Stolen Child

by SusanaR

Summary

Summary: Some of the darker rumors about elves are true. In Arnor, men whispered...'Have a care of the elves...for they will steal your children away.'

Notes

A/N 1: Please note that this was written as a challenge response, with the challenge to include a famous quote from literature, so I have the quote woven into the story at one point.

A/N 2: My sincere appreciation goes out to African Daisy and to Sparx, who reviewed an earlier draft of this story and gave me some excellent suggestions.

A/N 3: Please notice that this same story was posted as chapter 27 in "The Elves of Imladris"

A/N 4: The OC Belemir, who appears in this story, is a younger son of Elrond for purposes of this AU. He is introduced in Part 9 of this series, "The Six Children of Elrond Peredhel."

Quote:

"Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
'My dear Father,' wrote Elrohir Elrondion, 'I find that I miss you even more than I had expected. I do not think that I am ready to be the 'head' of our family on Middle Earth. Of course, Daerada Celeborn helps, and Erestor and Glorfindel, too. And my dear twin, in his own inimitable way.

But neither Daerada nor I have ever known what to say to Arwen. Nor does Erestor. I think that Glorfindel might know, but if he does, he's keeping it to himself. When I complain about the foolishness of Arwen choosing to bear a child so soon after her marriage to Aragorn, he just smiles that cursedly infuriating smile of his - you know the one- and tells me to mind my own affairs! My younger siblings' idiotic decisions ARE my affairs, which he should perfectly well know!'

Elrohir paused to dip his quill in the inkpot again, and frowned.

'Although I might be overestimating just how helpful you would be in this particular situation, Ada. For all I know, you would just take Arwen's part. Some of the most impressive lectures you and Naneth ever gave me were for interfering in her ridiculous and ill-considered ventures.'

Elrohir put down his quill again as he remembered a particular windy morning in the shadow of Emyn Uial, called by Men the Hills of Evendim. He and his younger siblings Arwen and Belemir and their escort had been riding along the Lindon river, on their way back from a visit to Lord Cirdan in Mithlond.

Elrond's heir had awoken to find breakfast made and the horses all readied for departure. And, oh yes, a small, filthy little girl wrapped in Belemir's warmest cloak, sitting cuddled on Arwen's lap, being hand-fed bacon and honey-sweet porridge.

The previous day their party had passed through a small, poor village along the river Lindon. Arwen and Thenithol, one of their guards, had gone to the little hamlet's one blacksmith to have Arwen's horse re-shod. In the course of which they'd observed the man beating his only daughter bloody. Thenithol had intervened, because if he hadn't, Arwen would have. They'd ended up leaving the village hastily, with Arwen's eyes still on the the blacksmith's stall, sharp and gray and intent.

Arwen's slightly older brother Belemir, who should have known better, had been encouraging her. He'd spoken quietly of how a child might be taken away, in the night, with no one else aware.

Elrohir, who had overheard, had absolutely forbid his youngest siblings from taking action. He'd been understanding as well as firm, counseling them that there was nothing which could be done, now. Promising the two little crusaders that they could come back in a season, or have one of Cirdan's elves do so. But he'd clearly told them that nothing could be done, now. The humans already whispered dark rumors about elves stealing children.

For that reason- that very good reason - Elrohir had told them no, not to take the child. So of course, of course, here was Arwen with the little girl in her arms, and the entire camp - every elf of them - prepared to leave at a moment's notice. Traitors. Pawns in the hands of Imladris' youngest Lady and Lord. Or at the very least, accessories after the fact. Elrohir would run them all ragged on the practice fields, once they were all back safe, at Imladris. If they made it there.
"Muinthal-laes," Elrohir warned his baby sister, while pulling off his belt, "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't throw your disobedient hide into the river Lindon for Cirdan to fish out later, and at my earliest possible convenience." His forbidding expression made it clear that 'his earliest possible convenience' might be right here, right now, although they all knew that wouldn't be possible.

Arwen didn't even bother to look at him. She was infuriating. She was... comforting the poor child, who was now terribly afraid of Elrohir, and worried that her brave rescuer Arwen might suffer the same fate she had been rescued from by Arwen.

It was Belemir who gave their eldest brother a disappointed look. Well, him and Thenithol and all the rest of their escort, including dour Lieutenant Duathben and Samnolas the sculptor, who was normally quite the cloud-gatherer. It was a truly impressive range of elves to have upset with him, and Elrohir would feel almost proud of himself if he weren't feeling so dismayed and a little guilty. Well, he'd scared a child, so rather a lot guilty.

"For shame, iaur muindor," Belemir scolded lightly, "Can't you see that you've made poor little Elsa take a fright?"

Elrohir cleared his through uneasily. "Ah, yes. I'm sorry, ah, Elsa." He knelt down near her. She shrank against Arwen, who raised cold gray eyes to meet Elrohir's repentant gaze. Arwen softened a little at seeing his genuine sorrow and guilt for upsetting the child.

"Shh, shh, sweet little one." She soothed, in her lyrically accented Westron. Elrohir could just imagine her, waking the child up with a sweet biscuit in one hand and a doll in the other.

"'Come away, O human child!' He could just hear her whisper enticingly. Describing Imladris in a soothing lilt, "[t]o the waters, and the wild."

Come, Arwen would have promised. 'It is not so scary. You will not be alone. Come with me, come, "[w]ith a faery, hand in hand."

"For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand," she would have mourned with little Elsa.

'But I'll protect you.' Arwen would have sworn, fierce as well as sweet. 'He will never harm you again. Nor his ilk. I will find you a safe place to live, and teach you to protect yourself. I promise it, by all the stars above. Yes, sweetling, those stars, who have comforted you as you cry every night. Shhh, shh, it's alright, it's safe...'

"Come away with me, O human child."

And Elsa had come. She was Arwen's responsibility now. Since Arwen was in turn Elrohir's responsibility, that made Elsa his, as well. But she wouldn't talk to him or look at him now, and they had to ride.

"I'll tell the girl I'm sorry again later, Arwen." He said, once he'd stood up again, trying not to see his dear friend Melpomaen's elflinghood nightmares in the little child's frightened eyes. "Belemir," he directed sternly, "make sure that the child has everything she needs. Arwen, just...just keep doing what you're doing. Keep her calm."

Elrohir turned to their guards, "We need to ride hard and fast. There will be no detour to Annuminas to visit the King." The soldiers all nodded. They'd expected this. The saddlebags carrying their provisions bulged; someone had done extra hunting in the night, so that they could move quickly now. The traitors. No time to dwell on it now.
"Duathben," Elrohir directed, "Take two guards, and fan out behind us. I want to know if anyone follows us from that misbegotten village, or from the nearest garrison of Arnor. Thenithol, I want you and Haldanar to ride at your best possible speed for Annuminas. Requisition fresh mounts as you go if you need to." He ordered, tossing them a substantial bag of coin, "Let our ambassador and Elladan and Melpomaen know what's happened. Tell my twin and our gwador to meet us at their best pace. They'll know where."

Thenithol frowned, "Elrohir, I think that Lord Elladan or Lord Melpomaen might BE the ambassador, just now. Lord Arandil expected to be recalled to Imladris sometime this autumn, over some concern about a trade dispute with Edhellond."

Elrohir mentally cursed the too-blasted clever Prince of Dol Amroth, then said, "Well, tell them to use their discretion then, but make sure that at least Elladan comes to meet us." Melpomaen could convincingly claim complete innocence when it came to Elrond's family abducting human children, again. He'd done it before, a time or two. The most harrowing of those incidents had even been Elrohir's fault.

Thenithol nodded, and took off. Duathben led the force guarding their rear, and Elrohir drove them their party forward as fast as possible. It was unlikely that the alcohol-addled blacksmith would be able to organize an effective pursuit after his daughter, but it was not impossible.

When Elsa was sound asleep and they were paused at a cold camp to let the horses rest, Elrohir took the opportunity to lecture Arwen.

"Wait, I told you!" He whispered fiercely, "Wait a year. Wait even a month, or a week. A month would be better, but curse it all, Arwen! He's going to know that it was us! We don't need more fuel for the rumors about elves stealing human children!"

"A day would have been too long!" Arwen argued back, just as fiercely, tossing her midnight-black hair. "Half a day was too long, Elrohir! For the Valar's sake, LOOK AT HER!"

Elrohir could see the bruises and the cuts just fine. And he knew that this - this taking away of children from abusive caregivers and finding them a home where they could be loved and cherished and nurtured- was a family tradition. Elrohir had done it, by himself or with Elladan and sometimes Melpomaen, some half a dozen times, although the last had caused no end of trouble.

Their father Elrond had done it, and Aran Ereinion had at least turned a blind eye at human children disappearing in his realm, at the same time that extra small passengers appeared on the manifests of ships bound to Numenor. Elrond had said that it was his foster-father, from whom Elrond and Elros had first come aware that children might be spirited away from harm. For years Elrohir had thought that his father had meant Lord Cirdan. It was only recently that he'd realized that Elrond had actually been referring to Maglor Feanorion, whose name their father did not often speak.

Elrohir had even known that Glorfindel had helped his father to steal children, and that the balrog slayer had done so by himself, on occasion. Although often he had to be pressured into just doing something so non-confrontational as stealing. Elrohir and Elladan had both witnessed Glorfindel threaten to replicate every whip lash and bruise on the person of a master beating his apprentice. And Elrohir remembered a week when there had been shouting matches between his normally calm father and Glorfindel, something about it being inadvisable and also cruel to a tiger to leave the cat in a tormented child's bed after stealing said child. That had been just after Erestor adopted Melpomaen, when Elrond and Galadriel had ordered Glorfindel to let Rumil tag along at his feet for several years. When Elrohir had asked his adopted uncle why, Rumil had explained that it was because he didn't like to kill even animals. Glorfindel had caustically called the pale elven youth 'soft,' but there had been reluctant gratitude in his eyes when he did so, as well as fondness. Elrohir had decided not to
ask any more questions. Well, Elladan had decided so, but Elrohir had agreed. Neither of them had
told Melpomaen, or Erestor. Elrond had carefully scheduled the shouting matches about the tiger
around when Erestor and Melpomaen were busy elsewhere, and the twins had decided not to
question their father's judgment in that particular instance.

But here and now, isolated in Arnor amongst thousands of the humans, Elrohir had to be the hard
one, because if they stole every child the humans didn't appreciate, then their human kindred would
become their enemies and hunt them down, 'til all the elves were dead or fled.

"She'd survived five years in that house, Arwen. She would have survived another blasted week."
Elrohir hissed.

"She's eight, muindor." Belemir spoke up, defending Arwen, as he always did. "She's been fed and
cared for so poorly that she just LOOKS three years younger."

Elrohir gritted his teeth.

"Plus, I bribed the blacksmith's brother." Belemir continued, "And the village mayor. And the chief
of what passes for their village guard."

"You did. Of course you did." Belemir started to speak up, probably to elaborate, but Elrohir just
held up a hand, wondering if this was how his father felt with him and Elladan.

"I don't want to hear anymore about it." He instructed Belemir firmly. "No more about any of it until
we're home. Do the two of you understand?" Arwen and Belemir both nodded solemnly. The ride
was much quieter, after that. Once they skirted the edge of the shire, Elladan joined them. It was a
relief to everyone, perhaps even especially Elrohir, when Elladan opined that none of the trauma Elsa
had suffered should permanently impair her faculties.

It was good for Elrohir to have his twin brother back, because as assuredly as Elrohir often kept
Elladan from doing stupid things and putting his foot in their mouth, Elladan kept Elrohir from doing
the same. Elladan had Elsa smiling and unafraid of Elrohir in less than a day.

"Arwen was right, you know." Elladan irritatingly insisted, as he took a turn cuddling the sleeping
Elsa. "From the way that she and Belelmir and Thenithol described Elsa's father, he could have
snapped at any time. Killed her, killed himself, killed them both. At any time. A day might have been
too late. A year most likely would have been."

"Bah." Said Elrohir, who did not like to admit to being wrong.

After they crossed the bridge over the river Mitheithel, home-free now to Imladris, Arwen rode up
even with Elrohir.

"Thank you." She said, her great heart shining from her luminous gray eyes. "Thank you, iaur
muindor. For getting us home safe. I don't think that anyone else could have done it as well."

As long as his baby sister looked at him like that, Elrohir thought that he could put up with the stupid
things that she did. Especially when he understood the impulse. But that hadn't stopped him from
going to their father, and demanding that Arwen and her foolish impulsiveness be dealt with most
firmly.

"Mmm-hmmm." Lord Elrond had replied, just looking at his oldest son and heir with some emotion
Elrohir couldn't even read. Though it seemed irritatingly almost like fond amusement, to Elrond's
heir.
"Well, aren't you going to do anything to punish her, Ada?" Elrohir complained, "Confine her to quarters, send her to Daermaneth Galadriel when she's in a mood, have Naneth make her weave thistles, I don't know, anything?"

"Elrohir, as...laudable, as your protective instincts towards your youngest sister are, I find it rather...ripe, that it is you who is complaining about Arwen stealing a child at an inopportune time."

"She couldn't even wait a day!" Elrohir said, aggrieved, "Even that time, I waited a whole month!"

Lord Elrond leaned forward, putting a gentle hand on his agitated son's cheek. "Yes, you waited a month, ion-muin-nin. And you did a good thing. But the child you stole was the son of a royal lord. It took me three years and more gold than I care to think of to set that aright. Erestor still has nightmares about the paperwork."

"She couldn't even wait a day." Elrohir repeated resignedly.

Elrond laughed. "You cost me a fortune and three treaties, and all I did to you was to send you to stay in the Greenwood so that you would be out of the reach of Armor's laws. Knight or no, I would have feared for your life had our cousin the King caught you."

"Arwen gets away with everything." Elrohir complained later, to his twin.

"Generally, yes. It's the prerogative of the youngest elfling, particularly if she's an elleth." Elladan replied with enviable equanimity. "Or at least that's what all the psychology scrolls say."

Elrohir left his memories behind with a mental laugh. He was glad that he still had his twin and his youngest sister. He'd miss his father until they reunited in the West, and he'd miss his brother Belemir, dead these many centuries after marrying and dying to protect a human, until the day that Arda ended. But he was glad that he still had Elladan and Arwen, and it was with that in mind that he returned to his letter.

'Strangely enough, Adar, I miss even your lectures. You were so very good at them. I never know when to yell versus when to soothe or berate. Elladan says that I'm terrible at it, and since Melpomaen and Arwen and Aragorn all agree, I am forced to accept that it is probably true.'

Elrohir's letter-writing was interrupted again as the agitated Prince of Dol Amroth led a party into the long gallery in the King's House, where Elrohir had taken to conducting his correspondence. He was not generally an avid writer, so frequent interruptions were welcome. Elrohir put his writing materials aside and sat up with interest, as this interruption promised to be even more entertaining than the norm.

"You have got to leave off doing underhanded, manipulative things such as bribing people, Faramir!" Prince Imrahil lectured his nephew, the Steward of Gondor and Prince of Ithilien, who was doing a relatively bad job of looking contrite. Well, bad for Faramir, so for most humans it would be pretty good. But it didn't fool his maternal uncle, more's the pity for Faramir. Who was normally better at hiding whatever manipulative things he was up to. Frighteningly so, for those who cared about him. But Imrahil was one of the best at catching Faramir at something, and would not let it go, so Elrohir smirked a bit at the Prince of Ithilien's unhappiness. He was not at all averse to seeing Faramir receive a rare comeuppance.

"You are responsible for the laws of Gondor, nephew! You ARE the highest law, save the King!" Imrahil thundered quietly at his nephew.

"What did you even do, Faramir?" Asked the confused Aragorn. Elrohir sneered at his baby foster-
brother, who really should know what was going on. Not that Elrohir did, but Aragorn was the King, and the husband of Elrohir's very pregnant sister, who appeared somewhat distraught. Her distress probably had something to do with Faramir being in trouble, and it was Aragorn's responsibility to fix that, and he wasn't doing it fast enough.

"You can't keep going around bribing people to circumvent the laws of our Kingdom just to make events turn out as you deem fit!" Imrahil continued, as if Aragorn hadn't even spoken. Elrohir smirked.

"Peace, Prince Imrahil." Arwen ordered, every inch the Queen as she laid a gentle hand on Faramir's arm, a silent but eloquent statement of her support of him. "Faramir did nothing more than give to a poor grandmother sufficient funds to show a member of the orphans' guild that she was financially stable enough to support her grandson, to get the poor child away from an abusive step-father."

"Yes, thank you, Your Majesty." Prince Imrahil said, calmer in the face of the pregnant Arwen but still unusually formal, which seemed to Elrohir to be some sort of odd Dol Amroth scolding mechanism. "However," Imrahil continued more sarcastically, "My sources in the city are aware of where that money came from, and that Faramir had a role in it. Which is unacceptable."

Faramir frowned, and finally opened his mouth. Only to have the most unexpected person intervene on his behalf.

"The money was mine." Asserted Ynithe, the Queen's most proper lady-in-waiting, "Mistress Sirien - the grandmother - is a cousin of my former nursemaid. When Faramir alerted me to her grandson's plight, I made her a personal loan. There is no law against that." Lady Ynithe lifted her aristocratic chin, as if to dare Imrahil to contradict her, or condemn what she'd done.

Imrahil ignored Ynithe, and glared at his nephew. "There is a law against the Steward of Gondor facilitating it."

"Technically, I don't think..." Faramir began, only to cut himself off when Aragorn stepped on his foot.

Elrohir watched all of this closely, wondering to himself how the situation which had led to this fascinating conversation might have first evolved. In his mind's eye, he could see Arwen, walking through the city with Faramir and Ynithe as she'd planned to do today, visiting markets and school rooms and different guild halls, the type of 'keeping your finger on the pulse of your people' thing that Queens were wont to do.

Elrohir could see her suddenly coming upon this stepfather, beating his dead wife's son. Elrohir could clearly picture Arwen's normally warm gray eyes alighting from within with a fierce flame, her face turning from ethereally beautiful to both beautiful and terrible and resolute. Arwen was not human, and when she was angry at a perceived injustice, it showed. More, Arwen was the granddaughter of Galadriel and the great-great granddaughter of Luthien, and she had not just the charm and beauty of that lineage but also the darkside, the strength and the implacability. Arwen could be cold and dangerous, when she was protecting someone she thought needed her strength. And in such moments, Arwen appeared frightening, and inhuman.

Meanwhile, it was Faramir's purpose, and Ynithe's, to make their Queen appear exotic but also loving and human, a long-lost cousin of Numenor returned home at last, a flower of the virtues of the forebearers, come to rule beside their King in beauty and understanding.

Oh, yes, Elrohir could see Arwen's eyes turning dangerous, her anger and protectiveness called forth beyond what she could bear without seeming more, and other, than human. He could see Faramir,
gently taking the Queen's arm and leading her into one of the houses in the lower city where those handicapped by the war were being re-trained to other occupations, or a similar place. A destination in which anger would be assumed to be anger at Sauron, at the enemy, at those who had crippled their people, and determination would be seen as the determination to help them as much as possible. Ynithe, at his sister's other side, would be loudly telling her Queen that the Enemy had indeed caused great damage, and that there were some things which could be done, and some which required more money or attention, could the Queen perhaps look into them? And of course the Queen could. And Faramir and Ynithe between them had given a good, socially acceptable cover for Arwen's steely rage and mithril resolution, one that made her seem even more the human Queen Gondor would want, instead of the dangerous loose arrow that Arwen could be when she saw socially sanctioned injustice.

If Faramir and Ynithe hadn't done something to protect the poor abused boy, then Arwen would have. Faramir had protected Arwen, and so Aragorn - and even Elrohir - should step into protect Faramir. Elrohir sighed, and prepared to get up and insert himself into what had so far been an enormously entertaining skit.

"You are quite right, Imrahil." Aragorn said, slapping Faramir's thigh gently to keep him quiet whilst making eye contact with Imrahil. "Obviously, the entire structure and duties of the orphans' guild require a review. And also of the, er, ..."

Elrohir sat back down, because apparently Aragorn could handle this, however annoyingly he'd set out to do so.

Arwen made a disgusted face at her husband's lack of knowledge. Faramir shook his head, but supplied, "We don't have a guild for that. The wives of the council representative for each level of the city have traditionally been the ear to whom complaints about the mistreatment of children could be spoken, but it was informal and continues to be insufficient."

"Well, that, then." Aragorn concluded, "We should fix that." Elrohir rolled his eyes. His youngest foster-brother was entirely smarter than he was acting right now. Aragorn just acted less intelligent to make the people around him do more of the work and to defuse situations such as this. It was extremely irritating, to Elrohir. Legolas did it, too. Elrohir wasn't sure if Aragorn had learned it from Legolas, or if the two of them had developed it independently of each other and then complemented one another later on what bright young lights they were. Both annoyed Elrohir greatly when they pretended to be idiots. If he ever again heard Legolas say, "Oh! You mean a diversion!" as if the elven prince did not have a brain in his head, Elrohir was going to throw his favorite idiot baby cousin into a fountain.

Imrahil seemed not to know that Aragorn was just pretending to be stupid and clueless, or at least mostly just pretending. The Prince of Dol Amroth put a hand to his head and sighed. "Aragorn, I have the utmost respect for you as my King and as a leader of men, but you really have never progressed beyond the point of having your second in command write up all of your reports, have you?" Imrahil said this with the deep sincerity and depth of dismay that a man could only have if he had once been that long-suffering executive officer. Which Imrahil had, of course, been, during the battles with the corsairs when Aragorn had been in Gondor as Thorongil.

"Ah...No, not really, my Rahi." Aragorn concluded ruefully, "I suppose that I never have."

"Poor Faramir." Arwen murmured sympathetically, putting her delicate hand again on his arm, as she had once done to her brother Belemir. Elrohir was shaken, again, by how very much Faramir resembled Belemir. Not in appearance, although there was something, perhaps, about the way the youth stood. But in spirit, Faramir was so very much like Belemir.
From the expression on Faramir's face, he felt that the Queen's sympathy was quite well-deserved. He might even have murmured 'lucky me,' a few moments ago, but even Elrohir with his near-elven hearing could not be sure of that.

"Help us out, then, eh, Rahi?" Aragorn appealed to Imrahil, looping a companionable arm around the younger man's shoulders, "Faramir is overworked as it is, and I recall Dol Amroth having a fairly good support structure for parents who are having troubles, or more than troubles."

Imrahil sighed, and agreed, with a fond if exasperated look directed at his only surviving nephew.

Elrohir considered all of them. Arwen, catching his gaze, lifted an eyebrow in inquiry.

"Yes, I'm writing to Adar. Yes, I'll be done by the time that Haldanar is ready to sail, so that he can carry the letter to the West." He replied, knowing her question already.

"Good." She said, and she smiled at him, her great loving heart shining out from her luminous gray eyes. Shining just for him, in this moment. Just for her oldest brother. And with that, Elrohir knew that he'd be stuck protecting her, and protecting Faramir, who'd taken Belemir's place in always supporting her, for all of the rest of her life. And he wasn't sorry about it. Not at all.

End Notes

I'd love to hear from you if you've enjoyed this story! Thank you for reading, either way!

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