

Author's note: Inspired by Edoraslass's "A Useful Skill" and subsequent nuzgul flinging. Set within "The Long Road Home" AU verse. The character of Nanny belongs to Edoraslass.

Those Darned Socks

A storm was brewing over the Bay of Belfalas. Lighting streaked across the dusky sky, unseen except for the way the flashes lit up the bricks of the building opposite the narrow alley. Nîneth had opened the windows, so that each puff of wind that made its way through the streets of Linhir could waft into the room. The breeze carried the tang of the ocean, and the air reeked of approaching rains.

She had dragged her stool underneath the window, to catch the last of the evening light while she worked. On the floor beside her stood her sewing basket, filled with needles and pins and yarns in all sorts of colors and materials. She was not currently plying her needlewoman's trade for a patron, however, but performing the more mundane task of mending her family's clothes. Last week, the hem of her finest skirt had come loose, and this morning her son had scraped his knee on a sharp cobblestone and tore his breeches. Once his tears had dried, Galwion requested she embroider a dancing monkey atop to hide the tear. The exotic creature was all he talked about since having seen one perform at the summer fair a week past.

Boromir had taken up position on a straight-backed chair across the room from Nîneth. A candle spluttered on the table beside him, the light glinting off the kitchen knife in his hands. The knife needed sharpening, and thus he could put his sword's whetstone to good use. But at the moment, his hands holding the knife and the stone rested in his lap, not moving, while he considered the woman outlined in the window.

She felt his gaze and looked up. "Erândír?" she asked. "Do you require anything? A drink of cool water, perhaps?"

Embarrassed at being caught staring, Boromir shook his head. "No. No, thank you. I was just—" He stopped. He could hardly tell her what he had been thinking. That she looked beautiful in the fading evening gloom, or how a burst of lightning made her dark curls sparkle for an instant. He could not tell her such a thing; not after the promise he had made when she agreed to leave her life at *The Merry Fisher* behind and go with him to the stonemasters' district.

Nîneth gave him a bemused smile and leaned down to reach for her sewing supplies. Boromir lowered his gaze and slowly started to draw the whetstone along the edge of the knife. The *swish* seemed loud in the quiet room, though thunder rumbled in the far distance. He could not help himself and glanced again at Nîneth. Peeking through his lashes he observed how she threaded a thick needle with a length of wool yarn before

she withdrew a sock from the pile of clothes that required mending. He recognized it as one of his. He had worn a hole in it last week, when the bricklayer's grandmaster had asked him to walk to the stone quarry outside of town and bring back a load of freshly carved building blocks for the base of the new pier.

Watching her, he didn't notice how his hands grew idle once more, the knife forgotten. Nîneth rummaged around in her basket and drew out a small, smooth wooden object that she slipped into the sock—a *darning egg*. Suddenly, like a flash of the storm's lightning, the word popped into his mind unbidden, bringing with it an outpouring of images long forgotten.

As a boy, their nanny had tried to teach him and his brother how to darn their own socks. It would be a useful skill for a soldier, she said. Faramir, always interested in a new craft, had taken to their darning lessons with enthusiasm but young Boromir had found himself too impatient to be bothered with such menial tasks. Learning how to use sword and bow to kill orcs, or how to draw up battle plans that ensured victory were far more to his liking.

"It's women's business!" he had complained to Nanny after he had pricked himself with a needle several times. "*My* job is to fight orcs." With those words, he had collected his practice sword and stormed from the room. Nothing anyone said to him afterwards could make him change his mind.

And he had never had need for the skill, despite Nanny's dire warnings. Even during the long battle campaigns in the east, there had always been supply wagons in the rear to provide newly knitted socks or man servants to fix the holes worn in the old ones. No, he had never missed knowing the craft of darning socks—until that frantic journey through the wilds in the attempt to take the Ring back to Mordor and destroy it. Carrying on on foot, day after day after day, through lands that had not been touched by a man's footstep for years, scrambling across steep slopes, through cold streams and dense forests had taken a heavy toll on both travelers and their kits.

The big toe on his left foot itched at the memory of the ugly blister it had grown one day, after the hole in his sock had grown too large to protect it from the chafing leather of his boot. That eve, while the others slouched around the fire and Sam cooked a meager dinner, he had slipped away in the drizzle and the darkness to find a secluded spot, where he had taken off his boot and stared at the sock with dismay. Realizing he lacked both the skills and the tools to repair a hole the size of a *Far Harad* gold coin, he had simply slipped the sock back on and tried not to limp—although his foot had felt like it was on fire. The worst of it was, he suspected Aragorn had known; the ranger had offered him a meaningful look each time he failed to keep his pace steady. Pride had kept him silent, though, until the blister broke and a callus had formed in its place.

"Erandír? Are you all right?"

Nîneth's softly-voiced question brought Boromir back to the present. He realized he had been looking at her again, though this time without seeing her. His eyes stung, and something tickled his right cheek. He brushed it away with the back of his hand. Surprised to see moisture glistening, he rubbed at his eyes. "Yes. It's just a little itch. Must be the smoke from the candle."

She held his gaze, without comment, and he knew he had not fooled her for an instant. Yet, how could he ever explain?

He nodded at the finished sock in her lap. "You have done a good job," he said, attempting to divert her attention. The egg was still inside, stretching the knit, yet he could not see where the hole had been.

Nineth blinked, a bit taken aback by the odd change of subject. "Thank you."

"I—" He hesitated. "I would like to learn."

She looked at him for a moment more. "Of course." She searched the pile for another sock and found one with a hole in the heel. He carried his chair over to set it beside her stool, placed the candle on the window sill and sat back down. Nîneth stuffed the egg into the new sock. "'Tis really not very difficult."

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