

# **THE LONG ROAD HOME**

**A Boromir!Lives novel**

**by**

**AmandaK**

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## A Stealthy Arrival

"I would have followed you, my brother. My captain. My king."

Aragorn had no answer to the dying man's final declaration of trust and fealty. With a soft sigh, the last word left Boromir's lips and his eyes lost their focus.

It was over.

Swallowing hard to banish his tears, Aragorn leaned over his fallen comrade and pressed a gentle kiss on the high forehead. "Be at peace, son of Gondor."

He was about to pull away when he felt it: the softest breath caressed his bloodied face, as faint as the stirring of air beneath a butterfly's wings. Aragorn stiffened. It could not be, could it? Yet, there it was again. A gentle touch, a light caress. Wary, unbelieving, prepared for the inevitable disappointment, the ranger sat up slowly and looked down upon Boromir's body. The soldier's eyes had drifted shut but his chest rose and fell ever so slightly, visible only to a careful observer.

It was not over yet.

Aragorn sprang into action. "Gimli! A fire! Hot water! Bandages! Quick!" The orders were short and clipped; he had no time to waste on the dwarf's sensitive pride.

But pride appeared to be the furthest thing from Gimli's mind. "He is alive?" His voice mimicked the disbelief Aragorn felt.

"Aye. I understand not how it can be, but Boromir is alive still."

Aragorn knew Boromir would not live much longer, though, unless he acted quickly and decisively. Three orc arrows protruded from his body. If he were not treated at once, Boromir would die. There was but a small window of opportunity, a scarce moment in time to do what was needed.

"Legolas!"

The elf gave no reply and when Aragorn chanced a glance over his shoulder, he caught the slim form disappearing among the trees. He allowed himself a brief smile before turning back to the wounded man. Legolas need not be asked; he would bring Aragorn what he desired most: his satchel of healing herbs, left behind on the beach with the rest of their gear when they went to search for Frodo.

He steeled himself for the grim task of cutting out the arrowheads. He broke off the shafts, removed Boromir's leather vest and maroon tunic, and peeled away the heavy mail. Though potentially lethal, Boromir's injuries appeared

not as severe as he had initially feared. "You may have to keep your promise still," Aragorn murmured. "Be strong, my brother, and you will live."

The heavy chain mail had absorbed much of the arrows' impact, and two were lodged in flesh and muscle only. They would be easy to remove. It was the third arrow that worried Aragorn; Boromir's breathing had grown more labored while he assessed the injuries. He eyed the bloody lips and worried about the harm the arrow might have caused to Boromir's lung. Once he started cutting the point out, speed would be of the essence.

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It was well nigh thirty minutes later before the arrows were removed to the last splinter and the flow of blood from the wounds had been staunched. Boromir's breathing was a little easier and his fate was starting to look less grim. Yet, as Aragorn looked down upon the soldier's pale and inanimate face, despair again gripped him. His heart was torn in two directions. Which obligation should he heed? To the fallen son of Gondor, whom Death's cold hands might yet take? Or should he be true to the brave hobbits who would certainly suffer a fate much worse than death at the hands of their captors? Left in the orcs' care, the hobbits' prospects for survival grew slimmer with every passing minute. And so much time had been lost already in caring for Boromir.

With a heavy heart, Aragorn made his decision. "We cannot stay with Boromir."

"What?" spluttered Gimli. "You want to leave him? Now?"

"We have no choice," Aragorn said. "We did everything we could for him. His chances to survive his injuries are slim at best, whether we remain with him or not. Merry and Pippin need our help. You do not want them to suffer the fate the orcs have in mind for them, do you, master dwarf?"

"It is not to my liking to leave an injured friend behind," Gimli said. "What say you, Legolas?"

Inwardly, Aragorn smiled. A dwarf asking an elf's opinion! There was hope for Middle-earth yet. "We shall not leave him to his doom," Aragorn said. "One of us will go with Boromir to Gondor while the others pursue the orcs."

"What about Frodo?" said Legolas. "You mean not to follow him?"

"Nay." Aragorn recounted to his comrades the conversation he had had with Frodo on top of Amon Hen, just before the Uruk-hai appeared. "Frodo's fate is no longer in our hands."

After a few moments of contemplation, both Gimli and Legolas agreed with Aragorn's plan. "Who will travel with him to Gondor?" the elf asked. A painful silence followed.

Legolas looked pointedly at Gimli, who glared back at the elf with belligerence. Aragorn sighed; it was up to him to make the difficult decision. All three of them liked the hobbits and were very concerned for their safety. But one would have to place their fate into the care of the others. And logic dictated it would be the one with the shortest legs.

"Gimli?" Aragorn said gently. The dwarf's glare changed direction and struck him. Aragorn looked back, meeting Gimli's eyes squarely.

At last, Gimli threw up his hands. "Oh, all right! I shall see Boromir reaches his home safely. But do not take this as proof that you are right and I would slow you spindulegs down. Because I see that is what you are thinking. I will have you know a dwarf can run as swiftly as any elf!"

Wisely, Aragorn merely nodded in acceptance of the statement. He was grateful Legolas did not comment either.

Once the decision was made, man, elf and dwarf set to work without further ado. Speed was of great import; the sooner they sent Boromir on his way home, the sooner Aragorn and Legolas could follow the orcs that captured Merry and Pippin.

They carried Boromir past the Falls of Rauros, an arduous journey downhill through dense forest, and placed him in one of the elegant Elven vessels that had brought the Fellowship from Lothlórien to the shores of Amon Hen. They made sure he rested comfortably, and then Legolas went back to the original landing site to gather the rest of their few belongings.

Aragorn looked down upon the fallen warrior. "Fare thee well, my friend," he whispered. "May the grace of the Valar smile upon you. Mayhap we will meet again."

The current was swift and strong and tugged at the boat, forcing Aragorn to hold on tight while he waited for the dwarf to board.

"Stay true to the Fellowship," Gimli told him in a low tone. "Find the hobbits. They are valiant creatures, if rather small."

Gimli reached for the side of the boat and swung up a leg. His boot caught on the gunwale of the vessel, his reach not quite enough to clamber into it easily. He swore when he lost his balance. In a reflex, Aragorn grabbed for the dwarf. The great river, as if sensing its chance, instantly tore the vessel from his grip and carried Boromir off.

"By Durin's beard!" cursed Gimli.

Aragorn could but stare after the boat while it floated away.

They had sent Boromir to his doom.

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Faramir woke with a start. His hand clenched tight around the hilt of his sword, ready to slay orc or Wild Man. He forced himself to lie still for a moment, to listen to the sounds of the night. It was calm and quiet beneath the still moon; hardly a sound could be heard, except for the gentle murmur of the Anduin or the rustle of wind through the reeds. Soft breathing indicated where the soldiers of his company lay asleep while watchmen sat guard in silence against possible enemies. Wisps of clouds overhead briefly obscured the moon, but it showed its smiling face an instant later, turning the waters of the river a molten silver.

With the night so peaceful, Faramir turned his thoughts inward to discover what had awakened him. A dream, it was. A dream, in which the Great River bore his brother home. A sob lodged in his throat when Faramir recalled what he had seen in his sleep. He could still picture it in his mind's eye: the strange vessel with its high prow, Boromir's broken body laid out on its bottom, his great horn cloven in two, sword clasped in still hands. A warrior slain on the field of a fierce battle.

What did it mean? What doom had befallen his brother that he should be plagued with such visions? Had Boromir died? No! It could not be so.

Unable to find rest once more, Faramir stood up from the hard ground, more familiar to him these days than the soft, feather beds of the Citadel in Minas Tirith. He walked toward the bank of the river without making a sound.

The ranger on guard confronted him quietly, but was quickly assured that his captain's shadow moving through the night was no threat to the company, and Faramir soon found himself alone, a stone's throw away from his camp. He gazed out across the Anduin, unable to keep himself from looking upstream toward the north.

And while he stood watching in the direction of Rivendell, where his brother's quest had taken him, the dream came to Faramir again. He blinked. Was it possible to dream while wide-awake?

Blinking did not unravel the sight before his eyes. There, riding on the silver Anduin, its high prow gleaming in the moonlight, was the vessel of his dream.

The slim boat was of a strange design that Faramir could not place. It came swiftly on the strong current. It would be but moments before it would pass by

forever on its way to Ethir Anduin and the Bay of Belfalas. Fright paralyzed Faramir's limbs when he saw his dream come true, and he urged himself to shake off the lethargy. He strode down the bank of the river and into its depths. The shock of the frigid water was enough to chase off any lingering doubts he might be dreaming. No dream river could be so terribly cold.

He was immersed up to mid-thigh before he reached the boat. A sharp gasp wrung itself from his throat when at last he looked upon its bottom. Another image from his dream was mirrored in reality: his brother, sword clasped in his hands and the horn in two pieces at his side. His brother's eyes were closed, and his face was pale in the moonlight.

"Boromir," Faramir whispered through burning tears, "what terrible fate has befallen you? Who has slain you?"

When he made to drag the boat ashore, a tiny gasp escaped the motionless form on the bottom. Faramir's heart leaped with joy at the sound. "You are not dead, brother!" he cried.

His cry alerted the guards and they helped him pull the boat out of the water. "Lord Boromir is in bad shape," one of his men informed the captain, rather needlessly.

"He must be taken to the Houses of Healing as quickly as we can," Faramir agreed. "I will take him there myself." He would entrust such a task to none but himself.

Orders were passed and carried out quickly, and the new day was still hours away when Faramir set out for Minas Tirith with a small escort, leaving the remainder of the rangers to guard the western banks of the Anduin.

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Many hours later, the city came into view just when the sky to the east was finally growing pale. Golden rays of sunshine stabbed through the dark poisonous cloud spewed out by Mount Orodruin and struck the Tower of Ecthelion standing watch over the city. The white tower flared, a beacon in the gloom of daybreak. The banner displaying the White Tree of Gondor flapped in the wind. And there wasn't a man among the rangers, hardened soldiers though they might be, whom the sheer beauty of the radiant city did not awe. Though none spoke out loud, many of them repeated in their minds the words of the oath sworn to their steward and their land, and vowed they would defend its people to their last breath.

Faramir bent forward and leaned over the bier that carried his brother's body. "Behold, Boromir," he whispered, "our city welcomes you."

Much to the captain's surprise and his intense joy, Boromir chose that moment to wake, as if he had been waiting to hear those words. His eyes fluttered open, and they slowly focused on Faramir's face. For a moment he looked confused, then recognition set in.

"I failed our people," Boromir whispered, his voice so low that Faramir had to lean closer to make out the words. "I broke my vows; I shamed us all. Do not tell Father I am here."

Boromir's request took Faramir by surprise. No matter what had happened, Boromir would not have failed in their father's eyes. "He will be so pleased to have you back," he reassured his brother. He should feel bitter about it, except he was too happy to have Boromir home.

"No!" Boromir clutched at a fold of Faramir's cloak. "Please."

Gently, Faramir freed his brother's hand and put it back on the bier. "Peace, Boromir. We will talk of this later. First, we must get you to the healers quickly."

"No healers. They know me... too well." Boromir's fingers wrapped themselves about Faramir's wrist. His grip was cold and weak, yet strong in its urgency. "You must... promise me." He tried to pull himself up and Faramir gently pressed him back.

"Stay down, Boromir. You are too weakened to get up."

"You must... swear. Tell... no one." Boromir's voice was weakening and he was having increasing trouble getting the words out.

Faramir frowned. Boromir did not have the time to waste on such discussion. "All right, I will promise, as long as it keeps you calm. I will not let anyone know you have returned. But I am going to have the Warden of the Houses take a look at you, whether you like it or not."

His last words fell on deaf ears, for his brother's eyes had closed again, and although his breathing was regular, for the time being the cares of the world were no longer Boromir's to bear. Faramir was left to mull over his brother's agitated plea. Whoever had sent Boromir down the river had done so with great respect. They had cared for his wounds, laid him out in the most comfortable position and placed his sword and horn with him. Signs they held him in the highest regard, a soldier fallen with honor. Yet his brother confessed to vow-breaking and failure. Were those the delirious ramblings of a man caught in a fever?

It was best not to act rashly; for now, he would respect his brother's wish, although it would pain him to see their father longing for the return of his oldest child needlessly. Mayhap Boromir had good reason for secrecy. Discussions could wait until his brother was awake and lucid. Then he would

convince him to return to the Citadel and report to the steward about his journey. First, it was of vital concern to bring Boromir to the Houses of Healing, where they could nurse him back to health.

Faramir called his rangers about him. "Nobody is to speak about what transpired tonight," he told them. "Captain Boromir's return must remain a secret, for the time being. I want your word you will not tell a soul."

The soldiers exchanged startled glances, but one after the other dipped his head in consent.

"Good." Faramir nodded, satisfied they would keep silent, if that was what their captains wished from them. "Then let us make haste. I fear Captain Boromir is in dire need of a healer's attention."

The guards at the Great Gate waved them through as soon as they recognized the captain of the rangers. They never looked at the injured man on the stretcher. It was early enough in the morning that the good citizens of Minas Tirith were still rubbing the sleep from their eyes. They also barely paid notice to the small band of rangers carrying a bier up the steep streets of the city and the company reached the sixth circle without a problem.

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Dark and terrifying were Boromir's dreams. Caught in the grip of a tenacious fever, he could not discern reality from nightmares. What was real? The cool hand brushing strands of hair from his forehead, where they clung to sweaty skin? The soft voice, calm and comforting in its tones, although Boromir could not understand the words? Or the thousands upon thousands of fighting orcs, the Uruk-hai, who came marching down the Pelennor Fields, as unstoppable as the waves of the sea? What was dream, what was nightmare?

*Frozen to immobility, Boromir watched orcs break down the Great Gate and pour into Minas Tirith. He was a spectator while the hordes of Mordor brought his city to ruin, murdering the men, raping the women and devouring the children of Gondor raw. "No," he cried, "please! I did not mean to take it." For it was his fault, his alone -- Boromir son of Denethor -- that Gondor fell. "You failed me," Denethor accused him, his voice so filled with loathing Boromir's heart grew cold in his chest. "I tried," he whispered, "I tried."*

*The scourge from the east spread all across Middle-earth. He traveled with the orcs and stood by while they brought destruction to the beautiful forest of Lothlórien, burning the mellyrn and casting the Elves into the deepest dungeons they could find, pits so dark even the light of Lady Galadriel could not penetrate them. The hordes swarmed through Rivendell and laughed while they trampled the shards of Narsil beneath their booted feet and sent the house of Lord Elrond up in flames. The Shire, that green and peaceful land*

*Boromir only knew from the halflings' tales, fell under the shadow of Sauron, as did Rohan and Mirkwood and Eriador, and all the lands of the free folk.*

Faramir visited his brother again the eve before he returned to Ithilien. He watched his sibling suffer in the claws of terrible dreams, and his heart cried. There was nothing anyone could do to lighten Boromir's torment.

"'Tis a strange fever that holds him, my lord," the warden told Faramir. "I know not how to break it. I have done all I can and now we can do naught but wait. Lord Boromir might awaken in an hour, or a month." He paused. "Or he might not wake at all. Perhaps I should send word to--"

"Do not!" Faramir interrupted. "I will inform the Steward myself if all hope is lost and his presence is required. Not before."

*Round, blue eyes, filled with mistrust, turned their accusing gaze upon him. Boromir cringed beneath their heat. "I am sorry," he whispered. "I did not see. I failed us all." The eyes changed shape and color, darkening to a deep gray. A kind voice spoke. "You fought bravely. You kept your honor," it said. "No!" Boromir cried. "Do not speak such a lie. 'Tis not true!" He tried to twist away from the gray gaze and hands clasped around his shoulders, keeping him still. "Then make it true," the voice commanded. Boromir finally recognized it and he grew calm, filled with sudden purpose and understanding. "By your command I shall, my king," he whispered.*

The warden put his hands upon Boromir's brow and felt his skin. A tiny smile tugged at the corners of his lips. "The fever has broken."

The woman who tended Boromir heaved a sigh filled with relief.

"Aye." The warden looked at her. "He will be thirsty when he wakes. Give him some tea if he desires it. And call me if there is any change in his condition."

She nodded her acquiescence silently. The warden turned back to look down upon Boromir for a moment. For the first time since they had brought him in, his patient's features were not contorted with dread and anguish.

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Slowly, reluctantly, Boromir floated up from interminable darkness. It was like swimming through a thick, viscous liquid. His arms and legs felt too heavy to move, and he wanted to stay in this void, this place filled with emptiness. Outside waited pain and torment and despair; which he feared. Inside he was as safe as a babe in its mother's womb. Yet the spark of consciousness refused to obey his desires and go back to sleep, and instead pulled and pushed at him until at last he broke free from the black and opened his eyes.

Sunlight from a window set high in the wall flooded the small room he lay in. Judging by the color of the light -- a warm red -- the window faced to the west, and the sun was close to setting. A furrow appeared between his brows. He had no knowledge of how he came to be here, or even where 'here' was. The last thing he remembered--

A gasp escaped him. "The little ones! They took the little ones." He struggled to sit up but every time he managed to get an elbow beneath him, it buckled and he fell back on the mattress. He let out a frustrated growl. Merry and Pippin had been taken by orcs and needed his help.

Strange hands, gentle but firm, helped him sit up. Boromir looked at the woman who steadied him. She was dressed in the garb of a servant, and the emblem of the Houses of Healing was embroidered above her left breast. So he was in Minas Tirith. Tiny crows' feet surrounded her green eyes, which currently looked down on him with concern, and gray streaked her hair. She was a little heavier than was currently in fashion among the noblewomen, but it made her look kind and motherly, and that was a proper guise for someone who worked in the Houses.

She fluffed up the pillows behind him, and by the time she helped him rest his upper body against them, he was grateful for their support. How could he go and rescue Merry and Pippin from the Uruk-hai when he was too weak to help himself? He closed his eyes in despair.

She tugged on his hand. He refused to acknowledge her and her pull grew more insistent.

He wanted to deny her, wanted to wallow in hopelessness and guilt except his body had other ideas. His mouth was dry and the thought of water made his throat constrict painfully. He forced his eyes open and turned them on the woman by his bedside.

"Will you--" Boromir stopped. His voice, grown rusty from long disuse, sounded like an unoiled wagon wheel.

She put a cup against his lips. It contained cool water and he swallowed several gulps eagerly.

When the cup was nearly finished, he tried again. "Tell me what happened," he demanded, and was pleased to find his voice sounded much stronger. "How did I get here?"

She did not answer. Instead, she shook her head and pointed at her throat.

"You cannot speak?"

The woman firmly nodded.

Was that not the cruelest irony? So many urgent questions he needed to have answered, and they had entrusted him to a mute nurse.

She held up a bowl, a question on her face. A strong, delicious smell drifted from it. His stomach growled. The questions would have to wait.

"Yes, I am hungry," he said. "Broth will be good."

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A short while later, Boromir swallowed the last spoonful of soup and rested among the pillows with a contented sigh. The woman put the empty bowl on the bedside table. At first, Boromir had balked when she began to spoon-feed him, but once he learned how heavy a spoon could be, and what hard work eating was, he relented. Now, exhausted and satisfied, sleep threatened to overtake him. He struggled against it, forcing himself to remain awake.

"So, will someone now tell me what has happened? How long have I been here? Who brought me? Who knows I am in Minas Tirith?"

A quick handwave told him to wait and she scurried from the room. A few minutes later she returned with the Warden of the Houses in tow.

"I see you are feeling better, Lord Boromir. Ethiel tells me you have many questions."

"I do."

"Let me try and answer some of them," the warden said. "You have been ill for many days. A fever held you and many a time we feared for your life. 'Twas your brother who brought you."

"Faramir?" Boromir frowned. He did have a vague recollection of talking to Faramir in his dreams. Perhaps that had not been a dream at all.

"Aye. He never said much, only that he found you, injured and unconscious. We know not what befell you before although orcs must have attacked you, judging by your wounds. Someone cleaned them, someone with great skill at healing. I would desire to meet this person and learn more of his lore."

"Aragorn," Boromir murmured. The last person he remembered seeing was Aragorn. His king, risking his life to keep the Uruk-hai from killing the man who betrayed their quest. He swallowed. He had not deserved such kindness. When the orc stood before him, arrow notched and bow drawn tight, Boromir had resigned himself to his fate. It would have been a fitting penalty for his crime.

"My lord?"

"Nothing," he said. "Please, continue."

"There is not much more to tell. You were ill, and you will soon be well again."

Boromir grunted. So much time must have passed since he fell to the orc arrows, and he could not ask about the things he most needed to know, or he would reveal Frodo's quest. He had already betrayed the brave hobbit once; he would not do so again. So he held his peace, and did not ask about Aragorn, or Gimli, or the halflings carried off by the orcs.

A thought occurred to him, a question the warden had not answered yet. "Who knows I'm here?"

"Not many, my lord, and they are commanded to secrecy," he said. "Captain Faramir gave strict orders. We placed you in a little-used wing of the Houses, the servants are instructed to stay away and I am the only one to attend you."

"And the nurse." He gestured at the woman who stood silently near the door, waiting for when her services would be needed. "She knows I am here."

"Ethiel, aye. But as you will have noticed, she is mute. She will not gossip."

"For now, my brother's orders stand," Boromir said. "I would like to continue to keep my presence here confidential." Suddenly exhausted beyond measure, he sank deeper into the pillows. Although the warden could not tell him much, he had a lot to think about and sleep crept ever closer in its attempt to claim him.

The warden caught the weariness in his expression. "You need to rest, my lord. It will be a while before your strength returns. I shall be here if you need anything."

Ethiel helped him lie down and drew the covers up to his chin.

"Thank you," Boromir whispered. He wanted to say more, but sleep took him.

## Battles Fought

Despite worry about his people and despair about the Fellowship's fate, Boromir's body demanded more rest. It wasn't long before he fell asleep once more. The next days passed in a blur of deep, healing sleep, and nourishing meals -- Ethiel soon learned he was quite capable of feeding himself again. News from the war was scarce and Boromir resigned to idle fretting when the warden refused to let him leave his room.

Boredom drove him out of bed and he staggered around the chamber on trembling legs. Each time he tried, he managed a few more steps before he grew short-winded and weakness forced him back into bed. Gradually, his strength was returning.

As many waking hours as he could, he pushed himself to the limits of his endurance, causing the arrow wounds to ache and injured muscles to throb. News might be sparse, but war could not be far off and he would not spend his days in a sickroom while his country needed him.

One afternoon, about five days after he first woke from his fever, Boromir used his sword-arm to raise a small stool above his head. He tried to hold it up as long as he could. His arm was trembling, the muscles in his chest and side screamed in protest. He closed his eyes, counting the seconds. Fifty. Fifty-one. Fif--

A loud gasp broke his concentration and he dropped the stool; it crashed onto the flagstones, and one of its legs broke off. Boromir's eyes flung open to see the disapproving face of Ethiel stare at him from the door opening. She gestured angrily that he should get back into bed.

*At least she cannot scold me.*

However, Ethiel did not need words to give voice to her discontent. Her hand motions made it clear she would call the warden on him if he did not withdraw to his blankets immediately.

Boromir had no desire to confront the warden or hear the healer's dire warnings about taxing himself too soon. He shrugged an apology at Ethiel and sipped the tea she brought while she took away the ruined stool.

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Much to his surprise, dusk had come and gone when he next opened his eyes. The window was dark; a dozen candles bathed his room with their golden glow. Someone sat in the chair beside the bed. The man's face was hidden in shadows, but Boromir recognized him instantly.

"Faramir."

The soft word was enough to alert his brother and Faramir closed the thick leather-bound book that rested on his knees. A pleased smile lit up his features when he leaned forward and let the candlelight fall upon his face. Despite the smile, however, Boromir caught the deep concern in his brother's gaze.

"I was told you had awoken, brother. Yet I found you fast asleep."

Boromir uttered a chagrined noise. "Not by choice, I assure you. I suspect it is something they put in my tea."

"You always were a difficult patient," Faramir chortled before his face turned grave. "Your fate was uncertain for a time. We have much to discuss, but I fear our time grows short."

"How is Father?" Boromir asked. "Have you said--"

"Nay." Faramir shook his head. "You asked he not be told, so I have said nothing to him of your return. Although I cannot understand why you would want such a thing, he believes you have passed out of this world. It pains him much and I worry about him. I fear his need for answers has led him astray, down a path that leads to shadow. Perhaps you could talk to him. He listens to you, Boromir."

"Ah, little brother." Boromir sighed. "I fear I would only make matters worse. I am not the son Denethor believes me to be."

"What mean you? What happened to you on your quest? Will you not tell me?"

"No," Boromir said. "I am ashamed."

Faramir did not respond, except to cock an eyebrow in surprise.

Boromir tried to think of a change of subject, unwilling to answer the silent question. Yet in the next instant, he found himself unburdening his heart after all, pouring his woes into his younger brother's attentive ear. He told him about the visit to Rivendell and what was discussed at the Council of Elrond. He explained about the Fellowship, and their journey south to take the ring to Mordor to destroy it. And he told Faramir about his betrayal on Amon Hen, where he tried to take the ring from Frodo by force.

"It is my fault we were divided when the orcs attacked," he finished. "My fault that the little ones were taken. I did not see; I believed I asked only for the strength to defend my people."

In the silence that followed, Boromir waited for Faramir to denounce him, to condemn him for his heinous crimes. He could no longer face his brother and turned away to stare at the darkened window.

"I shall not judge you, Boromir," Faramir said after a lengthy pause. His voice was gentle, not at all what Boromir had expected. "I, too, have experienced the lure of the ring. I have heard its false promises and was tempted by them."

Boromir turned back, looking straight at his brother for the first time since he began to tell his tale. "How can that be?" he asked, torn between hope and despair. Had Frodo failed?

"I have met the halfling you speak of," Faramir said. "The Ringbearer. With him was another, Samwise, who said he was his gardener. We took them captive near Henneth Annûn, believing them to be spies for the enemy."

"Spies?" cried Boromir, sitting up. "No, they are not spies. Faramir, you must release them at once."

"Peace, brother," Faramir shushed him. "Do not fret, I sent them on their way already."

Relieved, Boromir fell back in the cushions. "What news about the other members of the Fellowship?"

Faramir shook his head. "I do not know much. Except Mithrandir arrived today, with another halfling. Peregrin is his name, I believe."

"Pippin! He's alive." Boromir let out a sob of happiness. "What about M-- Wait, did you say Mithrandir? But... I saw him fall in Moria."

"I do not know what happened, I have not had the chance to talk to him alone. But I can assure you, brother, Mithrandir is here and he is well. He spoke to Father about a great battle at Helm's Deep, where the Rohirrim fought a brave and hopeless fight, and yet were victorious. The troops of Saruman are destroyed. Mithrandir is counseling Father to light the beacons and call for Rohan's aid in the fight against Mordor."

"Much luck to him," Boromir muttered. He knew well how graciously Denethor would accept advice from the wizard.

Faramir snorted with wry laughter. "Mithrandir will try anyway. I am sorry I have no more news to tell you of your companions."

Silence reigned for long minutes. "Will you not tell Father of your return?" Faramir asked at last.

"And tell him of my failure? Open myself up to his scorn? Nay, I could not bear it," Boromir whispered. The memories of his deeds on Amon Hen as well

as at his further cowardice about confronting his father already shamed him almost beyond bearing. He had witnessed Denethor denigrate Faramir often enough to know his father's reproach would be too much to endure if heaped upon his own guilt and remorse. "It is better he believes me dead."

"I understand," Faramir said softly. He looked away from Boromir.

Boromir reached over, clasping Faramir's hands between his. "Does he still not acknowledge your quality, Captain of Gondor?"

"He told me he wishes our places had been exchanged," Faramir said in a toneless voice. "I am to ride out on the morrow, with a company of our best soldiers. I have been ordered to take back Osgiliath, which was lost once more. Perhaps I can at last prove to him I am as much his son as you are."

"What?" Boromir said. He sat up straighter, ignoring the twinge in his chest at the abrupt movement. "That is folly. If Osgiliath has fallen into the hands of the enemy again, you will need more than a company to take it back. He cannot ask such a thing of you, or any of our soldiers. 'Tis madness!"

"Aye. Yet it is our Steward's bidding."

"Suicide, is what it is," Boromir said. He swung his legs out from underneath the blankets. "I shall come with you. Together, we will cast the orcs out once more and reclaim Osgiliath."

Faramir's firm hands on his arm stilled him. "Not this time, brother," he said, a sad smile on his lips.

Boromir's heart grew tight in his chest. Did Faramir no longer trust him to fight at his side?

Some of his dismay must have shown in his face, because Faramir shook his head decisively.

"No, Boromir, please do not think that. There is none I would rather have at my side in battle than you." Faramir gave his brother's arm a squeeze. "But by rights, you should already be dead. Those orc arrows would have killed anyone else. That you did not die, must mean something. I know not what your future will be, but dying at Osgiliath would serve no purpose. Boromir, this is my fight, and mine alone." He was no longer talking about the mission to take back Osgiliath, and they both knew it.

After a lengthy pause, Boromir bowed to his brother's will. He was grateful Faramir made no mention of the weakness caused by his sickbed; but he was in no shape to fight such a desperate battle.

"Farewell, little brother," he said. "My heart shall go with you."

"And I will carry it gladly."

The younger of the Steward's sons pushed his chair back, and without a further word, he strode from the room. He hesitated for a moment on the threshold, then closed the door behind him without even a glance over his shoulder. Boromir was glad, for now Faramir could not see the tears forming in his eyes. He did not think he would see his brother again in this lifetime.

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Boromir waited impatiently for further word. Neither of his caretakers could provide him with news about his brother's fate. In an attempt to distract himself from his worries, he continued to exercise relentlessly. He ignored the Warden's warnings and Ethiel's silent censure and was pleased to find his strength returning slowly yet steadily.

The third morning after Faramir's departure Boromir awoke to the sounds of screaming in the distance and the faint scent of smoke in the air. Echoing thunderclaps made the ground shake. His soldier's mind understood at once: the war had come to the gates of Minas Tirith at last.

Cursing at the weakness that still lingered in his limbs, Boromir hastened from his bed. As soon as he stood, he was at a loss. No soldier, not even one fallen from grace as badly as he had, could go to war covered to his knees in a white nightshirt. Fortunately, in the moment of his indecision and before he could do anything rash and foolish, the door opened and Ethiel came in, her arms filled with a breakfast tray.

Her eyes widened in surprise when she saw him up and about at this early hour. She put the tray on the table and gestured frantically. Boromir translated her message as an apology that she was late but that much was happening in the city.

"She must think I'm deaf, dumb and blind," he said below his breath. Another tremor shook the room and Ethiel cringed. "My clothes, woman. Where are my clothes?"

She began shaking her head. He grabbed her shoulders and shook her hard.

"The city is under siege. Gondor needs me. Now, bring me my armor and my sword. At once."

Understanding shone in Ethiel's eyes, warring with concern for her patient. At last, she nodded, if a little reluctant. She pointed at the breakfast.

"All right," Boromir said, letting go of her. "I will eat something if you go look for my clothes. Hurry. The war will not wait for me."

He quickly wolfed down the sausages, bread and hot tea Ethiel had brought him. He swallowed down the last bite as the door opened and she returned. This time, her arms were laden with a soldier's armor and a long, scabbarded sword. One look told Boromir these were not his things; the armor marked its wearer for a simple footsoldier. But it was sturdy and strong, and it would suffice.

Actually, Boromir thought while Ethiel gave an apologetic wave, it was better that she had not brought his own mail and tunic. Nobody knew he had returned to Minas Tirith, and he would hardly be able to command the troops without giving away his secret in any case. He no longer had a right to command but the soldier's garb would at least allow him to fight for his city anonymously.

"It will do," he assured her. "Help me get dressed."

With Ethiel's assistance, he quickly donned the undertunic, the chain mail shirt and the heavy armor. Though the cuirass constricted his chest in a way his own suit never had, and he needed to buckle the vambraces at their widest, Ethiel had judged his size well. He dared not think of the poor soldier's fate that she had taken the armor from.

He took a deep breath and turned this way and that, getting used to the feel of the breastplate. Should he leave it off altogether? No, its tightness did not hinder him much, and he would have need of its protection.

He pulled the sword from its scabbard and swung it experimentally, forcing himself not to wince at the way the movement tore at the newly healed scars on his left side. The weapon felt good in his hands, well-balanced, a measure of Gondor's weapon masters' skill. He glanced around, snatched a napkin from the tray and used it to test the blade's sharpness. It did not surprise him that the merest pressure rent the napkin in half.

Ethiel grabbed his hand and looked at the torn cloth before she raised her eyes to meet his.

Boromir nodded. "Yes, I must go. I have no option; I must come to the defense of my city and my people."

Tears welled in her eyes and she squeezed his hand. Her lips mouthed a silent, "Thank you."

Boromir blinked, a little taken aback. He met her gaze briefly and in it saw the confidence and trust the Minas Tirith citizenry proffered its soldiers. Those brave men were all that stood between the people and a fate too terrible to contemplate. Inwardly, he winced; he no longer deserved such blind faith.

He gave her a quick nod, not trusting his voice, before he slipped out of the room and the Houses of Healing. If anyone saw him go, preparations for the expected influx of wounded kept the healers and servants too busy to pay the unknown soldier much heed.

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Boromir hurried through the emptied streets of Minas Tirith as fast as the heavy armor allowed him to. Though soldiers ran back and forth, the citizens had long since fled their homes or were hiding in fear beneath stairs and in cellars. Shouted commands drifted down from the levels above, and from the lower tiers sounds of battle rose. They grew louder when Boromir passed from the sixth to the fifth and then the fourth circle.

He gave himself a moment to study the defenses on the higher walls. The commanders appeared to have matters under control, despite the mayhem surrounding them. As far as his eye could see, all along the battlement soldiers were struggling to haul pieces of stonework to the catapults, pulling the chains and releasing a stream of deadly projectiles onto the enemy below. Archers stood in rows, firing a rain of arrows at the besiegers before the gate. Beneath his helmet, Boromir smiled with grim satisfaction. They were good men, his troops. Even without their Captain-General to command them, they did what they should.

He walked to the edge of the wall and cautiously stuck his head up to get his first good look at the enemy on the Pelennor. The fields were black with Sauron's troops. He gasped -- so many! -- and his heart sank. How long could his city hold against such numbers?

Screams rose from the level below. Boromir tore his gaze away from the fields and glanced straight down. Siege towers had touched the battlement and orcs were pouring into the city. Officers shouted orders; wounded shrieked in agony; metal clashed against metal where sword struck sword. Boromir shoved away from the parapet and began to run again. He cursed the layout of the city that forced him to travel halfway around each tier before he came upon the gate to the next circle.

He turned a corner, racing for the gate that connected the fourth and third tiers, and came upon a house in ruins. Amidst the rubble lay a huge boulder, which was certainly a strange sight to behold in the middle of the city. A sound overhead, a whistling roar in the air, which grew ever closer, made Boromir duck his head. Another large boulder sailed past and while he watched its trajectory with growing horror, it slammed into another building. The structure crumbled to dust. Weak cries rose from the ruins but they died before anyone could even start clearing the wreckage away.

From the depth of his mind, a memory rose. He recalled Aragorn's words, the vow spoken on Amon Hen. *I will not let the White City fall.*

Aragorn had better hurry. Or there would be nothing left.

Rage surged through his veins, and he uttered a vile curse that did not bode well for the orcs responsible. How dare the enemy lay such ruin to his city? How dare they spill the blood of his people?

Shaking with anger, Boromir stormed once more along the streets, heading for the battle. The lingering fatigue had faded into the back of his mind; he no longer felt his recently healed wounds or the weight of his armor.

"For Gondor!" he screamed while leaping into the fray. "For Gondor!"

The other soldiers quickly picked up the battle cry. "For Gondor!" The shout traveled along the lines of defenders, empowering them with its simple reminder of what they were fighting for. Boromir swung his blade in wide arcs. The sword sliced easily through armor and flesh and the enemy fell around him like corn before the reaper's scythe. Wrath embodied, he barely saw friend from foe, instinctively blocking and parrying the enemies' blows, and ignoring the sudden pain when a blade made it through his defenses and nicked his brow.

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Some unknown amount of time later, a high, familiar voice finally pierced the red veil before his eyes and the roar of battle in his ears.

"Gandalf. Gandalf!"

Boromir whirled toward the cry -- when had night fallen? -- and his heart swelled with happiness. Dressed in the black and silver of the Citadel stood none other than Pippin, alive and, but for the fear in his large eyes, well.

The hobbit pelted past him as fast as his small legs would carry him. He did not spare him a second glance, for which Boromir was grateful. His shame over having let Pippin down when he needed protection most gnawed at him. Still, he was terribly glad to see at least one of the hobbits alive. And if Pippin made it out of orc captivity, then perhaps Merry had too.

But what was the little one doing here in the midst of battle? The short sword in his inexperienced hands would not be much use in defense against the longer blades of a ruthless enemy. Boromir glanced around. The fighting had reached a lull, the orcs mostly driven back over the wall. The soldiers had done well, their captains were competent and determined. They would hold, even without his blade.

From a distance, Boromir tried to follow Pippin's mad dash through attackers and defenders in search of Mithrandir, determined to keep a close eye on the halfling. He might have failed to protect his little friend once; he was not about to do so again. He would lay down his life to keep the hobbit safe from harm. But even in his determination, Boromir was hard-pressed to keep up with Pippin's shorter legs. His breath ran short, and his legs protested, reminding him he had very recently abandoned a sickbed and expended most of his energies in a fierce battle with the enemy.

He was relieved when the subject of Pippin's quest finally came into view through the smoke and dust covering the streets. The wizard sat astride a magnificent white stallion, giving orders to the soldiers and batting away assailants with his staff.

Pippin doubled over, gasping for air and gesturing frantically at Mithrandir. Boromir tried to get closer, eager to overhear what had Pippin in such a state. Irritated that they were in his way, he lunged at the orcs whose assaults kept him from eavesdropping. His sword arm shrieked in protest but he reached his friends in time to catch the last of Pippin's words.

"... lost his mind! He's burning Faramir alive!

Boromir froze at the mention of his brother's name. For an instant, joy swept him. Faramir had survived! But then the full extent of Pippin's words sank in, making him gasp involuntarily.

A cry raced up the streets and for a moment the fighting slowed. One soldier after another picked up the shout until Boromir could make out the words. "Rohan has come! The Rohirrim are fighting on the fields of the Pelennor!" Cheers went up and the weight of despair on Boromir's shoulders lightened a bit. They were still facing overwhelming odds, but their allies of old had heeded the cry for help. He turned his attention back to Gandalf and Pippin.

He was just in time to see Gandalf swing Pippin up on the horse in front of him. They galloped away toward the Citadel. Boromir hesitated a moment. What to do? On the first tier, before the Great Gate, they would need every sword available, even with the men of Rohan riding to Gondor's aid. On the other hand, Faramir's life was at risk, if Pippin were to be believed. And what more good could he, Boromir, really do in the fight against the enemy? His energy was waning, and his recent wounds were making their presence known with a dull throb that would soon turn into a drumbeat of pain.

No, Faramir was more important than the few orcs he might still slay before his strength failed him. His brother still lived, a marvel in itself, but he was in grave danger. And if -- no, when Aragorn came to take his throne, he would need the help of a steward.

Boromir hoped his father would come to honor Aragorn as he had done. Even if he did not, his father's love for Gondor would hopefully lead Denethor to accept Aragorn's claim as rightful and that the ranger would make a worthy king. Yet, whatever happened, his father was old, and some day soon might have to relinquish the stewardship to his heirs. With his eldest son fallen from grace and presumed dead, the task would fall to Faramir. Which was good fortune, indeed. Who better to sit at the king's right hand than Faramir son of Denethor, a man who had heard the call of the ring and proved his worth in resisting it?

Boromir followed the horse's footsteps back up the mountain, ignoring the battle raging below. His gait so much less swift than that of the stallion, he arrived at Rath Dínen long minutes after the wizard and the hobbit.

The door to the House of the Stewards stood open. Knees trembling with exhaustion and struggling to draw enough breath from the smoke-filled air that drifted over the city, Boromir could but watch with rising dismay. The House was in chaos. The white stallion reared, throwing back several of Denethor's personal guard. A fire had been set to a pile of wood in the middle of the great hall, and his brother's pale face hovered between the flickering flames.

"*Nae*, Faramir," Boromir whispered.

Before he could take action to rescue his brother, Pippin threw himself onto the pile of wood, ignoring the flames, shoving at Faramir's limp form. They rolled off the pyre. Faramir was safe.

Turning toward his father, Boromir no longer cared about his shame and guilt, or about the vow of protection he had broken. His father needed him. He was about to cry out and announce himself, when he saw the look in Denethor's eyes. Again, his breath caught, and the words went unspoken. Those eyes no longer belonged to the father he loved. Madness raged in their depths, madness and shadow beyond repair.

Aghast and mute, tears stinging in his eyes, Boromir witnessed how his father fought Mithrandir and set himself on fire. He could do naught but jump aside when Denethor, encased in a ball of flame and fiery robes flapping, rushed past him, seeking a certain death.

Nobody paid Boromir much attention while he stood among the servants who observed in shocked silence how Mithrandir carried Faramir's limp body out of the House. The wizard placed him onto a bier and ordered a soldier to stand guard over Faramir. Boromir cried with relief. Beregond was a good man; his brother would be safe under his watchful eye.

He cried too in mourning at the passing of a noble man led astray.

Still unnoticed, his face hidden beneath his helmet, he followed as they carried his brother to the Houses of Healing. He hovered near the chamber that held Faramir, keeping a silent vigil in the shadows, while Beregonid stood at the door and Pippin rushed in and out. How he longed to talk to the hobbit, to learn of Faramir's fate. But he could not reveal himself.

Much later, he heard footsteps approaching, and voices talking. Among them, Boromir recognized the tones of Aragorn.

"You will be fine now, little brother," Boromir whispered. "Your king has returned." Happy in the knowledge Faramir was in the most capable of hands he slipped away and disappeared down the hallway before anyone could challenge him.

The battle for Minas Tirith might be over, but there was a lot of work to do still.

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Over the days that followed, Boromir did not visit his brother again; too afraid he would run into one of his former companions, and loath to face their contempt. No, 'twere better they believed him dead, also. Faramir would keep his secret.

He hid among the refugees from the Pelennor, and found it amazingly easy to remain anonymous. Nobody suspected that the quiet man who kept to himself was the Steward's son, the former Captain-General of Gondor. He volunteered for the grimmest work, and busied himself with hauling dead orcs through the gate and casting them onto burning piles that sent up black smoke. The gruesome toil served as a small step toward redemption as well as a method to build up his muscles again.

Ethiel, in her silent yet expressive ways, kept him apprised of the happenings in the Houses of Healing and of Faramir's condition. It was she who confirmed how Aragorn proved himself of royal blood by healing those who had fallen victim to the Black Breath. It had been a shock to hear Merry was among them.

When the day came that Aragorn led the armies down the Pelennor Fields, across the Anduin and to the Black Gates of Mordor in a final, desperate bid for victory, Boromir was not among them. He stood with a heavy heart near the wall of the Healers' gardens. As expected the gardens were quiet, and that pleased him; he had desired to avoid the crowds that thronged on the walls of the lower levels. He wanted solitude while he watched the armies march off, listening to the sounds of booted feet walking in step, the clop of hoofs and the jangle of mail and weaponry. His pride demanded he go with them, march as one of the soldiers and seek honor in death while defending the free peoples of

Middle-earth. Yet his pride was not as forceful as it had once been. Reason was stronger now, and a perverse delight in extending his suffering. Seeking certain death in battle was too easy, too mild a redress for his guilty conscience.

"Wishing you could join them, brother?"

Startled, Borormir spun around. "Faramir! I am surprised to see you up and about. The Healers--"

Faramir gave a gentle laugh. "The Healers do not know that I have left my bed. With luck, I will return before they discover it. I heard the ring of trumpets, and I had a desire for fresh air. I am glad to find you here."

Boromir turned his gaze back to the armies below, departing toward an unknown fate. They watched in silence for a long while, standing side by side, until the last of the dust settled on the fields.

"Do you believe he will succeed?" asked Faramir.

He wasn't talking about Aragorn. "He's a steadfast little creature," Boromir said. "And he's got Sam at his side. Together, they just might carry through. If they do not, all this," he gave a wide sweep with his hands to take in all of Gondor and the lands beyond, "will fall under the Shadow."

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Boromir knew the ring was destroyed in the fires of Mount Doom the exact instant Frodo achieved what he set out to do. He knew before the messengers arrived with the news that the war was over. He felt it in his heart, in the small place where the ring had gained such a treacherous foothold. It was but a small stab, though unexpected and causing a startled gasp to escape, a physical pain that paled in comparison to some of the injuries he had suffered as a soldier. But his heart seemed cold afterward. A void was left in that tiny spot once the ring was gone, an empty hole of longing Boromir feared would never fill again. Still, for the first time since he realized what he had done on the slopes of Amon Hen, he was filled with hope. Hope for Gondor, which had survived and would thrive under the gentle rule of its king returned. Hope for his people, who might live in peace and prosperity, no longer crouched beneath the shadow of looming doom. And yes, even a small glimmer of hope for himself.

Because he knew what to do. His skill with a blade had never deserted him. He vowed to himself that he would use it in the service of his king and his people once more. No longer for honor or glory, but for redemption and atonement.

"When are you leaving?" Faramir asked him the night before Aragorn's coronation.

"Tomorrow," Boromir said. He was not surprised his brother knew his intentions and felt grateful that Faramir had managed to slip away from his stewardly duties for an hour. At least he would be able to say his farewells. They sat in a dark and quiet booth in the back of a tavern on the second circle, a place neither had visited before. "After the coronation."

He had made up his mind weeks ago: he would wait for Aragorn to officially take up the throne. That would be when he had fulfilled his obligation to Gondor. Then, and only then, would he feel himself free to set out on the quest for his own salvation.

"Where will you go?"

Boromir shrugged. He had no destination in mind, no particular direction he wished to go. "Where my feet take me."

"I would have you reconsider," Faramir said. "You ought to stay, take up your rightful place."

"'Tis not my place any longer. This is your time, Faramir, not mine. An age of peace and restoration instead of death and destruction."

"Please, I cannot believe you think so little of yourself."

Boromir smiled. "My skills are best used elsewhere," he said. "The war may be over but there is much evil left in the world."

Bands of orcs and Uruk-hai, which had fled before the swords of Gondor and Rohan, roamed the countryside, leaving death and destruction in their wake. Other allies of Sauron or Saruman were still at liberty, plotting devilish acts. No, the war might be over, but the battle for freedom still raged.

Faramir sighed. "Perhaps, but I am not convinced that you going off in stealth is the best course of action. Though not many still live that know the truth, I believe we should not perpetuate this deception. I feel like cringing every time someone addresses me as 'Lord Steward'. We should reveal that you are alive."

"Promise me you will not, little brother. I forfeited my rights when the ring took me and you will make a much better steward than I ever could. It is best this way."

Faramir gazed into his ale. Although Boromir knew his brother well, he had no idea what was going through Faramir's mind.

"I wish you would speak with the king," Faramir said. "He seems to me an understanding man."

"Has he ever spoken of me?"

"Aye, but not much. I got the impression he does not like to speak of what happened during your journey and he believes you have passed beyond the circles of this world. Father spoke of his conviction of your death to the halfling, who told the other members of your Fellowship. I do not like to lie, Boromir. I will keep your secret, as I promised, but only while I can do so by silence. I would beg you change your mind. The king spoke highly of you; I expect he would be pleased to learn you live and forgive you for what you think is your failure."

"Mayhap," Boromir said. In his mind, he traveled back to that dark day in Parth Galen. He recalled Aragorn's words. *You fought bravely. You kept your honor.* Boromir refused to believe him. They were the kind words of a compassionate man spoken to one on the brink of death. Aragorn had not meant them; he could not have.

"It is not the king's forgiveness I seek, nor that of my former companions. It is my own I need. I do not know that I shall ever be able to find it. Please, Faramir, give me leave to try."

They drank in silence, and Boromir knew words were no longer necessary between those of the same blood who loved each other without fail. At last Faramir put down his tankard.

"If you must go... There will be a horse waiting for you in the public stables near the gate."

"Faramir, no, I cannot accept--"

"Please, Boromir. I will feel better to know you are well-mounted."

He held no claim to any of the horses any longer. In refusing to come forward and declare himself alive, he had forsaken his birthright, his title and possessions. Yet without a horse, his quest for salvation was doomed to fail before he had even begun. Boromir sighed.

"All right. For your sake."

Faramir gave a half-smile. "I should go. There are many preparations still, which need a steward's attention." His tone was wry.

"Thank you." Boromir also stood up, and pulled Faramir to his chest in a silent goodbye. "Be well, my brother."

"And you, also." Faramir's voice sounded strange, and Boromir suspected there were tears in his eyes. His brother did not look back as he strode through the tavern and out of the door.

## The Journey South

The spring day dawned cold, yet bright and sunny. Even the weather celebrated, offering a clear blue sky and gentle breeze, when Aragorn accepted the crown of Gondor and officially became King Elessar. Not a sound was heard when he sang his vow in a clear voice that reached into the farthest recesses of the city and not a throat remained silent once Gandalf placed the crown of Gondor upon Aragorn's brow. The cheers must have traveled all the way to Edoras and beyond, so loud were they.

After many generations of Ruling Stewards, Gondor had a king at last.

The shouts of joy from the Citadel followed Boromir through the streets of Minas Tirith. The city appeared deserted. Every able-bodied man, woman and child had climbed to the seventh circle to catch a glimpse of the crowning. Nobody wanted to miss an instant of the ceremony, so glorious a moment in Gondor's history. Stories of this day would be told to children and children's children for years to come.

Boromir drew up his shoulders in a vain attempt to fend off the noise. He should have been there, beside Aragorn, to see him accept the crown and rejoice that the kingless era had drawn to a close at last. He *would* have been there, if he were the honorable man people had believed him to be. But Boromir knew better. He did not deserve to share in Gondor's finest hour. *He* would never tell his children tales of this day.

He neared the gate, still a gaping hole in the wall -- though it was rumored Gimli's kin had been commissioned to repair it. A small complement of soldiers remained on guard and Boromir kept his head down, trying to hide his face. He nodded at the soldiers, avoiding their eyes.

He need not have bothered. They were paying far more attention to the joyful noises high above than to the lone rider departing Minas Tirith.

After he passed the gate, Boromir turned his horse and rode south across the Pelennor Fields. The sounds of the celebrations quickly fell behind. He had chosen the direction without purpose -- he merely wanted to put many miles between himself and Minas Tirith as quickly as possible.

The first days, he drove his mount hard, trying to outrun the memories. The war was done and Sauron defeated, yet victory had been achieved in spite of him, Boromir son of Denethor. If only he had been stronger; if only he had resisted the ring's call... Shame soiled his name. If he had any hope in restoring it, he would have to make amends.

He rode from dawn till dusk, pushing himself and his horse to their limits. He would have continued through the night except that the moon was new and inky blackness descended over the land at sunset. When it grew too dark to

continue, he made his bed on the hard ground, on a mattress made of fallen leaves and soft moss. Though most were still deserted, the people having fled to the city, he avoided the inns and farmsteads, afraid someone might recognize him. The hard riding left him tired, with little energy left to think, and he slept until first light, wrapped in his wool cloak to ward of the night chill. As soon as the sun rose, he was back in the saddle, munching on a chunk of bread or some of the dried meat from his provisions, and washing everything down with water from his flask.

Several hours after sunrise on the third morning, while galloping along the road, Boromir's horse missed a step. Though the animal quickly recovered, the unexpected jolt was enough to nearly dislodge Boromir from the saddle.

"Whoa, boy."

Jarred from his reverie, Boromir slowed his mount and slid down. The horse, a dark bay gelding, stood with his head down, flanks heaving. The stable hand had said his name was Barangol, for the color of his coat. He was a young beast, yet stalwart and well trained. Not the kind of horse to trip easily.

Boromir ran his hands along Barangol's legs and led him forward a few cautious steps, fearful of what he might discover. But his hands detected nothing wrong, and the horse was not limping.

"Are you okay, master?"

The question startled Boromir and he whirled around. Two boys, barely in their teens, stood in the yellowing winter wheat near the road, the field behind them half-weeded. They both wore muddied overalls and carried hoes in their arms. They looked like brothers, one perhaps a year older than the other.

"Your horse looks tired," the elder boy continued.

"Aye," Boromir said, "he does."

He turned his face away. The boys were young, still children, and chances were small that they would know the former Captain-General of Gondor but his features were widely known in these parts; he had traveled south often.

"I have been fortunate, it seems," he added while stroking Barangol's neck contritely. The near-accident had frightened him. Such a misstep could have easily turned into something worse, causing a sprain, or even a broken leg. And he had only himself to blame. What need did he have for such hurry?

He dug a handful of oats from the sack he brought and let the horse nibble it off his palm. "I apologize. I have been careless."

Barangol nickered softly, shaking his head.

Boromir waved to the boys, who returned to their weeding. He took the rein and began to lead the horse along the road. He would ride no more today, not until he was certain his haste had not caused the horse injury.

The slower pace allowed him to pay more attention to his surroundings. With the wind no longer rushing in his ears, he could hear the birdsong from the trees, where sparrows twittered and encouraged their newly fledged young to take flight. A woodpecker tapped somewhere in the distance. Far away, sheep bleated in the fields, and cows mooed.

The distant jingle of mail and the clang of weaponry announced the approach of a company of soldiers long before they came in sight. Boromir looked around, searching for a place to hide. He did not wish to meet any soldiers; unlike the boys, they would surely recognize him.

He led Barangol off the road, toward a copse of hazel. The dense shrub, fresh green leaves thickly covering its branches, kept him from sight until the soldiers were gone. They marched by quickly and he waited until the noise of their passing had faded beyond earshot before he returned to the road.

Yet, aside from such occasional companies of soldiers rushing at speed along the road with tasks known only to their captains, there were not many travelers at all.

How unlike earlier days it was. Boromir had traveled the road to Pelargir many times, and memories assailed him. He recalled when wagons filled with merchandise rolled back and forth between the cities and farmers loaded their carts with crops to sell at local markets. The decision to go south had been instinctive, but he already regretted it. Every outcropping of rock, every turn in the road seemed to have some sort of memory attached.

There, in the bend, stood the chestnut that lightning had struck during a fierce summer storm, splitting the tree from crown to root. The strike had frightened his horse and thrown Boromir painfully onto the flagstones.

How long ago had that been? At least five years, he thought. The Corsairs had been very daring that summer, sailing up the river as far as Pelargir, and he had traveled to meet the harbor's garrison commander to discuss their defenses. Like Gondor, the tree had survived the assault, and new branches were growing from the blackened stump.

A little further along the road was *The Two Oaks*, the inn where he used to stop for a meal. It was abandoned, the windows boarded up. The thatch of its roof was green and moldy, and weed grew thickly among the cobblestones in the courtyard. Boromir did not want to think of what might have happened to the owner.

Once, when they were both little boys, he had shoved Faramir into the mud among the pigs behind the inn. Faramir, little more than a toddler who could

barely walk, had been following his older brother every step he took, until Boromir had had enough and lost his temper.

Strange, that he should remember it now; he had not thought of the incident for many years.

His father had not been with them, but the reproach in his mother's eyes, her face pale and strained with the fatigue of travel had hurt him more than any punishment Denethor could have meted out. Remorse had nearly overwhelmed little Boromir then, and he had sworn to himself that he would never turn on someone smaller or weaker again.

He had managed to hold onto that oath for many decades.

ooo

The weather grew warmer, though it was still mid-spring. Each day, the sun stood in a clear blue sky with nary a cloud to be seen. At midday on the fourth day since the king's crowning, it became too warm for travel, and Boromir climbed a hill clad in tall oak trees. He found a small clearing with a carpet of green grass covered in dappled shade; it would make a good place to wait out the worst of the heat.

He took off the saddle and placed it beneath a tree. Freed from his tack, Barangol rolled around in the grass, scratching his back, clearly enjoying the respite from hard work. Boromir watched the horse's antics with a smile, glad that his recklessness had not brought any permanent harm to the animal. He stripped down to his breeches and undershirt, took his midday meal from his saddlebags and stuffed cloak and tunic deep inside.

His meal consisted of a hunk of cold roast left over from last night's dinner and a few hazelnuts from the winter's harvest that the squirrels had not eaten. He ate with relish; travel made him hungry, and he finished off his meal with a large gulp of water from his water skin. The liquid, collected early that morning from a cold mountain stream, had grown tepid in the heat. Still, it was wet and banished his thirst. He lifted the skin a little higher and let water drip onto his heated face. Then he sat back against the tree with a satisfied sigh.

*Have you already forgotten?*

The sobering thought chased off encroaching slumber and his good mood evaporated. Not even a week had passed since he departed Minas Tirith -- what sort of man was he, that he dare lounge in the shade, his belly full, like he had no care in the world?

Barangol snorted, as if sensing the change in his rider's mood. The gelding lifted his head from browsing the grass and flowers, and looked at Boromir with liquid brown eyes.

"Aye," Boromir agreed softly. It would not do to forsake his duty and forget his purpose in this quest.

He made himself relax against the rough bark of the oak -- guilt or no, he would not force his horse to travel in the midday heat -- and gazed across the fields that stretched out from the foot of the hill.

Directly below was the South Road. Further east, near the horizon, glistened the silver ribbon of the Anduin, sparkling beneath the sun. In between were meadows of green grass and colorful spring flowers in red, yellow and purple. Scattered among the plains were deserted patches of farmland, overgrowing with weeds.

Far away, a farmer was urging his oxen to pull a plow, the occasional shouted encouragement drifting on the breeze. Boromir squinted against the bright sunlight. It was late in the season to be plowing the land; the spring grains should have been sowed weeks ago. But farms and villages had been abandoned at the approach of the enemy, their populace seeking protection behind the thick walls of Minas Tirith and Pelargir.

People had been slow to return to their homes. Boromir knew their fears; in Minas Tirith he had listened to the stories the refugees told amongst themselves, of farms looted and burned, of orc bands still roaming the pastures.

When he learned of the stories, Faramir had sent out what was left of the Ithilien rangers. They patrolled the land between the river and the road, scouring the land of the enemy. With their fears seen to, gradually more and more farmers gathered the courage to return to their homesteads. Still, spring was progressing fast and time lost could never be regained.

But it might not be too late. With luck, the summer would be long and gentle, and crops could still be sowed and grown to maturity. If the weather turned bad, however... Boromir would not think of it.

In past years, his father had always made certain there was a surplus stored against bad times and hard winters. Granaries in Minas Tirith had been full. How much of those stores were left? How much had been used in the past year, while Boromir traveled with the Fellowship? How much had gone up in flames during the siege? What sort of inheritance had his father left for Gondor's new king and his own younger son?

Thoughts of his father cast an even darker cloud across Boromir's increasingly gloomy mood. He had seen the madness in his father's eyes. How long had it festered, nipping away Denethor's sanity? What had caused it?

Had he, Boromir, sent his father across the edge? The thought sent a cold shiver down his spine. Faramir had spoken of his fears about Denethor's chosen path. Perhaps, if he had not been so stubborn in his insistence his brother keep his secret... Perhaps, if he had come forward... Could he have prevented his father's gruesome death?

Doubt nibbled at his heart like rats at a cheese rind. Had he exacerbated his sins by hiding the fact that he survived? Had he disgraced himself even further? Perhaps he ought to turn his horse around and ride back to Minas Tirith.

Did he not owe his people that much, that he should go back and face his king, face his former companions? They had suffered much, and yet had helped save Boromir's world from the Shadow. Should he not beg for Frodo's forgiveness, at the least? Was that not the more honorable path, to face renunciation instead of this self-imposed exile? At any event, then, he might keep some of his honor.

Honor! What honor was left him? Would he rob victory of its sweetness with his presence, by reminding his friends almost daily of what happened at Amon Hen, how he had failed their trust? By reminding them how he had nearly caused them to lose their lives -- and their quest?

He had no answers. The questions simply made his thoughts go around in circles. A shiver ran through him and subconsciously he rubbed his arms, slowly starting to realize that his musings had kept him occupied a long time. The afternoon had gone by swiftly and shadows were lengthening. It was time to continue.

He got up and gathered his belongings while he whistled for Barangol. The horse came trotting up across the clearing, eager to continue after the respite in the shade. Boromir saddled the horse, tied his pack behind the seat and led the animal back to the road.

The soft clop of Barangol's hoofs mingled with the late afternoon noises of buzzing insects and the cry of a hawk high up in the sky. Soft breezes made the tall grass rustle and sway in the wind. Boromir set a brisk pace, which ate up the miles but did not overtax his horse. The sun was approaching the western horizon, shadows growing thick, when he caught a whiff of burnt wood.

Boromir's spirits lifted. It pleased him that more and more people were returning to their homes. But when he could make out the silhouette of the farmhouse in the fading light, his heart sank. He soon discovered that what he had believed to be smoke were old ashes stirred up in the evening breeze.

He nudged Barangol off the road, down the path that led to the house, wanting to take a closer look.

The homestead was in ruins. Three walls still stood, leaning against each other at crooked angles. The fourth wall had collapsed entirely, along with most of the roof. The thatch was singed, and a few blackened support beams stuck up against the night sky like accusing fingers.

Boromir dismounted. His trained eye told him the destruction was recent. Maybe a day or three old, certainly not more. What could have caused such ruination? There had been no lightning storms at all.

As he circled the ruins, peering through the growing darkness, he soon found the answer. He stumbled upon an orc corpse, bloated from the sun's glare and stinking worse than a score of living orcs. Embedded in the demon's skull was the blade of an axe. It was not a battle axe, such as a soldier might wield, but a simple blade of steel with a wood handle -- the kind of axe a peasant would use for felling trees and chopping wood.

Someone had killed this orc in defense of their home.

His skin crawled when he imagined what might have become of the brave man standing up against orcs. What would his courage have cost the farmer?

A few feet beyond the orc corpse, he discovered a head.

"Nienna weep for us," he whispered.

The head was severely damaged, but the shape of the skull and the few strands of dark hair still clinging to it declared it had once belonged to a man. Boromir surmised it was the farmer's, defending his home to his death. What had happened to the rest of the man?

He searched among the rubble, and his next find was even worse. Half-hidden beneath a charred beam he found the bodies of a woman and two children, nestled against their mother. These bodies were also burned and mangled, showing teeth marks on exposed bone. He'd seen enough such injuries to know they were orc bites.

His stomach turned, and he swallowed down bile. He had hoped -- no, believed! -- that this sort of mindless butchery was a thing of the dark past.

He lurched away from his find, glad for the darkness that hid the worst of the atrocities from his eyes. He kicked the orc corpse, a cry of frustrated impotence tearing itself from his throat. Crows flew up from a nearby tree, cawing in the night. He cursed, and kicked at the body again, bruising his toes. The corpse shuddered beneath the force, the stench increased; but Boromir no longer cared. His emotions, bottled up for many weeks, had found an outlet at last.

Where were the cursed soldiers? The ranger patrols? Why had they not stopped the beasts? What would it take for the people of Gondor to live their

lives in security at last? He realized he had unsheathed his sword without thinking, ready to chop the dead orc to small pieces.

Boromir took a deep breath to calm himself, gagging on the stink. What good would it do to hack at the corpse? The farmer and his family were gone, and nothing he did could bring them back.

If only he had not lingered in Minas Tirith as long as he had... If he had left the city but a few days sooner... he might have come in time to stop the carnage.

But ifs and maybes availed the dead family nothing. In his powerlessness, Boromir swore the vilest curses he knew and withdrew from the property into a cluster of trees a hundred yards east of the farm. He would wait for first light and give the bodies a proper burial. He might have arrived too late to aid the people while alive; he would not desert them in death.

He did not light a fire, begrudging himself its cheery brightness, which would be in such stark contrast to his dismal mood. The hare he had designated as his dinner never made it out of his saddlebag; he felt no desire for food. His stomach was tight with an all-consuming hatred for the orcs who, even after the war, still inflicted destruction upon his country and murdered his people.

He groomed his horse's dark coat, finding some calm in the mindless toil and the animal's clear enjoyment of this treatment. After he was done, he made sure Barangol could not wander off in the darkness and lay down, his head resting upon his saddle while he stared up into the starry night sky.

He had not expected to get any sleep, but in the dark and silent night, exhaustion overtook him, and Boromir drifted off into a restless slumber.

## Man's Best Friend

A soft rustle in the fallen leaves that were his bed woke Boromir from uneasy dreams filled with orcs and bloodshed. A small noise was uttered too close to his ear for comfort. Then something cold and wet touched his face.

With a shout, Boromir bounded to his feet and drew his sword. He slashed the air where he expected his assailant to be -- encountering nothing. Blade held in front of him, ready to strike in an instant, he peered into the blackness that reigned beneath the trees. At the height of his knees something growled and Boromir let out a surprised cry when that something latched on to the leather of his boot. Instinctively, he kicked out, and whatever it was that had taken hold of him let go with a yelp of pain.

Once his eyes had adapted to the filtered light of the moon piercing the canopy overhead, he recognized the shape yapping at him from beyond the reach of his boots. White teeth glimmered as the dog growled.

Boromir began to laugh. "You are fortunate you're so small, little mongrel," he said while sheathing his sword. "I might have cut you in two with the first swing. Have you not learned it is dangerous to sneak up on an armed soldier when he is asleep?"

Boromir's offhanded tone calmed the dog somewhat and it sat back on its haunches, watching him cautiously. Boromir walked away from the trees into the open field where the moonlight could cast its silver glow unencumbered.

"Come here, and let me have a proper look at you, you beast."

It remained where it was, head tilted. Its ears twitched, flicking back and forth while Boromir spoke.

He slapped his thigh with the flat of his hand. "Here, then. I am not going to hurt you."

The dog hesitated another moment, then barked and bounded up to Boromir, tail swishing. In the clearer light, he noted that the animal was a young female, nearly full-grown but still a bit gawkish, like a puppy. He did not think she was yet a year old.

"Why are you out here all alone?" he muttered. "What happened to your master?" He glanced over at the farm, and back at the dog.

"That used to be your home, did it not?"

She yipped, and her tail flicked faster. Boromir knelt and she closed the last few feet at speed before she started licking his face.

"Whoa." Boromir laughed, pushing the animal off. "I believe you have seen as few people as I have these past days. Come, girl, let us get some food in you. I assume you will be hungry."

Boromir unwrapped his uneaten dinner, sliced it into smaller pieces and fed them to the dog one at a time. She eagerly gobbled the bits of meat from his fingers. Was she hungry? Or just happy to have found a companion? Poor thing, it was not difficult to imagine the farm's children in happier times, playing with this spirited animal. Renewed anger at the mindless killing of innocent farmfolk surged through him.

No longer tired, Boromir sat down, stroking the dog absently. Her coat was matted, with burrs clinging to her skin, and he tried to pluck them off. She had some scratches on her right shoulder -- from an orc claw, most likely -- but as far as he could tell in the thin light, they had scabbed over and did not seem infected.

She licked her muzzle clean after having finished her meal, and lay down beside Boromir with a contented sigh. In silence, man and beast waited for morning.

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As soon as the sky to the east brightened and announced the onset of sunrise in hues of pink and orange, Boromir began his grim task. He started with the orc corpse; it would take all day for a wood fire to consume it. The copse of trees where he had spent the night provided ample dead branches to build a pyre, and he dragged some of the scorched but not fully burned beams from the ruins to add to it. The oak rafters from the house were heavy and dry, and would burn hotly. When the pyre was ready, he set fire to the orc, watching for a moment until the flames took a good hold of the fuel.

How often had he built such pyres and piled up dead orcs, as much as to banish the awful reek of decomposing bodies as to keep them from further staining Gondorian soil?

Too often. Yet not often enough; and the enemy had kept on coming.

The dog growled deep in her throat and danced around the fire while it threw up thick, black smoke. It made Boromir smile a little, despite the horrible work still ahead of him.

"Aye, they are loathsome creatures," he said.

Once the fire burned fiercely and was slowly eating the dead orc, Boromir collected stones from the farmhouse to build a cairn large enough for the dead family. He could not find the rest of the farmer's body; likely, the orcs had

taken it with them to dine on. The thought sickened him and he gritted his teeth.

It took him most of the day before he was satisfied. He could have simply buried them and been off on his way by midday, yet that did not seem right. These people had been courageous enough to return to their home, and had died for it. They deserved something more commemorative than a hole in the ground. And a cairn built from the stones of their farm -- it had a certain aptness to it. In a way, they were home.

Boromir put the bodies in the cairn, covered them with the last few stones and gazed down at the pile. He should say something. What were the right words for such a burial? These people were not soldiers but they had died protecting their land just the same.

He spoke the thoughts that were in his heart. "May you find peace after death, people of Gondor. Your valor shall not be forgotten."

The sun was low when he finally mounted Barangol to continue his journey. Black thunderheads were gathering in the south; the presage to an early summer storm, he would not be able to travel far today. Soon, he would have to seek cover and wait out the oncoming storm; but he would get as far away from the farm as he could. He had no desire to spend another night in a place of such undeserved horror and tragedy.

He was directing Barangol down the narrow path back to the main road when a sad whine made him stop and look back. The dog hovered at the edge of the farmyard. Her head was cocked, her ears drooped sadly, and she studied Boromir with large eyes. She whimpered again.

Boromir chided himself; in his desire to leave the graveside as soon as his self-appointed task was finished he had forgotten the creature. But what was he to do? Should he take her along? The last time he had taken up responsibility for another creature, it had not worked out so well. Yet he could not leave her; she would likely starve to death if he did. There was nothing else for it: he would have to bring her with him.

"Come on, *Híril*."

ooo

The following afternoon, the storm had passed, leaving clear blue sky behind, and the seafarers' beacon of Pelargir loomed on the horizon. Boromir halted his horse. He longed to go to the city, report what he had found at the ruined farm and demand that someone find the orcs responsible.

Yet, he could not. He did not even dare enter Pelargir's gate.

The secret of his survival was quite safe; Faramir was the only person who could attest that Boromir had survived the war. Faramir had given him the sad news that none of the rangers who carried him from the Anduin had survived the battle for Minas Tirith, and Boromir had not visited the Houses of Healing since shortly after the end of the siege. But he still needed to be careful; his features were familiar to the army. Soldiers from the southern fiefs filled Pelargir and it would be impossible to pass through without chancing one officer or another recognizing him.

He still feared such recognition. They would not understand. If they learned he lived, they would make him return to the city. The thought of having to face the king before he was ready made his stomach clench.

Turning due west, Boromir left the road, and guided Barangol along overgrown rutted tracks. Ahead were the hilly woodlands of Lebennin. He would have to pass through the forest before he could look for a way across the River Sirith and return to the road.

The sound of Híril's excited barking put Boromir on edge; he tightened his hold on the reins in preparation. Though the horse regarded Híril with wariness and shied when she startled him -- whinnying and stamping his large hooves in annoyance -- the larger animal did not frighten the dog a bit. On the contrary, for Híril chasing the horse was a fun game.

She loved to use Barangol for hunting practice, lying in ambush and pelting out from beneath dense shrubbery when the horse approached, despite Boromir's attempts to teach her differently. This would be the third time in the last hour. Boromir sighed. If she kept this behavior up, she might learn a much harder lesson than his stern admonition if Barangol ever decided he had had enough and kicked her.

For once, however, Híril did not head for the horse. She was chasing after a frightened rabbit, which zigzagged across the track in an attempt to evade the dog's sharp teeth. It vanished beneath the brambles on the opposite side of the trail. Híril followed, uncaring of the thorny bushes, and disappeared from his sight.

Abruptly, her voice changed pitch and turned into a shocked whimper. Boromir's brow furrowed. He whistled. Another helpless mewl answered him but she did not return. Something must be wrong.

He dismounted, tied the reins around a young sapling and cautiously worked his way through the dense growth. It appeared as if every branch and thorn conspired to stop him; he cursed below his breath when his tunic caught and ripped free.

At last, he freed himself from the brambles' grip and reached a small clearing between towering trees. Híril was a reddish shape in the shadows. The dog's

snout was to the ground, her tail end sticking in the air, and she was wiggling her behind furiously. For a moment, he looked at her with puzzlement. Then he understood and began to shake with laughter. In her youthful zeal to catch the rabbit, Híril had tried to follow it into its burrow, shoving her nose into the hole with such force that she was now stuck in the hard earth.

Híril whined in protest, this time with as much chagrin at being laughed at as frustration at being stuck. It only made Boromir laugh harder, and he had to hold his sides. It felt good to laugh, and though a part of him thought a man like him did not deserve to feel such merriment, he could not help himself.

Híril, apparently realizing he would be of no help, tried again to wiggle free. Clawing with her front paws at the rabbit hole, she finally succeeded in getting herself unstuck. She sat back on her tail, the look on her face one of such offended disappointment that it sent Boromir into a renewed bout of laughter. Híril shook her head, smacked her lips a few times and rubbed a front paw across her nose to wipe off the dirt. Then she sneezed and directed a couple of angry barks at the rabbit hole for good measure.

"I have thoroughly misnamed you," Boromir hiccuped. He wiped tears from his cheek with the back of his hand. "You are no lady! But you are a bold one, indeed. You certainly make up in courage what you lack in wits."

Híril darted over to him, tail swishing, ordeal already forgotten. He knelt for a moment, chortling as a wet tongue lashed at his face.

"Come, girl," he ordered as he stood back up. "We still have a ways to go today."

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Travel was not easy; once he reached the hills, there were no paths, except for the narrow trails of deer or boar. The forest floor was uneven, forcing him to dismount and lead Barangol to warily pick his way among moss-grown boulders, fallen trees and rabbit burrows. But the good weather held, and the sounds of the forest were peaceful and soothing. Birds chirped from early morning until nightfall and small animals rustled among the underbrush after dark. Soft breezes made the leaves of oak and ash and beech swish together, and bluebells and violets lent a sweet scent to the musky forest smell of old leaves and dead wood.

Boromir paid little heed to the countryside. His thoughts often turned inward. The farmer's fate still weighed heavily on his mind, and dissatisfaction about what felt like a dereliction of duty ate at his conscience. If only he could be certain the orcs would pay for their deeds. If he knew where they had gone, he might extract vengeance himself. But he could not. He would have to trust the soldiers to do their jobs and avenge the family for him.

Híril did not much care for his brooding moods. She would draw his attention, chasing after bees or trying to catch flowers waving in the wind, making him smile, despite himself. He shared his meals with her over the evening fires, while at night, she cuddled up against him, and he stroked her soft fur until he fell asleep. Her devotion proved a balm for his raw emotions and he was glad for her company. Before long, he realized he could not imagine journeying without her.

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Boromir traveled four days through the forest before he found a place to cross the Sirith and aim for the old South Road again, several leagues west of Pelargir. And three days later, almost a fortnight since leaving Minas Tirith, he arrived in Linhir.

Once a thriving fishing community, the small town at the mouth of the River Gilrain had suffered much during the war. Like most coastal towns, its harbor had endured attacks from the Corsairs of Umbar time and again. Many of the houses showed scorch marks from burning projectiles, and a fire had raged out of control through part of the docks, leaving piles of sooty debris behind. Shipwrecks blocked the harbor, their hulls submerged and masts sticking out of the waves. There were several black Corsair vessels among the wrecks.

Everywhere Boromir looked the people of Linhir were hard at work to clear away the rubble and restore their town to its previous glory. He steered Barangol to the side of the road to allow the wheelbarrows to pass that workers pushed back and forth along the quay. The clop of hammers and axes echoed in the streets. Nobody paid much attention to the traveler or his animals once a cursory glance had ascertained he was neither orc nor a dark-skinned Southron.

In the seamen's district, near the southern end of the harbor among run-down alehouses, boarded-up brothels and empty warehouses, Boromir found an inn that was open for business. The sign above the door read *The Merry Fisher*. The inn fitted in well among its surroundings; paint was peeling and the windows were coated with salt spray from the nearby sea. But it looked as if it had come through the war unscathed and it would be cheap and inconspicuous.

Boromir dismounted, tied Barangol to a post, and walked through the door. Híril trotted at his heels. Inside, it was dark after the bright light of late afternoon but several oil lamps and candles fought back the darkness. Boromir's eyes quickly grew accustomed to the gloom and he strode to the counter. At this hour, the common room was mostly deserted though a handful of men sat in the farthest corner, their heads close together and their noses buried in mugs of ale.

"How may I help you, sir?" The innkeeper, a tall, thin man with bushy eyebrows and a long nose approached Boromir, wiping his hand on a spotless white apron. His eyes flicked briefly down to the dog, but if he had any objection to the animal's presence in his establishment, he gave no outward sign of it.

"A room, if you have one," Boromir said. "And a place for my horse in your stable."

"Aye, sir, those I can provide. We offer the finest lodgings in the harbor. Mind you," he added, lowering his voice, "'twas many a day you would find all our rooms occupied. But nowadays, with the war scarcely over, we do not see many travelers around this way." He sighed. "We have seen some hard times, sir. Hard times indeed."

Boromir could only nod. His country, his people had endured so much. Although the patron's hardships paled in comparison to some of the atrocities he himself had witnessed, he could imagine they were very real to the man and a threat to his livelihood.

Boromir's nose crinkled at the cooking smells drifting into the taproom. His stomach growled, leading him to matters that were more mundane.

"How about supper?" He pulled a small pouch from his tunic and dug up a few coins.

He had found the pouch in one of the saddlebags and suspected Faramir had put it there. It did not hold much; yet, if he used it sparingly, he could make it last several weeks. Though grateful for Faramir's forethought, he had been glad to see his brother had not provided him with a larger purse; the steward's treasury was better spent on the restoration of Minas Tirith than on his search for atonement.

The innkeeper smiled and accepted the money. "Supper? Of course, sir. 'Tis almost ready. Allow me to show you to your room first." He called for a stable lad and ordered the boy to look after their guest's horse. Then he preceded Boromir up a narrow staircase and through a long hallway.

"By what name should I address you, sir?"

Boromir opened his mouth to give his name, but shut it before speaking. While his face might not be familiar to the commoners in Linhir, his name might be recognized. What to tell the innkeeper?

"Erandír," he said. It was the first thing to come into his mind. "You may address me as such."

The innkeeper stared at him a moment, then shrugged. He opened the door. "Do you find this suitable, master wanderer?"

Though small, the room was surprisingly clean, and a large bed with a soft mattress and white sheets took up most of the available space. A wash basin, a porcelain ewer and some soap waited on a table beside it. The window faced southwest, overlooking the harbor.

"Your price?" he asked, though the bed beckoned after weeks of bivouacking in ditches and fields and Boromir had no desire to try and find another inn.

The man suggested a price that Boromir thought would befit a hostel on the second tier in Minas Tirith. It seemed reasonable.

"The room is excellent," he told the innkeeper.

The man's smile widened and Boromir realized he was overpaying. But his custom seemed most welcome after the dire times of the past so he let the matter rest.

The innkeeper bowed. "I could have the bathhouse heated up for you, sir. It would not cost more than a few coppers extra."

Boromir was tempted for only a moment. "No, thank you." The room was all the luxury he would allow himself; he would need to be frugal with his funds. Cold water would serve as well to wash away the road's dust.

"As you wish." The man's voice held a hint of disappointment. "By the time you have refreshed yourself, supper will be ready. Should you want to dine in your room, or downstairs?"

"Downstairs," Boromir said. He had spent enough time in his own company over the past weeks; new faces and perhaps some innocuous conversation would distract his thoughts for a while.

"Perfect, sir." The innkeeper hesitated, then added in a rush, "I would ask that you leave your sword upstairs, though."

Boromir raised an eyebrow.

The man shrugged. "'Tis house policy, sir. I have no wish for trouble."

"I see." In a way, it made sense. But did he want to abandon his weapon unguarded in his room? It was not as valuable as his own sword, the Captain-General's blade, had been, yet it was crafted with great skill.

"It'll be perfectly safe," the proprietor continued as if he could read Boromir's thoughts. "Nobody comes up here, except the staff, and the overnight guests. We have only one other gentleman staying tonight, besides you."

What harm could it do, really? The war was over; he would have no need for his blade in a seaside tavern. "I shall leave my sword in my room, then," Boromir agreed.

Relief flooded the innkeeper's face. "Thank you, sir. I'm much obliged. And I will ask Cook to spare a bone for your little friend."

"Thank you." Boromir smiled at the innkeeper and leaned down to scratch the dog's ears. Híril gave a short yip of pleasure.

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Outside his window, the sun was setting in the Bay of Belfalas in a colorful display of deep purples and fiery crimson by the time Boromir was ready to go downstairs and eat supper. Refreshed and dressed in a spare shirt and a clean pair of trousers, he felt better than he had in many days.

A crowd had filled the common room while Boromir had washed up. Here and there someone sucked on a pipe, adding clouds of sweet smoke to the aroma of strong ale and roast and soup. The scent gave Boromir a sudden pang of longing for the days spent with the Fellowship. Amazing how quickly the northern habit had spread across the South.

Most of the chairs were taken, but Boromir found that the innkeeper had kept him a seat at a small table near the wall, close to the hearth. The fireplace was cold, the early summer weather warm enough that no fire was needed.

"Sir, supper tonight would be roasted lamb, carrots and fresh bread with butter. We also have stew, if you should like it, and wild berries for your dessert."

"Berries?" Boromir asked. Wasn't it a little early in the year for fresh fruits?

"Aye, Master Erandír. We had a mighty fine spring this year. Weatherwise, that is." The innkeeper grimaced.

"Lamb roast and berries, then," Boromir said. "With a mug of ale, if you please."

The innkeeper nodded and scampered off. A few minutes later he reappeared with a steaming plate, a basket of buttered bread, and a foaming tankard. The aroma of lamb roast wafted up and made Boromir's mouth water. He wasted no time, grunted his thanks and dug in.

ooo

It wasn't long before he wiped the greasy juices from his plate with the last piece of bread and finished his ale. He leaned back in his chair, suppressing a contented belch.

"I don't think I've ever seen a man enjoy his meal so," an amused female voice remarked.

Boromir looked up. The woman sat one table over, half-hidden in the shadows next to the hearth, watching him with dark eyes. Relaxed after the hearty meal, his guard was down, and he answered her without thinking. "So would you, madam, after enjoying two weeks of my cooking."

"Two weeks?" She leaned forward a little. "Then you have traveled far?"

He wanted to bite his tongue. "Aye."

He examined her a little closer. The dark curls piled high on her head freed a pale throat and a neckline a tad lower than fashion considered decent; the rosy-lipped smile she offered was too studiously innocent. If not for the gloomy light in the room, the thick smoke, and the fact that he was tired and had just eaten his fill, he would have noticed it right away.

"Do not trouble yourself with the likes of me," he told her. "I have neither the need nor the funds for your company."

She shrugged. "I am mostly keeping myself out of *their* view." With a nod, she indicated a table further back in the common room, and he turned his head to follow her gaze.

The same fellows were hunched around the same table as when he first arrived. There were four of them, dressed in dirty clothes, faded and torn. They had thin faces, with the deep tans of sailors. They did not look as if they had moved at all. Had they been drinking their ale continuously since the afternoon? If he were a betting man, his purse would say yes.

He turned back. The prostitute was watching him still. Had he not made clear he did not desire her services?

"You should not. They might offer more profitable company than I. Although I doubt they have many coins to spare either way."

She made a noise in the back of her throat and turned away.

Boromir was suddenly uneasy. There was no need for rudeness. He was about to offer an apology when the conversation of the four men caught his ear.

"I'm telling you," one of them, a short fellow with round shoulders, said loudly, "this new king'll be trouble for Belfalas! They say he's going to raise taxes, so he can build 'imself a palace up north."

"Prince Imrahil wouldn't let 'im," said another, taller man, whose chock of dark hair hid his eyes.

A third man snorted. "Imrahil'll do that king's bidding if he knows what's good for 'im. I've heard it whispered that the king killed the old steward, and the steward's eldest son. He made the younger his lackey, who is weak and ill of health."

It took Boromir several long seconds to digest the words he overheard, and when realization struck it took the breath from his chest.

"Those are filthy lies!" he shouted, pushing his chair back. It hit the wall with a crack. He glared at the drunks and his hands balled into fists at his side. Híril sprang up from where she had been dozing beneath the table and bared her teeth. Boromir wished for his sword; he should not have adhered to the request to leave it upstairs. Nothing would please him better than to run the blade through these treacherous orc-sons.

"What d'you know about it?" the short one said belligerently. "Were you here when that pretender came into town, leading an army of dead men? I saw 'em charge friend and foe alike. I lost my boat. He should've stayed north, where he belongs, and let good folk go about their lives."

Boromir clamped his jaw tight. He had already drawn more attention to himself than was wise; everyone in the common room was staring at them. But he could not let these lowlifes slander Aragorn barely a fortnight after his crowning.

"King Elessar has already done more for Gondor in a few brief months," he forced out, "than you will in your entire life!"

Shorty got up, too, his chair falling over. From the corner of his eye, Boromir watched people back away slowly, forming a wide circle around them. A scullion boy put down his pile of dirty dishes and ran back to the kitchen. One of Shorty's companions put a restraining hand on his arm but he shrugged it off and strode toward Boromir.

Boromir stood his ground. He towered over the drunk and wondered why his opponent did not back off. The amount of ale in the man's belly must have made him careless of danger. He swung a clumsy fist, and Boromir intercepted it easily. Shorty struggled against his tight grip, a glimmer of uncertainty appearing in his eyes when he failed to wrench his arm loose.

"I would have you take back your insults against the king," Boromir said in a low voice. The uncertainty turned to fear, battling with drunken defiance. Shorty's teeth gritted while he strained to get free.

The innkeeper came scurrying out of the kitchen, alerted by the scullion boy. He wrung his hands. "Gentlemen, please," he cried. "Have we not seen plenty of strife these past months?"

He threw Boromir a pleading look while he grabbed Shorty's elbow. After a moment's hesitation, Boromir let go. Shorty rubbed his arm unobtrusively. The man should be grateful to the innkeeper that a few bruises on his wrist were all he would show in the morning.

"Go home, Ereg." The proprietor tugged on the elbow he held and urged Shorty to the door. His three friends followed. "You've had enough ale for one night. Go home, before your big mouth gets you once again in more trouble than you can handle."

Ereg threw a last black look in Boromir's direction.

Boromir snarled. "Do not show me your treacherous face again, or I might decide to dull my blade upon your skull!"

He fell back onto his chair, struggling to get his temper under control and forcing himself to ignore the looks cast in his direction as well as the muted whispers traveling through the common room.

"You speak as if you have personal acquaintance of this new king." A small hand was placed on Boromir's forearm, and he shook it off, glaring at the woman.

"Not everyone believes as those boatmen do," she added, unperturbed. "Don't let Ereg's lies get under your skin, he just tries to hide his own cowardice. His boat's sinking was his own fault. When the dead came out of the mountains, everyone was very frightened and fled into the hills. But the king's army did us no harm; they only chased off the Corsairs. Those wrecks in the harbor?" She gestured in the direction of the waterfront. "'Twas their work."

Boromir scanned her face. He saw nothing but honest curiosity and he lessened his scowl. "You have guessed rightly," he admitted. "I have seen King Elessar with my own eyes."

"Then, please, I would hear more. Is he truly Isildur's heir?"

Boromir hesitated. He knew he should not engage in further conversation; he had already brought more notice upon himself than was desirable. But the urge to redress the sailors' accusations was strong, the anger still burning in his veins. Around him, the people in the common room slowly returned to

their business and conversation picked up. Nobody was watching him any longer. And if he minded his tongue, what harm could it do?

"All right," he conceded. "I can see you bear him no ill will. I will tell you what I can."

## A Whore's Tale

The woman proved herself a good listener, presenting a friendly ear that Boromir found hard to resist, and he said more than was prudent. Conversing with her offered a pleasant diversion from his own bleak thoughts of the past or Ereg's outrageous charges and he gladly allowed himself to be distracted to the point of forgetting what she was.

"My apologies, sir. Nîneth is wanted elsewhere. Unless you plan to compensate for her time..."

"What?" Boromir blinked up at the inn's proprietor, for a moment not understanding what the man was talking about. "No. No, I do not." She was a pleasant companion to talk to, and not disagreeable to look upon, but he would not spend his coins on fleshly pleasures.

Nîneth got up and smoothed her skirts. "Which room?"

Her voice sounded different. Flatter, less animated, businesslike.

"Room three. Paid until the morning. He claims to be a wool trader, looking for passage west. Treat him well, and we might--"

"Yes, I understand," Nîneth said. "We might see him again." She turned to Boromir. "Thank you for your tales."

"'Twas my pleasure." Boromir shrugged. "I apologize I..." He paused. Why was he apologizing? For taking up her time? Or for not purchasing more of it?

She gave him a brief half-smile that failed to reach her eyes and departed.

ooo

He was still pondering her while he prepared for bed. Nîneth was not the first whore he had met, yet something was different about her. She was not as experienced as she pretended to be, or she would not have spent an hour listening to him talk about Aragorn without bringing up the subject of her fee.

Aragorn... The thought brought back recollection of the false accusations and Boromir's anger renewed. Was that what people believed? That Aragorn had murdered him, and everyone who could stand in his way, to take up the throne of Gondor? Or did Nîneth speak true, and were Ereg and his friends merely the kind of discontents nobody could ever please?

Perhaps he should remain for a while, try to learn more. He had no urgent places to go and Linhir was not well known to him, for all that it lay on the

road to Dol Amroth. As long as he avoided the usual soldiers' haunts, nobody was likely to recognize him. But when it could save Gondor from further conflict, he would step forward in spite of what it might cost him. Aragorn did have the public support of most of the nobles, but if Ereg had voiced the general feelings of the people, it could spell trouble regardless and the king would need to know.

If he stayed, he would have to find work as a laborer, though. His small purse would not last him long. But what sort of work could he do? He had no skills; soldiering was his trade, yet it was the one job he could not do for risk of discovery.

Boromir pushed the matter from his mind; it was a concern for the morrow that he would not solve tonight.

As soon as he climbed into the soft bed and rested his head on the pillow, all worries fled his consciousness. Within minutes he drifted off into sleep and never even noticed how Híril jumped on top of the bed to nestle herself near his feet.

ooo

Early the following day, over a morning meal in a deserted common room, Boromir asked the innkeeper where he should go to inquire for a job.

"Planning on giving up your wanderings, eh?" He thought for a moment. "You might try the masons' grandmaster. The guildsmen'll be busy for quite some time rebuilding all that was destroyed in the war. No doubt they have need of strong men and extra hands."

The grandmaster of the stoneworkers turned out to be a harried-looking man with hands rough from many years of handling stone and brick. Boromir quickly introduced himself and explained he was looking for work.

"Where were you apprenticed?" the mason asked. "Dol Amroth? I would need to see the journeyman letter from your master before I can assign you."

"I apologize," Boromir said. "I have not been clear. I am not a stone mason. But the innkeep of The Merry Fisher said you might have need for an extra pair of hands."

The guildsman took a long, hard look at Boromir. "I suppose we do have use for one such as you," he said at last. "Even if you are not trained. One doesn't need skill to hale stone, only strength."

He told Boromir to return to the waterfront where fires had reduced numerous warehouses to piles of burnt girders, shattered brick and blackened

mortar. Before the morning was halfway past, Boromir found himself part of a long line of sweaty, barechested men, hauling debris, sorting it into piles of unsalvageable rubbish or stone blocks that could be cleaned and used again.

ooo

The days lengthened and threaded together, and the month of Lótessë soon made way for Nárië. To his gratification, Boromir discovered that the heavy labor suited him. Though the work was not intellectually taxing, it prevented him from brooding too much. It offered a way to expend his energy and helped build up his muscles further until he felt physically stronger than even in his days of fighting orcs. At night, fatigue kept the nightmares at bay and his sleep was deep and dreamless. While his skin tanned beneath the southern sun, the arrow marks from Amon Hen faded to a pale pink until they were a few among the many battle scars that marred his body.

Nobody spoke to Boromir about those scars, though his co-workers noticed them and whispered among themselves when they thought he wasn't listening. Their silence suited him fine. He rarely spoke with anyone, always worried his manner of speech or a moment of carelessness would reveal him as one of high blood and raise more questions than he was willing to answer. Yet, he kept his ears open, listening for resentments or displeasure about Gondor's new king.

He heard none. People had more pressing concerns than stately matters they could do nothing about. They still grieved for loved ones lost in the battles, and were slowly picking up the pieces of their lives again, rebuilding their city and their homes. They spared little thought for what happened in Minas Tirith. Nîneth had been right all along. The nasty gossip he had overheard on his first night in Linhir had been more the ale talking than the first signs of an uprising. Aragorn had nothing to fear.

Yet, Boromir remained in Linhir, at The Merry Fisher. Ereg and his comrades were oft sitting at their customary table, mugs before them, when Boromir returned from his hard labor. It seemed they attempted to drown their disgruntlement with their fate in ale, spending what little coin they had on foaming pitchers. Though they cast dark, foreboding looks in Boromir's direction, they let him be and watched their words whenever he was near. Their reserve was not likely to last, Boromir knew. One day they might collect enough courage to overcome their fear of him, though he did not think they would attack him openly. Still, he was unconcerned. He had survived more than one ambush, confronted orcs and easterlings, and he was not afraid of a few sour fishermen.

At night, during supper, he sometimes glimpsed Nîneth among the other women in the common room. But Boromir's habit to withdraw shortly after he

finished eating, avoiding the lively business of the inn, assured he had not talked to her since the night of his arrival.

On one more warm evening in a string of endless hot days, Boromir's room at the inn failed to cool even with the window wide open. Sleep would be impossible. He returned to the common room, which was nearly empty, even the regular customers staying away in favor of cooler places. Boromir took a seat beside the door where he could catch an occasional breeze. Híril lowered herself near his feet, her panting tongue resting on her forepaws.

He ordered a pitcher of cold cider to drink while struggling to subdue a needle too tiny for his hands and a thread that kept slipping from his fingers. His work breeches were piled on the table before him. They had ripped when the cloth caught a nail and he had pulled away without realizing he was stuck. Boromir had ignored the tear for a few days, but it kept growing wider until he was left with the choice to either spend precious savings on a new pair of breeches, or find someone to repair them for him.

Or he could try to mend the tear himself. After all, how difficult could it be? Oft had he watched when severe cuts in torn flesh were stitched together, and a piece of fabric would neither bleed on his hands nor twist in agony.

Still, the fabric was more wayward than expected.

He cursed when the needle pricked his thumb a third time while he was trying to thrust the thread through its eye. Sweat broke out on his brow and he wiped his forehead with his palm.

Laughter made him look up.

"Here, let me do that," Nîneth said. She held out her hands.

He glared at her, frustrated and displeased with her merriment. "I can manage. I would not want to rob your patrons of the pleasure they paid for."

Her lips tightened and her smile disappeared. He was instantly contrite. "I apologize," he said. "That was uncalled for."

"Aye, it was," she muttered.

"I would welcome your assistance," Boromir added. "If you are still willing after my boorish behavior."

Her features softened and the corner of her mouth twitched. "You're a strange man, Erandír."

She drew up a chair and took the garment from him. Her hands moved quickly and he watched the rip disappear beneath her nimble fingers.

"You speak like a high born lord," she continued, "yet you live in a shabby brothel by the harbor and work the skin off your bones like a commoner. The girls gossip about you."

"Truly?"

"Aye. Some say you were an important man once but have fallen from grace. Others believe you are a spy."

"A spy?" He laughed, trying to hide his discomfort. His throat felt tight; some of the talk came too close to the truth for comfort. "For whom?"

Nîneth looked up and smiled. "That, they do yet not know."

He grinned back and poured himself more cider. He held up the pitcher and raised an eyebrow.

"Please," she said.

He poured another cup for her and took a sip from his own. The tear was nearly mended; she would be gone soon.

"What else do they say about me?" he asked.

Nîneth tied off the thread. "That you have never shown an interest in taking any of the girls to your bed. They speculate that you do not like women and wonder why you stay here."

He shrugged. Why did he, indeed? But where would he go if he left? When he followed the dream's words and searched for Imladris, he had had a destination, a place at the end of his travel, though he did not know where it lay. Yet, where did one go to find forgiveness? East? Or west? At least in Linhir he could make himself somewhat useful in helping with the restoration efforts. It was not much, but it was something.

He realized Nîneth was looking at him. "Because my bed is soft, the room clean and the food decent?"

Her lips curled up. "Still, you are a man. You must have... needs."

How had an offer to mend his breeches brought them to carnal desires? Was she craftier than he thought her to be, artfully manipulating him? Perhaps this was an attempt to convince him into buying her for the night. And yet, unlike some of the other women, Nîneth had never before tried to compel him.

What if she was? Nîneth was agreeable enough to look upon, despite a nose that was tad too large for her face. And the masons' guild paid him fair wages.

He shook his head. No. He would not. He had enjoyed paid companions before, well-rewarded courtesans in unobtrusive yet elegant houses on the fourth circle. But those had been different times -- and he a different man. "I also possess a measure of self-control. And I can assure you, I like women as much as the next man."

She smiled but did not say anything. She handed him the breeches. "Well, here you are."

"This is astounding," he said, holding up the garment and squinting at the repairs. "I can barely see where it was torn."

She finished her cider, placed the cup on the table and pushed her chair away. "I used to be a seamstress. Before the war destroyed all I held dear."

The sudden bitterness in her voice was like a cold gust of wind and Boromir did not know what to say.

"Will you not sit back down?" he said softly. "I would hear your story, if you do not mind."

She hesitated, her gaze heavy on him.

"I will reward you for your time," he added hastily, "if that has you worried."

Nîneth shook her head. "I don't want your money. It is a quiet night, the girls will manage fine without me. You have told me your stories, I will tell you mine. But not here, not in this common room."

ooo

They left the Fisher and walked along the quay, which was bathed in the orange light of the setting sun. The mild breeze that came up from the sea made the heat bearable. Nîneth watched his dog trotting ahead. The young animal seemed eager to chase after the wood stick her master kept throwing away. She carried it back between her teeth, begging him to cast it again.

Where to begin?

It was hard to relive the memories and speak about them. She had never told anyone her full history, always separating her life in a before and an after.

"I was a respectably married woman once, my husband a captain on one of Linhir's many boats," she started her tale at last.

It seemed another lifetime, the days she supplemented her husband's earnings with needlecraft. It had been a good life, until Corsairs overtook his vessel and

slew all aboard. Theirs had been a marriage of love and she still missed him. She had scraped by, barely, until a fire consumed her home and workshop, and thus her livelihood.

"Nobody had a job to offer me. The war was on our doorstep. Everyone was in dire straits themselves, struggling to survive the attacks from the Corsairs. They had no need of needlework. We lived on the streets, my son and I, begging for the scraps of food that none could spare." Her son, bless his little heart, had kept her sane, her child's needs driving her to try to make ends meet. If not for Galwion, she feared she might have given up the desire to live.

"What about your family?" he asked. "Have you no kin that could take you in?"

Nîneth gave a sad shake of her head. "My husband's family never approved of his marriage with me; my father is a wooltrader from the Hills of Tarnost. A landlubber, not a seaman. I met my husband when we traveled to town for the Midyear's Day Fair, years ago." She was silent for a moment, lost in the memory before she pulled herself back to the present with a shrug. "As for my own kin -- it was too dangerous to travel home with a little boy."

Home. How she longed to return to the green hills, the flocks of sheep and goats, her mother's berry pies. Yet, she could never go home. Her parents -- the shame would be too much for them.

The hour had grown late while they walked along the quay. The night air was cooling at last. Stars twinkled overhead and a thin moon shone down upon the waves. Nîneth stopped and turned to gaze out across the sea.

"In the end, I had nothing left to sell but myself." She gave a dry, humorless laugh. "I did not earn much at first. I was crying too much and men don't like a weeping whore."

"What is it like? I mean..."

She pivoted around, the question putting her on edge. Was this his fancy, his secret pleasure? To keep her talking until her defenses lowered, then have her speak of things she'd rather forget?

"I should not have asked--" Erandír's eyes held genuine regret.

"It depends," she said, not sure why she answered. "Some men are considerate and it's not so bad. Others..." She looked away and shrugged, not meeting his eyes. "Anyway, I have grown used to it. And it keeps Galwion, my son, fed and clothed, with a roof over his head."

"I'm sorry such fate has befallen you," he said quietly. "I wish 'twas different. I wish I could do something."

"You already have," she said, turning back to him. "You are kind to me."

"How can that be? I have said cruel things to you," he protested.

"Aye. And then you are always full of remorse an instant later. Nobody ever does apologize. You are the first man in many months who treats me like a person."

Something washed over his face before he looked away, avoiding her gaze. Had she said something wrong?

"It will get better some day."

Nîneth gave a bitter snort. "Some day, maybe."

He gave her a sideways look and she sighed. Tears welled in her eyes. Curse it! She was done crying over what she could not change. She brushed at her eyes with the back of her hand.

"It's late; we should go back. Someone might have asked for me."

She veered away and began marching along the quay. She should have taken him up on his offer to pay her. It would have been quick money. Yet, she would not ask now. Her last smidgen of self-respect demanded she keep to her word.

"Nîneth." Erandír drew up beside her, taking long strides to keep up with her quick paces.

"Don't," she muttered, walking faster until she was near running. He stopped and fell back, but she could feel his eyes burning her neck all the way to The Merry Fisher's door.

ooo

Galwion was biting his lip with concentration, cheeks red with effort, and he had no eyes for his mother. Cook had given him a large bowl of peas that needed to be shelled and he was sitting on a stool in the middle of the kitchen, the scullion boys bustling about him. An affectionate smile played around Nîneth's lips while she observed her son from the doorway.

"What is he like?"

"Who?" Nîneth turned from watching Galwion and faced the speaker.

"Who." The girl rolled her eyes. "Erandír, of course. Come, tell me. Is he as stout as he looks?"

"I wouldn't know." Nîneth looked back into the kitchen. Galwion was growing fast, he was going to need new clothes soon. She would have to find a weaver who was willing to let her buy some scraps, or see what the ragman could sell her that could be mended.

"What? You're not serious, are you? You spent all evening with him. And he never--"

"No. We only talked."

"That's really strange. Perhaps he truly doesn't like girls. Pity, though."

"Fimlas!" Nîneth could not help but laugh. Fimlas lacked for modesty and did not care one wit. A short, plump girl with a quick smile, she was very popular with the regular visitors of The Merry Fisher. She was also an incorrigible gossip.

"What? I'm right, aren't I? Tell me I'm not. Look at him!"

The subject of their conversation was sitting across the room, alone at a table, as was his wont, with the dog that never strayed far from his side curled beneath his chair. He forked his dinner, unaware of the women's chatter.

"Perhaps," Fimlas continued in a lower voice, "he's deformed. Maybe he sustained a terrible injury and he just, you know, can't any longer. He was a soldier, wasn't he?"

The girls truly managed to think up the most outlandish explanations for Erandír's reticence. But to them, a man who did not reward their advances was a curiosity; there had to be something wrong with him for their world to make sense again.

"Yes, he was," Nîneth said. "Have you considered that perhaps he might simply be too principled?"

Fimlas snorted. "Nîneth, you're a hopeless romantic. Such men don't exist. And if they do, they certainly don't stay at the Fisher."

Erandír must have felt their eyes on him, for he chose that moment to look up and catch Nîneth's gaze. With a dip of his head, he invited her to come to his table.

"Go for it," Fimlas whispered. "If you treat him well, perhaps you can help with his problem. Who knows, he might be so grateful he'll take you away from here, ask you to marry him."

Nîneth chuckled wryly. "Now who's the romantic?"

"I've heard it happens," Fimlas said, her tone a bit defensive. "With men, you never know what makes them do anything. Now, go, before he grows impatient." She nudged Nînth's back.

Nînth made her way to Erandír's table. "Is there something you wish?" she asked, keeping her tone even. She had not forgotten how his gentle questioning had brought her to tears the eve before.

He smiled, despite her cool demeanor. "Aye. I would have you join me." He indicated the chair opposite his.

Before Nînth could find a reply, the proprietor materialized at her elbow. "It is a busy night, sir, and--"

Without a word, Erandír placed a few coins on the table. The innkeeper snatched them up.

"Of course, sir."

"Have you eaten yet, Nînth?" Erandír asked once she was seated. "Can I order you something?"

"No, thank you. I have had supper earlier."

"A shame. I do not much enjoy eating by myself."

ooo

He asked for her company again the next night, and the night after. He never demanded more than that she wait until she could dine with him. He amused her with anecdotes of his day while she told him the latest gossip of the brothel. Though he was a good storyteller, mimicking his foreman and coworkers until she laughed out loud, he never said a word about himself. The others, burning with curiosity, pestered her for details, yet she could not tell them much. It only served to increase the aura of mystery surrounding Erandír.

After several such joint suppers, he suggested she have Galwion sit with them.

"I don't know," Nînth said. "This common room at night is no place for a young boy."

"Aye," he agreed. "Would you not like to spend a little more time with your son, though? At this early hour, not much is happening that would not be fit for a child to watch."

ooo

"You three mimic quite the little family," Fimlas said the following evening while they were primping themselves for the night's work.

Nîneth combed her hair and daubed a drop of rose water behind her ears. "Erandír just doesn't like to eat alone." She tugged at her bodice and eyed herself critically in the mirror.

Fimlas made a sound in her throat. "There are plenty who wouldn't mind sharing a meal with him. He only ever asks for you." There was a hint of envy in the girl's voice. "Has he asked you to leave with him yet?"

"Leave with him?" Nîneth turned away from the mirror and stared at Fimlas. "Go where? Erandír has no plans for leaving."

"Yes, he does." Fimlas showed a smug grin. "He has been looking for private rooms in the bricklayers' district. Didn't you know?"

She did not. Erandír had not mentioned a departure. Yet she had always known he would not stay at the Fisher forever. He had behaved oddly tonight, she must admit. Several times had he seemed on the verge of saying something, only to remark on the weather, on the other guests in the room, or the saltiness of the beef. What was it he had wanted to say? That he was going away?

Her throat constricted at the thought of Erandír leaving. It would put an end to their meals, to that daily hour where she could pretend normalcy. And, may the spirits forgive her, but a small voice whispered she would also suffer the loss of the easy money he offered her.

ooo

Although the hour was growing late, the common room was crowded, filled with sweaty men and the scent of spilled ale and pipe smoke. Outside, a storm was raging. Lightning zinged across the sky every few seconds, instantly followed by roaring thunder. Rain streaked against the windows.

Nîneth glanced outside. If only the rains would stop the patrons would disperse and return to their wives. She was sore and tired, her back hurt, and though the gains were good, they did not make up for the fact that she had not had any chance to look in on Galwion since supper.

She wished one of the overnight guests would invite her to his bed. The salesman from whom she had bought the rose water seemed kindly enough and a night in a private room was much to prefer over the endless groping and

grabbling from the local longshoremen and mariners that she must endure whenever she passed through the common room.

But the rain refused to stop, the men refused to go home and the peddler had nothing more than a passing interest in her.

"Ello, pretty girl." Breath heavy with sour ale assaulted her nostrils. "'Ow about a littl' kiss?"

She suppressed a shudder when she recognized the man who uttered the slurred words and whose beady eyes blinked fuzzily. "Ereg. You know better. A kiss is a copper."

He grinned, revealing crooked teeth. This time, Nînth failed to squelch the shiver that coursed along her spine.

"I 'ave money," he said. He fumbled among his clothes and dug up a handful of silver. "See? What's that gonna buy me? Eh?"

"Where did you get that?"

Ereg never had money. His tab always ran high and he never did pay until the barman threatened to cut him off entirely. Nînth wished the barkeep would make good on his threat one day; perhaps Ereg would go find another haunt to spend his evenings.

"Found it."

Nînth laughed. "Stole it, more like."

Something stirred in his drunken gaze. "Think you're too good for the likes of me, eh? Why? 'Cause I don't speak like 'is lordship from the City, who thinks he's better than me because 'e's seen the king? That it? We'll see what the boss 'as to say about that."

"I don't have to go with you," Nînth protested.

"I have the coin," Ereg growled, seizing her hand. "If I can pay, you'll spread y'er legs for me, woman."

"No, I won't. You're drunk, you stink, and the spirits know what diseases you hide underneath those filthy threads."

Ereg flung up his hand and would have delivered her a stinging blow if strong fingers had not snapped around his wrist and held him back.

"Are you hard of hearing? She said she is not interested."

"Erandír?" Nînth asked in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"I can pay," Ereg rasped through clamped teeth. "She can't refuse."

Erandír tightened his grip and Ereg's face twisted with pain.

"She can, and she has. Now, get yourself gone, before you tempt me to do what I should have done weeks ago."

Nîneth glanced around and frowned. They were drawing the attention of everyone in the room. Eyes glittered in anticipation of a brawl but the innkeep would be angry if she allowed men to fight over her.

She grabbed Erandír's elbow. "I'll go with him. Please."

Erandír stared down at her. "Is that what you want?"

She tried to say yes, but the words refused to come beneath his intense gaze. "I thought so," he said at last and turned his attention back toward Ereg.

"Do something!" Ereg groaned. His drinking buddies crowded around them. One man raised an earthen pitcher, spilling ale, and threatened to break it on Erandír's head.

## Fate's Admonishment

An hour later, peace had returned to The Merry Fisher's common room. Nîneth had her wish: the room was deserted, the patrons were gone. Servants were picking through the debris of broken tables and shattered chairs, collecting those mugs and earthenware that remained miraculously unbroken. Shards of crockery crunched beneath their feet.

"Why did you interfere?" Nîneth dabbed at a cut on Erandír's cheek and he flinched. "You know how much Ereg dislikes you."

"Aye." Erandír rubbed his fist with a wry smile. "I doubt he will bother you again any time soon, though."

"What made you come downstairs at this hour?" Nîneth was not about to let him distract her so easily. "You never have before."

"I wished to speak with you." He pushed her hand away from his face and took it between his. The calluses on his fingers felt rough on her skin and his knuckles were scraped raw and bloody.

"You are too good for this place, Nîneth, for this work. You are an intelligent woman, caring and gentle, and you have a skill that is going to waste here. You should leave, start anew."

"Do you not believe I want that?" She laughed bitterly and pulled her hands free. "Don't you think I wouldn't take Galwion away from here if I could? Before he is old enough to understand why his friends are not allowed to play with him any longer? I would. I'd like to live in a place where nobody knows us, where we have no past. Where I can work as a seamstress again, and Galwion will be the son of a widow instead of a whore. But such dreams take money. Money I don't have. Money I will not have for a long time and many more men."

He blinked at her outburst, and she took a deep breath. Calmer, she added, "I would leave, Erandír, if only I could. But I can't."

He reached for her again, taking her by the shoulders. "Come with me, Nîneth. I have rented rooms in the stonemasters' district. I am moving tomorrow."

Her throat tightened. So Fimlas had been right; he was leaving. "What are you suggesting?" she asked. "That I be your personal harlot?"

He winced but did not let go. "No. That is not what I meant. I will have need for someone to cook and clean. Someone who does laundry and mends my clothes." He flashed her a smile. "You know I am a terrible sewer."

"You want a housekeeper."

"Aye. You can cook, can you not?"

"Why me? I'm not nearly as pretty as some of the other girls."

The smile disappeared. "Nîneth, I am not looking for a pretty wench to warm my bed, I would never ask it of you. There are two rooms; we will not give the neighbors cause for gossip."

Nîneth grimaced. "What reputation do I have left to lose? It doesn't matter much what people think."

He sighed. "Perhaps. Yet, you have suffered greatly, through no fault of your own. You deserve a second chance."

Did she believe him? She stared into his face, tried to read his eyes. She saw nothing that indicated deceitfulness or insincerity.

"All right," she said. "We will come with you, Galwion and I. You *will* let me bring my son, won't you?"

His lips curled back into a grin. "That goes without saying."

ooo

The tiny apartment Boromir had rented was not much of a home, especially for one used to the vast chambers and long hallways of the Citadel: two small rooms on the second story of a brick building, with a scorch-marked door leading to crooked steps, and small windows looking out onto the wall of the next house. The whole first week after they moved in, Nîneth treated him with more wariness than she ever had during evening meals at The Merry Fisher. Boromir carefully kept his distance; he was convinced she expected he would break his promise to her any day. And though, sometimes, when he thought she would not notice, he did look at her and wonder what it would be like to lie with her, he was determined to keep that vow. When his body threatened to betray him, a long walk served to clear his head from its lustful thoughts and exhaust his body for easy sleep.

His efforts were rewarded, and gradually, Nîneth grew less tense. She had been right about the neighbors, however. It did not take long for the others in the street to learn about her, and they shunned Nîneth and Boromir, forbidding their children to play with Galwion. Nîneth bore their coldness with a grim courage, but Boromir did not mind overmuch. *Let them gossip*, he thought. At least it spared him from having to socialize and neighbors querying his past.

Time progressed, and summer grew old and weary. The restoration efforts at the docks were well underway. Most of the ruins and debris had been carted off, and though it would be many years before every scar the war had left would be repaired, the harbor was freed of the shipwrecks and overseas trade picked up. Exotic goods from faraway places made their way to Gondor again. Peddlers tried to sell their wares at summer fairs and entertainers displayed their skills to much ooh-ing and ah-ing from the Linhir children.

One eve in late summer, it was still too warm to stay indoors in their tiny home, and after supper Boromir took Nîneth and Galwion to the market, to stroll along the summer fair stalls. The alleyways between the booths were crowded, most people having waited until the worst of the summer heat had passed and evening shadows cooled the air somewhat. The stallkeepers did good business, selling earthenware or intricately worked trinkets made in far Khand.

"Mama, Erandír, come look!" Galwion dragged them to a colorful stall. A small creature sat on the table. A long, thin chain ran from a collar around its neck to the wrist of its owner, a fat man with a thick beard and a skin dark from the sun.

"What is that?" the boy asked.

"I do not know," Boromir answered. The creature vaguely resembled a man's shape, with hands and feet and large, brown eyes. It was covered with hazel-colored fur that darkened near the tips of its ears and tail.

"It's a monkey," the fat man said in a rolling Westron. "It comes from very, very far away, where the forests swarm with these animals."

A monkey! Boromir remembered a traveling menagerie had visited Minas Tirith one summer. He had been eighteen years old and off on his first command; he had missed the entire visit. But Faramir had spoken excitedly to him about the animals. The thought of his brother caused a pang of longing.

"It'll dance for you," the handler continued, "if you give it a copper."

Galwion looked up at Nîneth, eyes shining. "Mama? May I?"

Boromir grinned. This, he liked to see. Faramir had been very impressed with the tricks of the entertainers and their animals. "Here," he said, and dug a coin from his pocket.

Galwion offered it to the monkey, who snatched it away. The fat man began to play a merry tune on a flute. The monkey jumped to the music, waving its arms. Galwion clapped his hands. "Look, Mama, it's dancing!"

A few minutes later, the performance was over. The creature sat back on its haunches and looked at Galwion, tiny head cocked.

"Can I have another copper? Please?"

"Do not beg Erandír for money," Nîneth said to her son. "It's not seemly."

Boromir chortled. They walked on, enjoying the many displays. Galwion kept throwing glances over his shoulder until they reached a stall where sweets were sold. There were candied anise seeds, small nut cakes, pynade made of golden honey. Boromir spied a shaded pail filled with cold river water. Inside the pail, its rim barely above the water, stood a cup filled with small squares of a smooth dark brown, carefully shielded from the sun, the water keeping it cool. He recognized the rare delicacy from formal state banquets. Finding a few pieces at a summer market in Linhir was a marvel indeed.

"Nîneth?" Boromir said. "Here. You should try some of this."

She walked over to him. "What is it?"

He grinned. "Cocoa nuggets. Candy of kings." He gestured for the vendor to give him two pieces and emptied his purse. "'Tis an unusual find."

The vendor took the silver and handed Boromir the dark candy. "It sure is, sir. This is the first I've seen in many, many years though it wasn't so terribly rare when trade with the south was more frequent. But even then it usually went to the fine lords in their fancy houses." He lowered his voice. "I bought this off a Harad merchant who came with their ambassador traveling to Minas Tirith. I don't think he was supposed to sell it to me but I gave him a fair price." With a chortle, he turned to Nîneth. "You are in luck, madam."

Boromir stepped away from the stall and gave one piece to Nîneth, the other to Galwion. She looked at it for a moment.

"Taste it," Boromir said. "Before it melts."

She slipped the chocolate past her lips. "It's sweet," she said after a moment, surprised. "And bitter, all at once. It's a bit like carob but... different. I like it." She licked her fingers and smiled. "And it's sticky."

"Mmm," Galwion said, smacking. "May I have some more?"

"Nae," Boromir said. "It's a rare treat, and so it should remain." The two pieces had cost him nearly a week's wages, yet he did not regret it. The look on Nîneth's face as she tasted the candy made it money well spent.

That night, for the first time since leaving Minas Tirith, he smiled as he slept, his features relaxed. For the first time in many, many years, Boromir had no other responsibility than to get up in the morning and do the job the foreman gave him. For the first time in his life, he was helping build homes, not defend them. No longer need he lie awake at night, worrying about orcs crossing the

east borders, or about the readiness of his troops. No longer did he train new recruits one day, only to see them die terrible deaths on sharp orc blades the next.

The time had come that he could look to Gondor's future, if not his own, and not see death and destruction. The sons of Gondor would have a chance to grow old at last.

Or so he believed, until, one day, the fates reminded him that death always lurked, ever seeking a chance to claim a life.

ooo

Boromir stumbled up the narrow, creaking staircase. He shook his head, nearly lost his balance, but the memories refused to let go. Of all the terrible things he had seen in his life, this seemed among the worst. He could still feel the crumpled body of the child in his arms... see the face of the despairing mother...

He flung the door open and crossed the threshold, breathing a sigh. Nîneth looked up from her needlework, surprise on her face.

"You're home early, dinner is not..." Her voice faltered when she took in his appearance. "What happened to you? Is that blood?"

She sprang up, worry creasing her brow. "Erandír, are you hurt?"

What was she talking about? He followed her gaze down his body and for the first time noticed how his shirt was torn, with dried blood staining it. That poor boy.

"No. The blood is not mine. There was an accident. A rope of the scaffolding was frayed. It snapped, the scaffold collapsed. There was--" His voice broke and he swallowed. "There was a boy, one of the bricklayers' apprentices."

"Is he... Did he die?"

"Aye." Boromir paused. "Where is Galwion?"

"Out playing with Híril. Why?"

"The boy that died... He was a mere few years older than Galwion. He had started his apprenticeship last week."

Boromir slumped on a chair, too tired to stand. He rubbed his face, his eyes stinging with dust and unshed tears. His fingertips were ragged, torn with the haste of trying to clear the debris off of the boy's limp body. They had been too

late. The boy's family did not live far, and Boromir had carried the child home to his mother. The walk had seemed endless; his thigh was likely bruised where one floppy foot had hit it with every step.

"If the foreman had checked the scaffolding..." he rasped.

It was such a waste of life. He had thought that his years as a soldier had hardened him, but seeing the dead boy among the debris had been like a blow to the chest. The land was at peace, people were not supposed to die useless deaths any longer.

"Erandír, I'm so sorry."

Nîneth pulled him to her, and he went like a disconsolate child. She rested his head against her chest. He closed his eyes, breathing deeply, trying to stem the emotions that welled up and threatened to overwhelm him. Why had the Valar seen fit to destroy this child's life before it had barely started? What sin had the boy committed that he should perish, while he, Boromir, yet lived? Had the world not seen enough needless pain and suffering? It should have been him, not an innocent child, if anyone had had to die today because of the foreman's negligence.

Nîneth was running her fingers through his hair, tugging gently when they got tangled in the disheveled strands. Boromir gradually became aware of the softness beneath his cheek, the slow rise of her chest with every breath, her body heat seeping through the thin material of her summer dress.

He squeezed his eyes tighter, unaware that his breathing had become rushed and shallow. Despite himself, he snuggled closer, wrapping his arms around her waist. So much time had passed since he last held a woman...

He shoved her away, refusing to look at her. He did not want to see her face. "Nîneth..." His voice was raw and sounded strange to his own ears.

"Dear Erandír." Light hands cupped his face and forced his head up until her eyes met his. She smiled, her expression tender. "It is all right," she said softly. "You need this."

For the briefest moment he could not move. A groan escaped his throat and he wrapped his hand in her hair, dragging her down until his lips could meet hers. She responded with an eagerness that shocked him and for a moment doubt resurfaced. She had been a whore, a professional harlot -- was this genuine?

But then her hands slipped down to the fastening of his breeches and all thought fled from his mind. He forgot everything: the past, the future, the boy's death. None of it mattered. All that existed, all there was, was this moment and the driving need to possess her.

He wanted her, wanted to feel her around him, to drown in her vitality and warmth, take it for himself so he could overcome the desolation and loneliness and banish the hurt and guilt.

He clawed at her bodice and her hands came up -- to help or to stop him? -- but too slow, too slow. He shoved her hands aside, uncaring that seams tore beneath his force, or that buttons flew across the room, skittering to far corners.

He mumbled against her throat for a moment, unsure what he was saying, or even if the sounds formed words, before he lowered his mouth to capture the tip of a breast between his lips. Nîneth made a small sound that stirred him into further action. He lifted her up, and she wrapped her legs around his hips, her weight resting easily in his arms.

Not long now. No time. Where... More fabric was in the way and he growled in frustration as he ripped it aside. Then, at last, he sank into her, sobbing on her shoulder while she clung to him, her ankles digging into his back and her fingers tightly gripping his hair. He shifted, shivered, found his release, fast, furious, unstoppable.

ooo

When his need finally let go of him, thought slowly returned. Boromir set Nîneth down and backed away, his stomach roiling.

"What did I do?" he gasped. He took in her torn dress, disheveled hair. "I did not mean--"

He turned and fled, tumbling down the narrow staircase and into the street. She called after him, "Erandír!", his false name an accusation of misdeeds, the sound of her voice chasing him. He would not look back, did not dare look back. He ran around the corner into the cool shadows of a narrow alley.

Boromir fell against the rough stone wall and hid his face in his hands. Was this the reason he had left Minas Tirith? So he could betray the trust of yet another who was weaker than he?

He pushed away from the wall to stumble along the alley and through the streets, his stomach tight. He paid no attention to where he was going, merely followed his feet, until he passed an alehouse. Raucous laughter drifted out and Boromir stopped. It seemed like a place where he could forget for a while. He pushed through the door and made his way to the counter.

"Ale," he said. "The strongest you have."

The tavern's proprietor looked him up and down. "If it's strong drink you need," he said, "I have something better than ale."

Boromir's brows lifted. "What would that be?"

The server grinned and held up a small flask. "A special brew from Rohan. Made from barley, they say, and far more effective than ale."

Theodred had offered him one of Rohan's brews once, during one of his rare visits. It had burned itself a path down his throat, Boromir recalled, and brought tears to his eyes. "I will have some of that," he said with a nod, digging up a coin.

The light golden drink was everything he remembered. Soon, a warm buzz spread through his limbs, and his pain dulled to a muted ache in his belly. His repugnant deeds did not seem so horrible any longer.

He could not recall how often the barkeep refilled his glass. When his pocket was empty, the proprietor urged him out of the tavern. Boromir tried to protest, demanding more of the drink but he was no match for the sober barkeep.

"Go home," the man said, not unkindly. "Make up with your woman."

Boromir squinted. "How'd'you know?"

The barkeep laughed. "Because she's all you talked about all night. Now, git!"

With the door of the tavern closed against him, his money gone and the night dark and quiet around him, Boromir did not have much choice but return home. Nîneth should be asleep by now, so he would not have to face her yet. He promised himself he would wake early so he could slip out before she rose.

The staircase seemed to have grown extra steps in his absence and they conspired to keep him out of his house. He snarled a curse when the stairs wobbled beneath him, upsetting him so he fell painfully to his knees.

Above, a door opened and soft light shone in the narrow stairwell.

"Erandír? Is that you?"

Boromir groaned. So much for tiptoeing in unnoticed.

"Aye. What happened to the stairs? They are moving."

There was a long moment of silence. "Are you drunk?" She sounded disbelieving. "I have never known you to drink too much."

Was he drunk? Oh yes, he was. He looked up at Níneth while attempting to conquer the last few steps, blinking blearily into the candlelight.

"I am sorry," he said. "I broke my promise. I will leave on the morrow."

"Don't speak nonsense," she said. She took his arm and guided him to the alcove where his bed was. He fell on top of the mattress.

"Sleep it off. We can talk in the morning."

ooo

He woke to someone hammering steel blades with a heavy mallet inside his skull. Sharp sunlight pierced his eyes as soon as he opened them. Moaning, he squeezed them shut.

"Here, drink this."

He gingerly slitted his eyes open. Níneth handed him a cup with a dark liquid.

"What is it?"

"It'll help. It'll dull the pain and clear your senses."

Warily, he drank of the concoction. It was bitter, tasted like seaweed, and he shuddered. His face twisted in a grimace he could not hide.

Níneth chuckled and he glared at her.

"What nasty witch's brew is this?" he said after he had managed to get most of the cup's content down.

"Sailors make a sport out of drinking," she said. "This is something my husband taught me to make. It will make you feel better soon, you'll see."

She was true to her word. Within moments, he felt the medicine do its work. The pounding in his head faded to a distant clonk and the sunlight did not seem painfully bright any longer.

Unfortunately, the return of his senses also brought back memories he would rather not recall.

"Níneth, I--"

She cut in, "Aye, we should talk." She took the cup and knelt beside his bed. "Erandír, do you believe you forced yourself on me? Is that why you ran off?"

He looked away, not wanting to see her face and nodded.

"Then you are wrong." Her hand took his chin and turned his head until she could meet his eyes. "True, I am not strong enough to stop you should you have decided to take me against my will. But believe me, I would have let you know if I did not want you. What happened, happened because you needed it, and because I wanted it to happen."

He stared at her. She had wished him to bed her?

Her eyes were soft, though they held a hint of grief. "Call me wanton," she continued when he did not speak, "but I desired to be with a man of my choice while I could, if only once. To wipe out the memories..." Her voice died and her eyes swam with tears.

"I am--"

"Mama? Why is Erandír still in bed? Is he sick?" Galwion, small fists rubbing the sleep from his eyes, wandered into the alcove.

Nîneth sobbed a laugh and wiped her cheeks. "No, he is not sick. Just lazy. Come, let's get breakfast ready."

## Autumn Falls

"While I could," Nîneth had said. What had she meant with those cryptic words?

For a while, Boromir did not understand but as the days shortened and the nights grew cool, his disquiet increased. He could no longer find peace in lugging bricks. Where he would find the absolution he sought, he did not know but Linhir was not going to provide it -- and neither was Nîneth.

One morning, when the air was crisp with the presage of autumn, he realized it would soon be time to journey on. Rumors had reached the town, stories of orcs hiding in the vales of the White Mountains, terrorizing outlying villages and destroying much-needed crops. Those people had need of his skill with a blade, not his might at carting stone. He could not stay in Linhir; he would travel further west, to Calembel or maybe Erech. He should be able to reach the end of the road before the thick of winter. After that, he was willing to let fate lead him.

How could he explain to Nîneth and Galwion he had to go, though? The question pressed like a weight on his mind, and the more he thought about it, the more the answer seemed to elude him. They relied on him; he could not desert them. And thus he lingered, restless and unhappy.

Shortly after the harvest feasts, while rain threatened on the horizon, he arrived home to find Nîneth waiting for him dressed in her finest gown. His eyes narrowed.

Nîneth smiled when she caught his look. "I believed I should dress my best for the occasion."

"What occasion?" Had he overlooked something important? A birthday? A local custom?

"Your last eve in Linhir."

Boromir shook his head. "I have no plans to leave."

"Yes, you do," Nîneth said. "I've always known you would not stay, and I have seen the longing grow in your eyes."

It was then that he saw his shirts and breeches, all neatly folded, lying beside his saddlebags on the table. His sword, secure in its scabbard, was placed on top of the pile. He sought Nîneth's gaze.

"You're not content here, Erandír," she said softly. "I see you suffer. Few came through the war unscathed but you're still haunted more than most. I don't know what it is you need, but I do know I'm not able to offer it."

He opened his mouth to protest, but she crossed over to him and placed a finger against his lips. "Do not deny it, man of Gondor. You know I speak the truth. You helped me, now allow me to help you. You're free to go, you have made me no promise. Be sure, though, that you will take my heart with you, and that I have warmed myself in our friendship."

Tears sprang into his eyes, tears of sorrow as well as of relief when she lifted the burden of responsibility from his shoulders. He pulled her into his arms. "I shall not forget you, Nîneth," he whispered into her hair.

They stood for a moment, holding each other tightly. Then, with a small laugh, Nîneth eased herself from the embrace and stepped away.

"I have supper ready," she announced. "You better go wash up, unless you want to enjoy your last evening meal in Linhir smelling like a boar!"

ooo

He did not want to desert her alone on his final evening in Linhir. But it might be his last chance for a while to send a message and so he excused himself after dinner, saying he had an urgent errand to run. Nîneth looked disappointed and curiosity shone in her eyes, but she did not protest or ask questions.

Boromir took long strides through the darkened streets of Linhir, leather boots resounding on the pavement. At last he found what he sought: the house of a scribe. He knocked, waited a moment and knocked again, rapping his knuckles impatiently against the wooden door.

"Yeh, yeh," a voice grumbled inside. "I'm coming!" The door opened a crack and a white-haired man peered at him over the light of a candle.

"Sorry to trouble you at this hour, master *pethran*," Boromir apologized, "but I have urgent need of your services."

After thoroughly assessing Boromir's appearance, the scribe stepped aside and opened the door wider, motioning Boromir inside.

"I would have some parchment," Boromir said, "and a quill and ink. Also some wax to seal my correspondence."

"Will you be writing the letter yourself?" the man asked, watching him with renewed interest.

"Aye."

A few moments later Boromir squeezed his large frame into a seat before a small writing desk. Sheets were placed in front of him, along with a tiny bottle of ink and a feathered pen. The surface of the paper gleamed blankly in the candlelight. He stared at it for a long time, unsure how to start.

At last he dipped the quill in the ink and placed the point on the paper.

"To Faramir son of Denethor, Steward of Gondor," he wrote at the top of the page, and a little below that: "Dear little brother..."

ooo

Although he had planned the epistle to be short, the watchman cried midnight by the time he signed it with a flourished B and sealed it with a drip of red wax. He had found himself divulging to Faramir not only his adventures so far, but also his deepest thoughts and doubts.

Once he finished the long letter, he took a new sheet, dipped the pen in the ink again, and began another note. Though he also addressed it to the Steward, he did not offer a salutation nor did he sign the second letter. Faramir would know who sent it.

After he had sealed the second document, he handed it to the scribe, along with several silver coins. "I trust you will see that this letter reaches its destination safely," he said.

The scribe's eyes widened when he saw the address, but he nodded without asking questions.

"I shall take good care of it, lord."

Boromir started. "Do not call me that. I am but a messenger."

"Of course," the scribe said. He put the letter away. "A courier headed for the citadel is expected to pass Linhir in a few days, carrying missives from Dol Amroth and Lord Angbor of Lamedon. I'll see that he takes your letter too."

ooo

The day of his departure dawned and Boromir rose at first light. Nîneth, already awake, had prepared him a hearty breakfast of eggs and sausages, with bread still warm from the oven. They did not speak much. All the words that needed to be said had been spoken over supper the evening before.

An hour later, Boromir finished tying his pack to his saddle, and he mounted. Barangol pranced as he did so, eager to be off after long months of little exercise. Nîneth watched from the doorway, Galwion clutching at her skirts. The boy's cheeks were streaked with tears.

"Why are you leaving?" he cried. "I don't want you to go."

"Shh, dear son," Nîneth hushed him. "I explained to you yesterday why Erandír cannot stay with us."

Galwion sniffed and wiped his nose with his sleeve. "Will you come back?"

"If I can," Boromir said, his own voice hoarse. The boy's misery tore at his heart. The child had latched onto him like a father, and it would be hard for him to miss the second man he had come to see in such a role. "I promise, if I can, I will come and visit you some day. Now you are the man of the house. You have to look after your mother, all right?"

The boy nodded and visibly struggled to stop his tears.

Boromir turned toward Nîneth. "Remember what I told you: go to Minas Tirith. You can start a new life there, you and Galwion."

He leaned down from the saddle and offered her the long letter he wrote the night before. "Take this. When you reach the City, have it presented to the Steward. The Steward only, do you understand?"

Nîneth's eyes turned round. Her mouth dropped. "The Lord Steward? Erandír, I am but a simple woman. How can I--"

He held up a hand. "Please, I cannot tell you more. But do not worry; he will be expecting you. You should have no trouble getting an audience. Just promise me you will do as I ask."

She looked at him for a moment. "Erandír is not your true name, is it?"

"No," Boromir said. Something lodged in his throat and would not budge, no matter how hard he swallowed. "'Tis not. My true name..." He squared his shoulders. "My true name matters no longer."

Though her eyes softened at the sadness in his voice, Nîneth did not comment. Instead, she gave him an understanding nod. "I will do as you bid me. You have my word."

With a nudge of his heels, Boromir urged the horse into a trot. Híril was bouncing along the street ahead of him, yapping happily at everything that moved. He did not look back; he wanted to be long gone when Nîneth went to tidy up the alcove and his bed and found the heavy purse he had left her,

containing most of the savings he collected during his stay in Linhir. They would help her start the new life she dreamed of.

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Boromir hoped he would reach Ethring on the River Ringló in five or six days. There was more traffic along the road than when he had departed from Minas Tirith, many months ago, but he no longer felt the need to hide, with the exception of the second day when a company of soldiers approached. Their banners announced that Prince Imrahil of Dol Amroth traveled with them and Boromir had no desire to explain to his uncle how he came to be alive. He withdrew into the forest, hiding until the company passed and the dust had settled back on the road.

He quickly established a daily routine once he left the coast behind. He woke at first light to the twitter of birds. After a quick cold breakfast, he would mount a frisky Barangol; the horse was always glad to start the day after a night's rest. He stopped briefly for his midday meal, and then rode again until near to evening when he would set up camp for the night. He ate what he could find along the road, sometimes stopping at a farm to buy bread and cheese; at other times quickly bringing down a hare or pheasant Híril startled into flight. His dried provisions he saved for more dire times.

The land in southern Gondor was rich and fertile. The road wound its way through the hillocks and dales that formed the foothills of the White Mountains. The tall white peaks that gave the mountains their name glimmered farther away to the north, where they rose high above forests of deciduous trees. Far to the south, the hills of Belfalas crowded together on the horizon. In the valleys, small farming villages lay scattered among forests of tall pines or oak offering shade or shelter. Boromir had been pleased to discover that over the months he spent in Linhir, the farmers had returned to their homesteads and were tending the land as if the war never happened. Oxen pulled plows to reveal a deep red earth, while womenfolk and children sowed winter barley and oats. Sheep, their coats not yet fully thickened for winter, roamed grassy meadows, while trees bowed down beneath their burden of sweet apples or fat late-season plums.

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Five days out of Linhir, the weather changed. Boromir woke to a gray and dull morning. A leaden sky hung over the land. Low, thick clouds scudded along, driven before a chill wind that blew in from the Bay of Belfalas. Without warning, summer had vanished until it was but a memory; the wind and the clouds preceded the first of many autumn storms that would scour the land before winter set in.

By midday the wind had grown in strength until a forceful gale whipped the countryside. Trees swayed back and forth, their crowns groaning beneath the onslaught. Leaves -- red, gold, and brown -- tore free and danced around in wild circles. Boromir hunched in the saddle, shoulders raised high against the chill biting through his cloak. Barangol struggled to move forward against the strong winds that buffeted the large horse.

Then the clouds opened. Heavy sheets of rain pelted down, the drops flying almost horizontally, slashing at man, horse, and dog alike. They were quickly drenched. At last, when a gust of wind nearly unseated him, Boromir decided he had had enough. He would not reach Ethring today, and it was no use risking his life or that of the animals any further.

He dismounted, and, angling his body against the storm, led Barangol to a grove of leatherleaf some paces from the road. It would be safer to hide beneath the thick, glossy leaves of the bush than underneath an oak or chestnut, which could be dangerous in this sort of weather. A sudden gust of wind might find a weak branch or a rotten trunk to break. But Boromir hoped that the dense evergreen would provide less of a risk and offer some protection from the storm's fury.

He tied Barangol's lead to a nearby birch sapling before taking off the saddle and his belongings. The horse turned against the wind, sheltering his head in the sapling's branches. Rain streamed down his flanks and the wind whipped at his tail and mane.

"Sorry, my friend," Boromir murmured. "I wish I could provide you with a roof over your head, but alas!"

Barangol nickered softly and dropped his head, a picture of abject misery.

Boromir shoved blanket, saddle and bags underneath the shrub and squeezed himself in as far as he could manage. The ground, though damp, was not yet soaked and he drew his knees up to his chest. Híril wiggled herself into the small hollow beneath his knees, seeking his body heat. He wished for his oil skin cape, the one that had kept him dry during many a campaign on the East-borders. But he had lost it somewhere on the journey to Imladris and so far had failed to replace it. It was an omission he planned to rectify at the first opportunity -- although he doubted *any* coat could withstand this deluge from the heavens. He tugged his wool cloak tighter around his shoulders. It would not do much to keep him dry, but at least it helped him stay warm.

Boromir resigned himself to his discomfort while he waited for the storm to pass. Water dripped down his face, leaving trails on his cheeks. He hated the forced rest. Not so much because of the physical misery -- though that was bad enough -- but because it gave him too much time to think. And as they always did when he had nothing left to occupy himself with, his unchecked thoughts

perversely wandered down the too-oft-trodden path of self-doubt and remorse.

Had he done the right thing, leaving Nîneth and Galwion to fend for themselves? What if she had not believed him, despite her promise, and did not go to Minas Tirith? He should have stayed, should have taken her to the city himself, even if it meant giving up his secret.

Had he been selfish?

No! Boromir shook his head violently, disturbing the bush so water droplets flew everywhere and Híril started out of an uneasy slumber. The dog growled and Boromir rested a weary hand on the furry head, scratching her between the ears.

It would be too easy to give in to such thoughts. He had done all he could for Nîneth; he would not abandon his quest. What would his renewed presence offer those he loved most except more grief? No, if he ever wished to return to Minas Tirith, he would need to make amends first.

ooo

The storm raged through the night, keeping him awake with its fury. It wasn't until sunrise -- perceived only through the scant lightening of the dark clouds that still obscured the sky -- that the heavy rain began to let up, changing to light drizzle. Boromir shivered, grateful for the meager warmth Híril's small body provided. The dog had burrowed beneath Boromir's cloak some time during the night, nestling herself against his chest, and he had welcomed her presence.

His trousers clung to his body as he crawled out from beneath the leatherleaf. Boromir reached for his saddlebags and tried to pry open the clasps. His fingers were stiff and clumsy with cold but at last he managed to take out the spare set of clothes. They were clammy -- even the thick leather bag had not completely kept out the moisture -- but they were drier and warmer than the wet tunic and breeches he wore.

Breakfast was a cold affair of soggy bread and a few red apples. He longed for a cup of hot tea to warm him but the rains had soaked every piece of wood. Kindling a fire would be impossible.

*I should not have lingered in Linhir so long, he scolded himself. I could have reached the end of the road before these autumn rains.*

He used his discarded tunic to dry off Barangol as best as he could before draping the saddle blanket over the horse's back. The results did not well

please him, but at least the animal's developing winter coat had kept him warm.

Chagrined to find that the tack had suffered the same fate as his clothes and food, Boromir apologized to his mount for using a damp blanket. "I would walk," he said while tightening the straps, "if I had the time. We need to find shelter and warmth. Ethring is about a day's ride away. But I promise you, you will have a nice, dry stable tonight, with plenty of clean straw and sweet oats."

Barangol snorted and shoved him with his head. Boromir chuckled, his spirits lifting a little. "Sometimes, I can believe you understand my every word." He offered the horse the last slices of his apple, which the animal gobbled eagerly, and hoisted himself into the saddle. A cluck of his tongue, a nudge with his heels, and they were on their way.

ooo

The road was deserted; anyone with any sense was settled somewhere dry and warm. The clouds continued to leak drizzling rain. Many new streams ran out of the hills and across the road, muddy brooks that formed to drain off the water from the deluge and eventually carry it to sea. Boromir led Barangol gingerly across the slick surface of the road, their speed of travel slowed to such a snail's pace that he began to fear he might not arrive in Ethring that day at all. His black mood darkened even further when he stopped after a few hours of travel and inspected his horse's withers. Though barely noticeable yet, the animal's skin showed the first signs of sores developing where wet straps rubbed his fur. He cursed the autumn storm below his breath. If only it had waited another day, he would have reached Ethring before it broke and he would have been dry and comfortable while waiting out the storm. Now, he was chilled and miserable, and his throat hurt with the onset of a cold. Worse, he was causing injury to his horse.

*Mayhap I should seek a farm, he thought, where they will allow me a place near their fire to dry out my belongings and where I can take proper care of Barangol.*

Unfortunately, he did not see signs that anyone lived nearby. The road swerved through a dark pine forest of tall trees, on soil sandy and harsh. Nobody would try to farm in such country. Briefly he considered an attempt to start a fire, but quickly dismissed the thought. It was still raining, and everywhere around him he could hear the drips of water trickling through the trees. No, his only option was to go on -- and hope the developing sores would not get much worse until they could be dealt with properly.

Though he knew it was not much use, he tried to shift in the saddle as little as possible in an attempt to relieve the pressure on the sensitive areas of his horse's back. The animal, though wearied, was steadfast and continued along

the road as fast as Boromir dared to go. Even Híril's spirits seemed to have dampened in the dreary weather and she never left the horse's side.

Suppertime drew near and the gloomy day was growing even dimmer when the houses of Ethring finally appeared over the crest of a steep hill. Boromir let out a sigh of relief and swung himself from the saddle. He could walk the last stretch and give his horse a respite, however small.

At the bottom of the hill, the road crossed the River Ringló; Ethring lay high on its western bank. He grimaced at the thought of having to cross the cold, wet river -- although in all truth, neither man nor beast could get much wetter than they already were.

After he led his horse down the incline, Boromir stopped at the river's edge. With rising dismay, he watched the ford. The heavy rains had swollen the river until it seemed near impassable; although the river ran level and wide at the crossing, its current was swift and filled with debris torn down from higher elevations. Even as he watched, an uprooted tree almost as tall as a man came rushing past.

Beyond his view, he heard the river tumble headlong down a steep slope further south. The roar of the falls added to his discomfiture. A waterfall of such size would surely kill him and his mount if they lost their footing. He shivered at the memories of how he nearly drowned in the Greyflood when he was riding to Rivendell. He had lost his mount then, and never did learn what had happened to the horse the Rohirrim had lent him.

But it was growing dark. His stomach was growling and the lights of Ethring beckoned on the opposite shore. Their cheery brightness promised fires to drive the chill from his bones, of warm stew for his belly, and of a dry stable for his horse. Another deluge threatened on the horizon where black clouds were gathering strength. If the next storm broke, the river would become impassable for days, maybe even weeks. And Boromir had no desire to spend another night out in the cold and damp.

In the day's dying light, he studied the fords closely, trying to determine the best route across. He would have to hurry, though, for when darkness had fallen completely, it would be a fool's labor to try and cross the angry waters. He tugged on the reins, leading Barangol to the edge of the river, where he swung back into the saddle. The horse danced restlessly, surveying the swift stream with distrust.

"Come on, boy," Boromir urged him. "Remember that stable I promised? Just a little further, and then you can rest." His soothing tone, if not his words, convinced the horse to trust his master and slowly he walked into the river.

Boromir gasped when the frigid water splashed up. *Coldflood*, indeed; the Ringló was aptly named, he thought glumly. Although he had been cold all day, he was not so chilled he could not feel the icy touch of the river's water

slowly seeping into his flesh. He consoled himself with the same promise he made his horse: just a little further, and then he could get rest in a dry and warm place.

Much to his relief, they reached the opposite shore without incident. But as he stood shivering beside his horse, puddles forming around their feet, he realized something was amiss.

"Híril? Here, girl!" He whistled, and was answered with a distant bark. Boromir peered into the dusky evening. His heart sank when it occurred to him that Híril had not forded the river with them but was still on the opposite bank.

"That wretched cur!" he grunted, though it was really himself he blamed. The river was too deep for the dog to wade across and the current too swift for her to swim. If he had not been so cold and tired, he would have remembered it sooner. The only way for Híril to reach Ethring was for him to go back. For an instant, he was tempted to abandon her and give in to the lure of the town's warm fires. But then he sighed and began to wade back into the cold stream. He had no choice; he could not desert the dog.

## The Captain's Company, Part 1

Faramir rubbed his burning eyes with ink-stained fingers. He leaned back in his chair and stretched, hearing his spine crackle. Shaking his head to loosen the muscles in his neck, he sat forward again. With heartfelt loathing, he glared at the piles of letters on his desk, willing them to dwindle. He had thought, once the king's crowning and wedding were over, things would settle a bit. Never had he imagined that governing a realm involved so much paper. And it wasn't that he was averse to reading, not at all -- he loved the written word. There was nothing more enjoyable than strolling through the library, taking this book or that ancient scroll from the shelves to study it.

But those were instructive, or at the very least, entertaining. These writings, on the other hand...

He grabbed the nearest sheet, scanned it, and threw it back on the desk with a disgusted snort. A shopkeeper's complaint about custom lost during the siege. And here. He snatched up another page. A plea for the king to intercede in a neighbors' quarrel. And then this! He pulled a third page from the pile. A request for nails to be allotted to the carpenters rebuilding the gates. He was the Steward of Gondor, and he was spending his time signing orders for the distribution of nails. How did the foremen think a wooden gate *ought* to be mended? He had already confirmed the work order for the repairs; it should have been sufficient.

*Dare they not make any decision on their own any longer? At this rate, I will soon be busy deciding how many hammer strokes the workers are allowed to use on their precious nails.*

He ran a hand through his hair, longing for the simple days when he was Captain of the Ithilien Rangers and written reports were of true consequence. Faramir did not recall his father ever being inundated beneath such frivolous petitions and letters as covered the current Steward's desk, although Denethor had been burdened also with many responsibilities. But it was as if, with the threat of war ended and the promise of a prosperous future made, trivial matters had gained such importance they needed the eye of the country's highest authorities. The worst of it was, it took his attention away from the truly important things. Such as separating the king's assets from those of the steward's, as they had become terribly entangled over the centuries. Or starting on the restoration of Ithilien so more crops could be produced to feed the populace.

Something needed to be done about it. Come tomorrow, he decided, he would see to hiring more clerks. His hours were simply too short to handle every detail himself, much as he might feel responsible for Gondor's well-being. The clerks could sort the letters into matters a trusted aide could handle and those he himself needed to see to. If he did not, the citizens of Minas Tirith and their

petitions would wound him as much as any Southron arrow had -- but these would see him succumb.

He slumped back with a tired sigh. Perhaps it had been a mistake to stay in Edoras for as long as he had. After Théoden's funeral, while Aragorn accompanied the hobbits as far as the Gap of Rohan, he should have returned to Minas Tirith forthwith instead of remaining until he could return at the king's side. The number of requests, dispatches and orders waiting for him to be perused, signed, or forwarded to King Elessar after the long weeks of absence had been staggering.

Yet, he deemed the time in Edoras well spent. Unbidden, a smile curved his lips. He had passed many a pleasant day with Éowyn, riding across the golden fields of Rohan, discussing plans for their wedding and their future together. Free from the demands of war and office, they were able to unbend and rejoice in each other's company -- despite the ever-present chaperons his future brother-in-law seemed to believe were needed. As if he would ever do anything to disgrace his betrothed... But Éomer had been right; for people of their rank, the appearance of propriety was as important as propriety itself. He could not wait, though, for the wedding. Six more months, until next spring. It felt like an eternity.

Outside, rain slashed at the windows; wind howled around the Citadel. Unbeknownst to Faramir, this very same storm had kept his brother prisoner beneath a leatherleaf bush overnight before it had blown north and reached the capital late in the morning. But that was hours ago and it had long since grown dark. Inside, however, his study was warm and well lit, for soundless servants had put down lamps to cast the room in a golden glow and started a crackling fire in the hearth.

He could not recall what hour had been called last, but his stomach told him the evening was growing late. Pushing the delightful memories of the visit to Rohan from his mind, he went back to work, determined to finish one more pile of papers before pursuing dinner.

He had just signed the last order with a firm *Faramir Denethorion, Steward of Gondor* and was sprinkling sand upon the ink, when someone knocked on the door.

He looked up with mild surprise at the sound. 'Twas a while ago that he had given the clerks leave to retire to their homes for the evening.

"Enter," he called.

The door opened slowly. A page stuck his head in.

"Begging your pardon, my lord," the boy said. "A messenger has arrived, carrying dispatches from Lord Angbor of Lamedon and Prince Imrahil of Dol Amroth. Chamberlain said you might wish to see them right away."

Faramir suppressed a sigh. He had no desire to see even more paper make its way into his office. Still, news from the southern lands was always of concern. And his uncle, at the least, could be trusted not to burden him with trivialities.

"I will take them," he said, waving the page in. The boy gave him a packet wrapped in leather stained dark with rain, bowed and made to depart the room.

"The storm is quite fierce. Has anyone seen that the courier has a chance to warm up after his journey?"

"Yes, Lord Steward. Chamberlain sent him to the kitchens and ordered the cooks to provide him supper."

"Good."

Faramir waited for the lad to close the door before loosening the ties that held the package closed. He pulled out the large sheaf of documents, adding them to the piles on his desk. He shifted through the dispatches quickly, determining whether they could wait until the morning, or if the news they held was so important that it needed the king's attention right away.

His breath caught when his eye fell upon the handwriting on a sealed envelope. He knew that script -- it belonged to Boromir. What could be so important that his brother would risk discovery? Boromir would know there were others at the king's court beside Faramir who might recognize the hand. Then again, none would expect to see the dead practice their penmanship. He shook his head wryly at the thought; he still did not agree with Boromir's decision.

His fingers trembled a little with excitement when he broke the seal and took out the letter. It consisted of a single page with only five lines. "I will send you a woman by the name of Nîneth," Boromir wrote without preamble. "She will carry further word from me. She and her son Galwion have suffered much in the war. I place their fate in your care and trust in your judgement regarding them. Nîneth can tell you more."

Faramir read the words three times, as if by reading them repeatedly, he could make them tell him more. "Leave it to my brother to give me a morsel and then make me wait for the rest of the tale," he muttered below his breath. Still, he smiled. Boromir was alive and well. That was of main import. For the rest, he would just have to wait until this mysterious woman presented herself. He folded the letter and carefully tucked it inside his tunic.

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Boromir opened the door to the stable behind *The Tumbling Falls* inn in Ethring and stepped inside. The mixed odors of manure, hay and horse assaulted him. It seemed dark after the bright light of day outside and he waited for his eyes to adjust. Barangol nickered softly in greeting.

"Hello my friend," Boromir replied. "How are you today?"

He entered the horse's stall and ran a hand over the animal's withers. Except for a bald spot on the horse's hide, with downy new hair growing back in, the sores had faded; a week's rest and ointments provided by the inn's mistress, Miluien, had done their duty. A day or two more, and Barangol would be fit to be ridden again.

Boromir nodded to himself in satisfaction. He wished to leave Ethring soon. He planned to travel to Erech at the end of the South Road and he hoped to do so before winter's snow closed the pass at Tarlang's Neck. He did not yet worry about where to go from Erech; the winters were cold so high in the mountains, too cold for travel. A season's stay in Erech would provide him with plenty of time to reflect on the matter.

The horse turned his head, nostrils flaring. He smacked his lips and started nibbling on Boromir's sleeve. Boromir laughed. "You do have a nose for treats, eh? Well, you are right. I did bring you a nice carrot." He pulled the carrot from his tunic and broke it into pieces before offering them to Barangol.

Behind him, the stable door opened again. Yapping, Híril barreled in, followed by Gahir, the innkeep's son.

"Oh, hello, Master Erandír," the boy said. "I took Híril outside, that we might play together. I hope that was all right?"

"It certainly was, Gahir," Boromir answered. "It seems she has taken a liking to you."

Gahir shrugged and offered a shy smile. "I like her too."

"I am glad you were there to look after her," Boromir continued, "while I was not well."

The mere thought of illness brought back the urge to cough; he forcefully suppressed the tickle in his throat while appraising the dog who cocked her head as she looked back at him. He had come very close to losing her during the crossing of the Ringló.

The water had seemed colder still on his second crossing and by the time he reached Híril, he was soaked to his skin, his fingers stiff and useless. He had had no choice but to tuck her under his arm before tackling the frigid waters a third time. About mid-river, a smooth stone hidden beneath the froth had caused him to slip and in regaining his balance, he had let go of the dog. Only

a reflexive grab for a hind leg had prevented the animal from being swept away toward the sea far south.

He had soon learned that his swim in the biting waters of the Ringló and the storm's icy rain remained not without consequence: while Barangol mended in the stable, Boromir spent most of his days cooped up in bed or wrapped in a blanket beside the warm fire in the common room, miserable and feverish. Luckily, Mistress Miluien's generous care and her spicy soups helped him recover quickly until his chest no longer hurt with each breath and his head no longer pounded.

He added some hay to the horse's fodder trough and checked the water in the pail. He gave Barangol's neck a final stroke before leaving the stall. Híril, with the young canine's usual impatience, jumped up at him, demanding his attention. Boromir knelt to scratch her ears. In reward, he received several sloppy wet licks from a pink tongue and, with a laugh, he pushed her away.

"That's quite enough, girl!"

Híril gave a single bark and ran back to Gahir, giving him the same treatment.

"Are you going to the gathering tonight, Master Erandír?" Gahir's eyes sparkled when his gaze met Boromir's over Híril's furry head.

"What gathering?"

"Have you not heard?" the lad exclaimed. "Orcs have been sighted, not far to the north. Môrohîl wants to put together a company to chase them out of the Ringló Vale."

"Orcs?" Boromir straightened, his interest piqued. The gossips in Linhir spoke true, then, about orcs roaming the foothills of the White Mountains. *Will it never end?*

"Aye! A great host, they say. I can't wait to join the company and fight those Mordor spawn!" The boy was quiet for a moment, then heaved a sigh. "Mother wouldn't allow me to go with Lord Dervorin and the soldiers to Minas Tirith."

"Your mother is a wise woman," Boromir muttered. "War is not a game."

He eyed the boy dubiously. Barely sixteen years of age, the lad's voice still cracked when he got excited. And while he was good with the animals and no doubt could wield a frightening axe to cut firewood, battling orcs was quite a different matter. Yet, Boromir could not fault him. He himself had killed his first orc at sixteen. His father had patted his shoulder when Boromir's captain gave the report, and his eyes had gleamed with pride. Denethor never spoke a word of praise, but he always treated Boromir more like a man after that.

"Where is this gathering taking place?" Boromir asked.

"In the town hall," Gahir said. "'Tis at the market near the fords. Will you go with Môrohîl too?"

The action would do him good after the unsought bed rest. And was not battling the remnants of evil what he had set out to do?

"I might," Boromir murmured. "I just might."

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After supper, Boromir wandered down to the river and followed along its bank until he reached the fords. The surge from the heavy rains had drained away and though the river was still swift, it no longer resembled the furious, debris-filled stream he had crossed a week ago.

When he arrived at the town hall, a lot of Ethring men were already assembled. Short and swarthy they were, like the folk who lived in the foothills of the White Mountains. Their faces were grave and determined and beneath their stern exteriors, Boromir sensed a mixture of energy and tension.

Trying to avoid attention, he hovered in the back of the hall, content to listen and watch with a careful detachment. He caught a glimpse of Gahir. The boy was standing with a couple of other lads his age, their faces excited and their eyes gleaming. He noticed Boromir watching him, and waved in greeting. Boromir acknowledged him with a nod, and turned away to study the rest of the crowd. While the boys looked excited, the men appeared more doubtful. These were tanners, carpenters, weavers; men that were not used to discussing orc bands or battle tactics.

Boromir also noticed several woodsmen in the crowd, grim people dressed in garments of green and brown. *They, at least, look like they might wield a blade with some skill, or fire an arrow without catching their thumbs on the bowstring.*

A man jumped on a bench at the front of the room. He was young, barely in his twenties, with long dark hair that hung to his shoulders and the stocky built of the Ethring people. After a few moments, the hall quieted and the young man had everyone's attention.

"Men of Ethring," he called, his voice carrying easily. "Most of you know me. But for those who don't, my name is Môrohîl. My father Galdor served as constable to the old lord. I'm afraid I bring you bad news. You have all heard the rumors. And they are true: orcs have been sighted in the northern reaches of the Vale." Some of the mountaineers who lived in the Vale nodded in confirmation.

"It seems," Môrohîl continued, "that they are traveling south along the Ringló. They could reach Ethring soon." A wave of appalled gasps and murmurs ran through the hall. Many people shifted uneasily and cast quick looks about them as if they expected a band of orcs to come crashing through the door any instant.

"We must send for help!" someone cried to a chorus of *ayes*.

"Send a messenger to Calembel, to Lord Angbor. Or ask Dol Amroth for their Swan Knights to help us."

"Those are good suggestions," Môrohîl said. "But it takes time. It will be days at least before either can muster a force to help us. And the orcs are moving ever closer."

He gestured for another man to join him. A short fellow with a thick black beard and garbed in the earthy hues of the forest people clambered upon the bench beside Môrohîl.

"My name is Gladon," said the newcomer. Boromir had to strain to hear him as he spoke softly and his voice did not carry as far as Môrohîl's.

"I lived with my wife and sons in the mountains north of Ethring; our home is some ten leagues up the Vale. Three nights ago, the orcs came upon our house--" Gladon's voice caught for a moment while a horrified ripple ran through the room at his words. When he spoke again, the hall was as silent as a tomb. "I tried to fight them, but they were too many. At least a score, maybe more. I hit my head in the battle and passed out. When I woke again... My wife was dead. My strong boys were murdered." He brushed at his eyes. "I don't know why I was not killed also. 'Twere better had I died with my family."

Whispers filled with fright and shock rose from the assembly. "Only ten leagues," people murmured. "Three days ago."

Môrohîl let them talk for a few minutes before he demanded their attention again.

"You heard Gladon's tale. We cannot wait for Lord Angbor or Belfalas while the evil hordes find us. Will we let them lay ruin to our homes? Will we stand by while they murder our families?" He paused for a moment. "No, I say! We shall revenge Gladon's wife and sons! We shall pick up arms and find those demons before they come close to those we hold dear. We can defend ourselves!"

Shouts echoed in the hall. "Death to the orcs! Let's go kill them!"

It was a good speech, Boromir conceded. Short, to the point and arousing. *Perhaps the lad knows more than his age suggests.*

Gladon's tale worried him. If it was true -- and he had no reason to believe it was not -- the Vale was in trouble indeed. These people were not used to such danger lurking on their doorstep. They lived far enough from the coast that Corsairs had never bothered them. And although in the past, orc bands occasionally had made it across the Anduin, the soldiers patrolling the west bank of the river usually stopped them before they could cause much havoc.

True, Ringló Vale men had come to the Pelennor when Gondor needed them, three hundred strong. But see where it had left them: their lord's son dead, as were many of their most-capable men. And still, with the enemy troops having fled from the battlefield in every direction, peril they were ill-equipped to handle threatened the Ethringers. Boromir was anxious to see what course of action the town's self-appointed militia leader would propose.

"Tomorrow, at first light," the young man was saying, "I will set out north. I will find the orc horde and slay them to the last monster standing. Who will come with me?"

The men's inexperience and fears did not hold sway over their bravery. Or perhaps it was fear for their families that strengthened their resolve. Young men and old, the strong, the healthy, and the weary, they all spoke up. "I will!" "Me too!" "I'll come with you!"

Boromir's heart swelled with pride at their courage. The people of Gondor had never retreated before the threat of Mordor and even now, with the war over and Sauron defeated, they were not inclined to do so. But the pride intertwined with concern for their fate. *These are not soldiers!* a voice in his mind cried. *They do not know what daunting task they take upon themselves.*

Not one to sit idly by while good people plotted their own doom, he pushed himself up from the bench he lounged on and made his way to the front of the room.

"How, exactly," he raised his voice to be heard over the din, "do you plan to fight this host?"

"How?" Mōrohîl repeated. "With whatever weapons we have available. They can't be allowed to reach Ethring."

Boromir shook his head. "That is not what I meant. What strategy will you follow? What is your plan?"

"We will go and meet them head-on," Mōrohîl answered. "We'll show them we're not afraid. It's the strategy the commanders applied on the Pelennor Fields. And look what they did to the forces of Mordor." He puffed up his chest, daring Boromir to contradict him.

Boromir smiled ruefully. It was a great simplification of the battle but he could see how it might have seemed to be this way to the young man.

"Those commanders had the entire Gondorian army under their command," he said calmly, "as well as the Rohirrim cavalry to aid them. I do not see any such force here." He did not mention that such direct tactics were a desperate move, applied only when the battle commander was out of other options. This orc-band was not as big as Sauron's entire army but they were battle-seasoned veterans with nothing left to lose. An army of craftsmen and herders would be no match for it.

Môrohîl glared at Boromir. "Do you question our valor, stranger? Because I would have you know I fought alongside the lords of the Vale, and so did many here."

Others turned angry looks on Boromir as well. "You can call me Erandír," he said, unperturbed, "so I am a stranger no longer. And I do not doubt your courage, master warrior. The men of Gondor have ever been valiant in the face of danger. No, it is your grasp of battle tactics I question."

For the first time since the meeting began, Môrohîl looked a little uncertain. "You have experience with such matters?"

"Aye," Boromir confirmed. "I do happen to know a thing or two about planning for battle."

He could hear the murmurs traveling through the crowd. Several people craned their necks to catch a glimpse of him. He hoped that unfamiliarity with his features combined with his shorter hair and a thicker beard would keep his identity undiscovered.

ooo

Môrohîl studied the older man in front of him. He was not from the Vale. Tall, as a Dol Amroth knight, and broad of shoulder, he carried himself with an air of great confidence. Môrohîl was glad he was still standing on the bench or he would have had to crane his neck. This was clearly not a man to be trifled with. But why would a stranger want to involve himself in their perilous business? And what kind of name was Erandír, anyway?

*But I do believe him, when he says he knows about war. He has the look of a professional soldier.*

The well-trained troops of Gondor's standing armies had stood in stark contrast with the militia fighters from the southern fiefs; Môrohîl recalled them clearly. Unfortunately, the reminiscence brought with it the memory of the stark terror he had felt on the battlefield, the reek of blood and smoke, the screaming of the wounded, the chaos and confusion, and how glad he had been when somebody told him what to do. He suppressed a shudder.

He had to be truthful with himself: he did not know anything, really, about strategy and tactics. On the Pelennor, and later in front of the Morannon, he had gone where they told him to go and wielded a sword when they told him to wield it. He was proud to have come forward when his country called, and even prouder that he had managed to slay two of their enemies and wound several others.

But he was no soldier. Yet, he had no choice. Lord Dervorin was dead and the orcs would be upon Ethring before help could arrive. So perhaps this stranger, if he truly knew about the art of war, was the Valar's gift to the people of the Vale. It would not hurt to hear him.

"What would you do?"

"First of all," Erandír said, "we need more knowledge. Are they Mordor orcs? Or do they have Uruk-hai with them? What weaponry do the orcs have? And we need scouts to locate the horde. We want to fight them where we can hold the high ground."

There was more than one kind of orc? Môrohîl winced inwardly at the barrage of questions. He should have asked those himself. They were good questions, about things that had slipped his mind. Important things.

"I can tell you," Gladon said. "I may have run like a coward but I have seen the orcs with my own eyes. And I will be your scout, if you allow me. I know these woodlands."

"I shall go with Gladon," another man offered. "Two see more than one. Tarandor am I," he introduced himself. "My home is in the north Vale also. After Gladon reached us with his warning, I brought my family here, to Ethring."

Although Môrohîl was aware he had already surrendered to the foreigner's authority, he was surprised to find the foresters accept him so readily, also. The men from the mountains were not a trusting sort of folk and oft wary of strangers.

Erandír nodded at Tarandor before he grasped Gladon's shoulder.

"You did the right thing," the tall man said. "No single man can stand up to such a host." A strange shadow washed over his face but it was gone before Môrohîl could decide what it was. "With your information, we can better prepare ourselves. We shall slay those orcs and revenge your family. This I promise you."

Gladon gave a detailed account of the attack on his family and told Erandír everything he could about the orcs. Môrohîl listened closely, as did the foreigner. He interrupted Gladon a few times to ask questions about the

number and size of the orcs, their armor and weaponry, and he wanted to know the lay of the land north of Ethring. Then he grew silent. He appeared to mull over the information while an expectant silence hung in the hall. Nobody seemed to dare break it and everyone, Môrohîl included, waited for Erandír to speak again.

"All right," he said at last. "Be glad there are no Uruk-hai. It makes our task easier. Orcs from Mordor do not like the daytime, so they will burrow in at sunrise and wait for nightfall. Most likely in those caves Gladon described. If they do, that is where we will attack them." He began to explain his ideas to the men of Ethring, pushing aside the benches to make room and drawing large diagrams on the hall's wooden floor with charcoal from the fireplace.

It took a while before everyone understood their role in Erandír's battle plan, but once he was satisfied that they knew what to do, the meeting concluded.

## The Captain's Company, part 2

Boromir woke an hour before sun-up. He broke his fast by candlelight in the common room where Miluien offered him a plate of sizzling ham and bread with freshly churned butter.

"You cosset me," he said, then hastily chewed and swallowed the last bite, washing it down with a cup of cool cider.

Miluien smiled. "My husband would not begrudge it you. 'Tis the least we can do for someone who is about to walk into danger to keep us safe."

She cleared away the crockery while Boromir examined the edge of his sword for minuscule notches one last time. *You take care of your blade, and it will take care of you.* That was one lesson his old armsmaster had taught him he always heeded.

Finding the blade sharp along its entire length, he shoved it back into its scabbard and buckled it on. Miluien offered him a package.

"Some meat pies," she said, "and bread and cheese."

He accepted the food with a grateful nod and stuffed it in his pack. "As I said, you are pampering me. But I thank you, mistress. It will be most welcome after a long march."

Gahir hovered near the door, hopping from foot to foot in eager impatience. "Are we going yet?"

"You aren't going anywhere," his mother said. "The stables need mucking, and I would have more firewood. What would your father say if he knew I let you run off to play soldier while there is so much work to do about the house in his absence?"

The lad gave Boromir a pleading look. Boromir remembered his own desire to go to battle and sympathized, but without proper training a lad like Gahir had no place in a war-party routing out orcs. He would only get himself killed.

"Your mother is right." The lad's face fell. "Someone needs to stay and stand guard against any orcs that might slip through our net."

Gahir looked at him for a moment, trying to make up his mind whether he was being patronized or not. Boromir met his stare, kept his features straight, and finally Gahir nodded, if somewhat reluctantly.

Híril sat on the doorstep of the common room. Stirred by the general air of excitement, her tail was swishing with gusto.

"You too, eh," Boromir chuckled when she began to follow him out. "Stay!" he commanded. "A skirmish is no place for a dog." She might alert their foe before he had his troops in place.

Híril cocked her head and offered Boromir a doleful look that made him smile. Even Gahir had to laugh.

"Don't worry, sir," he said. "I will look after her for you. Come here, Híril!"

With a bark, the dog ran to the boy, jumped up and begged him to scratch her ears.

With an amused chortle, Boromir stepped outside and breathed in deeply. The night air was tinged with the cool of early autumn and the sky was clear. Bright stars glimmered in the darkness overhead. He could identify only a few of the constellations; he had never paid as much attention to their names as to how the stars could aid him in navigating unfamiliar land. Yet in the southeast was Menelvagor, still detectable though fading fast while the eastern sky lightened until fiery Borgil was the last to remain visible. And in the north, barely perceptible over the peaks of the Ered Nimrais, hung the Valacirca, the seven stars that formed the Sickle of the Valar.

Boromir grinned in grim satisfaction. It would be a perfect day to go orc-hunting. Not a single fiend would venture out of its hiding on a day as bright as this would be.

He set off in the direction of the market just as the sun peeked over the horizon in a fierce red flame. The rays made short work of the autumn dew, which had gathered on meadow and bush, and for a few moments white mists curled up in the sky.

ooo

When Boromir reached the town square, little more than two score of men were gathered. They carried axes or rusty pikes. A few wielded a sword experimentally, and others were testing the strings on their bows.

He frowned. This was a mere fraction of the crowd that had assembled last night and agreed to go after the orc horde. Would their numbers be enough? Was there even a choice, with the orcs approaching the town?

He was not truly surprised; these people were mostly gentle citizens of a small town, and it was much easier to speak bold words after rousing speeches than it was to find courage in the clear light of morning, when one had to say goodbye to wife and child. And what business did bakers or saddlemakers and smiths have in a battle with war-hardened demons?

Among those gathered were the men from the wilds. So they had come, at least. They possessed woodland skills and knew the lay of the land. They also knew how to handle a weapon. Môrohîl and some of his comrades who had fought with Dervorin on the Pelennor Fields were also present. They were not many, but they were good men. If fortune were with them, they might see the job done.

Môrohîl saw Boromir approach and pushed his way through the gathered men to greet him. "Gladon and Tarandor have not yet returned with news. Should we wait for them?"

"No," Boromir said. "We have not the time to spare. The weather is to our advantage but who can say how long it will stay so. We will start out north. We should meet them on the way."

"Then we are ready."

"Good." Boromir nodded and grinned. "Let us be off and kill some orcs!"

It appeared as if the entire populace of Ethring had come to see them off. Women, men and children waited at the fords to watch them cross the Ringló. They shouted encouragement, or passed provisions to the men. Yet Boromir recognized none from last night's meeting; shame held those men home while the company departed.

Once they reached the eastern bank, the townspeople quickly fell behind and the small group began to walk along a narrow path north into the mountains, following the river upstream. Soon, Boromir's gratitude for the presence of the mountain folk grew beyond appreciation for their weapons' prowess -- they managed to find trails where he saw none. The going grew more difficult; oftentimes they needed to make a path of their own when even the foresters could not find a deer's or boar's trail. Brambles and stinging nettles grew in thick clumps, forcing them to go around. Boromir worried his men's strength was failing -- they were not making as quick progress as he wished. They might not reach the orc den that day. And he did not desire to spend a night in the forest with untrained companions and orcs on the loose.

At noon, he called a brief halt. They stopped at a small stream, a tributary of the Ringló that could be crossed without getting one's feet wet. Rocks in the waterbed provided easy stepping stones. On the northern bank they found a small glade with a floor of lush grass where the men plunked onto the ground or mossy hillocks to rest their weary feet.

Boromir, however, could not find the peace to sit. Neither of the scouts had returned and his misgivings about the entire undertaking were increasing by the minute. Was he going to get them all killed in an ill-advised attempt to quell a pocket of evil? Should he perhaps have advised the townspeople to flee while they sent for soldiers instead of leading them to battle?

He wandered to the edge of the clearing, peering into the darker forest, trying to see what lay ahead.

A shadow moved beneath the trees and he stiffened, his hand instinctively going to the hilt of his weapon.

"It is I, Gladon."

"'Tis good to see you," Boromir said and relaxed his stance. "You were keenly awaited."

"I apologize for my lateness," Gladon said while he walked out into the sunlight. "You were right. The orcs have burrowed in the caves. I stayed for a few hours after sunrise to ensure they were not moving. Tarandor is still there, hiding, keeping an eye on the demons."

"How much further is it to the caves?"

"Not far. Another stream runs out of the east hills less than a league from here. After we cross it, we can follow it upstream for a mile, and we'll have reached the glen where the orcs are hiding."

The answer renewed Boromir's faith in the endeavor. It would take another two hours, mayhap three if the terrain remained hostile, to reach the dell. In any case, they would arrive in the clear light of day, long before sunset. He would have time to scout the area, and to rest his men, letting them regain their energy after the march north. By sundown, when the orcs dared venture out, his company would be well rested and in place.

He gave the men a few more minutes before he called an end to their break and gestured for Gladon to lead them out.

ooo

When they reached the tributary, the sun was still high, although the shadows were lengthening. Boromir halted his company. Gladon pointed upstream.

"The caves are but a little further east."

Boromir squinted. The forest seemed quiet and deserted. There was no sign of orcs.

They crossed the stream and followed it east. They had not gone far when Tarandor appeared, emerging out of the undergrowth with all the skill of an experienced huntsman. He grinned at the startled gasps of some of the men before he turned to Boromir.

"The orcs haven't moved," he reported. "You'll find a meadow beyond the trees. The caves are a little uphill, on the north cliff face."

"Thank you."

After sending Tarandor off to get himself something to eat, Boromir waved Môrohîl close. "Have the men take some rest. I will have Gladon show me the site. We will go over the plan one more time when I return."

"Yes sir." Môrohîl saluted and walked off.

"This way." Gladon disappeared into the undergrowth, moving through the forest making barely a noise. Trying to imitate the mountaineer's stealth demanded all of Boromir's attention, leaving him no chance to dwell on the salute. He found himself admiring Gladon's proficiency; he had never fully mastered the Rangers' skill of stealth, much to Faramir's amusement and his own chagrin.

They reached the treeline. Shielding himself carefully behind a cluster of stunted birch trees, Boromir took in the terrain. A grassy sward with a few scattered autumn blooms amid boulders and debris washed down from the mountain lay between the riverbank and a steep slope. The hill was bare, and at its bottom scree had piled up. Boromir suspected winter avalanches swept away any sapling daring enough to take root.

About halfway up, the incline became steeper and stark cliffs rose vertically. At their feet, dark shadows hung, though the hill itself basked in the autumn sunshine.

Gladon indicated the shadows. "Those are the caves."

Boromir contemplated them. The cliff faced southwest, which meant the sun would light it until it sank below the trees. *If I can get them to leave the caves early...*

He would change his strategy. He would not wait until nightfall when the orcs abandoned the caves. No, he would lure the beasts from their den and fight them at the time of his choosing. The orcs would be at great disadvantage in the light, facing toward the sun while negotiating the treacherous slope. And his ragtag army needed every advantage he could give them.

"Go back and bring Môrohîl and Tarandor," he told Gladon. "I will stay and watch until you return."

ooo

A short while later he heard them come. Or rather, he heard Mōrohîl scramble through the forest while the mountain folk were as quiet as wraiths.

"Gladon said you wanted to see us?"

"Yes. I have an idea."

"I thought you explained your plan yesterday?"

"Aye, so I did. This is a new plan." He turned his head to meet Mōrohîl's gaze. "A good commander will amend his strategy if the situation calls for it; no plan is ever final before a commander has seen the site for himself."

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Mōrohîl, you take half of the men and go up the ridge." He pointed east. "See it?"

"I see it."

"Have your men spread out along the rim. Make sure you take the best archers along, and put them where they have the clearest shot."

"Aye, captain."

Boromir, startled, glanced sideways, unsure how to read the honorific. He cleared his throat before he turned to Tarandor. "You are in command of the rest of the men. See where the slope angles off? And those bushes growing along the edge? That's where you must take them. I will draw the orcs out while the sun is still up. We need to engage them in the glade, where we have room to maneuver. Wait until they reach the bottom of the slope. Then attack upon their flanks. We will crush them between us. Understood?"

"Aye." Tarandor also offered a salute, and Boromir cringed inwardly.

"Do we go now, sir?" Mōrohîl asked.

"No," Boromir said. "Wait another hour before moving out. Make sure the men use the respite to relax and get some rest. When the sun is low enough, we will attack. You will know the time to take your positions has come when you see me enter the clearing."

ooo

Boromir did not move. His hand rested easily upon the hilt of his sword; his gaze never wavered from the deep shades that marked the caves while he

waited patiently for the orcs to notice him. It was obvious they had not set a guard, or they would have spotted him already. He stood in clear view among the lengthening shadows on the grass below the caves, knowing that in the fading daylight he made a prime target. It was a risky ploy, but he had to draw the orcs out of their hiding while giving his men the advantage of surprise. He prayed the orcs would not fire an arrow at him from their hiding place; he was too familiar with the devastating force of those black-feathered darts and the light leather cuirass he wore would offer scant protection against them. But he wagered curiosity would get the better of them. A single man's obvious challenge, like the one he offered, would be too much to bear. As long as there were indeed no Uruk-hai among them...

As the sun dipped low, the waiting ended and he was proven right.

Something moved inside the caves, so slight it would be barely noticeable, but Boromir, who had been staring at the shadows for close to a quarter hour noted it immediately. Black shapes shifted in the darkness. A murmur of guttural voices drifted down, speaking a language he had hoped never to hear again on Gondorian soil. A puff of wind brought the stink of orcs and Boromir scrunched up his nose.

"Foul-smelling beasts," he murmured. He loosened his sword in its scabbard and adjusted his grip.

An orc stepped from the caves. His misshapen features twisted in a derisive grimace. "You must be the local fool!"

"They call me Erandír. I have come to chase you out of this vale, and out of Gondor. These lands belong to King Elessar and the people of the Reunited Kingdom. Be gone, or learn the bite of my sword!"

Other orcs gathered beside the first and they roared with laughter. Boromir knew he appeared absurd, standing here alone and boasting such big promises. But it was part of the lure, and the orcs must fall for it. If they did not...

He could almost taste the tension that wafted up from Gladon, hidden in the tall grass behind him. He hoped the troops on either flank were as ready.

"*Bite* sounds right," the orcs' leader said. "You'll do nicely for dinner. How 'bout putting man flesh on the menu tonight, lads?"

The other orcs howled their agreement and poured out of the cave. The black horde came bearing down on him, scrambling over the loose rock, careless of their own safety. Encouraged by several successful raids over the past few days, they saw no danger until it was too late.

Boromir drew his sword and held it before him. He counted out loud. "Three. Two. One! Now!"

Arrows flew through the air, firing into the orcs from both sides. Not all made their mark but the unexpected attack threw the orcs into frightened disorder.

"Elessar!" Boromir shouted, charging. "For Gondor! For Gondor!"

Behind him, Gladon jumped up and followed, screaming the name of his wife and sons. From both sides, men ran onto the sward, falling upon the confused orcs.

"For the Vale!" they cried. "For Ethring!"

Within moments, the peaceful clearing turned into a chaotic melee of men and orcs. Swords flashed. Axes fell, hewing through flesh and bone. Arrows flew. Men screamed and orcs howled in pain. Boromir's sword danced among the escapees from Mordor.

Slash! One orc down.

Thrust! A second died on his blade.

Parry! Hew! Another black body fell. The stench of blood mingled with the reek of orc and the screams of men and demons.

Three -- no, four orcs advanced on Boromir. He parried their attacks as well as he knew how, but he was slowly losing ground under the onslaught. His only salvation lay in the fact that they yet failed to combine their efforts in a coordinated attack. He saw a hooked blade descend in a flash of orange sunlight and threw up his sword to meet it. The force of the impact jarred his arm to near numbness. With a double-handed grip, he hewed left, barely seeing what he was doing, and sliced off an orc's sword arm. Blood spurted and the orc fell back, howling with pain. An arrow whisked by Boromir's ear, catching a second orc in the throat.

He did not get the chance to see whose arrow aided him. The two remaining orcs renewed their attack, driven by desperation and bloodlust. The sheer power of their thrusts forced Boromir further backwards. The trees were at his back. He needed to stay in the clearing -- the trees' closeness would limit his freedom of movement considerably.

He aimed his sword at the closest orc's belly and lunged. The weapon connected, and the tip of his blade sliced open its gut.

The last orc growled. "You will die, whiteskin. I will send your severed head to your king as a farewell present."

Boromir laughed. "You would, Mordor spawn."

He thrust forward but his opponent deflected the blade and engaged in a counter attack. The orc blade came swinging down and desperately Boromir brought up his own weapon. He managed to deflect the orc's sword enough that it did not separate his head from his body but the flat side of the blade hit his skull hard enough to make his ears ring.

While he was trying to regain his senses, the orc pushed the advantage and his blade came up again. Boromir was forced to take a step back. His boot caught on a rock, half-hidden in the dirt, and his ankle twisted. The ground rushed up to meet him while a surprised yell escaped him. His sword slipped from his hand.

Boromir's eyes darted around, searching the growing darkness for the lost blade. He looked back up at the orc, panting for breath. The demon bared his fangs in a triumphant grin.

"Prepare to die, whiteskin."

Suddenly, Boromir was transported back to another place and another time -- on his knees, his executioner grinning down at him, taller than this orc but with the same evil gleam in its eyes while it drew back the string on its bow, tightening it slowly, relishing the moment...

*So, Death has caught up with me at last.*

Another arrow whizzed past. It hit neither Boromir nor his attacker but thudded into a nearby tree, yet it was enough to break the spell. Boromir shook his head, trying to clear the memories. He tore his eyes away from the orc's hideous face and searched again for his sword.

There!

He dove for his weapon the same instant the orc's blade descended; it would have split his head if he had not moved. The orc grunted when its blade met no resistance and instead cut deep into the rocky ground where it lodged firmly.

The orc growled, abandoning its weapon and lunging at him before Boromir could get a firm grip on his own sword hilt. Boromir landed on his back, the heavy orc on top. Yellowed teeth snapped at his face while sharp talons squeezed his throat. He fumbled for the knife in his belt, drove it into the orc's belly. It howled in pain and its grip lessened.

A pale red-golden blur streaked through the air, snarling, striking the orc and tearing it off of Boromir.

"Híril?" Boromir was too shocked to believe his eyes.

The dog ignored him. Her jaws tore at the orc's throat although it was already dying. Once the demon stopped twitching, she let go. She kept continuing to growl at the corpse as if daring it to get up.

"Híril! You disobedient cur!" Boromir grinned. He grabbed the dog's jowls, ruffling the animal's fur. "How did you get here? Did I not tell you to stay with Gahir?"

She reached up, attempting to give him a lick. He pushed her off, having no desire to let her tongue, slick with orc blood, anywhere near his face.

"All right!" he laughed. "All right, you did well. You are forgiven."

ooo

Darkness had fallen by the time the battle was over and Boromir ordered a roll call. One man had his hand sliced off, and he looked gray from bloodloss and pain. Another suffered an ugly cut to the leg that might leave him with a permanent limp. Several more men had sustained injuries but most were superficial and would heal easily with proper care. Their losses were not as great as Boromir would have feared; they had been very fortunate.

Only Gladon was found missing.

A quick search among the bodies located the woodsman at the foot of the slope, a hooked black blade buried in his chest. His glazed eyes stared up at the newborn stars, unseeing.

Boromir knelt at his side. He removed the blade and pressed the man's eyes shut. "You have your revenge," he whispered. "Be at peace. May you find your family again."

After a moment's silence, he turned back to the others. "We will make camp down the stream," he said. "Tomorrow we will burn the carcasses so they will no longer contaminate our land." He paused a moment. "You did very well, men of Ethring. You are all worthy soldiers of Gondor."

The men hollered and clapped, looking quite pleased with themselves and with his praise.

ooo

They returned to where the small stream met the Ringló. Fires were kindled quickly. Some of the men used the supplies they brought to prepare a thick stew, the smell of which made stomachs growl and mouths water. Their voices

were loud, cheerful, while they recounted their role in the skirmish. The tales grew bigger with every telling.

Boromir sat a little off to the edge of the camp with his back against a tree, Híril at his feet. He had pulled out his whetting stone and was slowly running it along his blade.

Môrohîl brought him a bowl. "You should eat something, captain."

"Stop calling me that," Boromir snapped. "I am not your captain. I'm *nobody's* captain. Understand?"

Môrohîl looked startled at Boromir's vehemence. He opened his mouth to say something, then thought better of it and shut it. He gave a hurt little nod and set the bowl at Boromir's feet.

The stew would have gone cold, untouched while Boromir stared off in the distance, if not for Híril's eager tongue.

## The Pass At Tarlang's Neck

Boromir escaped Ethring three days later. He left some silver in his room as payment for bed, board and good care, hushed Híril and slipped out of the inn so early in the morning that even Mistress Miluien was not yet awake. He could not bear the gratitude and adulation the Ethring people were heaping upon him any longer. He had stayed for Gladon's funeral, made sure the injured were cared for, and, at the insistence of Môrohîl and Gahir, had partaken in the celebration of their victory.

But where once he would have enjoyed being the hero of astonishing tales or the teller of grand stories, it now made him uncomfortable. There was no heroism or special prowess involved. He had merely done his duty, letting common sense and years of training dictate his actions. And when Môrohîl told him they planned on sending someone to their lord with the suggestion he be asked for command of the town's small militia, Boromir had had all he could bear. He understood their desire; the death of Lord Dervorin had left them without a capable captain -- but they would have to find someone else.

He snuck into the stable to saddle Barangol, pleased to see that the last marks of the animal's injuries had faded, and proceeded to lead the horse through the dark streets as quietly as possible. The clop of the hooves sounded loud and he hoped nobody would wake from his passing. But the festivities had lasted until deep in the night and the people of Ethring slept the sleep of the secure, helped along with good amounts of ale and wine imbibed during the merrymaking. More than a few of the orc-hunters would wake with a pounding head and no memory of their last few waking hours. They had been the center of the celebrations and everyone had joined in the effort to make sure their cups never went dry.

At the edge of town, when he was about to embark onto the main road, the nightwatch challenged him.

"Who goes there?"

"Erandír."

"Oh, hello, captain. You aren't leaving, are you?"

Wincing at the honorific he had failed to obliterate from Ethring's vocabulary -- though not for lack of trying -- Boromir replied, "Aye, I am." He lowered his voice. "I am needed in Calembel. Your people are safe, now."

"That they are, thanks to you," the watchman said. "We'll be sad to see you gone. Fare thee well, captain. You be safe too."

Boromir swung himself into the saddle and spurred Barangol into a trot.

He was following the South Road again. The sun rose behind the clouds and the world was revealed slowly. The foliage on the trees displayed a myriad of bright colors: oranges, yellows, reds, deep purples. Gusts tore the leaves from the trees, making them pursue one another in swirling winds. Híril found it fascinating; she snapped at the dancing foliage and often ended up spitting out mouthfuls of leaves. The air was cold and smelled of the snow on the White Mountains. Boromir pulled his wool cloak closer about him. The fair weather had not lasted long and he feared he would have need of his new raincape before long.

By noon, his fears proved well founded. Boromir was immensely grateful for the oilskin Miluien had given him on the night after the orc-hunt. She'd laughed when she offered it, saying she might not be at hand to nurse him back to health with her chicken broth and honeyed teas when next he got himself soaked to the skin in a rainstorm. But he had seen the brief glint of pain in her eyes when she added that the cloak once belonged to her brother, a soldier in Lord Dervorin's small army who had died before the walls of Minas Tirith. It made the gift invaluable in Boromir's eyes. Hers was the only reward he had accepted out of the many tokens the grateful people of Ethring tried to bestow on him, for to refuse it would have been an insult to the soldier's memory.

ooo

Calembel was built on a hill, overlooking the fords of the river Ciril. A long, sloping meadow ran from the gates to the river's edge where, across the stream, the dark ribbon of the road twisted westward through hills and groves until it faded from sight in the gray distance. The town was larger than Ethring, protected by an earthen wall topped with a rough palisade. Here and there the tiled rooftops of large merchant houses peeked over the rim of the wall.

Dusk was falling when Boromir nudged Barangol up the hill to the gates of the city. Entering the fiefdom's capital would be risky, the fear of recognition still ever present. But he did not have a choice. His desire to leave Ethring in stealth had prevented him from taking on supplies and he needed provisions. He wanted to cross the mountains over the pass at Tarlang's Neck before the winter snows closed it off. And as far as he recalled, the land between Calembel and Erech was wild and inhospitable, with no inns or taverns and barely any farms along the way.

The rain began again before he reached the gate, giving him the excuse of pulling his hood closer about his face, hiding his features in the shadows. The pair of soldiers at the gate huddled in their guardhouse and waved him through after a cursory glance. A year ago, he would have reprimanded them on their carelessness, reminding them of their duty to their people. As it was, he did not complain and quickly entered the city.

It had been many years since he had last visited Calembel yet he still recalled that the road left of the gate led further up the hill to the citadel where the lord of Lamedon resided. After a glance uphill, Boromir turned right, riding deeper into town until he found a small inn where he took up residence for the night.

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The next day dawned cold but clear, the first bright day since the day they killed the orcs. Boromir rose with the sun. If he left early, he could make most of the day's fine weather. He ate a quick breakfast in the common room before he walked to the market. Vendors were busy putting up their stalls and welcomed his early custom. Soon his arms were filled with the necessary provisions.

He stopped last at a stall selling large, red apples.

"Last of the season, sir. You'll find them sweet and juicy."

Boromir bought a sackful and added the load to his other purchases. The apples were heavy but up in the pass little greenery grew and Barangol would be grateful for the addition to his diet of grains and meager forage. Besides, Boromir enjoyed the sweet tartness of the fruits himself. He handed the man his coin.

"Going to Erech? Or will you be traveling to Ethring, sir?"

"Erech is where I'm headed," Boromir said. "Is there aught you can tell me about the road across Tarlang's Neck?"

The man's face turned thoughtful. "You best be careful in the Neck, sir," he said. "I've heard a band of Haradrim waylay innocent travelers sometimes. Lord Angbor has sent out several parties to apprehend them but so far the Southrons have evaded the scouts."

"Haradrim?"

"Aye. Odd, isn't it? With the battles over and all, one would expect them to return to their strange land and leave the roads safe for innocent people." The vendor shrugged. "Me, I never go far from the city. Much safer here. Out there you have those Haradrim, wolves, and who knows, mayhap one of the King's Dead lingers down there by the water." He pointed to the river. "That's where they camped when they came out of the mountains. Still, 'tis best not to dwell on such matters. Here you go, sir." He gave Boromir his change and tipped his hat. "Safe travel, sir."

Boromir accepted the change and well-wishes absentmindedly. Haradrim, this far west in Gondor's lands! They must fled from the Pelennor and believe their way home blocked by Gondorian soldiers patrolling the banks of the Anduin. They would not know of Aragorn's mercy.

Perhaps he should delay his departure and see if he could offer his services to the troops looking for the Haradrim.

No. As soon as the thought entered his mind, he dismissed it. Angbor knew his face. He could not risk discovery. And the lord of Lamedon was a capable and cunning soldier. He did not need Boromir's aid.

ooo

By the time he led Barangol across the river, it was near mid-morning. The sun hung low in a pale blue sky, another sign that winter was approaching. The air was brisk, and Barangol's breath gusted in white plumes before the horse's nostrils.

Yet, he was fortunate; though it was rather cold for the time of year, the clear weather lasted for the next few days.

Boromir reached the foot of the pass on the third day, around noon. The sun was growing dim, veiled with thin, high layers of haze. Over the tops of mountains, heavy clouds formed, gathering strength before being pushed in front of the wind over the realm of Gondor. In the few moments during which Boromir watched the clouds, they grew in size, obscuring the white peaks within their gray folds.

He muttered a curse. If he did not hurry, an early snowstorm might catch up with him in Tarlang's Neck. Despite the need for haste, he dismounted. It was important to be prepared for every eventuality, especially when traveling through treacherous mountains.

The timberline was near. Up ahead, where the road ascended the pass, nothing grew but a few scraggly bushes and mosses. Around Boromir, though, small, stunted pines and birches still grew. He did not know their names but their dried, dead branches would burn hotly. And the brown needles on the ground would make for good kindling.

He gathered a pile of deadwood and bundled it onto Barangol's strong back. The horse shied at first at his strange burden but a few calming words and stroking of his neck relaxed the steed. There was no room left for Boromir, though, and he realized he would have to walk.

He glanced once more to the north where the clouds had grown to black masses. Perhaps he should not attempt to cross the pass under these

conditions. However, a storm such as was forming in the mountains could linger and keep him pinned down here for days. There was no proper shelter nearby. He could brave the pass and hope the weather would hold long enough for him to reach Erech; or he could return to the lower lands around Calembel. But if he turned back, he might not have another chance to leave until spring. He did not wish to stay in Lamedon's main city for such a long time.

With a cluck of his tongue, he urged Barangol into motion, leading the horse by his guide rope while they climbed the sloping path toward the pass.

ooo

Before long, Boromir started to doubt the wisdom of his choice. Within the hour, the ominous black clouds swooped down and obscured the sun. The temperature dropped sharply and a strong wind began to blow. The cold bit at his exposed skin and he pulled the hood of his cloak as close about his head as he could. He moved to the other side of the horse, where the animal's large body would provide some protection against the wind.

Soon the first flakes began to fall. The wind whipped them beneath his hood, the cold sting on his face brief but unpleasant.

The snow thickened and within moments, the world was covered in white, an even layer that obscured landmarks and made it dangerous to continue. The path through the pass was far less-traveled than the road between the capital and the coastal cities, and not so well maintained. It was barely more than a rutted track. It would be easy to stray off the road, have Barangol step into a hole and break a leg. And then where would he be?

Caught up in worries about his horse's well-being, Boromir failed to notice the hidden scree, broken off from the cliff wall at some time in the past, until he planted his foot upon it. The rubble gave way beneath his weight, his right boot slipped, his ankle twisted and he bit down at the sudden pain.

He clutched at Barangol's saddle, trying to regain his balance, and cursed the pain that lanced through his leg when he tried to put his weight upon his injured foot. He would not be able to continue further today. The need for shelter had suddenly grown dire, and he had better find it soon. He squinted into the swirling whiteness dancing before his eyes.

Limping, supporting himself against Barangol every time he needed to put his weight onto his injured leg, Boromir made very slow progress. The sky grew dimmer still; darkness approached, and he began to despair as to whether he would find a suitable place to spend the night. Then, though almost afraid to believe his eyes, he noticed a triangle of deeper gray among the snow-shrouded cliffs.

"Thank fortune."

The cliff did not jut straight up but formed an inverted incline with the top hanging over, providing a sheltered recess into the mountain's side. It was hidden from the wind and most of the snow was carried past it; deep inside the hollow damp black earth still showed in patches through the snow.

Boromir limped toward the overhang and crawled beneath it. Instantly, the wind tapered off, only the occasional gust finding its way into the hollow beneath the cliff. If he could get a fire going, he could wait until morning when, hopefully, the rest made his ankle feel better. And with luck, the storm would have abated also.

ooo

A small fire soon burned beneath the cliff wall, its heat reflecting off of the rock and making the hollow a pocket of warmth in a world of freezing cold. Boromir relished the heat; he had not realized how chilled he had become. He put on some water and while he waited for it to boil, he prodded his ankle with a finger, wincing. He did not dare take off his boot out of fear he would not be able to put it back on. His flesh felt tender through the sturdy leather, but he did not think he had broken any bones. Best to keep the boot on for what little support it offered.

The water in the small pot started to bubble and he added some dried meat stores along with spices and a few greens from his provisions. Híril sniffed, inching closer to the delicious smell that wafted up from the stew.

Boromir chuckled. "Hungry, are you?" He dug up another piece of dried meat and gave it to the dog. Powerful jaws closed around it, tearing off a strip, while Boromir rummaged around in his satchel for grains and apples for Barangol.

The hollow was too small to accommodate the horse's body and he hovered outside, as close to the warmth as he could come, his hindside turned outward and his large body shielding the makeshift shelter further from the storm.

With the fire in his face and the smell of broth in his nose, Boromir could almost forget the throb in his ankle or the cold snow that kept falling. Tonight, at least, he would neither starve nor freeze to death.

He was stirring his soup with a wooden spoon, deciding it was almost ready, when Híril let go of her strip of meat and growled deep in her throat. Boromir dropped the spoon and looked at the dog.

"What is it, girl?"

The dog got up, hackles raised and teeth bared. Another low growl reverberated in her throat. Barangol snorted and stamped, tossing his head.

Boromir pushed himself to his feet, careful to rest his weight upon his uninjured foot. He placed his hand upon the hilt of his sword, ready to draw the blade in an instant, and peered around the horse into the deepening night and swirling flakes. He could not see beyond a few feet in any direction and could not tell what danger the animals had detected.

Híril barked at the same instant that Boromir saw two -- no, three man-shaped shadows approaching.

"Who goes there?" he demanded, his voice getting lost in the storm. Of a sudden, he remembered the stall-keeper's warning and he unsheathed his sword. The blade glimmered golden in the flames. The three shapes stopped.

Good. If they feared the sting of a sharp sword, at least they were not phantoms. Men, he could fight, but he'd be helpless against malicious spirits.

For long moments nobody moved. The wind howled, Boromir's fire softly crackled and Híril continued to growl. Then one of the shapes slowly walked closer, until Boromir could see his suspicions confirmed.

The man was one of the Haradrim. He wore long, tattered robes of red silk, lined with purple. Dark eyes, nearly black, peered out from beneath a headdress of the same bright red as his tunic.

"Put down sword, please," the man spoke in halting Westron. "We want food and fire."

"And slit my throat while you're at it, no doubt."

The Southron began to shake his head but Boromir interrupted him. "Do not bother," he said. "I know your kind. I may be alone but I can assure you, I am quite skilled with my blade. And Híril here--" he indicated the dog with a nod, never taking his eyes off of the Haradrim, "--has tasted orc flesh. I do not think she would object to a chunk of Southron meat, do you?"

The black eyes shifted to the dog, who bared her fangs even further, before they traveled back up to Boromir's face. "Please." The man from Harad spread his arms. "No weapon. War over. My friend is hurt. So cold."

Boromir hesitated. Common sense said he chase the Haradrim off, or better yet, run his sword through their bellies and end their threat once and for all. But whereas he never suffered many qualms about killing an orc, it was a little harder to murder a Southron, especially one who claimed to be unarmed.

"Have your friends show themselves."

The stranger said something in his own tongue and Boromir tensed. The other shapes came closer, slowly. When they were near enough, Boromir saw one was leaning on the other for support. His tunic, as frayed as that of the others, was stained at the shoulder with dark, dried blood.

Boromir studied the three men. They were lean, with gaunt faces pale beneath their sun-darkened skin. It gave them a sickly gray look and their black eyes stood out in sharp contrast. Their thin robes were unsuitable clothes for this sort of weather, and they were shivering hard.

He sighed and lowered his sword, resting its tip in the snow. He shifted ever so slightly, transferring some of his weight to the weapon.

"I suppose it will not do great harm to let you share my fire," he said at last. "The war is over, indeed."

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The men hunkered as close to the fire as they could without suffering burns. Híril rested beside Boromir, her watchful gaze on the strangers. With the dog's vigilant eyes turned upon them, Boromir felt strangely secure. Any sudden move that might be construed as an attack would have Híril at the attacker's throat in an instant. The three men knew it also, for they took great care to stay to their side of the fire, moving slowly and carefully.

He shared his broth with them, a little startled at the speed with which they devoured their share. While he watched them wolf down the meal, Boromir pondered the strange twists of fate. A year ago, he would not have hesitated to kill the Haradrim. Nor would they have had a moment's doubt before they slew him if given the opportunity. Yet, here he sat sharing a fire and a meal with them.

The one who spoke a few words of the common tongue peeled away a stained bandage from his comrade's shoulder. He revealed a ragged hole in the man's flesh.

"That's an arrow wound!" Boromir said, sitting up straighter.

The Southron nodded. "Aye. Your soldiers, they chase us into mountains. Four days ago." He described the banner the soldiers flew.

"Angbor's men."

It made sense. The fruit seller had said Angbor was aware of the Southron soldiers on his lands, and had spoken of parties sent out to capture the strangers.

He watched while the man cleaned his friend's injury and re-banded the shoulder with a new strip of red silk torn from his tunic.

"Why have you not returned to Harad?" Boromir could no longer hide his curiosity. "The war was ended many months ago."

The other man settled himself on his haunches beside the fire and told him their tale. They had been part of a company of archers assigned to one of the *mûmakil*. They had been safe from harm, high up on their gray mount, until Aragorn and his host of wraiths disembarked from their ships. A stray arrow had killed the animal's handler and it had panicked amid the fray, stampeding off at a gallop, the archers helpless passengers on its back.

Before the beast had collapsed from sheer exhaustion, it had taken them many leagues west, deep into the foothills of the White Mountains, far from the Anduin and their way home. All summer long, the archers -- he said they had been five, but two had died -- had attempted to find their way back, coming up on soldiers time and again. Slowly they were forced further and further west. "We die here," the man said at last. "We will not see our home again."

"Do not be so certain," Boromir found himself saying, as much to his own surprise as to that of his uninvited guests. "There is but one way: you must give yourselves up."

"They kill us!"

"Nay, they will not." His compatriots would not kill unarmed men who came to surrender. "Tomorrow, you must go east. Follow the road until you reach Calembel. Surrender yourselves to Lord Angbor and tell him you will put yourself at the mercy of King Elessar. You will find that the King of Gondor is a good man."

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Dawn arrived late the following morning, with dark clouds still hanging low in the sky. The storm had been fierce, but mercifully brief; the wind had abated and the snow had stopped falling. The temperature was rising and soon the white blanket would disappear. Already, the sound of dripping water was everywhere.

Boromir watched the Haradrim, once his sworn enemies, now men like himself in search of a way home, plod through the slush toward the east. He hoped they would take his advice and give themselves up to Angbor. It was their only hope. Aragorn was anything but a spiteful man, and it was more than likely he would have them escorted to the border of Harad, and there set them free.

When they disappeared from view, the trail in the snow the only sign of their passing, Boromir turned west, where his own road was leading him. His ankle was still plaguing him, but the swelling was down, and with most of the wood burned to ashes, he would be able to ride in the saddle today. He planned to reach Erech by nightfall.

## New Beginnings

"Look, Mama!" Galwion climbed up on the railing, eyes glittering with excitement and red spots coloring his cheeks. He tottered precariously, holding on with one hand while the other pointed forward, beyond the bow of the ship.

"Get down!" Nîneth snatched her son up and hugged him close. "You don't wish to fall into the water, do you?" she chided him.

"No," he said. "But look!" He wrung himself from his mother's arms and again pointed.

Nîneth followed his tiny finger. Far ahead, shimmering in the distance, white walls gleamed. They seemed to cling to the side of a mountain while a tall tower spiked high above the city, reflecting the light of the afternoon sun.

"Minas Tirith, mistress," a voice to her right said.

Nîneth looked up to see the speaker was another passenger on the river boat, a small, rotund man with an easy smile and red cheeks. "It's not far now," he added. "Do you remember the address I gave you?"

"Aye, I do," Nîneth said. "On the fourth circle, the second street past the gate. And I wish to thank you kindly once more for your help."

He laughed and gestured with his hand. "Ah, 'tis nothing. Always pleased to help out a fellow cloth expert."

Nîneth couldn't help but smile at his easy manner. She had met the merchant, a dealer in fabrics, in Pelargir when she boarded the *Swift Winds* for Minas Tirith. He told her that linens, silks and brocades filled the holds of the ship, goods he was planning to sell in Minas Tirith.

"With the king returned, and all those fancy lords flocking to the city, and bringing their ladies too, there is much demand for clothiers. And clothiers can't make clothes without cloth, if you catch my meaning." He had laughed heartily at his own joke and Nîneth had taken to the man instantly.

During the journey, she told him about her skill with a needle. And when he heard she had no kin in the city but hoped to make her own fortune, he had insisted that she go see his wife's sister.

"She's an established seamster in the capital. Dear girl, you must go and talk to her! I bet good coin she would be most grateful for your help. And she is no niggard, she'll pay you well."

The winds, however, had not done the ship's name proud. They had been anything but swift and instead of bringing the balmy southern breeze that would have made for a speedy journey they had blown from the north, cold and fierce. The ship was hard-pressed to sail against both the Anduin's current and the wind. It had taken four days before the walls of Minas Tirith came in sight and Nîneth was glad to see her long journey was finally over.

Almost three weeks ago, she and her son had set out from Linhir, determined never to return to the fishing town that had brought them such grief. Hidden within the folds of her skirts, she carried a leather purse filled with silver coins. When she discovered the heavy purse that Erandír left for her, she'd cried like she had not done since they carried her husband's broken body home. His gift of coin, along with her savings, helped advance her dreams greatly, and she was able to leave Linhir not long after Erandír's departure.

Hitching rides with traders' wagoners and carriers, or walking when none would take her and her son, they had traveled to Pelargir and embarked upon one of the many ships sailing north on the Anduin.

The cloth trader was right; not much later after they had first spotted the white walls of the city the ship moored in Harlond. Nîneth gathered their few belongings, said her good-byes to the merchant, thanking him once again for his kind help and assuring him she would go see his wife's sister, and went in search of a carrier who would take her and Galwion to the city.

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From his perch high upon the sacks of flour, Galwion's head swiveled in all directions. It was a joy to see her son so curious, so excited. There was so much to see, he could not decide where to look first. The crowds awed him, as did the general air of resolute bustle or the many carts traveling to and fro between the harbor and the gates. Their wagon crossed the Pelennor Fields, most of which were bare of crops, the harvest season over. But everywhere people were busying themselves on the land, preparing the soil for next season's seeding or repairing fences and sheds. It was hard to imagine the fierce battle fought here so recently.

Ahead, the city walls grew ever more imposing until at last they loomed high over the travelers. Before the gate, wagons queued up. They were filled with goods and merchants who wanted to enter the city but would have to pass the scrutiny of the guards first.

"You might's well step down and continue on foot," the carrier suggested. "It'll be a while, and you and your boy won't give the guards reason to stop you for long, I should think."

"Aye," Nîneth said. She clambered down from the wagon and reached up to lift Galwion from the pile of sacks. The wagoner offered her the small pack that held all her belongings.

"Here you go, mistress."

"Thank you." She hoisted the pack high on one shoulder. "And thank you for taking us."

He gave a shrug. "My pleasure. Do you have a place to stay? "

"Nay. I was hoping to find someone who rents out rooms. I cannot afford an inn, really."

"Try the third circle," the driver said. "Go left, after you passed the circle's gate, then right. Ask for Meleth. She's my brother's wife's cousin. She sometimes takes in lodgers. Tell her I sent you."

A grateful smile formed on Nîneth's face. It was good to learn there were many kind and helpful people in the world. "Thank you again, good sir. May the Valar reward you for your kindness."

The wagonmaster, a short, squat man with a loud voice and fists like mallets, blushed beneath her words. "You are most welcome, mistress. Take care of the little one."

Nîneth nodded, hitched the pack higher upon her shoulder, and took Galwion by the hand. They walked past the line of wagons to the gate where the guardsman gave them a cursory glance and waved them through.

They passed the gate -- and stopped dead in their tracks. If the city was impressive on the outside, it was more so within its massive walls. The buildings were tall and crowded close to the street. Nîneth had to crane her neck to see the rooftops. Beyond the roofs, on the higher circles, rose even taller buildings. She could still see the damage of the war, though. Gaps between the fronts marked the sites of collapsed houses but the rubble had been cleared and wide-shouldered men carried large blocks of stone to repair the damage. A pang of longing pierced her at the sight. What would Erandír be doing right this instant? Was he all right? Was she ever going to see him again?

Around them, people bustled in and out through the gate, jostling Nîneth and her son impatiently.

"Out of my way, woman!" a wagon's driver shouted, guiding his horse-drawn cart so close past them Nîneth had to jump aside, dragging Galwion with her. She glared after the man but he disappeared into the crowds without looking back.

"Lost, are ye?" Nîneth looked at the speaker, a one-eyed man who gave her a gaptoothed grin. "I can take ye. Where's you want to go?"

"I'll find my own way, thank you," Nîneth said. She did not like the way the man leered at her or slyly eyed her few belongings. Galwion shrunk from the stranger, clutching her skirts; she gathered the boy in her arms, quickly scurrying away without caring much where she was going.

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A little while later, she had to admit that she was lost for true. The streets formed an impassable warren of back-alleys and dead-end side streets. She'd stumbled accidentally upon the gate leading to the second level but was unsure how to find the third. When the ancient builders of the city did not place the gates in a straight line, they did so to deny any invading enemies easy access -- but for one of Gondor's own citizens, grown up in the Hills of Tarnost, it was as impossible to find her way through the labyrinth.

When she found herself in yet another dead-end street, which stank of stale ale and garbage, she sighed and put Galwion down. The boy was growing too big to be carried long, and her pack grew heavier with each footstep. She would have to ask for directions. She looked around in search of some kind citizen who might steer her to the third circle where she would have to find Mistress Meleth.

Unfortunately, the two men who approached her did not appear to be friendly citizens at all. They were unsavory, unshaven, their clothes tattered; a reek of cheap wine hung around them. One of the men toyed with a knife, tossing it from hand to hand.

"Your pack, missy," he said, "and we won't hurt ya."

"Mama?"

She shoved Galwion behind her skirts and clutched her pack possessively. Except for the purse hidden beneath her clothes, the pack held everything she owned, including the set of thin bone needles her mother had given her upon her wedding, and she refused to give it up without a struggle. Though her heart thudded in her throat with fear, she told herself she had survived whoring in Linhir's dockside taverns; a pair of ruffians would not do her in just when she was starting a new life.

The men approached slowly, blocking the alley and the escape to the wider street at its end.

"Stop, or I'll scream!" It was the best threat she could come up with and she was painfully aware of its inadequacy.

The men laughed and moved another step, relishing the fear they induced.

"Hey!"

Another man appeared at the mouth of the alley. He wore a black surcoat over his mail, like the guards at the gate. Embroidered upon his chest was the Tree of Gondor and a sword was girded to his hips. Under his arm, he carried a helmet.

"What's going on here?"

The two thugs backed away from Nîneth.

"Nothing. Nothing. The girl's lost. We're just offering our help." They turned and bolted past the guardsman, who snorted and glared after them before he turned back to Nîneth.

"Are you all right, miss?" he asked. "They did not harm you, did they?"

"Nay," Nîneth said. "But I believe your arrival was timely."

She knelt to pull Galwion in her arms. Tears streaked the boy's face and he hid against his mother's breast. "Shh," she hushed him. "We are safe now."

The guard let out a breath. "The lower circles of Minas Tirith are not a safe place for a lone woman to wander around in. We of the Tower Guard do our best, but so many people are coming to the White City these days, there are bound to be some rogues among them."

Nîneth met his gaze over Galwion's curls. "I thank you, sir. If you could do me one more good turn?"

"What do you wish, good lady?"

"I do seem to be lost. I am looking for Mistress Meleth on the third circle, who may provide lodgings, and then I have a letter I need to deliver to the Lord Steward. Could you tell me where I may find either of them?"

The guard's eyes widened and he laughed. "Aye, mistress, you are in luck. I can take you to the third circle and I can deliver your letter, as I am myself on my way to the citadel. My duty starts in a few minutes' time. If you give me the letter, I will see it safely delivered."

Nîneth shook her head. "I thank you for your offer, but I was instructed to give the Steward the letter personally."

She set Galwion on his feet again. He stayed close to her, not letting go of her hand but staring curiously at the guard and the long sword at his side.

The laughter faded and the man frowned. "Steward Faramir is a busy man, mistress. So unless you have an appointment with him, I think you would be better off giving me the letter to deliver."

Nîneth sighed and her shoulders slumped. From the moment she had promised Erandír she would present his letter to the steward in person, she had feared it would come to this. How was she, a simple woman from a small town, going to convince the guards of the citadel that she needed to see the Steward of Gondor?

"I was told he would be expecting me," she said uncertainly. "I made a promise to a dear friend I would deliver the letter myself."

"Hmm." The man thought for a few moments. Then he shrugged. "Well, I suppose it won't hurt if you come with me to ask if the steward has indeed been notified of your coming. Come, I will show you the way."

The guardsman quickly led Nîneth and Galwion through the maze of streets on the lower levels, steering them through one gate after another, ever going upward, until at last they passed through a long lamplit tunnel that led into the citadel's courtyard. The guards, dressed like Nîneth's guide in armored livery and black surcoat, stopped them. The gates stood open, and through the arched entryway she could look into the wide plaza behind, with a sapling in the middle and a tall tower behind it.

"State your business," one of the guards said.

Her guide answered. "This is Mistress Nîneth and her son, Galwion. She has traveled from the south, bearing a letter for Lord Faramir. She says she must deliver it in person, and that she is expected."

The second guard eyed her dubiously and Nîneth was keenly conscious of her plain traveling garb. "Wait here." He walked away to confer with his colleagues.

A moment later he returned.

"Mistress, you are expected. If you wait but a moment, someone will be here to escort you to the Steward's office."

Nîneth blinked and nodded dumbly, startled into speechlessness with the sudden ease how something she had worried herself over for many weeks appeared to resolve itself so smoothly.

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Some minutes later, while dusk was cloaking the courtyard in gray shadows, a page came hurrying to the guardhouse. "Mistress Nîneth?"

"Yes."

"If you would follow me, please."

She thanked the guardsman who guided her for his help and followed the page, forcing herself to stop gaping at the splendor of the buildings surrounding the courtyard. To the west stood the tall, white tower she had first seen from the river. From her new vantage point at its foot, it was even bigger than she had imagined, and when she looked up, she noticed that, while the city was already shrouded in twilight, the tip of the tower glowed red with the setting sun. Behind the tower, she glimpsed a magnificent stone building, the banners on its roof flapping in the evening wind. And to her right was another large, multistoried building with many windows.

"That's Merethrond, the Hall of the Feasts," the page told her, following her gaze. He pointed to the building with the banners. "And that's the King's house."

It was impossible not to feel awed by the grandeur of the citadel and the power being wielded from behind the walls of the seventh level. This was where the rulers of Gondor lived, where they decided the fate of the country and where they had plotted and won the war. For a moment, she mused on the strange turn her life had taken and wondered about Erandír. Her imagination, inspired by the solemn atmosphere of the citadel, fancied that the girls at The Merry Fisher had been right after all: that Erandír was an important man on a critical but secret mission for the king. Her more practical half chided her for the bare nonsense. He could not have such mission; if not for her prodding, he would still be lugging bricks in Linhir.

The page took her past the grand buildings, and turned left, where smaller buildings stood side by side. "The House of the Stewards," he explained.

He led Nîneth and Galwion up three stone steps and preceded them through a large door. The hallway they entered was lit with many candles whose light reflected on the paneling covering the walls. The wood was dark with age. Paintings hung in a row, depicting stern-looking men with strong features and gray eyes.

The page caught her look. "Those are the Stewards of old," he said. "Every one of them, all the way to Mardil Voronwë, who was the first Ruling Steward." He smiled, pleased with the opportunity to display his knowledge.

The faces in the portraits seemed familiar; however, Nîneth was afforded no chance to dwell upon the odd impression.

"This way, please." The page knocked on a door and when a voice answered from inside, he opened it. "Mistress Nîneth and her son to see you, my lord."

"Send them in." The voice sounded firm but not unkind.

On the doorstep, Nîneth hesitated, apprehensive. She smoothed her skirts nervously, pushed a wayward curl behind her ears and combed her son's dark locks with her fingers until he shrugged her away impatiently. She was acutely aware that she was about to meet the second most powerful man in the entire kingdom. Never in her life had she dreamed that she, Nîneth, daughter of a tradesman from the Hills of Tarnost, would have reason to interact with such important people.

But she had a promise to fulfill.

She squared her shoulders, took Galwion's hand and walked into the study. A man was seated behind a desk littered with papers. He stood up as she entered and she realized he was tall, wearing a long, dark-green tunic embroidered with gold thread. He was younger than she had expected but she could see a strong resemblance to his forebears in the portraits in the hallway.

She dipped a curtsy. "At your service, my lord Steward."

"Mistress Nîneth." The steward smiled and his eyes twinkled. "I have waited for your arrival eagerly, ever since I was first informed to expect you."

Nîneth blinked. "My lord?"

He chuckled. "You carry a letter for me?"

"Aye, lord." She fumbled through her pack, inwardly cursing herself she had not taken the letter out earlier, and handed him the sealed envelope. She was chagrined to see it was crumpled from the long journey, but the steward did not seem to mind. He tapped the envelope in his palm thoughtfully. Then he waved at her to take a seat while he tore the seal.

Nîneth glanced around and for the first time noticed the chairs drawn up near the desk. She cautiously settled herself in one and heaved Galwion onto her lap before he could slither away and explore the study. The room was silent except for the occasional hiss from one of the lamps or the crackling of the small fire in the hearth.

The steward was deeply engrossed in the letter, sometimes frowning, now opening his eyes wide in indignation, even chuckling at one point. While he read, Nîneth took the opportunity to look around the study unobserved. Dark, heavy velvet curtains hid the windows and prevented anyone from seeing in. Bookcases lined one wall, filled with leather volumes that looked old and worn. Among the books, other things took up room on the shelves. There were silver goblets, finely wrought; half-unrolled maps; a chessboard with stone

pieces set meticulously in the center of their squares; a simple white rod whose purpose she could not determine, and, strangely, one cloven horn. She wondered for a moment why someone would keep a broken instrument.

At last, the steward put the letter down and turned his eyes upon her. He gazed at her intently and she forced herself not to shrink from his scrutiny. She feared what Erandír might have said about her past in this letter; yet even as the thought crossed her mind she silently admonished herself for her foolishness. Undoubtedly someone who wrote letters to Gondor's Steward had more important issues to speak about than a whore.

"So, you have lost your husband and home in the war," he said at last, surprising her. He leaned back in his chair, folding his hands before him.

"Aye, my lord."

"And I am beseeched to see that you are compensated for your loss and help you start anew here in Minas Tirith."

Nîneth wasn't sure whether to be embarrassed or annoyed. "Is that what Erandír says?"

"Erandír?" He frowned.

"The man who wrote you the letter, my lord."

"Ah, yes, of course." For a moment he looked worried.

"I know that's not his real name," Nîneth said in an attempt to put the steward's concerns to rest. "He said it no longer mattered."

Gondor's second in command made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a snort. He muttered something below his breath, so softly that Nîneth failed to catch it. Again, she wondered who her friend really was, and then decided she did not want to know. It was best never to meddle in the affairs of others, especially those of mighty lords. The thought scared her.

"I'm very grateful to Lord Erandír for his concern but I truly have no need for your help," she hurriedly added. "I am a skilled seamstress and I've been told where I might find work. We will be fine, Galwion and I."

She lifted her son from her lap so she could stand up. "I have delivered my letter and kept my promise, so I believe I should best be on my way, my lord. 'Tis getting late and you must have more important things--"

"Whoa!" He held up his hands. "Not so quickly, mistress. I would hear your tale, if you please. I understand you spent quite some time with... Erandír. Can I send for some refreshments?"

He rung a bell and an instant later a maid appeared in the doorway. The steward ordered sweet cakes, fruit tarts and mulled wine. "And some cider for the boy," he added at the last instant. The maid curtsied and the door closed.

A short while later, Galwion was hungrily stuffing himself with the delicacies the steward had ordered while Nîneth spoke. She quickly discovered that Steward Faramir was an easy man to tell a tale to; he listened intently. More so even than Erandír, in whom she had recognized a kindred spirit; someone who lost everything, including himself, in the war that had ravished the country.

Hers was a long tale, and while she spoke, her son, exhausted from the long journey and full with sweets, dozed off in the chair beside her. She had almost finished her story, telling the steward about how she had found the purse Erandír had left her, when muted voices sounded in the hallway. The door banged open without further warning and a tall, dark-haired man strode in. He wore dark gray trousers and a long-sleeved tunic of expensive-looking burgundy silk. Intricate patterns in white and yellow embellished the hem and collar.

"Faramir! You are not working still, are you? I unexpectedly find myself with an evening bereft of duties and--" The newcomer caught sight of Nîneth. "My apologies. I did not know you had a visitor."

The steward had sprung to his feet and Nîneth thought it wise to follow suit. Someone dressed as lavishly, who could just walk into the steward's study without even bothering to knock, had to be an important person.

"My lord," the steward said, "may I present Mistress Nîneth from Linhir?" Was it her imagination, or did a soft blush creep onto his cheeks?

Nîneth had no chance to dwell on the observation for long. When his next words sank in, it was her turn to blush furiously while she tried to curtsy and smooth her skirts at the same time.

"King Elessar Telcontar, King of Gondor and Lord of the West--"

"Enough with the titles, Faramir," the king chided his steward. "You are frightening the poor woman." He turned to Nîneth. "Do not look so perturbed, mistress. I do not bite."

Nîneth swallowed, searching for her voice.

"Are you a real king?" a small voice behind her asked. She whipped around to see her son rub the sleep from his eyes while he stared curiously at King Elessar. "Like in the stories?"

"Galwion!" Nîneth hissed. But the king laughed.

"Yes, I am," he said and knelt before the chair to look the boy in the eye. "I even have a real crown with jewels."

"You do?" The boy's brow furrowed when his gaze lifted to the top of the king's head. "Where is it? Why are you not wearing it?"

"Because," the king lowered his voice and explained in a conspiratorial tone, "such a crown is very heavy. It makes my head hurt. But shh, do not tell anyone, all right?"

Galwion giggled. "All right. I promise."

The king straightened. "I will leave you now," he said, "so you and Faramir can continue your conversation. I shall see you tomorrow, Faramir."

"Of course, my lord."

Nîneth found that her knees were shaking badly and the curtsy she gave upon the king's departure turned into a rather undignified drop onto the chair. Fortunately, the door had already closed.

Galwion was pulling on her sleeve. "Mama! That man says he is the King!" His eyes sparkled

She offered her son a tremulous smile but did not yet trust her voice enough to speak. Strangely, it seemed as if the steward was also shaken by the king's sudden appearance. Something in his demeanor had changed and he seemed far less amicable. He no longer smiled; there was nothing that hinted at his earlier interest when he refolded the letter she had given him and put it back in its envelope.

"Do you have lodging?" he asked.

"Eh... Yes, my lord." His abruptness startled Nîneth into a stammer. "Aye, I was going to see a woman on the third level. I've been told she takes in lodgers."

Steward Faramir shook his head. "It is late," he said. "You cannot go present yourself to a woman's boardinghouse at this hour; she would be most unwise to open the door for you. Here," he plucked a gold coin from his pocket and slid it across the table. "I have kept you past a reasonable hour and thus kept you from finding a place to stay. I will have one of the guards escort you and your boy to the *Moon And Stars*. It is a very respectable inn where you will be safe for the night."

Nîneth hesitated a moment before she took the coin. "Thank you, my lord. You are most kind."

A hint of a smile returned to his face. "I must thank you, mistress. You do not know how much I enjoyed hearing your story."

## Thieves In The Forest

"'Tis been a long winter, Master Erandír." The innkeep wiped at the table's surface with a piece of cloth, though it shone brightly already, reflecting the candlelight. The common room was empty except for Boromir and the inn's proprietor. Despite the candles, the room was gloomy, although it was the middle of the afternoon. A winter storm howled outside around the corners of the building, whipping sleet through the snow-filled streets.

"Aye," Boromir agreed. The winter lasted long indeed. Long enough for his increasing impatience to slowly become unbearable. He was impatient to be on his way again. Near to four months had gone by since he came down through the pass at Tarlang's Neck to the Morthond vale. Though he had hoped to be able to travel further before winter, the unpredictable weather quickly made him change his mind.

Winters were always long in the White Mountains, with summers hot and brief. This year winter had set in quite early. Two days after he reached the Morthond, on the morning of his intended departure, he had woken up to a leaden sky from which wet flakes drifted down. They cloaked the deserted Hill of Erech in white until in the late afternoon a watery sun melted the snow and left the earth damp. With the cold season so close on his heels, he did not dare risk being caught in its icy claws somewhere in the wilds; although many folk dwelt in the fertile Morthond Vale, the land further west was desolate and sparsely populated.

So, reluctantly, he had stayed in the Morthond vale, where he had found a simple and cheap establishment in a narrow alley near the bridge over the river.

"A very long winter," he repeated. His funds, never much to begin with because he left his summer savings with Nîneth, had quickly dwindled further. He had paid for his stay in kind, providing venison for the inn's tables, hunted during brief spells of bright weather, or doing menial work around the town when he could find it. He did not mind such work -- it kept his mind off of other things -- but his restlessness was increasing until he felt ready to burst with impatience.

"'Tis said that the Vale has not seen such a harsh winter since my Grandda was a young man," the innkeeper continued after a moment.

Boromir cast a look at the man's silver hair and gray beard, and surmised that must have been a long time ago indeed.

"'Tis also said the Dead Host are the cause of it, because they left the Haunted Mountain last spring." The innkeeper gave a shrug. "People've always blamed those phantoms for their misfortunes. I think it's plain bad luck. What say you, Master Erandír?"

"Bad luck, would be my guess also," Boromir answered absently. The old arrow wounds in his left side ached; mayhap the pain announced a change in the weather. He rubbed the scars through his tunic when a thought occurred.

"What date is today?"

"Today? 'Tis the sixth of Súlimë, sir."

Boromir's flesh crept. Not surprising he was feeling so restless, then. It was a year to the day that he should have died. A year to the day when he had been given a second chance. And what had he so far done to redeem himself? No longer able to sit, he pushed back his chair and began pacing the room.

The snows would melt soon, he could sense it. Spring would be upon them in a few weeks. It would shortly be time to move on.

At least the long winter had provided him many opportunities to study sketchy maps of the country ahead, and make inquiries of the trappers who knew the woods well. He believed he had learned the lay of the lands as well as any stranger could hope to. The old South Road ended in the Morthond vale; from here on his path would lead through wilderness, along animal trails and herdsmen's footpaths. He would follow the foothills of the Ered Nimrais, cross the Lefnui and head for the pass into Drúwaith Iaur. Then he would continue until he reached the Isen. Once he crossed the mighty river, he would have left Gondor's soil and passed into the northern realm of the Reunited Kingdom. Where he would go once he arrived, Boromir had not yet decided; he could not think so far ahead.

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Two days later, the storms broke at last, taking winter with them. The sun grew stronger each morning until its warmth melted the snow, and the first shoots of new grass and a few hesitant snowdrops poked their heads through the slush. Boromir began to prepare for his departure. He acquired enough provisions to sustain him during a long journey through the wilderness and discovered Barangol needed his front shoes replaced.

"No problem, sir," the village farrier said after examining Barangol's hoofs.

"I have no coin left to pay you with," Boromir admitted.

The smith frowned for a moment, slowly shifting his gaze from the horse to Boromir, then his face brightened. "You can repay me by chopping some of that into firewood," he said. He pointed to several thick tree trunks.

"Hand me the axe."

Though winter still lurked around the corner, it was warm enough that Boromir's shirt clung to his back by the time he straightened after chopping the final block to small pieces. He wiped the moisture from his face with his arm.

"You've chopped the entire pile!" The smith blinked at the neat pile of logs, ready to stoke his fires high. "That wasn't necessary. Your horse only had his front hooves reshod."

Boromir shrugged. Perhaps he had overpaid the smith, but he had enjoyed the physical toil after many long months of being forced stay indoors.

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Finally, the day came that he rode out of the town. Soon the Hill of Erech fell behind and he entered the dark forests covering the foothills of the Ered Nimrais. It did not take him long to fully appreciate the earlier ease of riding along a road, even one constructed a long time ago and no longer well maintained. The wet ground, soggy with snowmelt, made for difficult progress and while he was used to traveling twenty miles on a good day on the road, he counted himself fortunate if he made five miles a day through the woods.

One evening, several weeks after he left the valley of the Stone, he made camp beside a nameless stream, which raced out of a narrow gulch it had cut through the hills. Rain had fallen far up in the mountains for several days, and the river was swollen. Boromir managed to find enough dry wood for a fire and it was kindled quickly. Within minutes, a hare was sizzling on a spit over the flames. Boromir was alone with his horse; as soon as he started to set up camp, Híril had run off, following a scent only a dog's sharp nose could detect.

The evening was quiet, almost balmy, whispering promises of warm summer days to come, and Boromir took off his wool cloak. He draped it over a branch to keep it off the muddy ground before he settled back to cooking dinner. Overhead, the clouds were breaking up and while the western sky still glowed dark pink, bright stars sparkled to the east.

Something rustled in the underbrush nearby; startled at the sudden noise, Barangol whinnied. A squirrel darted into the clearing and zigzagged around the horse's hooves before it raced up a tree trunk. Spooked, the horse reared, front legs slicing the air, and he tore loose his picket.

He disappeared among the trees.

Boromir swore at the squirrel as he hurried after Barangol. The last thing he needed was to lose his horse. Fortunately, though the rodent had startled him

into flight, Barangol was not easily given to panic and did not run far. Soon Boromir had caught up with the animal. He reached for the reins, uttering soothing nonsense words, and began to lead the horse back to his camp. He re-staked Barangol in a small meadow near the river before he returned to his fire.

As soon as he entered the clearing, he froze, all senses on edge. Something was wrong. His hand drifted to the hilt of his sword even as his mind tried to determine what it was that alerted him. He wished for Híril's presence; her keen nose and sharp hearing oft alerted him to danger. Then he noticed the spitted hare was missing -- as was his cloak.

Thieves? In the middle of a vast wilderness?

Anger surged through him but he kept his temper in check. He did not know how many bandits there were, or what kind, and the first rule of warfare was to know the enemy.

Though he was learning fast, his tracking skills were still slight -- he was like a new recruit compared to Aragorn's abilities -- but he quickly found the tracks and realized they were easy to read. The ground, soft after the rains and covered with soggy moss, revealed a single pair of small barefooted prints. They led away from his camp, following the river uphill.

Daylight was fading quickly, and he should hurry if he were to catch up with the thief before complete darkness was upon him. Once true night fell, he would no longer be able to follow the tracks, clear as they were. He raced up the hill, keeping one eye on the prints and the other on where he was going. His large strides carried him quickly to the summit.

A soft noise, near inaudible over the rushing waters below, reached his ears. He turned his head and caught a glimpse of dark green near the rim of the gulch. His cloak!

"You!" he shouted. "Stop! Or I'll use my blade." The figure froze where he stood.

The thief was small, Boromir noticed, and scrawny. The cloak was several sizes too large for his frame, and the hem dragged in the mud.

"Please, don't kill me." The voice was in tune with the thief's frame, light and trembling with fear. "I'll give you back your cloak."

"And my dinner."

"I... I can't do that. I ate it."

"Already?" Boromir said. "'Twas not even fully done."

The thief turned around slowly, revealing himself as a boy of perhaps twelve winters old. His hair, dark brown, was unruly and matted with dirt. His eyes appeared gray, like those of many of the men in Gondor.

"I was hungry?" he squeaked.

Boromir's anger at being robbed was melting quickly at the sight of the scared, thin child. And while he was pondering how to respond, something red pelted through the undergrowth.

"Híril, down!" Boromir warned. The long hours he spent in Erech training her paid off and she obeyed him instantly, skittering to a stop.

But it was already too late.

Frightened into panic, the young thief let out a long squeal, floundered backwards and tripped on the hem of Boromir's long cloak. The soldier snatched for him but only caught a handful of air. The boy tumbled over the side and plummeted into the river.

Híril whined.

"Not your fault, girl," Boromir said absently. A few fast steps took him to the edge. He hardly dared watch and reluctantly cast a cautious glance into the dark gully. Below, downstream from where he stood, he caught a dark blotch bobbing up and down amid the white foam glistening in the moonlight. Incredibly, the boy was still alive and clinging to a pile of rubble lodged in a tree branch that jutted out over the water.

"Hold on!" Boromir yelled. He sprinted down the hill to the river's bank.

"Help!" The child sounded terrified. "Help me."

Trying to find his way through the darkness among the trees was not easy and Boromir concentrated on the sound. The boy was hanging on for dear life but slowly yet surely losing the contest with the current. Boromir grabbed the tree with one hand and leaned forward as far as he could, reaching with the other hand.

"Take my hand," he instructed.

With the last of his strength, the boy managed to do as he was told and cold fingers wrapped themselves around Boromir's. With a mighty pull, he hauled the boy onto the shore, where they both lay panting for several minutes.

Boromir's waterlogged cloak clung to the boy's slim form and he was shivering violently.

"Come on," Boromir said once he had caught his breath. "You need to get out of those wet garments before you catch your death."

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He took the boy back to his camp and warm fire, and told him to strip and put on some of his own spare clothes. They hung awkwardly on the boy's narrow frame. Boromir tied a rope around the child's waist to hold up the breeches and helped him roll up the sleeves and pant legs. He looked like he was playing dress-up, but at least the boy was dry.

Boromir heated some water and prepared a thick soup, using some of his precious dried stores. His stomach growled at the smell that wafted from the stew, a reminder he had not yet eaten dinner. The boy eyed the soup with large, hungry eyes and Boromir offered him the first bowl. He ladled it down quickly, not caring that it was hot.

"You seem starved," Boromir said, spooning up the last of the soup himself. "What are you doing here, anyway? There is nary a village near, is there?"

The boy shrugged. "No. My mother died when I was real little so I live with my da. He's a trapper. He left for Erech right after the first frost night. Winter was early this year and he wanted to sell some pelts and buy food before the snows locked us in. I haven't seen him since."

"You survived the winter by yourself?" Boromir did not know what to say. Some mishap must have befallen the boy's father; it was unlikely he would ever return. If the man could, no doubt he would have come back already. At least it explained why the youngster had been hungry enough to steal Boromir's supper.

The boy shrugged again. "I've been alone before."

"Where do you live?"

"We have a house," the boy said proudly. "My da built it."

"Then let us go there," Boromir decided. "It will be better for you than here outside." He scooped some dirt over the fire to extinguish the flames, gathered his belongings and his horse, and gestured for the boy to lead the way.

"Do you have a name?" he asked. "You can call me Erandír."

"Hallas."

"That is a good name," Boromir said absently. The name tugged at his memory and he wondered why. Several minutes later, trampling through the darkened

forest by the light of a single torch, it came to him: one of his forebears was named Hallas.

A short while later they reached a crumbled dwelling in a small, grassy clearing. It was a shack more than a house and built so low that Boromir could not stand up straight without his head touching the thick beams holding up the roof. The single room was chill, dark, and sparsely furnished. A stuffed mattress covered with a torn quilt lay in the corner. Before a cold, blackened fireplace stood a wooden chair and a small table. One of its legs was crooked, so the table's surface was tilted.

"Let us get a fire going," Boromir said, pointing to the hearth. "You do have firewood, do you not?"

Hallas gave another shake with his shoulder. "Yes. But I used the last of the kindling, and it's been raining for days. I thought my da would be back by now." His voice cracked on the last sentence and he was still shivering, despite wearing some of Boromir's dry clothes.

Boromir grabbed the thin, dirty blanket from the bed and wrapped it around the child's small frame. "We will worry about your father later. First, I need to get you warm."

Full night had fallen, and though the moon was up, it took Boromir a while to find enough wood that was dry enough he might start a fire. Yet at last, yellow flames flickered in the hearth and Boromir heated up water so he could make the boy some tea to warm him up.

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Still, as Boromir had feared, the next morning Hallas woke with flushed cheeks and eyes gleaming with fever. Boromir resigned himself to staying for a few days and playing nursemaid to the boy.

The question of what he should do with the youngster once the fever was gone was never far from his mind. It turned over and over in his brain while he cooked hot soup and gently washed a fevered brow. One thing was evident: he could not leave the child to fend for himself. It was a wonder in itself that Hallas had survived one winter; the Valar must have truly smiled on the boy. Boromir doubted the child would be so fortunate again.

"How old are you?" he asked on the fourth day. The boy's fever had broken, but he was weakened and his face was pale.

"Twelve."

"That's old enough." Boromir helped him sit up on the thin mattress and handed him a bowl of broth.

"Old enough for what?" A hint of wariness crept into Hallas's voice.

"Old enough to be a squire, of course." Boromir grinned. "I have been traveling alone for a long time. I could use an extra pair of hands and eyes. Or someone to talk to. Someone who does not reply with *woof-woof*." He imitated Híril in the hopes of bringing a smile to the boy's gaunt face.

It worked. Hallas chuckled, which caused him to cough violently. Boromir quickly grabbed the bowl and waited for the fit to pass before handing the broth back.

"What about my da?" Hallas asked. "What if he comes back, and I'm not here? I have to find him!" He shoved his bowl at Boromir and flung away the blanket.

Boromir set the half-empty bowl down. He reached out a hand to steady the boy, who stood swaying on his feet. Gently, he pushed Hallas back onto the mattress. "Do you not think," he said quietly, "that your father would have returned by now, if he were able to do so? The snow has melted a while ago."

"Are you saying something happened to him? That he died?" Hallas sniveled. "Maybe he is fallen sick and can't come home yet." Maybe... maybe... The boy faltered, searching for excuses.

Boromir sighed. "Hallas, I do not know what happened. But I do not believe your father will return. You cannot stay here alone."

"You lie! My da will come home! He promised."

Boromir did not know what else to do but draw the child into his arms and hold him awkwardly while the boy cried for his lost father. Twelve years old, and an orphan. What was he going to do with him?

"Here now," Boromir said when the racking sobs abated, "dry your eyes. Squires do not cry. They do, however, learn how to handle a sword." Trying to distract the boy from his grief, he handed over his blade, hilt first. "How does that feel?"

Hallas took the sword in both hands and nearly dropped it. "It is heavy!" he said in surprise.

Boromir laughed. "Aye, it is. It is made of the hardest steel the sword makers of Minas Tirith can produce. The better to cleave orc heads with.

Hallas gazed up at Boromir with curiosity. "Did you kill many orcs?"

"Yes, I did," Boromir confirmed. "Though not as many as I would have liked."

"Did you ever see the king? My da said he came through the Haunted Mountain and was not afraid of the ghosts. He said that he killed the most orcs of all the soldiers."

Boromir's mood sobered at the memories of the war. "Aye," he confirmed reluctantly. "The king did kill many of our enemies. Now, give me that again before you cut yourself." He took the sword from the boy and slid it back into its scabbard.

"Eat your soup. You need to regain your strength if you hope to ever wield a blade like mine."

## Enmities

Híril noticed first that something was amiss, her senses far more developed than those of her master. A soft growl formed deep in her throat and she snarled, pulling back her lips to reveal sharp canines.

"What's wrong with her?" Hallas, perched high above the ground on Barangol's back, twisted in the saddle to look at the dog.

Boromir glanced up at the boy. A long winter of scarce nourishment and the fever after his fall in the icy river had weakened him so Boromir often let him ride while he himself walked, leading the horse by the bridle. But gradually, color was returning to the boy's cheeks and he did look a little stronger every day.

Grief for his father still showed in his eyes, yet he had not put up much resistance at Boromir's suggestion he come along, after that first, tearful outburst of denial. Well, the lad was twelve years of age, old enough to face the realities of forest life, painful to admit as it was.

"I do not know," Boromir said. "She must scent something."

He signalled for the dog to keep close; he did not want her running off on her own to investigate. Something about her behavior worried him and the way she bared her teeth told him she did not merely scent a hare's burrow or a fox's den. Whatever it was that put the dog on edge distressed her enough to raise the hackles on her back.

Boromir kept a hand near the hilt of his sword, scanning the surrounding countryside and keeping half an eye on Híril. They continued cautiously, winding their way through pine trees and scattered thickets of birches. The river Lefnui flowed past somewhere on the left, mumbling soothingly. They followed its course upstream, hoping to find a place to ford the river. A ridge of impassable hills had forced them far south and by the time they reached the Lefnui, it was too wide and deep to cross, thus leaving no choice but to backtrack north. Boromir was determined to head west as soon as they crossed the cold stream, to search for the pass that would take them over the southbound arm of the White Mountains and into Drúwaith Iaur.

A cool breeze came down from the mountains, carrying a whiff of an unpleasant stench on its wings. Boromir stopped in his tracks as he inhaled, tasting the air. Híril repeated her warning growl.

Yes. There it was once more. That smell, though diluted with fresh mountain air and spring flower fragrance, was awfully familiar. He would have recognized it from among a thousand foul odors: orcs!

"What is it?" Hallas looked around, bewildered when he could not see anything wrong.

Híril was quivering with eagerness to go and confront the danger. Yet in the time spent together, Boromir had trained the dog too well for her to run off without his permission. Barangol snorted nervously and pranced, tugging on the reins in Boromir's hand.

"Orcs," Boromir muttered. He gestured at Híril. "Stay."

The dog whined softly but settled herself on her tail, still trembling with suppressed anxiety. Ears pricked forward, she kept her eyes fixed upon the eastern hillside and never stopped the low grumbled warning. Boromir followed her gaze and studied the sun-bleached hill. It was a clear spring day, and the grassy slope was sprinkled with pink and purple crocuses; yellow daffodils; a white flower whose name he could not remember. Rocks and crags cast shadows but he could see no caves. If there were orcs here -- and there must be -- they could not number many. There simply was not enough shade for them to hide. Still, he dared not risk continuing without knowing more about his eternal enemy.

It was an unpleasant surprise to find orcs so many leagues to the west. He had expected to have left the last remnants of the surviving hordes far behind. He loosened his sword in its scabbard. "You stay with the animals," he told Hallas.

"I want to come!" the boy complained. He readied himself to drop from the saddle.

"No. I need you to make certain Híril does not get in my way and that Barangol does not spook and run. Understand?" He refrained from adding that the boy was too young, too weakened and too inexperienced to confront anything as fierce as an orc.

"All right." Hallas nodded, reluctantly.

Boromir's gaze had detected a narrow crevice near the top of the hill that looked promising as an orcish hiding place. He began climbing the slope, mindful of the loose rock that littered the grass.

The stink grew stronger the closer he came to the shadowy opening, and he heard shuffling in the darkness. There were none of the usual snarls and growls, however, that he had come to associate with orc bands.

His brow furrowed, and he pulled his sword from its scabbard. With the weapon at the ready, he took a deep breath and stepped into the gap.

The floor in the small crack between the rocks was rough and uneven. Her body shook with fevered chills that sapped the last of her strength. Even so, soft noises from the darkness urged her to try to gather her strength; her litter, three younglings strong, mewled with hunger. In a little while, she knew, their soft whimpers would change into demanding shrieks echoing around the mountains.

"*Gôsh!* Be quiet!" Her voice was a rough snarl but it lacked conviction.

It was not the cubs' fault; the whelps were too young to realize the danger of drawing attention. She should get up and feed them what little she could -- although it would not be enough. Days had passed since she last managed to venture out of the den and find sustenance for herself. She was dying, and when she died, her offspring would die with her. The pups could not yet survive on their own, and there was no one else to care for them.

Still, in a way, she considered herself fortunate. When her tribe lived in the shadow of Lugbúrz, the sick were put down without mercy. *Those who cannot work, are no-good burdens*, so the captains commonly held, *and only fit to be fed to the winged steeds of the Nazgûl lords*. But here, in the mountains with the snow-capped peaks of the Ered Nimrais towering high above, she was alone. The Nazgûl were destroyed and could no longer terrorize her into obedience; there was no rival female coveting her small nest. And she was far from the white City of Men. Nobody would kill her before her time. *Her* whelps might have a chance to continue her line -- if she could manage to hold on to life long enough to give them a decent start..

Such illness as hers was an uncommon occurrence for her breed. The race of the orc was stalwart and rarely got sick. But a fever had haunted her since the end of last summer, when she birthed her litter. It slowly drained her strength until she was a mere husk of the powerful female she used to be. And though it was likelier that her fever was the result of a birthing in squalor, or exhaustion and malnourishment, she found it more satisfying to blame the new king of Gondor, who, in defeating the Great Eye, had caused an end to the only existence she had ever known.

"May Her Ladyship feast on his flesh." She had uttered the curse below her breath before recalling that the fearsome spider was likely long dead.

Yet, while she struggled to gather enough energy to feed her children, she found it easy to muster hate and her eyes shifted toward the two boys in her litter. "You would make mighty warriors," she told them. "Warriors fit to kill the nasty *tark* and filthy whiteskins!" They gurgled in reply. How could they understand what she meant? They were so young.

Her head turned back until she gazed at the wall opposite. She licked her lips. "They taste good. Sweet and juicy." She chuckled, and the chuckle turned into a round of coughing that racked her body and left her gasping.

A tiny claw curled around her wrist and Karguk, her eldest, hauled himself onto her chest. She grinned with motherly pride and used some of her meager strength to help him up further. An instant later, sharp fangs closed around a teat. She shifted, trying to find a more comfortable position while her son struggled to draw the nourishment he needed so badly.

She gave a deep sigh. "Oi, bold Karguk, I fear you will never learn the taste of Man-flesh."

The future had not always seemed as bleak as it did today. "Before were the good days," she told the suckling whelp. "Sauron, the Great Eye, watched over us and the Lord of the Nazgûl promised treasures beyond imagination. We'd find it in the Men cities and Elven realms, he said. Sparkling riches and more meat than we could ever dream to eat."

She drifted with the memories, never noticing how Brugagh replaced Karguk at her breast after a short but fierce struggle for dominance. In her mind, she was back before the walls of Minas Tirith, reliving the battle lost. A staggering defeat that had cost the race of the orc their future and forced her to flee far from her home.

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It was not much later when a moan escaped her and she woke with a start from her nightmares. The stark fear she experienced on the battlefield that day held her frozen so it took her a few moments to realize she had been dreaming, that it was no longer real.

But it had been real, once. The arrival of the wraiths, led by the Man-king, causing sheer panic to race through rank upon rank of black orcs, catching them all up in its terror. The Nazgûl lord fell and, when his power no longer kept them together, they ran. She had spared no thought for where she was going; terror drove her on, fright for herself and her unborn litter, still safe in her womb. She had stumbled blindly, farther and farther away, until much, much later she came to her senses and found herself among green, rolling hills with white mountains looming high above.

She was alone, insulated from news, yet instinctively knew when the war was over. The orcs had lost. Their fate was sealed, their race doomed. If Men or Elves found her, she would suffer a terrible end and her whelps would never be born. She did not dare turn back, and so she ran on, deeper into the forest, higher into the mountains until at last she could run no more.

And that was where she found herself now. In a narrow crack between the rocks, feeble with fever and three brats clamoring for her attention.

She turned her head away from the wall to look upon her spawn and she flooded with pleasure in spite of her dire situation: she had produced three strong cubs, an unusual number. Two of them sturdy sons and one fine-looking daughter with long arms and wide hips. Yet she despaired at the world they had to survive in. Hunted by the victors, chased to the end of the world and beyond, with no place left to hide -- what future was it that they could look forward to?

But it no longer mattered. They *had* no future. Soon, she would die, and they would die with her. The line of her foremothers, the lineage of Skullgrinder, would be wiped away forever with the passing of its last daughter, Drukh from Nurn and her three babes.

Still, life was tenacious. Drukh was not yet ready to give up the fight and she clung to what little hope she had left. When Silge in her turn pulled her brother away and took his place at her breast, she strained to sit up. Her daughter was sucking hard in an attempt to draw what she could from her mother's dried glands.

Something blocked the entrance to the small cave, casting a shadow to fall over them. Drukh looked up in alarm and a sharp hiss escaped her when she saw a Man standing in the opening. It was a sign of the shape she was in that she had not scented his presence or heard his approach with senses honed through generations until he revealed himself.

Drukh pushed Silge off of her, despising herself for trembling in the face of the enemy. The pup whined in protest even as her mother's hand searched for a weapon. But Drukh was too weakened to move much and could only stare up in hatred while the Man gazed down upon them. In her eyes, he was hideously fair, like so many of his kind. Tall, broad-shouldered, strongly muscled. She knew he was no weakling. This Man was a warrior, and she was certain her end was near. She was like unto a helpless suckling, an easy kill, and while she prayed for a swift end, she waited for the blade to come down.

Yet, though his sword was unsheathed, he did not raise it. Numerous expressions crossed his features but she could not read any of them. Drukh had no experience with the faces of Men. At last, he cursed in the Elven tongue she despised so much and turned away, leaving a ray of sunlight to fall onto the floor.

Her yellow eyes blinked in surprise. She gaped at the empty spot where he had been standing, trying to comprehend. Why was she still alive? Why had he not used his sword to spill her insides onto the cave floor? It could not be fear that kept him back, of that she was convinced. He had the look of a warrior, and even a Man couldn't be as blind as to not see her frail and helpless state. So, why, then? Perhaps this was a cruel game like the

descendants of Ungoliant played with their prey. She shuddered. He would be back soon, and her end would be all the more terrible for the delay.

But time went by, and he did not return. He was still outside somewhere, though, not far away, waiting. This she knew, for she could scent him now she had learned of his presence. Panic assailed her and she tried to shift her limbs. She had to leave! She should take Silge and Karguk and Brugagh and find another hiding place. But her strength was waning and she could move only a feeble arm.

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It took Boromir's eyes a minute to adjust to the gloom inside the crevice after the brightness of the spring day. He tensed, expecting to be set upon any moment, but no attack came. Once his vision had adapted to the dark conditions inside the cave and he could determine what it held, he could scarcely believe what he saw. Instead of finding a band of orcs, he found a single adult and three... baby orcs?

Did orcs produce *offspring*?

He had never given the matter much thought. He lived by a simple truth: orcs existed, a bane to Man. They embodied evil and it was his obligation to slay each one that he found. Yet, he hesitated. His sword was in his hand, the blade sharp and ready; all he needed to do was raise it and plunge it down into the orc body slumped at his feet. Still, strangely, he found himself holding back. It was an orc, and as such deserved death. Yet, it was also, by the looks of it, a mother.

"Valar forsake me!" he swore and turned away, unable to bring himself to cold-bloodedly murder a defenseless mother, even an orcish one.

"Erandír? What is it? What did you find?" Hallas called up. He had dropped from the saddle and tied the horse to a tree. A tense Híril sat near his feet. He shaded his eyes from the sun as he peered up at Boromir. Surprisingly, his voice held more curiosity than fear.

"Stay there!" Boromir called back. He stood for a long moment, torn with indecision, before he began to pace on the meadow in front of the orc den. His long, quick strides betrayed his agitation. The green grass crumpled beneath his boots, releasing a fresh spring scent that banished some of the reek emanating from the cave.

The decision should not be so difficult. Inside the crevice, hidden from sight and the sun in their stony lair, were four of Gondor's enemies. Foul beasts that would not hesitate if the situation were reversed. Four determined slashes

with his sword would extinguish their lives, and his land would be the safer for it. It should be so easy; it was what he had trained to do all his life.

Except nothing had prepared him for a situation like this. Three of the orcs were helpless whelps. And the fourth was a female, a mother, and if his eyes did not deceive him, a very sick creature. Hardly the kind of ruthless enemy he was used to.

He stopped walking to wipe his brow with his sleeve; the day had turned warm, filled with the promise of summer soon to come. Perhaps, he decided while he turned his gaze toward the shadow that marked the orcs' hiding place, perhaps all he needed to do was wait. He did not know much about orc anatomy -- aside from the most effective way to kill them -- but even in the gloom of the cave, the she-orc had appeared to be on the brink of passing. If she died, no action was needed on his part and nature would take care of the problem all by itself.

"Erandír? Are you not hungry?"

The voice startled Boromir from his wishful thoughts. He realized he had forgotten all about his young charge. He glared at the boy, though he was unsure whether he was upset with himself for being caught off guard, or with the boy for disregarding his order to remain with the animals.

"I'm sorry," Hallas said upon noticing the scowl. "I know you told me to stay with the horse but you've been up here for the longest time, walking back and forth. Nothing happened, so I thought you would want something to eat and have some water." He held out Boromir's water flask and a package wrapped in cloth, like a peace offering.

Boromir had to admit his stomach was feeling rather hollow, and the thought of food made it rumble in anticipation.

"Thank you." He unwrapped the cloth, revealing a cooked rabbit's haunch left over from yesterday's catch. He tore off a strip of meat.

"Did you find any orcs?" Hallas took a curious step further up the hill.

"Stop," Boromir said. "I do not want you to go there."

"But--" Hallas began, when his protest was cut short by a loud ruckus coming from the crevice. With the attention of man and boy diverted, Híril had no longer been able to withstand the scents that had been assaulting her senses for a long time. She had slipped past them to the cave. She barked furiously at the darkness, then suddenly she yelped in pain.

Boromir swore beneath his breath. "Accursed mongrel!" He ran to the crevice, grabbed a handful of hindquarters and pulled Híril back.

His anger dissipated when he noticed the animal's snout. It was bloody where sharp fangs had pierced the sensitive skin of her nose.

"Is she all right?"

Híril whined and tucked her tail between her legs as soon as Boromir let go of it. "She will be. Let me see those bites, girl."

He reached for his water flask and poured a generous amount over the animal's nose, holding on tight to her fur with one hand while ignoring her struggle to get away. He hoped plain water would be enough to clean the wound so it would not become infected. Orc bites could be nasty.

"Are those real orcs?"

Boromir cast a glance over his shoulder to see Hallas peer into the blackness of the cave. His voice held no fear, only wonderment.

"Yes," Boromir confirmed. He let go of the dog and climbed back to his feet. "You would do well not to stick your nose in. Did you not see what happened to Híril? That ought to be a lesson for you."

"She scared them," the boy said, slowly inching further forward. "What's wrong with the big one? Is that the mother?"

Boromir rolled his eyes. The boy was full of questions today. "I do not know. But I suppose yes."

Hallas was making soft, soothing noises while creeping even deeper into the cleft. Tense, ready to pull the boy away in an instant, Boromir decided not to interfere just yet. If Hallas did not want to heed his words, perhaps he would have to learn the hard way.

But the anticipated attack never came. Hallas crawled back, unharmed, cradling a baby orc in his arms. Its misshapen face crinkled at the scent of the dog's blood and cooked rabbit. It snapped its fangs at Boromir.

"They are so little," Hallas said. He looked up at Boromir. "I think the mother is dead. Can we keep them?"

For a long moment Boromir was too stunned to reply. Then, not sure whether to laugh or be angry, he replied curtly, "No. Put it back with the others."

"But they'll die without their mother!"

"Precisely." He softened his voice. "Hallas, orcs are vicious, nasty creatures. Has your father not taught you such?"

Hallas hesitated. "Yes, that's what he said too. But I've never seen an orc before. And these don't look very dangerous."

Boromir chuckled. "I believe Híril would disagree with you." The dog was licking her paw, running it repeatedly over the injured nose. She kept a wary eye on the little creature in the boy's arms. A soft growl emitted from her throat every time the orc shifted.

"She attacked them first," the boy said with stubborn logic.

And for good reason, Boromir thought, but did not say. "What would we do with baby orcs?" he asked instead. "We can barely find enough to eat to sustain ourselves. And when they grow up--"

"But we can't leave them to die!" Hallas cried. "Look! It's hungry." Much to Boromir's amazement, the small orc suckled Hallas's thumb. Boromir cringed inwardly, expecting the wickedly sharp teeth to sink into the boy's flesh at any moment.

"True," he agreed. It suddenly dawned on him what he would have to do and he wondered what made him hesitate before. Was he growing soft-hearted?

"Put that back with the others," he said. "Then take Híril and Barangol and walk ahead. Leave the orcs to me. Perhaps you can find the nest of those ptarmigan we saw, and raid it. I would not say no to fresh eggs with dinner tonight, would you? Whatever you do, do not come back here. I will find you. You hear?"

"What will you do?"

"What I must," Boromir replied. "What I should have done hours ago."

For a long moment it seemed as if Hallas would disobey but then he bowed to Boromir's authority. He dropped to his knees and cautiously shooed the orc back into the crevice with its siblings. "Bye, little one," he muttered.

He gave Boromir a last glance before he trotted down the hill and untied Barangol's reins. At a gesture from Boromir, Híril ran to the boy and followed him when he began to lead the horse through the trees. The soldier waited until the child and the animals had disappeared into the forest. He pulled his sword free and tested its sharpness with his thumb. He gave a last look to make sure Hallas complied with his orders and had not come back, then took a deep breath of fresh air, stooped and entered the orcs' den.

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Hallas stared into the flames of their cooking fire without saying a word. He had been quiet and morose ever since Boromir caught up with him. When he had finished his dinner, he set his bowl aside and poked the burning logs with a large stick until sparks shot up into the night sky. Híril, dozing patiently beside the fire, opened one eye to watch the flames. When satisfied she was not in danger, the eye closed again and the dog heaved a sigh.

"You killed them, didn't you?" the boy asked at last.

"Aye."

"Why? They were harmless."

Boromir sighed. "Today they were," he said. "But once they grew up, they would have become our enemy, delivering death and torment to the people of Gondor. The way their kind has since time immemorial." He put his own plate down and turned to face the boy.

"Hear me well, Hallas. Every terrible story your father told you about orcs is true. And they are tenfold more vicious than he could ever explain to you in words. Consider yourself fortunate that you have never had to see with your own eyes what orcs can do to a person."

His voice drifted off and he was talking more to himself than to the boy. "Countless are the scenes I have witnessed. Farms burned to the ground, their occupants still inside. Women, children, maimed and butchered. Soldiers, torn limb to limb." He suddenly looked up and caught Hallas's eye. "They feast on the flesh of their victims, devour them raw, did your father tell you that?"

Hallas's eyes grew round and he shuddered despite the warmth of the fire. Boromir felt a pang of guilt at frightening the boy, but it was important he understood why Boromir had done what he did. That sometimes a soldier had to make choices that might not be to his liking, but that were the right thing to do regardless.

"You lie," the boy said, but his tone betrayed it was a token protest.

"I would wish," Boromir said. "They hate us, you see. It is in their blood." He paused for a moment. "I do not know why. You know we could not take them with us. And with their mother gone, they were doomed. Would it have been kinder to let them die slowly of hunger?"

Hallas shook his head, gazing at the ground. "I suppose not," he mumbled.

## Riders Of The Mark

"One, two. Counter! Aye, that's it! Three, four, good! Watch your feet. Keep them moving. Remember, tread lightly."

Panting with exertion, Hallas tried to follow Boromir's rapid instructions. The sounds of his gasped breath mingled with the noise of wood on wood.

"Ow!" Boromir grunted. Following a particular unusual riposte, Hallas's practice sword had slipped through his defenses and struck his forearm. He rubbed the sore flesh, seeing a bruise already form. Inexperienced recruits were the most dangerous to train; they always did the unexpected. "That's enough for now."

"I'm sorry!" Hallas said, dropping his sword. "I didn't mean to hit you."

"I would hope you *did*," Boromir said with a smile. "That is the entire purpose of a sword. Just mind this lesson and I will consider a bruise a small price to pay: even if you believe you know what your opponent is going to do, you should always be prepared for the unforeseen. You did well."

Pink rose to the boy's cheeks and Hallas beamed with the praise.

"At the next smithy we find," Boromir continued, "we must see about getting you a real sword. I believe you are ready."

"Really?" Hallas said. He was bobbing with delight. "Then will you also teach me how to kill orcs?"

Boromir laughed. "All in good time, son. All in good time."

It was not long ago that the boy had wanted to adopt baby orcs and raise them like pets. But Boromir's warnings about the viciousness of orcs had not gone unheeded. Neither had some of the stories the boy demanded he tell.

"You are still a long way away from killing anything. Let us start by acquainting you with the feel of a real blade in your hand, all right?"

"Can't I try with yours?"

"My blade is not fit for you," Boromir said. "Your arms are shorter than mine, and you do not yet have the strength of a grown man."

Secretly, he was rather proud of his young pupil, who had made remarkable progress in wielding his wooden sword. The boy had taken to handling the weapon like a natural-born swordsman; he was a joy to teach. Not even two full months had passed since Boromir rescued Hallas out of the river, yet he could barely recall the days spent alone. He had never realized how lonely he

had been with but a dog and a horse to keep him company until he found the orphaned boy and took him under his wing. With his youthful zeal, never-relenting questions and keen interest in learning new things, Hallas provided a much-needed diversion from Boromir's own glum thoughts. And though he did not want to admit it, Boromir was especially glad to have found someone to whom he could pass on his extensive skill with a blade. Hallas had proven an eager pupil, as eager to learn how to handle a sword as Merry or Pippin.

"Erandír?" Hallas broke in on his thoughts.

Boromir realized he had been staring off in the distance, seeing the past, for several long minutes. He shook himself.

"We better pack up," he said, grabbing his shirt and pulling it over his head. "There are some hours of daylight left. We can still get a few miles beneath our feet."

"Aye." Hallas collected the makeshift practice swords in one hand, hoisted his small pack upon his shoulders with the other and was ready to go on. The days had grown long and hot, the nights short and warm as spring was about to give way to summer; the travelers wore linen undershirts and breeches, and not much else. Boromir's wool cloak and rain cape were stuffed deep inside Barangol's saddlebags, no longer needed.

Each day brought more sunshine, and the open spaces among the trees were bright green with new growth, dotted with white and yellow daisies, red poppies and purple violets. The forest was alive with birdsong and chicks called for their parents among fresh shoots. Barangol enjoyed the new grasses while Híril had a grand time chasing buzzing bees or squeaking rodents hither and yon, her antics often eliciting a laugh from her masters. They made easy progress in the dry weather, although Boromir paused each afternoon for an hour or so. He used that time to instruct his pupil further in sword fighting. One day he tried to give the boy an archery-lesson, but he quickly learned that Hallas was his better with bow and arrow and Boromir had nothing to teach him.

"My father often took me hunting," the boy explained after he struck the target three times in a row, "when I was still very little."

Thus Boromir confined his lessons to swordsmanship and war tactics, or told the boy old battle tales. Hallas took it all in with an enthusiasm that brought his younger brother to Boromir's mind, in earlier days when Faramir was allowed free run of the libraries of Minas Tirith and absorbed the history of Gondor as if the fate of the world depended upon it.

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Despite the abundance of life, people were scarce in the thickly forested vales between the hills of the Pinnath Gelin and the White Mountains. Sometimes, a week or more would pass without them seeing another living soul. Occasionally they came upon a small farm or trapper's house, and villages were even scarcer. The people they did meet were a suspicious lot, not welcoming to strangers. Thus, even when a hamlet was nearby, Boromir and Hallas rarely stayed for longer than a brief visit to buy supplies, and camped beneath the stars.

The people who lived in the vales were generally small of stature with wide faces and it was obvious that the blood of the Púkelmen ran still in their veins. Gondor's cities were many weeks' riding away and the hillfolk kept to themselves. They were farmers or huntsmen and indifferent to Gondor's politics. Yet, when a pair of wargs had strayed far from their usual haunts in the Misty Mountains and was terrorizing a small farming community, the local men had been glad for the addition of Boromir's sword to their arrows and knives. He had killed one of the beasts single-handedly, leaving the villagers awestruck. Little children hid behind their mothers' skirts, much to Boromir's chagrin, while Hallas strutted around filled with pride about his master. He told everyone who would listen about Boromir's many mighty deeds, embellishing his tales until they took on epic proportions and Boromir ordered him to silence.

"What can we give you in return?" the village chieftain, an elderly man with white whiskers and deep-set eyes, had asked while the last ashes of the incinerated warg corpses drifted away in the wind. "We wish to repay you for your help."

"A horse," Boromir answered, not needing long to think. "For my fanciful friend."

"'Tis a fair price," the chieftain said. He took them to the stables where Hallas chose a pale dun animal. Though not quite large enough to be called a horse, the pony was sturdy and strong, and reminded Boromir of Sam's faithful Bill.

"You've made a good choice," the headman agreed. "My own daughter likes to ride him sometimes. He should not give you much trouble."

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More weeks passed. With both Boromir and Hallas riding their own mount, they made even better progress and it was not long before they reached the Gondorian border.

Boromir halted Barangol when the horse crested a hill. Far below, a silver ribbon glistened among the trees. It meandered from north to south in an erratic course, always seeking the lowest land. To their left, the river faded

into the murky distance, and on the right it disappeared among the hills it sprang from.

"That's a big river," Hallas said. "Is that the Anduin?"

"The Anduin?" Boromir chuckled. "I should hope not. No, this is the Isen."

He dismounted and drew some lines in the dirt. "See? This is the Isen River. It is the western border of Gondor. We are here." He marked the ground with an X. "The sea is to the south. If you follow the river with your eyes as far as you can see and look closely, you can just make out its waters. The Anduin is far to the east, about here." He drew another line in the dirt.

"Show me where my house is," Hallas said. "And Minas Tirith? I would like to see the White Tower some day."

Boromir made two new marks and pointed with the tip of his knife. "This is Erech. And Minas Tirith is here, near the Anduin, on the eastern edge of the Ered Nimrais."

Hallas studied the makeshift map for a moment. "Oh," he said, not able to hide his disappointment. "That looks far away."

Boromir laughed. "It is. It would take many months to travel to Minas Tirith. Perhaps some day you will visit. But for now, I am taking us further west, out of Gondor."

"Will you tell me again about the Tower?"

"Ah, the Tower of Ecthelion."

Boromir turned away from the river and stared off into the distance, gazing east the way they had come as though he might see the walls of Minas Tirith if he looked hard enough.

"The Tower is a thing of beauty that rivals the Elven cities of myth. It glows red in the dawn, when the first rays of the sun strike it and the city at its foot is still cloaked in night. It is white in the glare of a summer's day, so white it can pain the eye, sparkling as brightly as those peaks you see to the north. And at night... At night the Tower burns with silver beneath the moonlight. Aye, the White Tower of Minas Tirith, how I wish to lay eyes on it again!"

"Then why aren't we going there?"

Boromir shook himself out of his memories. "Maybe some day," he said curtly. "For now, we should get down this hill and find a place to cross the Isen."

The river was wide and deep, and they were forced to follow it north for many leagues, looking for a place Boromir deemed safe enough to cross with a boy and a pony in his party. They rode on until they came upon the Adorn, a large side river that added a substantial amount of water to the Isen's flow. Boromir had no choice; he would have to ford the Adorn first. Once he did, he would have left Gondor and entered Rohan, a realm he would have preferred to bypass altogether.

But perhaps, relieved of the inflow of its tributary, the Isen would prove less of an obstacle.

They spent the night on the southern bank of the river Adorn. His last night in Gondor; tomorrow he would leave his homeland behind once again -- and this time perhaps for good. Boromir was awake for most of the night.

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Still more days passed and they had yet to find a way to get to the west of the Isen. Meltwater from the mountains kept the river swollen, even at the height of summer, and the banks were steep and dangerous, the stream swift and deep.

Boromir watched their continued travel north with growing unease. Soon they would approach the Fords of the Isen, at the Gap of Rohan. It would be a simple matter to cross the river at the fords and head west through the Gap; however, the Rohirrim would have set a guard. He did not desire to meet the horselords. Someone might recognize him for Gondor's former Captain-General; though his visits had been more rare than he had liked, he had stayed in Edoras often enough that it was a just concern.

But while Boromir looked ahead with trepidation, danger came from behind. A company of riders appeared in the south-east, following along the feet of the White Mountains. Boromir noticed them too late to find shelter before they were detected. He and Hallas were traveling across the open plains of the Mark; the nearest hiding place was a copse of trees they might have tried to make a run for if their horses had not been weary from long days of travel. Boromir did not want to risk being caught while appearing to flee. The Rohirrim were bound to experience the occasional attack from Dunlendings still; they would likely fly arrows first, and ask questions later. And none could shoot from the saddle like the horsemasters.

He brought Barangol to a halt and turned his horse to await the riders. He would have to chance meeting them, and hope for the best.

Hallas inched his pony close to Boromir. "Who are they?" he asked. There was a slight tremor in his voice.

Boromir couldn't fault the boy. An *éored* bearing down at full speed was a frightening sight indeed. They left a great dust cloud to drift gently in the wake of their passing.

"There is no need to worry," he told Hallas. "They are the Rohirrim. They have ever been friends to Gondor. Their king, Éomer, has fought side by side with King Elessar."

His initial fears eased, the boy sat up straighter on his pony, and an interested glint appeared in his eyes.

When the riders came closer, and he could make out individual horses and riders, Boromir realized that his initial tally was wrong. The group was more likely half an *éored*, sixty men. Still, it was a force to be reckoned with. The riders' pikes stood tall, their banners of the white horse on green flapped proudly, and the sun glinted off of shining armor.

They watched as the mass of horses and riders came to a stop in a flurry of dust. Their captain urged his horse forward and took off his helmet. Boromir was relieved to find he did not know the man whose golden hair fluttered in the wind.

"In the name of Éomer King, state your name and your business in Rohan."

"My master is Erandír," Hallas said before Boromir could reply. In the face of Boromir's reassurances about the Rohirrim friendship to Gondor, he seemed to have lost all fear of the powerful riders. "And I am Hallas. My master's business is his own."

Boromir was not sure whether to laugh or cuff the boy's head in annoyance. By the look on the captain's face, the rider was equally in doubt, taken aback by the child's forwardness.

"We are travelers from Gondor," Boromir said. "We seek passage across the Isen."

"From Gondor?" the captain said. "'Tis a strange path you have chosen to travel. Most travelers use the Great West Road nowadays. The roads are safe while the wilds are not."

"My master has nothing to fear," Hallas piped up. "He has fought in the war and slain many orcs. He killed a warg all by himself a little while back."

"Be still!" Boromir snapped. This time, he would have boxed the boy's ears if he had still been within arm's reach. But his pony had stepped sideways.

"The lad's exaggerating," he said with a shrug. "Though I did fight for the White City when it was besieged."

"Then you are a friend of Rohan's," the captain said. He gestured at his men to lower their guard. "I am Wulfwine of the Westmarch. We are on our way to the fords to bring relief to the troops guarding it. You are welcome to ride with us."

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They shared the riders' fire and supper near the fords that evening. Hallas was beside himself with joy at being in the company of such mighty soldiers. Much to everyone's amusement, he demonstrated his new sword skills and he never stopped asking questions of anyone who was willing to answer them. He wanted to know about their weapons, their horses, the emblem on their banners, and was most eager to hear about Éomer King and the battles of the war.

After supper, Boromir soon lost sight of him altogether.

"He's not your son, is he?" Wulfwine asked Boromir over a cup of ale from the garrison's stocks.

"No," Boromir answered. "He's an orphan." He explained how he found Hallas.

"I took him along. I could not leave him. And he seems quite happy as my 'squire'."

"That he does," Wulfwine agreed. "So. Where are you headed, Master Erandír, if you don't mind my asking?"

Boromir lifted a hand and gave a vague wave toward the land on the opposite bank of the Isen. "West. I do not know yet where my path will take me."

They were silent for a while. Then Boromir gathered his courage. "What news can you give me of Minas Tirith?" he said. "I left not long after King Elessar was crowned and much must have happened in the city since." The desire to hear of his home had been on his mind since he first detected the riders and he was not sure it was wise to broach the subject. It might lead to questions he was not willing to answer. However, the need to know had outgrown his concern.

"Aye, I would imagine. I fear I cannot tell you much, though." Wulfwine paused to collect his thoughts. "'Twas with the funeral escort for Théoden King that I left Gondor. And that is all but a year past. I would like to visit your

city again in better times. I suspect that I will, too, with the new kinship bonds between our king and your steward."

It took Boromir a moment to digest the words. "What?"

"Oh, you are bereft of tidings indeed!" Wulfwine exclaimed. "I believe I can give you some news after all. Aye, this spring the Steward of Gondor wedded the Lady Éowyn, sister to Éomer King. And," Wulfwine grinned, "it is whispered that one of the finest ladies of Gondor has captured the heart of Éomer. The women of Edoras expect another wedding soon."

Boromir was speechless. Before he left, Faramir had mentioned something about a white lady from Rohan who stayed in the Houses of Healing but truth be told, at the time he had been too occupied with his own woes to pay his brother much mind. He did recall the Lady Éowyn from his visits to the Golden Hall; a pale, aloof woman of cool beauty, with a hint of sorrow buried beneath her grave demeanor. And now she was his kinswoman. Sadness for all the important events he had missed warred with happiness at the joyful news. He longed to know more but did not dare ask. He could not stop the slow smile breaking on his face, though.

"Those are good tidings! I thank you for your news. I will travel with a lighter heart, to know that things are well in Gondor."

"I suppose it cannot be easy to leave your land behind," Wulfwine said. He gazed into the fire for a moment. "I would have no desire to depart the golden plains of the Westmarch for such an uncertain journey as yours. But if you must, you best stay on the road," he changed the subject. "As I said, the roads are safe, but many evils live in the wilds still. Not all vermin of Isengard have been accounted for. And the Dunlanders still dislike us as much as ever."

"Hence the many riders here at the fords," Boromir understood.

"Aye," Wulfwine confirmed.

Hallas returned to their fire and forestalled any further soldier talk. He stood swaying on his legs a little. Boromir narrowed his eyes and sniffed. "Have they been feeding you ale?"

"Aye." Hallas giggled. "And they taught me a song about the war. Listen, Erandír!"

*"Raise a jug for the wizard gray  
all praise to his long sight,  
and the dwarf with the axe whose fierce attacks  
beat back the orcish horde.*

*Here now dear, bring another beer..."*

Wulfwine laughed. "The lads learned that song in Gondor," he said. "I did not know they sing it still. But you've got the words wrong, boy. This is how it goes."

The captain began to sing the words in a surprisingly melodious baritone.

*"Drink when day is done to the Steward's son,  
the Captain-General bold,  
To defend the small he gave his all,  
and his deeds will long be told."*

The words hit Boromir like an arrow to the chest. He felt the blood leave his face, and all of a sudden found it hard to draw breath. Wulfwine sang on.

*"For the valiant Pip we'll take a sip  
of the ale that's Gondor's pride,  
Then drink to the fame of Merry's name,  
When he stood--"*

"Excuse me," Boromir croaked, interrupting the Rohirrim captain mid-verse. He could feel Wulfwine's startled gaze on his back as he stumbled away from the fire.

The song was mistaken. It was wrong! He did not deserve to be mentioned in such a song of heroes. What would people sing about him if they knew the truth?

Hallas tugged on his sleeve. "Are you all right, Erandír?"

Boromir took deep breaths, trying to get his emotions under control.

"Yes," he barked hoarsely. "I am fine. Now, get yourself some sleep and forget that nonsense they taught you. We haven't taken up enough of the Rohirrim hospitality, we leave at first light."

## Revelations

Faramir sympathized with the man quivering on his knees before King Elessar. The messenger had no reason to be afraid; yet to be brought before a powerful king in such a splendid palace would be overwhelming for most everyone, let alone a simple traveler from Bree.

Aragorn gestured for the fellow to get up. The man climbed back to his feet and darted quick glances at the doorwardens, the servants bustling about, and the pages awaiting errands. He did not dare look up at the king or the steward.

"What news from the North do you bring?" Aragorn asked. His lord kept his tone light in an attempt to put the traveler more at ease. Yet, Faramir knew the king was anxious for news from his hobbit friends.

"Letters, sire. From the Shire-folk. And -- and a message from Master Gamgee. He said to tell you that the Shire is fine, and for you not to worry."

Aragorn grinned. "That does sound like Sam, indeed. Is everyone well?"

"Aye, Lord. They were when I departed Bree with the mail. Although that was many weeks ago. I assume they have since returned to their homes."

"Where are the letters?"

"I gave them to the Lord Steward, Your Majesty." The man's eyes flicked briefly toward Faramir.

Aragorn cast his steward a look as if to find confirmation. Faramir held up the handful of envelopes. One was even addressed to *King Strider* and he suspected it came from Pippin. Aragorn accepted the letters and pondered them a moment. Unbidden, Faramir's hand drifted to the inner pocket of his tunic where another sealed letter waited for his perusal. He was eager for the audience to end so he could find some privacy and read it.

"Good." The king nodded and turned his attention back to the visitor. "I thank you for carrying these. What else can you tell me? How fare the good people of Bree? I have visited oft, in the past."

The visitor blinked, not suspecting such an admission from the ruler of the vast lands that comprised the Reunited Kingdom.

"How is Master Butterbur, for example?"

"Alas, Lord King. About Barliman I have sad tidings. An orc band beset him last winter, and he was killed."

"Orcs?" The king straightened and his voice took on a sharper tone. "Is there no end to the mischief of Sauron's fell creatures?" He turned to Faramir. "How many soldiers have we dispatched to Arnor?"

"Two companies, my lord, to aid the northern Rangers."

"Perhaps we should send more. I will not abide any of the people of Middle-earth to continue living beneath the terror of orcs."

"'Tis not as bad with the orcs as a few years back," the Breelander ventured shyly. "Only during the winter, they sometimes come far from the Misty Mountains, all the way to the South Downs and Bree." The messenger stood straighter. "Your Majesty need not worry. The soldiers are doing their best. And sometimes the people call on the aid of Master Aranmegil. He destroyed the orcs who killed Barliman Butterbur, although he came too late to save him."

"*Aranmegil? The King's Sword?*" A pensive expression formed on Aragorn's face and his eyes seemed to gaze in the distance. "Rumors of such a swordsman have reached me before... So he went north." He seemed to be speaking to himself. Faramir tensed; his full attention was focused on his liege while the letter burned in his pocket. At last, Aragorn addressed the messenger again. "Is that what he calls himself, Aranmegil?"

"Nay, Lord. He calls himself Erandír. But the people give him other names. Sometimes they call him *Longsweard* or *Agân-'nUruk*." The messenger looked worried. "He is no trouble, Lord. He keeps to himself mostly, traveling the northern lands with his dog and a youngster, and lending his sword where help is needed." He lowered his voice. "They say he slew twenty orcs by himself once."

Aragorn gave a soft snort. "I have seen many great warriors, yet I know few who could accomplish such a feat. Tell me. Have you seen this mighty soldier yourself?"

"Yes, sire. He gave me a letter for the Lord..." The Breelander's voice died down when Faramir caught his eye but it was too late already.

"Lord who?" Aragorn asked. "If there is someone at my court corresponding with this mysterious stranger, I would know who." His voice was commanding and not even the doughtiest soldier dared stand up to him when he spoke so. A man from Bree was no match for the king's might.

"The L-Lord Steward, Sire."

Aragorn raised a questioning eyebrow at Faramir and the steward tried not to wince beneath the scrutiny, unsure what, if any, words to speak.

The king remained silent a moment, mulling things over. "I thank you for your news," he said at last to the messenger. "And for carrying these letters." He waved one of the pages forward. "Take this man to the chamberlain and tell him I wish him well rewarded for his services."

"Thank you, Lord King." The man bowed and hurried to follow the page from the chamber, relieved to depart the presence of the powerful lords and the tension that had crept into the room at his slip of the tongue.

Aragorn leaned back in his seat, stacked his fingers beneath his chin and spent several minutes deep in thought. Faramir tried to think of an excuse, a matter of state that needed his urgent attention so he could leave. He dreaded the questions that were, without doubt, coming. Honor would not permit him to lie; yet it was honor, also, which had forced him to silence all this time.

At last Aragorn looked up and gestured at the servants, the guards, and the squires. "Leave us. I wish to speak to my steward in private."

The servants obeyed and a minute later Faramir found himself alone with the king.

"Secret correspondence, Faramir?" Aragorn asked lightly. "With a man who claims to act as my sword, no less! Yet, I do not recall sending such a man. Should I believe that you conspire against me?"

"Nay! Never, my lord." Unsure whether his liege was jesting, Faramir was horrified he might consider such a thing. "You have nothing to fear from this man. He is a friend to Gondor."

"I would be the judge of that," Aragorn said. His tone was still mild but held an undercurrent that Faramir did not much like. "Many stories have I heard about this man. I thought him the substance of rumors, of myth, tales created by bards for whom the war's grim reality was not heroic enough. But here I find he is real after all. So, will you tell me who he is?"

Faramir shifted his stance in discomfiture; he could not help it. Not even many years of attending council meetings and watching political maneuvering had prepared him for a day like this. With the passing of the years, the promise to his brother had grown an ever heavier burden. Never had he fully agreed with Boromir's reasoning, believing his brother was mistaken -- and watching King Elessar's benign reign only confirmed this impression. Yet, he had kept the secret for so long; his tongue tied itself in knots when he tried to speak. In the end, though, Faramir could only give one answer: the truth.

"He is my brother."

For long minutes, neither spoke. Only the crackle of the fire in the hearth broke the silence. "Boromir?" said King Elessar at last. "Are you talking about *Boromir*?"

"Aye, sire." Faramir did not dare look at his king. The weight of the lie had been lifted from him at last; yet, what consequences might revealing the secret have?

When the silence lengthened, he risked a quick glance at Aragorn's face. The news had visibly stunned him; the king looked pale and his eyes, unfocused, glittered strangely. Faramir could not determine if his revelation pleased or angered his lord.

"Sire?" he said at last.

Aragorn blinked, and his gaze settled slowly upon his steward. His eyes smoldered with emotion. "How long have you known this?"

Faramir cleared his throat. "Since I pulled his boat from the Anduin."

"Are you telling me," Aragorn said, his voice low and calm -- and Faramir found this more disconcerting than any overt passion would have been -- "that you have known all these years that Boromir survived his injuries, and yet you allowed everyone to believe he had perished?"

"It was Boromir's desire, not mine, to hold the truth from you." Faramir's answer was but a whisper. He kept staring at the flagstones on the floor, unable to tear his gaze away. He felt like a thirteen-year-old called to task for mischief rather than like the Steward of Gondor. His eyes found the missing chip, the same flaw in the stones he had always sought during his father's lectures on his shortcomings.

"Why, pray tell, did you decide to adhere to such a cruel request? Do you trust me so little, my steward?"

"No. That is not it at all." His head whipped up and he stared at Aragorn in dismay. When had the room grown so cold? "I had no joy in keeping the secret. I would have mentioned it, if I could. But Boromir swore me to silence. I gave him my word. I promised him I would not speak. Not unless someone asked me about his fate."

"Boromir *wanted* me to think he was dead?" Aragorn sounded puzzled, and more than a little hurt. It was the first clear indication of his feelings, but it did not make Faramir feel any better.

"My brother was ashamed, my lord. It weighed heavily on him that he had broken his vows. I suppose he no longer felt he deserved your friendship. He could not bear the thought of facing you again." While he spoke, a new insight into his brother's mind dawned on Faramir, Boromir's reasons suddenly clear; Boromir had never had to deal with personal failure, real or perceived and when at last he found himself not up to the task, he simply was not equipped to handle it.

Aragorn swore violently, startling Faramir from his introspection and alarming him with its vehemence. King Elessar was a man of restrained temper who hardly ever raised his voice. Not even the many minor nobles of the kingdom, begging for his favor in their petty schemes, could draw him out. To see him so upset was frightening.

Aragorn had started pacing. "Is there no end to that man's foolish pride? I told him on Amon Hen, while his blood stained my fingers, that he had not lost honor in my eyes. And yet he believes I would denounce him? And you!" He turned to the steward, as if suddenly remembering Faramir's presence. The king's gray eyes blazed with fury and Faramir took an unbidden step backwards.

"You allowed your love for your brother to cloud your judgement. Your duty should have been to trust me, your king and friend, to do right by your brother, not to keep this foolish vow of silence."

Faramir wanted to cry out in denial. He wanted to explain how Boromir insisted, how he refused care until Faramir made his promise. But the words failed to come.

Suddenly the king's anger faded, and Aragorn the man was left. His shoulders slumped with sadness and when he spoke again, Faramir had to strain to hear him. "'Twere my hands that let the boat slip prematurely. For years, I have believed I was to blame for Boromir's death. Many a night have I spent fretting over my guilt."

"Lord, I--" Faramir began, not fully understanding the king's words but sensing the enormity of his mistake. Aragorn silenced him with a curt gesture.

"Leave me," he ordered. "Go home, spend some time with your wife and son. Do not mention to anyone what secret you revealed me, I will send for you when I have need of you. And tell the captain of the guard to send messages to Legolas and Gimli. I wish to see them at their earliest convenience."

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Time passed at a crawl. For long days, the steward awaited the summons of his king. None came, and he grew more and more harried. He found no joy in either his beautiful wife or the antics of his son, Elboron, who was just learning how to use his stubby legs for crawling and had turned into a menace on four limbs.

"He will send for you," Éowyn assured him on the morning of the fifth day. Faramir sat in the window, staring out across the garden of their house in

Eryn Arnem. Far in the distance, across the glittering Anduin, the tower of Minas Tirith gleamed in the light of the rising sun. His eyes burned from lack of sleep.

"Aragorn is not a vengeful man. Give him time."

"How much time does he need?" Faramir murmured. "He will have to denounce me as the Steward soon. Before the people of Gondor hear that he has banished me from his presence. The news of such a chasm between king and steward will create unrest; it might lead to strife and civil war."

"Aragorn knows you are no threat," Éowyn said. "The people would be wrong."

"Mayhap." Faramir turned away from the window. "Yet not everyone favors King Elessar as you do, my love. Some will wonder what terrible deed I have done, Steward from a house that ruled Gondor for many generations, and that ruled it well. They might use the opportunity as an excuse to question Aragorn's kingship. Or even his sanity. They will ask, 'what dreadful crime has the steward committed?'" He raised his eyes to meet Éowyn's. "I hurt him terribly, Éowyn. But I did not know. If I had known he blamed himself so, I would have told him the truth a long time ago, despite my vow to my brother."

Éowyn pulled him into her arms, and he rested his head against her breast, aware of the reassuring beat of her heart beneath his cheek.

"He knows that," she whispered into his hair. "If not today, he will remember it soon, when he has had the chance to think about it. Faramir, my husband, do not forget you are a good man. They placed an unfair choice upon you, your brother and your king. Whether you spoke or not, you would have failed the trust one of them put in you. The king will come to realize this, I know it in my heart."

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Whether Éowyn was right, or whether Aragorn also feared the rise of gossip and the emergence of civil unrest, Faramir did not know, but just before midday a rider came from the city, bearing the order Faramir awaited so eagerly.

"The King wishes to see you right away, Lord Steward."

It must be a good sign that it was a court messenger bearing the summons, and not a company of soldiers with orders to throw him into the deepest dungeon of the citadel. Still, Faramir could not keep his heart from trying to jump in his throat when he knocked on the door to the king's study and awaited entry.

"Enter!" The wood of the thick doors muffled Aragorn's voice and it gave no indication of his liege's mood.

Taking a deep breath, Faramir opened the door and walked in. The room felt empty with none of the usual courtiers milling about. Only three people were present: the king, and two members of the former Fellowship.

"King Elessar, I am at your service," Faramir said, bowing deeply, more formal in his greeting than he had been in years.

Not until Aragorn acknowledged his presence did he greet the other two in the chamber. "Prince Legolas, Lord Gimli."

Legolas nodded at him, looking unperturbed in the way of the elves, but Gimli gave him a dark look full of recrimination.

Faramir made himself meet the dwarf's gaze. It took a conscious effort to hold on to his wife's wise words, but Éowyn had made a valid point. No matter what action he would have taken -- be it to remain silent or to speak out -- he would have betrayed a trust placed upon him by one very dear to his heart.

"Tell us everything," Aragorn ordered. "From the moment you discovered Boromir's boat upon the Anduin."

It took Faramir the better part of the afternoon to relate Boromir's tale up until his departure on the day of the king's crowning. He left nothing out. He told them of Boromir's illness, his feelings of guilt. He mentioned how his brother fought in the garb of a footsoldier during the siege of Minas Tirith, eliciting a grunted comment from Gimli. And he told them of the letters, infrequent and always long in coming.

By the time he was finished, his throat was parched and he wished for a goblet of water. Silence fell upon the chamber. Faramir risked a glance at the faces of his audience. Their expressions were the same: a myriad of conflicting emotions.

Legolas spoke first. "I do not know what to feel," the elf admitted softly. "Should I feel angry that this was kept from us, or be relieved that our fellow warrior is still alive?"

"That bull-headed fool," Gimli said, "I have never met a creature more obstinate!" This brought a chuckle from Legolas but Gimli did not even notice.

Aragorn looked at his friends, then at his steward. Faramir held his breath. The king's expression did not give anything away. When he finally did react, however, it was in the least expected way: Aragorn began to laugh.

"Gimli, my old friend, you are right. Boromir has ever been stubborn. He could put the stubbornness of dwarves to shame."

Gimli harrumphed and a smile appeared on Legolas's face.

"But he is also a man of great valor," the king continued. His mirth vanished and his expression grew more serious. "One I ever held in high regard."

"My lord?" Faramir could no longer keep still. "What *did* happen after my brother was overcome? He never told me how he came to be on the Anduin in a boat of elven design."

Aragorn blinked, pulled back to the present. "We dressed his wounds," he said softly, "and carried him to the boat. Gimli was to travel with Boromir, to care for him when needed."

"Except I was too clumsy," Gimli added with a grumble.

"And I allowed the boat to slip from my hands before Gimli had the chance to climb in," Aragorn finished.

For a long moment nobody spoke, each apparently occupied with his own thoughts.

"Have you decided what shall be my fate for failing you?" Faramir broke the silence at last.

"Your fate?" The king directed his gray gaze to his steward. "What would you suggest to be a just penalty?"

"'Tis not my place to say. I put my future in your hands, my liege, as I have ever done." Faramir sank to one knee, getting as close to begging for understanding and forgiveness as his self-respect allowed.

"You ought to be tarred and feathered and chased through the streets of Minas Tirith for this foolishness," Gimli said. "Permitting me to believe it was my doing that led to your brother's death. I have been feeling guilty for naught!"

"Gimli!" Legolas looked shocked. "You are talking about the Steward of Gondor. And none was at fault for what happened at the foot of the Rauros."

Gimli snorted, apparently not quite convinced. He continued to glare at Faramir.

Aragorn chortled. "Tarred and feathered, eh? It would be hard to conduct a council meeting after presenting such a spectacle. None would take such a steward seriously."

Were they jesting about his sentence? Aragorn caught Faramir's expression and the smile faded.

"I have no desire for a new steward," he said. "You have ever served me well. At least when your allegiances are not rent in two opposite directions."

Hope flared in Faramir's heart. Did his liege comprehend? He sighed with relief when he caught the gentle understanding in Aragorn's gray eyes.

A twinkle of humor appeared next. "I have a most suitable doom for you," Aragorn continued. "The pressures of my kingship oft weigh heavily on me. Long have I desired to return to the wilds, if only for a little while. And my queen tells me I enjoy the food that graces the tables a little too much. I fear she is right. So, Steward Faramir, I have decided to leave the care of the kingdom in your hands for a time, while I go off to find your wayward brother and bring him home. Leaving it to you to judge the squabbles among the nobles, or to negotiate trade agreements with the ambassador from Harad is a penalty befitting the transgression, would you not say?"

ooo

The king's household was in chaos, the servants thrown into confusion. The chamberlain gave instructions to pack trunks with clothes and tents only to have his orders countermanded as soon as Aragorn got wind of them.

"It is not befitting for a king to travel in squalor," the chamberlain complained to Faramir. "Please, my lord, he must take my advice in these matters. King Elessar will need valets, and cooks, and pages to run errands. A full complement of servants, nothing less will do."

"Your advice is duly noted, Chamberlain Malbeth," Faramir said. "Yet it is the king's wish to travel light and unobtrusively. I do not think that anything you or I could say will change his mind."

Muttering to himself, the chamberlain left Faramir's office.

The captain of the tower guard was also displeased with the arrangements. "At least take a guard detail along, sire," he said on the night before Aragorn's departure. "For your protection."

Aragorn chuckled. "The world is a much safer place these days than it used to be, captain."

"But, my lord--"

"No. I shall travel with Gimli and Legolas for company, and none else. No harm shall come to me."

"I must concur with the captain," Faramir said once they were alone. "It would ease my mind if you took some soldiers with you. Or a company of the Ithilien Rangers. They can be inconspicuous if they want."

"I have survived in the wilds alone for more years than you and the captain combined," Aragorn said. "And how well would you rate my chances of finding your brother if I traveled with a company of guards? Rumors of my imminent arrival would race ahead and they could chase Boromir into hiding again."

"Or they might not. He might reveal himself. His letters... I think he would want to come home."

"Mayhap. But I am not taking any chances. He disappeared on me once, I will not let him do so again."

Faramir held up his hands in surrender. Nothing he said would sway the king from his chosen path.

"That is settled, then," Aragorn said. "Let us go over the state's business one last time. I have drawn up orders granting you full authority to act on my behalf. Do not hesitate to use it."

"Aye, my lord." Faramir ran down the list of current matters in his mind. Was there anything he needed to discuss before the king left?

"I would know your mind on Cranthir of Tol Falas before you leave. His father's sickness proceeds, and I received a second and more reliable report today that Cranthir is seeking the support of the fisher-folk of Ethir for his designs to resettle South Gondor. I do not doubt he will raise the matter again if his father passes before you return."

"My decree stands," Aragorn said. "The status quo in South Gondor must be maintained until we can work out an agreement with regard to the Haradric settlements. For now, I wish you to concentrate on further improving trade with Harad. If we can come to a mutually beneficial commerce relation, other affairs will be far easier to deal with. Cranthir will have to learn patience."

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The midnight hour had been called long since when Faramir finally departed the king's house to return to his town residence. It was dark and quiet, with most of the staff gone to bed. His manservant was waiting for him with a single candle.

"The lady Éowyn has arrived from Emyr Arnen today," he said. "She said she would wait up for you in your private chambers. I had some warm wine and fruit cakes sent up earlier."

"Thank you." Faramir smiled. It had been a week since he last saw his wife. The preparations for Aragorn's journey had taken much time, too much to make the trip to Eryn Arn, and mere thoughts of her nearness revitalized his spirit.

"Would you be needing anything else, my lord? I can wake up Cook, if you are hungry."

"No, that is not necessary. It is late. Go to bed, I can manage."

"Good night, then, my lord."

The bedroom was cold, the fire in the hearth allowed to burn low, its glow casting oddly shaped shadows. Éowyn lay on the bed, asleep. Her hair was loose and spread across the pillow. Faramir took a moment to admire her gentle beauty before he tiptoed over to draw the covers closer about her.

As soon as he touched her, Éowyn opened her eyes. "Faramir?"

"Shh," he said. "Go back to sleep. 'Tis late. We can talk in the morning."

But she pushed back the covers and reached for her robe. The mulled wine had been placed near the hearth in an earthen jug and she touched it with the back of her hand. "It's still warm." She poured a goblet and handed it to Faramir.

"Aragorn has kept you busy?" she asked.

"Aye. He is leaving tomorrow. I doubt I will find much time to come home to Eryn Arn while he is gone."

"I know. That is why I returned to the city. Should I send for Elboron too?"

It would be nice to have his family near, so he could spend what little free time he had with them. "Aye."

He held the goblet between his hands, enjoying the warmth that seeped through the pewter. "I wonder where Boromir is now," he said softly. "What he is doing."

Éowyn offered a chuckle. "Sleeping, I have no doubt."

He answered her laugh with one of his own. "No doubt."

Wrapped up in his cloak beneath a starry sky, most likely, his dog close to his side for warmth. Curious how their roles seemed to have reversed. Boromir was leading a ranger's life, while he had taken up the stewardship, something he always believed would be Boromir's one day.

"Do you think Aragorn will find him?" Éowyn nestled herself against him, seeking his body heat.

"If anyone can, it will be him." He absently ran his fingers through her long hair. What would it be like to have Boromir home? To hear his boisterous laughter echo in the halls again? To share their worries, large and small? So much had changed since his brother left.

"What will happen if he does?"

Faramir could barely hear the question, muffled as her voice was against his neck. Her breath was warm on his skin.

"Aragorn wants to bring him home. Beyond that, I have no idea. There will be consequences. Political, and personal. Boromir is my father's eldest son, his rightful heir. I have no right but to the second born's share."

Éowyn pulled back and looked up. Her eyes were wide. "We could lose Eryn Arnem? Our home?"

Faramir turned away from her and took a long swallow of the cooling wine. "Mayhap. We would still have the lands I did not yet return to those families holding it in fief before Ithilien was deserted. And I would own some property in Anórien. That might not be a bad place to make a home."

"Faramir, you worked so hard to restore Eryn Arnem. 'Twould not be right for Boromir to take that from you. Not after all this time. Not after you have kept his secret for so long."

"My love, he would have every right." Faramir was startled to hear the bitterness in his voice. He had poured his heart into bringing the estate back to its former glory and Éowyn had toiled many long hours to build the herb garden. They had earned the right to Eryn Arnem.

"The law of inheritance is clear, there is not much I could do about it."

Not much, other than ask Aragorn to declare Boromir forfeited his rights when he disappeared. Would his brother truly cast him out of Eryn Arnem? What *would* it be like to have Boromir home?

## Loss In The Weather Hills

Boromir woke from cold drizzle numbing his face. He sat and pulled his cloak tighter around him to ward off the chill. Much to his irritation, he discovered that, in spite of careful banking, the fire had gone out during the night, leaving the charred wood damp and cold. Hallas was nowhere to be seen. He suspected the lad was off checking the snares set last evening. Without a fire, however, it would be a cold and miserable breakfast, whether the traps were full or no.

He pushed himself up from the clammy ground and looked around the clearing, squinting to see beyond, among the dense trees. He was not even aware what he was searching for, until he pursed his lips in preparation for a shrill whistle.

He caught himself and cursed inwardly, letting out the deep breath slowly.

Hiril was gone.

He had buried her with his own hands, and he was a fool for expecting her to come bouncing out of the undergrowth, yapping and jumping up to lick his face. But the wound was raw. For years, she had been a companion, had made him laugh, and kept him warm on cold nights. Countless times had she rescued him from doom without paying heed to her own safety -- until her luck ran out at last.

Her death had happened mere days ago, in the rolling lands between the Ettenmoors and the Weather Hills. Investigating herdsmen's gossip of a large monster stealing sheep in the deep of the night, they had come across clear footprints in the forest. Though vaguely human in shape, the prints were toeless, two inches deep and very, very big. Boromir needed both hands to cover their breadth and measured the tracks as more than three handspans long.

"A troll," he muttered.

Hallas whistled between his teeth. "A large one, too."

Boromir checked if his sword was loose in its scabbard. Though not smart, trolls were dangerous enemies. They were incredibly strong, hard to kill, relentless. A cave troll had come frighteningly close to killing Frodo and wiping out the Fellowship in the depths of Moria before they could stop it. It would not do to underestimate the danger such a creature could pose.

Darkness was about to fall when they reached the hole where the troll was hiding. As they approached on silent feet, Boromir could hear it waking up inside its lair, lumbering around, unaware of its enemies drawing near.

Using low-voiced commands he had fine-tuned over long usage, Boromir told Híril to stay back and keep quiet, then waved Hallas to the other side of the cave where the lad could hide in a growth of shrubbery.

Once his companions were in place, Boromir walked in front of the den. "Hullo, Ugly!" he called, bringing a muted snicker from Hallas. The inside of the cave grew silent and Boromir could almost picture the expression of dumb confusion on the troll's face. He used the time to move further away from the cave and tighten his grip on the knife in his right hand.

Finally the insult passed through the troll's brain and an angry roar rolled from the cave, followed by a stampeding mountain of flesh covered in dark green scales. Boromir swallowed as he got the first good look of his opponent, towering high above him. He didn't waste time, though, and let fly the knife, aiming at the troll's right eye.

Without checking to see if the weapon hit its mark, he drew his sword and dove for the troll's legs. Behind the creature, Hallas sprang from his hiding place and added his sword to Boromir's. Both weapons drew blood, yet neither disabled the troll. It howled in pain, mindlessly stamping around and kicking at anything that moved. Boromir swore while he ducked to avoid an arm as thick as an oak tree. He had hoped to incapacitate the troll in the first attack, but instead had only succeeded in enraging it further.

Híril danced around the monster on light paws, baying, her voice barely audible amidst the din of the troll's howls. She was making sport of the attack. The troll whirled in circles, swatting at the dog the way Boromir would wave away an annoying fly.

A hidden root snared Hallas, and he tripped, arms scything like the troll's in an attempt to keep his balance. He failed and fell face-forward into the beast's path with a cry. His sword clattered uselessly from his grip to come to rest a few feet from his hand, out of reach. The troll hollered in triumph and raised one enormous foot, ready to trample the lad and ground him into the dirt.

Boromir's blood froze.

"No!"

Mindless of his own safety, he rushed forward, blade held out. Híril was quicker. She howled and sprang up at the troll, aiming for its throat.

But she never reached it. A fist the size of a small boulder snatched her away and flung her across the clearing.

Boromir flinched as she crashed through the trees, whined once, then was silent. With an inarticulate shout of rage, and an agility he had not known he possessed, he clambered onto the troll's shoulders and stabbed his sword down. The sharp steel sank between the scales; it disappeared almost to the

hilt into the meaty neck. The beast let out a final growl before it tumbled forward in a mass of quivering limbs. Hallas rolled away just in time to avoid being squashed.

Panting and covered with the troll's sticky blood, Boromir stumbled away from the corpse, into the trees.

"Híril?" he called. "Where are you, girl?"

He whistled, then stopped to listen. Somewhere to his right, a pain-filled mewl answered him. He tore through the shrubbery toward the sound and stopped short. Híril was lying on her side, gasping in quick little bursts, and in the dying light he could see her snout was wet with blood. More blood bubbled from her nostrils with every breath.

"Why?" he asked her. "Why did you have to do that?" Heartache made his voice harsh.

The dog whimpered and one leg pawed aimlessly for him as if begging for forgiveness. Boromir blinked to force back his tears and rested one hand atop the dog's head.

"It is all right, girl. You did good."

"How is she?"

"She is not well," Boromir whispered, stroking her soft fur. She was dying; he knew she was in pain, and he knew the kindest thing he could do for her was to speed her along to the world beyond this one. But he was not yet ready to say farewell to the animal. She had been his first companion on his journey, a friend who gave affection with no expectations in return.

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They buried her far from the troll's cave, in a patch of forest where the ground was soft and grassy, and where Boromir suspected many flowers would bloom come full spring. The kind of place where Híril would have happily chased bees and butterflies, or dozed lazily in the patches of sunshine afterward.

If only his knife had flown true. If only his first sword thrust had slashed the creature's tendons. If only Hallas had not tripped over the confounded root. If only...

He shook himself back to the drizzling present, startled and a bit chagrined to find his cheeks wetter than the rain could account for. It was no use to dwell on what-ifs. It would not bring her back, no matter how much he scoured his brain to find things he might have done differently. She was just another

creature fallen victim to the black curse that lay on the land still. One of the many victims he had failed to save.

He cleared his throat, glancing around furtively for Hallas. But the lad had still not returned. Judging by the empty feeling in the pit of his stomach, Boromir believed it to be past sunrise, although it was hard to tell beneath the gloom of the pine trees and the dark clouds overhead. The boughs of the trees drooped, their branches heavy with moisture. Off to one side Barangol and Hallas's pony stood, their heads down.

He would have to replace the pony, he reminded himself when his gaze landed on their mounts. Hallas had outgrown the animal. He could scarcely believe how quickly the lad had grown in the few years since Boromir had found him, alone in the woods near Ethring. If they had been in Minas Tirith, the boy would have entered into training with the army.

He rubbed his left side. The cold and damp made old wounds ache, providing a miserable reminder of why he was not in Minas Tirith, and why Hallas would not join Gondor's armed services any time soon. Though he had left the city in search of atonement, at some point during the journey his purpose had changed; no matter how far he traveled, Boromir never found the forgiveness he sought. Still, time softens all hurts, and it was no longer a broken vow or guilt that kept him in exile, but duty. During his travels, he had seen many new things. He had traveled from the Grey Havens to the Ice Bay, and from the Blue Mountains to the Misty Mountains. He had met many peoples, been told about many different and strange customs, which he would likely have held in quiet contempt a few years ago. He had learned to love all peoples of Middle-earth, be they elf or dwarf, hobbit or man. He had found that the long fingers of Mordor's evil reached into the farthest corners of the Reunited Kingdom. And although he knew Aragorn was doing the best he could from his kingly seat in Minas Tirith, sending forth armies and Rangers to free his people from fear, they bowed beneath the threat of surviving mountain orcs, cave trolls or Uruk-hai. So Boromir stood fast, frequently the only sword between innocent folks and gruesome death.

Still, he was growing weary of fighting and oft feared its futility; for every orc slain, two more seemed to appear from the Misty Mountains. Though that should be no surprise to him: with his own eyes had he seen the infestation of goblins within the halls and tunnels of Moria. It would be many more years before all orcs were killed. He could not resign his self-appointed mission, not while there were still so many foul creatures roaming the lands.

And even if he slew them all, still he would not be able to return to Minas Tirith. Not when so many years had passed since his departure. Everyone believed he had died during the Ring War. What could he tell them, should he return? Why upset the order of things? What would it gain him?

Though the depressing thoughts kept Boromir's mind busy, his hands were not idle. He searched for dry sticks, finding them buried deep beneath dead

leaves and pine needles. Soon, he had a small fire going, feeding it carefully with larger, slightly damp branches.

"Breakfast will be ready soon," a voice said behind him.

Startled, Boromir whirled around to see Hallas grinning down at him, holding up the furry bodies of two rabbits with a triumphant grin. Boromir offered him a wry nod. Stealth came as natural to Hallas as breathing; he was truly a trapper's son and a skill learned as a child was something one never forgot. With Híril gone so she could not spoil his fun any longer, the lad seemed to make it a sport to sneak up on Boromir unnoticed, despite the dire warnings that one of these days Boromir would spit him on his sword before realizing he was no enemy.

"Good."

Boromir moved away from the fire, leaving it to Hallas to skin the rabbits and prepare them. Since he had proven to be the better cook, the lad usually took care of their meals. Boromir grimaced at the thought of more roasted rabbit for breakfast. Yet, he chided himself, he should not complain. Even unseasoned, roasted rabbit far outrivaled the few crusts of moldy bread in their saddlebags. Those would have been their morning fare if the boy's traps had remained empty. But he longed for a true breakfast, for sausages sizzling with fat, and fresh eggs, and buttered bread still warm from the oven. Soon, he promised himself.

There should be a village called Gowan among the South Downs, less than a half-day's travel away. They could rest there for a while, enjoy such breakfasts as he longed for, perhaps even sell the pony and purchase a horse for Hallas.

*And have a decent bath*, Boromir added silently, his nose wrinkling when he caught a whiff of himself. He stank worse than an orc-burrow; and so did the boy.

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Gowan proved to be farther than expected, and it was long past noon when they crested the last hill. Below, in a vale covered with winter's brown grass, the village sprawled.

It wasn't much of a village. Too small, even, to have any defensive works beyond a rudimentary earthen wall that would not be of true use in case of an attack. A single rut track ran through the settlement. Most dwellings were low-roofed homes made from plastered wood and clay, small lean-tos for animals crouched against their walls. Scattered among the tenements stood a handful of two-storied stone houses with thatched roofs. Smoke drifted from chimneys. In the cold, damp weather, the smoke promised warmth and a

chance to dry out. Boromir's stomach rumbled, reminding him they had not eaten anything since breakfast.

Without exchanging a word, he and Hallas urged their mounts into a trot. Even the horses perked up a little at the thought of dry stables and soft hay underneath their hooves and they quickly reached the bottom of the slope. A gaggle of small children, busy kicking a leather ball back and forth, stopped their play and turned to look with large eyes and unsmiling faces at the strangers. One little girl stuffed her thumb into her mouth while she stared unabashedly.

A man appeared in the opening of the nearest building. His sooty face and stained apron marked him as a blacksmith, yet he gripped the handle of a long ax in his hands while he studied the horsemen. Boromir sighed at the veiled hostility. It was the same everywhere in the north: people were very suspicious of strangers, on their guard and cautious. He longed for the day when such wariness was no longer of first priority and people felt secure enough to approach strangers with cordiality.

"A good day to you, master smith," Boromir greeted the man. He tried to appear as harmless as possible, tugging his cloak closer about his sword so as not to further alarm the villager with its sight. But he knew it was difficult to allay the suspicion. He and Hallas were shabby and unkempt, and he could not hide that he was a tall, hard-muscled man with the look of a soldier, or that Hallas was growing into a stout young fellow.

"I am called Erandír, and this is Hallas. We have traveled far and are weary. Pray tell, is there an inn or lodging house in your village where we might find bath and bed and food? Or a hayloft will do, as long as it's dry."

The man's stance relaxed a bit at Boromir's courteous address and he took in both travelers from head to foot. The children inched closer, whispering amongst themselves in a Westron dialect that reminded Boromir somewhat of hobbit voices or the Bree folk. At last, the smith nodded, and Boromir felt they had passed muster.

"Ask the widow Gooseberry," the man said. He pointed out one of the stone houses to Boromir. "She has a room she sometimes lets to travelers, those few that journey this far. You might find lodgings with her."

"I thank you, master smith. One other question, before I leave you to your work. My companion is in need of a proper horse." Boromir grinned. "As you can see, he has outgrown his pony."

The smith nodded with a slight smile of his own. "You could ask old Frayr. Mayhap he has a horse fit for riding that he's willing to sell. But don't let him know how desperately the lad needs a new mount, or he'll drive up his price."

The Gooseberry home had seen better days. The thatch on its roof was gray-green with moss and the shutters beside the windows could do with a lick of fresh paint. Yet the glass was clean, the stoop was swept, and an orange glow flickered behind one of the windows.

Two children ran up. Boromir recognized them from the group playing in the dirt at the edge of the village. The girl, perhaps six years of age, no longer sucked her thumb but still looked at them with open curiosity. The boy was a little older, maybe ten years old. One glance told Boromir they were siblings; their likeness was too obvious to overlook. They both had dark curls -- the girl's longer than her brother's -- and deep blue eyes.

The boy spoke first. "Would you be needing lodging, sirs?" he asked.

Boromir nodded. The boy nudged his sister. "Go get Ma. Tell her there are travelers at the door." The girl hopped up the stoop and disappeared into the house.

"Shall I take the horses, master?" the boy asked. "We have a small shed behind the house, where they will be dry and warm. I'll take good care of them."

"Please do." Boromir dismounted and loosened his saddlebags. After a moment, Hallas followed his example and slung his pack over his shoulder.

"They will be pleased to be out of the rain." Boromir handed the boy a copper coin. "Feed them some oats, if you have it. Or grain."

"Aye, sir." The boy waited until both travelers had finished unloading their packs and began to lead Barangol and Hallas's pony around the house.

"I could have looked after the horses," Hallas murmured.

"I know you could," Boromir replied. "They can use the money, though."

At that moment, the front door to the house opened and a woman bustled through. She appeared to be in her late thirties, with a few gray hairs streaking through her dark locks -- curly, like the childrens'. "My daughter tells me you need lodging?"

"Aye. Are you the widow Gooseberry?"

"That I am," she confirmed. "My husband, bless his heart, passed away some years back. I have been taking in the occasional lodger to provide some extra income for my children. With Gowan not having a proper inn and all-- But I am babbling, while you are out getting wet in the rain. Please, my apologies. Come on in." She stepped aside and waved Boromir and Hallas inside.

Boromir did not think the drizzle could make them any wetter than they already were, despite their oilskin capes, but he was glad to be out of the damp and chill. The room he entered was warm, with a cheery fire crackling in the hearth. Hallas went straight to the fire, holding out his hands and rubbing them together in an attempt to get warm. Almost instantly, his wet clothes began to give off steam, pervading the room with the unpleasant smell of wet wool.

"Please, sit by the fire where it's warm," Mrs. Gooseberry urged, barely refraining from shoving Boromir to join Hallas near the flames. "I'll make up your room, and Alvin here will draw you a bath."

A big, hulking man filled the doorway. The frizz in his dark hair and the blue of his eyes marked him as another family member. Something was odd about the man, though. He shuffled his feet, and stared at Boromir and Hallas with the dull eyes of a simpleton.

"Alvin?" Slowly his gaze traveled to Mrs. Gooseberry. "Be a dear, and go heat up bathwater for our guests."

Alvin nodded before he trudged off deeper into the house.

She turned back. "My brother, he was born that way," she said softly. "He grew up all muscle and no brain. He wouldn't harm a fly, though, big as he is, unless that fly would threaten me or the children." She smiled fondly.

Boromir nodded. With a brother like Alvin to watch over her, she was safe enough, even when letting strangers sleep beneath her roof.

"Gertie?" Mrs. Gooseberry called. The little girl appeared in the doorway.

"Gertie, honey, bring our guests some posset and a bowl of broth from the kitchen."

At the mention of broth, Hallas's insides growled so loudly that it could be heard over the crackle of the fire. The lad gave an embarrassed shrug and Boromir chortled.

"Mistress Gooseberry, you seem to know exactly what we need."

She blushed a little. "'Tis my job, sir. We take good care of our guests here, few as they are."

While their hostess scurried away to prepare their room, the fire warmed Boromir on the outside while the posset and soup took care of his insides, quelling the hunger pangs for the moment. Hallas gulped down the soup quickly, and was happy to accept Gertie's hesitant offer for another bowl. The

little girl giggled shyly when he thanked her profusely and Boromir hid a grin behind his cup of wine.

A pity he would never have the chance to introduce Hallas to Gondor's courtly ladies. The lad's charms would not be lost on the flighty creatures.

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"Twas not long ere Mrs. Gooseberry announced the bath was ready. "I am sorry," she told Boromir with a regretful shake of her head. "I have only one tub so you and your friend will have to take turns."

Boromir exchanged a glance with Hallas. The lad, enjoying his second mug of posset and third helping of soup, grinned mischievously.

"You go first, Erandír. You're bigger than me so you are in need of a bath more."

"Mind your tongue, boy," Boromir growled in mock anger. "You are not yet big enough that I cannot put you over my knee."

Gertie's eyes grew round at his words and Boromir winked at her before he followed Mrs. Gooseberry through the narrow hallway to a room in the back of the house.

"If you would give me your garments, sir," she said while opening the door, "I shall have them cleaned and mended ere the morrow. You can leave them outside the door."

"You are a most gracious hostess," Boromir said. "I will gladly avail myself of that offer."

The room Mrs. Gooseberry showed him to was not very large, and the wood tub filled with steaming water took up most of the space.

"There is soap and a towel on the stool," she pointed. "If you need aught else, please let me know."

"I shall," Boromir said. He eyed the tub with longing. Sweet-scented mist rose from its surface, fogging the room and condensing upon the windowpane. So eager was he to immerse himself in the inviting bath and wash off the mud and dirt that he could barely wait for Mrs. Gooseberry to leave. As soon as the door shut behind her, he stripped off his tunic and breeches, and dropped them on the floor in the hallway. He shoved his saddlebags roughly out of the way into a corner and lowered himself in the tub.

A deep, contented sigh escaped from his chest when the hot water enclosed his weary limbs. It dragged the chill from his bones, and as his muscles relaxed, the old wounds stopped aching. He rested his head against the rim of the tub and closed his eyes, enjoying the pleasure of warmth for as long as he could.

Not until the water began to cool did he reach for the soap and lathered up. He shuddered with disgust when he noticed the spatters of dried troll blood that cold mountain streams had failed to wash away. He was dunking his head beneath the surface to rinse the suds from his hair when shouts rose outside. He sat up, frowning and straining to listen more closely.

While water dripped onto his bare shoulders and his exposed skin pebbled with the chill, more shouts and screams came to him. To a soldier of Boromir's experience, the noises were unmistakable. Frightened cries. A woman screaming. And amidst it all, the guttural shouts of orcs.

Orcs!

He growled a curse and scrambled out of the tub. Heedless of the puddle he made on Mrs. Gooseberry's polished floor, he snatched his sword from its scabbard and flung open the door, reaching for the pants he had put out a short while before. But his hands only touched bare floor boards. Perry or Mrs. Gooseberry must have already taken them away to be cleaned.

Spirits, what to do? For a moment he hesitated, looking around in a near panic, searching for his pack and debating whether he should take the time to dig his spare breeches from his bags, when another shriek filled with terror made up his mind.

Not wasting another second, he snatched the towel from the chair, dragged it around his hips, raised his sword, and bounded down the hallway and out the front door.

He found the village in an uproar. It had stopped raining but darkness had fallen and the confusion was great. Through the flickering light of torches, he saw several gnarled shadows, the flames glinting off breastplates and hooked swords. The orcs were dragging villagers out of their homes, casting them in the mud of the street, all the while laughing and cursing in their native tongue.

To the left, an orc raised a howl that cut off abruptly and Boromir's head whipped around. Hallas stood panting over a twitching form, his sword dripping with dark blood, a satisfied smirk on his face. The lad was unaware of a second orc approaching from behind, ready to skewer him with the blade of his black sword.

Boromir let out a shout of warning, slipping through the mud to Hallas's aid, knowing he was too far away. Looming over the pair, Alvin hulked from the shadows; he snapped the orc's neck with his bare hands, roaring something unintelligible while he dropped the body in a heap of black armor.

Boromir breathed with relief. Yet, he was given no chance to thank the man, orcs came upon him from three sides. His sword slashed in wide arcs, seeking the foul creatures without discrimination. The sharp blade danced among the attackers and cut through flesh and bone, turning surprised cries quickly into angry curses and screams of pain.

"Elessar!" he shouted. "Gondor!"

Those battle cries had grown legendary among the orcs of the northern reaches, causing terror and dismay in those who heard it and this band was no different. They had expected a village filled with shepherds, farmers and craftsmen to be an easy prey; they found fierce and deadly resistance instead.

The orc captains called the retreat and they stampeded off, leaving Boromir standing in the middle of the street.

Boromir rested the tip of his sword in the mud, leaning on it while he tried to catch his breath. His hair hung in limp strands, clinging about his face, eyes still burning with battle fever.

A giggle, quickly growing in volume, caught his ear. Hallas stood a few feet away, a gash over his right eye dripping blood onto his cheek. Yet he was grinning like a mad man and for a long moment, Boromir stared at him, wondering if the boy's mind had snapped. Then Hallas pointed.

"Erandír! You--" More giggles stopped him from speaking. "You are naked!"

Boromir gazed down his own body, realizing the boy was right. Streaked with blood and gore, only a miracle protected the last smidgen of his dignity where the towel still clung to his hips. In the heat of the fight, he had all but forgotten about his state of undress. He looked up, ready to retort, but found himself in the middle of a circle of goggling villagers and the words died on his lips. Inwardly, he groaned. Had they never seen a naked man with a sword before?

But then he saw their eyes. Those eyes were wide and filled with something that held both fear and respect. It was not the kind of look he would expect in response to his nudity and for long moments he was confused.

"'Tis him," a woman whispered. "*Agân-'nUruk*, the Slayer of Orcs." A shock rippled through the crowd.

At once Boromir understood. It was not his state of undress that caused the villagers to gawk; it was his reputation that preceded him. He was not convinced the other would not have been preferable.

*I am no hero!* he wanted to shout. *I do not deserve your worship.* But it would be of no use to tell them so. People believed what they wished to believe.

A wail cut through the whispers, silencing them.

"Gertie? Gertie? Oh dear Eru, they took my baby!"

## Reunion

Dusk was falling fast, turning the shadows a deep black-blue. Bree-hill rose from the surrounding flatlands, a black shape silhouetted against the darkening sky. Little dots of light sprang up at the hill's foot as the people of Bree lit lamps to ward off the night. Aragorn reined in his horse and waited for Legolas and Gimli to catch up.

"How much further do you plan to travel today?" Gimli asked. "It is getting late and my insides are grumbling for sustenance."

"And they do not do so in silence," Legolas added.

Gimli snorted in response and shifted in his seat behind the elf. He grimaced as several of his joints made a popping noise. "Soon my bones will take on the shape of this horse's back."

Aragorn grinned at the grouchy dwarf. He had learned long ago that Gimli's bark was far worse than his bite.

"It is not much further," he assured Gimli. He pointed at the cluster of lights. "Only to the town. We must make haste, though, or we may find the gate closed for the night."

Gimli harrumphed. "Aragorn, you are the king. If they have closed it, you can simply order them to open it. They would not dare keep you out."

"Mayhap not. But I prefer to continue keeping my presence unknown. If Boromir should learn of our coming--"

"He had better not run again!" Gimli interrupted. "I have no wish to chase his accursed hide all over the known world. I am a dwarf, I am not made for riding."

"We shall find him, my friend," Legolas said. "The rumors tell us he is near."

"Yeh, yeh. But time's awasting! Let us not tarry any longer. Go, Legolas. Get this beast moving. Warm beds and hot food are waiting for us."

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They reached Bree a quarter hour later. The gatekeeper was preparing to close the gate when the hooves of the horses echoed on the bridge spanning the protective dike that surrounded the town.

"Oi, hold up!" Gimli cried. "Let us pass first."

The guardsman stopped shoving at the gate and grabbed his torch to cast a light onto the travelers. He appraised them with a long look.

"Well, my!" he said, startled. "It's not oft one sees the little folk travel with men. And on horseback, no less!"

"That is not by choice, I assure you," Gimli said. "No offense to this fine beast, of course." He reached to pat the horse's flank. "But I must correct you. I am not a hobbit. I am of the race of dwarves."

"A dwarf, say you! I beg pardon. I've never seen one of the Stone-masters. I must say I did think you were a mite tall for a hobbit."

"Hmm." Gimli sounded placated. "I bet you have never seen an elf either, have you?"

"Gimli!"

Even as he spoke, Aragorn knew the caution came too late. And it did not matter, really. The people of Bree would learn of them soon enough; to see a man, elf and dwarf travel together and visit their quiet village was bound to set tongues wagging. He would just have to hope that they found Boromir before word of their presence reached him. Boromir might have been a fool for leaving, he was not stupid. He would know who they were, and might disappear quietly again. Gimli was right about one thing: they could not chase Boromir all over the kingdom.

"An elf, master dwarf?" The gatekeeper raised his torch a little higher, closer to their faces. "By the spirits! You speak true." His eyes had widened and his tone was a curious mixture of awe and alarm. He gave Legolas a bow. "My apologies to you also. I have never seen such as you either."

Legolas did not seem perturbed in the least by the man's behavior. He gave him a quick nod and an enigmatic smile.

The gatekeeper turned toward Aragorn. "And you, sir? Are you a man, as you appear? You understand, I mean no offense but I must ask these questions or I would be remiss in my duties."

"I am as I appear," Aragorn said. "A man, like yourself."

Gimli gave a soft chuckle, earning him a glare from Aragorn.

"I traveled to Bree often in my younger days. Pray tell, does the Prancing Pony still serve the finest fare in town?"

"Aye, sir, that it does."

"Then would you let us pass already?" Gimli growled. "I have a strong desire for good food and a soft bed tonight."

"Oh. Yes, of course. Beggin' your pardon." The gatekeeper scurried aside and waved for them to enter. Roheryn squeezed through the small gap, barely wide enough for a single horse, that was left between the gate and its post. Arod followed closely.

Aragorn glanced back over his shoulder once they were in the streets of Bree. The gatekeeper was staring after them, his job and the gate momentarily forgotten. Aragorn sighed. News of their arrival would have reached every household in Bree by midnight. At least the gatekeeper had not recognized him as the ranger Strider. Aragorn did not know how widely spread the knowledge was that Strider and the new king in distant Gondor were one and the same person, and for the time being he had no particular desire to find out. It would complicate their search greatly.

They trotted further up the road, leaving the Westgate behind, until they reached the Prancing Pony. To Aragorn's pleasure, the inn appeared much as he remembered it; if anything, the three-storied building looked even more inviting to a wearied traveler than it had before. The whitewashed walls of the stables were clearly visible despite the darkness of the night. The windows of the common room glowed with a warm yellow light. Muted laughter and snatches of song drifted out to mingle with the aroma of roasting pork from the kitchens.

"Ah," Gimli sighed. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. "That smells delicious! I hope they have made enough; I am so hungry, I believe I could eat a horse -- oh!"

The last was a startled cry when Arod sidestepped abruptly, nearly unseating the dwarf. Only a quick grab for Legolas's cloak kept him from falling off.

Legolas leaned forward and stroked the horse's neck. "*Avaro naeth, mellon nín.*"

Twisting in the saddle, he added to Gimli, "You should watch your tongue. Arod might refuse to carry you any further. And how will we ever find Boromir if we have to travel at the pace of dwarven legs?"

Gimli glared at his companion, muttering something below his breath. Aragorn's sharp ears could not quite make out the words, but he thought he detected something about being glad to never see the backside of a horse again. Out loud, though, Gimli said, "I did not say I *would* eat a horse, I said I *could*."

Aragorn chortled and urged Roheryn to pass under the archway into the courtyard. He was happy to see it was Bob, the hostler of old, who greeted them and promised to see to the horses. Bob did not seem to recognize him

either, but then Aragorn had never had much business in the stables during his ranger days; he usually visited Bree on foot.

Once assured that the horses were in good hands, he led the others back through the archway and up the steps to the inn's entrance. He froze at the top of the stairs. For a moment he was unsure why, yet certain that something was not as it should be. Then it came to him. The letters above the door: they read *The Prancing Pony by Archibald Butterbur*. Aragorn felt a pang of sadness, mixed with a smidgen of guilt. Barliman Butterbur, the old cheerful innkeep, was one of many he had failed to keep safe from danger. He knew the thought was foolish, that nobody expected him to be personally responsible for every single subject of the kingdom, but still, he felt blameworthy.

"Aragorn? Is something wrong?" Legolas's voice was soft behind him.

Aragorn gave a start. "No. Not wrong. Just... different."

"What's the holdup?" Gimli complained from the bottom of the steps. "Let us go sample some of that roast. Some fine ale would not go amiss either, I would say."

Legolas chuckled and said softly so only Aragorn could hear, "You best continue, my friend. Or I fear Gimli will go through both of us to get to the food."

The common room was packed to capacity. Aragorn stopped again in the doorway, watching the crowd enjoy pints of ale. Red-faced maids waved their way through the mass of bodies, their arms filled with tankards as they tried to keep up with demand.

"C'mon laddie," came Gimli's voice from the hallway. "Keep moving." He shoved past Legolas and Aragorn so he could see for himself why the others had stopped once more.

"Oh." He sounded disappointed. "I do hope they slaughtered a big enough pig."

Aragorn laughed at the dwarf's singlemindedness regarding his dinner. It reminded him of the hobbits they were to meet in Bree, how they managed to eat enough food for someone thrice their stature, and in the direst of circumstances too.

"Do not worry, Gimli. If memory does not fail me, today has been market day. Most of these folk have come only for drink and will soon go home for dinner. We merely have arrived at the busiest time."

"So you have indeed, good sirs!" a cheerful voice broke in.

Aragorn turned on his heels to watch the newcomer. He was a short, thickset man with a ruddy face and wearing a white apron upon which he was wiping his hands.

"You must be Archibald Butterbur."

"Aye, so I am, indeed. How may I help you?" Butterbur replied.

"We are looking for lodging," Aragorn said. "And dinner. My good friend Gimli here," he placed one hand upon the dwarf's shoulder, "has not stopped talking about your pork roast ever since he first caught a whiff of it out in the street."

Butterbur gave a hearty laugh. "You will find it to your liking, I can assure you! I fear you may have to wait a spell, though. As you can see, our common room is full. It will be perhaps another quarter hour before we can properly set out a table."

"I believe," Aragorn said, forestalling the protests he feared from Gimli at any further delays, "that you have a private dining room available?"

Butterbur's brow furrowed. "We do, indeed. But I am afraid it is already occupied. I have some of the little folk visiting, and I feared they might get trampled in the crowd, so I put them up in the other room." He gave an apologetic shrug and was forced aside when two burly farmers exited the common room and made for the outer door.

"G'night, Butterbur," they said.

"Goodnight, Alden, Woody," Butterbur replied absently, his mind still on how to best serve the interests of his new guests.

"Those little folk," Legolas asked, "are they from the Shire, by chance? If they are, they might be the friends we were hoping to meet here."

Butterbur's face brightened. "Aye, they did come from the Shire, sir! Come, come, let us see if they are your friends."

Pleased at the prospect of being able to keep everyone happy and not having to make his guests wait for their dinner, Butterbur scrambled ahead. Many lamps lit the hallway, reflecting off the wood paneling that was polished to a shine, casting the inn in a cheerful light. They turned a corner and the din from the common room faded to a dull roar, occasionally broken by a burst of loud laughter.

Butterbur stopped before a door and rapped his knuckles on the wood. "Pardon the intrusion, little masters," he said while opening the door, "but these gentlemen believe they might be friends of yours."

He put himself out of the way and allowed Aragorn a good look of the room and its occupants. Sam, Merry and Pippin sat around the table, their chins barely clearing the surface though thick cushions had been put on their seats. The table was laden with enough food for a state banquet and mouthwatering smells rose from the dishes.

"Strider!" Pippin slipped down from his chair and raced over, waving a half-eaten chicken leg around. "And Legolas! And Gimli!" He reached with his free hand and gently tugged the dwarf's beard.

"Eh! Watch it!"

Pippin chuckled, his grin widening. "Just making sure my eyes aren't deceiving me."

"Hmm. Next time, go... go..." Gimli threw a desperate look around, searching for an alternative. "Go pull on the elf's pointy ears!"

"Can't." Pippin giggled. "He's too tall."

"Arrumph."

Aragorn bit his cheek to keep from laughing. He felt his insides warm in the glow of friendship and bonds forged through shared hardships. It was the kind of bond that would never break; it would last over many, many years, and it would not matter if they visited each other's home often or not. Still, it was good to see the hobbits and he was doubly glad he had decided to make the journey.

"You look well... sir," Sam said, adding the honorific a little hesitantly.

"Hush, Sam," Aragorn said. He cast a look over his shoulder, but Butterbur had already disappeared, no doubt to see to his many guests in the common room who were clamoring for another keg of beer to be brought out. "Call me Aragorn."

"Yes, Sam," Merry said with a smile, "He's in disguise, remember?"

Sam looked unhappy. "'Tis not right, I say," he muttered.

"Is that pork roast I see?" Gimli said, changing the subject to what was dearest to his heart. He pointed at one of the dishes on the table.

"Aye, it is!" Pippin said. He gave an exaggerated bow and a wide sweep of his arm in invitation. "Though we missed dinner, we are happy to share our supper with you, Gimli. There are chicken legs, also, and smoked ham and pie and apples, and lots of other tasty dishes as well."

While they enjoyed their evening meal, they exchanged news and gossip. Aragorn kept quiet, listening mostly, simply enjoying the uncomplicated camaraderie. He had not fully realized how burdensome the responsibilities of his kingship could be until he shed them, however temporarily. He sometimes missed the simple ranger's life, where one's worries often did not extend beyond where the next meal would come from, or where to make a bed at night.

The hobbits divided an entire meatpie among themselves before handing Gimli the plate with a few left-over crumbs. Aragorn hid the smile that formed unbidden as he caught the look of dismay on Gimli's face. It would never cease to amaze him how much food the hobbit-kind could devour, and then still be hungry for more. It had been a source of endless amazement ever since he first encountered their race.

Not about to be outdone, Gimli snatched the last chicken leg from beneath Pippin's hand. Pippin looked taken aback for an instant, then he shrugged and reached for an apple.

There was a soft knock on the door. It opened a moment later, and Nob entered. He held a large pitcher of ale in one hand and a plate of steaming sausages in the other. Behind him one of the kitchen boys carried in a tray filled with more sizzling dishes. "Master Butterbur thought you might want some more food," he said.

Gimli's face lit up. "And he is most right! Come, come, put those here." He rapped his fingers on the tabletop in front of him. "Those hobbits are robbers; they would steal the food from a dwarf's mouth if given the chance."

Nob frowned for a moment at Gimli, not sure if the dwarf was jesting or not. He placed pitcher and plate on the table before his gaze fell upon Aragorn. Recognition dawned on his face.

"Oh, hello, Mr. Strider. It's been a while since..." His voice trailed off and he gave a puzzled look. He cast an uncertain glance at the hobbits, who were too entranced with the new dishes to notice.

"They," Nob indicated the hobbits with a dip of his head, "told the old Mr. Butterbur that you are..." Again he stopped himself short.

Aragorn could easily read the thoughts on Nob's face and took pity upon the hapless hobbit. Though he wished to remain unknown as long as possible, he was not about to deny who he was. "What they said about me is true," he said. "But you would earn my gratitude if you kept my presence quiet. Not many here would still know to associate me with the ranger of yore and thus recognize me for who I am. And for the moment I like it that way."

Nob, who had turned pale at Aragorn's admission, nodded his head vigorously. "Of course... sire. My lips are sealed." He made an awkward leg and was about to turn away when he stopped. "My lord... Have you come to help with the search?"

Aragorn had not an inkling what Nob was talking about but the hobbit looked at him with such eagerness to hear the answer that he didn't have the heart to say so. "Tell me more about this search."

Relief spread over Nob's face. "Oh, I knew help would come!" His outcry was loud enough that it silenced the conversation of the others. They turned their attention to Aragorn and Nob.

"I told Mr. Butterbur the rangers have never let us down. And with the king himself to help--"

"Hush, Nob," Aragorn admonished him. "Nobody is to know, remember?"

Nob blushed deeply. "I'm sorry. It is just such a comfort to have you here, sire. One of them is my cousin, you see. His name's Willy, Willy Sandybanks."

"Tell me everything," Aragorn ordered. Nob was not making much sense but his distress and relief were genuine. Aragorn worried if he had tarried too long in Gondor and should have traveled north sooner. "And start from the beginning."

"First we heard of it was when folk started traveling up the Greenway," Nob began, wringing his hands. "Some of their townsmen disappeared and were never seen or heard from, they said. We Bree-folk did not pay much attention at first. People from the south have always been a bit odd, you know. But then people around here started disappearing. My cousin, he's from Staddle. He went to the forest to collect spring onions, but he never came home. Folks say it's orcs that took them. Just like they took old Mr. Butterbur!" He burst into tears and rubbed his face with a slip of his apron. "Poor Willy. If that's true, I will never see him again."

"*Yrch*," Legolas muttered in a voice filled with disgust. With the single word, he managed to convey the age-long hatred his people harbored for the twisted elves from Mordor. Aragorn gestured for him to keep quiet.

"How long ago is it that your cousin vanished?"

"Four days, my lord. His friend Drogo went missing at the same time. There is talk in the common room about mounting a search party." Again, he wiped his eyes. "But I fear that's the ale talking. On the morrow, they will not be so brave."

"Aragorn will find your cousin," Pippin said. "Will you not?"

Aragorn hesitated. Searching for missing hobbits and chasing after orcs was not what he had envisioned when they embarked on their journey north. But how could he resist the look of trust in Nob's eyes? And had he not felt guilty over not being able to protect all his subjects mere moments ago? What sort of a king would he be, if he did not help his people when he was needed?

He gave a curt nod, and Nob exhaled in relief. "I will try," Aragorn said. "If your cousin is still alive, we will find him."

"Thank you, my lord!" For a moment, Aragorn feared Nob would drop to his knees and embrace his ankles in gratitude but then the hobbit pulled himself together. "I will not tell anyone who you are," he repeated before he rushed from the room.

"Well, that is just splendid!" Gimli grunted. He pushed his empty plate away and leaned back. "I thought we had come all the way here to find that misguided fool. Now I learn that the plans have changed and we are going off on an orc chase."

"Are you not pleased to see our friends, then?" Legolas asked quietly. "That alone should have made the journey worthwhile."

Gimli's face darkened beneath his beard. He blinked, chastened. "Well... Of course! Gladly I would have traveled twice as far to see our fair hobbit friends. But... but..." He glared at Aragorn for a moment, then sighed as a satisfied belch escaped him. "Ah well. It has been a while since my axe tasted orc necks. Might as well give it something useful to do while we're here."

"That is settled then," Legolas said.

A pungent scent began to permeate the room. Merry and Pippin had lit up their pipes and were puffing contentedly. Pippin pushed a leather pouch in Aragorn's direction.

"Here, Strider. Have some."

"Tis Longbottom Leaf," Merry said through a cloud of smoke.

"First harvest in four years," Pippin added. "And still the best in the South Farthing."

"So, indulge yourself, my friend."

"Or has your lady made you give it up?" Pippin's eyes gleamed with mischief.

Aragorn laughed. "She has tried," he admitted. He pulled his own pipe from his tunic, ignoring the pained look on Legolas's face, and began stuffing its bowl with a clump of pipeweed. "But it was one thing I would not give up. So

we have an agreement: I do not smoke indoors, and Arwen will not complain when I do so elsewhere." He passed the pouch on to Gimli. Legolas's expression turned even gloomier.

Pippin nodded pensively as he blew out another puff. "That sounds like a kingly arrangement."

"Pippin!" Sam heaved a deep sigh. "Stop poking fun at... at Aragorn. It is not seemly!"

"I will," Pippin said around the stem of his pipe, "if he tells us what was so secret that it could not be said in a letter."

"Aye," Merry agreed. "I take it that is not orc hunting!"

Aragorn felt the smile melt from his face. The time had come; he could no longer avoid the reason why he had come, and he did not relish the thought. He had no idea how the hobbits would react to the news of Boromir's survival. He still was not sure how best to tell them, although he had had many weeks in the saddle to think on it.

"The news I have to tell you will be as startling to you as it was to us when we first learned of it, not three months ago."

"Then perhaps," Merry said, "we should send for another pitcher of ale first." He upended his pipe and emptied the ashes onto one of the dirty dinner plates.

"I shall go," Gimli offered.

Aragorn pondered what he would say long enough for Gimli to return with not one but two full pitchers of frothing beer. Legolas raised an eyebrow. Gimli placed the pitchers on the table before he shrugged at the elf. "I thought two pitchers would be better than one. We might have need for it." Legolas nodded in understanding.

"Aragorn? You're beginning to frighten me." There was not a trace of humor left in Pippin's tone and he looked grim. "Is it such bad news that you dare not tell us?"

"No. No, 'tis not bad news at all. I am just unsure how to say it." He cast a quick glance at Legolas and Gimli but that one look told him they would be of no help. He sighed. He recalled how difficult it had been to explain what Faramir had finally revealed to him. He remembered their response, such an echo of his own -- anger intertwined with relief, joy, disbelief, the sense of betrayal -- and knew there was no gentle way to break the news to Sam, Merry and Pippin.

"'Tis about Boromir," he said softly. "I have learned that he did not die when we sent him down the river." Gimli made a soft noise and gulped down a large swallow of ale. "Boromir survived. He lives still."

For long minutes, the room was utterly quiet. Behind the closed door, Aragorn could hear muted sounds from the common room and the clink of dishes being stacked in the kitchens. The three hobbits did not move; they seemed frozen. Pipes and tankards were forgotten, the beer slowly going flat as they stared at Aragorn. Only their faces betrayed their thoughts, and an entire spectrum of feelings crossed their features.

Finally, as if on cue, Merry and Pippin unfroze and jumped up at the same instant. "What? How? What happened? Where is he?" The questions came flying at last.

"Why would he do such a thing?" Sam asked, his voice much quieter. "Mr. Frodo would have been so pleased to know. And now I can never tell him." He looked sad and his eyes glistened. Even with Frodo gone from Middle-earth forever, Sam's first thought was to his master's well-fare. It tore Aragorn's heart and for a brief moment, his anger at Boromir flared anew.

"Because he is a stubborn fool," Gimli snorted. He had not forgotten the needless guilt Boromir had caused him to feel for many years.

"He was ashamed," Aragorn said. "He did try to take the ring from Frodo. He blamed himself for your capture at the hands of the orcs. In Boromir's eyes, it meant he had failed when he was most needed."

"But that's ridiculous!" Pippin cried. "Boromir defended us. I will never forget how hard he fought so we could flee. And I have always believed he died trying to help us." He dropped back onto his seat, hard, looking suddenly older than his years. "That's what I told his father."

"He did not die that day," Aragorn repeated. He was stunned with the sudden realization that they had never fully spoken about what happened on Amon Hen or about Boromir's fate. At first, too many urgent things had demanded their attention to take the time. And once the war was over, the exact details no longer seemed to matter. What was done, was done, and dwelling upon it too painful. They had mourned Boromir's passing together, even if the exact method of that passing was different in everyone's perception. He regretted never having talked in more detail with his small friends.

"I saw him fall," Merry muttered. "Pierced with many arrows."

"Aragorn saved him," Legolas said.

"Aye," Gimli added, "and then we lost him again when we let the boat slip."

"Boat?" Merry asked, confused.

Aragorn gave a quick account of what happened. He explained that they had found Boromir on the brink of death. He told how he had managed to stop his bleeding and keep Boromir alive, and how they had placed him in one of the elven boats for quick transport toward Minas Tirith where they might help him better. Gimli looked at the floor when Aragorn mentioned how the boat had escaped from his grasp.

"I presumed him perished," he concluded, "and never dared discuss it again. Denethor held the broken Horn of Gondor and I assumed that was all that was left of Boromir. I am sorry for not speaking sooner."

Silence again reigned, as the three hobbits tried to come to grips with this unexpected turn of events.

"So, where is he?" Merry broke the silence at last.

"Yes, where?" Pippin added. "I have a few choice words to say to him!"

"You will have to wait your turn, laddie," Gimli said.

"We know not where he is, exactly," Aragorn said. "He is not far from Bree, that much we have learned. It appears he spent the last few years here in the north."

"He must miss Gondor terribly," Sam said. His eyes were distant, as if he were again feeling the desolation of being far from home, never knowing if he would ever return.

"We know by what name he goes," Legolas said. "Erandír."

"I have heard that name mentioned," Sam said. "That is the man they say avenged Mr. Butterbur. The old Mr. Butterbur, I mean."

"That was Boromir?" Merry asked.

"Yes."

"So, now what?" Pippin said. "How are we going to find him?"

"I do not know," Aragorn admitted. "First, we must help Nob and find those missing hobbits. We shall look for Boromir afterwards."

## The Rescue

"They took my baby!"

Gasps filled with horror rippled through the crowd of villagers. Mrs. Gooseberry dropped to her knees in despair. She wrung her hands before her breast, while she lamented for her daughter.

Boromir walked to the woman's crumpled form, and the crowd split before him like river water before a boat's prow. It made him uneasy, but he pushed the sensation to the back of his mind. More important matters than ill-considered reputations required his attention.

"Mistress?" He crouched before her, awkwardly aware of the towel. "You shall have her back."

She looked at him with a tear-stained face. "Do you promise?"

"I promise," he said. A sob escaped her, and she flung herself into his arms, clinging to him desperately, her tears hot on his chilled skin. With his sword still in one hand, and the other needed to hold the towel, Boromir could but let her pour out her grief onto his shoulder.

"Mistress Gooseberry?" Hallas came to his rescue, although the boy's eyes still sparkled with mirth. "Please, let me take you inside. My master will get your little girl back, but you must let him get dressed first."

Alvin came near. The big man had one large hand on Perry's shoulder, keeping the boy near, and he stared at his sister with an anxious look of incomprehension. Boromir gestured them closer. "Help Hallas get Mrs. Gooseberry inside."

"Is there aught we can do to help?" someone asked. Boromir recognized the blacksmith's deep voice.

"Aye," he said. "Hallas and I will need fresh horses. The fastest ones you can find. Ours are tired from the long journey."

"I will get them for you." The smith turned and ran off.

"I shall prepare you some food for the journey," a woman offered.

"And I'll gather some haversacks for the horses," said another.

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Once Boromir had dried himself and put on some clean clothes, he returned to the sitting room. Mrs. Gooseberry was in a chair by the fire. She looked calmer but stared at the flames with unseeing eyes. Hallas offered Boromir his cloak and he donned it quickly, suppressing a shiver; though the fire had done its best to dry it out, it was still damp.

"I want to come too," Perry said.

"You cannot," Hallas said. "It's too dangerous."

"She is my sister!"

His mother let out a whimper and cried out for her son.

"I understand." Boromir rested a hand on the boy's shoulder. "But your mother needs you at her side. I will return with your sister, or I will not return at all."

Perry stared at Boromir for a long time. When his mother called for him a second time, he nodded gravely. "She is my sister," he repeated in a whisper, of a sudden no longer a boy on the verge of adolescence and trying to be a man, but a child, frightened by the sudden twist of fate that had upturned his life. He ran to his mother and flung himself in her arms.

Boromir looked at them for a moment, then strode out of the door. Hallas followed without a word. Outside, the smith was waiting with fresh horses. The woman who had spoken earlier offered them small knapsacks. "Here is some bread and cheese," she said. "'Tisn't much but--"

"Thank you, mistress."

"Please bring Gertie back safely," she murmured, her voice breaking.

"Don't worry," Hallas assured her. "My master will. He always keeps his promises."

*Not always*, Boromir thought darkly.

He swung himself into the saddle and the horse cantered off into the darkness. Behind him, he heard the clop-clop of hooves as Hallas followed. The villagers had gathered near the edge of the town, looking on in silence as the two swordsmen left in search of one missing girl.

ooo

For the first hour, Boromir had no trouble following the orcs' trail. As they fled in a panic, they had left a clear path through the undergrowth and trampled

grass on the meadows. But once the trail entered a thick forest of dark pine trees where the moonlight did not penetrate, it grew too dark for the hunters to follow any longer.

Gritting his teeth in frustration, Boromir dismounted and tied his horse to a tree. "We have to wait for first light," he said. "The risk of losing the trail altogether is too great to continue." Inwardly he chafed at the delay. The spirits only knew what terrible fate might befall a little girl at the mercy of orcs. Boromir's only hope was he had scared them so badly that they would continue to flee and as such would not have much time for mischief.

They saw to the horses, making sure they could not wander off, and settled themselves in a small hollow. The floor was soft and covered with sweet smelling pine needles. They ate some of the provisions the unknown village woman had given them, then pulled their cloaks further round them to wait for daylight.

"I'll take first watch," Boromir told Hallas. "You get some sleep. I'll wake you in a few hours."

Soon, the only sound in the cold, dark night was the soft breathing of the lad, at times interspersed with a horse's soft nicker. Those were sounds Boromir was familiar with, and despite his misgivings and worries, falling back into their regular routine was soothing.

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The following morning, as the first light of day crept in through the pines, Hallas shook Boromir's shoulder. He started from a fitful sleep and was on his feet in an instant. There was no time to waste on a proper breakfast and he told Hallas to saddle the horses. They ate the last of the bread while they rode. Boromir leaned down to keep an eye on the orcs' muddy footprints.

"At least the trail is clear," Hallas said.

"Aye." Boromir stared ahead. The orcs had cut a swath across the needle-carpeted floor that was too obvious to miss in the clear light of the new day, even if he had not had years to practice. It would be child's play to follow the trail.

"How far ahead do you think they are, Erandír?"

"Too far for my liking," Boromir said, "yet not far enough that they are safe from our blades. Let us make haste." He urged his horse into a quicker pace.

Orcs were fast on their feet, but the villagers had provided them with good steeds. The terrain made for easy travel; the pine trees provided such a dense

canopy that not much grew beneath and the horses covered the leagues with ease and speed.

Around midday, the distant sound of growling voices and a whiff of the orcs' stench carried on the wind warned them that they had caught up with the kidnapers. The dark forests had ended a league or so behind them; around them lay gently rolling hills covered with groves of birches and ash intermingled with smaller brush.

Boromir tightened the reins and held up a hand. He listened intently for long minutes. Then he dismounted and with a gesture told Hallas to do the same.

"We best hide the horses among the trees," he said, keeping his voice low. "We are downwind. If we take them any closer the stench might agitate them. We cannot risk alerting the orcs to our presence before we are ready."

Hallas tied down the horses while Boromir searched for a path through the undergrowth. They would need to be careful; the shrubbery did not provide much cover. The trees and bushes were still bare after the long winter, but branches and twigs were heavy with fat buds ready to sprout new leaves. Spring would arrive soon.

They found the orc camp not far ahead. The orcs had burrowed down in one of the dales, a narrow valley filled with tall trees and a small brook running along its length. It was not a bad place for a camp, Boromir thought, especially if one was an orc and detested daylight. Two steep hills shielded the valley from most of the daylight and added their shadows to the meager shade the bare trees cast.

In Boromir's experience, orcs were not very disciplined, and this group was no different. The creatures were clustered in twos, threes, or fours, lazing in the shadows or roaming around under the trees. Boromir and Hallas studied the encampment for several minutes.

"There seem to be more than in the raiding party, yet I see only fifteen of them," Hallas whispered at his right shoulder. "And some are injured. Let's go and kill them."

"No. Not yet. See those bigger ones?" He pointed. "Those are Uruk-hai. They are smarter and stronger, and it will not do to underestimate them. They may have posted guards. And we do not yet know where they keep the girl."

He did not fear the mountain orcs. If those had been the only orcs in the band, Hallas would be right; the odds were good. They had two skilled and sharp blades between them, a lot of experience fighting as a team and the orcs would be drowsy during the day. But the Uruk-hai gave Boromir pause. He had not come up against the larger, cleverer orc-breed often since Amon Hen and he would not engage them lightly.

While he watched the camp and tried to devise a plan of action, voices rose and a scuffle broke out in the valley. Two of the smaller orcs were at each other's throats, growling and spitting dark curses. One of the Uruks lashed them with his whip, hollering at them to break apart. A few more lashes were needed before the pair obeyed his orders. Bloody from fist and whip, they let go, although they continued to glare at each other. It was truly amazing that this race of misshapen beings could have caused the army of Gondor so much trouble. But what they lacked in discipline, they made up for in boldness, sheer strength and viciousness.

Careful to stay downwind, Boromir and Hallas inched in a wide half-circle around the camp. They moved in silence. Hallas was born for slinking through forests, and Boromir's long years in the bush had given him skills to match an Ithilien ranger. They stayed on the southern hill's edge, looking down into the camp and soon found the orc captains had failed to set guards to watch their perimeter. *Undisciplined rabble*, the soldier in Boromir grumbled, none too displeased. It would make coming up with a workable plan of attack so much easier.

A gentle tug on his sleeve drew Boromir's attention. When he turned, Hallas pointed down.

"Erandír, look."

Boromir's eyes followed the boy's outstretched finger. Once he saw what excited Hallas so, he could not stop the soft intake of breath. A few crooked branches, roughly thrown together and tied with coarse rope, formed a makeshift cage. Inside the cage sat little Gertie, along with four other frightened-looking children.

"She's still alive!"

For now, yes, she was. Boromir shuddered at the thought what the orcs might have planned for the youngsters. With difficulty, he suppressed his every instinct to draw his sword and run down the hill to kill all orcs in sight. The children's lives were more important than his desire to mete out dark wrath and vengeance; he had to be certain of success before making his move.

"What do you want to do?" Hallas asked.

"We wait until an hour before sunset," Boromir said. "When the mountain orcs are weakest from a long day of sunlight is when we attack. But we must go for the Uruk-hai first. They are the cunning ones, the leaders."

"What about those children?"

"We will make our attack here. It will put us between the children and the orcs," Boromir said. "We must keep watch and make sure the orcs do not take them prematurely."

"I'll bring the horses closer, then," Hallas said. "I'll be back shortly." With only a soft rustle of leaves, he turned around and slithered back through the underbrush. Boromir watched him go with pride. The lad had learned a lot since he took him under his wing four years ago. He did not want to think of how lonely his life would have been without Hallas as his companion. He usually tried not to dwell on it too much but he knew deep down he considered the boy the son he never had the chance to have.

Shaking his head to clear it from the distracting thoughts, Boromir turned back to further study the cage with the children. The orcs did not pay much attention to them; for the time being, they were safe enough. Any untoward moves on the part of their captors, and he would be ready to discard all plans and attack at once. He'd be damned if he let anything more happen to them.

There were five children, packed together tightly in the makeshift prison. There was Gertie, of course, with another girl and three boys. At first sight, they all appeared to be close to Gertie's age, perhaps a year or two older, but when Boromir peered closer, he frowned. There was something odd about two of the boys; something that appeared strange and yet familiar at the same time. But he could not grab hold of the nibbling thought. Both boys had frizzy hair and large eyes in round faces. They wore dark pants, and dirty shirts that once upon a time had been white. Both boys were barefoot and...

"Hobbits!" he gasped in surprise. The two boys weren't children at all -- they were halflings, kin to Merry and Pippin, and Sam and Frodo. With the realization, memories assaulted him. Memories long since buried, though not forgotten, of that fateful day at Parth Galen. He had erred gravely then, and he was at fault for Merry and Pippin falling into the hands of orcs.

He forced himself to banish the memories. This time, he swore, it would end differently. In a few hours, he would see that the children were to be returned to their parents unharmed. And he would rescue the hobbits, ensure their safe return to their fair Shire.

He glanced up at the sky to see how much time was left until sunset. The clouds had broken open, allowing a watery, pale sun to peek through. It had passed its highest point, and nightfall was mere hours away. Boromir was pleased with the sunlight. It would work in his advantage, tiring the mountain orcs even more.

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During the afternoon, Boromir and Hallas alternated between keeping watch and dozing to catch up on last night's missed sleep. Their plans were made, the battleground scouted as well as could be from their vantage point; all that was left was to conserve their strength for the fight to come. As expected, the

orcs did not leave their camp but waited in the shade for nightfall. They left the children alone, much to Boromir's relief. Sunset was a little over an hour away and the sky to the west had turned a fiery orange when he began to prepare for the assault on the orcs' encampment.

With a last stroke of the whetstone, Boromir finished sharpening his sword. He did not need to test it; he knew it was sharp enough to shave with, should he so desire. The blade would cut through orc flesh and armor like a knife through freshly churned butter. He uttered a satisfied grunt and sheathed the weapon carefully before putting the stone back in his saddlebag. Hallas checked the horses a final time, making sure they could not stray or run and leave their riders stranded in the wilderness. Then he turned to Boromir.

"All is ready."

Boromir studied him. "You are not wearing your armor."

Hallas sighed. "That leather thing is so heavy. And it hinders my movements."

"Your movements will be hindered even more if you get riddled with arrows or cut in half," Boromir said dryly.

"You never wear one," Hallas protested. "Why do I have to?"

"Because I say so." Boromir offered the lad a stern glare, hoping to forestall any further argument. It was a discussion they had increasingly often as the boy grew older and more self-assured. Still, it wouldn't do for him to go battling orcs without some protective leather. Hallas was Boromir's responsibility and he would be cursed if he let harm come to the lad.

With the exaggerated sigh only a bold, overconfident youth can utter, Hallas allowed Boromir to tighten the straps of the stiff leather cuirass. He shifted, rolling his shoulders until it settled comfortably.

"*Now* all is ready," Boromir said. "Let us go and rid the world of those orcs."

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The battle was fierce, bloody, and brief. The orcs, confident of their safety in the wilderland far from the nearest town, were caught unprepared. Soon, while the western sky colored from bright orange to deep red, dark orc blood soaked the earth. Misshapen bodies lay crumpled where they had fallen, gutted, stabbed, limbs missing. Only a few were fortunate enough to escape with their lives and ran into the deepening night.

Boromir ordered Hallas to let them go. It was with regret -- one of the Uruk-hai captains was among the fugitives -- but for the moment, their priorities lay elsewhere.

"Let's get those children out," he said. "And the hobbits."

"Hobbits?"

Boromir realized he had never told the lad about his discovery.

"Aye. I first thought they were children too, but they are not." They walked across the field, stepping over bodies as they made their way to the cage.

"Fear not!" Boromir called when they approached the makeshift prison. The valley had grown dark and he did not want to frighten the children. "You are safe now. Stay back from the bars."

He gripped the cage and wrenched. His muscles bunched, the branches that formed the prison's bars groaned but they did not give. The orcs' handiwork was more sturdy than it looked.

"Here." Hallas offered Boromir his knife and they quickly slashed through the ropes holding the cage together. Boromir pulled again.

With a crack that echoed in the night, the cage gave, breaking apart. The children and the hobbits scrambled out. Gertie threw herself at Hallas, clinging to the lad while she sobbed. The other children and the two hobbits watched the rescuers with a little more wariness.

"Well," one of the hobbits spoke at last, his gaze drifting away from Boromir and across the field littered with orc bodies. "I'd say you killed them good, you did." He grinned. "I am Drogo Whitfurrow."

"Call me Erandír," Boromir said. "And this is Hallas."

Drogo's eyes widened and so did his grin. "Aye, that is good fortune indeed!" he cried. "To be rescued by the glorious knight from myth and tales, and his faithful squire."

Boromir shuffled uneasily. He knew people talked about him; the villagers of Gowan had not been the exception. He had heard some of the stories and the praise made him uncomfortable. He merely did what a soldier of Gondor should do: keep the people safe from harm.

"Oh yes, we have heard of you, master swordthain," Drogo said when he caught Boromir's discomfort. "But I must apologize, I forget my manners." He dragged the other hobbit near by his sleeve. "This is my friend, Wilibald Sandybanks. And for your information, we are hobbits. From--"

"The Shire," Boromir finished, glad for the change of subject. "Yes, I know."

"You know of our kind?" Wilibald spoke for the first time. "Not many Men from elsewhere do."

"I have met a few of your kin along the way," Boromir said noncommittally. From the corner of his eye, he noticed how Hallas's gaze shifted from him to the hobbits and back. He knew there would be questions later. The lad's curiosity knew no limit. And although their travels had sometimes taken them near to the Shire, they had not yet met any of the halfling kind. Until today.

"We must beg your pardon, sir," Drogo continued, "but not all hobbits live in the Shire. We do not. We are from Staddle, a village near Bree. You did not know this?" Boromir shook his head; he had believed all hobbits lived in the Shire. "'Tis our cousins who live there. Many of them, indeed."

Boromir longed to hear news of several of those Shire-hobbits, yet he dared not ask. Much as he wished to know how they were faring, he feared what he might hear more.

Something tugged on the hem of his tunic. When he looked down, a tear-stained face looked up at him, with dark, round eyes. It was the little boy. "Can we go find my mommy now?"

With a pang of guilt, Boromir realized that in his excitement over meeting the hobbits he had forgotten his purpose. He picked up the child and settled him on his arm.

"Yes, we will take you back to your mother," he said gently. "We will. But first, let us leave this dreadful field. We will discuss our options elsewhere. We have some food left with our horses. Perhaps Hallas can do something about dinner."

Hallas grinned. "I can make a meal with anything," he boasted.

"Food." The hobbits sighed wistfully. "We haven't had a decent meal in six days. Oh, how I miss Dora Brownlock's apple pies."

"Or your mama's lamb stew!" Drogo told Wilibald.

"Yes. And what I would not give for..." Their voices faded as they followed Hallas up the hill.

Boromir chuckled. They may not come from the Shire, they were true hobbits all right. Halflings could discuss food like none other.

The moon was slowly rising over the trees while they picked their way carefully. Ahead, the two halflings were happily chattering away, still discussing the merits of various dishes, and before them, Hallas was taking

Gertie to the horses. The silver light cast strange shadows and turned the orc bodies into monstrous shapes, giving the place an otherworldly feel. The scent of orc and death was heavy in the air. The other girl began to cry and Boromir lifted her up to carry her in the crook of his other arm. She hid her face against his neck and sniffled softly in his ear. He could barely see where he was going and it was hard to maintain his balance on the rocky ground with two small children clinging to him, but since it seemed to reassure them he would gladly suffer the small discomfort.

All of a sudden, a soft whistle pierced the air and something thwacked him between the shoulder blades. The impact was strong enough that he stumbled to his knees, letting go of the children, who tumbled across the mossy ground. Amidst a chorus of shocked voices and startled outcries, Boromir rested on hands and knees and tried to catch his breath. He wondered why breathing had suddenly become so much harder. He told himself to get up, that something was very wrong, but his body demanded a moment more. And another. Then...

"Erandír!" Hallas screamed. The children's cries changed in pitch, from startled to frightened. Slowly, ever so slowly, feeling as if the very air was keeping him prisoner, Boromir turned. Behind him, towering high, loomed the Uruk-hai captain. The creature threw away his bow and drew his blade; the crude sword glistened black in the moonlight, and his crooked teeth were bared in a grin.

"Not so mighty now, are ye," he spat, hefting his weapon. "Killed my lads. But at least they'll be avenged. *Agân-'nUruk*, pwah."

Boromir struggled to draw his own sword, but it felt terrible heavy and seemed somehow to be stuck in its scabbard.

The dark blade started to come down. Through the encroaching darkness, fading in the distance, Boromir heard Hallas shout, "No!"

He managed to spare a moment's thought for the odd coincidence, that he should die at an Uruk-hai's hand while rescuing a pair of halflings.

Then the thought dissipated and the world turned black.

## In The Nick Of Time

Pippin climbed to the top of the knoll and shaded his eyes with his hand against the setting sun. He appraised the land before him. Despite the balm of the first spring evening, he could not fully suppress a shiver at the gray bleakness ahead. The Lone Lands were aptly named. Who would live in such barrenness, where nothing grew but stunted trees and scraggly bushes clinging to the rocks? A few cheerful spring blooms, ignorant of the desolation, added a bright splotch of color here and there. Pippin did not believe they would last long.

They had passed Weathertop several hours ago, on the trail of the orcs that kidnapped the hobbits. At first, it had been easy as the orcs had left a wide path through the forest. But once the trail crossed the Great East Road, it had become harder and harder to follow when vegetation grew more and more sparse. If not for Aragorn and Legolas, Pippin believed they would have lost the trail long ago.

He turned away from the view just in time to see Aragorn push himself up off the ground where he had been studying for tracks close up. Aragorn slapped the dirt off his knees. "We are gaining on them," he said. "We must leave the horses and continue on foot. They are not far ahead, and though they are but few, I do not want to give warning." He glanced up at the sky where the first stars appeared. "Mayhap we should wait for the morning."

Pippin studied the faces of his companions. The other hobbits looked grim, much as he felt. Legolas's face betrayed none of his feelings, as usual. But Gimli looked almost eager. The dwarf tested his axe with a thumb.

"Let's not dally," he grumbled. "There is plenty of daylight left, and my axe is hungry. Who knows what mischief those orcs might get up to in the night."

Pippin suppressed a grin and checked if his small sword sat loose. It had been a while since he carried it but he had become reaccustomed to its presence quickly. The last two days in the wilderness had been eerily familiar, yet completely different from his memories. Only a little over five years had passed since he had traveled this same land in the company of Strider and his friends, yet it felt as if it happened in another lifetime. Then, he had been a frightened, naive hobbit without a clue as to what fate had in store for him; today, he was a trained soldier, armed and determined to deal with the orcs that took his kindred. Today, he was the hunter, no longer the hunted.

It had come as a surprise to learn that orcs still roamed, albeit less freely than they once did. Perhaps life in the Shire was too sheltered and tranquil. Was he losing touch with the rest of the world?

Still, *that* surprise had paled beside the discovery that Boromir was alive.

Pippin allowed his thoughts to wander on the subject that he had avoided for the last few days, while his hands were busy tying down his pony so it would not stray.

Boromir was alive!

He was still not sure how it made him feel. He rejoiced at the thought and wanted to sing with happiness, yet at the same time could not suppress the feelings of hurt and anger. It was very confusing. Why had Boromir not revealed himself? If Lord Denethor had known, perhaps he would not have burned himself at the pyre. And Faramir! Keeping the secret!

Men. Every time he thought he was beginning to understand their race, they did something that puzzled him.

"Pippin! Are you listening?"

"Yes, Merry?" Pippin realized his cousin had called his name repeatedly.

"Where are your thoughts?" Merry asked. "You look upset. And you did not even hear me. We will find Nob's cousin, don't you worry about that."

Pippin shook his head. "I was thinking about Boromir and Faramir. I don't understand why they would keep this secret."

Merry sighed. "Strider explained it. Faramir had no choice, he was bound by oath."

"I know. Still," Pippin said, "he should have said something!" Angrily he tightened the straps of his sword belt.

"It is easy to condemn a man for his deeds," Aragorn said softly as he approached, "when you do not have to wear his shoes."

Pippin looked up at Aragorn. "I suppose you are right," he said. "But it hurts, you know."

Aragorn smiled. He placed a light hand on Pippin's shoulder. "I know."

"What are we waiting for?" Gimli interrupted. "You can discuss Boromir's foolishness as much as you want later. We have orcs waiting." He glanced over to Legolas. "What was the score again?"

"I believe we left it even," Legolas said absently. He was peering intently ahead, where the trail ran through a strand of crooked birches before disappearing into a shadowy ravine. "Aragorn is right, they are very close. I can smell them." He started forward without a sound as he passed among the trees. He looked deceptively at ease, but Pippin could see the tenseness in Legolas's shoulders, ready to draw his bow in an instant.

Pippin raised his head and sniffed. His sense of smell was not nearly as strong as the elf's, yet he did believe he detected a whiff of the foul orc stink. Gripping his sword hilt, he fell in behind the others.

They did not get far before Legolas stopped so abruptly that Gimli, walking behind the elf, nearly bumped into him. He raised a hand to tell everyone to keep quiet, then nocked an arrow onto his bowstring. Gimli hefted his axe while trying to peer around the elf. Behind him, Pippin could hear the soft hiss of *Andúril* being drawn from its scabbard. Cautiously, Pippin wiggled his own blade free.

The shrubbery rustled. Branches shivered and swayed for a moment, then creaked when a dark figure came crashing through, bearing down on them, groaning and wheezing. With a cry, it tipped over and landed not far from Legolas's feet. Instantly, the orc was surrounded, deadly weapons pointing at it from all angles. It did not move.

"What is the meaning of this?" Legolas muttered.

Aragorn booted the orc's shoulder and it rolled over onto its back, limbs flopping.

"That's new," Gimli said. "It is only half an orc."

A nervous giggle escaped Pippin and he bit his bottom lip to keep quiet. Gimli had a point. The orc's right arm was missing from just above where the elbow joint should have been. Its chest showed deep gashes and cuts. It had bled to death while fleeing whatever it was that killed it.

"I would say someone else has taken offense to orcs kidnapping innocent hobbits," Merry muttered.

Pippin exchanged a hopeful glance with his cousin. He could tell from the look on Merry's face that they had the same idea. Could it be -- but no, that would be too much of a coincidence to hope for. There were rangers about, also, and the soldiers that Aragorn had sent north to rid his realm of miscreants. Still...

"Should we go on?" Sam asked.

"Aye, Master Samwise," Aragorn said. "But be very cautious now."

They tried to walk even more silently than before. Aragorn and Legolas moved through the grass without making a single noise; the others were not so adept and occasionally a twig snapped beneath an unskilled foot. Soon, however, they learned their diligence made no difference. They came upon other orc corpses, mutilated bodies that had died where they had fallen.

Gimli grunted. "There is no fun in this chase. I do hope some are left for my axe."

"I would not count on it," Legolas said. "Look." He pointed.

A narrow valley lay before them. Though the sun had sunk low and the ground was coated in shadows, they could still see the carnage. Black, crumpled bodies lay hither and yon. A puff of wind carried the orc stench up to where they stood, mingled with the smell of fresh blood.

"Ew," Merry said. His nose wrinkled in disgust. "I had hoped to never smell that again."

Pippin agreed. "Be glad they are dead already. The only good orc--"

-- is a dead orc," Gimli finished. He chuckled. "Very true, laddie."

Pippin relaxed and locked his sword back in its scabbard. Clearly, there would be no fighting today. He did not relish the thought of having to search among the fallen bodies for the missing Staddle-hobbits, though.

Suddenly, Legolas shoved him and Pippin nearly tripped as he stumbled. "What--" he began but the protest died on his lips. Legolas whipped up his bow and in one fluid motion let fly of an arrow. The same instant the dart cleared the bow string, a cry echoed through the ravine.

"No!"

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Hallas found it impossible to move. Frozen in horror, he watched Erandír topple forward. A black arrow was sticking up from his back. The two children tumbled across the ground and rolled over before they came to a dazed rest. Hallas did not pay them much attention. His gaze was glued to the body of his friend and protector, and to the orc that had materialized to stand over his master. When the orc captain slowly raised his blade, Hallas found his voice at last.

"No!"

He knew how futile the cry was. The orc would be insensitive to his plea and he was too far away to do anything but watch helplessly.

Then, out of nowhere, another arrow hissed through the air and struck the orc in the throat. Dark blood spurted. The orc made a gurgling noise; it tottered, its sword arm coming down harmlessly as the blade slipped from its grip. The

orc tried to keep its footing and took two stumbling steps before it slowly fell sideways and landed with a soft thud half on top of Erandír.

For another agelong moment, Hallas stared at the unmoving bodies. He failed to comprehend what his eyes were telling him. A dismayed cry wrung from his throat and he ran to Erandír's fallen body.

"Please, Erandír! Be alive!" he pleaded, tears streaming down his face. He shoved the dead orc aside and dropped to his knees. His hands hovered uselessly over Erandír's still form; Hallas did not dare touch him for fear he might make matters worse. He wished he had paid more attention to the lessons in rudimentary battleground medicine. Never in his darkest dreams had he imagined he would be called upon to administer such aid to his friend. "Please!"

"Step aside, lad." The voice that broke through his grief was gruff, yet not unkind.

Hallas looked up and in a blurry vision, he saw several people. Some were clearly hobbits, others were taller. One wore a scraggly beard and carried a large, wicked-looking axe. Another carried a bow and quiver, and Hallas instantly understood he was the one he needed to thank for coming to Erandír's aid.

"Step aside," the bearded one repeated. "Aragorn will see to him."

A small hobbit hand tugged at his sleeve. "He will be in good hands. Aragorn is the best healer I know."

Hallas allowed himself to be pulled away though he kept a wary eye on the dark-haired stranger that took his place. But it seemed the hobbit spoke the truth. With deft hands that looked quite capable, Aragorn gently prodded the area around the arrow's point. A moan escaped Erandír and Hallas let out a sob of relief. He was alive!

"How is he?" the archer asked.

"The wound itself does not worry me," Aragorn said. "See where the arrow deflected on Boromir's shoulder blade? It is a superficial wound. But the dart was poisoned. Sam!"

"Yes sir?" said another of the hobbits.

"Remember the athelas plant?"

"Kingsfoil? Of course."

"You should be able to find some here. I need as much as you can gather. Gimli, Merry, start a fire. Get some water from the stream boiling."

Hallas watched as they dashed in different directions to do as Aragorn ordered. They did not seem to need many words and looked as if they had done this a thousand times before.

"Legolas," Aragorn told the archer, "I will need your help to remove the arrow. Pippin?" The hobbit that had pulled Hallas away looked up. "Will you look after those children?"

It was not until Aragorn spoke of them that Hallas remembered the rescued children. Startled and frightened, they huddled where they had fallen and were crying quietly. He glanced at them, wanting to make sure they were all right yet reluctant to leave his master's side. He was glad when Drogo and Willibald spoke up.

"We'll take care of them," Drogo said. "Please, make sure the man will be all right. "

Pippin blinked and pointed a finger at Willibald. "You must be Willy Sandybanks."

It was Willibald's turn to blink. "I am he. How did you know?"

"Your cousin Nob. He told us you had disappeared. I see a strong resemblance." Pippin grinned.

"Nob!"

The voices grew dimmer as the hobbits wandered away to take care of the children. Hallas turned his attention back to Aragorn.

"You will not die on me now, Boromir." Aragorn's voice was a soft murmur while he sliced Erandír's tunic and prepared to cut out the arrow.

"His name is not Boromir," Hallas said hesitantly. He was not sure if it was a good idea or not. For all he knew, this Aragorn would refuse to help when he found out the injured man was not who he thought he was. "His name is Erandír."

Aragorn gave him a quick look before he peered down at the wound again. Legolas rested a hand on Hallas's shoulder.

"Aye. But before he was Erandír, he was Boromir. We wish to restore his name."

"If I can keep him alive long enough," Aragorn murmured. "Sam!"

Hallas was not sure what to make of these people. His master's name wasn't Erandír but Boromir? He sensed there was more to the story than Legolas's simple version. But right now was not the time to start asking questions.

"Sam! Make haste!"

Sam came running back, his arms filled with plant stalks. He dropped his load near the fire. "This is all I could find," he gasped, trying to catch his breath. "If you need more, I will need a light. It is getting too dark to tell kingsfoil from nettles."

"This should be enough," Aragorn said. He began sorting through the pile. "Thank you, Sam."

Soon, a fire burned high and water boiled in a tin pan. Hallas watched Aragorn steep the herb in the pan, surprised at the soothing scent that rose in the steam. Aragorn cleansed the wound with the sweet-smelling water and lathered it with an ointment he had prepared with the rest of the kingsfoil. Then he bandaged it and gently turned the wounded man over onto his back. Sam placed a rolled up blanket beneath his head and Merry covered his body with another blanket. Hallas found himself only capable of watching; his limbs felt so very heavy and it was a struggle to keep his eyes open long enough to see Aragorn lean forward over his master.

"I have done all I can," he said, his voice so soft it was near a whisper. Hallas did not think he would have been able to understand the words if he had not sat so close by. He realized Aragorn was not speaking to them but to Erandír. "It is up to you now to live or die. Do not fail me, my brother."

"Is he going to be all right?" Hallas asked. Erandír looked peaceful as he slept, his chest rising ever so slowly with every breath.

Aragorn looked up. "I cannot promise you that, yet. The next days will be critical. But I can promise that I have done my very best."

"You better," Gimli said gruffly. "I would be very displeased if he were to die now. I still have a few words to say to Boromir."

Hallas blinked. He did not like Gimli's tone. He shifted a little closer. "What are you?" he asked. "You're not a hobbit, right?"

Gimli rolled his eyes. "Do I look like a hobbit?" He pulled himself up to his full height and Hallas realized that, though not as tall as a man, Gimli was taller than Drogo or Willy, or any of the other three hobbits.

"I," Gimli said formally, "am a dwarf. Gimli son of Gloin is my name."

"Oh." A dwarf! Hallas could scarcely believe his ears.

"What is the matter with you men?" Gimli continued. "Are you blind? Next you will tell me you have not noticed Legolas is an elf."

Hallas's eyes grew round and his gaze searched out Legolas. He stared. How had he failed to notice Legolas was not like any man he knew? Today was turning out quite remarkable. Elves, dwarfs -- creatures he had believed to exist in myth only. If not for Eran--, or no, Boromir being so badly injured, it would have been quite exciting.

Gimli caught his look and snorted. "As I said, blind, all of you."

"You should get some rest," Aragorn said. "There is nothing you can do for Boromir now. And it has grown too dark to travel. We will leave on the morrow, find a place where he can rest and heal."

"There is a village a few hours from here," Hallas offered. "That's where we were when the orcs attacked and took Gertie." He nodded at the sleeping children. "She's the curly-haired little girl."

"We shall take her back to her village, then," Aragorn decided.

Soon, the camp grew quiet. Opposite Hallas, across from the fire, Gimli lay snoring loudly. The hobbits had also wrapped themselves in cloaks and blankets. Only Aragorn and Legolas were awake, one gazing into the fire while occasionally checking up on Boromir, the other moving silently among the trees, keeping watch.

Despite feeling exhausted, Hallas found it hard to catch his sleep. So much seemed to have happened in a single day. He worried about Boromir still, despite Aragorn's assurances that there was nothing they could do now. And he had learned so many new things his brain was trying to catch up.

Even so, the silent night, with the gentle crackling of flames broken only by the occasional loud snort from Gimli, was soothing and Hallas found himself drifting off. But then, in the realm between wakefulness and sleep where the subconscious takes over, a thought came to him. He sat up with such a violent start that across the fire Gimli awoke, disoriented, his hand reaching for his axe before realizing they were not under attack.

"The stories..." Hallas gasped, suddenly wide awake again. "The songs..."

"What songs?" Pippin asked sleepily. He sat up and rubbed his eyes.

Hallas tried to recall the words of the song he had learned long ago from the Rohirrim. The memory had faded because his companion would never let him sing the song out loud, for reasons he refused to explain.

"The songs the soldiers sang," Hallas said, "I can't recall all the lines, but there was a verse about an elf-lord and a dwarf with an axe." He pointed at Sam and Merry. "You have the same names as the hobbits in the song!"

Sam made a noise in the back of his throat. Merry punched his shoulder. "Don't complain, Sam. I know very well you secretly like being in a song."

"So, it's true, then?" Hallas asked. "You are this... Fellowship?"

"Oh, aye, it's true all right!" Pippin said. "That's us."

"But... there are only six of you?"

"Seven," Gimli said. He indicated Boromir's sleeping form. "There's your Captain-General. We proved the song untrue today."

"Erandír was part of your fellowship? But why would he... He never said anything. Though he always hated that song."

Aragorn sighed. "We will need to have a long talk, you and I. There is much I would know. And I will have to tell you the tale of a man who was a hero yet believed himself unworthy. There will be plenty of time later, however. For now, get some sleep. You will need to guide us to that village tomorrow."

ooo

*Long black fingers clawed for him. Nebulous hands, yet firm enough to grab and sear his flesh with their touch. He struggled to avoid them but they seemed to be everywhere, forever shifting and drifting, reaching for him when he did look elsewhere. He wanted to scream and nearly choked when the cry lodged in his throat, tears streaming down his face as he tried to gasp for air. Frozen in time, he could not move. His limbs refused to work. He could only watch as the hands closed in on him, closer and closer, surrounding him, suffocating him...*

*Then a voice. It came from so far away, it seemed a mere whisper. But it was soothing, calm, achingly familiar. "Do not fail me, my brother."*

*It was the same voice that called him once before. It offered strength and purpose, and he renewed his struggles to fight the clawing fingers. And he was successful. One after another the hands dissipated, turning into foggy wisps that disappeared into the thin air, until nothing was left but a calm gray, a featureless plain that went on forever and ever. There was no sound, no smell, nothing to stimulate his senses.*

*Boromir started walking in the direction he believed the voice had come from. He walked for a long time. Strangely, neither thirst nor hunger plagued him.*

*He did not tire, he just put one foot in front of the other, left, right, left, again and again. Once he looked back but the field behind was as featureless as the land in front of him. Not even his footprints were to be seen beyond the first two or three sets. He hoped he was not walking in circles.*

*And while he walked, he began to hear voices. Voices he knew, voices that he loved. The voices brought memories crashing back, bringing tears to his eyes with their loveliness. He heard Merry and Pippin, squabbling over a piece of apple. Sometimes he heard Hallas's voice, imploring him to not give up. And sometimes, worst of it all yet the most hopeful at the same time, he heard Aragorn's voice. His king.*

## Many More Reunions

Boromir woke in the manner he had perfected many years ago: instantly. There was no slow transition from sleep to wakefulness, no lingering in a peaceful doze. His was the way soldiers woke: alert and ready in the blink of an eye.

He kept his eyes closed, though, aware that something was not as it should be, and tried to determine what it was that alerted him. His breathing remained slow and steady, so nothing would give away that he was no longer asleep. He used his senses to take stock of his surroundings. He was surprised to find himself in a soft bed -- when had that happened? A pillow supported his head and he was shrouded in sheets that felt crisp to his touch. The sheets held a vague scent of rose blossoms. It was a bright day, so the glow behind his closed eyelids told him. He felt strangely light on the feather bed, almost floating, as if he were still drifting in dreams he failed to remember. The single dissonant note to the peace he found himself in was a dull throb between his shoulder blades.

A sudden soft noise made him tense -- there was someone in the room with him! His eyes popped open. At first he could not make out more than a black silhouette -- the light was even brighter than he had imagined and it hurt his eyes, so long used to darkness. But gradually his vision adjusted and he began to make out details until the shape came into focus.

Boromir gasped in shock and instinctively tried to sit up. But he was too weak and after a feeble attempt fell back against the pillow, his heart thudding and his sight wavering. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment before opening them again. The specter was still there -- if he was dreaming it was a remarkably persistent dream.

Then the figure smiled.

"Welcome back, Boromir. For a while I feared we had lost you, just when we found you again."

"My lord." Boromir hardly recognized his own voice, it was so hoarse. He made another attempt to sit up and found he could neither lift his head nor raise more than a limp hand.

"Shh," Aragorn said. He took a cup from a side table and brought it to Boromir's lips. Sweetened cold tea slipped down his throat and he swallowed with gratitude. "There is no need to talk. Not yet. You have been quite ill and are very weakened."

"What... happened?" Boromir's brow furrowed as he tried to grasp the jumbled memories. The last thing he could recall was little Gertie's smile.

"You do not remember?" It was Aragorn's turn to frown. "You took an orc arrow in the back. It had been steeped in poison that nearly killed you."

"Oh." Boromir fought to keep his eyes open but the lids had grown heavy. Terribly heavy. There was so much he wished to ask Aragorn, so much he needed to tell him. But the words would not form in his brain and the outside world grew blurry. Aragorn seemed to dim before his eyes.

"Sleep, my friend." Aragorn's voice came from very far away, across a great chasm. "We shall talk later."

ooo

The next time Boromir awoke, night had fallen. Candlelight lit the unfamiliar room. He let his gaze drift around, hoping that it would trigger a memory. But all thought of his surroundings was forgotten when his eyes landed upon the still figure of his king, sitting at a small writing desk and studying a piece of paper.

It had not been a dream, then.

He could not fathom how Aragorn came to be in this simple room with him. He longed to beg for forgiveness but, unsure, did not know where to begin. So much time had passed since they had last spoken.

"My lord?" Boromir was glad to find his voice sounded less raspy than before though it was still raw from disuse.

Aragorn got up from his stool. "How are you feeling?"

"My king, I cannot-- I must--" Boromir stopped, breathless already and still undecided about how to start what he wished to say.

Aragorn smiled. "Hush," he admonished gently. "I will not have you waste what little energy you have to speak about things that can wait. First, we need to get some nourishment in you. You have lost a dreadful amount of weight."

He turned from the bed and stuck his head out the door. "Tell your mother," he said to someone unseen, "to bring up some of that soup she's been preparing. Oh, and some more honeyed tea, if you will."

"Aye, sir." Quick feet pattered away.

The voice had belonged to a boy -- Gertie's brother. Boromir suddenly knew where he was: in Mrs. Gooseberry's house in Gowan.

A few minutes later -- minutes, which to Boromir seemed long and burdensome when he had so much on his mind he wanted to tell his lord but could not -- the door opened and Mrs. Gooseberry walked in. She carried a tray that she placed on the small desk. On it stood a bowl from which a spicy scent drifted up. The smell made Boromir's mouth water. He realized it must have been quite a while since he last had food in him.

Mrs. Gooseberry turned toward him. Unshed tears glimmered in the candlelight. "I thank you," she whispered, "from the depth of my heart for bringing back my little girl." She brushed at her eyes. "I don't know what I would have done..."

Boromir cast a quick, embarrassed glance at Aragorn. He stood near the door, grinning. Boromir turned his attention back to Mrs. Gooseberry. "'Tis nothing," he tried to shrug. "I am glad to hear she is well."

The woman sniffled and smiled through her tears. "Thank you," she repeated before fleeing from the room.

Aragorn closed it behind her. He dragged the stool over to Boromir's bed. "I hear you have done a lot of such good works," he commented while reaching for the bowl and spoon. "Now, eat, Boromir." He spooned up some of the soup and brought it to Boromir's mouth.

Boromir's eyes widened with dismay when he caught his lord's intention. He tried to grab for the spoon. "I can--"

"No, you cannot," Aragorn interrupted. "You have been gravely ill. You can barely lift your head, so how do you think to handle a spoon?"

Reluctantly, Boromir had to agree. Aragorn was right. He was as weak as baby. If he tried to eat the soup himself, he would make a mess of Mrs. Gooseberry's sheets. And he did not dare imagine what embarrassment Aragorn might put him through during the changing of the covers. Left without a choice, he opened his mouth. As soon as the soup hit his palate, he forgot his embarrassment. It tasted delicious, better than anything he had ever eaten before. Aragorn chuckled at his eagerness to eat.

"How long?" Boromir asked between spoonfuls.

"Three weeks," Aragorn said. "The poison gave you a fever. It took a long time to break."

Three weeks! That must be why he was feeling so weak and why the food tasted so good. The spicy soup seemed to bring a little strength to his limbs and once he had finished it, he managed to sit up a little straighter. Aragorn placed the bowl back on the tray and poured another cup of honeyed tea from the pitcher.

"My lord," Boromir asked, "why do you extend me such care I do not merit?"

Aragorn gave Boromir the cup. "See if you can hold this." He stayed close, ready to intervene should Boromir drop it.

"I told you once before," he said when it seemed Boromir was strong enough to hold the tea clasped between his hands, "you have lost no honor in my eyes. Where you failed was not on Amon Hen but when you had no faith in your friends."

Tears burned in Boromir's eyes and he was glad he could hide behind the cup of tea. "That is what Faramir said, also. But I could not bear the shame. Frodo was so small and brave, and I, who should have been his protector, attacked him."

"Your brother is a far wiser man than people sometimes give him credit for," Aragorn said. "The only shame there is, is the shame you imagine in your own mind. To learn you trust us so little that you rather disappear and let us believe you had died than stay and talk hurt far more than anything that happened during our journey."

Boromir turned his head away. He could no longer bear to meet Aragorn's gaze. Often in the past years had he thought the same thing, and sometimes he had longed to return to make things better. But always something had held him back. Until so much time had passed he did not dare rake up the past. And now, his past had caught up with him.

"Boromir, look at me."

Slowly, incapable of disobeying the soft command in Aragorn's voice, he turned his head back. Instead of the fierce look of disapproval he had expected, Aragorn's gaze was warm and gentle with just a hint of the hurt he spoke of.

"Can you ever forgive me?" Boromir whispered.

A smile formed around Aragorn's lips. "I already have, my brother. Welcome home." He leaned forward to lightly kiss Boromir's forehead.

And with those few words, with that simple gesture, Aragorn lifted a weight of Boromir's shoulders, a heavy burden he did not know he carried until it was removed. A sob escaped Boromir's lips and he squeezed his eyes shut to banish the tears.

A voice cut through the turmoil of thoughts whirling in his brain.

"Aragorn may have forgiven you, but I will not so lightly forget what you put me through."

Boromir's eyes flew open, tears forgotten. "Gimli?"

Gimli stood in the door, looking exactly as Boromir remembered, with a long, scraggly beard and dark glittering eyes. Boromir started to smile but faltered when he noticed the scowl on Gimli's face.

"Gimli, I--"

"Erandír! You're awake!" A happy shout interrupted Boromir.

Hallas raced into the room, unceremoniously shoving Gimli aside and grinning from ear to ear. He staggered to a halt beside the bed and gazed down on Boromir. Then he raised a finger. "See," he said, doing a frighteningly accurate impression of Boromir at his sternest, "this is what happens when you don't wear your armor."

For a moment, the room was deadly silent. Then Aragorn exploded into laughter. Gimli's face twisted with the struggle to keep his scowl before he started to guffaw also. Boromir wanted to laugh with them but the sudden intake of breath hurt his lungs and he began to cough instead. The pleased smile fled from Hallas's face and he appeared worried.

"You are going to be all right, are you not, Erandír?"

"Yes, lad, he will be." Aragorn had taken the cup, refilled it and handed it back to Boromir. He took it and gulped the cool liquid down his throat. Taking a cautious breath, he managed to quell the coughing.

"And, laddie," Gimli added while he placed a hand on Hallas's shoulder, "you should learn to call him Boromir. That is, after all, his true name." He winked at Boromir. "'Tis good to see you again. And see you, hmm, somewhat well."

ooo

It took the better part of another three, frustrating weeks before Boromir had mended enough that Aragorn would allow him to leave Gowan and head for Bree. In a way, Boromir was glad for the change. The confinement, first to his bed and small room, then to the small village, had chafed. He had pushed himself to regain his physical strength but it had not been an easy task. As soon as he went out of the door, he could feel the eyes of the people follow him and hear them whisper in awed tones. He would be glad to escape their adulation. If only Aragorn had told the townspeople who he himself was, that would certainly have diverted their attention. But Boromir was hardly in a position to fault his king for wanting to keep such a secret.

Yet, though he would be happy to leave the small farmers' community behind, the thought of traveling to Bree also left him anxious. Bree would be his first

step on the road home, to a return to his City and reclaiming his position. He was not sure he was ready. He was not sure he would ever be ready.

And there was another issue weighing heavy on his heart. In Bree the rest of the Fellowship would be waiting. The reunion with Aragorn and Gimli had gone far better than Boromir could have ever hoped or dreamed, yet he could not be certain the others would judge him as mildly.

For days after he first woke from his fever he had not dared ask how they fared for fear of what he would be told. Then, one morning, after he had cautiously made his way from his room for the first time, he found Aragorn and Gimli sitting outside on a wood bench in front of the house. They were enjoying the morning sunshine and smoking their pipes.

"Sit, Boromir." Aragorn patted the bench between himself and Gimli.

"Before you keel over," Gimli added. "You look as white as a sheet."

Indeed, after the arduous journey down the hallway, Boromir was shaking and dizzy with fatigue. He wiped his forehead when he realized it was pearly with perspiration. He was grateful for the chance to rest his trembling limbs.

A tendril of tobacco smoke drifted up his nose, and Boromir coughed, though it was more for appearances' sake than that the smoke truly bothered him.

"Hmph," Gimli snorted around the stem of his pipe. "You are no better than Legolas."

Boromir hesitated only a moment, then took the offered opening. "How is Legolas?" He tried to make the question sound off-handed.

Aragorn gave him a sidelong glance. "I never did tell you, did I? It was Legolas who fired the arrow that saved your life. If not for his swift action, we would have come too late."

Images flashed before Boromir's eyes. A smirking orc, a raised blade. Then, a sudden arrow, blood spouting. He gasped. "You were there?"

"Aye," Gimli said. "Did you think we would let you have all the fun? We were there, and so were Merry, Pippin and Sam."

"The little ones came too?"

Aragorn smiled. "None were more eager to find you, once they learned of your survival."

Boromir closed his eyes briefly against the renewed stab of guilt. How could he ever make up to them? "I am sorry," he whispered.

"Hush," Aragorn said. "It is all water down the Anduin now."

"Then..." Boromir hesitated. "Why have they not come to see me?"

"Is that what is worrying you?" Aragorn tapped his pipe against the side of the bench to empty it. "Once they learned you would live, I told them to return home. They did not want to leave but I knew it would take a long time for you to recover, and there was naught they could do. Those two hobbits you rescued wished to go back to Staddle and I did not want them to travel alone. And Legolas took the other children back to their parents."

"So... They are not upset with me?"

"That, I cannot promise," Aragorn said. "You will have to find out for yourself. Once you're well enough, we will go to Bree. The hobbits will meet us there."

"And... after Bree?"

"We must return to Gondor," Aragorn said.

"And you will come with us, of course!" Gimli added.

Gondor... The land of his people. With Minas Tirith, his beloved White City, surrounded by the green fields of the Pelennor. The tower of guard, all pearl and silver, with banners flapping in the wind. The images came sudden and unbidden, stealing Boromir's breath with the unexpected pain of homesickness.

"I do not know that I can," he said at last, quietly.

Aragorn gave him another sidelong look but did not speak. Gimli snorted.

ooo

Boromir tightened the cinches on Barangol's tack and tested they were secured properly. In a few more days, he would learn the hobbits' opinion of him. And after that, he would have to make a decision -- although he did not think he truly had a choice. He knew he would go with Aragorn to Minas Tirith and face up to whatever fate had in store for him.

"Sir?" Mrs. Gooseberry was standing behind him, but it took Boromir a few moments to realize she was talking to him. It was strange how the people of Gowan had started showing deference to him while Boromir himself was having trouble adjusting to his newfound status. For so long had he been simple "master" that the sirs did not feel quite as indubitable as they once had. At least they did not call him 'lord', as they were doing Aragorn, instinctively sensing he was more than he appeared. Hallas was the only other person who

seemed to have as much trouble adjusting to Boromir's reformed name; the lad kept slipping and calling him Erandír. For that, Boromir was strangely grateful.

"Sir?" Mrs. Gooseberry repeated when he did not reply.

"How can I help you, Mrs. Gooseberry?"

She held a small bundle wrapped in cloth in her hands. Her children stood beside her, Gertie shy behind her mother's skirts. The girl had never fully thawed in Boromir's presence, but he could not blame her. She had been through a frightening experience, and he had been at the center of most of it.

"I baked you a meat pie," Mrs. Gooseberry said. "For your journey." She offered him the bundle. He accepted it with a smile, touched. It was still warm.

"Thank you, mistress. I am sure I will enjoy it much after long hours in the saddle."

She smiled and was about to turn away when she hesitated. Much to Boromir's dismay, she flung her arms around him, clutching his shirt, tears staining his tunic. He juggled the pie in one hand and awkwardly stroked her back with the other.

"Here, here..." he muttered, wishing she would stop crying.

"I can never thank you enough!" she sobbed. "You brought back my little Gertie!"

"'Twas my pleasure, mistress," he said. "Take good care of her now."

Mrs. Gooseberry laughed through her tears and let go of him. "Ah, don't you worry 'bout that! I certainly will!"

She seemed embarrassed at her outburst and flushed red when her eye caught the tearstains on his shirt. Boromir quickly turned away and ruffled Perry's hair. "You look after your mother and sister, all right?"

The boy puffed himself up a bit. "They will be safe with me, sir!" he promised.

Boromir laughed. He put the pie in one of the saddlebags and hoisted himself up on Barangol. He grimaced as it tore at the newly healed scar but quickly settled in his seat. Aragorn, with Gimli behind him, and Hallas were already waiting and within moments, they set out on the trail that led north.

ooo

Aragorn insisted on setting a slow pace. Secretly, Boromir was relieved. The time abed had seriously cut back on his saddle-endurance. They reached the Great East Road shortly after noon and the smooth surface made for easy riding. Still, Boromir was grateful when Aragorn called an early halt.

Aragorn had picked a small clearing for their camp, a little off the road. Hallas quickly kindled a fire while Gimli trotted to a nearby brook for fresh water. Soon the smell of stew filled the clearing. Boromir unwrapped his pie and broke it in four pieces, three of which he placed carefully upon the cloth. He sat chewing slowly on the fourth piece, watching the fire morosely while the others busied themselves around him. He was feeling rather useless but they had adamantly refused his help.

"What is on your mind, Boromir?" Aragorn sat down beside Boromir and reached for a piece of pie.

Boromir swallowed down his last bite and brushed the crumbs from his beard. "'Tis my brother," he confessed. "It was unfair of me to demand his silence, to ask him to keep such a dishonorable oath. I hope you do not hold it against him."

Aragorn remained quiet for a moment. He put another log on the fire before he answered. "I will admit I was quite angry with Faramir when I first found out about the secret you and he kept from me."

"As was I," Gimli interjected. He stirred the broth with more force than was necessary.

Aragorn smiled. "But we have come to realize you left him no choice. Your brother loves you very much, Boromir. He will be pleased to see you return home at last."

ooo

They reached Bree two days later, late in the afternoon. The gatekeeper at the South Gate gave them a cursory glance. Not even Gimli's presence seemed to elicit surprise in the guard. Perhaps he had heard the gossip from his fellow guardsman at the West Gate. Or perhaps he simply thought it was too hot to bother. Spring was in full swing and the weather unseasonably warm for the northern lands, with the sun glaring down from a clear blue sky.

Aragorn steered his horse along the street and into the courtyard of the Prancing Pony. "Hello Bob," he said as he threw the reins to the stable hand.

"Good afternoon, sirs. And welcome back."

They walked up the stairs to the common room. As soon as they were through the door, Archibald Butterbur descended upon them. "Welcome, welcome!" He turned to Boromir. "You must be Master Erandír. I have heard what you did for my uncle, and Nob's cousin. And for those poor children!" He wrung his hands. "What horrors they must have suffered. I have reserved the best room for you, just so you know!"

"I was not alone," Boromir muttered.

"Of course, of course. Best rooms for all of you!" And with that promise, Butterbur bustled off, calling for Nob.

Boromir shook his head while he stared after the proprietor's back. "I wish people would stop being so effusive," he muttered. "I'm only doing what I do best."

Aragorn laughed. "You did not used to be so self-deprecating," he said.

Boromir shrugged. "Twas true he used to take more pride in his achievements. But pride had not had a place in his life these past years. His pride, at the least, had died on Amon Hen.

"They are merely grateful for your help," Aragorn continued. "And I am glad for their talk. Your reputation allowed us to find you. We just had to follow the stories."

"And some stories they were!" Gimli added.

Boromir groaned inwardly. "I can imagine."

"Will you tell me some of those stories, Master Gimli?" Hallas asked, grinning.

"Of course. But not right away. First, we have important business."

Aragorn proceeded into the common room and there was nothing left to do for the others but to follow him. The room was quiet; it had not yet filled with Breelanders come for their evening ale. Only a few guests were seated at one of the tables.

As soon as Boromir stepped over the threshold, he froze. Those guests turned out to be four dear friends that for many years he had not expected to ever see again. Though he had known they would be waiting, laying eyes on them still came as a shock. A thick cloud of pipe smoke surrounded the three hobbits, while Legolas sat a little apart, out of the path of the drifting smoke. Pippin grabbed Merry's arm as soon as he caught sight of Boromir. They dropped their pipes and stared. Boromir could not think of a thing to say.

Then Pippin's face broke in a grin. "Boromir!" He hopped down and made a quick beeline for Boromir, his arms open wide. Boromir knelt and caught the hobbit in his arms. He could not stop the grin that formed on his face.

At last, Pippin pulled away. "You look much better than the last time I saw you," he said earnestly. "The bedrest has done you well."

"Aye, 'thas," Boromir admitted. He straightened to see the others crowd around them. Legolas smiled and grasped Boromir's shoulders.

"It is good to see you up and well," he said.

"I hear it is you I must thank for my well-being," Boromir replied.

Legolas shrugged. "It was an arrow well-spent."

"Come, Boromir, sit!" Merry was tugging on his sleeve. "We were so happy to hear you were alive. But then you gave us a pretty scare. You must tell us all that happened to you."

Boromir laughed. "All? That would be quite a lengthy tale, Master Meriadoc."

"Oh, we have time. As long as Butterbur supplies us with ale and food."

They put him in a chair by the cold fireplace and seated themselves around him. Sam poured ale from a large pitcher.

"Will you explain to us whatever possessed you to pretend you were dead?" Pippin cut right to the heart of the matter as soon as everyone was seated and provided with a pint.

"I tried to take the Ring from Frodo," Boromir said softly.

"And?" Merry demanded after long seconds had passed. "So would many other people, had they been given the chance. Is that a reason to disappear altogether?"

"Well, no..." Boromir fell silent again. Truth be told, he could not fully recall the reasons why he made the decisions he had, though they seemed to make perfect sense when he did. Time and distance had changed his perception; he had often regretted those decisions but believed it was too late to change anything. Yet here he found out it was never too late. He looked up. "Where is Frodo? I should like to speak with him."

"Mr. Frodo is gone," Sam said softly. "The quest had taken too much of a toll on him. He sailed west with Lord Elrond and the Lady Galadriel. So did Mr. Bilbo."

"And Gandalf, too," Pippin supplied. "We are all that is left of the Fellowship."

Quiet descended upon the room once more. In the distance, they could hear Butterbur ordering the kitchen staff around. Outside, a cart rattled past. The sun was sinking; soon the common room would fill. Boromir's heart felt heavy; for some things, after all, it was too late.

Then Gimli raised his pint of ale. "To the Fellowship."

The others raised their goblets as well. "To the Fellowship," they echoed.

## Roadside council

Nîneth tied off the final thread and held up the tunic for a critical last look. She allowed herself to feel a moment's pride in her handiwork and satisfaction in a job well done. The tunic was cut from a dark blue silk; silver trim gleamed along the collar and cuffs while a plane tree leaf embroidered in white adorned the chest. The steward should be pleased. The garment was among her finest work.

She had labored hard to make it so, with little time to spare for food or sleep. A mere two days ago the Steward had shown up near suppertime in the small workshop on the fourth level that she had bought when the previous owner retired. Nîneth had been most surprised, and a little worried. Although he and his lady wife occasionally commissioned garments from her -- curiously enough always when business was slow and she was struggling to get by -- he had never set foot in the shop before. In fact, in the years since the interview upon the eve of her arrival in Minas Tirith, she had not exchanged a single word with him.

But he had quickly put her concern to rest. "I want you to prepare a full suit of clothing," he had said without many preambles.

"Of course, my lord."

She brought him to the corner where bales of fabrics were waiting for her clientele. He instantly picked out the midnight blue silk that had arrived from Far Harad the day before.

"A very good choice, my lord. This material is supple and light, you will enjoy wearing it. It goes well with the silk velvet for a cloak I have here."

"Oh," he said, "it is not for me!" He had frowned, and Nîneth remembered thinking to herself that he looked tired. She did not envy his task: the king had been gone for several months and the city was growing restless in his absence. People believed that trouble was brewing. The very morning of his visit, at the market, she heard a conversation that still send chills of fear along her spine as she recalled it.

*"Best buy extra stores today, when prices are still reasonable," one woman had advised another while she picked up an orange squash and turned it this way and that to appraise it.*

*"Why's that?" asked the other.*

*The first woman had lowered her voice but Nîneth could not help overhearing standing right next to the pair as she was. "My sister's neighbor's cousin works in the household of the merchants' guildsmaster. She says that her master is*

*very concerned there may be a war because Captain-General Boromir is on his way to the City."*

*"Boromir?" the second woman exclaimed, and the first quickly hushed her to quiet. She continued in a softer voice. "But I thought he had died in the war."*

*"Aye," said the first woman. "That's what they wanted us to believe. But it's whispered he's been kept prisoner somewhere up north and is now returning with an army to take back what belongs to him."*

*The second woman shook her head. "But the king--"*

*"Don't you see? The king's not even here!"*

"I suppose you will need to know what size to cut the cloth," the steward had continued after a moment, bringing her back to the present. "Picture a man as tall as I am, but a little broader in the shoulders." He stopped there, his gaze growing distant. "It's been so long," he murmured before he turned back to Nîneth. "Make it as you would for me, and it should fit him. Be sure to do your best work. Anyone who sees the clothes must know the wearer is an important man and a member of the House of Húrin."

"Yes, my lord."

"Oh, and you must make haste. I want it to be finished in two days' time at the latest."

Nîneth hesitated only a moment. "Of course, my lord."

He had smiled, then, though not at her, and muttered, "I cannot wait to see his face."

She had had work into the night to finish the clothes in time. But she had managed, and he would be pleased. It did not matter that her back hurt from being hunched over for so long, that her eyes stung or that her fingertips had gone numb from pushing the needle through the cloth countless times. She owed him a debt of gratitude and was glad to be able to repay it.

Almost as if her thoughts summoned him, the bell over the door rang and the steward strode in. He seemed even more worried and rushed than he had on his first visit.

"Is it done?" he asked, again without prelude.

"Yes, my lord. Just let me wrap it up for you."

"Thank you."

A few minutes later she had wrapped the tunic, a matching pair of breeches and a light summer's cloak in a piece of burlap and tied it with a string. "Here you go, my lord."

"Thank you, Nîneth." He left a purse on the table that looked far too heavy, even for the swift work she had done, and quickly departed before she could find the words to protest that he was overpaying her. The soft chime of the bell echoed for a moment before the shop went silent again.

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The air was heavy and still. The sun was a white-hot ball that burned the sky to a pale blue and made the horizon shimmer in the distance. High overhead, a bird of prey was flying lazy circles in search of its midday meal. The road was deserted, except for the small traveling party and their horses, although far off Boromir could see people busying themselves on their land; dust rose where they worked. It hung in the still air for a long time.

He squinted at the peaks of the Ered Nimrais silhouetted sharply against the sky. The white snow glistened in the sunlight. In the privacy of his mind, he had been calling the peaks by their names as they slowly fell away behind them. Halfirien, Calenhad. Eilenach towered over the Druadan forest and Amon Din rose up not far ahead. Soon, Mount Mindolluin would appear over its shoulder. More than four years had passed since he last saw those mountains, the silent watchers over Gondor's history. Unlike he, they had not changed at all.

So much had happened during those years. So much he had missed. His brother married. Mithrandir departed. Frodo gone. And Sam--

"Is something amiss, Boromir? Is the wound paining you still?" Aragorn pulled up beside him, a slight wrinkle marring his brow.

"Eh?" Boromir realized his horse had used his master's absentmindedness to stop walking and nibble on some of the grass growing at the edge of the road. He thought he must be looking rather foolish -- sitting still atop a horse that was not going anywhere, gazing up at mountaintops. "No, everything is fine. The wound has healed nicely, due to your care. I was thinking about the little ones."

After the initial awkward reunion in Bree, he had spent several weeks catching up with the latest news in the hobbits' lives while recuperating further, before Aragorn said it was time they head back to Minas Tirith. It was during their farewells at the bridge over the Brandywine river -- which was as far into the Shire as Aragorn was willing to travel -- that Sam had presented him with the tiniest, prettiest little girl child Boromir had ever seen.

"This is Elanor," Sam had said while the toddler clung to his knee. "My daughter."

Boromir had blinked, overwhelmed with a sense of happiness. He could not recall what he had told Sam but the hobbit had blushed with pleasure and pride before taking the girl back to her mother -- a rather pretty hobbit herself, Boromir had thought.

"Ah," Aragorn replied, pulling Boromir back to the here and now. The king gave a half-smile. "You need not worry. They are a sturdy people that can take care of themselves." He handed Boromir his water skin. "Here, have a drink. It is a hot day."

Absently, Boromir accepted the flask and took a deep swallow. "Thank you."

Aragorn was right, of course. The halflings were living normal, happy lives, with sweethearts and wives and children. It had turned out well, all things considered. Still, he wished he could have talked with Frodo one last time. No matter how often Sam assured him that Frodo had understood why Boromir tried to take the Ring, had understood better than anyone, it would have been nice to ask for his forgiveness. Frodo's pardon would have bolstered his determination to return home at last and finally face up to the consequences.

"Boromir?" There was laughter in Aragorn's voice. "You are daydreaming again. We will never reach home if you keep indulging in reveries."

Boromir's cheeks glowed with embarrassment and he was glad for the heat so the blush would go unnoticed. "I apologize. It is just--" He stopped, uncertain of what he wanted to say.

"Do you not wish to return?" Aragorn asked, more serious now. "Or do you fear the reception you might receive?"

Boromir blinked, for a moment taken aback that his feelings were so apparent to the king. But he should not be surprised; Aragorn had always been able to read him well.

"I am concerned," Boromir admitted. "It will be a great pleasure to see the walls of Minas Tirith, to lay eyes upon the Tower of Guard again though I had given up hope. But I worry my return might cause strife. Not everyone will be pleased to see I still live."

Such worries had been plaguing him ever since Aragorn had made it known he wanted Boromir to return to Minas Tirith. When he had left, Boromir had not given much mind to the consequences of pretending to be dead. But now, with his name reclaimed and his position about to be reinstated, there were many legalities that needed to be dealt with. He was his father's oldest son, and his heir. And what was worse, Faramir had *known* his brother was alive, yet still

had accepted their father's inheritance. Boromir feared what his return might mean for his brother more than anything else.

Aragorn nodded sternly. "Aye. But you *are* alive. And I will not have you deny that again." The king's expression softened and he smiled. "Come, Boromir. We must hurry to catch up with the others. Who knows what nonsense Gimli is putting into the boy's head right now."

Putting deed to word, he nudged his horse into a trot. Quickly, Boromir brought Barangol to follow. Up ahead, the two horses carrying Legolas, Gimli and Hallas were about to disappear behind a bend in the road.

It took them several minutes to catch up. Gimli was talking animatedly to Hallas, using both hands to underline the point he was making. When Boromir pulled up, Hallas turned in the saddle.

"Gimli says that you and Lord Aragorn killed a water monster that was ten times as big as you. And that it had twenty arms!"

Aragorn chuckled below his breath and Boromir shot the king a brief glare. "Gimli exaggerates," he said.

The dwarf harrumphed. "That's not exaggeration," he protested. "A dwarf knows how to tell a tale well, that's all there is to it. And I found your young friend here has quite a few stories to tell of his own. Perhaps Aragorn would like to hear about the spectacle you inflicted upon the unsuspecting village women when the orcs attacked."

Aragorn raised an eyebrow. "I have not heard about such a thing. Please, Hallas, tell me more."

"Aye, my lord. It happened when..."

Boromir groaned and rolled his eyes. He allowed his horse to fall back out of earshot. He had no wish to hear the story; he had many other, more important things to think about.

Overhead, the sun was still fiery white. Ahead, Mount Mindolluin came into view, wavering in the heat.

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They were still several leagues from the Rammas Echor when darkness was falling. The sun had disappeared behind Mount Mindolluin and though the sky overhead was still a dark blue, the road was shrouded in the long shadows of the mountains.

"We will not reach Minas Tirith before nightfall," Legolas said. "Aragorn, what do you wish to do? Do you want to continue in the darkness? It is nearly full moon and the sky is clear so we should have enough light to travel by. Or shall we make camp here?"

Aragorn pondered for a moment. "We will make camp," he said. "I do not want to arrive after nightfall and cause a commotion when the guards recognize me."

Legolas turned back in his saddle and peered ahead intently.

"What do you see?" Gimli asked, attempting to peek over Legolas's shoulder and failing.

"A fire," Legolas said. "Someone else has set up a camp."

"Then let us go join them," Gimli said. "We might share a meal."

"Or frighten them witless when they recognize their king," Boromir said.

Aragorn was shaking his head. "I doubt that they would," he said. "If they are from Anórien or the Pelennor, they would not be making a camp. If they are not, chances are, they do not know me by sight. And I can blend in well, as you know." He smiled. "Besides, I would like to know why someone would be camping out in the wilds instead of finding themselves an inn in the city."

"Perhaps they also could not reach the city before nightfall?" Hallas suggested.

"Perhaps," Aragorn said absently. "We will know soon enough."

As they approached the fire, they could see the camp was small. A single tent stood pitched a few yards from the road in a small clearing between the trees. An unsaddled horse stood not far from the tent, nibbling on the leaves.

A lone man sat on a log beside the fire but he jumped up when the riders approached. He was dressed in light leather armor and had his sword halfway out of its scabbard before he fully stood. "Who goes there?" he challenged.

"It is I, Beregond," Aragorn said as he rode into the circle of light and dismounted. With a start, Boromir recognized the man as the guard who had saved his brother from the pyre.

"My lord!" Beregond dropped his sword back in its scabbard and took a deep bow. "I apologize, sire. I did not recognize you. I am glad to see you."

"'Tis dark." Aragorn shrugged off the apology. "Tell me, what are you doing here?"

"The Steward, sire. He received King Éomer's message that you were on your way. He sent me to ride out and intercept you."

"Why would Faramir do such a thing?" Aragorn frowned. "Has something happened in my absence?"

"Not that I know of, sire. But the Lord Steward told me to inform you that he politely requests you visit his house in Emyrn Arnen before you return to the City."

"He would keep me from going to my city?"

Beregond looked shocked at the suggestion and forgot himself for a moment. "No! He says there are issues he urgently needs to discuss with you first."

Aragorn's frown deepened. "And where is Faramir now?"

"In Minas Tirith, sire. I am told to go get him, while you ride to Emyrn Arnen."

"Perhaps we should do as Faramir asks," Boromir said softly while he stepped closer to Aragorn.

"Lord Boromir? Is it truly you? Lord Faramir said that... But I never thought... I believed..." Beregond grinned broadly. "In any case, it is good to see you, my lord."

Boromir returned the grin a little awkwardly. "Thank you, Beregond. It is good to be home." He turned back to Aragorn. "Faramir must have good reason for his request. And I believe I can guess what it is about."

"So can I," Aragorn muttered. Louder, he said, "Ride back to the city. Tell Faramir I am waiting for him here."

"But, sire--"

"I will not give fuel to the gossips by sneaking around the Pelennor at night," Aragorn said, "or by having private meetings at the steward's country residence. Someone is bound to read too much into it. Tell Faramir I will meet him here tonight, or speak with him tomorrow when I reach the city."

"Yes, sire." Beregond bowed. "With your leave, I best be on my way, then." He turned briskly and went to saddle his horse.

Within moments, Beregond was galloping away along the road at a dangerous speed. He quickly disappeared in the encroaching night. Boromir listened as the footfalls of the horse echoed against the mountains and slowly fell away.

"Boromir? What's happening?" Hallas appeared at his elbow.

"Politics," Boromir said. He turned to Barangol and started unstrapping his belongings before taking off the tack and saddle. "I told you that Faramir, the Steward of Gondor, is my brother. He is also five years my junior. That means it is I who is my father's heir with regard to the Stewardship, as well as many other things, and not Faramir."

"But they thought you were dead!"

"Exactly," Boromir said. He began to brush down Barangol's coat until it gleamed in the firelight, finding the mindless activity soothing. "And now they will learn I am not. It makes for a rather complicated jurisdictional entanglement and could cause grave problems for Faramir or King Elessar."

"But how--"

"Enough," Aragorn interrupted. "We will discuss this further when Faramir arrives. Now, off you go, lad, and see if you can snare us a late night supper. I fear it is going to be a long night with little sleep."

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"Someone is coming," Legolas said softly, several hours later. Boromir pulled his eyes away from the flames and strained his ears. It was five minutes later before his hearing could confirm the elf's observation. Distant and muted at first, he detected the sound of horses on the smooth surface of the road. The noise carried far through the night and grew louder gradually.

Though it was close to midnight, it was not very dark. As predicted, the moon had come up not long after Beregond left. It was a near-perfect circle, missing a sliver so small it could fool the eye into believing it was full. Thousands upon thousands of stars sparkled around the moon in the velvety black sky. Together, they created an ethereal atmosphere where the silvery gleam leached the color out of the world. The fire had been allowed to burn low as the summer night was warm, and it cast a small circle of brighter yellow light.

Another five minutes passed before three riders came into view. In the moonlight, they were nothing but dark shapes with ghostly pale faces. It was hard to tell who they were. Yet Boromir's heart began to beat a little faster when he recognized Faramir by the way his brother sat his horse. No longer able to remain seated, he got up, waiting expectantly. He barely noticed when Aragorn came to stand beside him.

The second rider soon revealed himself as Beregond. Boromir felt like he should know the third rider also, somehow, but before he could further discover who the man was, Faramir had hopped off his horse and closed the few steps to Boromir and Aragorn.

"You look well, my lord," he said to Aragorn.

"You, on the other hand," Aragorn replied, "look harried. Are the Harad emissaries giving you so much trouble?"

Though he said it with a laugh, Boromir knew the king well enough to see the concern beneath his easy manner. And he had to agree with Aragorn. Close up, Faramir still was pale, and there were shadows beneath his eyes. He appeared like a man who had not had much sleep, lately.

Faramir did not smile back. "Those," he said, "I can deal with. Other issues have kept me up late. I am glad you are returned."

He then turned to Boromir who grinned in greeting.

"Hello, little brother," Boromir said.

Faramir looked him up and down for a long while, his face betraying little of his emotions, and Boromir's grin faded. He had always been able to read his brother but now he was not sure what Faramir was thinking. Then Faramir's eyes met his and his face split in a grin. He wrapped Boromir up in a hug, thwacking his back.

"'Tis good to see you again, Boromir! And you look well. Although a bit frayed around the edges, I have to add. A good thing I brought you some decent attire to wear. Cannot have my brother enter the city looking like a vagrant."

Boromir glanced down, noticed the worn cuffs of his simple linen shirt, the sewn-on patches on his oft-mended breeches, and gave a rueful grin. "These clothes have served me well and long."

"Far too long, I should think," said a deep voice.

Boromir looked up, startled. "Uncle Imrahil!" He knew suddenly why the third rider had been familiar.

Imrahil's eyes flashed with suppressed anger. "What *were* you thinking, boy? Running off like you did?"

"I--" Boromir began but his uncle was not done.

"Have you any idea how much grief you caused? How much trouble you put your brother in? I should put you over my knee, big as you are!"

There was a suppressed snort somewhere off to Boromir's left. A quick glance told him Hallas had made the sound but he could not tell if the boy was frightened in the face of the angry lord, or if nervousness made him snicker at the mental image. He felt his own anger rise.

"I do not think--" he protested.

"Apparently not," Imrahil cut him off. "I thought you were smarter, Boromir. I expected more sense from you."

"I did what I thought best for Gondor," Boromir said stubbornly. "It was my choice, a personal matter, not anyone's business but my own."

"Did not your father teach you anything? For one of the high houses of Gondor, and even more so the House of Húrin, personal matters *are* matters of the realm. By blood, you are one of Gondor's nobles. You cannot come and go as you please and expect it to have no consequences."

"Imrahil, I think that will do," said Aragorn, placing a hand on the prince's shoulder. "'Twas I, who asked Boromir to come home. Come, we have important matters to speak of. Then, when all is settled, I give you leave to do to Boromir as you must." He flashed a quick smile designed to ease the tension.

For a moment Imrahil continued to glare, then his shoulders slumped. "Ah, well, it never did him much good in the past. No reason why it should do now. And the damage is done." He turned to Aragorn. "You are right, of course, my lord. Let us concentrate on minimizing the consequences."

Aragorn preceded Imrahil to the logs around the fire. Faramir began to follow but Boromir held him back. "Uncle seems really upset," he said softly. "Are things truly as bad in the city? How much trouble did I put you in, exactly?"

Faramir shrugged. "I am not sure. I tried to keep your return quiet until you and Elessar arrived but word has gotten out anyhow. I had not even told Uncle about you until the messenger came from Rohan with the news that you were in Edoras and on your way home. He has not had much time to get used to the idea and I think he is as angry with me for keeping your secret as he is with you. He will come around, you shall see." He gave a soft smile. "You were always his favorite nephew."

"Second favorite, Faramir. Second favorite."

They followed Aragorn and Imrahil to the fire.

## Homecoming

Within moments, the four men were seated around the fire. Gimli was sound asleep in the tent, undisturbed by the new arrivals. Even Imrahil's outburst had not woken him. The dwarf's snores drifted out through the opening, loud in the quiet night. Hallas and Beregon had withdrawn out of earshot and were looking after the horses. Boromir had no idea where Legolas had disappeared off to. The elf did not seem to need much rest, and apparently, Legolas had decided the proceedings did not concern him.

"It is good of you to have come, Imrahil," Aragorn was saying. "I will welcome your counsel."

Imrahil gave a self-deprecating shrug. "When the fate of my nephews and that of my country is at stake, how could I stay away?"

"You keep speaking of doom," Boromir said. "It cannot be as bad as you make it out to be. How does my return to Minas Tirith put the future of Gondor at risk?"

Imrahil sighed. "Think, Boromir. You are, or should have been, your father's rightful heir. Instead, you disappear, leaving everyone to believe you are dead. And then you return five years later. Did you expect that would not have serious ramifications?"

"Yes, but--"

Aragorn held up a hand to silence Boromir's protest. "You will have the chance to explain your decision to your uncle later. First, I want to hear what my steward has to say. I would like to know what is so important that it needs to be discussed here by the roadside and cannot wait until I am returned to Minas Tirith."

Faramir's lips pressed together and Boromir noticed how much his brother seemed to have aged in the five years since he had left. Or was it just exhaustion that made him look haggard?

"There is unrest brewing in the city. Discontented parties are drawing together; they are using rumors of Boromir's imminent return to sow uncertainty." He took a moment to collect his thoughts. "Or for a diversion. Cranthir of Tol Falas has been quietly settling the coast of South Gondor."

Boromir tried to recall who Cranthir was but failed to put a face to the name. Thoughts of the island of Tol Falas brought to mind a soft-spoken man with white hair who had rarely raised his voice the few times he attended council meetings. But then it came to Boromir -- Cranthir was the son; the old lord must have passed away.

"He has always been a hothead; I knew he was not pleased with my edict regarding the southern lands," Aragorn mused. "But I had not believed him capable of such rebellious acts."

"He has been stirring up the people near the Ethir Anduin to join him," Faramir continued, "telling them that as long as the occupied lands are not ruled by proper Gondorian nobles, the threat from Umbar remains. The people in the Ethir Anduin suffered greatly the last decades and they are susceptible to his arguments."

"You have never mentioned such thing to the Council!" Imrahil interjected.

"Aye," Faramir said. "It was only a few days ago that I received confirmation. I hoped the stories were exaggerated. But Cranthir is counting on the Council being too occupied with the difficulties in the City to pay much attention to what is going on in the south. He relies on his lands being too far from Minas Tirith for us to bother. The Haradric ambassador is not pleased. The settlers have been interfering with the trade parties."

Aragorn rubbed his brow, the carefree attitude of a ranger in his element replaced with the burden of responsibility. "I can see I have returned not a day too soon."

"I have drawn up the order to summon Cranthir to Minas Tirith," Faramir said, "where he will answer for his actions. It only awaits your signature. I do not believe he realizes that you are back, yet, for you have been gone without a word for a long time. Some even wonder if you have abandoned them."

"The people of Gondor must learn to accept that they have to share me with their kindred in the North," Aragorn said. "There will come other times that I must go forth for months, perhaps longer. And when I'm gone, you must speak in my stead."

Imrahil sat forward. "That is part of the problem, sire. Not everyone accepts Faramir's orders as yours. Even in the Council, there is often great debate, especially since Boromir's survival has given your adversaries the means to cast doubt on the legality of Faramir's office. Some never fully accepted the change of regime. In your absence, they have seen their chance. Cranthir does not believe Faramir will intervene--"

"I understand, Imrahil," Aragorn said. "Still, I cannot be here at all times to keep the fiefs in check. Faramir, you can not fail to act when--"

"I do not!" Faramir protested, not giving the king a chance to finish. "But the messenger from Rohan said you were on your way. Under the circumstances, I thought it better to have your full authority backing me up. The last thing Gondor needs is a civil war." He paused a moment, looking a little startled at his own outburst, and Aragorn gestured for him to continue. "Rumor says that Boromir is on his way to claim his inheritance. It has given the dissenters the

excuse to question my every decision and to rally others who carry a grudge to do the same. I wasted far too many hours the last weeks to rectify what should have been trivialities instead of resolving important matters. But I cannot stop the gossips. It is even whispered that there is an army on the way to set things right and put Boromir in my stead!"

Boromir snorted with disgust. "That is preposterous." He glanced longingly at Barangol, his trusted mount. Life as a drifter had been hard, but it had been uncomplicated and often satisfying. He could barely make out Hallas's shape in the shadows beneath the trees where the boy was keeping himself busy grooming Faramir's horse. The lad's face floated as a pale blur in the darkness every time he darted a worried glance at the group around the fire.

"Boromir?"

He felt the king's intent gaze rest upon him and he tore his eyes away from the horses.

"You know I have no desire to take Faramir's place," Boromir said quietly. "And I do not wish to be the cause of such problems for Gondor. Perhaps," he suggested, pushing up from the log, "it is better I remain dead. With your permission, I will go and return North so you can concentrate on consolidating your reign." From the corner of his eye, he saw Faramir give a start.

"It might not be such a bad idea," Imrahil observed after a short pause. He met Boromir's eyes. "Do not misunderstand me, Boromir. I am overjoyed to see you are well, despite my harsh words. But to have you return after five years... It upsets the balance wrought in the Council. Cranthir would not have dared such a rebellion if he did not think you would keep Minas Tirith distracted."

Aragorn appraised Imrahil for a moment before he addressed Boromir. "You will not have my permission," he said. "You are still a lord of Gondor, and as such should take up your rightful place. Whatever I decide that is. Sit down, Boromir."

Boromir hesitated a moment before he lowered himself back on the log with a sigh. "I had forgotten how irksome political intrigue can be," he muttered.

Beside him, Imrahil snorted a humorless laugh. "Welcome back, son."

Boromir glanced over at Aragorn. "They cannot compel you instate me as Steward in Faramir's place, can they?"

It was Faramir who answered instead of the king. "No. After the coronation, I did what you, or any other steward, would have done. I relinquished the office. The line of the Ruling Stewards has ended. It was King Elessar who next chose

me to be his steward, as is his right. The Stewardship and all it entails is mine, as long as I live or as long as the king wants me to serve."

"'Twould be a sad day when a few wayward nobles could tell me how to rule my kingdom," Aragorn added. "Now, Faramir, I assume you brought the summons with you. Give it to me, so I can sign it. Beregond can take it back to the City and have the guard dispatched."

Faramir started to get up, but as if he had anticipated his lord's need, Beregond materialized from the shadows. In his arms, he carried a small wooden box that he set down beside Faramir.

"Thank you, Beregond." Faramir opened the box to reveal sheets of paper, a writing quill and a small, stoppered bottle of ink.

"Perhaps you would also pour us some of the cider I brought along?" Imrahil suggested. "I believe we have need for some refreshment. I do hope it is still cool enough to be palatable."

"I'm sure it will be, my lord," Beregond said. "There is a small stream running out of the mountains not far from here. I had the bottle placed in the water to keep it cool."

A few moments later, they were all provided with cups of cider and Aragorn signed the order. Once the ink was dry, he rolled up the sheet of paper and put it in a leather tube before he gave it to Beregond. The guard's captain, given loan of Hallas's horse, which was far more rested than his own, led the mount toward the road, where he swung himself up.

"What other dissenters will need dealing with?" Aragorn asked when the sounds of hooves had faded in the night.

"The usual malcontents," Faramir said. "Ramloth of Linhir is stirring up the old grievances about the South Ithilien land deeds. He hopes that questioning the validity of my Stewardship will shed doubt on my decision to deny his claim."

"Does he have any allies?" Aragorn asked.

Faramir shrugged. "He may have gone into consort with Cranthir."

"If he has, he will suffer the same fate," Aragorn decided. "The Stewardship is beyond doubt. I will not have anyone question it again."

There was silence for a moment.

"Ithilien is inhabited?" Boromir asked. The news had come as a surprise to him. It had been before his birth that Ithilien was relinquished to the forces of

Mordor and subsequently robbed of much of its beauty. He had not expected restoration efforts to be successful so quickly.

"Aye," Faramir said with a smile that betrayed his love for the fair lands east of the Anduin. "It is hard work to bring it back to its previous beauty but yes, Ithilien is being tilled again. Boromir, you should see Emyr Arnen! You will not believe your eyes." For the moment, Faramir seemed to have forgotten the politics while he told Boromir about the house he had built, or the gardens Legolas had laid out, where flowers bloomed in spring and orchards filled with fruit in the fall.

Aragorn smiled as he watched his steward's enthusiasm and allowed him a short while to stray from the more serious subjects at hand.

"It sounds beautiful," Boromir agreed. "I would love to visit for a while."

The joy disappeared from Faramir's face as if he were suddenly reminded of an old heartache. "You cannot merely visit, Boromir. Emyr Arnen belongs to you. It is part of your inheritance from Father."

"What? But... You are Gondor's rightful steward, you said so yourself!"

"Faramir speaks the truth," Imrahil said softly. "Emyr Arnen is part of the Húrin estate, and as such it is not necessarily part of the steward's assets."

"But that leaves you with--"

"The second-born son's share," Faramir finished. "The house on Rath ENEG, a farm in Anórien, a few other odds and ends."

"No!" Boromir said forcefully. "No, Faramir, I cannot put you out of the home you built with such love. *I will not.*" He turned to Aragorn as if wanting to plead for the king's support. Much to his astonishment, Aragorn was smiling.

The grin widened at the surprise on Boromir's face. "Did you think, my friend, I had not prepared for this? Often, you have complained to me about your return to Minas Tirith. I know you do not wish to take on the role of counselor in my court. And I would not force you, you would not be happy there."

"My lord!" Imrahil interrupted. From the look on his face, he was as surprised as Boromir. "If you allow Boromir to give up his lands, he will be left--"

"Yes, I know." Aragorn held up a hand. "Let me finish. There are many parts of the kingdom that have not been granted to anyone, many parts that run wild, far from my control. Some of those areas are deserted and I have no interest in submitting wolves and deer to my reign. But other places need to be brought into the fold if we are ever to have peace. I cannot be in all those places at once. I need someone whom I can trust, who is not afraid to pick up the sword when needed, to do it for me. Someone like Boromir."

He tugged his saddlebag closer to pull out a scroll of vellum. He tugged the ribbon that held it close and unrolled it. "I had this drawn up in Edoras," he explained. "How does Lord of Dunland sound?"

"Dunland?" Boromir echoed.

"Yes. Dunland. Nobody seems to want it; they complain it is too far from the citadel. And the Dunlendings are considered too troublesome. Éomer has been keeping them in check for me, but I cannot continue to rely on Rohan to do my work. I thought it would fit you perfectly."

"I-- I suppose it does," Boromir stammered. He tried to wrap his mind around the idea. It would keep him far from Minas Tirith's meddling courtiers, far from the whispers they would exchange behind his back. It would keep Faramir in Eryn Arneth, where his brother belonged -- in spite of what the laws of bequeathal said. And it would give him a chance to really make a difference, to help Aragorn far better than he ever could do as a lone vigilante.

A slow grin broke on Boromir's face. "It would be my pleasure, sire, to serve as your liegeman in Dunland."

"Good." Aragorn scrawled something on the piece of parchment. "I, Elessar Telcontar, hereby grant the tenement of Dunland to Boromir Denethorion. Faramir, Steward of Gondor, and Imrahil, Prince of Dol Amroth, bear witness to this grant."

Boromir blinked for a moment at the sudden formality, then inclined his head and dropped to a knee. "Here do I swear fealty and service to Gondor, and to the Lord and King of the realm."

The words of the oath, learned so long ago and only spoken once before, came unbidden and natural. "To speak and to be silent, to do and to let be, to come and to go, in need or in plenty, in peace or war, in living or dying, from this hour henceforth, until my lord release me, or death take me, or the world end. So say I, Boromir son of Denethor."

"And this do I hear, Elessar Telcontar, King of the Reunited Kingdom of Gondor and Arnor, and I will not forget it, nor fail to reward that which is given: fealty with love, valor with honor, oath-breaking with justice!"

"This will not allay the fears of those who believe that Boromir is slighted and wishes to reclaim his inheritance," Imrahil cautioned. "They might see it as a further insult or even exile." He looked pleased, nevertheless.

"I realize that," Aragorn said. He sanded the vellum to dry the ink. "That's why we will have to do this again tomorrow in Council, with as much pomp and grandeur as we can muster."

Faramir chuckled as Boromir groaned. "See? I knew I brought you those garments for a reason!"

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Not long after Boromir had sworn fealty as the new lord of Dunland the sky to the east began to grow pale. The summer night was short. The moon set behind the mountains and the stars faded while Faramir and Imrahil prepared for their departure. They would need to hurry if they wished to arrive in Minas Tirith before the city woke up.

"Remember, Faramir, I want to see the full council at the noon hour," Aragorn instructed

"Aye, sire."

The time of their return was most fortuitous. Most if not all of Gondor's nobles were currently in residence in Minas Tirith in preparation of the midsummer ceremonies and festivities to be held in a few days. Boromir wondered if Aragorn had timed it so on purpose. Though he knew that his injury had caused the greatest delay, he would not put it past the king to have machinated their travels so they would arrive at the height of the social season. Beneath his sometimes lenient exterior, Aragorn had proved himself an adroit politician.

"Boromir!" Imrahil approached, leading his horse by its bridle. "Boromir, I do not pretend to understand why you did what you did, or to even condone it. But I do believe you meant well. It is good to have you back, alive and well."

Boromir smiled in gratitude when his uncle embraced him. "I am sorry," he said. He did not know if he would have made the same decision now; it was hard to recall his motivations at the time. The times were different now -- *he* was different.

Imrahil smiled back. "I will see you later in the morning, Boromir. Make sure you look like a proper lord of the realm."

Boromir chuckled. "Do not worry, uncle. I still remember how to impress the Council."

A moment later, the steward and the prince disappeared down the road toward Minas Tirith.

A hand landed on Boromir's shoulder. "Come, Boromir. We should follow Imrahil's advice and make ourselves presentable."

Boromir looked at the king, knowing his own appearance was as unkempt as that of his lord's, with too-long hair that had not been washed properly in too many days, and an untidy beard. Though they had passed several inns along the way from Edoras where they could have stayed in comfort, Aragorn had deemed it wiser to camp in the fields in an attempt to stay unnoticed for as long as possible. Of course, had they known their imminent return was no longer a secret, they could have chosen the convenience of beds and baths over the hard ground.

"Aye, my lord. A good thing Faramir has provided all that is needed."

Aragorn smiled wryly. "Aye, he shows remarkable prudence sometimes," he answered.

They went to work with soap and sharp razors. Slowly yet steadily the transformation from shabby travelers to Gondorian lords was completed. Hallas offered to help Boromir trim his beard, an offer he gladly accepted as Faramir's supplies lacked a mirror, while Legolas braided Aragorn's long hair into an intricate elfish design.

Once cleaned and groomed, Boromir finally had the chance to unwrap the package Faramir had brought. He shook out the clothes and held them up. He was surprised and touched to notice his family's crest embroidered on the chest of the tunic and made a mental note to express his thanks to his brother later. He was even more surprised when his eye caught the tiny mark sewn in the inside of the hem. "Nîneth!"

"Who is Nîneth?" Aragorn asked, having overheard the soft exclamation.

"A needlewoman," Boromir said. "From Linhir. I met her years ago and suggested she go to Minas Tirith. I asked Faramir to make sure she would be all right."

Aragorn looked taken aback for a moment, then laughed. "The small shop on the fourth level! That explains why he sometimes favored her over tailors of far more renown vying for his custom. Boromir, Boromir, I wonder what other mysteries you will still reveal me."

Boromir pulled the tunic over his head and let it fall free. It felt smooth, and the fabric seemed to shimmer in the early morning light.

"Boromir! You look like a rich lord!"

Hallas was looking Boromir up and down. He wore a strange expression that Boromir could not quite put a name to.

"Aye," he grinned. "I do, do I not? You do not look so bad yourself, either."

Hallas shrugged uncomfortably. Faramir had erred on the young man's size and the tunic was a bit wide in the shoulders, the sleeves a tad too long. Still, Boromir could scarce believe his brother had been foresighted enough to bring a page's uniform for Hallas, although he had often mentioned him in his letters.

He chortled at Hallas's discomfort. "Do not fret," he said. "You will be out of those clothes soon enough. Once you don the tower guard's uniform, I think you will find that more to your liking."

Hallas's eyes lit up for a moment at the mention of the army but then his features fell back into the curious expression. "I guess I will not see you much, will I, Boromir?"

Suddenly, Boromir realized why the boy looked odd. He was uncertain about the future, afraid to lose his one friend. "No," he said honestly. "At least not for a few years. You will spend a lot of your time training with the soldiers. And I will be in Dunland. But I will still be your friend, you remember that, you hear?"

Hallas nodded, some of the tension leaving him. "I will."

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The sun stood hot and high once more, baking the fields, when they at last approached the white walls of Minas Tirith. Perspiration broke out on Boromir's back and he swung the cloak over his shoulder. It had been a long time since he had worn the full attire of a lord headed for the citadel and even the thin summer silks failed to keep him as comfortable as his linen shirt used to do. A glance sideways revealed that, despite the weather, Aragorn appeared as cool and unperturbed as any king should be and Boromir resolved himself to follow Aragorn's example. But it was hard not to fidget in the saddle when butterflies danced in his stomach and shivers of anticipation ran up his spine.

He turned to look at the others, following at a little distance. Legolas looked unaffected by the heat; it was as if the sun's warmth could not touch him. Hallas rode beside Legolas and he gave a quavering smile when he caught Boromir looking. Boromir could not see much of Gimli, hidden behind Legolas. Behind the pair rode the dozen soldiers Faramir had sent to provide an honor guard. Their armor had been polished to a shine, and Aragorn's banner flapped high over them.

Boromir turned back to gaze up at the towering walls of Minas Tirith, gleaming white in the hot sunlight. The Gates stood open in welcome and though shadows reigned beneath them, Boromir thought he could detect people waiting for them, his brother among them. They were there to greet

their liege lord, returned after a long absence. He sat up a little more straight, not wanting anyone to notice his nervousness.

Suddenly, Aragorn held up a gloved hand to stop them. "Listen, Boromir!" he said. "Do you hear?"

Boromir listened and a moment later he did hear what Aragorn referred to: silver trumpets ringing, their song carried easily across the Pelennor on a light breeze.

"I hear them," he said, surprised to find himself without breath. His eyes stung, and he rubbed them. "I hear them."

Aragorn smiled. "Mark their words," he said softly. "Not a one can doubt it now: the lords of Gondor have returned."

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## Author thankyous

This is my magnum opus, a story that is longer than any I've written to date. The first few chapters have been posted before, as "Gondor's Son", a much shorter story. They have since been reworked and merged with what was originally a sequel. During the process of writing this novel, I met many kind and helpful people who were happy to part with their opinions, knowledge and even the occasional brainchild and thus help me tell a better story. I cannot name them all but be aware I am grateful for all the help. A special mention deserve Lylyn & Marta & Aeneid & Ann for valuable betawork; Liz & Gwynnyd for even more beta shredding; Cheryl for teaching me about horses; Middle-earth Adventure Riders Association for their incredible travel times chart, and all of HASA's membership.

## Chapter notes

**The Journey South:** I owe a great debt to Marta for her text suggestions involving Boromir's reflections. She managed to get into his head much better than I did and phrased things much clearer. The 'pig incident' that Boromir remembers at The Two Oaks is told in Life Lesson.

**Fate's Admonishment:** I'm aware that whether or not chocolate would have been available in Middle-earth is open to discussion. I decided to go with the school of thought that we have no idea what exactly is being cultivated in the lands far south of Gondor, and thus the existence of chocolate is not unthinkable.

**Autumn Falls:** Thanks to Cheryl for helping with the horsey bits!

**Enmities:** If some of this sounds familiar, you're right. A more extended version of Drukh Skullgrinder's tale can be found in the stand-alone story Enmities.

**Riders Of The Mark:** I'm indebted to Lylyn who let me borrow (and mangle!) her wonderful Drinking Song To The Fellowship. The full and actual version is available below.

**Homecoming:** Thanks to Cheryl for allowing me to use her variant of the oath. Many, many thanks to Gwynnyd and Liz for helping hammer out the political entanglements!

## **Lyllyn's Drinking Song "To The Fellowship"**

Drink when day is done to the steward's son,  
the Captain-General bold,  
To defend the small he gave his all,  
and his deeds will long be told.

For the valiant Pip we'll take a sip  
of the ale that's Gondor's pride,  
Then drink to the fame of Merry's name,  
he who stood at the Shield-maid's side.

And a cup they say for the wizard grey -  
All praise to his long sight,  
In the caves he fell to the balrog's spell,  
then he rose again: The White.

Lift a mug to the pair in the Valar's care,  
the noble Elven lord -  
and the dwarf with the axe whose fierce attacks  
beat back the orcish horde.

Raise a jug for the man who saved our land  
when the fields and the city burned,  
He fought and healed for the common weal -  
The rightful King returned.

Here now dear, bring another beer  
for Sam the loyal friend,  
Sam's the lad for when things are bad -  
Steadfast to the very end.

And last of all let's make our call  
for the one of whom all sing,  
Frodo brave and true who saw it through -  
the one who bore the ring,  
Yes, the one who bore the ring.

**Acknowledgment:** the song is based on Phil Och's "The Men Behind the Guns" which in turn is based on a poem of the same name by John Jerome Rooney.

## **Disclaimer**

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