

SWAN FLIGHT

Minas Tirith, Council Chamber, Summer III 2989

"... and so it is Dol Amroth's opinion that..." Imrahil's strong voice faltered when he became aware that the attention of the council members had shifted away from him. Something they witnessed through the high windows of the conference room appeared to be much more interesting than the principdom's thoughts on the renewed Umbarian raids.

He was about to raise an irritated eyebrow at his brother-in-law and so silently ask that the steward demand the council pay heed to the matter at hand when he saw the look on Denethor's face: disbelief, shock, fear slowly fading to something akin to panic, even. At the sight, Imrahil forgot what he had planned to say.

He followed everyone's gaze but saw nothing except a corner of clear blue sky. His place at the council's table prevented him from getting a full view of the outside world and he pushed back his chair to walk over to the window, half-reluctant yet curious, also. What could be so terrible as to cause such unguarded feelings to display on the steward's face? Denethor was well trained in the arts of politics; he never showed an emotion he did not want to convey, whether during difficult negotiations with demanding ambassadors or faced with the most exasperating courtiers.

At first, Imrahil could see nothing awry. The Place of the Fountain baked beneath the summer sun, empty except for the withered tree, its dead limbs drooping. The buildings surrounding the courtyard shimmered white with the sun's glare. Across the square stood the Stewards' residence, its front darkened with shade. It wasn't until Imrahil's gaze drifted higher that he discovered what had caused such distraction from the meeting's issues. His breath stuck in his throat, and he dimly realized his face showed a similar turmoil as had surprised him so much when seeing it on Denethor's face.

He forced his eyes away from the scene that played out across the courtyard and exchanged a look with the steward. In his brother-in-law's eyes he saw the same fear mirrored that gripped his own heart. Denethor's look wavered, the steward a little uncertain of what to do, something Imrahil never expected to see. He gave a curt dip of his head. *Go, that dip said. I will take care of the council.* Denethor replied with a thankful nod of his own. Surprisingly, for once, the steward and the lord from Dol Amroth were instantly in accord on the course of action.

"Excuse me, my lords," the steward said. Imrahil was impressed to hear that Denethor had already regained his composure and that his voice was calm, as if nothing was amiss

to worry him. "I have pressing business elsewhere. Lord Imrahil will preside the council in my stead."

Without waiting for a reply from the councilmen, the steward hastened from the room, leaving a buzz of muted whispers behind. Imrahil took Denethor's seat -- not because he wished to usurp the role of Ruling Steward, but because from the head of the table he could keep an eye on events outside while restoring order in the council at the same time.

oOo

Fifteen minutes earlier, Stewards' residence, upper floor study

"Woo-oo-oo! Whoosh-whoosh! Wo-o-oo!"

"Faramir!" Boromir slammed the book shut and turned around to glare angrily at his little brother. "Will you be quiet? I am trying to learn!"

Master Golion had demanded that tomorrow he be able to rattle off the names of the old kings, along with the dates of their births and deaths. If he could not, the tutor had added, he would speak to Boromir's father and ask that the boy's sword lessons were delayed until he showed a proper respect for Gondor's history. Boromir did not truly believe his father would be inclined to heed the teacher's request but he was not about to take any chances. Unfortunately, there were so many names to remember, so many dates, and the more he studied, the more those names and dates seemed to run together. He was trying very hard to get them straight in his head, although he failed to see what use the knowledge could be; and Faramir's playing noisily was not helping his efforts at all. Could his brother not go and read a book for a while? Or go draw something? Anything, as long as it would be done in silence.

"I'm sorry, Boromir," Faramir mumbled sheepishly. He hugged a carved bird to his chest, a gift from their uncle. The bird, a swan, course, was almost too large for his little boy arms.

Boromir's mood softened. It was not Faramir's fault that he finished his homework before his older brother did, and Boromir *had* promised he would spend some time with him this afternoon. If only he could get those confounded names of the kings into his head!

"She is pretty, is she not?" Faramir ventured. He held the bird away from himself to

admire it.

"Aye." Boromir had to agree. Though he preferred his own gift -- a practice sword, its hilt inlaid with a dark wood that Father called *ebony* -- he did think Faramir's present was impressive. It was made from a very lightweight wood that Boromir had never seen before, but that Uncle Imrahil said came from Far Harad. The bird measured a wingspan of more than a foot, with a long, graceful neck and a painted beak. Every detail, down to the last feather, was delicately carved. A small ringlet on its back would allow a cord to be attached so the bird could be suspended from the ceiling and resemble a swan in full flight. Faramir was not supposed to play with the carving, as the gift was too valuable to be used as a mere toy. But he had not let go of it since unwrapping the present and his little brother was so pleased with his bird that Boromir would not be surprised if he demanded to take it with him to bed tonight!

Faramir experimentally waved his arm in circles, pretending the bird was flying. "She looks so real. I wish I could truly make her fly," he said wistfully.

An idea struck Boromir. "Mayhap you can," he said. He got up from the chair and walked over to Faramir. "Give it to me."

After a moment's hesitation, Faramir relinquished his treasure. Boromir walked to the other side of the room. "You catch," he ordered. He pulled back his arm, swung it forward for momentum and released the swan.

The wood bird glided elegantly through the air. "Ooh!" Faramir sighed. He caught it, his eyes sparkling with joy.

"Now you catch!" he cried, flinging the swan back in his brother's direction. But he was five years younger than Boromir and his aim was not as true. The bird turned on its wing and before either boy could grab it, the swan disappeared through the open dormer window.

Their mouths wide open in shock, eyes round, the brothers stared at the opening. Faramir let out an inarticulate cry and ran to the dormer, standing on tiptoe to peer down over the sill. His lower lip trembled and Boromir watched him suck it in, biting down to keep from crying.

Guilt washed over the older boy. He had promised their mother to protect his baby brother and look at what he had done! He ran to stand beside Faramir, hoping to locate the swan and praying that the wood bird had reached the ground undamaged.

Much to his surprise, he caught a glimpse of white on the roof below the window. The

bird had not flown far and ended its journey a few spans beneath the gable, in the gutter along the eaves.

"See, Faramir!" Boromir hoisted the younger boy up so he could take a proper look. "There it is. Do not fret, little brother. I will go and bring it back for you."

Faramir stared at him, then gazed again out of the window. He leaned forward a bit and peered at the flagstones far below. "You cannot climb on the roof!" he said, shocked. "You will fall--"

"I won't," Boromir assured him. "Little brother, it's because of my mistake that your swan went out the window. I should never have tried to make it fly in here. So, I will be the one to get it back for you. Just wait here." He grabbed a chair, pulled it over to the window and clambered out onto the roof.

oOo

The roof was hot from the summer sun; the shingles burned through the soles of his shoes. And it was much steeper than it had appeared from the safety of the study room floor. Boromir crouched beneath the dormer window, holding on to the sill with one hand. He risked a glance over his shoulder and saw his little brother's pale face peeking out.

"Please come back, Boromir," Faramir pleaded. "We will wait for Father. He can tell one of the guards to get my swan."

"Do you wish to explain to him how it ended up on the roof in the first place?" Boromir asked. "Tell him how we were tossing Uncle Imrahil's present back and forth as if it were a leather ball? No, I can do it." He turned his back on the gable. He measured the distance to the swan and decided he should be able to reach it if he just stretched his arms far enough. He leaned forward, one hand clamped around the window's edge, the other arm reaching out further and further. His fingertips brushed the swan's wings but failed to close around the wood feathers. He would have to let go of the gable.

Boromir was about to make his move when quick footsteps pattered on the pavement below. Excited voices rose from the courtyard, shouting at him, telling him to keep still, and promising aid.

"Quiet your chatter! You will distract the boy." His father's voice rang out and Boromir's head whipped around at the unexpected sound. Father was supposed to be in council!

What was he doing in the courtyard? The sudden move caused him to shift on the shingles and he lost his balance. His hand slipped from the sill and he slithered down the roof.

Faramir shrieked, panicked. Cries came from below.

With a spine-jarring thump, Boromir hit the gutter and stopped sliding. His heart stuttered in his chest as he took a deep breath. He opened his eyes, not recalling that he shut them in the first place, and peeped over the eave. Far below, several of the Tower Guards stood, their helmeted heads in their necks. They looked strange, seen from above. All squat and chunky. Behind the guards, a gaggle of maids from the kitchens twittered amongst themselves while they were also goggling upwards. And while he watched, the steward joined the spectators, his face pale. "Do not move, son!" he called. "I will come and get you."

Denethor disappeared from view and a few seconds later Boromir heard the door to the study open. Footsteps thudded on the floor inside and the steward stuck his head out of the dormer.

His arm followed. "Take my hand, Boromir," he said.

Boromir shook his head. He crouched in the gutter, balanced precariously, his hands seeking purchase on the smooth shingles. He did not dare move an inch. He gazed out across the square and wondered how it would feel to hit the flagstones from this height.

"Boromir! Listen to me." His father's voice was calm and reassuring but brooked no argument. "I want you to reach up and take my hand. Are you not a son from the House of Húrin? You can do it."

Boromir tore his eyes away from the crowd below and risked a glance over his shoulder up at the gable. His father's hand seemed so far away! Denethor nodded in encouragement. Boromir took a deep breath and slowly he turned around until he could extend his right arm. His father's strong fingers clamped around his wrist and within moments Boromir felt himself being hauled up and pulled to safety through the window. His father pressed him against his chest for a moment, then held Boromir at arm's length, squeezing his shoulders.

"What in Eru's name did you think you were doing?" the steward demanded. He was shaking Boromir so hard that the boy's teeth rattled in his skull. "What madness had you possessed, boy?"

"But-t Fat-ther," Boromir stammered. "Faramir's bird--"

The steward stiffened. "*Faramir's* bird," he repeated. The slight stress on the name was not lost on Boromir and he risked a quick glance sideways at his little brother. Faramir's eyes were dark with fear in the face of their father's ire, and this time his younger brother had failed to keep his tears in. They glistened on his cheeks.

"Are Faramir's belongings more important than your life?" Denethor demanded, his tone harsh. "You would risk yourself, you, who will one day be steward in my stead, for your little brother's *toys*?"

"'Twas my fault that--" Boromir began, his voice trembling. He could not recall that he had ever seen his father so upset.

"I am sure it was!" The steward finally let go of his eldest and straightened. "I want you both to go to your rooms. We will speak of this matter later, when I have thought of a proper punishment for this foolish behavior."

oOo

It was not until much later that evening, when Boromir lay in bed, resting on his stomach because his backside was burning painfully, that he realized the swan had been forgotten and still rested in the gutter.

Author's note: Inspired by a true story, though in my case the swan was a paper airplane (!) and I was probably a few years younger than Boromir. However, I *still* don't understand why my parents (and the neighbors) got so upset -- I did have everything firmly under control... really! :-)

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