

(Nárië 24th, Fourth Age 11)

The sun had not yet risen, but in the east, over the shadowy ridges of the Ephel Dúath the sky was already tinged with gentle colours. Mist lay like a soft blanket over the meadows, so that the trees seemed like dark islands, afloat in a white sea. The air was fresh and fragrant, smelling of hay, and fruits, and flowers, and herbs, and forest – typical for Ithilien at this time of the year, Faramir thought, drawing a deep breath.

He had sorely missed this smell during the past months. He had missed the sight of the forested hills of Eryn Arnem now mounting before him, clad in all kinds of green, rich and warm in places where oaks and beeches, chestnuts and walnut-trees grew, dark and glistening elsewhere from the various evergreens, a softer dark from the many coniferous trees, pines and cedars, or silvery, mostly along the lower slopes where there were groves of olive-trees. He had missed the sounds of the forest. He had missed riding a horse, and the company of his rangers who were now riding about him, silent and watchful most of the time, lest some evil should now befall their lord and captain who they had not been able to protect back in Nénimë. Now, when he was only a few leagues away from home.

Home. That thought made his heart beat faster. For as beautiful as Ithilien was, and as delightful the company of the rangers, there was something Faramir had missed even more. Or someone, rather. He had not seen his beloved wife and his children for almost four months now, ever since he had been abducted by the Umbarian Marek Al-Jahmîr, one of his long-time enemies, in late Nénimë and had been held captive at an old fortress on the island of Tolfalas. His sojourn there had been dark and painful, but worse than anything his captors had done to him had been the fact he had been parted from his family. He had not witnessed the first four months in the lives of his little twins Meridoc and Peregrin, born only a few days before he had been captured. Nor had he attended the second birthday of his eldest son Elboron. And Éowyn ... Éowyn he had missed even more than the boys. What she had endured during the time he had been away he did not want to imagine. Although they had managed to correspond regularly (without his captors' knowledge), he was sure there were many things she had not put into her letters so as not to worry him.

In a desperate message written shortly before they had caught him he had promised her to come back to her, somehow. There had been times during his captivity when the keeping of that promise had been extremely difficult. More than once his life had been in grave peril. Yet the promise had strengthened his will so that he had managed to survive whatever hardship his captors had devised for him, and without it, he had no doubt, he would not have maintained his sanity.

Now the line of apple-trees they had been riding along ended, and the Eryn Arnem became fully visible. Faramir reined his horse and gazed at the hills. His home, Dol Arandur, the Steward's Hill as it had been named by the locals, was still hidden behind a wooded shoulder. Soon they would enter the forest and follow the winding road that climbed through the woodlands and over a rocky heathland smelling of thyme and rosemary. And thence Dol Arandur with its white buildings and the large terraced gardens would be fully visible. There were still some hours to ride, Faramir knew, and if it had been up to him he would have galloped all the way.

He must have urged on his horse more vigorously than he had intended, for it snorted and set off again at a trot. Faramir drew a sharp breath as pain shot through his right shoulder. It had only recently been dislocated and was not fully healed. He was still carrying his arm in a sling. And it was not the only injury he bore. During the past months he had been shot at, severely poisoned, and wounded by swords and daggers. The recent two weeks he had mostly spent on the wild coasts of southern Tolfalas, trying to elude Al-Jahmîr's henchmen, and battling wet, cold weather, and lack of food and sleep. He was amazed he was still able to keep on his feet, or in the saddle.

"Captain, how about a short rest?" the voice of Mablung interrupted his musings. Even though in fact Mablung was the captain of the rangers now, he and the men still referred to Faramir with this title, and he appreciated it. It seemed less formal than being called 'lord' or 'prince', and more fitting in this close-knit company. He turned to the other and with a slight shake of his head and a faint smile replied, "That would mean delay, Mablung."

The ranger gave him a sceptical, quite concerned glance. "If you fall from your horse because you are utterly spent the delay will be even longer," he objected. "We have ridden for two hours now, and even though you try to conceal it from us, it's plain to see that you are in pain. And weary, too. You should have spent the night on that ship before setting out on the ride."

"I simply want to return home," Faramir said whistfully, glancing towards the hills again. "Éowyn does not know I am safe, and I do not want to cause her any more fear and uncertainty. She was forced to endure far too much of those lately."

"Most likely the lady is still asleep, so don't you worry, captain," Iorlas, Mablung's lieutenant, added soothingly. "And imagine what trouble we'd be in if we delivered you all spent and likely to swoon any moment. She'd think we hadn't looked after you well."

Despite his anxiety, Faramir had to laugh softly at these words. "When I see her I am likely to swoon anyway, rested or not. But alright, since the entire company appears to be set against me," he sighed, "I shall yield."

"We can rest over there, underneath that giant chestnut where the road forks and begins to climb into the forest," Iorlas suggested, pointing. "There is even a small well there. The locals say it has healing powers, and for sure it does have a strange taste, like metal."

At the mention of the water Faramir felt a shiver run down his spine. It brought up extremely unpleasant memories of his captivity. To prevent him from escaping, Al-Jahmîr had caused his water to be poisoned. As long as he drank from it regularly, every few hours, the poison showed no effects. But if he ceased to, the result was pain of ever increasing intensity, finally causing death after hours of agony. Twice Faramir had experienced the full force of the poison, once during an escape attempt, and the second time when the Umbarian had decided to kill him and cancelled his water-rations. This second poisoning had almost cost him his life, and there was a chance it had done permanent damage to his body. The memory of the pain still lingered, too.

He must have paled, because when he glanced to Mablung again he saw that the other was watching him concernedly. He slightly shook his head. "I am alright, Mablung," he said quietly. "I was just reminded of the little device Al-Jahmîr used to keep me from running away."

"Young Iorlas' mouth runs quicker than his brains at times," the ranger remarked. "He should have remembered the poisoned water, and done some thinking before he babbled on about his mysterious well."

"I do not blame him," Faramir replied. "I wish I could forget about it so easily, too."

Mablung gave him a pitiful glance, then he made a gesture of utter contempt. "He is such a coward, that thrice-cursed Umbarian!" he hissed. "But then he knew that guards and locks would not keep you for long. So he had to poison you, the slug. Even to catch you he had to resort to venomous darts, because an outright attack we would have foiled."

"A broken leg would have done the job, too," Faramir replied. "But of course this would not have had all the little side-effects Al-Jahmîr cherished. But let us talk about something else." Upon this he set his horse in motion again. The other rangers had already reached the tree and were dismounting.

"Perhaps, if you will, captain," said Mablung as they approached the chestnut, "you could continue your tale of how you were rescued in the end. I think you left off when you were trying to reach that ship. The one that looked like it was hailing from Pelargir, I mean. Was it a trap, or was it really one of Lord Falastur's vessels?"



The lady at Dol Arandur was not asleep. In fact, Éowyn had slept little this past night, her worries and fears forbidding her to rest. The pre-dawn light found her folded up on the cushioned windowseat in the master bedroom, her feet tucked up under her, a blanket wrapped around her. The window faced east, toward the sunrise, toward other memories. She rested her head against the wall, its coolness soothing to her heated skin. For the past hour, or longer, she wasn't sure, she had sat here, gazing out the window at the trees and hills in their coats of semi-darkness but seeing none of them. Her mind was far from the scene before her.

Yesterday evening after supper, the letter she had sent to Faramir on the 21st had returned, unopened, unanswered. Aiglos had never returned without a reply, and surely the buzzard had previously had difficult searches. How many times had Faramir written saying he was amazed at how the bird had managed to find him after he had moved from place to place? Yet this time the bird had not brought good news.

The sight of her letter had been like a physical blow. The strain and wear of the past four months had steadily diminished what strength the birth of her sons had not used, and this new horror was another stroke chipping away at her reserves. She remembered the numbness that had set in, and the coldness. As she had written that letter a feeling of unease had weighed on her, and now it had been confirmed. She had barely managed to stay on her feet, and as Túrin helped her to a chair and called for Teherin, she had wondered if this was finally the end of the long ordeal. The others had tried to convince her that this was not a bad omen, but she could not find it in her to believe them.

Elboron had come up to her then, squeezing between and around the legs of the others.

Éowyn knew he realized something was wrong, but his two-year-old innocence could not understand it yet. She had scooped him up in arms and kissed his forehead gently, noting again how much he looked like his father. Then, she rested her cheek on his soft, dark hair and let tears that she had held back for so many weeks come. They had begun quietly at first, then grew until she shook. Over the past four months she had tried her best to hide her feelings to give a show of strength around others, letting herself come undone in private, but now she did not care about that show. She had reached her breaking point.

Now, she closed her eyes against the memory of yesterday evening, feeling more tears prick against her eyelids. How could there be more? She had not looked in a mirror yet this morning, but her eyes showed the evidence of her despair. The skin around them was pink, puffy, and tender. Her face was pale and drawn, both from her emotion and from the lack of sleep. Teherin had given her something to help her sleep, and it had helped for a few short hours in the early part of the night, but she feared her anxiety had trumped the healer's skills.

But now, in the pre-dawn, she felt her weariness catching up to her. Of course it would come in the morning, when it was time to think about preparing for the day, instead of during the dark hours of the night when the world rested. Part of her wanted to find dreamless sleep and stay there, not wanting to know what new tragedies this day would bring. There had been no word from the King, good or bad, about what his ships had found on the coast. They had gone in search of Faramir now that he had managed to escape the Umbarian's deadly snare. Whether or not Aiglos's returned letter had anything to do with success or failure, this would all end soon. The white tree had set out on the trail of the silver snake.

"My lady?"

The soft question pulled Éowyn out of her thoughts. She opened her eyes and stirred slightly.

"My lady, surely you have not spent the entire night there?"

"No, Rían," Éowyn answered quietly, "I have not been here long."

The small, dark-haired woman crossed the room, her candle illuminating the other's wearied features. "You should be resting," she said firmly. "This seat is not a bed."

"Do you chide the Queen like this?" Éowyn asked as a weak smile tugging at her lips.

"I would if she chose to spend her nights next to cold windows instead of in her warm bed," Rían answered. She was indeed one of the queen's own ladies-in-waiting, though for a time she was serving in Dol Arandur on the queen's wishes. Arwen had sent her after news reached the city that Éowyn's own maidservant and one of the guards had been indicted on charges of treason and espionage. She had not been there long, only a few weeks, but already she had proved that she could fill the emptiness that had been left. The children liked her, and Éowyn found that she too was at ease around her.

"You still have a few hours before the little ones will want their breakfast," Rían continued, more gently this time. "And you will feel better too if you rest again."

Éowyn shook her head. "Why are you always right?" she asked.

"I am not always," the other replied with a smile. "This time I was lucky. Come on," she said, tugging on the blanket, "back to bed."

Sighing, Éowyn unfolded herself, stood, and returned to her bed while Rian closed the curtains. "I know why I was awake," she said, "but why were you?"

"Last night your brother asked me to check on you occasionally after he left. Apparently, he didn't trust you enough to believe you were really asleep."

"And he was right," Éowyn confessed. "But—"

"But now you are really going to go to sleep," Rían cut her off. "As well you should. I know how much Elboron is looking forward to showing you the frogs in the garden again today, and I doubt he would appreciate it if you were half-asleep when he did."

"He never tires of it," Éowyn replied.

"Indeed, so do not disappoint him."

"I will not," Éowyn said softly even as the sleep that had eluded her for most of the night finally arrived.



"It was indeed one of Falastur's," Faramir answered as, with the help of a ranger holding his horse, he carefully dismounted. He walked over to the tree and lowered himself to the ground, resting his back against the rough bark. The high flowering grass was still wet with dew and cobwebs glistened here and there between the plants. Mablung and some of the others sat down next to him, while the piquets watched the surroundings. "And what is more, the Lord of Pelargir was on board personally," he continued. "Or so I found out later. Because that night I did not reach the ship. Al-Jahmîr's men had somehow found out where I had been hiding, and they waylaid me ere I could reach the vessel."

"How?" Dírhael, one of the youngsters of the company asked excitedly.

"Apparently they had also recognised the ship, and concluded that sooner or later I would try and reach it. So when the vessel anchored for the night, they hid in the vicinity. I had expected something of the kind, thus I was very careful when I approached the ship. Yet I had to try and shorten the distance I had to swim out still as much as possible because I did not feel strong enough to battle the waves and strong currents for long – not to mention the sharks. My mistake was that I had underestimated their numbers, and their watchfulness. One of their sentinels spotted me, and the chase was up. It was a dark night which made climbing along the rocky cliffs dangerous. Moreover the lower rocks were slippery because it was low tide, and they were covered with sea-weed. To make a long tale short, soon I was surrounded, and a well-aimed sling-shot dislocated my shoulder and sent me falling down a low cliff. Then they only had to pick me up and drag me back to their own ship."

"They must have been furious about you having caused them so much inconvenience," Mablung commented. "After having entertained them for about two weeks. It's a marvel they did not kill you on the spot."

"They were under strict orders from Al-Jahmîr to try and catch me alive. But yes, it must have been difficult for them to stay their hands when finally they caught me again."

"What did the slug say when he saw you?" Iorlas asked.

"For a long time he said nothing, just watched me," Faramir said, remembering Al-Jahmîr's expression when they had brought him aboard the corsair-ship the Umbarian had chosen for his escape vessel. "I was completely exhausted, and barely able to keep on my legs in front of him, despite the fact that two men were holding me. And since the shoulder had not been set, it hurt terribly. Al-Jahmîr obviously relished seeing me that spent and in pain."

Various favourable and highly inventive descriptions of the Umbarian and his descent issued from the rangers upon this statement. "He walked around me as if I was a very precious object, then he told the two men holding me to step back. I swayed and sank onto the deck where he stood towering over me.

'Enjoyed your little holiday on land, Lord Faramir?' he asked mischievously. Then his voice changed and became hard and cold. 'You did not seriously believe you could flee from this island without us catching you again, did you?'

'Us?' I replied. 'I did not see you out there with your men, Al-Jahmîr, enduring storm and rain and cold. You sat comfortably on your ship, ready to depart the moment danger approached. Not once in this entire affair have you dirtied your own hands, you coward!'

'I can change this right now,' he hissed, and with a swift movement stooped and pointed a dagger at my throat. 'I should have done this months ago.'

'So why did you delay? And why kill me now? Because it is so convenient that I am wounded and weary and unarmed, is it not?' I returned fiercely. 'Running no risk of getting hurt, are you? And all this with your men looking on. How embarrassing!'

I felt the pressure on the blade increase, and for a moment I thought he would stab me, but instead he removed the dagger and dealt me a blow to the temple that made me lose consciousness. I woke again in the same dark cabin I had been confined to after we had left Barad Gwaelin. My shoulder had not been treated, perhaps to ensure that I would not attempt to escape by leaping overboard again. I spent the day in considerable pain. They had provided me with food and drink, yet I dared not touch the water, fearing Al-Jahmîr had changed his mind about killing me and had poisoned it again. From the movements of the ship I concluded that we had left the bay and were sailing on the open sea now, most likely bound for Umbar. In the evening Al-Jahmîr had me brought to him.

'You may be interested in hearing that your friend Falastur is pursuing us,' he told me. 'So hope he is not going to attempt anything rash and stupid, or else he can watch you die. And I can assure you it will not be a pleasant sight.'

'Do you really think you will manage to get out of this, Marek?' I asked. 'Falastur hates me – and after you escaped from his prison he hates you even more. If he is pursuing us 'tis not for my sake, I can assure you, but to catch you and see to it you are being punished for your crimes. As well as satisfying his own desire for revenge. You have caused him quite a lot of inconvenience and embarrassment lately, and he is not a man to forget. It would be better for you to simply set me free and then run for it. And run swiftly.'

As on cue the captain of the ship entered and informed Al-Jahmîr that the Pelargirian ship had again gained on us. I was returned to my cabin, waiting anxiously for tidings. Obviously the corsair managed to elude Falastur's ship during the night, because the next day the hunt was still continuing. Then, around noon, suddenly the door to my cabin burst open and three of Al-Jahmîr's men rushed in. Two roughly bound my hands behind my back, which aggravated the injured shoulder even more. Then they dragged me on deck.

The wind was fresh, a stiff breeze from the west, and the ship was rocking on strong waves. To my surprise the southern tip of Tolfalas was still in sight, and not even far away. Apparently the ships had played hide and seek along the rocky coastline for the past day and half – a feat of impressive seamanship on both sides. Falastur's vessel was running parallel to us, in bow-range. It now flew the blue and golden banner of Pelargir. I could see archers positioned in the rigging, ready to pour a rain of deadly arrows on the other ship, and to set its sails on fire. Yet the corsairs and Al-Jahmîr's men were ready, too, and they outnumbered the crew of the smaller ship at least two to one. On the raised quarterdeck there stood Falastur, his expression grim. When he recognised me he stirred, though, as if the fact I was still alive surprised him. You can imagine that the thought of him undertaking the negotiations for my life did not exactly encourage me.

Al-Jahmîr had me brought to him on the quarterdeck. The stress of the past days was plain to see in his grey, weary, features, yet there was a deadly glint in his eyes when he beheld me. He pointed over to the other ship. 'Your fellow councilman demanded to see you. Here he is, Falastur,' he then called over to the Lord of Pelargir. 'And mostly undamaged, too. So withdraw your archers and remove your ship, or he will be slain.'

Falastur studied me for a moment. 'You know I do not care if he survives this or not,' he replied coldly. 'In fact, I would prefer if he did not. So kill him, if you have to. It is you I want, Al-Jahmîr, and with or without him you cannot run any further.'

Al-Jahmîr laughed. Indicating his men, he said, 'Have you by any chance compared the numbers of our crews? Your ship will make a beautiful prize. And you a more valuable and less troublesome hostage than him, perhaps.'

Falastur smiled thinly. 'I would not count on either. Kindly take a look over there. Or did you seriously believe I had come alone?'

Al-Jahmîr spun round to whither Falastur was pointing. There three more ships were approaching. Two looked like merchant vessels, rather slow and plump. The third however was a small, swift fregate, usually employed for accompanying konvoys and protecting them against pirates. Al-Jahmîr gazed at them for a moment, his anxiety plain to see, then he relaxed.

'Nice trick, Falastur, but unfortunately it did not work. These are but traders, and they will be

glad to stay out of this.'

'Only traders, Al-Jahmîr?' Falastur asked sweetly. He was obviously enjoying himself. 'Ah, but you will consider their colours, will you not?'

For in that moment on all three ships flags were released: blue and silver on the fregate and the second of the merchant-ships, and black and silver on the foremost vessel. The banners caught in the breeze and their emblems became plain to see, the silver threads catching the sunlight. There was the swanship of Dol-Amroth, and the white tree, the crown and the seven stars of King Elessar himself."



Dawn's light was stronger now as a plump, brown and white cat slinked into the master bedroom and crouched at the foot of the bed for a few moments, considering how much effort it would take to leap up onto it. Soon she made her jump and tiptoed up the covers. She sat at the head of the bed and after a moment's consideration, mewed plaintively. When two more cries brought no response, she shifted her position so she could flick her tail over the sleeping woman's face.

Éowyn flinched and rolled away. The cat followed, jumping onto the exposed shoulder and kneading her paws into it. "All right, Berúthiel," Éowyn groaned, "I'm awake." The cat mewed again and returned to the mattress. "Why do you insist on waking me up?" Éowyn asked, rubbing the cat's ears with her hand. "You know the kitchen feeds you, not me." She yawned and stretched gently. She had not slept long, a little more than an hour, but it had been a sound sleep and she felt somewhat refreshed now.

Standing, she stretched again, feeling some soreness from her cramped position in the windowseat. Stifling a yawn, she crossed the room to the nursery to check on her infants. Both were still asleep, but it would not be long before they were stirring and wanting to eat. She tucked the edge of Peregrin's blanket back under him and moved Meriadoc's arm so he would not wake up from a cramp. "Good morning, my darlings," Éowyn whispered before giving each a light kiss.

She returned to her room and began changing out of her nightclothes. The night-gown she shed with ease, but she paused when she came to the long linen shirt she wore under it. It was one that Faramir had often worn to bed. She had taken to wearing it under her own nightclothes after the kidnapping, its scent and feel bringing some comfort. She had worn others like it, but once her husband's scent faded, she exchanged it for a different one. The shirt she wore now was the last of these.

Lifting the cloth to her face, she breathed in. Last night his scent had been faint, and as she had feared, this morning it was gone entirely. Another reminder of Faramir, gone. She brushed back the tears that formed and traded the shirt for her dressing gown. Maybe, as she told herself every morning, maybe he would be coming home soon and she would have him next to her skin again at night instead of a piece of cloth.

She sat in silence for several minutes on the edge of the bed, alone with her thoughts.

Berúthiel had wandered off, either back to the kitchen for another snack or to wake someone else up and demand attention. Éowyn walked over to the window and pushed back the curtains with one hand. The outdoors was already stirring. She could hear birds chirping in the nearby trees and in the distance she faintly saw several deer meandering back into the trees. Then she opened the window and let in the fresh breeze. The air was already warm, and it was likely that this day would be another hot one.

A cry from one of her babies brought her back to the nursery. “Ah, good morning, my little halfling,” she said in her native tongue, lifting Meriadoc and his blanket with him. “Did you sleep well?” Her son grinned and cooed, waving his tiny fist. Éowyn settled in the nearby rocking chair and talked to him for several minutes. When Peregrin woke, she brought him over and let them nurse. It had been challenging, figuring out how to nurse two babies at once. It had not come as naturally as it had with Elboron, and this frustration combined with the anxiety of Faramir’s disappearance had not made things easier. But they had managed, and now her sons were nursing contentedly and gaining weight rapidly.

About an hour later, with her twin sons fed, burped, and left with Rían, Éowyn dressed and went to see if her eldest was awake yet. He usually did not rise as early as the twins did, which was a blessing. The three of them could become quite rowdy when together. Peeking into his room, she saw him sitting up in his bed, playing with his Horsey. He scrambled out of bed and ran to her as she walked in. She lifted him up and gave him his good-morning hug and kiss. “What were you doing?” she asked him.

“Racing Horsey,” he answered, pointing to the rumpled sheets the toy.

“Did he win?”

His answer contained some words she recognized, but he added in plenty of unintelligible sounds and half-words. Elboron was still far from the eloquent speaker that his father was, but he was learning new words quickly and how to use them correctly. And what words he couldn’t say yet he could at least understand. From what he was saying now, Éowyn guessed that his steed was indeed winning the race.

“How would you like to find some breakfast?” she asked. He nodded quickly. “All right, put your toys away and make your bed, then we’ll go find some.” She put him down and let him work. His toys found their place back in the box along the wall. For him, making his bed consisted of throwing the top blanket over the rest of the sheets, which was enough for now.

“We go to frogs?” he asked while his mother helped him dress.

“Yes,” Éowyn answered, “we are going to go see the frogs today. Probably soon after breakfast too, before it gets hot.” She made a face that made him giggle. As she watched him, she could not help but think, *Oh, Elboron, your father should be here. He would love to visit the frogs with you.*

Suddenly Elboron said, “Mami cry,” as he pointed to a tear she had not brushed away quickly enough.

“Yes, Mami is crying,” Éowyn replied gently.

Her son's face clouded over as he asked, "Why?"

How many ways there were to answer that question, Éowyn thought. "Because your Dadi is not here to see the frogs with us." She added, "Do you remember your Dadi?" and from her kneeling position in front of him, she felt the familiar sting in her heart as she saw his eyes fill with uncertainty. "Let me tell you about him," she said. She went on to talk about how Faramir looked (that he was tall and had the same dark hair), how he liked to go out in the garden too, how he used to take Elboron for rides on his horse, and always how much he loved his little boy. What Éowyn considered one of the most painful moments of this trial had happened just after one of these talks. Túrin and Khorazîr had walked in the room, and Elboron had pointed at the Southron, then looked back at her and asked, "Dadi?" She had barely managed to leave the room before weeping uncontrollably. Even Éomer had not been able to console her then.

"My son thinks a bloody Southron is his father," she had sobbed. "How can you tell me 'It's all-right'?" At that moment, she knew Al-Jahmir had won a small victory, and the memory haunted her still.

"Mami?" Elboron's questioning word brought her back from her thoughts, and she kissed his hand as he reached out to touch her face.

"Come on," she said, her voice quivering slightly, "let's go find some breakfast."



A cheer went up from the rangers. Faramir saw two men exchange a few coins. Apparently they had had a bet going on concerning the manner of his rescue, or the persons involved.

"I wish I had been there to witness Al-Jahmir's expression," an older ranger named Edrahil said, smiling mischievously.

"I bet it was worth spending money on," Iorlas added excitedly.

"It was priceless," Faramir said, "and repaid me for some of the hardship this man has caused me. He had already sported an expression of utter bewilderment two weeks previous, when I had left him standing at the railing like a complete fool and leaped overboard. But now, to see how his haughty confidence was shattered, and changed to confusion and then to fear ... It was ... well ... good."

"What happened then?" Dírhæl pressed, all giddy with excitement. "Did the King's men sink the ship? Was there a big battle? And what happened to the Umbarian? I hope he was left to the sharks! Where there sharks?"

"Not so swift," Faramir said, laughing. "All in good time. Yes, there were sharks. I am still amazed they did not attack me when I had swum back to the coast after my escape. Perhaps the sea had been too rough that day. But now they were there, and their sleek, dark forms could be seen moving to and fro where the ship cast a shadow on the water. This sight did not

exactly encourage me, as you can imagine. But of course I had quite other worries. As soon as the three ships had revealed their true identity – and thus their purpose –, and Al-Jahmîr had recovered slightly from the shock, he reacted with surprising swift- and coldbloodedness. His ship with her skilled and experienced crew was able to sail very fast, faster than the two merchant-vessels. The fregate however looked like a swift sailer, and Falastur's ship had already proven difficult to shake off. He knew he would not manage to escape, at least not the Pelagirian vessel which was closest to us. What he and the captain of the corsair-ship did then was as daring as it was desperate – at least it seemed that way to me, as someone not very versed in the art of naval warfare.

Making use of the fact that they had the weathergage, and had successfully taken the wind out of the smaller ship's sails, the corsair-ship turned and headed directly towards the other in an attempt to ram it with its massive hull and sharp keel. Also, using a small catapult mounted on deck they shot oil-soaked, burning missiles into sails and rigging of the Pelagirian ship to cripple her further and to prevent her from pursuing us. Soon parts of her were on fire, and a number of seamen and soldiers had to forgo their posts to try and quench the flames. Passing the smaller vessel by at a very short distance, several of the corsairs leaped across and attacked soldiers and crew, trying to take the ship as a prize indeed and perchance to capture Falastur. I would have liked to change ship as well this way, but I was again held by two men, and moreover, with my injured shoulder and my general state of exhaustion I would not have come very far.

Our ship had bit hit by burning arrows, too, and some of the corsairs had been wounded or slain by the darts, so we did not get away as quickly as Al-Jahmîr had hoped. The three pursuing ships had gained on us, especially the fregate. When we had completely passed the Pelagirian ship we sped on, the fire overhead having been extinguished. But still the fregate shortened the distance. Looking back towards her, I thought that for a brief moment I had spotted the King – and Imrahil next to him – standing in the bow, gazing over to us. Then I felt a stab in my shoulder. The guards had pulled me about roughly to face Al-Jahmîr.

'Your friend Falastur behaved very foolishly,' he said. 'How unfortunate for you that you high lords of Gondor are all at strife with each other. Otherwise you might be free now.'

I laughed grimly. 'You would not have set me free. Not alive, at least. And what will you do now? Eventually they are going to catch you, and you know that.'

'It does not look so black now, does it?' he returned, indicating the other ship. The distance had hardly lessened, which was discouraging. 'Pray that they do not gain on us. The further they stay away from us, the longer you are going to live.'

'And then what?' I asked. 'Do you want to drag me all over Middle-Earth with you as you are trying to elude them? For they will not cease to hunt you, however long it may take.'

He glanced at me, an evil light in his eyes. 'That may be. But they will hunt me regardless if you are still with me or not. The thing is, the longer you are my prisoner and the longer I can keep you away from home with your life in perpetual danger, the more painful the ordeal will be for your wife and yourself. Imagine, to be parted from her for years, always hoping to return one day ... and her, waiting for you to come home with no security you are still alive, her strength and youth and beauty fading away because most of it is being spent worrying about

you. And think of your children, who you will not see as they grow up, and who eventually will forget you. And perhaps, when time has passed and your wife deems the bed too cold at night, she will invite someone else to share it with her, and after a while the boys will call him father.'

'Tis not going to happen that way!' I said fiercely, struggling against men's grip until the pain became too great.

'How do you know?' Al-Jahmîr inquired evilly. 'You think you will escape? You have tried already, and failed every time. There is only one way of escape for you, and you dare not take that route because then you would lose everything you hold dear, and cause her even greater pain than she is suffering now. I have told you before: it is your sentimental love that makes you weak.'

'Without my "sentimental love" I would not be standing here anymore,' I returned. I was furious about his taunting, and desperate. 'And are you calling me a coward? You, the greatest coward I have ever encountered! Come on, let us settle the matter now! Give me a sword, and we will end it here and now!'

He laughed. 'You have lost your mind! You cannot even move that arm of yours,' he said, clapping my shoulder so that the pain would have conveyed me to the ground but for the guards holding me.

'I have got another,' I whined. 'Or are you afraid of fighting me, when I cannot use my sword-arm and barely keep on my legs? Say on! Your men have overheard the entire exchange. Imagine what they would think if you declined the challenge.'

There was a trace of uncertainty in his eyes as he studied me. 'You challenge me to a duel?' he said doubtfully. 'Now? In your state? That would be your end! Even if you managed to kill me, my men would slay you.'

'So be it! Better than having to endure your company a moment longer!'

'I will not fight you in this condition. There is no honour in it!' he stated.

'And what do you know of honour, Marek? You do not fight me because you are afraid you might lose!'

'I am not afraid of you, bloody tark!'

'Give me a sword, then, coward!'

He looked around him, where all hands that could be spared had gathered, and back at me. Then, with a curse, he withdrew the scimitar from one of the guards standing by and tossed it towards me. Drawing his own weapon, he nodded to the guards about me to untie my hands and to step back, which they did. Slowly I bent down and picked up the sword, and as soon as I had straightened up again he attacked."

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Éowyn sat at the dining room table, resting her chin in her hands. Elboron had finished his breakfast in an adjoining room and was now playing under Rían's watchful eye elsewhere in the house. His mother now waited for the kitchen to finish preparing breakfast for the rest of the household. Already a cut loaf of freshly-baked bread sat on the table, flanked by butter and jams. Nearby, several small bowls of strawberries glistened still from being washed, and a pot of breakfast tea waited next to several tea cups. Someone had gone out and cut several wildflowers and arranged them in a vase as a centerpiece. The scents drifting in from the kitchen promised more delights to fill the table.

The sound of footsteps in the corridor drew her attention. She looked up into her brother's concerned face. Silently, he pulled a chair closer and sat to study her face for a few moments. "How are you feeling?" he asked, brushing a few loose strands of hair from her face.

"Better," she confessed. "The shock has eased a bit. But..." Her voice trailed off as she shook her head slightly. "I am afraid to find out what this all means," she finished.

"You have not given up hope thus far," he replied, "and I do not believe this should give you cause. Perhaps this will turn out better than your fears make it to be."

"Perhaps," she agreed, tracing the wood-grain of the mahogany table with one finger.

"Now let me see that smile of yours," he said, cupping her chin in his calloused hand. "You look much prettier wearing that than the gloomy look I have seen too much of these past months."

Éowyn replied, her voice wistful, "I have not had much to smile about recently."

"I do not believe that," her brother countered. "You have three strong, healthy sons who I know are your pride and joy, and you have the love and support of many friends here to help you through this. Now, where is that smile?"

Éowyn responded with a slight smile that lengthened with a small laugh as she watched Éomer's look of scrutiny turn to a scowl when her smile did not come soon enough for his liking. "There now," he said when he was satisfied with her response, "I do not want to see you without it for the rest of the day."

"I will try," she said, unsure if she would be able to keep this promise.

A comfortable silence stretched between them, though it was soon broken by a merry whistle and the sound of footsteps in the hall. Soon Túrin, one of Faramir's closest friends from childhood, and his wife Visilya entered, arm in arm. The pair, and their now nine-month-old son Vorondil, had come to Dol Arandur in mid-Nénimë to help Éowyn prepare for the birth that was calculated to happen in late Súlimë but surprised everyone by occurring in late Nénimë instead. After Faramir's abduction less than a week later, they decided to stay until the crisis passed, offering further support to the new and grief-stricken mother.

Visilya squeezed Éowyn's shoulder as she walked past. "You're looking better today," she said quietly.

“Thank you,” Éowyn murmured.

Behind the couple trailed Teherin, the healer who possessed extraordinary skills and powers. She had been instrumental in saving Túrin’s life at his wedding when his throat had been slit by a treacherous guest. She had also earned the grateful thanks of Faramir, Éowyn, and others and humbly accepted their gratitude. After Faramir’s abduction, she had been most concerned about Éowyn. Birthing twins had been difficult, and any hopes for a swift recovery were dashed when news came that Faramir was missing.

“Where is Azrahil?” Éowyn asked. The young Umbarian was the healer’s latest charge, and she usually brought him in tow to breakfast.

“He is out seeing to his lion,” Teherin replied. “Last night he was out in the garden late and got into a row with a pair of guards who were teasing her.”

Éowyn sighed. “I will see to it that Beregond has a word with them.”

Since Faramir’s abduction, relations with those from the South had been strained in Ithilien. Complaints from merchants about harassment at the borders and toll stations along the Harad Road had risen, and even familiar errand-riders received less-than-friendly treatment on occasion. Despite having helped save Faramir’s life from poison, and despite the Steward’s help escaping from prison, and carrying a token to show that he was indeed friend not foe, some of the Ithilien and Rohirrim soldiers had problems accepting the fact that the young man was staying at Dol Arandur now. Azrahil’s situation was made even more complicated because he was the half-nephew of Marek Al-Jahmîr, Faramir’s captor. In the honor-bound South, he ranked low in the social order, a half-son of Marek’s half-brother, both born to slave women. As a male in the Al-Jahmîr bloodline, he was counted among the family, but in reality, he was hardly more than another one of their soldiers and assassins.

This had changed when after being assigned to guard Faramir on the island, the Steward had started to say things that forced the young Umbarian to question what honor and family loyalty truly were. In the end, Azrahil had confronted his uncle, which earned him a severe beating and chains in a cell. Faramir, still weak from his nearly-fatal poisoning, had helped with a desperate escape-attempt and managed to free Azrahil and send him on his way to Ithilien, accompanied by the lion-cub Pharzi, a gift to Al-Jahmîr that the Umbarian had put in Azrahil’s charge, himself not considering the lion worthwhile.

So despite having the Steward’s blessing, there were some who distrusted Azrahil and were not afraid to let him know it. There had been several reprimands, and now for the most part, the young man was ignored by most. He had found a friend though in Túrin, who had his own acquaintances with the South. Túrin was especially intrigued by the lion-cub which lived in a special pen out in the garden. He said the cub was a vivid reminder of his time in the South, but not an entirely unpleasant one.

“Do you know if Azrahil is planning to come to breakfast?” Éowyn asked the healer.

“He did not say, but he was not in pleasant spirits when I checked his bandages this morning,” Teherin answered.

“Well then,” Éowyn sighed, “it looks like everybody is here.” She glanced at the empty chair where Faramir would have been this morning. *Everybody except one.*



“You really took him on lefthanded, captain?” Iorlas exclaimed, obviously impressed. “Hah, but I bet he was no match for you even then, the bloody coward. How did it go? Did you kill him?”

“I think you overestimate my skills as a swordsman,” Faramir replied with a slight smile. “And underestimate his. Before we indeed crossed blades, I had never seen him do any fighting before, so I did not know what to expect. But I knew that in my condition I was no match for him, even should he be only a very mediocre swordsman.”

“Then why did you challenge him at all, and risk getting hurt?” Edrahil, who was known for his caution and thus was often put in charge of the young hotspurs of the company, asked.

“I reckon I wanted to simply try and hurt him,” Faramir said. “His taunts had enraged me, and I had endured his malice for so long already. Moreover I was really desperate. Even though the fregate was pursuing us, it did not catch up visibly. Perhaps I thought involving Al-Jahmîr in a duel would cause some distraction and draw people from their posts. Or perhaps I was simply trying to end my ordeal one way or the other, for I could not see that even with Elessar and Imrahil nearby and likely to catch us eventually, the Umbarian would let me go. I was sure he would find a way to negotiate his freedom and yet kill me or at least keep me his prisoner.”

“Yes, yes, that’s all very interesting, but what about the duel,” Dírhael interrupted, blushing when Mablung gave him a stern glance. He bit his lip, then smiled a little sheepishly and shrugged. “Don’t we all want to know what happened next?”

“Was he really any good with the sword?” Mablung asked.

Faramir nodded as memories of the fight came up. “Better than I had expected. His first blow I parried with sheer luck, and immediately I realised that there was both strength and skill behind it. Fortunately for me my anger and despair had mobilised forces hitherto unknown to me. They even numbed the pain in my shoulder, so that for a while I was able to hold my own against him. For a short while. Then, as my last resources of strength faded, he more and more took over control of the fight and began to play with me. Perhaps had I been able to wield the scimitar with my right hand instead of the left, I would have managed to withstand him longer, but like this, he soon managed to get past my guard and to wound my leg and shoulder – not deeply, but painfully. All the time he also tried to keep me away from the railing, fearing, obviously, that I would attempt to leap overboard, now that my hands were free. And I did consider that option, although the fact that I was bleeding and the thought of the sharks I had seen previously made me hesitate.

Then the inevitable happened: with a vicious blow he rid me of my weapon, and to evade his blade I dove under it and lost my footing. I stumbled and crashed against the railing, and immediately Al-Jahmîr was there, pressing the point of his scimitar against my throat.

‘Get to your feet,’ he hissed, quite breathlessly.

Somehow I pulled myself up so that I could lean against the railing and hold on to it to steady myself. The way he pointed his sword against my neck forced me to look back to our pursuers, and I noticed they had gained on us considerably. I also saw that Elessar was still standing at the bow, watching us intently. Archers were with him, bows at the ready, only waiting for his signal.

Al-Jahmîr’s voice made me look at him again. ‘You lost,’ he stated.

‘Then end it,’ I returned through clenched teeth, still fighting for breath.

He only smiled evilly. ‘I have no intention of doing so.’

He nodded to his men to take hold of me again, lowered the blade – and stumbled backwards with a cry of pain followed by a curse. An arrow had pierced his right arm. What happened next to him I did not see, however, for I had used the brief moment everybody was looking at him to swing myself over the railing.”

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