

## Strategy Meeting By Scribblesinink

A gentle puff of wind made its way beneath the tent walls, stirring the air but doing little to alleviate the heat. The maps gathered on the table rustled in the breeze and Faramir snatched at one that threatened to flutter to the ground.

"It's a dumb plan, if you ask me."

Heavily accented yet softly spoken, the words made Faramir start. He had believed himself alone, after having dismissed his lieutenants, and the numerous pages and squires always on hand.

He quickly recovered from the surprise, and waved Jake closer.

"And why is that?" Faramir was curious to hear Jake's opinion.

Faramir knew the guardsmen did not like the stranger very much and would be quite displeased to find them alone. Shorter of stature than the average Gondorian, with tanned skin and dark eyes, he resembled a Southron too much for their comfort, and they thought his manner lacked the proper respect due the Steward of Gondor. However, Faramir did not mind Jake's bold manner; secretly, he found it refreshing after the bowing and scraping at court. And he knew it was not intended to be discourteous—it was merely a matter of different custom.

Whose custom, Faramir had yet to determine. Even Jake himself had not been able to explain sufficiently where he had come from, or how he had appeared in the middle of an ambush barely in time to reverse the fates with his frighteningly deadly weapon.

He'd called it a *semi-automatic*; and Faramir planned to study it later if chance allowed—although Jake claimed it had become useless for lack of something called *ammo*. Faramir did not recognize the word, though he guessed it meant some sort of small shot. And, useless or not, it *had* killed from a distance, like a bow and arrow, but with far more accuracy and far less effort; it would be a formidable piece of weaponry if Faramir could unlock its secrets.

"Why?" Jake repeated now. "'Cause you're fighting a war on the enemy's home turf, that's why." He walked over, stuffing one hand into the pocket of his mottled trousers, made of a material that Faramir was unfamiliar with. The pattern was obviously designed to make its wearer blend in with the dry dusty hills and ravines of the southern deserts. It was

another part of the mystery surrounding Jake.

"Maybe you've gotten them outnumbered, but this is their home and they'll know this place like the back of their hand," Jake continued. "They'll have caves to burrow down in so deep that you'll never find them. They've got secret wells, while your men need to carry their own water. They're familiar with every crag and rock and ravine, and they'll ambush you when you least expect it. They'll come out at night, and nip away at your flanks, wearing your troops down man by man." He twisted away from the table and gazed out across the quiet camp where soldiers and beasts moved sluggishly in the dusty heat of the day. "It's gonna be a blood bath. It'll take you years, and even then you won't ever win."

Faramir remained quiet for a minute after Jake had finished before he said softly, "You speak as if from experience."

Jake shook himself, as if waking from deep thought, and turned to Faramir. "Yeah... Wasn't quite like this, though." He gestured around at Faramir's breastplate hanging on the stand, ready to be donned in an instant, and the sword that rested in its scabbard on the table next to the maps. Jake's mouth twisted into a self-deprecating smile. "On the bright side, at least you don't have to worry about suicide bombers."

After a moment's confusion, Faramir decided it best not to ask. If past experience was anything to go by, the explanation was likely not to make much sense to him in any case.

Jake's smile faded. "Anyway, numbers don't mean a whole lot when you're up against hit-and-run tactics."

'Tis true." Faramir nodded thoughtfully. "The Rangers were once tasked with similar duty in Ithilien, where we hid in the forest and harried the enemy troops marching for Mordor."

Jake looked at him with renewed interest. "You know guerrilla tactics? I thought—." He shook his head. "Never mind. Then you have to know this is a bad plan."

Faramir fished one of the maps from the pile. "I do. And no matter how much my infantry captains might argue for it, it is not the path we shall take."

"Glad to hear that." Jake blew out a breath.

Faramir observed the other man for a moment before reaching a decision. "Come." He indicated Jake should return to the table and smoothed the selected map out over the others. Jake had already proved he did not flinch from battle, and it appeared he also had

a decent grasp of tactics. "I would have your thoughts."

Jake rested a hip against the edge of the table and tilted his head, studying the map. A small frown appeared between his brows, as if he was unsure how to interpret the landmarks. Finally, his features smoothed and he jabbed a finger at a spot along the suggested path. "There. That's where they'll be waiting."

It was the same place Faramir himself had marked in his mind: a narrow gap between the mountains. It would force him to string his column out and walk two abreast at most. Those rough hillsides offered plentiful cover, and a handful of men hidden in the shrub could hold them off as long as their arrows lasted.

Faramir suppressed a grin. Perplexing as Jake might be, with his odd accent, unfamiliar dress, and crude mode of speech, his words were marked with wisdom and cunning, and Faramir was looking forward to satisfying his curiosity further and learning all he could.

Aye, it was going to be an interesting campaign.

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