she knew not if she had the strength to fight it as she should.

"I... do not know," she stammered.

Obviously touched by the confusion in her tone, Amerith reached out to cross the bare few feet
between them. She picked up Éowyn's hands in hers and looked up searchingly. "I do. What has it
told you? To trust him, I expect. For he is a man who loves all things deeply, is kind in the way that
comes from learning hard lessons well. Falling and picking oneself up no matter how hard the fall."
The woman's fine fingers clasped harder, as if willing her to believe. "You are, I think, the bravest
woman here, but in this I think you truly are afraid. Love we are born with. Fear of it we learn. It
takes courage to trust another with their many flaws and quirks."

"I am not afraid," Éowyn replied, though her voice was far from steady.
Amerith smiled then wistfully. "No, not of the dark. Or fire. Or black and stinking wings. But the world has ever been ringed with uncertainty. I understand as well as you, better than most, that hardship makes us doubt it more. Will you stand by and let the doubt be self-fulfilling? Let him slip away because now you must leap and take a chance?"

The implication irked. She-Éowyn, Wraithsbane, shying from a challenge! "You do not rule my heart!"

"No. But I suspect you hold his in your hands. Best decide what you want done with it."

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The Duchess of Lossarnach climbed the great winding staircase to the townhouse's second floor, marveling anew at how it could seem that its exquisite marble risers grew tall as Mindolluin with every step. Stars... but she was tired. A day too full of too much to do, a brisk ride and then an entirely too delicate discussion; it was not surprising that hunger and thirst now clawed. Almost she regretted declining Willen's offer of a tray, but no. The act of actually eating food would be too much. A drink. A drink was what was needed to banish the pounding of her head, and so she turned at the landing toward not the day salon used for receiving guests, but her private study—the separate, far more austere working room where her (and often Gondor's) business was accomplished. This time of night, per her routine, the fire would be lit. And most important, its brandy decanter held the best that she could finagle from Prince Imrahil himself.

At an otherwise unremarkable panel in the hall's exquisite marquetry, Amerith paused, gently pressed beside an artfully hidden seam and stepped back as the hidden door clicked open. A relic from the suitably anxious time after the Kin-slaying, she had never felt the need to change its face—the security and privacy quite suited her and the idea that she had liberated it from its former life as a secret trysting spot (Taras' grandfather, the 200th Duke) was quite amusing.

Once inside, she shrugged out of the heavier jacket of her riding habit and tossed it and her gloves carelessly across a damask chair, warming her chilled fingers at the fire. The walk down from the stables had not been far but the clouds had gathered, a stiff wind blown up and with it an unpleasant shower or two. She was chilled and more than a little uneasy. Discussions had not gone as planned, and while the problems before her were far from unsurmountable, they were intricate. And crucially important. Both to Gondor. And to her.

Crossing to the sideboard, Amerith poured herself a generous measure of pale amber liquor and tossed it back in one startlingly heady gulp. Rings and bracelets chimed musically against the cut crystal of the glass as she stood and pondered what to do. Self-centred gossiping old kine. She was willing to wager every castar in the treasury that Langstrand was one of them. That woman had a tongue sharper than a Morgul blade and far too many whey-faced daughters to portion out. She sighed and paced round the heavy desk. What now to do? Encourage Faramir to keep trying to communicate of course, but therein lay the issue: his sense of honour would be bruised after today's set-to. It was unfortunate enough that one of her own plans had come back to bite her, but for that long-abandoned ruse to become a sticking point—the root upon which Éowyn's jealousy grew—Valar, what a mess! She took another bracing sip. The elation that he had truly found an equal (and a gifted one!) fizzled in the face of the young woman's ire. How to get past Éowyn's pride, to help her see what was truly there? Only Faramir could rebuild her trust, but in the interim, the least Amerith could do would be to squelch the rumours. Take another favourite perhaps. That pretty and puppyish Swan Knight was the obvious candidate—the whole court had already seen them dancing...
—and he had hinted he would be happy to squire her around.

She tapped a lacquered nail thoughtfully against her teeth, pondering the pros and cons. Haldan was honourable (all of Imrahil's men were above reproach), handsome, light of step for one so strapping. Word of her first obvious new liaison in years would tumble round the Circles swiftly as wind-whipped leaves. And most helpfully of all, the man was set to leave, at least sometime after the coronation.

Yes. A suitable choice all round.

So long as his conversation was not a total bore, it might even be quite fun.

Having arrived at the start of a solution, Amerith refilled her glass and sat down at the broad desk, turning her attention to other forms of action. She had shot her bow and it was time for another to help with Éowyn. Swiftly she scratched out a note, rang the bell and spent a few minutes anxiously pacing, staring at the fire's ruddy glow.

This was a risk, but one she judged it best to take.

When Willen, attentive and silent as ever, poked his head around the door she held the small square out. "Send for Kale. He is to personally deliver this to Dol Amroth House. Into the Princess's hands." A nod and the man bowed smoothly out.

She began to pore over the day's correspondence: a hasty, breathless note from Taras's nephew at Cormallen; accounts of the regiment's recovery; lists of such produce as could be sent from Lossarnach's upper vales.

Another discrete tap on the door interrupted her burgeoning concentration.

Sighing heavily, she set her new quill down. "Come!"

The panel cracked open and her seneschal's lined and placid face once more appeared. "Your ladyship, Lieutenant Vastred is below. Will you come down or shall I send him up?"

Amerith frowned. Vastred, one of her longest-serving and more irregular sources of information, would never interrupt unless it was of import. A visit this time of night meant something urgent.

"Up please," she answered, for the idea of changing and descending once again truly did not appeal.

With an admirable swiftness that hinted at experienced prescience, Willen ushered a tall figure in black and silver into the room.

"My lady." Vastred bowed the correct distance down, holding his stiff winged helmet at his hip. The cloak over his forearm dripped faintly from another burst of rain and his chilled toes dug thankfully into the plush of deep pile carpet.

He was doing his best not to stare. The last time the veteran had been in this room the walls were orange. This evening's mellow gold was something of a shock.

Amerith's eyed the item tucked neatly into his right elbow. "Lieutenant. You were not followed?"

"No, my lady. I took one of the usual routes."

She nodded. All of them involved some combination of main gate to barracks, barracks to the taverns of the fourth, before heading back 'up' the City's levels. If a guard stopped in the Sixth to check all
was well, what of it? "The package?"

"A missive to be brought to the new Steward of Gondor. With no acknowledged sender."

"Really?" She held out her hand and swiftly he crossed the expanse of carpet to lay the scroll into her upturned palm. The wooden rollers were deeply nicked and the outer layers travel-stained. "The courier?"

"Dark. Northern. His accent and his coat. With none of the seals or passwords." The man smiled, a wry and grimly amused quirk. "I had to be…persuasive. He wished to deliver it himself."

Her eyes snapped up. And one auburn eyebrow. That was unusual. "On horse?"

"Yes my lady. Shorter. Not of Rohan. Dunlendish I should have thought."

"Well done." Well done indeed. Vastred was not the first to have this post, but in her experience, he was one of the very best: keen brown eyes beneath a thinning fringe of grey saw everything. No note or beast or soul passed Forannest's busy gate without being logged, as if painted in a picture, by his sharp brain. It was a most helpful skill.

Amerith arose and came round the desk, proffered her hand and graciously inclined her head. "Thank you Vastred. Leave it with me. I shall see to it that the Steward receives it on the morrow. Willen will see that you are properly appreciated."

"Thank you, Duchess."

After a swift handshake the guard bowed out and the door closed with a quiet click. Amerith turned back to the desk, swiftly untied the strings and began to remove the outer cover of dark, blotched, water-stiffened parchment.

*How very strange*… The message had obviously been a long time on the road, and though words had wings, and ill words the widest wings of all, it seemed most irregular for the North to send messages so soon. Thank the Valar it had been caught. Not for the first time did she bless the day she set up the standing orders. All unverified correspondence came first to her and then to the Steward's hands. It had worked neatly with Denethor—helped to avoid some rather unpleasant scenes—but with the attempts upon Faramir's own life (four times across a dozen years, thwarted by her own corps) she had no intention of changing the arrangement.

Warming the inner seal over a candle by the window, she broke the yellowed wax with a fingernail and began to unwind the scroll. Its spidery, elaborate crabbed hand was of a style she had never seen before. In Sindarin. There was no date but an opening flourish gave Faramir by name, and beyond were platitudes to Gondor's health and longevity. Farther down, the airy, almost impersonal words began to take on a sharper tone, until at last the sentence unwound that sent a bitter chill through the room.

"*Herein find a true account of how Denethor, son of Ecthelion, son of Turgon, Twenty-sixth Ruling Steward of Gondor, poisoned his own wife*…"

A hand across her mouth could not stop the shriek of pain.

The scroll tumbled to the rug and with it the vile and malevolent words unrolled and could not be ignored. Amerith sank down in shock. Who would make such a pernicious accusation? It was abominable! Unspeakable! Hands trembling, she pulled the rollers to the very end and found the certh—a white hand, upraised. *'For S'.* A shudder rippled through her bones.
There was one only it could be from. The wizard. Locked safely in Orthanc, ringed by enraged Treeshepherds of the forest. How could such a message have got through? A matter to take up with Mithrandir when he returned, for here, in black lies spilling down the page, was undeniable evidence of his enduring scorn. A few last poisoned words. Meant to wound, to shatter a grieving man's whole world. A lie, surely, if an insidious one. There had been those who questioned the Princess's long illness, the perplexing way she withered after the joyous news of a second son's welcome birth.

The truth, an ailment that could not be stopped, was rather less dramatic, if no less heart-rending.

Disgusted, Amerith at first shoved the offending paper away, but then, her well-honed sense of thoroughness made her take it up again. Faramir would need to be warned—any overt actions by the wizard bore careful watch—and therefore, before she raised the issue, she must know exactly what was said. She scanned swiftly, mind denying every word, and then even as she sat, hands still faintly trembling where they tugged the ragged edges, a dawning horror grew:

It must be true.

The details splashed down the roll. The vial. Red ichor. The exact date of Finduilas' first decline. The fight the entire household could hear.

Amerith let out a hollow moan. She could, would not believe it, but the details were too precise. The woman who now sagged, red-eyed and tears threatening to fall, had been a proud lady-in-waiting then. Twelve years old, her first time at court, helping to welcome the new day and then anxiously running to find the Steward's lady's nurse. Cleaning up the broken glass by herself on Nera's whispered instructions. A cut finger bound and stinging oddly.

So much was clearer and yet more clearly painful.

Oh Denethor.

The tears splashed down, one by one, onto the velvet of her skirt and the wool of the soft rug. Had he understood? Could some sense of responsibility have turned to weathered stone a heart already begun to dessicate? No. No. She would not believe it! Denethor adored Finduilas with every fiber of his being. It must be some wizardly trick—from one hand to another. Denethor unknowing. The healers never made the link. Or Nera. And that last drew her sharply up.

The only other soul who knew the truth.

And Faramir far too perspicacious not to understand.

She made a swift decision.

It mattered not if t'were true or no. All the years of effort she had invested to bring him happiness were threatened. Both within and from without. Faramir and Éowyn could be happy, would be happy if only each could see. The White Lady was worth him fighting for…

Amerith climbed slowly to her feet, wiped the tears from off her cheeks and stumbled to the desk. She tossed the last of the brandy back. It seared, melted into a ruddy warmth that braced for what she had to do.

Sinking down onto the carpet she gathered the sprawl into her arms and crawled over to the priceless Dwarven forged firegrate, shoved the mass of wood and parchment in. The edges caught, coiled, and twisted; turning in upon themselves and exploding into little fireworks of spark.

She sat, unmoving, while the hungry flames reduced the truth to so much ash. Set another load, hard,
mute, but so very necessary, upon two slim white shoulders.

Some secrets, some pieces of intelligence, were best kept.

Forever…

She loved him enough for that.

Chapter End Notes

Huge thanks go out to anon at tumblr and everyone who kudos and comments. You have keeping me going to the end: two chapters and the epilogue to go! I feel like a horse picking up its feet, smelling the hay of the barn. :)

A huge huge thanks this month to Wheelrider, Eschziola, Thanwen, Annafan and Carawyn for the wonderful comments and careful eyes cast out. As always I am honoured to have such insightful help.
The next morning Faramir jolted awake out of a formless, unsettling dream to find it was well before
the sun would crest the City's jutting spire. The lamps out on the hushed and silent street were still lit
for the dawn watch had yet to start. They spilled their wan glow through a gap in the damask
curtains, cast a streak of gold across the dark wine of the coverlet. It was early. Too early, but just
late enough to make it impossible to go back to sleep. Faramir groaned. The body that welcomed
many mornings on patrol before the finches sang knew this time by heart— wash and dress by feel
with no fire or candlelight, breakfast quickly and spy the first streaks of pinkish-gold on Ephel Duath
through silent stands of elm and pine. It was no different when surrounded by his uncle's townhouse
walls.

Reluctantly he rose, dragged on the tunic and breeches that had landed across the armchair the night
before and sought out the household kitchen. Liswen was there, and Kale, both sharing a first cup of
tea. He bid them a quiet 'good morn', swiped a warm sweet roll from the breakfast tray over Liswen's
laughing protest, and ducked out the service door.

Ivriniel would have to dine on her own. He felt guilty but not enough to stop.

The long jog up the stairs to the Citadel warmed up his body and his mind. The air was already
taking back some of the White City's hoarded heat and the morning promised to be fair; the sort of
clear clean day that made leaves sprout and plump buds swell, carpeting the mountain's slopes in
green. The thought put a needed lightness in his step. The night's restlessness had left him more, not
less, unsettled and the ride the day before had taxed his weakened body. Every limb protested the
hurried climb but he would not stop.

Space to think and time to ponder what to do were sorely needed. Both required he rearrange his life.

At his father's polished desk he hastily scribed two detailed notes. The first, for Nera, explained how
to handle his effects. The second, for Cahil, asked to clear his schedule for the day with just a twinge
of guilt. Neither could be helped, and though he could not remember a day his father had ever taken
off (Denethor's tidy ledgers followed him everywhere like a faithful hound), there was an argument
to be made that a little respite would make him more efficient.

Assuming a certain woefully tardy discussion went as he fervently hoped.

Faramir folded the light parchments carefully in half and began to prop them against the brimming
inkwell when impulse struck. It might be best if Hurin or Cahil could find him at short notice, and so
he took up another sheet and made a few quick strokes, ('If urgent I can be found at the Tree'),
scooped up the correspondence lying precisely dead centre of the blotter and set off for the Sixth
Circle's steps.

He pelted down them, nodding to the startled Watch again, turning to the west and at length arriving
at the forlorn little house that guarded Fen Hollen's fateful door. The young Tower Guard who did
honour to the Steward's ruined resting place started to strict attention and hastily dipped his spear. He
was clad in an engulfing, twice-belted tunic and surely had yet to shave.

Faramir's heart went out. It could not be easy having so lonely a post for one's first assignment.
"Lord Steward! Would you…?" The young man's words trailed off and nervously he bit his lip, eyes sliding to the low arched door. Obviously he could not bring himself to mention the ruined street.

Faramir quickly shook his head. There would come a time to brave that space again, but not today.

"Nay, Private. I am going the other way."

The spear tip sagged in relief. "You have the key?"

"I do."

Faramir pulled the familiar well-worn iron ring from his tunic pocket and turned left, stopping at the end of the short passage. The creamy and mottled smooth white wall looked just like more of the City's foundation stone but was not entirely what it seemed. Adept fingers found the tiny hole and turned the lock-in moments Faramir had shut the secret door behind, lit the waiting lantern and begun to traverse the darkened tunnel. He worked his way past neatly stacked stores and weapons, footsteps echoing hollowly on the rock. By a stout wooden ladder he snuffed the wick and began to climb; he passed another lock and door before daylight finally filtered in. He smiled, breathing in the just slightly mud-tanged fresh morning air. Success.

Once out on the grassy slope, he set the trapdoor back down, covered it with its disguise of grasses and rotted log, and turned uphill. A few more minutes climbing through forest of beech and silver fir saw him at the foot of his goal: a single spreading oak, ancient and proud, rising amidst Mindolluin's upper forest. Unlike the lacy beeches, the oak was bare—it would be weeks yet before its leaves came out- but the great arm-like branches were perfect to clamber on. A quiet and private nest for a much younger boy who wished to read and dream of Ents. And avoid an oft-disapproving gaze.

It was also the perfect spot to strategize.

With the ease of long practice he set the toe of his boot on a split on the roughened bark, reached up to the lowest branch and pulled smoothly up. In a trice he was straddling the straight limb, back to the gnarled ridges of the heavy bark, sun warm upon his face and the scent of leaf litter and moist soil rising with the morning dew. Minas Tirith and the Pelennor spread out below. His eyes skipped past the mounds and marred fields, past the blue glass ribbon of Anduin shining in the sun, to linger on the low hills of Emyn Arnen, gentle and welcoming in the distance.

Just the sight of them eased a little of the tenseness in his shoulders. He rubbed absently at those protesting, still-healing muscles and pulled a wrinkled, folded parchment from out of his tunic. Bless Imrahil. Knowing his absence would be keenly felt, his uncle had written a few lines almost every single day since he had ridden off to the Morannon and replied to Faramir's last letter with his customary promptness.

Next to Boromir, Imrahil knew him best. It was for this reason that the asked for and received advice was a comfort.

But also something of a problem.

The words in his uncle's small neat script were plain enough.

*Lad, you wrote: "I fear I have lost my heart somewhere where no forest skills can help."

Then I say to you: cast aside the tools you have relied upon and trust to your heart.

*It will serve you well and be your most honest guide."*
Damn and blast. He grimaced, running a hand across his brow. The words had not changed the third time through. The advice was succinct, correct, but sadly all too difficult to put into practise.

Rely upon his hopelessly well-mannered heart? The one so long guarded its instincts at times must surely be seen as suspect? That had been done and now had brought him to this pass. His heart had counseled patience in the face of duty and decorum; insisted the 'right' thing to do was give Éowyn time and space- trust to her affection, and not press beyond an honourable reading of her words- but Faramir of all people knew sometimes the 'right' thing did not always gain the desired outcome.

As Damrod would have none too finely put it, he had 'cocked up'. Completely.

That he had hurt her, and badly, was all too clear and the knowledge of it chafed, left an empty rawness that was nothing like the hollow where his mother was-a yearning softness, grief and beauty just barely indistinct like tattered old cobwebs that swung in the breeze between Ithilien's pines. Nor was it a darker pit like the memory of his brother and his father. That was rough and new; not right, but one that in time he would come to carry unthinking, less centrally present every minute of the day.

Not this. He missed Éowyn with an ache that was fierce and tender all at once; insistent; as much a contradiction as she was, and it absolutely could not go on. An apology was needed. For his own obtuseness, not his subjects gabbling-Éowyn cared not a fig for what Gondorian noblewomen thought of her and he loved her for it—but she needed to know and see that he could throw open his heart. Share of himself fully and freely, setting caution to the wind like so much milkweed adrift on the breeze.

But how?

And if he found a way would she even hear him?

Cursing his own hesitation he began to fold the letter when a sharp low whistle sounded. Instantly he cocked his head. It came again. A descending note just like a canyon wren, but far crisper on the end. "Friendly inbound" it meant. And was too adept to be made by young Bergil.

Faramir looked down and spied Anborn making his way up the slope, without sling but with his sword belt strapped across his hip. Valar. What could the Ranger want with him so urgently that Cahil would divulge his hiding place?

He hoped there was nothing seriously amiss.

Once Anborn's long stride's brought him in hailing distance, Faramir put his hands to his mouth and called, "You have found me, lieutenant. What news?"

Anborn looked up, spotted his black tunic easily against the tawny bark and waved, picking up his pace. By the time he reached the foot of the oak's great trunk he was puffing from his climb.

He set hands on hips and grinned. "Is this really the Tree? The one it took two guards and ladders to get Lord Boromir back down from?" he asked, resolutely ignoring his commander's question.

Faramir shook his head. The tale had changed in the telling. And been modified for a better light. "Actually it was four guards and a rather complicated rope ladder. My brother was furious. He wanted to stay up until he figured out how to descend but Father was having none of it."

"Sounds like t'Captain General. Not one to back down. Ever."

Too true. Boromir, all of fourteen and unwilling to be bested, had climbed so high he could not
safely get back down, but instead of being angered or embarrassed, his brother had been puffed up with pride, recounting to one and all how his 'little one' had such climbing skill. It was one of Faramir's cherished childhood memories.

Realizing it would do Anborn's shoulder no good if he thought to clamber up himself, Faramir swung a leg over the branch and neatly dropped onto the turf. "You are right at that. No, Boromir would not back down. Afterward we laughed and laughed, fell over ourselves plotting another expedition but it never came to be." He paused, losing himself in the happy memory. "Nienna, I miss that sound. No one laughed like him."

Anborn's voice grew a little thick and low. "Aye, sir. The best."

Faramir, touched by the sentiment, gratefully clasped the lieutenant's uninjured shoulder. At times in the rush of the past few weeks it felt as if he were alone in his remembering. "He was and I thank you for saying so. But I know you did not come up all this way to reminisce with me. What is judged of such import? Has the City come under assault again? Is the library ablaze?"

Anborn chuckled. "Your greatest fear. No sir, every musty, cracked and mysterious sheaf is safe." He cocked his head and rubbed sheepishly at his nape. "I know as how you were to be undisturbed…"

Faramir rolled his eyes. "But you are going to do it anyway…"

The lieutenant grinned. "Aye. But it is a mission of some import. Permission to speak freely sir."

A pair of black eyebrows flew straight up. This was a most unusual request. Anborn had never been hesitant to speak before. Either on patrol or in the barracks. "I should have thought a decade in the wild showed you that you need not for ask that," Faramir said mildly. "Is there a problem? Is this about the men coming back to duty? They are not too pressed?" he asked, knowing Anborn, a good listener by nature and inclination, often had the ear of the men.

To his relief the lieutenant gently shook his head. "No sir. It's personal."

Personal? That was a surprise. What could Anborn need his help for? Mystified but happy to be of service, Faramir sank down to rest against the trunk, crossing his legs and laying the letters aside. He gestured for his friend to sit. "You have my full attention."

Anborn ran a sweaty hand along his breeches and paused a moment before squaring his broad shoulders and looking down. Obviously the subject was serious, something he was loathe to broach. Faramir did what worked best in these situations-waited patiently- and before long the man settled down beside and roughly cleared his throat. "I know as I'll not have the words Madril would use, but Mad is gone," he declared unhappily. "Renil's vanished on business to Cormallen once again. And Mablung'll not be back for weeks. T'wil have to be me. I'll not stand round watching a cart come a wreck and keep my hands all to myself."

"'Born?" Whatever did he mean? Faramir could not fathom what wreck he meant. And what it had to do with him.

Anborn shifted slightly, rolled his stiffened shoulder and turned to catch his gaze. "I know 'mm not making sense quite yet. I reckon Damrod's words will have to do." He drew a breath. "Sir, you are being an outright eijit."

"Pardon?!" Faramir coughed hard but Anborn pressed quickly on, for the surprising flow of words, undammed and rushing like a torrent, was not yet done.
"The Lady Éowyn loves you, plain as plain. I've seen it in my sister and her man. Seen it in Madril's Annwyn when she thought we were too busy tacking up and to have notice for them both. All soft eyes that can't drink in enough and follow yer everywhere. Gleam like the Kindler's stars."

Éowyn was so in love with him that others saw it? Shock, and a decidedly elated wonder, sent a jolt of happiness straight to his chest. "Yes. Well. I..." He stopped and began again. Grabbed for words that scrambled out of reach before inexplicably blurting out the truth. "I did know she shared something of my affection. I asked leave to court her. But if her feelings are so—intense," unhappily, he bit his lip, "her words now are different than her eyes. I might see light in them, but I am bound by what she says. Yesterday there was no light there at all. It looked more as if given a half a chance she'd happily take off my head."

Anborn's frown lightened to something of a more serious grin. It was not the expression he anticipated. "Aye, my Mam always said 'twas the surest evidence of affection. That and a sudden fit of ailing. Kira's watched her mistress all these days. Just pecking at her food. Drifting round the gardens like a ghost. She's pining. All of us can see it. The two of you were light itself, like the Trees of Valinor. The lady fair glows when you walk into the room."


The younger man shook his head. "Nay. She is not herself, but the only thing that's truly changed is that she's keeping distance where 'twas none before. I'm not party to what drove in the wedge but I know she's a high proud filly that you must coax back to your hand."

Faramir snorted ruefully. "One that bolts every time I get too near."

"And that's reason to give up?!" Anborn looked offended for him. "That's not the Captain that I know. I've seen you patiently still for ages. Waiting for a hummingbird to come to rest."

"True. But even if she flays my hide with deserved words, I simply don't know where to start."

Disconsolately he looked down and plucked at a small blue starflower peeking up through the grass. This was the crux of the problem. How could he open a conversation again and have her not turn away? Have them not descend into the same bitter debate as yesterday?

Anborn had no answer and so both men sighed, falling silent for a bit. Faramir looking over the river to the hills, hoping their calm would bring some clarity. What could he say that would not make things worse? Once more he was going mentally round a bush, picking up and discarding every point; wondering if it would be best to beg forgiveness and avoid mentioning Amerith at all? Explain again the reasons he had let a rumour run? None of it felt right. Like hunting for that one shell amidst the wrack thrown up on the beach, or the one rock to skim high across the waves.

After minutes of quiet contemplation, Anborn followed the direction of his gaze to the forest they had so recently walked. The one through which the victorious Host would return, and then the whole world would change again.

"What is it that you most want?" he asked suddenly.

Faramir looked up, surprised, and then down into his lap. Not a question he thought that he might get. What did he imagine beyond the things he could not have? A home? A family? He plucked a small patch of blue from the grass and twirled the dainty flowers between his finger and his thumb, thinking hard. Those certainly and also a place that was truly his. By choice. Not merely a room that duty brought to him too.

He looked up again, to east and south. If he squinted, he fancied he could see it. Just above the tight
knee in the River's bend, on a short green-clad stretch of hilly shoulder. The lands bequeathed to him by his father on his majority. "No prize', Boromir had said, but that was before an entirely unshadowed sun shone upon its green.

At last he spoke: "To make a home. On land that means so much, untainted by bitter memories. With a partner and equal by my side." Faramir then stopped, began again knowing that in the past sennight the dream had changed and Emyn Arnen was no longer the sole focus of it. "With her by my side. That is the most important part. If Éowyn could not live in Gondor, were she happiest amidst the fields of Rohan, I would gladly follow her there."

Anborn was nodding. "And have you told her exactly that? That you want a partner, not just a wife? And not just on your terms?"

A flush crept up his cheeks. "No, not exactly."

"'Tis not too late for that I would wager."

Faramir huffed. "You sound like Damrod. Everything a gamble."

That made his lieutenant misty-eyed for a moment. Of all the officers Anborn had served, their famed curmudgeon had been the first. He sniffed loudly and scrubbed at his cheek. "Old bugger did say there was always a percentage in the margins."

Faramir smiled sadly. Damrod would have been aghast to find he was so much on both their minds. "He never believed that we would win through. I wish that he could have lived see to it."

"Aye, but without t'war what would he have grumbled on about? The weather? Too much change perhaps? I'm a lieutenant and Mablung's a Captain and Renil's disobeyed you twice."

That made them both stop and grin. Their field healer had simply copied the example he had been set.

Anborn went on: "Sir, what will happen to the Rangers if they aren't needed in Ithilien?"

"I am not certain," Faramir admitted. "It is the King's army now and I have had no chance to speak in detail with Lord Aragorn. All our letters have been focused about preparations for his arrival, but I cannot believe every Orc has turned tail and thrown down its arms. They are bred to fight and I am afraid all must be rooted out."

"Then there'll be summat for me to do. I do not fancy farming."

Faramir's mouth quirked. Obviously there was a reason the young man's mind was on the future. "Even with Kira by your side?" he teased.

Now it was Anborn's turn to flush. "Now, sir, that's putting the cart before the horse. I haven't asked her to make an honest man of me yet."

"And here you are giving me courting advice?!"

"Never said that I was that bright."

The high clear peel of the mid-morning bell sounded from Ecthelion's Tower just as Faramir began to climb to his feet. He stretched a crick out of his back and looked up through the canopy. The sunlight streamed strongly down through the lacework of green and brown. It was time to get on with the day, reorder his world and take on his lieutenant's surprisingly good advice.
"'Anborn?"

The younger man had stood and stopped, brushing blades of grass from off his trews. "Sir?"

'Thank you. And come. If you'll keep it secret, I know an easier way back home.'

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Once back in the Citadel with something less of a darkly clouded head, Faramir found he could quickly complete enough of his official duties to announce that he would be gone the rest of the afternoon.

The change he had requested had been admirably taken on. No matter how hard he had tried it felt wrong, entirely uncomfortable, to be in the Steward's literal seat—too much of a reminder that not just his father was gone but also that his brother should be there. Nera and the household had taken up his stated wish to shutter the family's rooms with far better grace than he could have hoped. Even Cahil agreed it was too hard, tore at the small patches of grief's healing that happened with each day, and for that reason distance was preferred.

A small receiving room was procured off the Hall convenient to Lord Hurin's official space and swiftly filled with a desk and chairs, enough books and papers that he soon felt like a rock at risk of being buried by drifting sand. All through the noon changing of the Watch he worked, reordering his life. It helped, far more than he had expected. Loosened a heaviness that had settled itself in his bones, and importantly helped everyone.

Nera, delivering a tray of tea and sandwiches, whistled the lay of *Uinen* and *Ossë* from her home. Cahil, whose habitual expression was longer than his nose, actually stopped reordering the transferred paybooks long enough to smile.

All around the start of a success. He was just standing briefly in the middle of the space, mulling where he might find Éowyn at that hour, when the door handle turned and a familiar perfume wafted into the room.

"Redecorating, darling?"

Faramir turned, biting back a groan. Amerith. The last person he wished to see, for she was, to Éowyn's mind, a part of the problem and he needed to focus on solutions.

"Does everyone know already where I can be found?" he declared, feeling a bit rude for not to offering her a seat, but quite certain he did not want her to settle in.

Naturally she swept past and sat neatly against the corner of the desk.

"News always tumbles faster down from the Seventh than upward from the First," she said, mouth twitching as she took in a pile of haphazardly discarded letters "I see you are already making this your home."

"Father's study was too full of memories and breakable antiques. This suits me more." It did. And while he might miss the family's courtyard, it would still be there. When, or if, he wanted to go back. "This will make it easier to work with Hurin."

Her expression softened. "I do not doubt it. What will you do with the other spaces?"

"I do not know," Faramir absently ran a hand through his hair. "Once the King is crowned, perhaps I will be just a Captain once more."
"Captain-General," she corrected gently.

He nodded, reflexively touching the moonstone ring hanging inside his tunic. Another thing to be sorted out. The Captain-General's horn and Steward's rod were gone. Would the King take the opportunity to alter those positions, too? He did not know and shook his head to show it. "Unless Aragorn chooses to make a change. He has no requirement to take on a Steward and even should he wish to, he has brothers who have come. They may suit him more as advisors. I do not want to assume."

Amerith tilted her coiffured head. "Somehow I think he knows the quality of the man he went so far to heal."

Faramir blushed. He did not need to be reminded of the debt he owed and she was being far too nice. Something was up. He could feel it; a sense of urgency, like a current below a placid river's surface. It did not take much of a stretch to guess.

"If you are also here to beat me up for my behaviour, you are quite late. My own lieutenant has already had a swing."

An auburn brow rose up, unconcerned to not have been first. "Anborn? Oh, well done. Someone had to start. I quite forget that just because you are thoughtful and articulate and empathetic you are of course a man."

"I will take that as a compliment."

"That was not exactly how it was meant. Between her pride and your stubbornness and occasional obtuseness, Valar save us."

Faramir frowned, brows crashing together like a storm. "We are not exactly on the best of terms. I have no idea if she would even receive me."

"I suspect she will if your aunt is as persuasive as I believe."

"My aunt?" He threw up his hands. "Is everyone in the City conspiring?!

"Yes!"

Amerith chuckled gaily as he shook his head. "It is not so simple a problem to solve. You cannot put ink sunk into parchment back into the bottle."

"No, but you can try to mop some up. You must ask again and again until she will listen."

"That is what Anborn said. And Aunt Ivriniel."

Amerith snorted. "Your aunt may be most the pedantic person I know, someone whose definition of truth is so firm no blade can shave it, but she is true at heart."

The irritation that had stiffened along his spine the moment she walked into the room leached into his voice. "Is that always your stratagem dealing with people? To insult them?"

"If I meant to insult her I would be far more cutting. You know I always pull my punches for your family. You would rather I was more blunt?"

"No!"

Two gazes, one green, one grey, locked horns like kine battling for turf. After a minute of struggle
no less intense for silence, Amerith sadly shook her head. "Some of this mess could have been avoided if you shared more of your heart and did not assume that you would be understood. I am sorry if the truth hurts in this instance, but it is the truth."

Faramir glowered. "Don't apologize. It only confuses me."

He thought she would smile like a cat, sleek and satisfied with her win, but instead the immaculately lacquered lips pursed into a moue of disapproval. "With that frown you look more like your father. You know that you need not keep behaving as if he were here. You can again wear your feelings on your sleeve."

"How dare you!"

Stock still and seething, Faramir let his anger flow outward, push a little on her shields to show her how much that hurt, but then, with mouth agape, he stared.

A wide smile had creased her pretty face.

"What are you grinning at?"

Green eyes glinted. "You two truly are meant for each other. That is exactly what she said."

MULISHLY, he crossed his arms across his chest but then forced himself to take a breath, let a little of the frustration bleed away. This wasn't helping. He needed to focus, to formulate a plan to speak to Éowyn and arguing was wasting time.

Amerith stood, still grinning, and suddenly the import of her last words settled in.

"You spoke with her?"

"I did," she nodded. "And discovered something. She heard you."

"Pardon?"

"Heard you."

"Heard you."

Faramir started back. She did? Éowyn had something of a gift? A wild flush of hope began to beat within his chest. "Is this true?"

"Yes," Amerith thought back, before speaking up. "At times she can hear you. I am uncertain if it is only you but it is most certainly why she reacted as she did when you spoke on the Pelennor. She feared you were deliberately coercing a reaction. It is untrue, but you must both speak of it. Help her to understand what this means."

They could truly understand each other? Share honestly. And felt dizzy at the thought, but also chastened. How was it that those we are closest to are the ones we read incorrectly when upset? Like he and his father. Or his father and mother. That thought made a little of the stubborn pride yield more. He needed to truly see. Both with and without a gift.

He looked down and found that once again he was absently shredding something green. Nera had thoughtfully placed a cup of small white croci by his quill. Their thin spikey leaves made a neat pile on the wood while a few sat shorn in his palm. He reached into his tunic, pulled out the starflowers and slit their stalks with a careful fingernail. The motion soothed. His fingers remembered this: laying a blanket across his mother's lap, passing bloom after bloom while she showed him how to fashion a simple chain. Soon there were three. Then five. A slim circle twinned into a ring, such as the Eldar
gave for handfasting.

For a moment he thought that Amerith might tease him but instead she walked over to gently touch the petals. They were waxy to the touch and just faintly damp. "There. You have your metaphor. Forge a new chain of green and life, where before there was only dark and iron. Go to her."

He nodded, taking a breath and mentally shredding any sense of doubt. Waiting would only make things worse. And with this knowledge he knew what he must do.

He slipped the little chain oh so gently into his pocket. "I will."

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Earlier that same morning Minas Tirith's Master Healer sank gratefully down onto the common room's empty bench and heaved a heartfelt sigh. Valar that had been long. Twelve hours, dusk to dawn; and though the night shift had always been his favourite, that was before this war, before weeks of endless need and strain had left him (and all of the staff, truth be told) weary and a little frayed.

"Thank you," he murmured, eyes closed, accepting but not seeing the cup of green ginger tea Ivriniel pressed into his fresh-scrubbed hands. The sweet sharp fragrance twined up, soothed and revived him a little before he cracked open one eyelid.

The most welcome sight of Dol Amroth's elder Princess was bent over and peering closely at the bags that lay large as boulders beneath his eyes.

"Better?" she asked, brandishing a small satchel of pungent grey-green leaves. "I can add galium and basil if you have need?"

"Nay." He ducked his head and quickly but imprudently taking a largish sip. Este, the steaming brew was hot. Enough to burn to his tongue and sheepishly he blew on the surface, avoiding Ivriniel's determined gaze. No need to have her tut-tutting over him like an offended wren. The night before had not gone as planned. Ranulf, the big, blond, lugubrious second to Rohan's Marshal had been making slow but steady progress, miraculously uncomplaining on the long road back from a near-fatal stomach wound, and so to find his leg swollen from a clot had been unwelcome in the extreme. The rue, applied whole and taken in a tincture, was dried perforce, not fresh as it never potted well, but strong enough to work. Just now, long hours later, the swelling had come down. It was a battle. But one Varan refused to lose.

He rolled his tired head upon his neck and eyed his friend. Ivriniel looked rested and refreshed; she had breakfasted early and clearly indulged in a bath. Her damp hair was unbound, not yet tucked up underneath her veil, and hung in a long straight fall of night. He smiled, thinking she looked like the fiercest of shieldmaidens ready to defend her charges from all harm. "The man won't dare get worse now that you are here."

She snorted as elegantly as one could. "I should certainly hope not. And, given that likelihood, you can take yourself straight off to your cot. You look positively grey."

Varan shrugged. He felt it, but would not leave before detailed notes on Ranulf's care were written and passed on. "No more than Marrit or Hirlas do. How you keep your energy up, dear lady, is a mystery to me. There must be hidden virtues in good sea air."

"If that were the case I'd have no foul-tempered scurvyed seaman to treat." A glint of amusement twinkled in light grey eyes. "How else would I learn to sharpen my tongue?"
"Bossing surly Rangers?"

Her half-hearted sputtered protest was cut abruptly short as the main door creaked on its hinges.

"Master? Are you here?" The broad, lined face of Dame Ioreth, bright and all too lively below the twin greys of veil and curling locks, peered into the room.

Varan stifled a sudden groan and ran a hand across his face. What now? He did not think he had the energy for more bad news, much less the dear woman's prattling. Reluctantly he climbed to his feet. "Yes madam, I am and just finished my evening's rounds. Is it the Rider? Or can the Princess help you with a problem?" Nienna, please tell me it is the latter.

The good wife bumped the heavy door full wide with her hip, keeping a practised steady grip on a tray piled high with scones and cream and jam. His stomach rumbled promptly as Ioreth bobbed her head. "Well I am not rightly sure my lord. I should not like to suggest her Highness was not fully skilled at every task, but she was your patient first, and I ken she is released from care but I thought as how you should know."

"What about who?" he asked patiently, setting the teacup aside and barely stifling a grin. Ioreth might not 'like to suggest' that Ivriniel was less equipped but her words had done exactly that.

"The lady's not eaten her breakfast again," Ioreth exclaimed, brandishing the tray. The china clinked musically and a bit of milk sloshed from its pot. "See this? Not a bite of cook's best baking made just for her. The third morning in a row. And yestereve her supper went untouched. Most alarming. Why, Kira tells me she's having to take in the lady's day dresses again. Should you not see to her? That Black Breath might be coming back and the King's not here and whatever would he say if we let her get ill again?"

Ah. 'She' was clearly their healing Shieldmaiden. The what was a puzzle still. He raised an eyebrow. "Well I daresay that is to be avoided at all costs, mostly for Lady Éowyn's own sake, but I examined her several days ago. She was a little pale but otherwise quite well enough. Her shield arm is healing properly. I allowed her to ride upon the Pelennor as the air and exercise would do her good."

Varan smiled to himself. 'Walk' was more the word, and the lady had been feisty enough to let him know what she thought of his precautions. "I have no serious concerns," he added before a frowning Ioreth continued on.

"Warden Hallas says he is most concerned and will send for the Lord Steward. Why, I've seen her in the garden morning, noon, and night. Face pinched and white as the old Lord's tower. Ailing, surely, or I don't have eyes within my head."

Hallas, who was always sure-footed when it came to handling staff, had had more years with Ioreth than any one of them. He knew when it was politic to give in. Varan's own sense of precision simply got in the way. "The Warden is of course entitled to his opinion, but her sword arm, the one that was chiefly the centre of the affliction, is no longer numb or cold."

"Nor is she is sleeping more," added Ivriniel firmly. "There is no indication the Black Breath has returned."

Ioreth huffed out a breath. "Well, it's not for the likes of me to know, but I've not been too busy to see that her eyes and hair are dull. There's dark smudges below where there weren't before and her face is suddenly long as a bad, wet winter. What could it be but her illness in other guise? Lord Faramir was took with fever. Gadron, that young Ranger caught by the Nazgul's breath, had waking visions and shivers before his heart just stopped."
A hand raised to stop the flow of words. "No, my good dame, you can be reassured on that point. As always your vigilance and concern does you great credit but I am quite certain it is not Black Breath," Varan said. "These symptoms are shared with other maladies. And I believe I know what it is," he noted gently as he could.

"Master?"


In both the Lady and the Steward.

His mouth quirked into the barest of wry smiles. "A far simpler condition. Although it, too, afflicts the heart."

Beside him, Ivriniel arose. She picked up her veil from the tabletop and strode across the room to the open door. For once, Ioreth was entirely caught without reply. Her eyes were wide and mouth agape. Varan chuckled to himself. It could hardly be the first time love had blossomed on the paths, but was certainly a first for a ruling Steward. "Go along, good lady and do not worry. Love is rarely fatal, although it is assuredly quite painful at times. We shall watch over both of them with care."

The penny finally dropped. The dumbfounded servant looked from Master to Princess. "Well I never…. Lord Faramir and the Lady."

Ivriniel pushed the door full wide and wagged a finger sternly. The corners of her mouth were set. "Mind you do not spread that bit of gossip like a brush fire. Neither would thank you for it."

Ioreth flushed and bobbed her head. "Your Highness, I should never think of it."

"Indeed," Ivriniel replied, taking the woman by the elbow. "Come. Let the Master get to his rest. It is time for me to see what other remedy I can affect."

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In a far corner of the House's outer garden the subject of discussion sat in the bright noon sun and futilely willed the warmth and light sweet scent of spring to challenge the cloud of her vexation. Angered, frustrated, and at a loss what to do, for an hour after rising Éowyn had tried to busy herself. Channelled the sour of her stomach into something useful, ripping with such force at the weeds around the herbs in the healing garden that Marrit (eyes thoughtful but mercifully not judging) had had to bid her to take it slow. The smell and scent of dry earth freshened by the night's brief gentle rain was welcome, the work moreso, but eventually busy hands let thoughts work harder. They turned to Faramir, again and again, until Éowyn simply gave up the fight. She bid Marrit good day and grabbed her new letters to retreated to the garden's wall.

Reading should have helped. Éomer's usual scrawling mess was filled with two pages on Dol Amroth's younger princess-her riding skill, her wit, her sunny disposition-enough to distract a bit but then it turned to pleas for Éowyn to visit. And, alarmingly, descriptions of Lothiriel's unmarried elder brother. How brave Amrothos was. How handsome. How much a warrior and how greatly Éomer had come to respect Prince Imrahil. Bema, the lovestruck, addled clod was matchmaking! Éowyn's stomach clenched. It was endearingly, if clumsily, done, but the thought of considering another suitor was simply nauseating.

And impossible.

She missed Faramir. Intensely. It was an ache as strong as her need for the fen and fields of the wold,
where the green shoots would now just be poking through the dried winter thatch. There every minute of the day, however much she tried to smother it. She missed Éomer and Lothíriel too, and Bergil who no longer appeared so often with beautifully penned notes. But most of all she missed Faramir. The softness of his touch upon her wrist. The happy hours they had spent just sitting in the still and quiet, warmed by good company and laughter and a sense of ease. The jasmine plant on her bedside table sat, ignored, like an accusation of her weakness. She could hardly bear to look on the pretty thing or smell the fragrance of its blooms and yet the Rohirrim in her could not cast aside something green and growing. The bowl of floating petals that Kira had rescued from her hair still sat upon the dresser.

She had watered both that morn.

 Damn the man!

Again she had hoped and risked opening her heart and again she had been burned. Amerith's conversation had only left her more confused and wanting to retreat. Could she be wrong about Faramir's intentions with the ruse? Could his reticence to speak, his keeping his counsel to himself, really be founded in Denethor's hardness on his son? It fit, for she, too, had heard servants whispering about stern words and sterner frowns but was she not owed the truth? An explanation? The full story instead of parts dribbled out when he saw fit? Bema's blessed horn, she hated this uncertainty! Being vulnerable. And needy. At the mercy of the tiny weak corner of her heart that flickered with joy to know there was some explanation. That panged, hard, seeing the hurt upon his face.

For half a candlemark she had sat in the rising westerly wind, feeling the warmth of Anor's steady rays on her face and the heat rise from bench below her light linen dress, furiously stripping a stray dead branch of its last remaining bark. It hadn't helped. She was no closer to knowing what course to take.

"May I sit down?"

A soft and cultured voice jolted her from her fractured thoughts. Éowyn turned toward the path. Dol Amroth's diminutive Princess stood on the verge, one hand clasping her long grey veil, the other in the soft wool of her healer's kirtle. Her shoulders were set and back. She wore no apron and her long hair was loose, not tucked up as it would be for working.

Ivriniel looked- intent. And nervous, for no reason that Éowyn could imagine. Curious, and determined to be courteous however much she wished for peace, she nodded curtly. "Be my guest."

The older woman swept the long fall of her hair aside and alighted on the bench. She sat with her hands clasped tightly in her lap and lips pursed as if she were thinking carefully of her words. When, at length, she spoke, her voice was shorn of its customary briskness.

"Dame Ioreth tells me that you sent back your breakfast."

This again! Éowyn just barely avoided throwing up her hands, struggling to not bite back and ask sarcastically if Ivriniel was touring all the wards. If they had so little to do that a ridiculously minor fuss demanded the presence of a Princess. It was maddening, but a display of temper wouldn't help.

Most likely the woman actually meant her well.

"True," she replied stiffly, when the anger simmering in her veins had cooled. "But you need not trouble on my account. I am perfectly well. I broke bread with Marrit at her break."
An eyebrow arched in pleased surprise. "Then that is well. I will report the good news to Master Varan who will be relieved." Ivrineli's mouth twitched up. "You know you need not fear him sending Bern with baskets anymore." Éowyn rolled her eyes. Thank Bema. She had had more than enough of that. Ivrineli went on, "But I do admit that there is growing concern that you are not yourself."

Éowyn stiffened sharply, picturing every denizen of the City tattling about their falling out. "Yours or someone else's?"

"Both." The Princess gave a frustrated sigh. "I am not here as a nurse but rather as a friend. You need not be so suspicious of my motives."

The sharpness that ruled Éowyn's tongue these days was no less blunt. "Faramir has sent you. Will Lothíriel be next?"

"He has no idea that I am here."

"I find that hard to believe."

Ivrineli's lips flattened into a frown. "Whether you do or no, it is the simple truth. As is the fact that Faramir is an honourable man. I love my nephew as my own son, but I am not blind to his qualities. He is infuriating, yes. Stubborn as an ox at times. Impossibly precise when arguing, but he is not often wrong. Nor is he ever false in his affections. You have a very simple choice. Will you take his word? Or that of a pack of gossips?"

Éowyn crossed her arms defiantly across her chest. "He should have told me. Before I had to hear it from those painted vultures."

Ivrineli held her gaze. "Yes. Yes, he should have. And should have spared more time these past few days for you but I somewhat suspect it would have made but little difference. You would still have given him short shrift, would you not?"

Shame, with its bitter aftertaste, spread across Éowyn's tongue. Ivrineli hit the mark. Yes she would not have given Faramir the time of day at first. Yes she would have turned him away but she was the one who had been wronged, not he. That this neither excused nor denied her own coldness pricked. And made her frustration flare. "That is what that conniving woman said!"

Ivrineli had no trouble divining who she meant. "Conniving is indeed quite apt in this instance but Amerith means you well. And there is none here who have worked so hard, sacrificed so much for Gondor, unless it is Denethor and his sons. She does not deserve your ire."

A cool fury breathed ice into Éowyn's reply. "I will be not be caged again! By expectation or another's need of me. We shared one kiss. He has no claim otherwise," she cried, but the princess did not flinch. Ivrineli looked Éowyn up and down with a gaze flat and firm as the bench upon which they sat. "It seems to me we are quite capable of bringing our cages with us. And though all evidence outward is to the opposite, I believe you do possess inside a voice of reason."

Éowyn gasped. She began to stridently object, but Ivrineli shook her finger sharply, cut off whatever she would say. "Do not bristle at me, young woman. I meant it not in offense for I have told much the same to him. It is not entirely clear to me how Faramir blundered into this mire, but I do not believe that you are as indifferent to him as you pretend before me now. Nor do I think you usually let your temper rule your wit." Ivrineli's voice softened for a bit. "What does your heart tell you? Your ears and eyes are not always the organs that see most clearly."
What did it tell her? Truly? Éowyn clenched her fingers on the marble's lip. That she was hurt and angry and Béma that despite everything that she did not or could not understand, she loved him.

Still.

But that was not enough to overrule the damage done. She had her dignity and her honour. Was not about to cheapen their value now.

The light grey eyes that held her own, demanding of an answer, did not glance down. They both sat, straight and stiff for so long that Éowyn expected Ivriniel to rise and leave, forgo a conflict she could not win, but instead Ivriniel broke her gaze, smoothed both hands absently down along her hair. The wet tendrils were piled into her lap. "Do you know why I am unmarried?" she asked finally, spreading out a dampened patch of skirt to dry

Surprise stained two spots of colour on Éowyn's cheeks. "Your fiancé died at sea."

Ivriniel heavily. "I suppose that is simplest to say after all these many years. Those who knew first-hand are gone, all save my brother, and Imrahil would never speak of it. To you or any other. It is not a tale for happy firesides or long winter's eves. But if you will sit and listen, I will tell it to you now, and then, when I am done, you may decide what best to do."

Éowyn blinked in surprise. It was an odd, slightly imperious request, but there was a furrow on Ivriniel's brow, a faint tremble to the fingers wound tightly in the strands in her lap. This was something difficult to share; a grief the woman would not speak of without good reason.

It would be discourteous to not let her tell the tale

Éowyn nodded once. Ivriniel cleared her throat and began to speak; looking not at her companion but far south across the ruined fields. Towards Belfalas and her home.

"I did not always plan to be a spinster," she began. "But not all of us get so favoured a tack upon the seas. Long ago in less shadowed times I was young, and not so serious. And if I did not have the gay beauty of my sister I had wit, and skill, and a pleasant face and pretty hair, and there were suitors. Most were official matches that stirred neither my heart nor my head, and I admit it, I was indulged." She gave a tiny, fleeting smile. "The Princes of Dol Amroth, from Imrazor on down to my charming rogue of a little brother, have never been able to deny to their womenfolk. My father Adrahil was no different. We were all free to choose to marry for love and for that reason I let a few matches go, certain that the right man would come along. I kept company with my father's knights and uncle's seaman, honed my craft, confident in my fate, until one day I was simply swept off my feet. Sador was his name, Aglamir's new second mate, and he was tall and fair and funny where I was not. A beautiful man inside and out whose touch made my blood sing and eyes made me want to dance. And though we shared but a few stolen kisses behind the rigging, I was smitten. I told only Finduilas. It seems silly now, for of a certain all our friends and family must have seen our giddy joy, but I thought none knew."

"What happened?" asked Éowyn, hardly daring to speak up. Ivriniel tightened her fingers in her lap. "He asked me for permission to seek my father's blessing. To pay suit. I am ashamed to say I hesitated. Not because I did not love him. I did, But because he was not who I had thought that I might wed. I was young and a princess and he was a commoner; a sea captain's son with brains and heart and courage who had won his post from Aglamir because of a worth all could see" Her dainty mouth twisted in a grimace. "We had a row. He accused me of considering him beneath me and I no answer for he was not wholly wrong. He sailed off, in a fury, on yet another of Uncle's wandering escapades. Three months was long enough to pine and miss him and come to know my heart. To realize how ridiculous was my hesitation and so I was overjoyed to hear word of their return. My feet
could not take me fast enough down to promenade to the docks. *Minuramar* was such a welcome
sight flying on the waves, but then, she closed no farther. Held back from port and ran up a black
forked flag."

"What did it mean?" Éowyn asked softly, when the steady voice and grey gaze had faltered.

Ivriniel swallowed once and closed her eyes before looking back again. "Contagion. An illness
among the crew. The wild leafy jungles far beyond Umbar harboured a malady. A fever more
virulent than any we had seen. Half the crew were dead inside a fortnight. Only through the greatest
effort did we stop it spreading into the city." She drew a shaky breath. "They burned the ship and all
the bodies.

It took my Uncle and Sador both.

Father nursed his brother by himself, would suffer no other to take the risk, just as I nursed Sador. I
was so vain, so certain of my skills. I could not believe that he would die but he was too far gone in
the fever's grip. Days he wandered in vicious dreams, awake but unseeing. With blood pooled in his
eyes and ears and in his body, wracked with pain and crying out for comfort. Calling my name even
as I held him helplessly in my arms. He never knew that I was there. He believed that I had
abandoned him even at the end."

"Why, that is…" Éowyn, heart in mouth, could not find the words.

"Horrific?" Ivriniel glanced down. A single tear dropped down to darken the light grey wool. "Yes.
A nightmare. Beyond any I hope to ever know again. But in the end it was part of my own making."
The princess sighed, wiped away the track of wet upon her cheek and then slowly rose, straight-
backed. She caught up her veil, looked up toward the shining crown of the Citadel and when she
turned back again her eyes were ineffably sad. "You see now I know whereof I speak, Éowyn.
Please. Talk to him. Hear what Faramir has to say. I know my nephew. He loves you—you are no
second best. And you both have a chance for joy. Look beyond the obstacles and listen to your heart.
However much this stings, do not let your pride alter the river of your life."

And with that, Ivriniel turned with her customary grace and walked away.

The rising breeze did not drift her long dark hair for the veil of her profession was back in place
again.

At the garden wall, another young headstrong woman watched her figure until it disappeared. Across
a new green carpet of soft fescue and below an arch of burgeoning lilac blooms.

Chapter End Notes

As always, my undying gratitude (and chocolate, wine and plot bunnies) to Wheelrider
and Eschschiola for betaing and Annafan, Thanwen and CarawynO for their
encouragement and wonderfully helpful comments. I still can't quite believe we are
almost there…one chapter to go.
The foreseeing gift of Dol Amroth was ever fickle.

Most often it came to Faramir as sudden sharpened images. Indistinct and tantalizing. Like bright flashes of silver scales in a weedy murky pool or a firefly's flitting beacon above a mist-shrouded twilight meadow. Beautiful yet maddening, for his mind's eye could not let them go nor could it see what clearly they meant.

Sometimes it appeared just as the Wave. Roiling minutes of sweeping dream that threw him forward or farther back. Holding him fiercely fast and then suddenly letting go, to stand shaken, grasping at straws, trying to discern the lesson in their midst.

Rarer, but all the dearer for it, were confirmations of a place. The rightness of it. The sense that he would be there again and all, in time, would and could be well. His heart would swell, he would feel suddenly rooted into the very bones of earth: like a sapling searching for sun and life-giving water, knowing that the music of the world unfolds as it should.

On that day, the thirtieth since Arda's jubilant release, this last vision took him on the Houses' garden steps.


The shock made him briefly sway, set hand upon a pillar's sun-warmed stone, look south, to Emyn Arnen's woods and hills again.

What had Najir said? *The wind tastes like south.* It did—the strong rising breeze that brushed his face brought with it the tang of salt from Befalas bay. A taste of summers long ago he had known and that brought a sweetness and a sadness all its own: *Boromir with a missing silver button beside their grandfather's bier. His father's deep, bass rumble of a laugh, free for once at some quip by his great aunt. A scent of jasmine as he reached up to take his mother's hand.*

*Praise Lorien.* he whispered. The tide of loss could indeed recede and in its wake leave life with all its tangled threads, uncertain but hopeful. Of this one thing he was assured. What he did now was right.

Even if, at first, he was sent away summarily.

The sense of affirmation spurred his steps.

Faramir strode along the curving paths; past the near courtyard and its showy beds bedecked with Spring's shy, small, but deeply coloured blooms; past cascades of softer pink and lavender in the wildly early budding trees. The light flirted with the new green leaves and warmed lilacs that lent their sweet scent to the freshness of the air.

He nodded to the passing soldiers and the servants, to Marrit who held a flat basket of pungent herbs against her hip and whose apron was smudged with moistened earth.

Something in his face made the others smile.
At the nearest fork he found the Warden and reassured Hallas he would indeed soon see the White Lady and allay her disquiet if he could. He took the left hand path, happy to pass its many familiar landmarks: the arbered bench where they first sat. The nodding cypress. The burbling stone fountain now cleared of fallen leaves.

By the high curtain wall he found her.

Crouched in a bed of pale blue los- aglar, pulling at the feisty weeds, Éowyn was unaware of his approach. The hem of her linen kirtle was stained and wet, her tresses were unbound: draped down across her back and nearly touching the softly waving grass. The warmth of the simple scene made him smile. Against the pale greens and browns of the garden weeks before, she had at first seemed white and set. Beautiful but sorrowful. Like a lily caught by an unseasonable frost but now, under the warming, shining sun, she was more gold and cream. Her pale skin had tanned a little from their frequent walks, Her hair was lit by streaks of paler flax. Vital and vigorous.

And possibly quite vigorously angry.

He stopped a careful length from the path's north edge.

"The squirrels do not always follow Grandmother Fana's plan."

He had spoken softly, striving not to startle, as Éowyn reached to pluck a lone yellow jonquil that marred the sea of blue and green. The interloper paused midair. The lady sat slowly back upon her heels, wiped a stray tendril of gold from off her forehead and turned to toss the errant flower into a flat wicker basket nestled at the verge.

Her brows were knit in a frown and there were stray blades of green upon the wrappings of her arm. She brushed them off. Rearranged the frown into a politely neutral mask, and then, graceful as an unfurling bud, she rose, turning to meet his gaze.

A carpet of clear, light sapphire and deeper emerald lay all about her feet. The tiny six-rayed blooms, white at their throat and periwinkle at their tips, were set as a myriad of stars amidst a firmament of green.

The sight and her loveliness caught his breath anew.

"My lady, the stars have fallen to your feet."

Éowyn glanced down, a slight flush staining her paler cheeks. Her expression, that had been stern and shuttered, opened just a crack. "Perhaps so, my lord but not for long. Their time is fleeting but for that very reason they are a favourite. They grow wild between the rocks on Edoras' slopes. So thick at times they make rivers of another blue."

"In Ithilien they are shyer and grace only the rocky higher slopes." Relief was pouring down along his veins. Éowyn was speaking to him. Coolly if not easily, but in tones without heavy censure or frustration. It augured well for the awkward conversation still to come.

But did not absolve him of being circumspect.

"May I help?"

Éowyn shook her head and so, loathe to rush or unsettle this temporary truce, he waited patiently, watched while she reached and set the basket on the gravel, brushed the last specks of soil from off her fingers and shook out the folds of her overskirt. A single industrious bee droned as it swerved between the beds. The Tower pennants snapped loudly in the wind. Just when he thought he might
have to break the spell and speak, she caught his gaze and inclined her head.

"You did not come here to speak to me of botany."

Blunt and direct as she had been almost from the first. It was bracing but not unwelcome. An icily polite, aloof Éowyn he could not have borne. "No. No. I did not, " Faramir admitted, shaking his head. "I came to offer my apologies."

A calmly apprising eyebrow rose. "Again? And what of this effort this time is to be different?"

He winced. "I deserved that."

"Yes."

It was a hard but accurate assessment. He steadied himself with a deeper breath, waited to organize his thoughts, for though this was not a contest of marksmanship, he had just one throw. It would not do to let words simply pour out like the Anduin in spate.

"Please. May I explain? Anborn tells me I have been an idiot. My uncle reminds me that the skills that served me well before are not needed here. I see that I have been too careful. It does not help to keep my counsel to myself, especially with the one who needs to know my heart unfettered."

That last word made her eyes widen slightly. An eternity wound tighter than a bowstring passed before she gave a single nod.

A chance. A gift he would not mistake.

He licked lips gone suddenly dry and let a long ago lesson from Mithrandir take him through. Begin at the beginning. Keep going through the middle and do not stop until you reach the end. The rightness of it prickled at his nape.

"Lady, at first you wished to be loved by another, that I know," he began, achingly soft and low. "Your hurt was real and raw, but like your body's pains it dimmed with time and you began to see that you could live again. Here in this restful space you took a chance, kept a fellow soldier company and found something that neither of us could expect. Ease. Trust. Happiness. Bravely you opened a piece of your heart to me for you felt, as did I, a light between us. One that I should have recognized."

"Your gift."

"And yours," he breathed, nodding gravely at the wonder of it all. "It is startling and frightening at first, I doubt not you found it so. But I was too blind, caught in my own cares, to realize. Then thoughtlessly, I dealt you another hurt. Left truths unspoken until too late and that new found trust was sullied. For that I am truly grieved." He was. For it had been so very needless. And he would not hurt her for the world. "Éowyn, there is no other. I understand it could seem so but I could never lie to you. In your company, I have learned to harrow my heart and take delight where I can. Set aside the many fleeting arrows of grief and focus upon the present. It has given me a joy I never thought to know and a hope to think upon the future."

He spread his hands in supplication. "Can you forgive me? Give what we have found another chance?"

In the quiet pause thereafter, the only sound was the rustling of almond and lilac leaves. Faramir nervously ran a hand through his long hair. Was what he had said enough? To heal. To nuture the bond that he could feel threaded sure but loosely between their hearts. Would she understand that he
had learned. Painfully. It hurt to see the telltale signs of her disquiet: The slight hollowness where her cheeks had begun to fill, the paleness of her cheek below the sun-kissed spray of freckles.

Éowyn gazed at him evenly, clutching her arms close to her chest, seemingly also in no hurry. "Can I?" she asked at last, a little less hard and cool. Warm rivulets had begun to traverse the slopes of snow.

He nodded, at first slowly but then with surer force. "Yes. Trust in this. I know that in life you must chart your own course, but you will not be bound again. I would give all my heart and strength to see it. By your side. Not as Gondor's Steward, or her Captain, but simply as myself. For I love you. So dearly I would lay down all my offices and follow you wherever that you would go. Edoras. Aldburg. A croft in far off Rhun, if it be your wish."

On impulse, he stepped to the garden's edge and held out his hands to her, palms upward to the sun.

Willing her to bridge the bare few feet of green and beauty that felt more like a moat.

"Éowyn, do you not love me or will you not?"

Uncertainty flickered across her gaze, swift as a hummingbird. There and gone, before shrouded by cool grey again. In its wake Éowyn stood tall and proud and still, unmoving though the wind gusted harder, scudding clouds across the sun and lifting the edges of her sleeve and set the blue stars rippling in the long grass. For a moment all was quiet and then there came another gust. It whistled through the swaying boughs and made her shiver. The thin dress was sufficient when working hard but not proof against the cool rush through the battlements.

Faramir cast his gaze about. At first he saw no cloak, worried fleetingly that she had with purpose forsaken his mother's mantle, but then he spied it. Draped across a low stone bench.

He walked around the bed and retrieved the heavy folds, looped them across his arm before stepping back to his appointed place. The blue velvet hung suspended above the verge, waiting for her to take it if she willed or no. He held his breath, not daring to presume.

At last, with a murmur of quiet thanks, Éowyn slowly unclasped her elbows and reached out to grasp the deep blue. She shrugged it about her narrow shoulders and fixed the clasp's lacy filigree. In the flirting rays of slanting sun the mantle's silver threaded stars winked brighter than the carpet that ringed her round.

Neither of them mistook the symbolism of the moment.

Faramir once more held out his hands to her.

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You must open your hands if you wish to be held.

It was Hilde's saying to her high-hearted, too-grown-to-accept-mothering young sons that incongruously came to Éowyn.

The steady, practical Marshal Elfhelm's equally steady, practical wife was the closest to a mother that Éowyn knew at Meduseld. Kind, generous, a font of knowledge even as she steered five busy boys
to manhood, Hilde had been the one to fill the gap left by Grandmother Morwen. Teach her the laments and lays, the voice of a woman of her station. To instill the truth that to be Eorlingas was to know that the world was ever ringed with uncertainty. That from the first moment to the last, they lived. Not without hardship, not without heartache and pain and grinding effort. But together. Honourably. Seeking solace where they will, and strength when sinews begin to fail.

you will not be bound again...

This man who with his gift read her as a Rider read the shifting winds upon the wold had gleaned her greatest fear. He offered not pity, nor false promise of life's perfection, but simply his heart. And word.

Could she believe it true?

A day of turning Amerith's explanation around from every angle had at last found no fault. The ruse of their attachment was no different than the one her cousin had employed. A sign of commitment, not faithlessness. In the Steward's garden she had touched his thoughts and felt no falseness there; only a strange new sense that fit with the honesty of his actions and apologies. The inattentiveness that further wounded her angered pride was, if she read Ivriniel's story right, the part she must simply learn to forgive.

If she would take a risk and love.

Éowyn looked from her own small hands to his. Both had once been weakened by toil and shadow but were stronger now. Her shield hand would soon lose its bindings. His sword hand would again have small calluses on the tips from pulling on the bow. She has felt warmth and life flow in them as they held hands sneaking through a hidden tunnel. In the House's graceful courtyard under Ithil's silver glow she has tasted his passion from just a brush of his fingertips. He yearned, as she did, for a certainty life could never give but would always strive in hope. He loved—intensely; cared—deeply.

And now he would forsake all for which he had fought and sacrificed. For love of her.

She looked upon his already beloved face and knew that he would do this: cherish and support, madden and surprise her. Always. And it would be glorious.

Éowyn crossed the green gulf between them and placed her hands in his.

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Faramir at first did not hear lady's words through the thundering of his heart.

Éowyn was smiling. Wide and winsome, shaking her head earnestly as he stood elated and a little dazed, beyond grateful that she had given him this chance. It felt almost as a dream but he could feel the cool of her fingertips against his heated palm, see the capricious breeze drift her hair about her face. South, west, swirling from one direction then the next it made small eddies in the grass,

He stepped closer, held her lightly close, willing her to warm up and stroking his thumbs slowly over the back of her faintly trembling hands.

She sighed and spoke again. "But what say you if I do wish to trade gold and plains for woods and
green? Would help to make Ithilien a fair garden once again?"

"You would?!" He blinked, and a smile tugged irresistibly at his lips. "You must understand that I am not neat."

Éowyn nodded. "Your room attests as much."

"And I have been known to get lost in books."

"Lothíriel remarked on it once."

"And I am not inclined to grow a beard."

Her gold head shook. "This is a most unconventional wooing, my lord, highlighting your deficiencies."

"If I am to endeavour to communicate it seems fair to make a clean breast of it.\" He raised a dark eyebrow. "You would prefer conventional? Jewels and verse and chaperoned, languid walks with my Aunt?"

She shuddered. "Béma, no. And it is a little late for that. I believe we have already danced the proscribed three times in a row. At two separate functions. Is that not a public declaration of intention by Gondor's fusty rules?"

Faramir laughed a little giddily "Oh yes. Anborn has been taking wagers on the outcome for days."

"Then in fair turn-about, I would have you know I am not always easy. My temper and my snap are long ingrained. Would you have the people say there goes a lord who tamed a wild Shieldmaiden?"

He ran his hands gently up her arms, put a wealth of feeling into a light, sure touch. "Not tamed, my lady. Joined."

She made quiet sound of happiness. "Then, yes."

"You will forgive me? Accept my suit?\" he asked, heart trying to beat out of his chest again.

"I will accept the proposal that you will give."

"I will gi….?" Stunned, Faramir looked down into her mist-grey eyes. They sparkled. With delight and happiness and something daring that all at once would melt his heart. "Truly?!"

She searched his face in turn. ""It is not what we both want? I will allow that our days together under Varan's care have taught me greater patience, but by now I believe you know how much I hate to wait. Especially for surprises. I love you Faramir of Gondor. I do not need months of elaborate ritual to know my heart."

Nor did he.

They stood so very close and in the warm sunlight, Éowyn's hair was gleaming, streaming out in the wind and twinning with his own long raven strands. The sense of rightness grew. This, here and now, was the moment that he had felt. To surrender to its sheer beauty felt daring. Reckless with joy and certainty that a dream could, would continue.

He slipped his thumb and forefinger into the pocket of his tunic. "Then it is well that I have something for a token.\" The slim circle of white and blue rested in his sword hand. "Éowyn, White Lady of Rohan, will you wed with me?"
"I would."

The happiest of tears glinted in her lashes. Faramir bent his dark head down, took her in his arms and kissed her. With wonder to know her fear and dark despair and hunger swept away. With joy for all the days of heart's ease and merriness and passion still to come.

Then with a sigh they broke apart, just enough that her fingers rose up to stroke his cheek, touched his lips that yet felt the tingling press. Below his hands she trembled. Without cool or chill or any fear.

"Are you going to do that again?" Éowyn asked,

He smiled and bent his head to catch her lips again.

"Always…"

Epilogue

_Fourth Age 08_

Finduilas was a breath of air.

It was not the first time she had been so. Lord Námo on occasion granted her this boon and she availed herself with joy; delighting in the news she spied, the tales she brought back to share with her husband and eldest son.

Most of the Secondborn did not bother so. Once beyond Arda's grey rain veil their fëar had no wish or need to concern themselves with its unfolding music, but Finduilas, her heart tied to Middle-Earth more than most, pined for the sea and the spray and the shimmering new green of the woods.

On the rare golden days that the Doomsman solemnly cast wide Mandos' hallowed doors, she would rush headlong past his lady's tapestries, sweep down the shining marble steps and traverse the Encircling Sea; blowing gales before her in her haste until Manwé's messengers, strong of wing yet kind of heart, would (gently) admonish her heedlessness.

This day they paid little heed. She passed swiftly but with decorum; the birds shook bright plumed heads and continued their revelry for it was high midsummer of the eighth year of Arda's Fourth Age. All those in the Reunited Kingdom, from Annúminas to Belfalas Bay, Langstrand to Ithilien were celebrating.

As was her wont, first she alighted near the Bay. In Dol Amroth's grand palace gardens she set the nascent apricots trembling on their stems, wafted their soft warm sweetness about her nephews and their families, made the azure ribbons in Amrothos's youngest's hair dance like fireworks. At the sight Ivriniel and Imrahil (a little greyer but no less vital) caught each other's eye and smiled, for they too had on a long vanished brilliant day run with their sister up and down the gravel paths, filled to bursting with figs and cherries and sugared sweets.

Finduilas smiled. All there, including Lossarnach's oft-spied Duchess, were well content and so she soared aloft, sped north to the City of Stone where she had lived. King Elessar and Queen Arwen
were presiding over perfect mountains of strawberries and cream in a sunlit glowing hall. Their son and daughters, raven-haired and grey-eyed, lithe and strong and graceful as their grandmother, were released from formal ceremony. Ran pell mell down the polished marble and out into the verdant courtyard, where stood a white tree in leaf—silver and opal and tender green. Soon with sunset to burst into clouds of snowy blooms.

Her heart shone with gladness. The city bore only shadows that were a welcome cool respite from the noonday sun and so, at last, she let herself pour eastward. Let need and hope and bridled anticipation take her in the merest beat across Anduin and to the low, verdant range of hills where lived her younger son.

Emyn Arnen, this day, was also celebrating.

On the Estate's rear porch she blew a short cooling gust for Rohan's Queen. Swollen ankles perched on a cushion, Lothíriel fanned her face and brushed a sweat damp lock from off her cheek. "I might have timed this better," she grumbled to her audience, shifting a little uncomfortably, "I feel like a summer melon, full to bursting and ready to split apart."

"Given Elfwine is just past his own name day, I should think you haven't planned at all." Éowyn grinned and shared a knowing look with Godwyn. Beside them, sitting decorously at Lothíriel's feet, Malina blushed red as the rose that climbed the nearest post. She was not yet eighteen. A beauty. With Theodred's glorious wheat gold hair and Godwyn's ice blue eyes, courted by half of Edoras' new recruits and somewhat relieved to be away from the attention.

"Let me, Aunt Thiri," she offered, rising to refill Lothíriel's silver cup. "A drink may help."

"Thank you, swéte." Lothíriel drank deeply of the sweet lemon water, sighing heavily at the heat and took up her fan again. She frowned as she followed her sister-in-law's gaze out past the near herb beds to the gilt and silver glory of a young mallorn tree. "Do you think that they need any help?"

Ithilien's Lady regarded the two men who were kneeling back to back below the spreading branches. They were barefoot. Clad in grass-stained breeches rolled to their knees and light linen shirts that stuck to sweat damp skin. One had his long fair hair tied in a thong. The other's dark locks hung lose.

They were entirely encircled by shouting children still adorned with smears of frosting and lemon cream.

"Oh no," Éowyn laughed lightly. "The odds are just slightly in their favour."

Finduilas soared out from under the stone house's eaves. She swooped low and gently, ruffled the ends of blond braids and dark sticky fringe, settled on the grass to watch a moment long foretold. The combatants fought not the Pelennor, for those memories were still a little new, but the little known, unsung epic battle of the Goblin Kings against the good folk of Anorien.

The first assault had been futile. Running headlong one by one and pummeling a pair of prodigiously tall and muscled fathers had not make a dent and so a new strategy was hatched. Finduilas' eldest grandchild, the one with his uncle's gay charm and love of battle sport, had his little brother on his back. Théomund trumpeted 'for Gondor!" and as one the pair swooped up, stretched out fingers to their father's ticklish left flank. He twisted and ducked just out of reach, swiftly plucked his youngest from his perch. One hand was sufficient to pin a giggling Theo to the turf. Faramir had begun to 'punish' the little one mercilessly behind his knee when Elboron spied an opening. With admirable speed and force he tried a hold that owed more to fracas on his great Uncle's docks than formal Minas Tirith wrestling. Faramir jerked, scrabbled for a moment to gain purchase on Bron's shirt, then
turned it inside out; flattened the lad beside his little brother just before the assault of their fiercest foe.

Finduilas' namesake. Swift and energetic and almost frighteningly bright. The one who one day would dream of waves and green and Númenor rushed in and smacked her father with all her might upon his thigh.

"Ow. Fin, sweetheart, not so hard." Concerned more for Rohan's prince toddling underfoot than for himself, Faramir grabbed his daughter bodily and tossed her softly to the grass, before pulling up into a protective fighting stance. "I never realized I was keeping up my conditioning for this!" he shot wryly to his left.

"Nor I!" laughed Éomer-King, arms full of fiercely writhing daughters. There was a drop of sweat streaking down his nape and a mallorn petal stuck to his collarbone. 'Accidentally' he loosened his grip; howled in despair as the pair—one fair, one dark—leapt away and mindfully took up their brother's chubby hand.

By now all the defenders had reached their feet again. A most dire situation. Goblin-Faramir raised his 'hackles' and his 'claws', breathed deep and let out an almighty roar.

The troops scattered in a cavalcade of delightfully frightened squeals.

Chest heaving, blades of grass akimbo in his hair, Ithilien's Prince grinned merrily and paused to admire his handiwork. A candle-mark of tumbling has left him scratched and bruised, shirt torn, and absolutely thrilled. A day to savour. He picked up his belt and dagger from their safe shelter by the tree, then paused, head cocked, for suddenly he caught the scent of jasmine and apricot. Strong and sweet and soothing. It made his heart swell with happiness; long for Dol Amroth's tawny sands and sun-drenched waves, for the first moist bite of summer fruit.

Faramir looked up to the house and smiled to his lady fair. Éowyn was sun-dappled, more beautiful than ever to his eye and, of course, focused on the practical. They were to wash off the heat and sugar in the River. He acknowledged her shooing motion with a wave, approved his brother-in-law's plan of first scrounging a mug of ale and began to scan the garden for his littlest. Théo would need a piggy back.

All at once a rush of cold air streamed past his heated cheek, It was welcome but startling-sharply chill and tinged with a breath of snow.

Finduilas, diaphanous, insubstantial as a sigh, coursed through the mallorn's branches and swooped down to kiss her son's furrowed brow.

Once, she might have feared; swirled about the intruding breeze and formed a cordon around her son, warded away the fëa of a foul and cankerous wizard. But not this day. It was naught but Manwe's western wind. Forthright and steady. Coming down from Mindolluin's snows to ease them all.

Finduilas sighed contentedly. All was well and as it should. She brushed playfully at Faramir's dark locks and drank in again the sunny faces of her grandchildren. Her dream had been a beacon for them both—in dark times and glad, through toil and triumph, under shadow and pale wintery sun. The truth was not exact. Not precisely as she had seen but it mattered not. The music changed as Eru willed but the main notes were there.

She gathered their happiness to her like a cloak.
It was time to journey home.

Chapter End Notes

Well everyone here we are. I can hardly believe it. This story has been so much a part of my life for so long it feels very bittersweet. I have quite literally begun to learn to write while doing it (if not how to punctuate!) and I owe so much thanks to so many. To Annafan for encouraging me and holding my hand at times. To the Ladies of the Garden of Ithilien for their support and always excellent commentary. To Wheelrider and lately Eschschiziola for betaing. But most of all to my husband and son who have put up with this hobby with good grace and helped me through a year of frightening and relentless illness. I am very blessed; with them, and all of you wonderful readers. Your comments and response have been a sheer delight and I have been privileged to get to know a few of you.

I will say Namárië. Just for a while. And hope our paths cross again...

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