

Frogbreeders

It was one of the first warm days of the year. After a long and hard winter, longer and colder, in fact, than even most of the old in Gondor could remember, spring had come at last. It was said the winters had lengthened in recent years, ever since the Shadow had returned to Mordor beyond the Great River, and evil had begun to spread thence, finally driving the last inhabitants of fair Ithilien, Gondor's easternmost fief, over Anduin to seek refuge in the city of Minas Tirith and the western provinces. Worse was about to come, people whispered, looking towards the Ephel Dúath and the land beyond with dread and foreboding.

But whatever the Dark Lord was devising beyond those mountains to trouble his western neighbours, today he seemed to be resting from his labours. The winds were in the west, warm and gentle, bringing but a few small clouds from the sea. They were casting shadows on the white buildings of the City and the yet brown fields of the Pelennor beyond her walls. On towers, battlements and the fair houses of some of the guilds and noble families banners rippled in the breeze. High up on the White Tower, the white standard of the Ruling Stewards, bearing no token or device, shone like bright snow in the sunlight, competing with the snows on Mount Mindolluin's shoulders behind it that still reached down much further than usual in late Súlimë.

The bells of the City had just announced the first hour after noon, startling a boy sitting on the rim of a fountain in the stately courtyard just below the White Tower. The water was tinkling merrily into the shallow marble-rimmed basin, in which was caught the dim, wavering reflection of a slender lad of perhaps twelve or eleven years, not very tall for his age, with a pale and despite his obvious youth rather stern face, the fair skin set in stark contrast to his short raven hair and his bright grey eyes under winged eyebrows. He was wearing a dark-blue tunic with some white embroidery along sleeves and throat, over plain dark trowsers and light shoes and a white shirt. On his belt was a slender knife and a small pouch, filled to the brim, by the look of it, with all those things boys tend to collect and keep because they could come in useful during one of their exploits. The cloth and make of his garments, despite their plain look, indicated he hailed from one of the wealthier if not noble families of the city.

He had been reading a book which upon the sound of the bells he lowered and then closed, after rummaging in the pouch for a short piece of string which he used as a bookmark. Turning, he gazed towards the doors of the White Tower as if expecting them to open any moment. But they remained closed, the two guards in their black and silver livery with the high, winged helmets standing like statues to either side. The boy sighed slightly and turned back to the book in his hands. But after gazing at the plain, leatherbound cover for a moment, he decided against resuming his lecture, and cast a keen but thoughtful glance around instead.

The white buildings surrounding the courtyard were shining brightly where the sunlight touched them. Somewhere high up in the tower the panes of a window glinted briefly as it was closed. Around the fountain's smooth marble basin there was a sward of short-cropped turf studded with daisies, and bordered by white paving stones. And there was the dead and withered White Tree, standing close to the rim, its branches hanging sadly over the water with drops from the fountain dripping from them. Amid all the splendour and serenity of the courtyard, the tree looked strangely out of place, creepy, almost; a vivid reminder of the slow decay that had taken hold of Gondor. And yet, even in this pitiful state with its branches blackened and often broken, and the once smooth bark withered and in many places peeled off, in its shape it still retained some of the grace and beauty that spoke of its high lineage.

The boy had just been reading about this very tree. About how Isildur, at the risk of his own life, had saved a fruit of the White Tree of Númenor from the King's guarded court in Armenelos, and how thus the sacred line of Galathilion, the White Tree of Valinor, had come to Middle-earth. *That the line of this tree should be this old, the boy wondered, so much older than this city and Gondor, and even the lands of Middle-earth in their present shape.* And yet, after all those years during which the line of the tree had endured, here finally it seemed to have ended. There was no sapling, no fruit left to revive it. Many people considered this a bad omen, especially now, with the Shadow ever brewing in the East beyond the mountains. The line of kings had failed long ago, and ever since the realm had been under the rule of the Stewards, who governed Gondor until the rightful king should return. But few actually believed that this would ever happen.

Tearing his gaze away from the dead tree, the boy sent a glance round the courtyard again. Not much seemed to live here. Even the Citadel Guards in their unmoving stance looked more like painted statues than living men. And the water of the fountain seemed devoid of life as well. It was so clear that the pattern of the tiled ground of the basin was visible, with only the drops of the fountain and the shadows they were casting with their ripples adding movement and a seeming of life to the waters. *There should be some fish in here, the boy thought sadly. Or at least pondscaters, and waterplants. Duckweed would be nice, and gladden, and waterlilies. And brightly coloured dragonflies.*

Carefully, he lowered a hand into the water. It was very cold. The fountain was being fed from a spring in the mountains, as had once been explained to him upon his question where the water came from so high up in the City, and whence it got the power to make the fountain spray into the air.

"Dreaming again, little brother?"

At the sound of a voice, almost as deep as a man's yet still somewhat raspy, the boy spun round so that his book slid from his lap. Only a quick catch saved it from falling into the water. He blushed, and looked up into the face of a tall boy of about sixteen or seventeen years whose lanky build and awkward proportions indicated he had grown a lot recently, and that some parts of his frame had not quite adjusted to the newly acquired height yet. There was an obvious resemblance between the two, although the older wore his raven hair longer, and despite it being only early spring, his face was already tanned from the sun as if he had spent quite a lot of time outside. He was clad similarly to the other, his tunic dyed in browns and reds, only that his trowsers were fit for riding, and he wore boots instead of light shoes. On his belt there also sat a pouch, there was a knife hanging from it, and over his shoulder there was slung a short hunting bow and a quiver with arrows. He was smiling broadly at the other.

"What have you been reading?" He nodded towards the book.

"About Númenor, and where our tree came from," came the reply. "Lady Lindórië gave me the book after yesterday's lesson. And it is good, although there are words I do not understand."

The other took the book and opened it at random, looked at the text, then shook his head and grinned as he handed it back to his brother. "She could have given you a version in Common Speech, could she not? Or at least a dictionary to help you. Sometimes I think she asks a little too much of us. No one speaks Quenya anymore, and surely there are more important things to learn."

The other shrugged slightly. "I do not know, Boromir" he said slowly. "I often think people should

consider the past more, and try and learn from it. I mean, most things have happened before, in a way. And why make the same mistakes all over again, when we already know what happened to others who attempted what we do? And if in order to study the old books and scrolls we have to learn the old languages, 'tis alright with me. Moreover, I like Quenya. It is difficult to learn, but it has a beautiful sound to it, almost like music."

"Hear hear!" Boromir laughed, yet there was grave respect and even admiration in his gaze as it lingered on his little brother. "This could have come from father himself, or our teacher. Remind me, how old are you, Faramir?" he asked jestfully.

Faramir stuck out his tongue in reply. "I was serious," he said a little indignantly.

"I know, that is why I tease you. Nay, seriously, I do not want to make fun of you. I know you enjoy learning all that stuff." Boromir winked at the other. "Guess you are brighter than I. Or simply more patient"

"Nonsense," Faramir muttered, his face flushing slightly. Even though it had been uttered in a light tone, he knew his brother truly meant what he had just said, and coming from one he loved and admired, and who, moreover, was loved and admired by the entire realm, and their father foremost, he relished the compliment even more. To change the subject, Faramir pointed at the bow over his brother's shoulder. "You are off hunting?" he asked.

"If a chance presents itself. I am off duty for the afternoon, and Vorondil asked if I would like to join him and some friends of his for a ride on the Pelennor. And I thought that if we encountered game, we could do some hunting as well."

Faramir's eyes shone with excitement as he heard his brother speak about his plans for spending the afternoon, but almost immediately the light faded again when he recalled that he would not be able to join them. Boromir must have noticed this, for he smiled and clapped his brother's shoulder. "By the way, father allowed you to accompany me. Well, to Lord Húrin's, at least."

"You asked him?" Faramir asked astonishedly, his eyes lighting up again.

"Of course I asked him. On a day this fair, I thought you should not be cooped up in the Citadel. And I reckon you did not bring up the courage to broach the topic to him."

"He seemed in a dark mood at lunch, so I thought it better not to disturb him, lest he get cross ..." His voice trailed off, and he shrugged a little dejectedly. Lately their father's mood had been dark and troubled most of the time, and Faramir wondered why. Surely, the Steward was very busy and always worked hard to maintain the peace and welfare of the realm, yet lately he seemed even more preoccupied with politics than usual. At times Faramir even worried about him, because he seemed to heed his own health and peace of mind so little, spending hours and hours in council with the lords and captains, or alone in his study, poring over maps and papers, hardly eating or sleeping. "I often think he could do with some sunlight and fresh air," he said quietly, "instead of spending all his time indoors, with even the windows closed."

"Aye, but try and tell this to him. Sunlight he might consider a distraction from work," Boromir replied with a shrug. "So, are you coming now? I need to fetch a horse from the stables. I shall not be able to ride Nim because she is still lame. So much for racing Vorondil."

“He has got a good horse, has he not? Túrin mentioned it.” Faramir grinned of a sudden. “Actually, he said the horse was even more crazy than his brother.”

“It *is* bloody fast, despite it being that small, hardly higher than a pony,” Boromir agreed, grinning as well. “But do tell your friend Túrin that no one beats his elder brother in crazyness, or inventiveness, for that matter.”

“Túrin might, actually,” replied Faramir. “He has some ... interesting ideas from time to time which almost always get Maradir and me into trouble.”

Boromir let out a roar of laughter. “Be careful it does not rub off on you. Although, sometimes I think a little crazyness would do you good.”

“I might end up like you,” Faramir returned grinning, then ducked out of his brother’s reach and raced off towards the gate of the Citadel. He cried out when Boromir who had sprinted after him caught him around the middle and swung him over his shoulder, marvelling at the same time about the other’s strength. No wonder his brother was accounted an excellent bow- and swordsman already, despite his youth.

“Hah, I bet you have not washed today, little worm,” roared Boromir, carrying his struggling catch back towards the fountain. “Tell you what, I believe ‘tis time the pond is peopled with creatures! And I have caught a nice frog here! Or perhaps ‘tis a newt?”

“Let me down,” Faramir squealed, squirming in the other’s grip until Boromir dropped him in surprise. “Hey, where did you learn this? That is quite a good move.”

Faramir swiftly stepped out of his reach, just to be on the safe side. “Maradir showed me. He is pretty good at fighting, and at wriggling out of people’s grips. Last month he gave a man of the city-watch the slip when he tried to apprehend him for nicking a small cake from a bakery.”

“No wonder, for someone this small and skinny. Right, let’s get out of here. Those fellows look like they would like to throw us out anyway, for ‘rowdy behaviour’ in this dignified place.” He nodded towards the guards at the gate who were eyeing the brothers warily.

Falling into step next to Boromir (which proved quite difficult due to the long stride of the other), Faramir accompanied him to the gate. The guards were grinning at them now. Boromir was well known and moreover beloved by the guardsmen.

“Off hunting, Master Boromir?” one of them asked when the brothers had reached the gate.

“Hopefully, Baranor,” Boromir replied cheerfully.

“And your brother?” the guardsman inquired.

“He got leave from the Steward to leave the Citadel with me. I am going to bring him to Lord Húrin’s so he can play with his friend Túrin, Húrin’s son – yeah, he *has* got this sense of humour, Lord Húrin has –,” he added upon Baranor’s grin. “I shall fetch him again later, when I return.”

“Well then, have a good day, masters,” said Baranor. “And do not get into too much trouble.”

“We shall do our best,” Boromir assured him with a jestful salute, and they passed the gate.

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The stables were situated in the sixth circle, not far from the gate of the Citadel, a low white building with long rows of stalls interspersed by stout pillars with carved capitals. They upheld a second storey where hay and straw and oats were being kept. Mostly, the steeds of the errand-riders were stabled here, although some of the noble families of the City also kept their horses in this place, as space for stables was scarce in the upper circles where the wealthier families resided. As the brothers entered the warm, softly lit building, Faramir saw that obviously the messengers were all out on business. Boromir’s beloved white mare Nimrandil was one of the few horses left in the stalls. She whinnied softly as they approached, her white coat shining in a ray of sunlight that fell through one of the small, high-set windows, made visible by the fine dust hanging in the air. Boromir patted her neck, and rummaging in his pouch produced a small apple which he proffered her, and she accepted gratefully.

“Pity you are still not fit for a ride, lass,” he told her gently as she rubbed her head against his tunic. “We would have shown Voro and his pony today. Seems he has left already,” he then observed, craning his neck over to where Vorondil’s horse usually was stabled.

“Her leg looks much better already,” Faramir said, carefully examining one of the mare’s frontlegs which was still bandaged. He reached up to stroke the neck and fine silken mane. “I wish I had a horse like her.”

With a swift movement, Boromir slipped his arm round his waist and lifted him onto the mare’s back, which she suffered demurely. “Do not worry, you will get one some day. A fine steed from Rohan like her, I bet. And then we can have races on the Pelennor, and all Vorondil will see from us will be clouds of dust as we leave him far behind.”

Faramir laughed. He loved horses, and greatly enjoyed every time he was allowed to ride one, which unfortunately was not as often as he liked. Nevertheless, he was a good rider. Boromir had remarked upon this more than once, with pride and almost a little jealousy – riding being one of the few things his brother actually bet him at. Leaning forward, Faramir whispered into Nimrandil’s ear, “Get well soon.” Then he slid from her back. Boromir glanced at him and laughed.

“Look at you. I should have thought of that. She is losing her winter-coat.”

Faramir looked down himself and laughed as well. “Yeah, on me,” he muttered, trying to brush white hairs from his dark tunic and trowsers. While he was still working on that, he heard footsteps approach, and looking up beheld one of the grooms coming towards them.

“Ah, Master Boromir, I have been expecting you ever since Master Vorondil fetched his steed.”

“His pony,” Boromir whispered to Faramir who chuckled.

“I reckoned you would be wanting a steed as well,” the groom went on. “Thus I have prepared Thoron here. I hope he will do.” He indicated a tall chestnut gelding with a white nose that was

already saddled and bridled, and was eyeing them interestedly from his stall.

Faramir could tell that his brother was surprised by this efficiency, and moreover the fact he was going to ride the Steward's horse. "Thank you," said Boromir. "He will do perfectly. Actually, I did not know I was allowed to ride him, him being father's horse and all."

"I have had word from the Lord Steward," the groom replied, with a wink. "The stirrups should be the right length for you. But do be careful. He has not been out much lately, and will want to run."

A broad grin split Boromir's face. "All the better."

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Outside the stables Boromir mounted, then helped Faramir scramble up behind him. Thoron was indeed lively to the point of being uneasy, neighing and tossing his mane. Boromir managed to control him, however, and off they rode towards Lord Húrin's mansion which was situated nearby, in the sixth circle facing north-eastward. As wardens of the City's keys, Húrin's family had always held a position of some influence in Minas Tirith, and due to their lands in Lossarnach and Lebennin they were rather wealthy, although they tended not to display their riches as openly and haughtily as other noble kindreds of Gondor. In fact, Faramir found them surprisingly modest, and very warm, open and welcoming.

This, in addition to Túrin being one of his closest friends, accounted for him spending as much time there as possible, whenever he was allowed to. Lord Húrin and his wife Lady Amarië had three children: Vorondil who was a year younger than Boromir, Lossanna, about Faramir's age, and Túrin, two years younger. Also, there was a host of aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews and other kinsfolk from the country who visited regularly, so that the house was rarely occupied by Húrin, his wife and children, and the serving-staff alone, but almost always included an invasion of relatives as well. It was as lively as a bee-hive, Boromir liked to describe it (mostly adding that like in such a hive, the food was good and plenty). When he thought about his own home, Faramir could not help noticing how different they were. Up in the Citadel there was little song and laughter, lest it be made by the Steward's sons. Denethor himself rarely even smiled, at least not when he was conversing with Faramir. The boy loved his father dearly, and he put the fact that of late their relationship had cooled to the stress and heavy work-load the Steward was subject to. Nevertheless, at times, especially after quarrels with his father who lately seemed to treat his younger son increasingly sterner and colder than his beloved eldest – ever since Faramir had begun to contest the Steward's opinion more frequently –, he had secretly wished to live at Túrin's. Things were easier there, and there was definitely more life and merriment than up in the Steward's quarters in the Citadel.

Also, there was the garden in front of the key-warden's mansion. Gardens and even large trees were rare in the City, and thus the walled garden and the small ponds and flower-beds in one of the larger courtyards were a real jewel, tended excessively by Túrin's mother. To both sides of the paved way leading up to the front door, there were thick clusters of lavender-bushes which in summer gave forth a strong aromatic scent, beyond were patches of lawn fenced by boxwood-hedges, rosebushes and other tall perennials, with trees in their middle. Some of these, like a stately chest-

nut, grew rather close to the wall surrounding the mansion. Faramir loved that tree. Túrin's father had once explained it had been planted by his grandfather, back in Steward Túrin II's time. In autumn it bore lots of nuts that could be used for all kinds of things, and moreover it was a convenient way of leaving the property without bothering with the gate, as its upper branches hung over the wall.

Now as the brothers rode along the wall towards the gate, suddenly there came a whistle from the yet bare branches of the chestnut. Turning, Faramir's eyes fell on a lively looking boy of about ten years of age, with bright hazel eyes in a sympathetic, red-cheeked face. He was clad similarly to Faramir with tunic, shirt and trowsers, all in shades of burgundy and green, yet even though he was tall for his age, almost as tall as Faramir, the tunic looked like it had been made for a larger person, and that he was given it to grow into. On his head was a tousled mob of wavy brown hair that went down almost to his shoulders. Faramir knew Túrin liked to claim his hair had a life and moreover will of its own, especially in moist weather, and that thus comb and brush were totally wasted on it (nevertheless his mother never gave up trying to tame it).

He had found himself a stout branch whereupon he lounged, chewing a wrinkled apple from the winter-store, and observing life on the street from his perch. As the brothers approached his face split into a broad grin. "Good day to you, masters," he greeted them with a mock bow of his head. "I would have liked to throw something nice and wet at you, to see how Boromir can handle this impressive steed of his, but unfortunately I don't have anything with me, and the apple isn't finished yet."

"Good for us," replied Faramir, grinning as well. During the short ride he had harboured fears that Túrin might not be at home, which now dissolved. Boromir had noticed him as well and reined the horse.

"I think I must have a word with your brother," he said with mock sternness, scowling up at the boy.

"Yeah, please do," said Túrin, grinning. "He's been nasty lately. Doesn't want to take me with him on this ride of his today."

"I cannot imagine why," Boromir muttered, but Túrin's quick ears caught his words. "Your brother is quite as bad, Faramir. I wonder if we'll get like them once we've reached their advanced age."

"Hey, what is that supposed to mean?" Boromir inquired sharply, pulling Thoron around and urging him towards Túrin.

Before he could answer, however, there was hoofbeat from the direction of the mansion's gate. Túrin's brother Vorondil and two other boy about his age came riding out. Vorondil's horse was indeed small, but looked tough and wiry. He himself resembled his little brother in the colour of eyes and hair, although Lord Húrin's eldest looked like combs had been used to some effect on the latter. His features were jovial and spoke of an open, easy-going manner. He, too, was tall for his age, his long legs making him look a little awkward on his small horse, yet he was more sturdy in built than lanky Boromir.

"Hey hey, are you going to attack my little brother, Boro?" Vorondil now called, then grinned and added. "Bet he earned it."

“Hah, he can’t reach me anyway,” came Túrin’s smug reply from his branch. Taking a last bite from his apple, he took careful aim and then threw the core at his brother. It glanced off Vorondil’s shoulder towards Faramir, who leaning forward swiftly caught it, then held it out for Vorondil’s horse to eat.

“That was a good one,” Boromir said appreciatively.

“Aye, *your* little brother seems to be good for something,” said Vorondil. “Unlike mine. We’ll have a word about that apple, my friend, when I return,” he called up to his brother who laughed.

“Yes, yes, when you return and have stopped sulking because Boromir bet you in the race.”

Vorondil glowered at his brother while his two companions sniggered. “That remains to be seen. Let’s be off, mates.” Casting a last dark glance at Túrin who was grinning broadly, he urged on his horse and rode past Boromir.

Boromir turned in the saddle. “I would not mind if you came along, you know, but ...” His voice trailed off.

“No problem,” Faramir assured him. “I will stay here with Túrin, and perhaps go down to the Great Gate with him to watch the traffic. That is always good fun. Be careful with Thoron. And good luck in the race.”

Boromir laughed as he moved the horse closer to the wall so that Faramir was able to stand on its back and climb into the tree from there. “Actually, I was about to tell *you* to be careful, and to try and stay out of trouble. Do not get lost in the lower circles, and stay away from certain alleys in the first and second. You know which ones I mean. I shall come and fetch you again early evening.”

Waving to his brother and Túrin, he swiftly followed Vorondil and his friends down the street. Faramir climbed up to Túrin. “Big brothers, eh?” Túrin snorted, looking after the riders. “Although I must say you have trained yours well. At times he actually listens to you, doesn’t he? Voro only teases me.”

“Ah, but you tease him as well, do you not?”

“Course I do,” Túrin grinned. “And Lossanna, too. I mean, that’s what little brothers are for, aren’t they? Want an apple?” He produced one from somewhere in his tunic. “I nicked loads from the kitchens after lunch.”

“Is that why you look like you are attempting to grow more limbs?” Faramir asked as he took the apple, grinning and indicating the strange boils disfiguring his friend’s tunic.

Túrin shook himself slightly so that the apples wandered inside the garment and laughed. “Yeah, I thought it would be useful to have a couple more arms. But truth is, I forgot to nick a bag as well. They’re good, aren’t they, the apples?” he inquired, biting into another one. “Very sweet. Aunt Fíriel sent up a barrel from the country. She’s always worried that we’re not getting enough decent food in the City. I was going to save a few for Maradir. I doubt he’s got any like them from his stepfather.”

“That is very kind of you,” Faramir observed gravely, taking a bite from his apple and chewing it thoughtfully. If at times, when he encountered cold disregard or harsh criticism from his father, he envied Túrin for the warm and friendly (if at times a little too loud and lively) family he got, he knew that in comparison to Maradir he was well off still. From all he knew about his friend, Maradir had never met his real parents. Supposedly they had died. He lived with his stepfather who had no love for the boy, and mostly seemed to consider him a nuisance, causing Maradir to spend most of his time on the streets of the City. That was indeed where Faramir and Túrin, on one of their expeditions, had encountered the witty, resourceful, little strawhead, as Túrin liked to tease Maradir for his fair hair, that hinted at a partly Rohirric ancestry. Although Maradir was younger still than Túrin by one year and a half, he made up for that with his boundless energy and his excellent ideas, as well as his broad knowledge of the secret passageways of the City. For Faramir, he resembled the little brother he did not have. At first he had felt bound to look after Maradir like Boromir was looking after him, being the eldest and, as Túrin often teased him, the most responsible, thoughtful and cautious of the trio, only to realise that in fact Maradir was very much capable of looking after himself, having been forced to do so from very early on.

“We should go and see if he is at home,” Faramir suggested.

Túrin nodded. Casting a wistful glance out over the City as it fell away towards the plain, he said, “Wish we could get out like Voro and your brother. I heard one of the delivery boys tell the cook’s apprentice today that there are loads and loads of tadpoles in the ditches down on the Pelennor. I’d love to get some.”

“What for?” Faramir asked after he had swallowed another bite from his apple. “I know you have strange tastes sometimes, but honestly I doubt tadpoles make good eating.”

“Very funny. It’s still about that worm, isn’t it? I only ate it because Voro said I wouldn’t dare. Hah, I showed him there, didn’t I? No, with the tadpoles, I’d like to breed frogs.”

Now that made sense. Frogs were fascinating creatures, they all agreed upon that. The previous summer, Faramir had spent some happy days hunting frogs with his cousin Elphir during a visit to Dol Amroth where his uncle Imrahil lived. For a few days the chance of finding frogs in the pools and high meadows in the countryside behind the castle had even seemed preferable to spending time at the beaches and rocky coastline with their abundance of strange and wonderful creatures. Elphir and Faramir had competed for the largest frog, or, more importantly, the best jumper. The fun had ended with Erchirion, Elphir’s little brother who had accompanied them on most of their expeditions falling into one of the ponds and coming out all covered in duck-weed (but otherwise unharmed), which had caused his mother to forbid future frog-hunts.

Faramir’s eyes were shining now. “Breed frogs? But where?”

Túrin obviously had already considered this. “In our pond in the courtyard. It’s large enough, and it’s got plants and everything.”

“But it has got fish as well,” Faramir observed.

Túrin looked a little sceptical now. “Do you think they would harm the tadpoles?”

“If they are still very small, they might eat them.”

Túrin bit his lip. “Perhaps I could catch the fish and put them in a basin until the tadpoles are large enough. I’m sure I’ll find a way to prevent them from getting eaten. Ah, but first we’ve got to try and get some.”

“How do we get past the guards at the Great Gate?” asked Faramir.

“We’ll ... dunno. We got out before, didn’t we? Perhaps we’re lucky and the guards are busy.”

That was enough for Faramir, who was certain an opportunity would present itself once they had fetched Maradir and reached the gate. He waited in the tree for Túrin to sneak into the house and fetch a large bottle. Then they climbed over the wall with the help of the chestnut and dropped down on the street on the other side.

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Maradir lived in the third circle, which meant they had to pass three gates, each in itself a small adventure. It was their luck that Faramir knew the passwords. Boromir who was friendly with many of the guardsmen had told him, under the condition that he did not tell their father. Faramir had kept the promise, although he was quite sure Denethor knew of their arrangement. Little passed in the Steward’s household – or indeed the realm – without his knowledge, despite him seldom venturing out himself. The guardsmen at the gates looked slightly irritated by the two boys giving the correct parole every time, but nevertheless they let them pass unmolested.

The house of Maradir’s stepfather was situated in one of the alleys leading towards the steep rock that divided the lower circles like the prow of a mighty ship. It was a narrow house with few windows, but at least it lay in the southern half of the circle so that these windows were facing south and west. The neighbourhood was rather lively. Many craftsmen had their workshops there, and at the entrance to the alley where it branched off the main street there was the stately house of the Guild of Carpenters.

Faramir climbed the two steps leading up to the door and knocked, then stepped back. Both he and Túrin secretly hoped Maradir’s stepfather was not at home. He was not a likeable man, wearing a perpetual frown, and considering everything and everybody a nuisance. When the door remained unanswered, Faramir knocked again, then shrugged to Túrin.

“They’re out,” came a voice from the other side of the alley. An old woman was sitting on the steps of her house, scratching at the weeds growing between the uneven cobblestones with her iron-shot walking stick. “The lad was sent to fetch some bread and milk and stuff, and his father left shortly afterwards.”

The two boys thanked her and set off in the direction of the butter-market, so called because most of the City’s victuals were being traded here. It was situated in the second circle, close to the gate leading down to the first. As usual, the market was crowded with farmers from the fields of the Pelennor, from Lossarnach and Lebennin, and even some from Pelargir or the western fiefs. Faramir and Túrin decided to split up, and it was Faramir who found their friend sitting on the rim of the well in the middle of the market square, eating a carrot and observing the commotion about

him with amusement.

Dressed in a plain brown tunic and trowsers, Maradir was a small, skinny boy of about eight years of age, with longish fair hair that once had caused a much larger boy in the street to remark that his head looked like it had been thatched with straw – which in consequence had earned him a “Better thatched than filled with straw like yours!” from Maradir. He was quick-witted (and –tongued) and fearless. Now his blue eyes lit up as Faramir hailed him, and he quickly slid from his seat to meet his friend.

“Are you on your own?” he asked.

“Nay, Túrin is with me, but we split up to look for you. He wants to catch tadpoles on the Pelennor.”

Immediately, Maradir was all interest. “I should be buying stuff,” he said, “but my stepfather is out until tonight, so he won’t know when I returned, as long as I bring what he sent me to get.”

“Excellent. We shall be back in time. Ah, here comes Túrin.”

Their friend looked excited as he bounded up to them. “Guess what I just heard. That fish-man from Harlond over there just told a customer that he’s awaiting another delivery that’s due any time now. They must come in through the Great Gate, so perhaps if we hurry we can be there when the cart comes in.” Túrin was foremost when it came to picking up gossip, a gift he seemed to have inherited from his mother’s side of the family and which had come in handy before.

“Good idea,” said Faramir as they set in motion. “Usually the guards check the carts to see if there is anything wrong with the cargo or if there is tolls to be paid.”

“Well, it’s fish, it’s bound to be wrong,” Maradir muttered, making a face. He did not like fish. Faramir suspected this had to do with his stepfather liking it and eating it frequently. “But at least the guards should be busy then.”

“Exactly.”

They darted off across the market, Túrin soon lagging behind because he was encumbered by the large bottle he was carrying, and the apples in his tunic.

“Ach, wait,” he panted as they reached the gate to the first circle. “I have to get rid of these, first.”

Maradir laughed as he produced a small heap of apples. “And I was wondering what was moving inside your clothes. I’ve heard about people stuffing ferrets down their bound-up trowserlegs and then bet on who can stand it longest. But I don’t think that’s your idea of a good time, is it, Túrin?”

Túrin only shook his head. “There are strange people out there,” he said wisely. “I once had a mouse inside my shirt and that was no fun, I tell you. But the apples are for you. Well, most of them, anyway.”

“Thank you,” said Maradir, looking pleased and a little touched by the gift. Well equipped for all eventualities as usual, he produced a felt bag he had stuck into his belt, and put the apples in.

“That’s better, isn’t it?” he asked Túrin as he straightened his now quite apple-free tunic. “Let’s be off again, otherwise the cart will be through already.”

As they went on, Faramir asked, “On what occasion did you have a mouse inside your shirt, Túrin?”

Túrin laughed. “Well, that was during one of my forays into our wine-cellar.”

“Wine-cellar? Have you taken up drinking already?” asked Maradir.

“I’ve tried wine at the last midwinter feast, and it tastes awful. No, I was looking for preserved plums. They are stored down there. And the honey, too. Unfortunately they’re up on one of the higher shelves.”

“I wonder why ...,” muttered Faramir, causing Maradir to chuckle.

“Anyway,” Túrin went on, choosing to overhear the remark, “I managed to climb up somehow, and just when I reached for one of the pots a mouse ran out between them and right up my sleeve.”

“You need more cats,” Maradir stated dryly.

“We’ve got plenty, as you know, but they prefer to hunt in the garden,” said Túrin with a shrug.

“What happened then?” asked Faramir.

“Well,” Túrin blushed slightly, “I think I screamed, and, well ... fell off the shelf. With most of it following. I ended up on the floor, all covered in honey and plums and various jams. But at least the mouse was gone.”

“Did anybody hear your scream, or the crash?” inquired Faramir. “The servants or the kitchen-staff must have.”

“Oh yes, they came running down the stairs, and laughed and laughed when they saw I was unharmed, just a little ... sticky. And then mother came ... “

“Alas,” Maradir and Faramir exclaimed in unison.

“What did she do?” Faramir asked.

“I had to take a bath,” Túrin said, making a face at the memory. Baths were wrong and evil in his opinion, and a total waste of time as he constantly tried to convince his parents because he tended to get dirty again shortly afterwards. “And she scrubbed me with soap until I thought I would suffocate, and my skin come off. Then she sent me down again to clean up the mess. Afterwards I had to bathe once more. With more soap. And then ...,” he dropped his voice for dramatic effect, “and *then* she combed my hair. With her finest comb. For *two* hours! That was pure hell, I tell you. She loves to do that, and I hate it because she’s doing all this stuff with it, like I was a bloody girl. And they locked the cellar. And there was no sweets for two months. For me, I mean. They said I’d had enough for some time. For the others there were plenty, however. And all of that because of the dratted mouse.”

“Bad luck,” Faramir said feelingly, wondering at the same time how his father would have reacted had he been in Túrin’s situation. Baths and no sweets for some time would have been the least of Faramir’s worries, he was sure. Casting a glance at Maradir, Faramir was certain by his thoughtful expression that he was pondering his stepfather’s approach to his ward devastating a shelf with preserves. Maradir seldom spoke about it, or if he did he tried to make light of his stepfather’s hard hand when it came to punishment, but Faramir knew he was treated very roughly at times. In this he was lucky again, Faramir thought. Denethor had never raised a hand against him. In punishment he hardly even raised his voice. It simply got colder, and more precise, and when it did so Faramir knew he was in trouble. Steward Denethor was able to inflict with words and gazes more punishment than other parents with their hands.

“Seems we’re lucky,” Túrin’s excited voice pulled him out of his contemplations. “They’ve just opened the gate, and there seems to be more than just one cart coming in.”

“We must be careful, however,” Faramir reminded him because he looked ready to dash off. They withdrew behind a broad pillar, part of a colonnade in front of one of the houses bordering the square adjacent to the gate. “If the guards spot us, they will try and detain us, distraction or no. Perhaps there is someone waiting to leave the City, now that the gate is open. Maybe we can join them, and thus sneak out unseen.”

“Hey, we’re lucky again,” said Maradir, pointing towards a company of horsemen waiting to one side of the square. One looked like an errand-rider, wearing on his livery the badge of Pelargir, a golden ship on a blue field, the others appeared to be travellers as their horses were equipped with full saddle-bags and rolled-up blankets behind the saddles. They were also leading two sturdy pack-horses with them. “If we can get close to them, we might be able to slip out.”

Carefully, the three boys made their way along the colonnade, slipping from one pillar to the next until they reached the group of travellers. As they drew close, the young man at the rear who was leading the pack-horses spotted them. “What’s that game you’re playing?” he asked them good-humouredly. “Or are you hiding from those guards over there?” He lowered his voice conspiratorially and winked at them.

“Don’t alarm them, please,” Túrin pleaded, screwing up his face so that he looked like a puppy begging for food from the table. “We’re from Harlond, and just sneaked into the City because we had to buy a bottle and some apples –” as on cue, Maradir produced the bag – “for his elderly grandmother.” He pointed at Faramir, who fought to keep a straight face at so bold a lie. His maternal grandmother was the only one he knew, and Lady Altariel of Dol Amroth was all but elderly. “She so craved apples, and we couldn’t get any back home. We just want to get home now.”

“For his *elderly grandmother*, right,” the rider said and grinned, but gave Faramir a keen glance. “I didn’t know she was living in Harlond these days. But don’t worry, I won’t alarm the guards. Just make sure you return before they close the gate for the night. Here, take these, young man,” he cast the reins of the pack-horses to Faramir. “And just pretend you belong to our company.”

Faramir caught the reins. “What was this all about?” he hissed to Túrin when the rider had turned his back to them. “About my granny and all? Have you not seen the device on the brooch the foremost rider wears to fasten his cloak?”

“Er ... no,” Túrin confessed, looking somewhat confused.

“It happens to be a silver swan-ship,” Faramir enlightened him. “Does that ring a bell?”

It did, as was plain to see by the changes in his friend’s expression. “Hey, I don’t pay heed to every little detail,” Túrin defended himself. “How could I know they’re from Dol Amroth? And that this fellow might know you? It’s not my fault that your face is so easily recognisable. I had to invent a story quick, otherwise he might have informed the guards – thanks to your timely action, lads. And my plan worked, didn’t it?”

He looked so indignant that Faramir had to smile. Behind them, Maradir was biting his lip so as to contain the laughter threatening to burst out of him. “Aye, it worked,” he muttered. “And Faramir, we should really do something about your looks.”

“We could dye your hair,” Túrin suggested, giving Faramir a skeptical glance. “Or bleach it, rather. Make another strawhead out of you, how about it?”

“Nay, thanks,” Faramir laughed. “I like my hair the way it is.”

“Then I’m afraid you will have to wear a sack over your head in the future,” said Maradir gravely, patting Faramir’s shoulder.

“Without holes for eyes,” Túrin added, narrowly evading a kick against his shin from Faramir.

“Well, actually that sounds rather pleasant, because that way I do not have to look at you all the time,” he returned, then, as the company was allowed passage by the guards, he gave the reins a gentle jerk and followed with the pack-horses, his two friends ambling along next to him, their jestful quarrel put to a hold because they wanted to remain as inconspicuous as possible as they passed the guards. Nobody stopped them. They stayed with the company for another furlong, then, as the riders turned right onto the broad road that led to Harlond and on to Pelargir and the southern and western fiefs, Faramir returned the reins to the young horseman.

“You’re not coming with us to Harlond, to bring these apples to your elderly grandmother?” he asked, with mock disappointment. “What a pity. You’ve got a knack with those horses. I don’t get them to move so readily.” With that he urged on his own steed to keep up with the company which had already moved on. The errand-rider was only visible as a cloud of dust in the distance.

“Where do we go now?” Maradir asked. “Where are those tadpoles of yours, Túrin?”

Túrin shrugged, casting a glance over the fields that stretched out north and east and south, studded with farms and orchards, and divided by lines of trees or hedgerows, or sometimes by shallow ditches. “They just said ‘on the Pelennor’, but they weren’t very precise. We’ve got to have a look round, I reckon.”

“How about over there?” Faramir suggested, pointing towards a line of alders and willows not far from a stately farm surrounded by fenced meadows and tall trees, about a mile or two from the crossroads. “There should be a creek, or perhaps even a small lake. Some of the farmers have fishponds close to their homes.”

“Let’s have a look,” said Maradir, and they set off in the direction of the trees.

Not long, and they encountered the first obstacle, in the form of a stout wooden gate set in a stone-wall overgrown with brambles, sloe and blackthorn, as well as ivy and trailing clematis, all together creating a tangled, stingy mass of thorns and spiky branches.

“We could go round,” Túrin said doubtfully, “but this wall seems to be stretching on for miles and miles.”

“Why not climb the gate and simply cross the meadow behind?” inquired Maradir, who almost always opted for the direct approach.

“Is there a gate at the other end?” asked Faramir. “I do not see one, but it could be hidden behind those trees.”

“There ought to be a gate,” said Túrin, “come on, let’s try. We’ll find a way through, and if not, we’ll return the way we came. But Maradir’s right. We should use this shortcut.”

“If shortcut it is,” muttered Faramir as he climbed the gate first and found himself in a broad meadow grown with tussocky grass.

“We have company,” Faramir observed, surveying the area intently after he had jumped down the other side. Near the southern end of the meadow, round a large oak there stood a small herd of cattle, eyeing them warily.

“They do look rather placid, don’t they?” Túrin said, following his friend’s gaze. But he did not sound altogether convinced.

“They’ve got big horns,” remarked Maradir. “And they don’t look like cows, more like bulls. I once heard the farmers only keep the hardiest and wildest outside over the winter.”

“Perhaps we should get a move on, then,” suggested Faramir. “But carefully, lest they take an interest in us. Or maybe we should turn round and take the long route?”

“Nonsense,” said Túrin. “They won’t eat us. Come on.”

Cautiously, they began to make their way across the meadow, which soon proved rather difficult because the ground was uneven and boggy, so that at times the three boys had to jump from one tussock to the next to avoid getting their feet wet, or indeed sinking into the mire.

“Look out for tadpoles,” Túrin reminded the others as again they were hopping along a large puddle.

“I think we have got other problems right now,” hissed Faramir as he balanced on one leg on a small knoll of grass and barely managed to avoid stepping into the mud. “Our friends the bulls appear to have decided we are worth a closer inspection after all.”

Túrin turned to cast a glance at the beasts that were indeed approaching. He cursed under his breath. “How about turning round?” he suggested tentatively.

“The way back is as long,” said Faramir, having steadied himself on the tussock. “Better to move

on. But do not run. Swift movement might attract them.”

“Very funny, as if running was an option in this mud.”

Casting a glance at his friends behind him, Faramir could tell that both felt exactly like himself – wishing fervently that running *was* an option. The bulls were trotting closer. They did have large horns, and were clad in masses of shaggy, mud-encrusted red-brown fur. They did not appear to be overly wild, but Faramir did not want to find out if that was indeed the case. Carefully, the three boys continued on their way, frequently casting wary and increasingly anxious glances at the animals. Those, too, were slightly hampered by the mud, yet nevertheless were closing in steadily.

Soon Faramir and the others could hear their breathing, and the deep grunts as they worked their way through the mire. The boys halted.

“This doesn’t look good,” said Túrin. Faramir saw that even though his cheeks were flushed from the exercise, underneath he looked rather pale. Maradir stood eyeing the bulls with an anxious yet determined expression. Most likely he was considering how to try and distract them.

Distraction, why had he not considered this before? “Maradir, the bag with the apples, quick,” Faramir hissed to his friend. Maradir understood immediately, nevertheless looked slightly rueful when, after taking out a handful, handed the bag over to his friend.

“I’ll bring you some more tomorrow,” promised Túrin, having noted Maradir’s expression at parting with the apples. “If we survive this, that is.”

Carefully, so as not to move too swiftly, Faramir reached into the bag, took out an apple and cast it towards the bulls. The animals halted behind their leader as he sniffed the apple, then began to search for it on the ground, tossing his head at his comrades if they got too close. Maradir also cast his apples, and Faramir threw some more so that the bulls were entertained for a short while.

“Come on, move, move,” hissed Túrin, and they followed him quickly across the last stretch of muddy ground. Then they progressed even more swiftly, until they were forced to halt again because the bulls were closing in once more. They divided up the remaining apples (Túrin found another in his tunic) and threw them towards the cattle, then they ran the last stretch towards the wall. It was set of stones that apparently had been collected on the fields, and it was also overgrown with thorns and brambles, with the faded remains of last year’s thistles and nettles in between. There was no gate.

“Bugger,” Túrin summed up their thoughts fittingly as he gazed into the tangled vegetation.

“Our friends are on the move again,” Faramir informed him, the bulls having finished their apples once again and now setting out on the search for more.

“Why do they have to eat so speedily?” Maradir asked with exasperation.

“Well, they keep the chewing bit for later,” said Túrin, grinning nervously. “Anyway, what do we do now? There could be a gate down there, some way along this wall, but honestly ...”

“We climb,” decided Faramir. “Come on, Maradir, I shall help you up. Over there is a hazel-bush

and only a few brambles, so at least we are not going to be stung so much by the thorns. You are the smallest. Try and find a way through. Here is my knife, try and cut the brambles should there be too many.”

He could tell that Maradir wanted to protest about having to go first, but a last glance at the bulls made clear there was no time for arguing. With his friend’s help he scrambled up into the hazel, cursing under his breath when he got encumbered by the brambles that attached themselves to his tunic. But with the help of the knife, he swiftly managed to cut a narrow path, so that Túrin was able to follow up the wall. Together they helped up Faramir, and just in time, because the bulls had reached the wall and were grunting and raking the ground.

“That was close,” muttered Túrin as together they fought to find a way through the matted, tangly brush. Behind them, the bulls were lowing.

“Aye,” Faramir agreed, casting a last glance at the beasts.

“Praised be your aunt, Túrin,” Maradir declared as he disentangled himself from the last brambles and clinging branches and jumped down onto the narrow lane on the other side of the wall.

“Aye, who would have thought that her apples would save lives one day,” agreed Faramir, fighting with a vine that had taken hold of a strand of his hair. All three had scratches on their arms and faces, and their clothing had suffered, too. Faramir hoped he would manage to smuggle it into his clothes-chest unseen, otherwise he was certainly in for trouble, should the servants detect the frayed hems and stains, which surely they would report to the Steward. And Denethor would not approve. But that was something to worry about later, he decided.

“Next time we go round,” said Túrin, fishing small twigs out of his shirt, “no matter how far. Bloody bulls. But hey, that was fun, wasn’t it?”

“One day, I should like to listen to your exact definition of the term ‘fun’, Túrin,” said Faramir dryly, and all three laughed, relief at the good ending of the adventure washing through them.

“Come on, let’s try and find the tadpoles,” Túrin suggested, sobering up again. Looking round for orientation, they decided to follow the lane towards the line of willows and alders they had seen previously, in the hope it would indeed lead in the right direction and not swerve suddenly.

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After a while it became clear that the lane took a parallel course to the trees they were trying to reach, and that another meadow was lying in between, keeping the two from converging. Upon passing by another gate, the trio halted, and Faramir climbed the stout wooden construction for a better view.

“There is no wall on the other side,” he reported, “just a hedge and a fence. And behind them there appears indeed to be some kind of ditch or brook.”

“Are there any bulls?” asked Maradir.

“Nay, there are only two horses on the meadow. Broad draught-horses, you know, the large bay-coloured ones they breed down in Lebennin.”

“Do they look vicious in any way?” inquired Túrin. “Remember, we haven’t got any apples left.”

“Actually, they look rather calm. But curious. They are coming over.”

Soon the great animals had ambled close enough for Faramir to stroke their heads and pat their broad necks.

“I think we can risk a passage without apples,” he said and climbed over the gate, his friends following swiftly. The horses were indeed huge and towered over the boys, looking even more majestic with their long, wavy black manes and tails, and the dark feather on their stout legs. But they were docile enough when they allowed the boys to stroke them, only Faramir nearly fell over as one of the steeds rubbed its massive head against his shoulder. He had not been prepared for a push this strong.

“Imagine charging one a horse like this,” said Túrin, reaching up to disentangle a blade of grass from the sweeping mane of one of the animals. “Bet it would need some time to get going, but once it went, I don’t think anything or anybody could stop it.”

“Aye, I like to imagine Nahar to look somewhat like them, only taller, perhaps, and his coat of a different shade,” Faramir said.

“Who is Nahar?” asked Maradir, looking impressed that there should be even larger horses. Faramir told him of Oromë the Vala and his powerful steed as they set out across the meadow, the horses trailing after them goodnaturedly. When he had finished, Maradir’s eyes were shining, and Túrin looked impressed as well.

“You know so much about these tales of old,” said Maradir. “I wish I had these books of yours where you can read all about them.”

“I can lend them to you,” suggested Faramir.

“I’m not good at Elvish,” Maradir shrugged dejectedly.

“Hah, don’t listen to him, Faramir,” fell in Túrin. “I know for a fact he’s much better at languages than I am. I’m sure you’ve got a dictionary so that he can look up those words he doesn’t know.” Maradir blushed slightly.

Faramir smiled. “I have got the *Ainulindale* and the *Quenta Silmarillion* in the Common Speech as well. With pictures. They used to be Boromir’s books, but he gave them to me, saying he was more interested in tales about men than all this stuff about Elves and Valar. As long as you do not mind Morgoth having a blue mustache on some illustrations, I am sure you will enjoy them.”

“Blue mustache?” asked Maradir incredulously. “I thought Morgoth was this evil evil Vala who stole the Silmarils. I’ve never heard he had a mustache.”

“Boromir gave him one when he was bored one day. He also did something to Ungoliant which

I do not remember. And on some pictures, Fëanor looks like a woman.”

“It’s because he’s an Elf,” said Túrin wisely. “My brother says they always look like girls.”

“When has your brother seen an Elf?” inquired Faramir curiously. He found Elves fascinating, after having read so much about them, and would have given much to see one.

“Well, he didn’t. But a friend of a friend of his said he saw one.”

“Haha, bet that happened after an extended visit to an inn,” said Maradir, grinning. “And what he saw was indeed a girl, and not an Elf.”

“That’s what I also said,” replied Túrin with a shrug. “But he insisted. But tell you what, I think I’ve seen a dwarf. A real one. Two days ago, when I was accompanying my mum and Lossanna to a visit to aunt Morwen who lives in the fourth circle, not far from that large house of the Guild of Jewellers. We were just passing by, and there was this goldsmith standing in front of the doors talking to a child. Well, at first I thought it was a child because he was only a little taller than me. But then I saw he had this *huge* beard.”

“There are dwarves in the City,” said Maradir. “One of the farriers down in the first circle is a dwarf. I was sent there once to get nails, and I was rather frightened because people had told me he had a mine underneath his house and made children work for him in there. In truth he was very nice if a little grumbly, and even gave me a horseshoe, for good luck. But I haven’t seen any Elves yet. My stepfather said there aren’t any around anymore. That they have all left, you know. But I don’t believe him.”

“There are places where they still abide,” agreed Faramir thoughtfully, patting the nose of one of the horses as it nibbled at his tunic. “My teacher the Lady Lindórië said so, and she is very learned in Elvenlore. But they live far away, to the north and west, beyond Rohan. I wish they would come down here more often, like they used to. Uncle Imrahil said there was an elvish haven near Dol Amroth once, and last summer Aunt Altariel told me that the Princes of Dol Amroth are rumoured to have some elvish blood in them, because one of their ancestors married an Elf-maid.”

“Lucky fellow. Bet she was really beautiful,” commented Túrin, then his eyes grew wide as he regarded his friend. “Hey, you do know what that means, don’t you?” he asked Faramir.

He shrugged. “What does it mean?”

“It means there’s a little Elf in you as well.”

“Nonsense,” said Faramir, blushing. He had not considered this before, although in retrospect he was sure that his aunt had meant to point this out to him by her tale about her husband’s ancestry. “My uncle’s ancestor lived ages and ages ago, and if there was indeed any elvishness in his children and their children, I am sure it has long worn off.”

“Oh, I’m not so sure,” said Maradir, grinning. “I think I can detect a trace of elvishness about you.” He winked at Túrin, who grinned as well. “Can’t you see it, too, Túrin?”

Túrin regarded his friend. “Yeah, now that you mention it, Maradir. I think it’s to do with the

way he walks.”

“Right,” Maradir agreed. “Like a girl.” And he darted off, with Faramir in hot pursuit, startling the horses who nevertheless remained calm, and obviously decided to leave the boys to their sports. Faramir caught Maradir near the fence, slinging an arm round his shoulders and pinning his friend’s arms to his sides.

“Do I *run* like a girl as well, eh, little strawhead?” he asked. “Answer wisely, or else I shall have to think of a proper way to repay you for your insolence.” Maradir squirmed in his grip, but Faramir was cautious, knowing his friend’s knack at fighting people larger than himself.

“I couldn’t see you run as I don’t have eyes in the back of my head,” Maradir panted. Faramir squeezed him some more, for good measure, then let go of him.

“Well, I guess the answer was satisfying enough,” he stated.

“Hey, look,” interrupted Túrin who had come up as well. All three looked round to where he was pointing. “We’re lucky this time. There’s a hole in the fence, and the hedge behind.”

“It looks like it has been made by some animal,” mused Faramir. “But you are right, it should be large enough for us to squeeze through.”

“I’ll give it a try,” volunteered Túrin, handing the bottle to Faramir as he got down on all fours and started crawling underneath the fence and into the hedge.

“I’ve heard there are giant water-rats in the ditches on the Pelennor,” Maradir called to him, and both he and Faramir laughed when they saw Túrin hesitate halfway through the hedge.

“Very funny, Maradir,” came his muttered complaint from the tangled mass of plants. “Actually, there are traces here that look more like a fox’s,” he said as he crawled on. Soon they saw his tousled head reappear on the other side. “You can throw the bottle over, Faramir. There’s a broad and quite deep ditch over here, with trees growing round it. I’ll see if I can get down to the water.”

“Let’s wait for the splash,” chuckled Maradir. The waited for a moment, but all remained quiet on the other side. Then Maradir crouched down to crawl through the hole, and Faramir brought up the rear. There were indeed traces on the ground, only visible now in places where neither of the boys had passed. On the other side the ground fell steeply towards the ditch Túrin had described. It was lined with leaning alders and willows. Faded reeds and tall grasses, all brown and broken after the long winter but already bringing forth fresh green shoots were growing alongside, whispering and rattling softly in the breeze. They marched down to a puddle of brown, murky water.

Túrin had indeed found a way down to it (more by sliding than actually climbing, by the look of the traces he had left), and was crouching down now, staring into the water.

“Have you spotted any tadpoles yet?” Maradir asked.

Túrin shook his head. “There are things moving in here, but the sunlight as it reflects on the surface startles my eyes so I can’t see too much.”

“Perhaps we should try and find a spot where the trees cast some shadow,” suggested Faramir. “Or where we have the sun in our backs.” He looked around. The trees were still bare, but there were places where their branches hung over the water. Carefully, he climbed down next to a large willow. Maradir accompanied him, and judging from the low curses issuing from the reeds, Túrin was clambering up the bank again as well.

“Look there,” Maradir exclaimed, touching Faramir’s shoulder excitedly. “There’s something moving in the water.”

“One of your giant waterrats, perhaps?” Faramir asked, grinning, but following Maradir’s gaze, he saw that the creature in question was rather small. “Hey, it looks like a frog.”

“Where there’s frogs, there ought to be tadpoles, too,” Túrin commented as he climbed down to them. “Can you catch the frog?”

“It’s swum to the other side,” said Maradir sadly. “But look there,” he went on, his eyes lighting up again. “There’s small things squirming next to those broken reeds, where they reach into the water.” Cautiously, so as not to slip and slide into the water, he edged closer to the spot.

“Lovely, lovely,” Túrin rejoiced, sounding, Faramir thought, just like his mother when she was delighted. “Here, Maradir, take the bottle, and see if you can scoop some up with it.”

Taking the bottle from Túrin, Faramir handed it on to Maradir who carefully lowered it into the water. As he brought it up again and held it against the light, to their great satisfaction it contained an assembly of the inhabitants of the ditch. There was a large larva of a dragonfly, a few snails, a water-beetle, and a mass of small tadpoles.

The three boys gazed at them delightedly. “They’re beautiful, aren’t they?” said Túrin fascinatedly as they assembled round the bottle. “And so many. Excellent, most excellent. I’m sure they’ll grow into first grade racing frogs.”

“We must take out the dragonfly, though,” Faramir said, watching the large insect. “They eat tadpoles.”

“How?” asked Túrin, indicating the narrow neck of the bottle. “Don’t tell me you can squeeze your hand in there. Not even Maradir’s hands are that small.”

Faramir thought for a moment, then he got out his knife and cut some of the reeds which he carefully lowered into the bottle towards the larva. “Come on, grab it,” he muttered. But the insect seemed to prefer floating through the water lazily. Faramir tried forcing it against the side of the bottle, and after much gentle probing with the reeds, he insect took hold of it. Cautiously, inch by inch, Faramir withdrew the stalks again, with the dragonfly clinging to them, until it was out of the bottle, and fell onto Maradir’s outstretched hand.

“They do look like real predators, don’t they?” he said as they regarded the greyish insect curiously.

“Yeah, ‘tis difficult to imagine that from something this nasty-looking comes something as beautiful as a dragonfly,” said Faramir. “But that seems often to be the case. Look at some kinds of cater-

pillars. You would never believe them to turn into the loveliest butterflies one day.”

“Aye, some things are nothing short of a miracle,” agreed Túrin. “But that must cheer you up tremendously, doesn’t it, Faramir?” he added with a grin. Faramir knew his friend well enough to anticipate a jestful remark to follow. Yet he decided to join the game, and to provide Túrin with an opportunity to tease him.

“Why?” he asked, therefore.

“Well, it must be comforting to know that not everything’s lost for you, and that perhaps, like a caterpillar, you’re going to grow one day and turn into a halfways decent looking creature.” Since he had grown a lot recently and had almost reached his friend’s height despite being much younger, Túrin enjoyed teasing Faramir about the fact that he was still rather small for his age.

“Yes, I shall put my hopes on that,” Faramir said solemnly. “Thanks for trying to cheer me up.”

“You’re welcome,” replied Túrin cheerfully. “Now, let’s see to our little friends here. Perhaps we should get rid of the beetle, too. Lest it harm our preciouses.”

“Tis going to be difficult to catch with the reeds, but I shall give it a try. Hold the bottle a little like this, will you?” As Túrin set the bottle on the ground and held it, Maradir, who had been studying the dragonfly on his hand with great interest, returned it to the ditch.

“There’s more tadpoles here,” he reported to his friends. “And frogspawn, too. The tadpoles must have hatched only recently.”

“Perhaps we could take some of the spawn as well,” suggested Túrin, tilting the bottle slightly so that Faramir had a better chance of getting at the beetle.

“How?” asked Maradir. “Shall I scoop it up with my hands? I might damage it. And it won’t fit into the bottle, anyway.”

“Your felt bag – the one you put the apples in – is it waterproof?” asked Faramir, frowning as he concentrated on his task, his gaze locked on the beetle.

Maradir shrugged. “Dunno. I’ll check.” He lowered the bag into the water, then held it up for inspection. “Appears to be holding the water pretty well. It’s going to be difficult to carry, though, when it’s full of water and frogspawn.”

“We can take turns,” said Faramir, having finally managed to push the beetle against the glass and beginning to draw it upwards. “Actually, we should do so with the bottle as well. It looks rather heavy.”

“It is,” said Túrin. “Oi, be careful, there. You almost lost it.”

“I know, I know. I would help if you did not move the bottle so much.”

“Sorry.”

It took Faramir another attempt to force the beetle through the narrow neck of the bottle, but in the end he succeeded, and the insect was also returned to the ditch. In the meantime, Maradir had managed to catch some more tadpoles with the bag which they added to their comrades in the bottle. After a thorough search of his pouch and pockets, Túrin finally produced a stopper for the bottle. Maradir then filled his bag with water and frogspawn and tied up the ends with a length of string Faramir provided.

“What way do we return?” he asked as they had climbed the bank again (which had proved quite a challenge with their burdens). “Honestly, I don’t fancy climbing gates and crawling through hedges with this bag. Not to mention dodging bulls.”

“We could try and follow this ditch,” suggested Túrin. “That way we may come upon a lane leading up to it.”

“Or a stout fence,” said Faramir. “How about taking the other direction. There is a farm not far away, down yonder. The ditch leads thither, and I cannot see any obstacles. There is bound to be some kind of road leading to the houses, branching off the main roads.”

“Right, let’s give it a try,” announced Maradir.

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After about a furlong of stalking through high faded grasses, and climbing over fallen branches or trailing brambles (and a considerable amount of complaints about the choice of way), they hit a narrow path that wound along the ditch. Eventually it broadened until it became a well-tended lane of short turf, which suddenly ended in front of a low stonewall grown with moss and lichen and hardy succulents. Beyond was an orchard. Through the recently pruned apple, plum and peach-trees underneath which some sheep and geese were grazing, a stately farmhouse could be descried, surrounded by lower buildings, a large vegetable garden and a cluster of tall trees. A small gate, covered in peeling white-wash, opened into the lane.

“Ah, do you smell this?” asked Túrin as the boys stood surveying the surroundings. “That’s apple-cake and no mistake. Perhaps we should pay the farmers a visit and ask for a slice.”

“Oh, they are going to be delighted to find us trespassing on their property,” remarked Faramir. “With a bottle full of tadpoles and a dripping bag of frogspawn. I do not doubt they are going to offer us the entire cake out of sheer delight.”

“Or to be rid of us quickly,” said Maradir, smirking. “And I don’t see how we could not be trespassing, unless we return the way we came. Come on, they won’t bite us. Unless they’ve got ferocious dogs, of course.”

“Actually, I do not trust these geese,” Faramir said, eyeing the large birds cautiously. “Last summer Elphir and I encountered some rather nasty ones on one of our exploits. They can be worse than dogs.”

“I find they look rather peaceful,” said Túrin, obviously emboldened by the smell of cake which

was wafting over to them invitingly indeed. Stepping forward, he opened the gate. It stuck slightly – obviously it had not been moved for some time. “What happened to you and your cousin that makes you fear geese?” he inquired curiously as he gave the gate another shove, then stepped through.

“Well, I do not *fear* them,” Faramir defended himself as he followed Túrin through the gate, lifting the bottle over carefully. “I have come to respect them, that is all. They can be as sharp and watchful as dogs. And their bites are not very nice. As for what happened, well, Elphir had told me about this splendid raspberry-place. Unfortunately it was in some garden that was guarded, more or less, by a flock of geese. We did not know this, and learned it the hard way. The birds chased us all the way back to the wall, and ere we managed to climb over, one of them bit my leg.”

“I was bitten by a goose as well,” said Maradir, closing the gate behind them. “Does any of you know Belthalion the fletcher. This old fellow who lives in the third circle, near the upper gate? He keeps geese for the feathers. I used to go there from time to time because he would tell me all about arrows and how they’re made, and he allowed me to keep those points that were faulty and he couldn’t use. One day I went there and he wasn’t home, but the door was open. So I went in to wait for him because his apprentice said I could. He left as well to fetch something, so I was left all alone in the workshop. I waited for a while, all the time hearing the geese hiss and cry in their cages. I thought that perhaps they were hungry, so I went over to check. One of the cages must have been open, because when I stepped into the yard where the birds are being kept, one charged at me and bit my hand.”

“And what did you do?” asked Túrin, glancing at the geese peacefully nibbling away at the short grass with some slight anxiety.

“I ran, of course. And like a dog, the bloody bird gave chase until I was well down the alley. I haven’t been there since.”

“Hm, does any of you happen have a frightening tale about sheep?” Túrin inquired, grinning a little nervously. The other two exchanged a glance, grinned, then Faramir began, “Well, actually ...”

“Oh, shut up, you’re only trying to scare me,” complained Túrin.

“Seems to be working,” remarked Maradir, grinning. He sniffed the air, and a smile appeared on his face. Faramir smelled the new scent as well.

“They are making tea now,” he said a little wistfully, realising only now how much time had passed since lunch (or the last apple), and that he was rather hungry again. Having been a rather sparing eater when he was younger, lately his appetite had increased tremendously. Boromir had joyously declared this a sign that his little brother was finally beginning to grow up, too, and had taken to providing him with extra food he regularly pinched from the kitchens (with the cook’s silent consent, Faramir was certain, for nothing passed in her realm without her knowledge). If their father had noted the second and third helpings his second-born was eating now during meals, however, he had not deemed them worth mentioning.

The three increased their pace now as they walked towards the house. The geese did not heed them much, and the boys were careful to proceed as cautiously and as far away from the birds as possible. Soon the track they were following forked off, one leading on toward the vegetable gar-

den and the house beyond, the other going round the building, apparently to join the road leading up to it. Now as they had drawn closer, Faramir saw that the buildings were arranged around some central courtyard in which a large tree was growing.

“We should take this way,” he said, pointing at the path leading away to the right, towards the road. “So far nobody has spotted us, and I should prefer to keep it that way.”

“But ... but the cake ...,” Túrin muttered.

“What do you intend to do?” asked Faramir, who rued the possibility of missing the cake as much as the other two. “Go over to the kitchen window and beg for some? Or steal it, even?”

“I wouldn’t dream of stealing,” returned Túrin, upon which the other two exchanged a glance. “Not from people I don’t know, I mean,” Túrin added. “Lest they have ferocious dogs, or geese, or sheep, or whatever. But what speaks against asking? They can’t say more than no, can they? Right, I’ll go and get some cake. You can wait here with our little preciouses.”

“He’ll never get some,” Maradir said as they settled down on the grass. “Not even Túrin.”

Faramir withdrew the stopper from the bottle to allow some fresh air to enter. The tadpoles looked as lively as ever as they wriggled to and fro, and one of the snails had almost managed to creep out of the bottle. Faramir stuck a finger into the neck to loosen it from the glass, and it sank down again. “I am not so sure,” he mused, gazing towards where Túrin was strolling boldly in the direction of a half-open window. “He can be very persuasive.”

“That is true,” agreed Maradir, grinning. “He could talk a man into believing he’s a girl. And the story he gave that fellow from Dol Amroth about your “elderly grandmother”... I had to look away to keep a straight face.”

“I noticed,” said Faramir, grinning as well.

“Still, I’m doubtful about the cake. Ah, look, someone has appeared at the window. Looks like a woman in an apron. What’s he doing now?”

“Pointing towards us, it seems. Perhaps he is telling her we have lost our way. She appears to be giving him directions back to the City.”

“He *is* smart,” declared Maradir. “Hah, but she’s leaving again. So much for the cake.”

“Wait, it looks like she has just gone inside. And there she is at the backdoor, handing him a parcel.”

Not long, and Túrin came strutting over again, carrying something wrapped in a patterned linen dishcloth, and an expression so smug that his smile seemed to extend from one ear to the other. “Lo and behold, gentlemen,” he announced as he halted in front of them, “the cake.” With a pompous gesture, he removed the cloth, revealing a round apple-pie decorated with almonds. “And it’s still warm,” he added.

“How did you do it?” asked his friends impressedly, but he only shook his head.

“My secret. Come on, eat it. I’m supposed to return the towel before we leave.”

Faramir had already taken out his knife and cut the cake into three slices, leaving a slightly larger one for Túrin because he had done all the work acquiring it. The pie was indeed warm, even hot inside, and it was delicious. For a while nobody spoke. Only when they were licking the last remains of apple-filling and crumbs from their fingers, Maradir said, “I think we’ll send you more often in the future, Túrin. This was one of the best ideas you’ve had in a long time.”

“Yeah, sometimes I amaze myself,” Túrin stated, looking very pleased with himself indeed. He rose from the grass, shook the discloth to get rid of the last crumbs, then strolled off back to the window where he placed the cloth, before swiftly returning to his friends who were waiting on the path leading round the buildings.

“Did you really ask for directions or was this just part of your act?” asked Faramir.

“No, the nice lady said if we follow the road for a bit and then turn left, we’ll get onto another road that eventually joins the causeway coming up from Osgiliath. It’s a bit of a walk, but better than having to climb fences or crawling under hedges, I reckon.” The all agreed on that, and set out with a good pace.

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The walk back to the City proved longer than expected. After a while the bottle grew rather heavy in their arms, despite them taking turns, and the bag with the frogspawn very uncomfortable to carry because it kept dripping water. In the end, as soon as they reached the causeway which was lined by a shallow ditch to either side, they decided to empty the slimy contents of the bag into the muddy water.

“At least this way there is a chance they will survive,” said Faramir as he watched Maradir rinse out the bag. “And that this ditch might be populated with frogs, too, in years to come.” There had been no tadpoles or frogspawn visible.

“Right, let’s get a move on,” said Maradir, climbing up to the road again. “The sun’s westering already.”

And indeed, as they looked towards the west where Minas Tirith and behind it mighty Mindolluin mounted, they saw that both were already casting a long shadow over the fields of the Pelennor. The wind had freshened up, and without the sunlight it was beginning to get cold.

“I should have brought other shoes,” Túrin complained of a sudden. “I told my mother that these are a little too small. They used to be Vorondil’s, and I’ve been wearing them all winter. But now they’re done, I reckon.”

“No need to worry, I am sure you will get another nice pair of his old shoes for the summer,” Faramir told him jestfully. He occasionally also wore Boromir’s old shoes or tunics, although not as often as Túrin was wont to be given his brother’s. It was not that Lord Húrin could not afford to buy his youngest new clothes, it was rather Túrin’s mother’s strange reluctance to part from her

beloved children's old garments which she seemed to hold dear for memory's sake.

"This tunic used to be his, too," said Túrin, indicating the slightly too large garment. "Actually, most of my clothes were Vorondil's."

"Could be worse," remarked Maradir. Túrin gave him a questioning glance, and Maradir grinned. "Well, you could be given your sister's old clothes."

Túrin laughed. "Don't tell my mum, unless you give her strange ideas. I'm not complaining. After all, Voro's tunic has proven useful, for putting the apples in. But my feet, they are killing me. How about waiting for a cart to take us back to the City?"

"How long do you wish to wait?" asked Faramir. "I cannot see much traffic on the road. Most appear to have already completed their journey. Come on, give me the bottle. 'Tis not that far anymore."

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Eventually, they made it back to the Great Gate. By then the sun had gone down behind the mountains, and the guards were in the process of shutting the gate for the night. The three boys managed to slip through with a group of farmers who were leaving the City with their carts and livestock. When Maradir saw them, his face took on a troubled expression. "Oh no," he muttered, "I forgot about the market. It's closed now for the night, and I was supposed to buy stuff. My stepfather isn't going to be pleased when he comes home."

He looked so dejected that Faramir and Túrin exchanged a worried glance. They knew his stepfather would most likely show his displeasure with more than stern words. "Perhaps we can buy the things elsewhere," suggested Faramir. "Or if not, you can come up with me to the Citadel, and we shall fetch them from our kitchens. The cook knows me, and I am sure she will give me the things if I explain the situation to her."

Maradir still looked uncomfortable. "I don't want you to get into trouble," he said.

"Nonsense," Faramir assured him. "Boromir is nicking food all the time (with her knowledge, I am sure), and he does not get into trouble for it. Perhaps Boromir can help, too. I am supposed to wait for him at Túrin's, although, come to think of it, most likely he is there already, with the gate shut."

"Yeah, let's hurry," agreed Túrin, who had used the short break to take off his shoes. "We have to divide up the tadpoles, too."

"You are going to walk home in your stockings?" asked Faramir.

"I can't walk another yard in these shoes."

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Dusk was deepening when they reached Túrin's home. This time they entered the official route, because climbing the tree would have been problematic with the bottle. The servant answering the gate looked both bewildered and relieved – obviously Túrin's absence had already been noted, although upon Túrin's question if his parents were home already he was told they were out still.

“But your sister worried about you, Master Túrin,” said the servant. “And so did your brother, who has returned not long ago.”

“Is my brother here as well?” asked Faramir.

“He was here. I had to ask him to return his horse to the stables before it could completely devastate Lady Amarië's beloved rosebushes. Master Vorondil and the other lads accompanied him. But they are bound to return any moment now.”

“Right, let's see to our little precioues, then,” said Túrin, “before we get company.”

Swiftly, they made their way into the house and the inner courtyard, where a small square pond sat between flowerbeds studded with snowbells and crocuses, and short-cropped boxwood-hedges. The court was cast in twilight, as most of the surrounding windows were dark still. A few pond-scaters were skimming over the still surface, and down in the deeps a few gold-fish could dimly be descried. Most of the waterplants were still brown, only the waterlily in the middle was beginning to put forth the first leaves.

Faramir knelt at the rim of the pond and looked into the dark water while Maradir and Túrin were opening the bottle. “What about the fish?” he asked. “Do you not think they could harm your tadpoles?”

Túrin looked troubled for a moment, but then shrugged. “I'll have to risk it, I guess. I can't catch them now. Perhaps I'll try and do so tomorrow. Or else I'll just feed them every day, so that they're not hungry anymore and so won't get tempted to eat my froggies. By the way, where are you going to put yours? Unfortunately, this pool is too small for all of them.” He looked at his friends.

“Good question,” said Maradir. “I haven't got a pond at home. I could use a large bowl, perhaps. Or a bathtub.”

Faramir shrugged. “I am going to use something of the sort as well, I reckon.”

“Hey, but you've got a pond, haven't you?” said Túrin excitedly. “Up in the Citadel. There's the pool of the fountain. And it hasn't even got fish, has it?”

“No, there are no fish,” confirmed Faramir, looking excited at the suggestion yet doubtful at the same time. He had not considered that option, which of course made perfect sense. “The water is quite cold, however, and very clear. Not like the pools and ditches they usually live in. I am not sure they are going to find much to eat in there, too.”

“But you could bring them food, couldn't you?” said Maradir. “Or we could, if you allow me to keep mine in there as well.”

“Of course, there is space enough,” said Faramir. “Only, what do they eat? Plants and mud and stuff?”

“I think so,” said Túrin. “I’ve seen them nibbling away at dead leaves and rotting stalks in the water. There are plenty of those in this pond, so you can take a few handfuls with you. Where is that bag of yours, Maradir?”

Together, they filled the bag with helpings of mud and dead plants from the pond (not without flicking bits of it at each other). Then Túrin took the bottle with the tadpoles and carefully poured about a third of them into the pond. The small creatures vanished immediately in the deeps. He filled in some more water, before handing the bottle back to Maradir who stoppered it. They were just about done, when they heard footsteps approach.

“What do I see here?” asked Vorondil’s voice. “Is my little brother actually considering to take a bath, or are you fishing for your supper?”

Looking up, Faramir beheld Túrin’s elder brother approaching, Boromir behind him. Both in fact looked like they could use a bath, since their garments and faces were splattered with mud, especially Vorondil’s. The right side of his tunic and trowsers was quite dirty, as if he had come to inspect a muddy patch of ground from up close.

Túrin of course noticed, and replied, “Actually, I’m not the one in need of a bath, am I? What happened? Did you fall off your horse?”

“He fell *with* his horse,” Boromir explained with a grin, clapping Vorondil’s shoulder. “They were a little too quick in a bend. But he would almost have won the race, but for his accident.”

“Yeah,” Vorondil said gloomily. “Bad luck.” Then he shrugged and grinned as well. “But we did find one of the best jumps on the Pelennor. Even Boromir didn’t dare attempt it at first. And what were you up to? Playing in the mud? Aren’t you a little too old for this?”

“Well, it looks like one never gets too old for that,” remarked Faramir, causing Boromir to laugh, while Vorondil looked indignant.

“Good one, little brother. But what *have* you been doing? What have you got in this bottle?”

“Water,” replied Maradir quickly.

“I can see that. But there seems to be something moving in there.”

“I very much hope you have not been doing something to our fish,” said Vorondil. “You know how Lossanna adores them. She has even given them names.”

“The fish are alright. I haven’t touched them,” said Túrin. “If you must know, there’s tadpoles in the bottle.”

“Where did you find them?” inquired Vorondil, frowning. “I don’t think there are any *in* the City.”

Faramir noticed that Boromir’s eyes watching him grew harder. “You did not sneak out, did you?”

he asked his little brother.

“So what if we did?” returned Faramir. “If you can, why not I? We have not been doing anything dangerous, like jumping ditches and racing our horses on muddy ground.” *Right, so we were chased by a herd of bulls, but that hardly counts*, he added in thought.

“True, but still, you could have gotten lost. There are all kinds of dangers out there. At least you should have told me.”

“I did not know. The idea came up after you had left.” He bit his lip, looking up to his brother with some slight anxiety. “Are you going to tell father?” he asked quietly.

“I should, should I not?” replied Boromir sternly, but then he smiled and ruffling his brother’s hair, he said, “But I shall not. I know how it feels like to be cooped up in the City. Moreover, sometimes I believe that actually you are more responsible than I.”

“Hear hear,” said Vorondil and laughed. “But as for you, little brother, I think it’s time for another treaty, isn’t it?”

“What do you mean?” asked Túrin cautiously. “You won’t tell father and mother what I’ve been up to, and I won’t tell them about your little accident?”

“Along those lines, aye,” agreed Vorondil.

“If you promise not to harm my tadpoles?” went on Túrin.

Vorondil made a face. “Why should I harm these creatures? What do you want with them, anyway?”

“Breed frogs,” Túrin declared proudly.

“Oh my,” said Vorondil, jestfully clapping his head. “No no, never fear. I won’t tell anybody you’ve lost your mind. But now we should get inside. I need to change, and we have to invent a good tale for our parents. They’re bound to come back soon.”

“We have to return home, too,” said Boromir. “What about you, Maradir?”

“He is going to come with us,” answered Framir. “I promised to give him some food-stuff from the kitchens, as we missed the market, and he was supposed to buy things.”

“Food, ah, what a wonderful idea,” exclaimed Boromir. “Let us lose no more time. See you tomorrow, Voro?”

Vorondil nodded. “There’s archery practice in the morning. Do bring your longbow. I’d like to see it.”

“Of course.” With that, he strolled off. Swiftly, Maradir and Faramir took leave of Túrin. “We have to try and meet as often as possible,” he said, “to compare our frogs’ progress. Do you think you can come over tomorrow?”

Both shrugged. "I might," said Maradir. "If my stepfather is out again."

Faramir looked more doubtful. "I hope Denethor does not find out about our little expedition. If he does, I doubt I am going to be leaving the Citadel for a while."

"But Boromir wouldn't tell him, would he?" asked Túrin incredulously.

"Nay, he would not," agreed Faramir. "But father has a way of finding out things ... Anyway, I shall try and make it also."

"Excellent. Right, I must be off, then. Don't forget to take your tadpoles, and the mud."

With a wave of his hand and a smile, he grabbed his shoes and followed his brother into the house. The two took up their things and made their way back to the gate where Boromir was waiting, then together they walked up to the Citadel. The guards were a little surprised to see them arrive so late – by now it was almost dark – but they let them pass without ado.

The court of the fountain was dark. Only high up in the White Tower a single window was lit. Looking up, Faramir said, "Father is still working, it seems."

"As usual," commented Boromir. "Come on, get rid of those tadpoles, so that we can pay a visit to the kitchens. I am starving."

Faramir was hungry, too, and Maradir looked up at the mention of food with light in his eyes. At the fountain they halted. Maradir held a hand into the water. "It's really cold," he said. "Hopefully they are going to cope." He opened the bag and emptied its muddy contents into the clear water. They swirled darkly, then settled on the ground in a little heap. "And now the tadpoles," he said.

Faramir gazed at the mud doubtfully. "I am not sure this is enough food for them. We shall have to fetch more at Túrin's tomorrow." He opened the bottle and poured the remaining water and its inhabitants into the basin. It was difficult to see, but at first the tadpoles seemed to cease their quick movements, yet after a while they resumed their wriggling. Maradir looked as relieved as Faramir felt.

"Grow, my little beauties," said Maradir, mimicking Túrin's voice, "so that we can show the others what excellent jumpers you are."

Both Faramir and Boromir laughed. "Needless to ask whose idea this was, eh?" said Boromir. "Next he is going to found a Guild of Frogbreeders."

"If you wish, you could become a honorary member," teased Faramir.

"I shall consider it. And what are you, if Túrin is guildmaster? Chronicler? And Maradir treasurer?"

"Sounds good," said Maradir with a grin.

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The kitchens were as swarming with people. Faramir knew they were even busy in the middle of the night, when the bakers began their daily business. Many of the kitchen-staff more or less lived in the place, even sleeping there. He sometimes wondered how much more busy the cooks and kitchen-maids and pages had been back when Gondor had still been under the rule of the Kings of old, with their large and splendid retinue. In comparison to that, Steward Denethor's household was rather small and plain.

When the three boys arrived in the long corridor leading down to the kitchens, they were greeted by the delicious smell of stew and roasting meat, which caused all of them to increase their pace. "I wonder if father wants to join us for dinner tonight," mused Boromir. "For if not, we could simply stay here and have our meal. I am sure the cook would not mind. And you could eat with us, Maradir."

"I can't stay much longer," came the reply, a little ruefully. "My stepfather is going to return any time now, and I want to be home before him, to give him no reason to get angry."

"Right," said Faramir, knowing that if Maradir was declining what smelled like an excellent meal he was in a great hurry indeed. "Let us see to your things, then. What is it you need?"

While Maradir was trying to recall what he had been sent to get, the three were accosted by one of the baker's apprentices, a girl of about Boromir's age with traces of flour on her cheeks and in her hair. "What can we do for you, masters?"

"We need some victuals, for an emergency," said Faramir. "My friend was sent to buy them on the market, but that is closed now for the night. So I wondered if perhaps you could help us out with bread and eggs and some milk. And carrots."

"And turnips," Maradir added. "Although I don't like them much."

The apprentice gave him a smile. "Neither do I. But I shall fetch the things. If it is an emergency. What about you two? You look hungry."

"We are ravenous," admitted Boromir, flashing her a smile that displayed certain wolfish qualities indeed, and which made the young woman blush slightly. "And that, too, is an emergency."

"I do believe that," she replied. "Wait here."

A short while later she returned with a basket covered with a linen cloth which she handed to Maradir. "This is for you, young man. You can keep the basket. And for all of you I have this." She gave each of the boys a bun into which was stuck a piece of roasted meat. "Cook told me I was not supposed to feed you too much, because you are supposed to dine with your father tonight. In about half an hour, to be exact. So you better hurry."

"Half an hour," said Boromir when swiftly they passed along the corridor, around a bite from his bun. "I have to wash and change. Will you accompany Maradir to the gate? I shall meet you in front of the dining room."

Faramir nodded, and they parted ways. "Thanks a lot for the bread and stuff," said Maradir earnestly. "You can have the money, if you want. I don't know if my stepfather is going to be pleased

if he finds out I kept it. He'll think I stole the food."

"Hide it, then, and keep it for another time," said Faramir. "Or if you insist, I shall take it and give it to the kitchen-staff."

Maradir rummaged in his pouch and handed his friend a few coins. "There you are. Hope you'll make it to Túrin's tomorrow."

"If not, try and come over early evening. I shall wait for you here at the gate, about two hours ere sundown. Then we can check on the tadpoles together, and you can tell me how Túrin's are faring. You will be alright on your way home, will you not?"

"Of course," said Maradir boldly. "It's not the first time I'm out after dark."

"Do be careful, still," his friend reminded him. "Good luck with your stepfather."

"Thanks. And you with your father, too. That he doesn't find out about our little expedition, Mr. Chronicler."

Faramir smiled. "Fare you well, Mr. Treasurer. And greet our Guildmaster from me when you see him tomorrow."

"That I shall. Good night."

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Dinner with the Steward proved a more conversational matter than Faramir had expected. Denethor questioned Boromir in great detail about how Thoron had taken to his new rider, if he was running well, and how difficult to handle he had been. Boromir did not appear to notice, but Faramir realised that through this seemingly casual conversation, their father learned far more about what his eldest had been up to than Boromir had wanted to reveal to him. As was his wont, he chatted away merrily and with no little pride at how well he had managed to cope with the powerful horse.

Faramir himself sat by and listened to his brother commending the gelding's smooth galopp and energetic trot, and watched their father as he sat at the head of the table, his face only faintly lit by the candle standing in its middle. It looked more lined than ever, the dim illumination bringing forth the angularity of the features with the high cheekbones, the curved eyebrows and aquiline nose more clearly. *Like one of the statues of the old kings in the great hall*, he thought. A pair of keen dark eyes was observing his brother intently throughout his tale. Even though Denethor seemed to know what Boromir had been up to, and moreover that it had not been without danger, Faramir detected little scorn or even displeasure in their father's gaze as it lingered on his brother, and he wondered what the reaction had been like had he been out on Thoron, racing along the causeway through heavy traffic and jumping hedges and ditches with dangerous footing on the other side. He helped himself to more stew and sat eating it thoughtfully, when suddenly Denethor bent his keen gaze on him.

“I take it you spent the afternoon with your friend Túrin, Faramir,” came the Steward’s calm voice, but Faramir thought it sounded a little sterner now than when he had been talking to Boromir. He quickly swallowed his last bite.

“Yes, I was at Túrin’s. Boromir took me there, and fetched me again in the evening.”

“And you remained there all the time?” came the shrewd question.

From experience, Faramir knew that it was almost impossible to lie to his father, or even twist the truth a little to one’s convenience, and moreover dangerous to try. So, long ago, he had taken to sticking to the truth in all but the most precarious situations. It was possible to simply omit information, in the hope that Denethor would not remark on the missing details, but that was about the only chance one had of trying to hide things from the Steward’s knowledge. In the present situation, Faramir knew the best option was to simply admit what he had been doing, because he was convinced his father either knew of it already, or else would find out about it in not time.

“Nay,” he therefore said. “Túrin’s parents were not at home, and his brother away with Boromir, and so we left also, to find Maradir.”

As he had expected, Denethor’s eyes watching him grew colder, and there was a slight note of displeasure in the Steward’s nevertheless calm voice. “And did you find him?”

“Yes.”

“Do remind me, he lives where?”

Faramir let out a soft sigh. There it came, and there would be consequences, he was certain. “In the third circle,” he said quietly, avoiding his father’s gaze.

“In the third circle, indeed,” repeated Denethor. “Quite a long walk from Lord Húrin’s mansion, is it not?”

Faramir nodded.

“I wonder how you managed to pass the gates.”

Aware of the quick warning glance from Boromir, he said, “I learned the passwords from the guards. ‘Tis not difficult to pick them up as so many people know them and use them frequently.” *Well, that is at least close to the truth*, he thought.

“Yes, I am aware of this problem,” mused his father, then he returned to the matter at hand. “What did you do after you and Túrin had found Maradir?”

Faramir bit his lip. Now they were drawing close to matters he would have preferred to keep to himself. He could tell by his father’s gaze that the Steward was aware of his dilemma. Drawing a deep breath, he said, “We went to the buttermarket because Maradir had to buy things. But he did not do it then, because we went to the Great Gate, too.”

The Steward’s gaze grew even sterner. Faramir could read the unspoken question in his eyes. His

own gaze lowered, he went on, "And then we left the City."

Denethor stapled his hands in front of him, as if in sign that his suspicions had been confirmed.

"Why?" he inquired.

"We ... well ... we wanted to try if we could." *Which is no lie*, Faramir thought. A quick glance to his brother revealed him watching both Faramir and their father with a frown. Obviously, he was not pleased about the interrogation. Most likely he was having a bad conscience because it had been his responsibility to look after his little brother. "We slipped out with a company of riders from Dol Amroth. The guards must have thought we belonged to that group."

"I see. What did you do once you had left the City?"

"We just wandered about. There were horses on a meadow which we visited, and sheep, and geese." *And bulls, but better not mention those.* "And then we returned and went to Túrin's."

"And there I fetched him again," interjected Boromir, apparently feeling that his brother's trial had lasted long enough. Denethor turned to him. He looked all but pleased. "I recommended him to your care, Boromir," came his stern, accusing reply. "And yet you broke my trust in you. Letting him and his friends roam the City freely, and even leave it! Have I not told you how dangerous this can be? Not only have you endangered yourself today – for surely you do not believe that I do not know what "adventures" you and your friends have had on the Pelennor –, nay, you also left your brother to divulge in all kinds of mischief. I must say I am disappointed in you."

"It was not his fault, father," Faramir fell in, aware of Boromir looking rather miserable, his bad conscience all too obvious now. He pitied him. "I told him I would stay at Túrin's."

"And you did not."

Faramir lowered his gaze. "Nay, I did not." He raised his eyes again, trying to face his father steadily. "Please do not punish him. It was not his fault. He would even have taken me with him, but I knew he was looking forward to riding Thoron and spending time with his friends, without having to look after me. If anybody broke trust, it was me."

He bit his lip, watching his father. Denethor gazed at him thoughtfully, his expression unreadable otherwise. *He does not look very angry*, Faramir thought. *But not pleased, either. Only ... what? Interested? Amused? This almost feels like a kind of shrewd test.*

"So," Denethor said at length, speaking slowly, almost deliberately. "So, you claim full responsibility, Faramir, and are willing to bear the consequences?"

Faramir nodded slightly, but before the Steward was able to continue, Boromir fell in, "Do not punish him, father, please. I am sure he did not leave the City to annoy you. It's just ... he has so little opportunity to get out, and I know he yearns to, every time I tell him of my adventures. And all went well, did it not? I mean, nothing dangerous befell. Honestly, if there is anybody you can trust with acting carefully and responsibly out there, it is him. More than me, in fact."

Denethor raised an eyebrow. "Is that so?" he asked, giving his youngest a long, measuring glance.

Boromir nodded fervently. "It looks neither of us behaved like we should have today, and we both are sorry. So if there has to be punishment, it should be either both of us, or neither."

"Well, I think the decision for that should rest with me," said Denethor. "I appreciate that both of you are aware of your wrongdoings, and are moreover willing to bear the consequences. As for your punishment, let me see ... You are both confined to the Citadel for the next three days, and I shall speak to your teachers concerning some extra tasks for you so as to avoid boredom."

The two boys exchanged a glance. Boromir looked relieved, 'it could be worse' written all over his features. Faramir was not as happy. Three days confinement to the Citadel meant three days with hardly an opportunity to meet with his friends. And he would have liked to meet them, to talk about their latest venture. He only hoped that Maradir would manage to visit him the next day.

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The meal finished, the brothers took leave of their father, who was about to return to his study. Faramir reckoned he would stay there for most of the night, as usual. As they parted ways on the corridor, Faramir cast a swift glance over his shoulder at the retreating figure of the Steward in his long, plain dark robes that swirled about his tall, lean frame. His stride was long and forceful as usual, yet Faramir thought he detected a trace of weariness in the way he held his head and shoulders.

Denethor turned round a corner and was lost to view. Faramir let out a soft sigh, then looked up as Boromir put an arm round his shoulders and squeezed him amicably. "Thanks, little brother," he said earnestly as he let go again.

"What for?" asked Faramir.

"For trying to defend me. You needn't have done so. It was really my fault, the whole thing, you know."

Faramir shook his head, but knowing that a discussion about the subject was futile, he said instead, "Father was not as angry as expected, do you not think? When you told him about how well you got along with Thoron, I even thought he looked rather pleased, and proud. And a little wistful almost, I thought. As if he was secretly wishing he had been out there."

"You do worry about him, do you not?" said Boromir gently, and Faramir gave a small nod, followed by a shrug.

"One should think he knows what is best for him," he said a little helplessly. "And yet ... I often wonder if he is really happy and content. The last time I recall him laugh was ... well ... when mother was still alive. I wish there was something we could do for him."

Boromir nodded. "Actually, I do not believe there is much we can do. Today I thought he could do with more sleep, and he hardly touched his dinner, either, but how to tell him that? Anyway, he could indeed have thought of worse things to punish us. Perhaps his weariness brought about his leniency, so I am not one to complain, certainly. And you know what? I must say I am rather

impressed about how you managed to defy him during his interrogation. I almost always falter when he gives me that stare, but you held your own against him. That was quite impressive.”

Faramir blushed slightly. “Well, I gazed at the table for most of the time,” he muttered, but Boromir shook his head.

“Belittling your deeds as always, when even you have to admit that you acted quite cleverly throughout the interrogation. You did not reveal anything about the frogs, and I bet you had more adventures than just visiting some horses and ... what was it? Sheep?”

“And geese,” Faramir added, laughing. “There were also some bulls.”

Boromir laughed as well, ruffling his brother’s hair. “I knew there was more. Come on, let me hear all about it.”

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Apart from a short meeting with Maradir at the Citadel-gate the following evening, Faramir heard nothing from his friends throughout his confinement. Maradir briefly told him that Túrin’s tadpoles were apparently doing well, and that the fish seemed not to endanger them, meaning there was no need for Túrin to catch them. He brought another bag full of “food” for the creatures which Faramir emptied into the basin after Maradir had left. Their own tadpoles were still alive, too (Faramir made certain to check on them at least twice every day), but they appeared to be rather lazy for they moved little, only sat in the shallow water where Faramir had poured the mud. He reckoned the reason for this was mainly due to the coldness of the water, and he delighted in every ray of sunshine that played on the surface of the basin, in the hope it would warm them.

Even after the three days, meeting with his friends to compare their tadpoles’ progress proved difficult. Maradir’s stepfather had obviously realised that his ward spent a lot of time abroad, and of a sudden felt the need to provide him with a more thorough education. Faramir also had to spend far more time with his books than before, a fact he would not have mourned but for the warm, glorious spring that was reigning outside the cold chambers, and the call of the tadpoles. A few times he was allowed to visit Túrin (most notably on the first of Vúressë, at Túrin’s birthday), and luckily Maradir managed to twice come, too. Once Faramir’s friends visited him in the Citadel (despite the guards not wanting to let them enter, so that in the end Boromir who happened to pass by had to interfere to secure their passage).

Their meetings and the comparison of the tadpoles confirmed Faramir’s suspicion that Túrin’s share was growing more quickly than Maradir’s and his. He reckoned this to be due to the better conditions in Túrin’s pond: warmer water and more food. But on the other hand, the big advantage in the Citadel was that the basin of the fountain suffered no disturbance. The pond at Túrin’s was inhabited not only by golden fish, but also a number of insects that slowly decimated the number of his precious tadpoles. Also, when his sister Lossanna found out about the new population of the pond that before had been ruled by her beloved goldfish alone, it took Túrin quite some effort to keep her on his side, and not to betray the tadpoles to their parents.

„Believe it or not,” he complained to his two friends as they sat on the brink of the pond watching Túrin’s tadpoles wriggle to and fro in the shallow water, “she forced me to strike a bargain with her. That’s what she called it, at least. In my reckoning it’s simple blackmail.”

“What happened?” Maradir inquired dutifully, knowing that Túrin wanted to take his time telling the story, for better effect. Túrin leaned back against the legs of a stone bench that stood next to the pond, putting on a most distraught expression.

“Recently, she’s got those coloured ribbons for her birthday,” he began. “For her hair, or whatever girls do with that kind of stuff.”

Faramir grinned. “And she used them on you, right?”

Túrin nodded gloomily. “Her friends were watching while she tied them into my hair.”

His two friends exchanged a horrified glance. “She did not,” said Maradir.

Túrin made a face. “I didn’t see myself in a mirror, but I bet I looked like a complete idiot. And the trouble was, she’d tied them so skillfully that she hardly managed to remove them afterwards. And all of that for you, my little fellows,” he added with a benevolent glance at the tadpoles. “So be grateful, and grow.”

“What a sacrifice,” said Faramir admiringly. “But why did she do it? I mean, I am certain she could have wrought a more useful bargain from you.”

“She simply wanted to humiliate me,” explained Túrin. “Sometimes she’s like that.” He thought for a moment, then grinned mischievously. “Well, perhaps I should add that I haven’t been very nice to her recently, so I reckon she’d been plotting her revenge for some time.”

Maradir reached for a tray containing a flagon of milk, three cups, and an assembly of small oat-cakes a servant had brought not long ago, and helped himself to a cake. “You know, sometimes I do appreciate the fact I don’t have any siblings.”

Faramir shrugged. “Who knows, perhaps you do, but you do not know them.”

“Yeah, you could have loads of brothers and sisters,” added Túrin. “But I see your point. At least they’re not around to get on your nerves.”

“Boromir is alright,” said Faramir, also reaching for a cake.

“True,” agreed Túrin. “You did a good job with his education. Unfortunately, Voro is more difficult to handle. And Lossanna ... impossible. Well, I hope that after letting her humiliate me in public, she will keep word at least and not tell our parents about the tadpoles and how we fetched them.”

Faramir watched the dark surface of the water and the pondscaters playing on it thoughtfully while eating his cake. “Has either of you considered what will happen when the tadpoles have turned into frogs?” he asked. “I heard they try to return to the pond where they hatched. But how can they, when they are shut in the City?”

Maradir bit his lip. "Perhaps we are lucky and they're going to consider the pond they grew up in their home, and just stay there."

"Hopefully. Otherwise there will be frogs all over the place."

"How splendid would that be, eh?" said Túrin, his eyes shining. "By the way have you thought about the acquisition of new members for the Guild?" He had leapt at the idea with great enthusiasm once Maradir and Faramir had introduced it to him, and was now proudly wearing a special hat he had made for himself, to be widely recognised as the Master of the Guild of Frogbreeders. It looked utterly ridiculous, like a flat frog with its legs dangling, but he did not seem to mind.

"I shall talk to my cousins the next time I meet them," replied Faramir. "Hopefully they are going to come over for the midsummer celebrations, or I might be allowed to spend the summer in Dol Amroth again. That would be splendid."

"It would be better if you stayed here," said Túrin, and Maradir nodded. "The frogs will be nice and big then."

"Then again, if you have the chance to visit your uncle, you should go," said Maradir. "It must be great down there," he added a little wistfully.

Faramir nodded, recalling the many adventurous summers he had spent on the coast. "Perhaps you could come along one day. Both of you. There are great places for frogbreeding, and I am sure my cousins will be delighted by the idea, and gladly join the Guild. I tried to win Boromir for our cause, too, but he said he was too busy at the moment to dedicate enough time to the matter of frogs."

"My cousin Edrahil is a fool, and Voro's age already," said Túrin. "And my other four cousins are very small yet. They can hardly talk. In a few years they'll make excellent frogbreeders, though. Little Beren already practises with worms and beetles, from what I heard – if he doesn't eat them."

"What about your sister?" inquired Faramir. "I mean, she *is* fond of fish, is she not? And she knows about our cause. Why not try and win her over?"

Túrin looked apalled at the mere suggestion. "You can't be serious. She is the *enemy!*"

"Exactly. Therefore we must convince her to join our side."

Túrin shook his head. "Are you fond of ribbons in your hair? For that's what it's going to end like. I'm against including her. Maradir, what's your opinion?"

Maradir shrugged. "I don't like ribbons, either. But she does seem resourceful. And it might be safer if she's indeed on our side. Perhaps we could make her a honorary member. I'm sure that would please her."

Túrin gazed at his two friends in turn, then shrugged and sighed. "Very well. Two to one. I'll talk to her. But it's your fault if it doesn't work out with her in."

It turned out that Lossanna's interest in frogs was rather low. She did not join the guild, to Túrin's great relief. During one of their next meetings, he told his friends excitedly that he had detected the first sign of legs on one of his tadpoles. About a week later, Maradir's and Faramir's had also begun to sprout extremities. All three now counted down the days until their frogs would be fully developed, and their tails gone. Again it was Túrin who, with great pride, presented the first frog to his friends, a tiny dark-brown creature on the palm of his hand, but a very lively one – twice it escaped during his presentation, and twice he had to catch it again.

"Ooh, they're going to make excellent jumpers," he told his friends delightedly. "Wait until they're larger."

"Ours still have got tails," said Maradir.

"But give them another week, and they will be fine," added Faramir. "And then we can let them race each other." Then a thought occurred to him. "Trouble is, how do we tell them apart?"

"That's a problem indeed," stated Túrin. "I haven't thought about that."

"We could drop some tiny bit of colour onto their backs," suggested Maradir. "Something that won't harm them, like flour, or cream."

Túrin burst out laughing. "Right, we'll decorate yours with whipped cream, and a raspberry on top."

"Actually, I prefer strawberries," said Faramir, laughing as well as he imagined little heaps of berry and cream hopping around. "Poor frogs. Perhaps we should stick to the flour."

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The big race never happened. Just when the frogs had reached racing-size, the Guild faced its greatest drawback yet. For Faramir, it happened quite unexpectedly. Due to a spell of rain that lasted for several days, he was more or less confined to his chambers in the Citadel, hardly even managing to visit his frogs. There were no tidings from his friends, either. When finally the clouds had moved on and the sun peeped forth again, he sent a message to Túrin. There was no reply at first, until, two days later, Túrin himself appeared at the gate of the Citadel. The guards refused to let him enter, but agreed to inform Faramir who ran down to meet him.

As he drew close, he noted that his friend looked rather miserable. "I don't have much time," he said hurriedly, after a brief greeting, constantly sending hunted glances over his shoulder as if he was expecting pursuit. "Actually, I shouldn't be here at all, and if my parents find out, I'll be in far worse trouble than I'm in already. But I thought you should know. You'll tell Maradir as well, won't you?"

"Of course I shall," Faramir said soothingly, for Túrin seemed positively agitated. "But what happened?"

"It's horrible," Túrin moaned, wringing his hands. "And it's all because of the dratted rain and our

spineless servants.”

“But what?” Faramir asked worriedly.

“My frogs, they started to move out of the pond. And all at once, too,” Túrin explained, looking most distraught. “But instead of hiding in the garden, the stupid things decided that the house would be nicer. Cat caught a few, and brought them into the kitchens. Some were alive still, and ended up in the milk-pot and in the jam. And the others just followed on their own. Suddenly they were everywhere. People stepped on them. One of the serving maids found one inside a tea-cup and ended up screaming herself hoarse because she was so scared. One of my mother’s handmaidens said it was an omen, and that the frogs were a plague sent by Mordor. Silly woman. One of them sprang at her as she was pouring water into the washing bowl. And then of course mum found out, because she almost sat on one of the frogs at breakfast. I tried to rescue it, and so the whole matter with the Guild was revealed – I didn’t mention you or Maradir, so don’t worry. But for me frog-breeding is done.”

He looked close to tears. Faramir patted his shoulder soothingly. “We still have got frogs, of which you can have a share. The Guild is not finished yet. But what did your parents do? And your frogs, were they all killed?”

Túrin sighed. “I hope not. They gave me an hour to catch them all. I managed to get a few. Even Lossanna helped in the end. We had to put them into a bag. Mother told the servants to get rid of them, but luckily father interfered. He took them, and said he would return them to a ditch on the Pelennor. You know, I think he quite liked them, because he said they were excellent frogs. Ah, you should have seen them hop about. I was very proud of them. They were really difficult to catch. Anyway, now they’re all gone, and there have been many sacrifices.” He sighed again. “And I’m stuck in the house until after Midsummer. And I’ve got to do loads of boring chores, day in, day out.”

“Is there anything Maradir or I could do?” offered Faramir sympathetically, casting a quick nervous glance over his shoulder to where the fountain was tinkling merrily into its frog-inhabited basin, wondering if he was facing a similar fate should they begin to leave their present abode.

Túrin shook his head, then shrugged. “Don’t think so. Just try and keep your frogs hidden.”

“That is going to be difficult,” said Faramir. “How is it, can you at least receive visitors? Perhaps we could help you with your chores.”

“Ah no, I won’t have that. You’d die of boredom. Although, I must admit ... maybe they’re not as bad if we’re together. I’ll ask father in a few days’ time. There’s no use speaking to mother. She’s adamant, because she really doesn’t like frogs. She screamed at me for half an hour, and she seldom raises her voice like that, only when she’s really upset. You know, I think she’s a little scared of them. But father, he’s quite reasonable, and not half as strict. But now I must be off. If they realise I left the house, there’s not going to be any visitors for the next year or two. Farewell, and good luck with your frogs.”

With a wave of his hand he turned and dashed off. Faramir watched him until he had crossed the courtyard in front of the gate and rounded a corner. Slowly, he made his way to the fountain. The short-cropped lawn around it was studded with daisies and flowering clover, amid which bees

where humming. He crossed it carefully, so as not to step on them. Suddenly he spotted something else move in the grass.

“Oh no,” he muttered. Quickly he stooped to catch the small frog crawling over the turf. Just as his hand closed over the creature, his eyes fell on another, not far away. It had almost reached the broad marble paving-stones that ringed the greensward. Where, a little further off, two more frogs were merrily making their way towards the gate.

“No no no,” he told them, casting an anxious glance over his shoulder at the guards at the gate and in front of the door to the White Tower. “Stay in the water, you fools.” But even as he was trying to catch the frogs he had spotted, there were more moving out of the basin. “Stay, stay in there,” he implored them. “In there you are safe.” He caught a few and returned them to the pond, but soon realised the futility of the venture, as more and more were crawling over the shallow rim of the basin. Nevertheless he did not want to give up so quickly. Nervously running a hand through his hair, he cast another glance round at the guards. They had noted his strange behaviour and were looking in his direction, but were of course not allowed to leave their posts. Not caring how ridiculous he might look to them, he returned to the task of catching the precious frogs.

“Faramir.” His name, spoken coolly but with some sharpness to it, made him freeze in his movements. Carefully closing his hands over yet another amphibian, he slowly raised his head to behold his father striding over to him. He closed his eyes for a moment. That was it, then. Túrin’s father might be understanding and even sympathetic concerning the issue of frog-breeding, even if his mother was not, but to expect leniency from Denethor was as vain as trying to keep the frogs in the water. Gingerly holding the tiny animal in his hands, he straightened up to face his father.

In his black and dark-grey robes the Steward stood out starkly contrasted against the white, sunlit masonry surrounding the courtyard, and the brightly coloured greensward with its friendly flowers. *Dark and forbidding*, Faramir thought. *Frightening, even*. Denethor’s face was pale, and his eyes were shadowed as from too little sleep, and the glance they bestowed on his second-born was keen and searching, albeit not unfriendly.

“Father,” said Faramir, trying to sound matter-of-factly, and not to invite too much attention to his hands, the fountain, or the small creatures moving on the ground. “Is it time for Adûnaic-lessons already?”

Denethor’s eyes narrowed slightly as they watched Faramir intently. “Nay, not yet. Although you have been missed by your brother, who said he had last seen you on your way down to the courtyard. What are you doing here?”

“I received a message from Túrin, to meet him at the gate.”

“And have you met him?”

Faramir nodded, all the time aware of the small animal moving between his cupped hands, and of Denethor’s gaze upon them. “I know I should have informed somebody whither I went, but I did not stay long. And when I passed the fountain, I thought I might remain outside for a brief time. Now that there is sunshine again at last.”

Denethor cast a glance about, as if he was regarding the serenity and beauty of the courtyard for

the first time. "I used to spend many hours next to this fountain, and the tree," he said suddenly. His voice sounded less stern and cold than usual, Faramir thought, but gentler, and almost a little wistful, as if his father was recalling a fair but faint memory. "'Tis a good place to think, and to dwell, not only on the past, but the present and future as well."

"You mean the tree?" asked Faramir, a little surprised to hear himself speak thus. It seemed almost an intrusion to address his father in his strange mood. But apparently Denethor did not mind. On the contrary, for a moment Faramir thought he saw a flash of appreciation in the dark eyes.

"Aye, the tree," the Steward said gravely, giving the skeletal form a long, thoughtful glance. "When I was younger, I often used to ponder that tree, and its history. I used to ask myself if it should ever flower again in my lifetime."

Faramir recalled that some time ago he had pondered this very question, in this very spot. "And do you think it shall?" he asked, relishing that rare gentleness his otherwise so stern father was displaying, and hoping the mood would last a while yet. It felt good to talk to him about these matters, because it seemed to him that Denethor understood them much better than others, having invested much thought in them. "And that the King may return one day?"

Denethor shrugged, yet there was a slight frown on his face now. "I do not know. There are some who still believe the rightful king will come again to Gondor, that there are signs for his imminent return, even, and that he will vanquish the Shadow in the East. Yet from my own experience, I can say that I have not yet seen ample proof for such fancies. All I have seen is the darkness over Mordor spreading, and our eastern provinces being harried by the enemy. And the tree is dead and broken, and has shown no sign of life in ages. Nevertheless, there are the Stewards still, and we shall not cease to hold our own against the Shadow yonder, as we have done for many generations. Without the aid of a king, we have protected Gondor, and shall continue to do so."

"But what would happen if the king returned?" inquired Faramir, eager to keep his father's attention occupied elsewhere but on his hands.

"If the *rightful* king returned, and his claim be proven true, we would of course cease to be Ruling Stewards. It would depend on him then if we were still allowed to retain a position of some influence in the realm. Else, we would return to our lands in Ithilien – should the Dark Lord be vanquished, that is."

Faramir cast a thoughtful glance over the battlements towards the east, where the Ephel Dúath lay folded in cloud, with a darker shadow mounting beyond their ragged peaks. "But how can he be vanquished?" he said softly. Denethor followed his gaze, then looked down at his son and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"A way will be found," he said reassuringly. "Even Morgoth was defeated in the end, if we can believe the tales of old. And of him, the Dark Lord was only a servant. You know these stories, do you not?"

Faramir nodded, relishing the conversation despite its grave subject. It was rare to find his father in so kind and relaxed a mood. He looked up to him as he stood beside him, studying the East with a keen gaze, the light of the noon-sun on his features and the wind playing with his grey-streaked hair. He looked proud and stern, and the weariness he had borne these past months seemed to have

fallen from him.

“I have read some of it only recently,” he said. “Of Beren and Lúthien.”

“In prose, or the Lay?” asked Denethor.

“The Lay. Of the duel between Thû and Felagund,” Faramir replied excitedly.

“Ah yes,” said the Steward with a faint smile. “*He chanted a song of wizardry, of piercing, opening, of treachery* – I do like this passage as well. Although, alas, ‘tis the wrong side which wins this duel. And he has not lost any of these powers, even increased them.”

“And yet you are certain he can be defeated?” asked Faramir.

His father glanced at him. “I am certain there is a way, yes. Although I will not deceive you with false hopes. We live in dark times, and they are bound to turn even darker when you grow up. No aid can be expected from others. No great alliance of Elves and Men will come to our help. Gondor stands alone in this, as usual,” he ended a little bitterly, but also with a stoic pride.

“But are not times dark for everybody?” asked Faramir. “Surely the elves and dwarves and other peoples must feel it, too. Why can there be no alliance, then? Should not all unite against Mordor?”

“Aye, they should. But their power has dwindled. The elves are leaving these shores, by all accounts, not heeding anymore the troubles of the Mortal Lands, and the dwarves are more concerned with their own affairs than those of the great world. And who else is there? Only men. And most of those hide behind Gondor’s shield, or else serve the Enemy.”

“How can they willingly serve him?” asked Faramir incredulously. “They cannot all be evil, can they?”

Denethor shrugged. “Nay, not all. Some are,” he replied. “Most of them are simply afraid. They did not join him of their own free will, but out of fear.”

Faramir glanced at the range of hills in the distance thoughtfully. “But how can we fight them, then? If they are not evil, how can we ride out and slay them?”

Denethor squeezed his shoulder gently. “Because they would slay us in their turn, if we were not prepared, or even struck first now and again. You are still young, but in a few years you will be out there defending our borders, and you will learn soon – too soon, that ‘tis the only way to maintain this realm.”

Faramir bit his lip. “I do not wish to kill these people,” he said quietly. “Or anybody, really. Of course I want to defend Gondor, but ... I wish it could be achieved without bloodshed. If those people are only serving him out of fear, they should not be slain, but given the opportunity to escape him, and live on in peace.”

“This wish will not be granted, I fear,” said Denethor gravely. He gave his son a long glance, then sighed softly. “You are like your mother, you know that?” he said softly. “She would have tried and befriend her worst foe.” A brief but warm smile passed over his features as Faramir glanced up at

him, surprised by the sudden gentleness in his voice, and the fact he had mentioned his diseased wife, something he only did on very rare occasions. "And succeeded, most like. She had this gift, you see. I have never met a better diplomate."

Faramir swallowed slightly as an image of a pale, darkhaired woman appeared before his inner eye. "I remember so little of her," he admitted sadly. "Sometimes I dream of her, I think, but mostly even those dreams fade from memory as soon as I wake."

Denethor gazed at him pitifully, his own expression grave and sad, too. "You miss her greatly, do you not?" he asked sympathetically.

Faramir only nodded, swallowing again.

Denethor took a deep breath. "So do I, lad," he said very softly, almost as if speaking to himself. "Believe me, so do I."

They stood in silence for a long time, gazing out over the City, each lost in his own thoughts. Faramir even forgot about the frog, until it began to wriggle again in his hand. Suddenly, their quiet contemplation was broken by the clear sharp sound of a bell, announcing the second hour before noon.

"Time for your lesson," said Denethor abruptly and turned to go, signing to his son to follow. Faramir muttered something about having to wash his hands and darted off towards the basin, to empty the content of his hands into the clear water. *So far, so good*, he thought as he watched the frog paddle away. Then he felt a shadow fall on his back, and dimly reflected on the pool's surface, he beheld his father's dark figure looming over him.

"When were you going to introduce the new inhabitants of the pool to me, Faramir?" came the soft question. Faramir swallowed hard, wishing to be able to dive into the pond like the frog and vanish.

"You did not really think I have not noticed, did you?" asked Denethor, his voice still calm, but with a hint of sharpness now.

Faramir shook his head slightly, his hands clenching round the rim of the basin.

"Three days ago, I was informed by a lieutenant of the guard who complained about his men stepping on frogs whenever they tried to cross the courtyard," went on the Steward. "I recalled that Lord Húrin of the Keys had told me of a similar infestation of frogs in his mansion. *What a coincidence*, I thought, *that such an unusual plague should strike two households at the same time*. Two households, moreover, who happen to be home of two befriended boys. So, Túrin asked you to meet him at the gate just now? And I thought he was under strict confinement at home, to do penance for bringing a host of frogs into the house."

"He did not bring them into the house, they went there themselves," Faramir heard himself mutter, and regretted it instantly.

"Ah, so he simply kept them in the garden, and forgot to consider that one day they might leave their watery home. Very much like a boy I know, is it not? Why did you never mention the frogs

in your account of your little expedition on the Pelennor? For there you fetched them, did you not?"

Drawing a deep breath, Faramir finally turned round to face his father. "Yes, we fetched them there. The tadpoles, I mean. And because we do not have a real pond at home, I thought ..."

"It was your idea to put them in here, then?" came the stern inquiry.

Faramir bit his lip, trying to look defiant. "Yes, it was mine."

He felt his father's gaze upon him grow harder as the Steward's dark eyes narrowed dangerously for an instant. But he seemed content with the answer, and not troubled by the lie (for actually the idea had been Túrin's). "A moment ago we were talking about the importance of this place," said Denethor, his voice steely now. It had become very quiet, and increasingly precise. Faramir knew from experience that this meant trouble. His father was angered, or perhaps disappointed? He would have preferred an outburst, for this subtle anger was far more dangerous than a thunderstorm. "About its anciency, its serene beauty. And in that moment I actually thought you had understood how much it symbolises Gondor and what we hold dear. And then the moment passes, and I find you trying to breed slimy frogs in this most dignified place. Is this what you consider appropriate behaviour? Dignified behaviour? Need I tell you how very disappointed I am in you? Obviously your lessons on the history of this realm and your study of our lore have borne little fruit. You prefer to follow your own whim, as usual. What say you to that?"

Faramir had been studying the ground to his feet while his father kept on chiding him. A frog was hopping towards the Steward's feet, and Faramir fought to resist the urge to stoop and catch it, to prevent it from being trodden upon. Now he raised his eyes. What could he say to defend himself? "Tis not like that," he finally ventured softly.

Denethor raised an eyebrow in a most frightening manner. "How is it, then?" he asked icily.

Faramir fought for words. "This pool, the courtyard ... they are beautiful, true. But lifeless. Everything is like hewn out of stone. The tree is dead. Even the grass is cut short. And so I thought ... perhaps some animal could live in the basin. And when we found the tadpoles ... I did not consider the frogs moving out. I meant no harm, honestly. Neither did Túrin. I can ... I can remove the frogs, if you want. Put them back in their ditch."

"Oh yes, that you shall do. And more. Since you have robbed these creatures of their freedom, you shall experience yourself what it means to be locked in. This summer, you will neither roam the City nor the fields of the Pelennor with your friends, nor will you journey to Dol Amroth. I shall devise tasks for you here in the Citadel, and I promise you, you will not lack occupation."

Faramir hung his head, swallowing hard. He had been looking forward to spending the summer with his cousins on the coast for months now. The prospect of having to stay in the City, and moreover with little opportunity to see his friends, was disheartening. Slowly, he stooped, and carefully reached out towards the frog and caught it. Denethor watched him coldly as he straightened up again, holding the animal in his hands.

"I shall inform Lady Lindórië that you have to learn another lesson today, ere you can resume your studies of Adûnaic," he told his son. "Find yourself a bag or bucket, and get rid of the frogs immediately. A servant can bring them where they belong. Afterwards, you will come to my study,

and we shall devise a plan for your tasks over the summer. Is that understood?"

Faramir nodded gloomily. Then a thought struck him. "May I send word to Maradir?" he asked softly. "For ... they are his frogs, too. He ought to know what happened to them, at least."

"After you are finished here," came the curt reply, and Denethor turned and left.

Heavyhearted, Faramir set to the task of catching all the frogs. He gathered them into a large wooden bucket that could be closed with a lid. He was almost done when Boromir arrived. He looked troubled, and displeased. "I just spoke with father. He told me what happened. I tried to talk him into lessening your punishment. Not allowing you to go to Dol Amroth is really mean. But he would not be dissuaded. He said you needed this lesson, painful though it be, and that you brought it upon yourself. Needless to mention, I strongly disagree."

He sighed, kneeling down to help his brother catch the last stragglers. "I told him if you were forced to stay here over the summer, so would I."

Faramir looked at him surprisedly. "That was noble, but stupid," he said sadly. "Why should you suffer for something I did? I do not want you to sacrifice a splendid summer for my sake."

Boromir shrugged. "What is done is done. I shall stay. Hey, come on, I thought that would cheer you up!"

Almost against his will, Faramir had to smile as he gazed at him. "Actually, it does. But you are still stupid."

"Nay, little brother, this time you are the stupid one. Keeping frogs in here ...," he shook his head, then grinned and reached out to ruffle Faramir's hair. "You know what, I am proud of you," he said, mimicking their father's voice. "Not even I would have dared pulling such a thing under the keen eyes of the Steward. So congrats for managing to hide them for so long."

Despite his heavy heart, Faramir had to laugh. "Thanks for trying to cheer me up," he said. "And for talking to father, even though it availed little. Perhaps the summer is not going to be that bad after all, with you staying."

Boromir clapped his shoulder, making him almost fall over. "That is the spirit. Give me some time, and I will talk father into at least allowing you to leave the Citadel, and perhaps the City, too, after a while. And to meet your friends. Just leave it to me." He cast a glance at the basin, now devoid of frogs and other living things. "And perhaps, with some luck, there might be something else I can do," he added thoughtfully.

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Some weeks later, the Midsummer celebrations having just ended, Faramir passed by the fountain on his way to the gate, accompanying Boromir to bid him farewell, as his brother was about to set out for a two days' ride to Lossarnach with some men from the company he was about to serve in come next year, when he had turned eighteen. Sunlight was playing on the

drops of the fountain and the water's surface, almost blinding the eyes on this bright summerday. When he had almost passed the fountain by, a spark of silver caught Faramir's gaze, shooting to and fro beneath the flickering surface. He stepped closer, and caught his breath. A swarm of slender, silvery fish was glinting there as their smooth sides caught the sunlight. They were beautiful, Faramir thought, unable to speak in his surprise.

Boromir stepped over to him and put an arm round his shoulders. "They are not very good at jumping, and not half as interesting as frogs, I admit, but at least they add some life to this place. Moreover, they have been personally approved by the Steward. I shall commit them to your care. Look after them well."

"I shall," Faramir managed. "Thank you, Boromir. They are marvellous."

His brother shook his head. "Not my idea, I swear. They just appeared in here one day. Might have come in through the drains."

"Through the drains, right," Faramir grinned, then hugged his brother. With a last glance at the fish, they resumed their walk to the gate. Faramir was delighted. True, fish were not as fascinating as frogs, but he was grateful for what Boromir had done for him. Tomorrow he would be able to see Maradir and Túrin as well (Denethor had finally yielded to his brother's unceasing implorations). The summer suddenly looked much brighter than it had these past weeks.

"You know, I have been thinking," said Boromir when they had reached the gate.

"Really," teased his brother. "How extraordinary."

Boromir cuffed him amicably. "Do you reckon I could still join your guild?"

Faramir laughed. "Given the great services you have rendered it already, I do not see why you should not be allowed to. I shall mention the matter to the guildmaster and the treasurer tomorrow, and propose to make you an honorary member."

Boromir smiled broadly. "Honorary member, eh? Sounds good to me. By the way, have I ever told you about that small pond near the northern end of the Rammas? Last spring, Voro and I found some huge newts in there. We must go there some day."

"Newts do not leave their ponds, do they?" Faramir observed.

"Never heard they do," Boromir replied with a wink. "See you in two days, little brother."

"Right. Have a good time. And thank you again."

Boromir waved to him, then turned to go. Faramir watched him until he was lost to view, then dashed off to the fountain, and his fish. They were resting in the shallow, sun-warmed confines of the basin now, oggling at him with their round golden eyes. He searched his pockets for the remains of a piece of bread he had saved from lunch, and sprinkled some of the crumbs on the surface, to see if the fish liked bread. They gathered round and began to nibble on the soaking crumbs. Faramir watched them contently.

“Well, my friends,” he addressed them cheerfully, “how would you enjoy the company of some newts come next spring?”

+++ The End +++