Adraefan
by Aeneid [archived by HASA_Archivist]

Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

Action, adventure, angst, humor. Mixed writing styles (prose and poetry), with a Greco-Roman feel. Rated for violence and adult themes. A warning to the squeamish.

2005 MEFA Award Winner: 1st place, Alternative Universe category

Notes
Note from the HASA Transition Team: This story was originally archived at HASA, which closed in February 2015. To preserve the archive, we began manually importing its works to the AO3 as an Open Doors-approved project in February 2015. We posted announcements about the move, but may not have reached everyone. If you are (or know) this author, please contact The HASA Transition Team using the e-mail address on the HASA collection profile.
Chorus I (The Beginning)

Awake, Arda, awake!
You see, You breathe, You give
life for all!
The lush-green grasses grow
the children are born
the races change develop evolve.
Fourteen Powers, fourteen Valar
guide the swaying winds and changing times.

All hail the blesséd Children of Ilúvatar!

Let Them move the world!
Let Them set the stage!

Fly fast now,
speed past the Years of the Trees, First Age, Second Age.
We care little for these long years
their seeds will fertilize other tales.

Take us, Valar-Gods, take us to the very edge of things!
Bring us to those days when the Ring was found
(but skip the part about Bilbo)
when all grew dark and terrible
and it seemed – for an instant, a brief flash of despair,
that all should be lost…
Of course, we had faith!
…even if the players did not.

And now show us our opening,
let us peek through the bushes and see it all,
(Entertain us if you can!)
tell of the mighty deeds of mortals and elves,
for only You, Valar-Gods, can bring us up
to the very point when everything changed
turned green black red and swirled away –

Yes! Yes! There they are!
(Where? Oh there! On Amon Hen,
right by the mossy statue under the elm-ash-oak tree
on that pleasant little patch of grass
called, what was it, Garth Palen? Pal Garthen?
Parth Galen!)

See them now!

Frodo: Ringbearer, good-good-good,
still with ten digits and handfuls of courage
always stout heart, resilient little hobbit.
The one who saved us all, bless him!
And now, followed quickly by another,
breathing hard,
Boromir: good-bad son of Gondor,
desperate defeated handsome heavyset with tissue-thin spirit.

He wants It!

Alas, Boromir, when will your heart grow stiff?
This is the act that dooms you.

And away with invisible-Frodo,
bring in the Uruk-hai,
let the fight begin!
We want violence! Blood, gore, lusting fury!
Yes, yes, that’s it! Ha ha! Make it hurt!

Wait.

Wise, vain, merciful, aggressive Valar-Gods,
halt the story now, at this very moment,
and give us time to think:
There is Boromir,
sword spinning
the Horn of Gondor at his lips,
standing inhaling waiting
(shielding defenseless Merry and Pippin)
and what do we think? We think:
Let him live!
Let the good-bad son of Gondor continue his song!

So give destiny a shake like a newly-pressed sheet,
and behold the twists that chance and the Powers of Arda
have devised…
Chapter Summary

The setting sun sent its pink-orange rays over gently rolling hills. Three elves walked silently along a path. The region around the Anduin was thickly forested, especially as one neared the Falls of Rauros. The three elves could discern the distant waterfall. They could also hear the birds, the wind in the trees, and the flies buzzing on the next hill. They could hear movement to the south – a group of creatures with heavy feet were running down the plains towards Rohan. But this did not interest them.

The first elf, the leader, was tall and slim. He had long, blond hair and thin grey eyes. His movements were graceful as he trod along the path, hopping over roots and avoiding low branches. Behind him, and moving with equal ease, was the second elf. This elf was shorter than the first, with dark hair and bright eyes the color of a midday sky. He carried a bow and quiver full of arrows. Bringing up the rear was the third elf. This elf had a larger build, and his hair was as dark as the second elf’s. He carried several traveling packs.

They moved stealthily and with speed. The ground sloped gently downwards, aiding in their descent towards the Anduin River. Dusk fell. The sky darkened, the woods progressed slowly to a deep blue. The elves never slowed their pace, even as it became too dark for a Man to see. Three black silhouettes crossed over a thin stream and entered the field of Parth Galen.

Suddenly, the first elf stopped.

He motioned for the others to halt. Quietly, the two elves joined him from behind. They stood at the base of Amon Hen. Mounds of black bodies were strewn about the forest floor. The acid smell of death filled the air around them. In that silent darkness, they could discern limbs, corpses, armor and weapons.

Moonlight streamed in through the trees. The three elves stood, hesitating, and studied the bloody mess around them. Desperation, hate, anger and fear hung palpably about the corpses. Evil emotions stained the air, unsettling the elves.

With great caution, the first elf moved forward. The second and third slowly followed, and the three elves moved as one amidst the gore and death. They walked slowly, keeping their footfalls light and invisible. The second elf drew his bow and arrow. The third elf retrieved a thin dagger from his tunic. The first elf scanned the bodies for movement. Yet all was still.

These were orcs. A new breed of orc adorned with battle armor from the west. A white hand painted on each mangled face. The elves shuddered collectively. They continued uphill. No birds could be heard. No innocent creature grazed this area, for the evil still lingered like a fog.

The second elf placed a hand on the first elf’s shoulder. He pointed to a large boulder where a pile of orcs lay. Beneath a collapsed orc was a Man. He was near hidden completely, and had it not
been for their keen eyesight, he would have gone unnoticed. The three elves hurried forth and knelt beside the unconscious Man. They pushed away the dead orc. Two arrows stuck rigidly from the Man’s ornate garments – one from his shoulder and one from his stomach. His torso was drenched in blood. His face, handsome and noble, was white against the dark, wet strands of hair that clung to his clammy brow. The second elf leaned forward and placed a hand on the Man’s neck. They waited.

“He lives,” the elf murmured finally.

Without further deliberation, the first and third elf hoisted the Man from the ground and pulled his arms around their strong shoulders. The soldier sagged loosely against their grip, emitting only a soft lament as an arrow pushed lightly against the first elf’s shoulder. He was heavier than they imagined, but nonetheless they dragged him away from the wreckage and down towards the Anduin River.

It was difficult work, and both elves were breathing hard by the time they reached the banks of the wide river. The second elf arrived a moment later, carrying the Man’s blackened sword. Carefully, they lowered him onto the damp ground. The third elf removed his traveling packs and began setting up a makeshift camp. A small fire was lit; water was gathered from the river. Meanwhile, the Man’s heavy garments were cut through and his chain mail removed to reveal a trembling, white torso soaked in blood.

As the second and first elf prodded each wound cautiously, the Man groaned softly.

“We must move quickly,” the second elf whispered. “Third One, hand me your dagger.”

The third elf obeyed. The second elf took the small dagger and warmed it over the fire, while his companions worked to clear some of the blood from each wound. Once the blade was sizzling with heat, the second elf returned and crouched beside the Man’s stomach. The third elf took a large rag and placed it against the protruding arrow. The second elf grabbed the shaft – provoking a whimper from the Man – and, in one swift movement, dug the smoking dagger into the wound. The Man howled in agony. His cries rang out in the night sky, and a flock of alarmed birds took flight from a nearby tree. The first elf forced the Man’s shoulders still, but the soldier gasped and choked and kicked away. The second elf continued working, forcing the dagger further into the wound until it felt the edge of the arrowhead. Then, pulling the shaft gently while twisting the dagger, he jerked the arrow free. Blood gushed, soaking through even the thick rag which the third elf had immediately applied. They hastened to grab more cloaks and bindings from their packs in a vain attempt to stifle the bleeding, the Man all the while screaming. The first elf kept a firm grasp to keep the soldier from squirming, but he nonetheless struggled away.

“Lie still,” the first elf soothed. “It will soon be finished.”

They managed to wrap his torso completely. The third elf retrieved some healing herbs from his pack and, after chewing them to form a sticky paste, applied the herbs to the deep stomach wound. The Man was shivering convulsively now. There was little time. No time. The second elf wiped the dagger against his cloak and held it at the base of the flame. After a few seconds of heating, he then forced it into the shoulder wound. The Man’s shaking made it difficult to work, even though both the first and third elf were holding him still. The second elf twisted the knife and hastily pulled the arrow out, ripping through muscle and skin. The Man cried out hoarsely, tears streaming down his face. As the elves cleaned and bound the shoulder wound, the trembling lessened and the Man fell very still.

The third elf retrieved a vial of *miruvor* from his pack and handed it to the first elf. He poured
some of the liquid down the Man’s slack mouth. Most of the liquid dribbled down his chin and the
sides of his mouth, but the first elf nonetheless tipped a little more. Once satisfied, he recapped the
vial and gave it back to his companion.

Then, they waited.

The Man remained motionless. His breathing came as a shallow wheeze. Already, the bandages
around his gut were soaked through. The fire crackled softly beside him. The elves watched
silently. Their own weariness and apprehension were apparent in the firelight.

“I fear we have done little,” the second elf muttered. “We have not the medicine to help him.”

“Perhaps we should stitch up the stomach?” the third elf suggested.

“Nay, he bleeds inside as well.”

“Know you not any incantations, First One?” the third elf twisted around to look at the first elf.

“Anything for the deeper wounds?”

The first elf hesitated.

“In truth, I remember little of the old healing charms,” he said. “Well, perhaps I could…” Without
finishing, he shifted in his seat and moved beside the Man. Warily, he placed a hand on the Man’s
burning forehead and chest. He lowered his eyes and murmured a soft chant.

Initially, it seemed to work. The Man’s breathing deepened, and the first elf could discern a sealing
of the wound in the gut. But as the elf’s magic delved deeper, probing his patient’s mind, he found
a growing darkness. An evil fire burning from the edges within. Visions of a White City turned
black and a golden ring against bright snow. More images rushed past – Men falling under a rain of
arrows, cold water flooding three nearby swimmers, a thin bridge over an endless abyss. And
suddenly, an Eye – a great, fiery Eye staring back at him –

The first elf jumped away, startled. The other two elves leapt forward to break his fall.

“What is it, First One?” the third one demanded.

“There is a fever in him, and an evil which I fear to utter,” the first elf gasped. “I saw in his mind
fire and doom. And a ring…”

That final word silenced the three companions. They watched the Man now with renewed alarm.

“Nay, it cannot be,” the second elf breathed. “It was destroyed with Isildur.”

“And yet he dreams of it,” the first elf countered. “His thoughts are bent towards despair and grief.
All is darkness. And he yearns for the One Ring… He has seen it, grasped it with his very hand.”

The first elf’s eyes lingered on the blood-soaked garments lying by the Man. He studied the image
of the white tree which they had cut through. Creeping back towards the wounded soldier, he
placed a hand on his shoulder. As the elf intoned another chant, the Man awoke with a gasp.

His dim green eyes roamed blindly before settling on the first elf. The other two elves approached
and also knelt beside the waking Man. Several moments of confusion passed until the Man
whispered with difficulty:

“…Legolas?”
“Nay,” the first elf answered. “You may call me First One.”

The Man closed his eyes and swallowed with visible effort. When he opened his eyes again, they were dark with exhaustion and pain. He seemed to be slipping from consciousness. The first elf kept a firm grasp on his shoulder.

“We have tended to your wounds,” the first elf continued. “They are deep, perhaps fatal.”

The Man nodded slowly. His expression was dimming.

“There is also a great evil that lingers on your person. I have sensed your thoughts – I have sensed the Ring in your thoughts.”

At that, the Man’s eyes flew wide open. He nearly raised himself before collapsing back onto the ground with a startled cry. The elves moved forward to keep him pinned.

“The Ring! It is gone, the Ring is gone!” he wheezed. “I tried to take it! Forgive me, Legolas, I tried to take it…”

“What was your business with it?”

“Nay, leave me. I have failed,” the Man choked, trying in vain to push the three elves away from him. “The Ring is gone. Gone – I’ve failed them all. Where – where are the little ones? They took the little ones! Legolas, find them! Where – Legolas – where are my legs? Ai, I cannot feel them! What has happened? Alas, I have failed you all! Leave me!”

“He is delirious,” the second elf muttered.

“Peace, brother,” the third elf placed a hand on the Man’s burning forehead.

“I am not this Legolas you speak of,” the first elf insisted. “Tell us, you are of Gondor?”

“Nay, nay,” the Man’s eyes rolled to the back of his head and his voice broke. “I am a ghost… I will never return. Leave me; it is over. The world of Men is over. It is finished…”

He lost all strength to speak and fell still. The three elves cast each other concerned looks. The first elf shook his head.

“He does not have the Ring,” he whispered. “And we cannot learn his tale tonight.”

“Aye, let him rest,” the third elf said.

The Man shivered anew as a cold wind passed. They placed one of their thick cloaks against his bare, bandaged chest, but that did not stop the ceaseless trembling. New, worrisome symptoms appeared. As the Man fell into feverish sleep, his breath came in labored, broken gasps. The first elf checked each bandage: a yellow-green mess had already formed on the shoulder. He spat in disgust.

“This is Istari treachery.”

“What then? Poison?”

“We shall see soon enough.”

And so the three elves lingered by the banks of the Anduin River in hope that the Man would heal. They spent the time alternating watch over his restless sleep. He showed no sign of improvement
and accepted no food or water for the duration of three days. These three days were spent in a constant battle between dream and reality and the Man revealed much in his irrational talk. The elves learned of the Ring, of a creature named Frodo, of a doomed Quest. There were brief, pained cries of Moria, Caradhras, and Lórien. Their suspicions concerning his origins were also confirmed: the Man was of Gondor, and of high rank. Among all this, he also spoke of Mithrandir, the Grey Pilgrim, and this brought hope to the three elves.

The Man’s condition worsened on the fourth day. At dawn, during the third elf’s watch, he awoke. The misty sunlight crept over the river and warmed the cool dew which still clung to the forest floor. The third elf, who had been meditating over a cup of tea, was startled to find the Man silently watching him from across the campfire.

“Good morning,” the third elf said cheerfully.

He grabbed lembas and a water-skin and walked over to where the Man lay. The soldier’s face was waxen, and his gaze languidly followed the third elf to where the latter sat. Once seated, the elf gently lifted the cloak to check the bandages. A sharp smell came from the shoulder, the infection was spreading, and the bandaged stomach was still oozing blood. Nothing had improved.

The elf forced back his worry and smiled at the Man.

“You have slept for three days,” he said lightly. “In truth, I was beginning to bore of your company. Will you eat?”

“Water?” the Man licked his parched lips.

“Aye, we have plenty of that,” the third elf retrieved his water-skin and pulled out the cap. He placed a gentle hand under the Man’s head and lifted it so that he could drink. After gulping down some water, the Man sank back onto the ground. He closed his eyes and, for all intents and purposes, looked very dead.

“So,” the elf began, “do you have a name?”

There was a pause as the Man seemed to gather enough energy to speak.

“Boromir…”

“Well, Boromir of Gondor, it is a pleasure to meet you. You may call me Third One.”

“Strange name,” the Man mumbled.

“Aye, it is. Once you are fully healed, perhaps I shall tell you the story of my name. It’s quite a long story and it seems now you would fall asleep ere I began.”

The Man – Boromir – smiled slightly, but the smile twisted into a pained scowl as a fit of coughing overtook him. Violent tremors shook his body. Third One grabbed the Man’s shoulders and helped him to his side. The coughing did not subside, but instead blossomed into painful spasms. Fresh blood streamed from the newly opened wounds. Unexpectedly, he vomited a mix of blood and bile, causing the elf to jump back in surprise. After a few more painful heaves, Boromir fell, shuddering, onto his back. He closed his free hand against his stomach.

Third One immediately moved to redo the bandages, but Boromir was loath to let anyone touch him. His shaking hand pushed Third One’s away as the elf started to remove the drenched gauze.

“Lie still,” the elf ordered. “Pride never saved a Man.”
Boromir clenched his teeth, “It’s – not – pride.”

“I see,” the elf said sympathetically. “In that case, this will be quick.”

Third One peeled away the thick bandage and placed it to one side. He then retrieved a fresh roll from within his pack and pressed it against the wound. Boromir squirmed under the pressure. Once the bleeding was sufficiently stifled, the elf helped the Man into a sitting position so that he could wrap the bandage around his torso entirely. When the elf moved to help Boromir lie back down, the Gondorian waved him away.

“Nay, I’ll sit,” he said. “It – it clears my head.”

“Very well,” Third One replied and took a seat opposite him.

A dazed silence.

“I remember others?”

“Aye. First One and Second One have wandered upriver in search of some athelas. They will be happy to see you have regained your senses.”

The effort of staying upright was already producing beads of cold sweat on Boromir’s brow. He let his head loll against the tree and kept his good hand clasped protectively against his stomach. The morning sun was shining. Its rays glinted off the Anduin and danced across the leaves and stone. A delicate wind passed over the river and ruffled their hair. Boromir clenched his teeth as another surge of pain shook through him. The elf watched, concerned.

“Fear not, the hurt will soon pass. The arrows were black with poison, but it is nothing a few elves cannot mend. All will be well once the fever breaks.”

A weak smile creased Boromir’s lips.

“You’re optimistic,” he whispered. “My heart tells me you… three are only prolonging the inevitable.”

“Inevitable for a Man, yes, but perhaps not so soon.”

Boromir exhaled, coughed a little. His shoulder bandage was drenched in sweat, yet he trembled. Third One knelt forward and felt his forehead – it burned.

“When First One and Second One return, I will tell them we should stitch up the stomach wound. That will help. In the meantime, try and drink a little water.”

The elf grabbed the fallen water-skin and was about to help Boromir drink when the Man, in a show of pride, took the sack from him with a weary grunt. Although his hand shook visibly, he steadied it enough to drink. Another fit of coughing overtook him. He held fast to his gut where red stains formed. The elf hurried forward and helped him lie down. Once Boromir was on his back, the coughing subsided only to be replaced by shallow breathing and renewed shivers.

His condition worsened throughout the day. He fell again into delirium, beyond the reach of any reason or coherence. Third One wished the other elves would return, because he felt useless, as if he was simply a bystander to the wounded soldier’s prolonged death. The long day was punctuated only by incomprehensible ranting and painful retching. The single substance the Man’s wounded stomach tolerated was the medicinal miruvor, and the first bottle was nearly finished.
After shaking the vial in hopes of loosening more thick liquor, and finding it completely empty, the elf sat back onto the ground with a heavy sigh. It had been six hours since the Man had fallen into his hallucinatory state, and it had been nearly seven since First One and Second One had left. Third One was beginning to worry that the Man would die before they returned. He watched as the soldier groaned and mumbled, his eyes sometimes open and blank, other times closed and motionless.

Third One placed a reassuring hand on Boromir’s good shoulder just as another fit of coughing racked through the latter’s body. When it ended, the Man looked up to the elf, his expression pained but lucid.

“Elf,” Boromir gasped. “If you have any – mercy… let it end.”

In the sharp midday sun, the Man’s red-rimmed eyes gleamed green against his white mask. Third One found he could not hold his gaze. He looked away.

“Nay, not while there is hope left,” he said sternly, surprised at the emotion in his voice.

Boromir’s breath shook as another wave of pain and fever weakened him. He took the elf’s hand and squeezed it.

“I am finished,” the Man coughed. “There is… there is no future for me. Let – it end.”

The elf steadied the Man’s trembling hand with both of his.

“Do not despair. Death is not the escape you seek,” Third One said. “Peace, brother. You will heal, and you will return to Gondor soon.”

Boromir’s face darkened to near weeping. He released the elf’s hand and fell limp.

“Nay,” he pleaded, “do not speak of Gondor…”

His words trailed softly as he lost consciousness. Third One adjusted the cloak around his chest. The garment was bloodied as well.

Movement from behind alerted him to the arrival of First One and Second One. They appeared in the clearing further up the riverbank, carrying two slim boats between them. Third One sprang towards them with a smile.

“Finally!” he exclaimed. “And this?”

“We found these two hundred paces from here,” First One explained.

“They are of Lórien make,” Second One added. “Those who hid them were skillful, perhaps there was one of our kind among them.”

“Oh?”

“So it seems.”

“Hmm.”

The elves watched the boats expectantly, as if the objects themselves would begin explaining where they came from and why they had been hidden. After a few moments of silent consideration, First One jutted his chin towards the camp.
“How fares the Man?”

“How fares the Man?” Third One sighed. “His name is Boromir, we know that much. But I worry for his sickness. He has spent the better half of today speaking nonsense. He cannot hold anything down and the stomach wound will not close.”

“We must stitch it,” Second One said. “First One, is the internal wound closed?”

“As far as I can tell, aye.”

“Then it seems we have only one choice.”

Third One nodded. He knew that the other elves had been healers in the past, and he was relieved to have them returned. He helped them carry the boats back to camp. Boromir was lying beside the fire, his jaw hanging open as he slept. Once they overturned the boats and set them aside, First One approached the Man. He lifted the shoulder bandage and grimaced.

“The infection has spread,” he sighed and placed a hand against Boromir’s temples. “And the life in him wanes. I doubt he will survive the evening,” he exhaled sharply, “Come, prepare hot water. Third One, have you needle and thread?”

Again, the three elves set to work in one final attempt to salvage the gravely injured Man. The hours passed, and he did not wake as they threaded the wound. Once the work was finished and the injury cleaned and bandaged, they tried cleaning the disease forming around the shoulder. It was rank with the smell of decay. As they worked, the sun burned golden shafts of light through the trees before disappearing behind Amon Hen. Night fell across the riverbank.

Finally, the shoulder was clean and fresh healing herbs were patted against the gash. They wrapped it tight and pinned his left arm as well. With a collective yawn, the three elves leaned back against the overturned boat. Bright stars peppered the inky black sky. A nearby owl hooted. All was peace, and very quiet.

Third One leaned his head back drowsily. His two friends seemed nearly asleep as well.

“Well, brothers,” Second One murmured in satisfaction, “by tomorrow morning, our talents as healers shall be revealed.”
Meriadoc Brandybuck and Peregrin Took were scared. They tumbled down the slope of Amon Hen, their feet slipping on dry leaves. Behind them, they could hear the Uruk-hai coming. Snorts and whoops of laughter, the clashing of huge swords. The two hobbits felt their thighs burning from the exertion, but there was no way they would stop. Adrenaline and sheer survival instinct kept them running madly, away from the roaring Uruk-hai. Merry urged Pippin forward.

“Run, Pip! Keep going!”

Another group of orcs was approaching from the other side. They were trapped. Merry grabbed Pippin by the sleeve and pulled him away. But it was too late – a single Uruk-hai was already lunging forward, jagged blade raised high. Both hobbits froze, unable to move in their terror. This was it. They watched as the blade fell towards them, slowly, like the axe of an executioner – only to clash against the sword of a Man – of Boromir. Merry and Pippin yelped in surprise and gratitude. They were saved!

They heard his familiar battle cry as he plunged his sword deep into the belly of the orc. With a final thrust, Boromir turned and pushed the hobbits away from the battle. They obeyed and frantically continued their descent. They could hear him grunting and snarling behind them. Uruk-hai fell against their heels. A howl was stifled as someone’s throat was cut. Merry and Pippin chanced a look over their shoulders:

More Uruk-hai, everywhere. The orcs swarmed all over the forest. The only clear path was down. An Enemy warrior came charging at Boromir – the Gondorian quickly ducked and flipped the orc over his shoulder, the weight of which caused him to stumble as well. Merry and Pippin dived forward, plunging their tiny swords into the fallen orc before he could get up. Out of the corner of his eye, Merry saw Boromir stand. The Man grabbed the hobbits by the scruff of their necks and practically threw them down the hill.

“Go! Run!” he roared.

But Merry and Pippin could not abandon their friend so easily. They grabbed some rocks and threw them at the charging Uruk-hai. Pippin had always prided himself a skilled rock-thrower, and he elbowed Merry in the ribs after one of his stones hit an oncoming orc square in the face. Boromir stood between them and the other orcs, slashing and cutting and hacking his way through the Enemy. The Uruk-hai fell at his feet in a constant stream and the two hobbits, in their renewed confidence, jeered and threw more rocks. They were scared, but with Boromir acting as a protective shield between them and any danger, their courage was fueled. They did not realize how many orcs were coming, and truly they did not care, for in their hearts, they knew that nothing could stop the son of Denethor. Nothing could kill him. Not so easily.

Boromir lifted the Horn of Gondor to his lips. He inhaled deeply, preparing to call for help, but
something happened.

An arrow, soaring out of nowhere, plunged deep into his shoulder. The Man staggered. His horn fell. The world around them slowed. Merry and Pippin jerked to a halt, frozen. They watched Boromir fall to his knees. Even the oncoming Uruk-hai slowed their pace. All noise fell away. They could hear only his heavy breathing, his sudden, painful gasps.

He met their eyes. They watched him struggling for breath, shuddering with every movement. Merry and Pippin stood with blank faces and stilled hearts. They forgot of danger, of fear. They could only stare transfixed at the fresh blood seeping through Boromir’s clothes. Dark blood like heady wine pouring liberally out of a corkscrew opening in the shoulder.

With desperate resolve, Boromir lifted himself from the ground and swung wildly behind him. He cut through a startled Uruk-hai. This sent the other creatures near him charging. Merry and Pippin were momentarily forgotten as the orcs rushed towards the wounded Man. But Boromir defended himself – his every movement an exhausted burst of fast-diminishing strength.

Three more orcs fell away when something whistled through the air.

Another arrow cut into the Man’s stomach, knocking the breath from him. Merry and Pippin watched him fall again to his knees. They did not know that their faces were wet from weeping, but Boromir’s expression seemed to soften – a silent apology – as he faced them. Pippin sputtered as fresh tears fell along his face. He grabbed his small sword and screamed defiantly, charging towards the oncoming orcs. Merry followed, rushing past Boromir and towards the Enemy. The hobbits were immediately swooped up onto black shoulders, and they screamed hoarsely. No! No! Please! They reached desperately for Boromir, stretching their arms, trying to help him, calling to him, watching him slowly get back to his feet. The orcs ignored the Man and instead hauled the hobbits away down the hill. The last image they saw was of an Uruk-hai colliding with Boromir and both warriors tumbling down the hill.

Merry and Pippin bounced against the jagged armor of the Uruk-hai, who ran at a terrible speed. They passed a thin stream. No! It could not end like this! Pippin was still sobbing. Merry looked wildly around – his vision jumping up and down due to the running Uruk-hai – yet he could not see any of the Fellowship. Where were they?

“Help!” he cried. “Help! Help us!”

“Silence the Halfling!”

Something hard hit his head, and Merry felt hot blood rush down his face and blind him. He struggled to hold on, but the dizziness overwhelmed him and he fell unconscious. The last sound Meriadoc Brandybuck heard was the triumphant Uruk-hai roars and Pippin’s weeping.

“Merry! Pippin!”

Boromir tried to lift his arm and felt a white-hot explosion of pain in his shoulder. He fell back against the ground. There was a terrible agony in his stomach, as if a thousand jagged knives were simultaneously ripping outward and stabbing inward with each breath. Below that fire, he felt nothing. Boromir bent his head to see that he did, indeed, still have legs, even though he could not feel them. But his vision was sufficiently blurred so that he could not distinguish the white-red gauze around his stomach from the pale skin of his torso. He raised his right hand to touch – even a tentative brush against his bare ribs sent tremors of nausea and pain throughout his body.

A few moments passed as he pushed down the urge to vomit. Visions of the days before drifted
back to him, of a suffering so acute he had begged for death. Another shameful act to add to the list, he thought with chagrin. And Frodo! The Fellowship! The Ring’s distant echoes. Boromir groaned. He was thankful that the Fellowship had left him behind, for he feared he could never face them again.

Or Minas Tirith, for that matter.

Boromir tugged at the heavy cloak on his side. A fire crackled nearby, but the night was still cold. Something hooted in the distance. Insects chirped. He closed his eyes – the dream was still vivid. He clearly saw their weeping faces leaving him, disappearing behind a crowd of black Uruk-hai. And he longed to see them again, despite the shame. Merry and Pippin had brightened his days, allowed him to smile. With them, he had almost forgotten the despair of Gondor. The endless drone of jokes, Shire politics, gossip, and inane asides had successfully drowned out Boromir’s usual worries. Something about the little ones made the rest of Middle-earth’s problems fade away, as if everything outside the Shire was nothing more than a surreal nightmare.

True, in the early days, he had felt annoyed by their endless merriment. He had envied their simple life, the peace they enjoyed thanks to Gondor’s blood. But in time he had let himself laugh and enjoy their company. He had even entertained the whimsical idea of visiting the Shire after the War.

“You’ve got to see the Green Dragon, Boromir!” Pippin exclaimed.

“Finest ale in the Shire!” Merry nodded.

The Fellowship was walking along a narrow forest path. The mountains loomed in the distance – Caradhras dominating the distant landscape. Birds chirped cheerfully, while the sun’s rays poured in through a ceiling of leaves. The company had been in a joking mood that day. Although they marched endlessly, never stopping if only for brief meals, there had been no evil to mar their path.

Gandalf was ahead, leading the way with his tall staff and pointed hat. Directly behind him walked Merry and Pippin beside Boromir. Then came Sam and Frodo. Aragorn followed, with Legolas behind him and Gimli last.

Merry and Pippin’s eyes were alight with excitement.

“And try some South Farthing pipe-weed, as well! Even Longbottom Leaf!”

“Aye, we can’t let you have any of our travelling supply, as it’s supposed to last us the entire trip. Sorry,” Merry grinned. “But they’ve got barrels of it back home!”

“Judging from the smell,” Boromir laughed. “I doubt I would enjoy it.”

“Oh, it’s better than you think, Boromir of Gondor,” Gandalf, who had been striding ahead of them and listening idly, commented. “You may find it a rare treasure. Yes, yes, there are many pleasant surprises to be found in the world of hobbits, if one knows where to look.”

All four hobbits beamed.

“Hear that, Mister Strider?” Sam’s voice traveled from further down the path. “I reckon a wizard’s compliments are of the highest sort.”

“They are, Sam,” Aragorn replied. “But I have a feeling Gandalf is just trying to get some of Merry and Pippin’s pipe-weed.”
The wizard’s low rumbling laughter traveled down the line of walkers.

“And,” Legolas, who was walking behind Aragorn, added, “it seems he is not succeeding.”

Boromir laughed genuinely as well. Merry and Pippin had indeed eyed Gandalf suspiciously since Aragorn’s comment. Their hands clutched greedily the bag of pipe-weed.

“Oh no, I have no need to endear myself to our young hobbit companions,” Gandalf smiled, and lowered his voice menacingly. “If I wanted any pipe-weed, I’d simply turn them both into a pair of toads and be done with it.”

The two hobbits gasped audibly, causing more laughter among the company. They watched his staff with horror-stricken looks. And on an affectionate impulse – something Boromir had not imagined himself capable of – he ruffled their curly hair and took a step in front of them.

“Fear not, little ones,” he said in joking solemnity. “No harm – no evil toad spells or thieves – will come to you under Gondor’s care.”

But the oath had been broken, he had failed. Merry and Pippin would die at the hands of the Uruk-hai. The innocent little ones so far away from their Shire would now suffer torture and death. All for the weakness of Men… His throat ran dry.

A rustling of leaves interrupted his thoughts.

“I thought I heard someone speaking,” a voice said.

A tall, dark-haired elf appeared in the left corner of Boromir’s vision. He could have been Legolas’s brother. Or father. The elf placed another log on the fire before settling down beside the Gondorian. He grazed the stomach wound – causing Boromir to gasp – and peeked under the bandage.

“Oh yes,” the elf grinned. “Good. I must inform Second One, he was right – very skillful, indeed. Boromir of Gondor, I am pleased to inform you that the bleeding has stopped and the fever has broken.”

Boromir stared at him blankly.

“How many times shall I introduce myself? You may call me Third One.”

The elf patted the Man’s good shoulder as if they were old friends and then retrieved a bundle of leaves from his pack. He unwrapped the bindings to reveal golden bread. The smell of lembas filled the campsite.

“Here, you must be hungry,” Third One said.

Yet the sight and smell of food repulsed Boromir. He felt acid bile creep up his esophagus.

“Nay, it sickens me,” he rasped.

“I’ll attribute that to madness then, for denying lembas is quite a feat.”

The elf smiled at his own joke and took a bite from the bread. Boromir found he could not even watch another eat, so he turned to face the burning fire. The flames licked up into the night sky. Beyond the crackle, he discerned the sound of water flowing. They had taken him to the riverbank. He was back by the Anduin.
Nudging against the top of his head was an overturned boat. He immediately recognized it as one of the three boats from the elf forest of Lothlórien. Shuddering at the memory of his brief stay there, the Man braced himself and tried propping himself up on his elbows in order to sit against the boat. His arms shook unsteadily and he collapsed onto his back. The elf moved to help him.

“I can do it,” Boromir snarled.

The elf backed away, a look of mixed amusement and worry on his face. Boromir struggled on, surprised and angered that suddenly the simple task of sitting up was near impossible. His arms shook as he pulled himself towards the boat. His legs lay motionless before him, nothing more than two dead weights. Once he managed to ease his back against the boat’s curved surface, he was exhausted. With each heartbeat, the blood pulsed through his stomach and awoke the burning pain. His left shoulder ached as well, trembling anew from the unexpected exertion.

“Well done,” Third One said, a faint smile creasing the corners of his mouth.

Boromir glared at him but did not speak for weariness. Instead, he leaned against the boat and watched the Anduin flow. He did not want to think of the little ones, of his brother and father, of Minas Tirith, of all that he loved and had now lost. But, naturally, that was all he could think of. His body lingered on Middle-earth, but there was no life for him. How would his father accept the dishonor Boromir now carried? Aragorn, if he was still alive, would ride to Minas Tirith and claim his crown – and the line of Stewards would end in disgrace…

Boromir shook his head to rid it of the morbid thoughts and studied the elf before him. Third One was peering up into the forest, through the thick curtain of black trees and towards some unknown object. Boromir followed the elf’s gaze, but found he could not penetrate the darkness. He clenched his teeth in irritation. Being outfought by orcs so as to lose Merry and Pippin; being outwitted by elves so as to avoid well-deserved death; succumbing to the Ring’s temptation. These were endless blows to Boromir’s fierce pride, to his honor, to his worth as a Man. He felt the anger and humiliation swell up from his pained, empty stomach through his heaving lungs and into his head. The elf, sensing the Man’s rising hostility, watched him with hesitation. But Boromir knew that Third One feared not an attack, but rather that an angered patient would simply injure himself further. Boromir’s blood boiled – and to think he had begged this elf for mercy, for a quick escape from the pain!

“Is something wrong?” Third One asked mildly.

Boromir inhaled painfully. He cursed the elves for their perception. He flashed Third One an angry look.

“Is it the custom of elves to meddle in the affairs of others?”

“What do you speak of?”

“I did not ask to be helped.”

Third One smiled again. The elf’s humor, ever unfazed, was also grating on Boromir’s dangerously frayed nerves.

“You were not able to ask, considering the condition we found you in. Nay, we took it upon ourselves to help you out of sympathy.”

“Did you three not think perhaps I preferred to be left alone?” Boromir spat.

“To die?”
“Yes, to die!”

The elf’s smile faded.

“No living thing desires to die, not in their heart. Believe me, Boromir of –”

“Do not call me by that name! I am no longer of Gondor, and it would be an insult for the Men of that realm if I should continue carrying such a title!”

“Why?” a new voice asked. “What crime have you committed?”

Both Boromir and Third One looked back to see the other elves emerging from the shadowy forest, though Third One was not as surprised as Boromir. First One’s thin frame appeared first, and it seemed it was he who had asked the question. From the other side of the clearing, Second One arrived, bow in hand. The two elves deposited their things by the other travelling packs. Second One took a seat beside Third One, while First One remained standing, peering curiously at Boromir.

“Your voice carries far for our elf ears,” Second One teased.

“Verily it does,” First One continued, serious. “As does your anger.”

“And do all elves inhibit the minds of others?” Boromir growled.

“Nay,” First One replied smoothly. “Rather it is Men who are transparent.”

Boromir started forward, pulling instinctively at his empty sheath, but the blast of fiery torment in his stomach stalled the attack. None of the three elves had moved, though all stared at him in alarm. His chest heaved. Shocks of pain lashed from his shoulder and gut, blurring his vision and fueling his anger.

“It is not wise to strike those who help you,” First One said, his voice cold.

“Peace, First One,” Third One said. “He is not himself.”

“Aye, what is it that torments you?” Second One asked.

“You know nothing of what torments me!” Boromir raged. “My death was on Parth Galen, and now you three have forced me to live on as carrion! What right do elves have in dragging a Man away from his end! What could they possibly know of what he must now endure? They see nothing for their arrogance!”

His voice echoed loudly throughout the forest, ringing ominously. A tense silence followed, punctured only by Boromir’s ragged breathing. Finally, First One knelt beside the Man and whispered:

“I would not presume so much. We know more than you think. The fever betrayed you.”

Boromir’s eyes locked onto First One with a flicker of alarm.

“Yes,” First One continued. “It is no mystery where you came from, and the so-called torment that haunts you. You speak of the Ring.”

The flicker of alarm in Boromir’s eyes grew to outright panic.

“We know of your travels. You voiced Caradhras… Moria… Lórien. There were also names –
perhaps they were your companions? Frodo. Aragorn. Legolas.”

“Merry, Pippin,” Third One added.

“Mithrandir,” Second One mused. “It must have been a significant quest to unite such characters.”

Boromir could not breathe but for short, shallow gasps. Cold sweat trickled down his temples.

“And we know of your crime,” First One dropped his voice to a lethal whisper: “To steal the One Ring.”

“Nay!” Boromir exploded. “I did not steal it!”

“Peace, Boromir,” Third One soothed. “The Ring is very powerful. Even the strong – ”

“Your companions left you because you were a danger to them,” First One interrupted fiercely. “That is the torment you speak of – Sauron’s temptation! We three have walked this Middle-earth for a hundred of your lives, do not insult our intelligence! Did you think we could not walk away? Abandon you to the danger you carry? You say that you are but carrion, very well. We shall leave you to your fate!”

First One stood abruptly and grabbed his pack from the ground. He walked to the other overturned boat and pulled it upright. The other two elves stood.

“First One?” Second One asked, bewildered.

“Come, brother,” the thin elf growled.

“We cannot leave him so soon!” Third One gasped.

“We can, and we will!”

Boromir watched in dread, a heavy panic pushing against his chest. He could not speak for the fear of what they had just told him – he had betrayed the Fellowship entirely – and of the idea that they should now leave him, stranded on the banks of the Anduin, while they walked the land with the quest’s secret.

“I – I don’t have the Ring!” Boromir cried.

“Aye, but you have meddled with it,” First One spoke without turning. “We have helped you enough, you will mend. Now I would be rid of such a heavy burden. It is not wise to get close to such evil.”

First One was already throwing in the other elves’ belongings. Second One tried placing a gentle hand on the elf’s shoulder, but First One shook it off. He began pushing the boat out into the river. Second One looked back to Third One, who remained hovering uncertainly over Boromir.

“Come, Third One,” Second One called.

Third One removed some more lembas and an extra vial of miruvor from his pack and placed them beside the seated Boromir. He then cast the Man a sympathetic look and rushed back to the other elves. They pushed the boat further, the water curling around their legs, and hopped in. Boromir watched as they paddled away, disappearing into the darkness. He caught one last glimpse of Third One’s distant face, turning to look at him, before the boat faded completely.

He remained seated on the bank, shivering slightly, feeling the silence press against him like a
tomb. And the dream returned…

_Sunlight danced across the forest floor. Boromir tumbled down the leaf-covered slope; Parth Galen was a blur of movement around him. He landed on his back with a grunt and slid several feet – the Uruk-hai warrior pinned on top of him. He could hear the rest of the Enemy retreating in the distance, the screams and sobs of the little ones no longer discernable among the great noise of stomping feet and terrible roars. Two more Uruk-hai soldiers came bounding downhill towards Boromir and the one before him._

With one desperate swing, Boromir hacked into the Uruk-hai’s side. The black warrior screamed in pain and fell to the side, pulling at the arrow in Boromir’s stomach as he stumbled off him. Pure agony ripped through the wound and unhealthy flashes crept through Boromir’s quickly disappearing legs. The blood was oozing out, soaking his torso and turning the White Tree of Gondor red; his entire lower half was falling numb.

Another Uruk-hai came running down the slope and Boromir had enough time to pull a dagger from the fallen Enemy soldier’s belt and hurl it at the oncoming Orc. The creature ducked to the right, but not before the soaring dagger caught his eye. He uttered a mangled cry before collapsing headfirst downhill.

Boromir did not see the third Uruk-hai until it was practically on top of him. The Orc seethed with rage - his yellow-black teeth bared in a vicious grin. With one fierce movement, he gripped Boromir’s throat, blocking the Man’s breath and keeping his head down, and grabbed the arrow shaft protruding from the gut.

Boromir whimpered and hated himself for it.

“So, Man thinks he can kill Uruk-hai,” the soldier spat, giving the arrow shaft a cruel twist and provoking a strangled wail from Boromir. “Your little halfling friends aren’t here to help you anymore – pity, I wanted them to see you die.”

Using his last reserve of strength, Boromir roared and threw his sword clumsily against the orc. He could not see for the sudden spurt of black blood sprayed into his eyes, but he felt the Uruk-hai resist momentarily, nearly snapping the arrow out of his wound, before relenting and falling dead aside the others. Boromir sputtered and wiped the mess from his face. He could feel his hands shaking, his vision fading in and out. He did not dare think of what his mangled torso resembled now, but the arrow was slick with blood when he tested to see whether it had been pulled out or was still in. The pain was also fading – a bad sign – and a dim feeling crept up from his forgotten legs through his gut and into his heart.

…As the darkness flooded in from all sides, Boromir thought he heard someone calling his name. It was so distant, only a soft voice carried by the wind through the trees, that he wondered whether it was real. He tried to respond but found there was no strength left. With a resigned sigh, his body fell limp…
Above Emyn Muil

Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

The forests north of Emyn Muil were thick with grey trees. Abandoned paths snaked through, riddled with thorny overgrown bushes and fallen tree trunks from where vile lizards crawled. The air was a misty fog, through which the sunlight appeared only as random, silver-white shafts. Every so often, a foul wind howled through the forest, rattling the bare branches of the dead trees and frightening away any creature who dared move south. For south was Emyn Muil and, beyond that, the Dead Marshes which led to the very foot of Mordor. With the absence of sunlight and a clear path, the musty winds from the Black Land were the only means of navigating the dense wood. As long as one avoided the source of the wind, one was sure to continue northward, or eastward, or northeastward. One was sure to avoid Mordor.

The elves knew their way around this forest, however, as they had often passed through it. They needed no navigation, since their feet were so familiar with the uneven, trampled ground, that they could have walked through whilst sleeping. They did not sleep on this particular journey, but rather remained awake in order to argue over the matter of their recently discarded companion.

“It was a wicked thing to do, First One,” Third One muttered.

They walked in single file, picking their way through the thorns and undergrowth, and the younger, dark-haired elf lingered by the back. Second One walked several paces ahead of him – he was at the moment managing to step over a fallen trunk while pushing aside some thorny vines. Leading the group was First One, who sliced his way, rather unnecessarily, through the thick branches using both of his knives.

But Third One knew that his companion was still ruffled from the Man’s hostility, which was why he now chose to cut and hack the interwoven limbs that marred his path. It was a shameful behavior, Third One thought, to injure the trees so, but the three elves had long since abandoned the proper comportment of their kind. So he did not speak when First One sliced through another bramble before stepping over it and continuing.

“Third One, we cannot be blindly compassionate,” First One said without turning. “That Man threatens to pull us into the very heart of Middle-earth’s affairs. The War brews, and I foresee the Ring as being the center of it.”

“But he does not have it!” Third One insisted.

“Nonetheless its evil festerst in him. I will not have one so corrupted in my company.”

“Fear not, Third One,” Second One said mildly. “The Man will heal, and he shall return to his people.”

“Yet he spoke of leaving Gondor, for he is banished,” Third One retorted.
“And justly so,” First One said. “He is a danger to those around him. Else why would his companions abandon him to death?”

“Perhaps they could not help it!”

First One spun around angrily.

“Third One, why do you defend this Man so stubbornly?” he demanded. “You did not see into his mind, I did! He is a desperate and stained spirit. Did you not see how his hand reaches for the sword, ready to strike at those who help him? Did you not hear his incoherent talk?”

“First One is right,” Second One agreed. “The Man is a danger to us. And we had no reason to remain with him.”

“And yet I fear that all our fates are now entangled,” Third One meditated in a low voice. “It has been near four hundred years since we crossed paths with another, and to have it now be a Man who demands our help and who knows of the Ring… I say we cannot ignore it. We will see that Man again ere we pass from this forest.”

First One did not speak but turned around and began to violently hack through the branches. They continued their slow progress through the forest, yet all three elves were visibly unsettled. It was difficult to ignore the coincidence of encountering a Man – prominent in Gondor, member of a quest which involved the Ring, Mithrandir, and every race – wounded and deserted by his companions. And now, of all times, on the eve of the storm – when all of this land’s fate would be decided by perhaps that very quest. Yet what could the Valar intend with such a meeting?

“Let us hope you prophesy falsely,” First One grunted.

No one spoke for several hours following First One’s comment. Instead, the three elves continued along the makeshift path. The already dim gray light of day began to fade, indicating afternoon. In their entire journey through the forest, they had not encountered a single creature, save a spotted owl that hovered above them like a guide. It hooted now and again, but mostly flew slowly over their heads. The elves made no comment concerning the owl.

After hours of silence, Second One cleared his throat.

“My friends, I have made a mental count, and we have little miruvor,” he said. “We must seek Radagast the Brown. Perhaps he shall meet us just south of Mirkwood? He may yet replenish our dwindling supplies with new elven goods.”

His attempt to make conversation fell on deaf ears. Third One was still sulking, and First One, although he had finally put away his knives, emanated tightly wound anger.

After a few tense moments, First One spoke: “We would have enough miruvor if Third One did not keep giving it away.”

“Would you deny help to one who is dying?” Third One glared.

“You did not need to leave him our last vial!”

“He needed it more than we do!”

“Peace, brothers!” Second One exclaimed. “Let us not squabble.”

The elves fell silent, and the owl above them seemed to hoot with amusement.
“Mayhap Radagast will bring us news of Thranduil and his kingdom?” Second One said.

First One grunted in response and Third One snorted. Second One sighed inwardly. *An age has passed and nothing changed between these two.*

“Shall we send him a message?” Second One tried again for conversation.

No one responded.

“We will reach the borders of Mirkwood in four, five days, no? I feel, perhaps we should send a message so that Radagast may be better prepared. Mayhap he has been busy of late, I do not know.”

Still no response.

“Or mayhap he is away, and would require advance notice of our need to see him.”

Silence. The owl hooted.

“We have need of some horses once reaching Mirkwood. He is friend to the wild horses of the eastern lands…”

“Call him, then!” First One burst suddenly. “By the Valar, what chatter!”

Second One smiled. *Finally.* The three elves stopped, and the two waited for Second One to make his move. He searched the trees for something and, after finding his prey, stepped forward. The other elves watched with amused looks as he bowed towards the large, spotted owl that had perched itself on the lowest branch of a tall oak tree. It seemed it had been waiting for this ever since they had reached these wood, for it had followed them the entire day. The dignified creature hooted once to signal the elf could speak.

"Master Owl, King of the Trees, Ally of the Great Eagles and Defender of Lesser Birds, we have a message for our friend, Radagast the Brown."

*Hoot.*

“He passes through the lands of Mirkwood, the woods which we cannot enter under penalty of death. If possible, we would meet Radagast at the southern-most tip of the forest. We are in need of elven supplies and news from our kind.”

The owl ruffled his feathers momentarily and, after a lengthy pause, hooted twice.

"Thank you," Second One bowed again as the owl flew off in the distance.

First One smiled. “Well done.”

Second One laughed. Though they had often sent messages to Radagast using passing creatures such as birds and field mice, it never failed to amuse the elves. Perhaps the humor depended on how they could not quite understand what the animals were saying in return. The elves often whiled away the endless hours by inventing possible conversations and phrases for the animals.

The most entertaining of animal messengers Radagast used was an elderly robin. The elves imagined Radagast found the tiny bird endearing, for he was always sent in reply, and the elves had come to rely on the tiny, wilting bird as evidence that Radagast would indeed meet them. This robin was characterized by a particular screech – “*Gah! My ears bleed at the sight of him!*” First
One had once commented – which he used to announce his coming.

The sun was setting, and despite the dreary surroundings, the elves’ tension broke. Second One smiled to himself. After thousands of years together, they had learned enough of each other to know when one needed to laugh, to talk, to be alone. Now was the time of laughter. They spoke of the elderly robin, decided his name should be Ragwing, to complement Radagast’s name. They joked about the owl, estimated when the robin would arrive, mused over what news the wizard could bring. And so it was, as it had been, for the millennia they spent together: a peaceful, endless walk tinged with humor.

A dream, or is it the truth?
Frodo, Frodo, Frodo,
Frodo, I’m sorry!
Come back!
I’m sorry!
Frodo!
Wait!
No!
?!
!

Is this how it happened? Is this truly how it happened?

The memory fades into view, mocking the half-asleep, half-awake Boromir.

Parth Galen is a small field, very green, very young. Vividly alive. Frodo is there, brooding, looking out in the distance with distant eyes himself. He is clutching the Ring – feeling its intoxicating power even through his clothes. He can feel it pulsing against his hand as if it were a living heart. And with each beat, it whispers: “Frodo. Frodo. Frodo.” Niggling away at his mind, pushing into it, insisting. The Ring will not be ignored.

Movement behind him. Frodo turns, and his heart sinks, for he knows the outcome of this encounter. He has sensed it for days. There, standing before him, tall and noble and sinister, is Boromir. The Man is breathing heavily. His eyes dart. He is nervous, unstable. Frodo pushes the Ring against his chest.

Words are exchanged, but they are drowned out by the Ring’s metallic hum. The tension escalates. Frodo backs away unconsciously. Boromir moves forward instinctively. A hand outstretched.

“Why do you recoil? I will not steal it, but I would use it. Aye, this you know. But I do not desire to keep it. Let me try, is that not reasonable? Let us test the plan. Gondor and all of Middle-earth could be saved. Lend me the Ring, I will not keep it.”

Frodo shakes his head. “No! It is my burden, never yours.”

The Man’s face twists; exasperated, desperate. “We are doomed to folly! Our victory or death lies in your hand, and you would choose death for us all? What right does a halfling have to decide such fates? Chance has given it to you, but you do not deserve it. And you would throw it away in an act of cowardice! It is the brave and bold who should bear it, not you! Give it to me!”

A lunge. Frodo cries out, jumps back. His heart is thumping madly.

(How beautiful it is in Parth Galen. How peaceful and calm and serene. One would want to lie
here and think of faraway lands and empty spaces. But neither hobbit nor Man can see that beauty. They see only the Ring, beautiful in itself, but not innocent, never innocent. It is a terrible, violent, surreal beauty. It is addictive.)

Frodo is afraid now. The Man continues, stepping forward slowly, slowly:

“Come, come, my friend. Rid yourself of it! Is it not what you desire? Let them blame me, let history blame and glorify me, for I am stronger than you and can take it whether you give it or not.” Frodo swallows scared; Boromir smiles wicked. “I am too strong for you, halfling!”

Stumbling back, one fist holding tight the Ring while the other swings out. Tumbling in the grass, fighting, kicking, jostling for escape. Savage snarls and angered cries. Boromir pushes Frodo’s chin back, arching his head against the ground so that his neck near snaps, and with the other hand seeks the Ring. Frodo cries out, desperate and furious, kicks outward, claws, struggles. He can feel the Ring beating against his own heart, beating with intensity. He can feel his own lust for the Ring fueling his anger.

Sting is withdrawn. Frodo brings the blade down against Boromir’s forearm, slices, and the Man falls back with a pained cry. But before Frodo can jerk himself free, Boromir, infuriated, lands a heavy backhand on the hobbit’s chin. There is a satisfying crack of bone. The world spins. Flashes of light. Frodo knows his choice: he rips the Ring from its necklace, thrusts it on his finger, and disappears.

Silence. Boromir, holding his bleeding arm, screams and bellows, cries out, damns the halflings to death and darkness. But Parth Galen is peaceful; he is alone. And as he sees again the field and blue sky, and realizes his betrayal, the Man falls forward on his knees, his face against the grass. He feels now the sting in his arm. Tears fall. “What madness? What cries? Ai, I am a fool. Frodo! Frodo! Come back! The madness has passed. Forgive me! Come back!”

But it is too late, too late for all. There is blood on the grass. Boromir cradles his injured arm. He sees a trail of blood leading away and disappearing. He imagines now: Frodo battered and beaten. Attacked by his ally. The wind whispers: traitor.

Surely this is a nightmare.

Boromir awoke and immediately regretted it. He was still lying by the Anduin, alone, abandoned by all. His broken body – near useless in its debilitating pain – ached, stung, burned, and throbbed with every movement. The sun was shining; it was already late morning. For many long moments, Boromir waited there, eyes open, breathing shallow. Waited for what, he could not say, though a morbid part of his mind imagined various brutal situations if a party of orcs found him.

He had betrayed the Fellowship. He had betrayed Gondor. It was only a matter of time before Sauron found the Ring. Boromir’s breathing quickened. Harsh images of Minas Tirith in ruin flashed through his mind. All his honor, all his worth, everything was gone. And Middle-earth would burn for it. Boromir knew that the only options now were death or exile.

Death or exile.

The elves! Boromir felt his head spin. The treacherous, deceitful, arrogant elves! They had not even revealed their true names to Boromir. They had kept their own identities guarded while learning all his secrets. And now, they had abandoned him for crow’s meat to walk these lands knowing everything. He groaned.

There was still a task. He could still mend something that had gone wrong. He needed to find the
elves.

Oh, but the pain of movement!

Weak tears spilled out as he pulled and pulled, dragged his legs, tortured his stomach, tried to stand. He found the Lothlórien boat lying overturned beside him. Using its stern, he attempted to prop himself up against it. After many failed attempts, and an agony so persistent that he wanted only to lie there for three days more, Boromir managed to get upright, on his knees. He leaned heavily against the wooden bow. With each heartbeat, the pain throbbed, growing louder, unrelenting, and his nausea rose. He bit back the gorge, struggled against it. Yet it could not be ignored. Casting himself on his hands and knees, he vomited painfully. The stitches stretched and pulled, his ragged wounds clenched and tightened. He vomited again, only white-red bile, for his stomach was empty save the sickness.

It was too much. He fell to his side, not caring for his wounded shoulder or where he fell, and clutched his torso weakly with both hands. The pain had reached such a level that Boromir’s mind receded back into a numb void, so that all was indistinct and blurred. Had he the strength, he would have screamed or wept from the pain. But he could do nothing, save concentrate on breathing, remaining conscious…

*Up, up, son of Denethor. Get up. You are asleep.*

Boromir awoke again. He had lost consciousness. The sun was much lower in the sky now. It was afternoon. He cursed himself aloud, pulled himself away from the dried mess he was lying in. This time, furious with himself and spurred on by anger, he reached for his sword, pulled himself up against the boat’s side. Again, the nausea. His knees shook. He half-stumbled, half-crawled to the water’s edge and dropped his head against the pebbles. The freezing water lapped up against his face, yet he welcomed it. Raising himself to his hands, he moved forward on his knees, until the water raised itself to his thighs while he knelt. There, he washed slowly, carefully. His naked torso was still mostly bandaged, and he avoided those areas. But his arms, his chest, the back of his neck, all cleaned.

Shivering, but feeling some semblance of strength returning, Boromir stood unevenly, using his sword as a cane, and walked the five or six paces back to camp. Carefully this time, he lowered himself onto the blanket. The desire to wrap himself up in a warm blanket and sleep for days was very strong, and he allowed himself a few minutes of cold repose. Then, groaning and grunting, he pushed himself up, searched for his clothes. The elves had left his things all neatly arranged. His familiar round shield lay against his pack, as did his horn.

*The Horn of Gondor.*

*Gondor.*

Something crept through Boromir’s limbs, through his veins. A suffering, a perversion. He was an exile now. He was not of Gondor. He could never return. Boromir of Gondor, as all had once known him, was effectively dead. He crawled forward, grasped the horn. It was a splendid thing. Well-crafted, beautiful, yet now stained with his own blood. He turned it over in his hands, fell forward slightly so that his forehead rested against the curved ivory. It was cool against his brow. Rigid, smooth, white. It whispered to him.

Cradling it as if it were a child, Boromir pulled himself away from his pack. He moved towards the water, fell to his knees, rested. And then, using his good arm, he threw the horn far off into the water. It bobbed up and down as a distant white speck on the placid waves, floating evenly south. Boromir watched until it disappeared into the mist of Rauros Falls.
He needed to dress. He had only his breeches and the thick bandages to keep the cold out. Moving slowly, closing his eyes as he swayed, he staggered back to his feet and hobbled to the pack. Lying beside the strewn blanket was a clear flask of liquid. He recognized it: *miruvor*. He bent down, gingerly, slowly, almost collapsed, retrieved the flask and drank. The liquor was warm. It coursed through him, and he felt some of the pain lessen. He had enough strength to dress now.

Undershirt, chain mail, red tunic, doublet, grey gambeson, black surcoat, Lórien cloak. The weight of his garments threatened to pull him to the ground, and he steadied himself against a boulder. He tied his belt loosely, enough to wear his sheath without it slipping off. Yet even so limp, the belt was enough to cause torment in his stomach. He gulped down more *miruvor*. His heavy gloves and vambraces lay outside the pack. The vambraces, embroidered with the White Tree. He would leave them.

When all was ready, he moved to the boat, leaned against it for support, and then struggled to overturn it. It was thankfully light, despite its size, but Boromir suffered for the effort nonetheless. He took a moment to gather his strength before continuing. He loaded in his shield, pack, sword, and bedroll.

And now for the most difficult part. Boromir nearly laughed as he recalled the ease with which he had paddled these calm waters only days before. Yet now, the task before him, to row from one bank to the next, seemed near impossible. The eastern shore was far. Perhaps an hour’s paddling, at his full strength. The waters were calm, but they moved towards nearby Rauros with a strong current. He felt a flicker of despair. But he had grown accustomed to despair in the last twenty years, as Mordor’s power grew, and by now he knew how to quell it.

Swallowing the last of the *miruvor* and dropping the empty flask, he began to push the boat out onto the water. Slowly, it crept forward. He paused, caught his breath, swallowed the nausea. He was sweating. The pain surged through his limbs, but he ignored it as best he could. Again, he pushed the boat. It reached water, floated buoyant and glided out. He scrambled inside and collapsed onto the seat. A few moments of recovery, and the boat had already drifted out and towards the Falls. He could feel the fine mist, hear the heavy roar. Grabbing the oar from underneath him, he thrust it in the water and pushed. Torment in his shoulder and arm nearly let him drop the paddle into the Anduin, but he resisted, pushed on.

He found that if he moved slowly but rhythmically, the boat kept its course. Every twist of his arms as he changed side, every throb in his shoulder as he dragged the oar through the water, all this threatened to make him swoon. How the oar had seemed light only days ago! How smooth and fluid it had been! Now, to his battered and weakened body, it seemed as if he were dragging a flimsy branch through muddy earth. He struggled against the current, and the boat was often still, neither moving forward, nor gliding back. He grunted and cursed, grinding his teeth at the pain until his temples ached. It did nothing to relieve the suffering, but it helped him stay awake and moving.

Late afternoon. The setting sun burned red behind him as it disappeared in the west. Boromir drove forward. Finally, after several hours, the boat touched land. By this time, his arms screamed with strain, yet they had grown accustomed to movement, and so falling still was an even greater torment. He pushed everything out of the boat and heard his shield splash water. After that, exhausted, he managed to drag himself out and fall onto the ground. He lay for a moment, half in the water, half out, panting and moaning like a wounded animal. Then, he nudged forward his things so that they rested on dryer ground, dropped his head and fell asleep.
The boat was poorly landed. It dislodged itself from the loose pebbles and drifted out onto the Anduin. Night fell.

The elves made camp in the shadow of some fallen boulders. Sickly trunks lay half-embedded in the ground, green with ancient mold. It was an unsavory environment, but the elves were, by now, accustomed to it. They made a fire, set water to boil, checked their supplies. The sun had already set, and the early March night was very cold. This chill did not touch the elves, however, and they were grateful they were not another particular person during this night.

Third One tore a large piece of lembas into thirds. First One was seated on the boulder, staring out west, towards the path they had just come from. Second One was managing the fire.

“I do hope the Man is well,” Third One said.

“E’er the sympathetic soul,” Second One quipped.

“Nay, not more so than most. Only, it worries me that we left him so soon. Lembas?”

“Thank you.”

First One smirked, looking down at the other two.

“Fear not, my oversensitive friend,” he said. “He is doing very well. He has managed to cross the River.”

Both Third One and Second One perked up at this. They stood, joined First One by the boulder. They strained their eyes and ears to perceive what the blond elf had detected. But the forest was silent, the only sounds being the howl of wind or chirp of night-insects. In the darkness, they saw an endless monotony of grey, half-dead trees stretching out on all sides. Except south, but they did not look south.

“You have heard him?” Third One asked.

“Aye,” First One shrugged. “I hear little now, he must be asleep. But, as we were walking, I did hear his pained cries and wails carried by the wind. He means to follow us.”

The other elves sat stunned, faint amusement tickling their expressions. First One laughed at their shock.

“To follow us?” Second One repeated.

“To challenge us, I imagine,” First One replied. “He betrayed his companions, told us everything, and now, in typical Mannish fashion, he will seek us out in order to silence us.”

Second One raised his eyebrows in amusement. “He would be a fool. We are three, and he is one. And a wounded, near-dead one, at that.”

“Still, he did manage to cross the River,” First One shrugged.

Second One laughed, and First One also chuckled. Third One remained silent, staring out into the forest. He turned back to the other elves with a worried look.

“Brothers, the night is cold for a Man,” Third One said. “The fever has only just left him, and I fear for his health. Let us go and retrieve him. You say he did but cross the Anduin?”
Third One was already moving back to the camp in order to gather supplies, but a hand on his shoulder stalled him. Second One sighed musically at his young friend’s haste. First One crossed his arms.

“Ah, Third One,” First One chuckled. “Do not coddle the Man. Let him be. He can manage.”

“It is not coddling!” Third One cried, indignant. “Foul things crawl through these woods at night, and the air is too cold. He will freeze if the wolves do not reach him first!”

“Be easy, Third One, he seemed doughty enough,” Second One soothed, failing to hide a creeping smile.

Third One stared agape at his elf companions. Their shoulders trembled slightly with stifled giggles. Third One could not understand. What sort of perverse mirth was this? To enjoy another’s suffering? He felt his face flush with anger.

“Third One, you are too compassionate,” Second One laughed.

“Why do you laugh?” Third One demanded.

“Come, leave something for him – lay some miruvor and lembas along the path – if you are so determined to help him. But do not worry, Men are surprisingly resolute when driven by a desire to redeem their honor. It seems you prophesied correctly today. We will see that Man again ere we leave these wood.”
Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

*Nienna is the Valar Queen of Pity, Suffering, Endurance.*

She weeps for every ailing beggar, every rejected lover, every orphaned child all the injuries of all the soldiers in all the wars every dead leaf on every abandoned tree every mortal or elvish lip-quivering chin-tremble she weeps washing down over Middle-earth in cascading rains filling the rivers and oceans, and then draining them again to weep ever more

and now, turning her teary eyes to Boromir sprawled half-dead stinking rotten cold on the eastern Anduin bank by Rauros Falls with wheezy breath and burnt soul and oh, how the arrow wounds rip through like tearing cloth, pulling his shivering muscles apart with poison poison poison, ai, the poison!

Poor child!

Nienna sobs weeps wails cries again and again.

“O woe! O anguish! O grief! O pain! O darkness! O torment! O general misery!”

“Not over yet, for poor poor son of Denethor,” she laments, and lays a warm blanket over him. “Sleep easy. Wounded, scarred, diseased, poisoned, lost, despairing, half-gutted Man. For now, rest and forgive me, my love, for I will visit you again. Too soon…”
Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

When Boromir awoke on the banks of the Anduin, he found his boots soaked through with icy water. His fingers were blue, his feet like two numb weights. The cold was absolute, complete, all-consuming. His body was past the stage of shivering, and instead at the stage when all its heat focuses on the center.

Sleep...

He lay for several moments. He could feel the sunlight pressing against his eyelids. He could hear the soft lap-lap of the water, freezing wet against his feet and up to his calves. He remembered little of yesterday. But finding himself on the eastern bank reminded him of the painful retching, the endless paddling. Had it been any other situation, he would have chided himself for sleeping cold, wet and exposed. But his views had changed considerably, so that he was instead more annoyed to find himself still alive.

Finding himself alive meant, however, that he had to push on. The elves. He needed to find the elves. And if he died with this goal in mind, perhaps he would acquire some speck of honor in death.

And so Boromir forced his eyes - sticky with grime - to open, forced his arms to curl up underneath him and push. Something soft and wooly brushed his face, and he felt a rush of fear, but it fell over his shoulders, innocent. It was a blanket. His blanket? He did not recall covering himself in a blanket. From the previous night, he remembered only the exhausted elation upon touching land and the senseless collapse onto the shore.

He arched his head up, looked back. The boat was gone.

For a moment, he wondered if someone had come upon him as he slept. But he did not truly care. If some thief had come in the night, stolen his boat, and paid him with a blanket, so be it. His mind was too fuzzy to feel any alarm. Only one clear thought rang through: he needed to find the elves.

Several moments passed as he labored to stand. His shield, sword, bedroll and pack were strewn about the riverbank, further up on dry ground. He crawled to these, arranged them. Movement seemed to reawaken the deathly chill, and so, as he worked, his teeth chattered loudly and periodic tremors shook through him. With bluish, slow hands, he put on his shield and scabbard. The strap dug into his wounded stomach, and so nausea and pain added themselves to the list of discomforts.

When everything was ready, and he was in a near-standing position, he surveyed the woods in front of him. Foreboding grey trees, no sound, an overgrown path. It was not very welcoming.

Merciful Valar, at least let them have followed the path.
With soggy boots that squelched with every step, Boromir set out into the dying forests north of Emyn Muil. His progress was slow and uneven. Often, he would pause to rest against a fallen trunk. He fell many times, as his leaden feet would get caught on unseen branches, and his broken body would slam against the ground unexpectedly. With each fall, he was slower to rise, until, sometime in the afternoon, he simply remained there and slept. But it was a light, troubled sleep. Keep moving. There is no time to rest. Go, son of Denethor. Chase your honor. And so, after an hour of dozing, he lifted himself from the thicket and began to drag his feet again along the path.

During this slow, stumbling hobble, he tested how far he could straighten his back without his gut blazing hot with pain. By mid-afternoon, he found that, if he kept his left arm against his stomach, and used his right to move aside the maze of vines and branches, he could almost stand straight. But this personal triumph was quickly washed away by gloom: he turned back to see that, after nearly a day of walking, the Anduin waters still glinted nearby. He groaned aloud. At this sorry pace, he would never reach the elves.

Boromir continued, nonetheless. As he walked, his mind drifted on in a dreamlike haze. Images crowded his vision, blocking the path ahead. Remembered shame burned fierce in his heart. I am too strong for you, halfling! Give it to me! Again and again, scenes from the Fellowship. Frodo's eyes, wide with shock and fear. Or the little ones. Merry and Pippin, both weeping as they watched him bleed. Go! Run! Gandalf's tiny form swallowed up by an impenetrable darkness. Fly, you fools!

As Boromir pushed aside a thin branch, he dropped his hand too soon, so that the branch snapped back to slap him in the face. He sputtered and caught his foot on a stone. With only enough time to damn the stone, the ground rushed up to meet him. He fell against his wounded shoulder. In the same breath, he cried out in pain and damned this wretched existence.

He lay there, panting. Suddenly, this pursuit seemed entirely foolish. How could he ever reach the elves? They were nimble creatures, moving fast and leaving no trace along the path. With a full night’s head start, it was likely they were miles and miles away. Boromir would never catch them, especially in his current condition.

No one could hear him, and so he moaned with despair. Childish tears blurred his vision. All tests failed. He had failed the Quest, ruined any hope Gondor had to defeat Sauron’s ever-growing darkness. And now three elves walked dangerously close to Mordor knowing everything of the Ring’s secret fate. Death or exile. The only true option was death. Boromir sniveled miserably, his face pressing against the damp earth, his nose buried in the dead leaves. Any honorable Man would have ended this pitiful half-life days ago. He was a fool to think he could have caught the elves.

Whimpering quietly and pulling in his arm, with every intention of unsheathing his sword to fall upon it, Boromir’s fingers Brushed against something cool and solid. He recoiled, startled. But, turning his head, his heart jumped to see a familiar vial: miruvor. Without thinking, he wrenched himself forward, uncorked the vial, and drank. The warm liquor coursed through his weary limbs, spreading wide, cleaning him, invigorating him.

He did not bother to think of why a bottle of miruvor was placed neatly along the path. He was simply thankful for it. Further up ahead, arranged in a little pile of clean leaves, was some lembas. From this, Boromir shrank. His stomach bubbled up in sudden turmoil, he felt again the cold sweat on his brow. Nay, not again. Please. He crawled on hands and knees away from the path. Part of him wanted to mull over the lembas and miruvor, to consider their origins.

But now he had to concentrate on the nausea. He coughed several times, he spat, he heaved and nothing came. His stomach wound was screaming with pain, his shoulder could not hold his
weight as he crawled, and so he leaned lopsided on one elbow. Yet the nausea superceded all other discomforts. He tried again. Nothing. But the revulsion was there, egging forward.

He waited.

He spat.

He closed his eyes.

It passed. Just enough to let him know that he would not be sick now, but perhaps later. And so Boromir shoved himself to his feet, steadied himself against a tree, and continued along the path. The miruvor helped substantially, he could lift his feet off the ground, he could almost straighten himself. As he walked, his thoughts lingered on the forgotten items. Were they really forgotten? Were not elves ever watchful?

With a sudden, jerking halt, Boromir stopped. And then he groaned. The elves had left the miruvor and lembas for him. Intentionally. They knew he was following them. They were even patronizing him.

This revelation fueled his anger, so that he began to limp along the path with renewed fervor. Plague take them! It was so clear. Leaving food and drink for him along the path was a message. It meant they knew he was following them, and they desired for him to know that they knew. It may have also been a jest, a barb at his fruitless hunt. Something to tease him with. For surely they imagined him incapable of truly threatening them.

Boromir growled. Then they are fools. He had fought wounded before. He had defended Osgiliath to the last bridge with an arrow in the thigh. He had survived fever in Henneth Annûn, poisoned darts in Pelargir, an orc blade to the shoulder along the Harad Road. And all his life, he had fought on. The elves were fools if they thought two poisoned arrows would forestall him.

Yet he could help but think of the similarity between his current, poison-riddled situation and that of his ancestor…

“Come, boy, I will tell you of your namesake.”

“Yes, father?”

“Boromir the First, son of Denethor the First. He was a powerful warrior, a strong soldier, a leader of Men. He retook Osgiliath after it was attacked by the Uruk-hai. They were a new breed then, none knew of them. And there was Boromir dreadfully wounded – Morgul-wounds, they say, with the dark magic. Foul wounds, they did shorten his life and leave him in constant pain as he aged. And yet, remember this, my son, Boromir the First continued – he fought on, never did he stumble.”

“He must have been very strong.”

“Yes, my son. As you will be.”

Boromir caught his foot on a root and stumbled. He grabbed a nearby branch so as not to fall. Nay, the elves should not have underestimated him. He would yet continue. He was not the first Boromir to suffer poisoned wounds at the hands of Uruk-hai. And he would fight on, just as his name beckoned him to.

With this in mind, he forced himself upright. He would meet the elves with head held high. He would challenge them.
“Well?”

“He is quiet now. I heard something earlier.”

“Aye, so did I. He did cry out.”

“Perhaps he fell.”

“I should think so.”

“And now?”

“He is perhaps three hundred paces away. Shall we wait for him here or go to meet him?”

“Let him come to us.”

Second One looked to First One and chuckled. Late afternoon light spilled onto the small clearing. Few trees grew in this part of the wood. Most had fallen, lying on their sides as decaying trunks. The ground was muddy and flat, indicating that at some point, there had been a pool. Lizards burrowed themselves into murky holes. Worms squirmed under the elves’ boots.

The elves were all three turned west, waiting for the arrival of the wounded Man. Throughout the day they had heard his muffled cries drifting with the wind. They had heard each fall, each pained moan, each branch being shoved aside. And while First One and Second One had found the entire ordeal highly amusing, Third One had grown increasingly irritated with his friends and worried for Boromir.

Now, as the Man dragged himself closer to them, they could hear also the gasping breaths and shuffling boots. Third One kept shifting his weight and looking worriedly at his elf companions, yet the other two seemed unperturbed. They waited for the steps to get closer, for the noise to grow louder.

Finally, they saw his form moving among the overgrown path, perhaps a hundred paces off. He moved slowly, visibly drained, and often used the trees as support. Yet when he looked up and saw the elves watching him, he straightened and hid all sign of discomfort. He strode forward, chin jutting out angrily, hand against the hilt of his sword.

“Greetings, Boromir of Gondor,” Second One said as Boromir approached. “‘Tis a surprise to see you again.”

“Did you forget to tell us something?” First One joked.

Both First One and Second One barely concealed their mirth, and this seemed to galvanize the Man. He glared.

“Elves, I am an honorable Man,” he began, “and I seek you out to deal justice. For you three have heard what was not meant to be heard, and I cannot be sure you are not spies of the Dark One. Therefore, I do challenge all three to a duel.”

At this, First One and Second One dissolved into shaking laughter. Third One stepped forward.

“Boromir, please,” the elf raised his hands. “We cannot fight you.”

“You can and you will,” Boromir dropped his pack and shield on the side of the path. He unsheathed his sword. “Come. Who shall meet my challenge first?”
“We are not spies!” Third One exclaimed, desperate.

“And yet you travel East in a time of war.”

“Where we travel is our business,” First One retorted.

“Why would three elves guard their true names, then? You three did tend my wounds enough to learn every secret I carried, only to promptly turn East. And what that I should find you on the very path to Mordor? ‘Tis suspicious, I should think.”

“These are our names,” Second One insisted. “As they have been for three thousand years.”

“We are not going to Mordor!” Third One said. “This path leads to all eastern places, not just the Dark Land.”

“Enough!” Boromir burst. “Fight me now, as honorable elves, else you will force me to commit some hasty act!”

Second One and Third One backed away with palms displayed. Boromir seethed, sword shaking in his grip.

"Very well, I will humor you,” First One cut in. “Yet, I am no swordsman, Boromir of Gondor.”

The elf loosened his pack and dropped it on the ground. Boromir leered.

"Then this will be quick."

A faint smile creased First One’s lips. He unsheathed his sword, a bent elvish blade, and took a defensive position. Both Second One and Third One watched in hesitation, unsure as to whether their leader was serious in fighting the wounded Man.

Yet they knew that honor forbade them from intervening, and thus they hovered uncertainly at the sidelines.

"It will be a fair fight," First One said. "An elf who is unaccustomed with the blade against a Man who has seen better days."

Boromir’s anger flared visibly. He began circling First One, keeping his sword at the ready, and revealing no sign of injury. First One held his gaze and also began to size up his opponent. The elves had to admit that the Man was convincing enough; he seemed much healthier than he could possibly be. Strength and nobility resounded from his person. A fierce, animal-like quality flashed in his eyes.

The fight began. Boromir was the first to attack, and he lunged at First One in a sudden thrust. First One parried, danced back, raised his sword. The blades clashed, fell back, met again. First One fought quickly, his movements elegant and graceful. Boromir swung wildly, sweat already pouring down his temples. Second One and Third One, as the unlikely spectators, admired the Man’s stamina. For someone so wounded, he was doing quite well.

But First One was clearly winning. For he sidestepped blows with ease, while Boromir was wearying fast. The fight would not last very long. The elf began to tease the Man with feigns and near misses. He threw his sword into his other hand, began fighting with his left hand. The Man flushed, snarled angrily, swung the blade again and again. It never touched the elf, and, by now, First One was laughing.
Yet in his arrogant mirth, First One had left himself undefended on the right. Boromir found the weakness and he pushed forward with his blade. Although the elf dodged the attack easily, still the sword nicked his shoulder and blood was drawn.

Second One and Third One nearly gasped in shock. Boromir stumbled back, smiling, sweating, breathing hard. First One touched his ripped tunic. The wound was not deep, it was barely a scratch. The elf grinned, unfazed.

“Well done, Boromir,” he said. “Have we finished?”

“You give up so easily?”

“Nay, I simply do not want you to injure yourself further. This is quite entertaining, indeed, but if we continue, I shall be forced to fight in earnest. And that will only finish in a death.”

“That is what I intended.”

First One raised an eyebrow. Boromir smiled.

Third One, who stood at the side, could not contain himself any further.

“Friends, stop this! I cannot bear it! First One, leave the Man be. He is not serious in his threat. Come, let us end this foolish duel before someone is hurt.”

First One sighed theatrically. “Third One, silence your worries, I beg you. I will not injure Boromir any more than he already is.”

“Are you sure your friend is not worried for you, proud elf?” Boromir muttered.

First One cocked his head.

“I highly doubt it.”

“Friends, I do not jest,” Third One continued. “Sheathe your swords. Boromir, we did help you on Amon Hen, and you must trust us now. We have nothing to do with your personal failings.”

Boromir seethed. He turned towards Second One, was about to speak, when First One suddenly acted.

The elf brought his sword down, catching the Man off-guard, so that the latter had to raise his sword from the ground swiftly to meet the descending blade. Metal clashed loudly, but all three elves heard also the sound of fine thread ripping, of a wound reopening. Dark spots of blood appeared on Boromir's midsection, and he stumbled back, face pale and sweating, clutching his gut with his free arm. First One lowered his curved blade to allow the Man a moment to regain his composure.

Boromir leaned against his sword as if it were a cane and kept his shield arm clasped protectively against his gut. His legs wobbled uncertainly. He grimaced and held his breath, and all three elves watched him - waiting for the logical conclusion of either surrender or loss of consciousness. When
Boromir pulled his arm away to check, the garments were soaked in blood.

"I underestimated you," he choked. "You are cleverer than you seem."

First One grinned slightly and, feeling that victory was very near, swung his blade around carelessly. "Well, thank you. I am surprised you have lasted this long."

"Oh?" Boromir cocked an eyebrow and, just as First One was twirling the hilt of his sword against his palm, lunged forward with a sudden, desperate energy.

The elves were taken aback by the Man's surge of strength, but First One responded with agility and ease. Before Boromir's blade had reached within centimeters of his face, the elf grabbed the hilt of his sword as it spun in the air and, in one swift movement, knocked the Man's sword away, sliced him lightly on the cheek and held the blade against his neck to finish.

Second One and Third One could not help but smile at the spectacle: Boromir was still leaning forward as if to strike, though his hands were empty and First One's blade was pushing dangerously hard against his neck.

After a few tense moments, Boromir finally asked: "Well?"

First One shrugged and dropped his sword.

"However much you may desire it, you will not die today. My apologies."

Boromir's face flushed. He was about to respond when his arm shot up to his stomach and he doubled over with a cry of pain. The other elves stepped forward to help him, but he drew back. First One stood over him and made no move to help.

"Do not fear, Man of Gondor," he said. "The secret of the Ring is safe with us. We too are foes of Mordor, and we desire neither weapons nor power."

"Nay," Boromir grunted through clenched teeth, "I cannot let you w – walk free. You – you know too much."

"Then walk with us," Second One suggested.

"Aye," Third One concurred. "And let us help you."

The elf had already retrieved needle and thread from his pack, but Boromir knocked them away with a sharp backhand.

"I need no help!" Boromir hissed.

The elves gave each other mixed looks, but did not argue as he retrieved his things and slung the shield over his shoulder. After that, without a word, Boromir hobbled away into the woods, his round shield disappearing amongst the bushes. Once he was gone, First One sheathed his sword and retrieved his pack. Third One bent down and picked up the thread and needle which had fallen among the muddy ground. He sighed and wiped them clean.

"The Man is bold," Second One mused.

"The Man is foolish," First One corrected.
The Adraefan

Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

Once Boromir had found a place far from the path and hidden among the trees, where he knew he could no longer be seen by the elves, he staggered forward and let his sword fall against the ground. He then collapsed beside it, for a moment simply lying there, breathing hard and clutching his gut, waiting for the throbbing fire in his stomach to wane. His face was pressed against the damp soil, but he did not turn his head, for it required too much effort. Instead, he breathed in the moss and earth, hoping only that none would see him so reduced.

After a few moments, the pain subsided enough to let him crawl to a nearby tree and lean against its trunk. He ripped off his shield and threw it to one side. He then sat amidst the large roots and closed his eyes. Yet he could not delay. He had succeeded only in embarrassing himself and ripping through his stitches during the fight, and while his pride would suffer for perhaps several weeks, the wound in his gut demanded attention now.

Keeping one arm against his stomach and using the other to search through his bedroll and pack, he finally found a small kit with needle, thread and alcohol. He pulled off his bloodstained gloves with some effort and then removed his heavy belt. The absence of the belt already provided some relief, yet the blood also flowed more freely. Think nothing of it, he told himself as he gingerly pulled off jacket, doublet, chain mail, overshirt and undershirt. Just a few stitches. Once his torso was nude, he began to peel away the blood-soaked bandages. The quicker you do it, the easier it is. Forcing himself not to squirm, he unscrewed the bottle of alcohol and – are you a soldier or not? – poured liberally over the open wound. The stinging bit into his gut like a beast clenching its jaws, but he did not cry out. Instead he swayed dangerously close to losing consciousness, the pain hanging about him like a fog, before he shook his head with a jerk – soldiers of Gondor are more resilient than this! – and continued.

Boromir had trouble threading the needle, as his hands trembled too much, but after several failed attempts, and numerous frustrated curses, he finally succeeded. Now to it. Yet, even as he forced his hands forward to prick through the first piece of mangled flesh and pull away, they would not move. He cursed himself for his fear and tried leaning further against the tree, so that his torso was flatter and the wound better spread. But still his hands would not move. Instead they hovered, shivering, over his stomach, never getting closer than a few centimeters. Despite his attempts to calm himself, he found he could not do the first stitch, for either his stomach instinctively shrank away or his hands would simply not move.

Now to it, you fool! Do it, before you bleed to death like a coward! The elves will leave you here and they will walk these lands, knowing every secret you sought to protect! Now!

Without thinking further, Boromir plunged the needle deep into his wound and an enraged howl escaped his lips before he could stifle the cry. His hands bounced unevenly against his stomach.
The thread tightened and he gasped hoarsely as the gash closed.

He was about to brace himself for the second stitch when the bushes shook beside him.

Second One appeared from behind some trees, his dark hair glinting in the afternoon sun and his hands clasped behind his back as if he were returning from an idle stroll. He studied the clearing for a moment, taking in the scattered belongings and the Man lying uncomfortably against the roots of a large tree. He smiled.

“There you are.”

“What do you want?” Boromir answered gruffly, pretending that the task at hand was as painless and routine as polishing his boots.

The elf walked closer – Boromir marveled how he made no sound amongst the leaves – and knelt beside the Man. He studied the open wound, the half-done stitching, and shook his head.

“This one is done very poorly,” Second One said matter-of-factly and pointed to the first stitch.

Boromir’s anger boiled.

“Oh yes?” he exclaimed heatedly. “And how would an elf fair under similar conditions?”

“He would accept any aid that was offered, I imagine.”

“Well, a Man does not accept aid from elfish kind! And I only sought your company to protect what was never meant to be heard!”

“Nay, that is a lie,” Second One replied calmly, never acknowledging Boromir’s quick temper. “We travel to meet Radagast the Brown. And then to the East, past the Sea of Rhûn and into the Wild Places. We have no desire to stay in this land. And we certainly do not care to sell our knowledge. There is no true danger in us, and you know this.”

Boromir ignored him and continued working. He pushed the needle back into the wound. He strangled another cry and continued determinedly, frantically, pulling the thread out and pushing the needle in with brutal imprecision. He could barely hear the elf beyond the ragged breathing – his own gasping breaths – in his ear.

“You too mean to abandon Middle-earth. You wander with us because Gondor will no longer accept you. Is this true?”

Boromir did not respond. He ground his teeth, kept his expression as blank as possible, and stitched. After a few miserable moments, his fingers were slick with blood so that the needle would not hold, and he dropped his shaking hands in defeat. The wound was only half-closed. Dark blood oozed out of the side, while the other half was a mess of needlework and flesh. It was nauseating to behold.

“Would it comfort you to know we too are exiles?”

The Man exhaled shakily and met the elf’s steady gaze. The sky was a pale orange as the sun set in the west. In the evening light, the elf’s blue eyes glowed with an inner fire, something Boromir had never noticed before. They seemed to pierce through any object they looked upon, and they were now studying Boromir’s wound.

“Do you have fresh bandages?”
“Exiles?” Boromir prompted.

Second One paused, a faint sadness drifting over his gaze, dimming the glow.

“Aye,” he whispered. “We are the adraefan, the Exiled Elves of Mirkwood.”

Perhaps Faramir had once mentioned their tale, but Boromir could recall no story of any exiled elves, and so he waited for Second One to continue. The elf was staring at the ground beneath his feet, his eyes distant and unseeing. He lowered his voice and uttered a mournful song in the common tongue:

“In the Last Alliance of the peoples free,
On the fields of Dagorlad, abandoned three.

The first with love that ne’er wane,
The second with fear of shadows plain,
The third with pity for lifeless bane.

Three punishments since the cowards’ misdeed,
Exile complete from all realms of elves freed,

Timeless wandering in timeless shame,
Ne’er to utter each cowardly name,

Loss of courage breeds loss of love,
With no fair face of kind above,

The realms of elves are forever barred,
From those three whose honor’s marred.”

The elf finished the song in a whisper and did not raise his head. Boromir sat, letting the words sink in, his wound throbbing and his mind racing. These were cowards. Elves without honor who had fled in the time of Middle-earth’s greatest need. Three who had abandoned their companions to death on the slopes of Mordor…

“That is not the original song,” Second One said softly. “It is the version we have composed, for we are forbidden from speaking the elven tongues. We cannot look upon our kind, we cannot enter our lands, we cannot utter our names. In three thousand years, we have traveled without home or identity. We have traveled into the Wild Lands of the East, deep into the deserts of the South, far North where it is e’er cold. To lands long forgotten by your people, and by all people of the West.”

Boromir stared.

“Now, we know your crime, and you know ours. I will not justify our actions, nor will I seek understanding on your part,” he sighed, flicked his head towards Boromir’s bare stomach. “I hope your pride and sense of honor are satisfied enough to accept help. You have bled enough.”

This new, jarring information, as well as the loss of blood and days of tortuous exertion, fell upon Boromir now, so that he swayed with dizziness. The elf moved forward, took the thread and needle from his limp hands, and began to work. Boromir found he could not focus on the elf. His mind was spinning. Exiles. Exiles. Cowards, fools, criminals. Like you, son of Denethor.

“Lie back,” the elf ordered.
Boromir obeyed. He relaxed against the roots of the tree, feeling a sudden, overwhelming weariness. The elf cleaned the instruments, matted the wound with stinging alcohol, and began to work. Boromir found his consciousness slipping as his thoughts fell deeper into confused disarray.


He registered vaguely that the elf was speaking to him as he threaded the wound.

“I will save you the suspense,” Second One said. “For I am the one who did not fight, for love that ne’er wane. I loved a maiden – aye, she was so fair, my heart does warm to think of her again. ‘Tis strange, no? In three thousand year, I have well forgotten my own name, the names of my parents and brothers. Yet in three thousand year, I have not forgotten her name. Nay, I never shall. She was called Itarildë.”

Love? Love! He did not fight for love? A dandy! Sweet Eru, I am being helped by an elf dandy.

Second One sighed. “I did fear death, for how would I see Itarildë e’er again? We would walk in separate realities – ne’er to feel each other’s touch, ne’er to hear each other’s voice. I was… not willing to give her up so easily. To give life up so easily. And so I hid, when the great armies were amassed. Even when Itarildë urged me to fight. Aye, she did. For she said she had prayed to the Valar, and they would protect me. But I could not do it, and I did not believe I had any more protection than the other elves or Men. And so I hid myself. Later, I learned my father and all my brothers died on the fields of Dagorlad.

“After the destruction of Sauron at Isildur’s hand, there was much celebration. Yet when the others discovered my crime – well… I will not speak of what they did. But, among my punishments, as you know, I was banished. Itarildë desired to come with me, she did ask the King to send her with me, to banish her as well. But that was to be our absolute punishment: ne’er again to see each other.”

Second One had finished the stitching and was now patting fresh bandages against the wound. The story had near lulled Boromir to sleep, and part of him – a part he did not know existed – felt a strange sympathy for the elf. He had never loved, except physically, and it was Faramir who had the lover’s heart. But things had changed, or perhaps the elf’s story had touched some deeper part of Boromir that had long lay hidden. Despite his exhaustion, Boromir found himself stirred.

The elf’s face was expressionless, but Boromir detected the note of regretful sorrow in his voice. The Man, whose head lolled back against the roots, roused himself enough to ask: “And then? What of Itarildë?”

Second One sighed again, shrugged.

“I know not. I pray only they did not blame her for my cowardice. When we begged with the King… I insisted that she was not to be blamed. She had urged me to fight, but I had fled for fear. She was not culpable, I was. But I heard that Itarildë, in trying to garner banishment for herself, did swear she forced me to stay. Of course, they did not believe her. And so it was. We were separated. I to exile, and she to remain in Mirkwood… I imagine she has sailed West by now.”

Boromir closed his eyes. A cool wind breezed through the clearing, chilling the sweat on his brow. He heard the elf shuffle away to retrieve his fallen garments. Already, his mind was drifting. He felt a hand on his shoulder and had just enough strength and sense to sit up so that the elf could wrap his torso completely. Once that was finished, he managed to get a couple shirts on before
collapsing back onto the tree. He heard the elf hovering by.

“We have made camp sixty paces off,” Second One said. “You are welcome to join us.”

In truth, Boromir was too exhausted to even consider standing and stumbling off to any nearby campsites. Yet he managed to open his eyes and glare convincingly. “I have no need of elfish companions.”

Second One smiled. “Aye, of course. How foolish of me to e’en ask. Good night, then. And you’re welcome.”

Boromir grinned slightly, heard the elf disappear back into the forest. As the near-silent footfalls dissolved among the general forest sounds of wind and insects, and the pain in his stomach subsided enough so that, if he stayed perfectly still, it stung only slightly, Boromir fell asleep.

Join them, son of Denethor!
Join the adraefan and be as one of them
four exiles to complement each wind, each point on the compass
whose needle swings to and fro with influence…

Mordor moves now
it is swelling with evil, the malice will soon pour out
over the tops of Ered Lithui and Ered Duath
and all that is cruel will shift, awakening like a demon in the filth.

From Isengard into Edoras
from Dol Guldur into Mirkwood
from Barad-dûr into Minas Tirith
Easterlings, Haradrim, Wild Men, trolls
rattling their arms-weapons
ready to tear away the good from Middle-earth.

Do not think, son of Denethor,
…good-bad Boromir…
…ai, me…
that you can avoid fate.
We Valar have something in mind for you
an exile of sorts, a change, a journey
a few victories and One Big Defeat
a weakness, a torment
another change
and then…

No.
We cannot give everything away
But whisper, whisper soft We can:

Follow the adraefan.

First One enjoyed teasing his companions. His arrogance had not faded in three millennia with them. Quite the opposite, it had inflated. He never failed to remind them that he was the leader, the noble elf, the better one. In the first years of exile, the other two elves had greatly disliked him, and
he them. There had been numerous quarrels, and many years of wandering alone. The three elves would walk together, argue over something, disband with vows never to seek each other out again, only to reunite perhaps a hundred years later by accident. Eventually, they had settled down into a rhythm of three hundred years together, a century apart, and so on. In the thousandth year of their exile, the three elves had inadvertently met at the Ice Bay of Forochel. There, they had decided to wander together, since company – even the arrogant kind – was better than solitude.

First One’s arrogance was, of course, largely a façade. He was certainly proud, but up to a point. The other elves soon learned that his demeanor would mellow as he grew more comfortable with them. They learned to tolerate his superficial insults and imperious attitude. It was clear from what it derived. For even though all three suffered the same shame of exile, First One was perhaps the most humiliated by it. He did not allow for Second One and Third One to discuss their punishment, nor did he wish ever to speak of Thranduil’s kingdom. When they encountered other Men or dwarves, First One was so full of disdain that these meetings never lasted long. And thus no Man or dwarf knew they had just met the Exiled Elves of Mirkwood, and eventually the adraefan were forgotten by all.

His initial reaction to Boromir, therefore, was not surprising.

First One had rather enjoyed abandoning the Man on the banks of the Anduin. He had relished provoking the others and had guessed, correctly, that Boromir was resilient enough to survive alone. They had tended his wounds well, Boromir could have picked his way back to Gondor. First One never imagined the possibility of Boromir following them, much less challenging them to a duel. It had all worked out into a very humorous situation.

Apart from the amusement, First One had to also admit a growing respect for Boromir. Few would have ventured to track three elves into unknown lands in order to regain their honor. Especially if they were so wounded. Thus when First One learned from Second One that Boromir desired to join their merry band of exiles, he was almost pleased. Finally! A new face! Surely, this Man would have interesting tales to tell.

Yet after a sennight travelling together, First One revised his opinion of Boromir, and decided that the Man was brave but unbearably dull. The group had left the forest and entered the Brown Lands without a single word from the Man. He would simply walk at the end of the line, glaring and breathing hard, pretending not to be in pain, ignoring the elves. Sometimes they asked him of Gondor, or of his general past, but he never answered. If Third One, in his ludicrous compassion, offered Boromir some lembas, the Man would snarl some insult and move away.

On the seventh day since the duel, First One was leading the group up a shallow incline when a familiar form caught his eye. Over the numerous, anonymous Brown Land mounds, a tiny speck was flying towards them. Lopsided, graceless, flapping its wings frantically. First One smiled.

“Brothers!” he called down without turning. “Ragwing the Robin arrives!”

A joyous laugh erupted from Second One and both elves hurried up the slope to stand beside First One. Boromir was still struggling at the base, but he arrived moments later, curious to see. The elves laughed and beckoned the bird forward. Ragwing was screeching madly as it saw them.

“The robin landed clumsily on Third One’s outstretched arm. His feathers had mostly fallen out, and his beak was broken at the tip. He seemed entirely overcome by weariness, for he flopped down against the elf’s arm with a whimpering twitter.

“Ah, welcome, good Ragwing,” Second One grinned, “what news of Radagast?”
A tiny roll of parchment was tied to the robin’s shivering leg. First One slipped away the string and unrolled it. He smiled as he read:

“Friends,

Much is happening in the world of Men and elves, and I have news from your kingdom. War will soon be upon Mirkwood, the threat from Dol Guldur grows. I send this letter on the sixth of March, and I do sincerely hope it reaches you before I do, though one can never be sure with old,” First One paused, smiled, “Brothers, Ragwing’s elvish name is ‘Old Wing.’ We were very close,” he continued, “As for your supplies, I will bring you the usual elvish trinkets. Gwaihir has agreed to bear me south so that I may hasten to you. I expect to meet you on the twelfth of March. And the owl tells me you three are moving northeast of Emyn Muil. I will therefore meet you in the Brown Lands, estimating your travel. There is much to discuss, and there may yet be a role for you three in the events to come. I do not know, we shall see. As usual, travel with stealth and caution. Now, more than ever, the lands around Mordor and Dol Guldur are ripening with evil, and so I urge you to keep a wary eye.

Until the twelfth,
Radagast.”

“Brothers, what day is it?” Third One looked up. “I have lost track.”

“It is the eleventh,” Boromir growled from behind them.

All three elves looked back, startled. In their distraction with Ragwing and Radagast’s letter, they had almost forgotten of the Man’s presence. Now, seeing him standing a few paces off, they acknowledged him with a curt nod or raised eyebrow. But Boromir shifted his weight slightly. He was obviously in discomfort, and hoping for a rest, but First One vowed not to stop until the Man asked for it.

“Who is this Radagast?” Boromir asked, attempting to appear only casually interested.

“A wizard,” Second One replied. “He dwells in Rhosgobel, on the western edge of Mirkwood. He is of the same council as Gandalf, and he is our friend and benefactor.”

“Do not worry,” First One added, smiling. “He is on our side.”

This satisfied the Man. He looked towards Third One and Second One, ignoring First One. All three elves noticed the compulsive grasping of his stomach. Yet First One had little sympathy.

“Very well, brothers,” First One said, looking towards the other elves. “Let us make haste, for I am eager to see the Brown Wizard. Come, if we go quickly, we may arrive before Radagast to the meeting spot.”

Third One and Second One both gave Boromir concerned glances, but the Man raised his chin and adjusted his shoulder strap. The elves shrugged, nodded to First One. And so they moved quickly down the slope and up the next one. They sent Ragwing on his way after the tiny bird had regained his strength. With a tweet and a chirp, the robin flew off, north.

After several hours of near-jogging, First One finally held up his hand to stop. The elves slowed their pace, turned around. Boromir stumbled after them, hugging his torso and sweating. As he noticed the elves had stopped, he slowed to a walk. First One noticed his legs were trembling.

“All is well, Boromir?” he called. “Do you desire a rest?”
The Man squared his shoulders, straightened his back. “Only if the others desire it as well. I can yet continue.”

First One smirked.

“You fool no one, Boromir,” Third One shook his head. “Come, we shall have a meal and a rest. It is nearly time for dinner. Very well, First One?”

“Very well,” First One nodded.

The elves set about making camp on the crest of the mound, and Boromir unrolled his blanket several paces away from the group. Second One had firewood in his pack, and so they made a fire and set water to boil. Third One retrieved some dried vegetables from his bag, causing the other elves to smile.

“Where did you find those, Third One?” Second One asked.

“I gathered them from Eastemnet. They have surely lost their flavor in the days they spent in my pack,” Third One chuckled. “But they will serve. Mayhap as a change from the usual lembas.”

“Indeed, good,” First One crouched over the water, watching as Third One added his vegetables. “Second One, have you any remaining Umbar spices?”

Second One sat next to the fire. He dug through his things, searching. “Aye.”

He retrieved a small bag and handed it to First One.

The sky dimmed. A cool breeze passed. The elves busied themselves with the cooking. When Third One turned to Boromir to offer him some of the soup, he found the Man asleep. The other two elves looked over. The Man was on his side, facing away from the elves. His chest rose and fell evenly. His things lay forgotten, strewn about the ground.

“He is exhausted,” Third One murmured, concern plain in his voice. “We should have stopped earlier.”

He looked back up to First One.

“Had he asked,” First One shrugged, “I would have let him rest.”

Second One raised an eyebrow. “Ah, but you know he is too proud to ask.”

“It is his own fault, then,” First One crossed his arms.

“Did you not see how he has finished the miruvor?” Third One asked, turned back to look at the sleeping Boromir. “I fear for him. A man in such condition should not journey so far on foot.”

“It was his decision to come with us,” First One said.

“Still. I worry. I have also seen that he sometimes drinks the acquavita. That is a harsh drink.”

“Third One, you over-worry,” First One chided.

“Nay, I am also concerned,” Second One said slowly. “He has eaten little to nothing since we found him.”

“Why, Valar, why am I to travel with such softhearted and ever-pitying companions?” First One
looked up into the night sky, asking loud. He turned back to the others. “Brothers, enough. Your concerns are womanish. I am tired of hearing all this mewling sympathy!”

The other elves tensed, clearly offended, but did not comment. First One stood and walked away from the group towards the crest of the hill.

The sky darkened to the south. As it reached Mordor, it cracked open with red lightening. First One shuddered. Often had he passed the Dark Land and looked upon its borders, and every time it sent a chill down his spine. And to think the Last Alliance had crashed upon those mountains, fighting on Morannon itself, defeating the Dark One, so many years ago. And Mordor had been silenced. Yet it was now reawakened, and First One could perceive the malice even from this far away.

He was about to turn back to the camp when something caught his eye. Movement to the south. Tiny shadows creeping along the horizon, at the base of Ered Lithui. First One squinted. It was dark, but he could see them well enough. A group of fifty, sixty creatures – Men, perhaps. Walking slowly west. First One scanned the vista. He picked out another group moving perhaps five leagues behind the first.

“Second One, Third One,” he whispered harshly.

The other elves joined him immediately. He indicated the horizon, and they followed his gaze to Ered Lithui. Second One inhaled sharply.

“Easterlings.”

“How do you know?” Third One asked.

“They bear the long spears of their people. It is their typical weapon.”

“I had not noticed them before,” First One admitted. “But I see now the lands around Mordor are full of them.”

“They go west,” Second One said.

First One exhaled in irritation. “We shall meet them as we continue east. What foul fortune! It will slow our journey past Rhûn.”

The elves were silent. As it grew darker, they could see less and less. Yet that one faint image was enough to chill their hearts. If the Easterlings were on the move, the elves would have difficulty passing unnoticed through Eastern lands. They would be forced to hide, to travel by night. First One was doubly irritated since, in all their recent wanderings through the realms of Harad and Gondor, they had traveled in such a way. The elves had looked forward to Rhûn, since there, they could usually walk openly.

“Shall we tell the Man?” Third One asked.

The three elves looked at each other.

Finally, First One shrugged.

“If you see fit.”
Radagast the Brown

Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

Boromir, son of Denethor, Captain-General of Gondor, High Warden of the White Tower, Prince of the White City and exile, was in a foul temper. His mood had worsened day by slow day, as the Exiled Elves of Mirkwood, the so-called adraefan, led him far into the unknown lands, away from his shame at Amon Hen and towards a strange, bleak future. Emyn Muil’s jagged landscape loomed to the south. Giant shards of rock and stone with no green thing upon them. To the east, endless dying slopes. The trees had thinned as they neared the wolds, and soon the earth grew bare and unforgiving.

These were the Brown Lands, where the Last Alliance between Men and elves had passed on its way to defeat Sauron. It was further south on these wretched plains that Isildur had taken the Ring, more than three thousand years before...

*How your mind strays! Think not of the Ring!*

It was March the twelfth, by Boromir’s reckoning, and they would meet Radagast in the evening. The temperatures varied from near-freezing night to sweaty noon. His tunic, doublet and jacket, soiled with blood and dirt, were never enough during the night hours, and were always too much for the day. The shoulder strap of his shield pressed against the throbbing wound in his gut, his scabbard dragged against the ground, and he imagined his beard unkempt as well. If Denethor could see him now…

*How your mind strays! Think not of Gondor!*

The effort of hiding his pain and exhaustion was also increasing his irritability. While Boromir had been able to drag his feet, limp and grunt in solitude when he had first tracked the elves, he was now forced to pretend the blazing wound in his stomach was an insignificant scratch. Yet he knew his constant suffering was betrayed at every meal – when he could not eat, nor watch others eat, for the nausea that blossomed in him, and instead took gradual sips of his water-skin or, if the pain was particularly bad that day, the flask.

Today, as they sat against the ground, with no rock or tree to lean against, Boromir drank from his flask. The sun, a hazy white orb nearly hidden by the thick grey clouds, did not warm them or lift their spirits. Instead, they sat in silence, the elves eating and the Man drinking. Before them, the eastern plains rolled out in disorienting monotony. No creature save them could be seen, except for the occasional lizard or solitary bird. The ground was a patchwork of weak grasses and dirt, spotted by sporadic shrubs or tumbled boulders. And the clouds in the sky were so low that they seemed a grey ceiling, at times drifting over the taller crests like a fog.

Boromir sat away from the others, and did not remove his shield. In truth, sitting was uncomfortable for him, since his belt felt tight around the wound. Standing was not particularly relieving, either, since that removed the pressure of the belt but added that of the shield strap.
Boromir exhaled angrily and took another sip from his flask. He had taken to adding some of the alcohol to his water in the last few days, and found that the drink was one of the few ways he could calm his aching stomach and ease his troubled mind.

Surely the elves had noticed, as they noticed everything, but they had not commented. Just as well. Boromir hated their limitless perception, how they picked up on every minor sigh or muttered curse, how they saw his every stumble or protective clasp of the stomach. He felt like a specimen under observation, an amusing spectacle. He took another drink, letting the warmth spread through his torso, thankfully numbing it.

“Boromir,” Third One’s voice came from directly over his shoulder, startling him.

Boromir did not turn, but rather continued staring over the rolling plains. The elf took a seat beside him. He had lembas with him, and the Man’s stomach churned. Boromir averted his face, breathed from his mouth. Anything to drown out the bread’s pungent smell.

“We will reach Radagast the Brown tonight,” Third One said.

Boromir grunted.

“Are you well?”

“Aye.”

“Will you eat?”

“Nay.”

“I would insist. Else your strength will wane, and you will not fully heal.”

“Must I repeat what I have said a thousand times?” Boromir snapped. “I cannot eat, I will not eat!”

He looked away stubbornly. Third One paused, as if to consider his next move. From further up the hill, First One and Second One had begun talking quietly, idly, to pass the time. Their voices drifted mutely over the scorched land, and Boromir could not pick up the exact words.

“Know you of the Wild Men?” Third One said after a lengthy pause.

“Aye.”

“We have spotted several small groups coming from the East. They walk towards the Black Gate.”

Boromir looked around; he saw nothing but grey sky and an empty horizon. Before he could contain himself, he asked foolishly, “Where?”

Third One pointed to a distant point to the southeast. Boromir could see nothing, but he imagined that the elves had discerned movement.

“They cannot see us, so we will not be bothered,” Third One continued. “Yet I fear they come in a constant stream from the East, and we will inevitably cross paths after meeting with Radagast.”

Boromir stood suddenly. Easterlings! He could feel the familiar adrenaline pumping through his veins. He placed his arms on his hips and squinted – trying to pry through the grey fog and see what the elves saw, to see his enemy.

“They go to Mordor,” he said darkly.
“Indeed. They go to fight in the War.”

Boromir began pacing along the ridge like a caged animal.

“How many have you seen?”

“Perhaps a thousand.”

“With more to come?”

“Aye.”

The ancient instinct – the loyalty, the honor, the desire to protect his home – pumped through his veins with renewed fervor. Boromir suddenly clasped his sword hilt for reassurance.

“We may yet ambush their passage…” he muttered absent-mindedly.

Third One laughed.

“Aye, three elves with no stake in this War,” he said. “And – take no offense, my friend – but a Man too wounded for any fighting, and too proud to even heal properly. Nay, Boromir, let us not meddle in the affairs of others. For did you not decide to forsake this Middle-earth?”

Boromir turned sharply.

“I cannot abandon my people to suffering, not when the Enemy walks within distance of my sword!”

“Distance of your sword? They are near five and fifty miles away. We would not reach them so quickly.”

“Yet you say they come in like a river from the East?”

“Aye.”

“And do we not travel east to meet this sorcerer of Mirkwood? We would be within a few days’ walk from the stream, if your eyes do not deceive you.”

“My eyes do not deceive me,” Third One responded with ruffled feathers. “And even so, what strategy could you devise for us?”

Boromir paused to consider. The elf was right. He needed to think. A surprise attack on a larger group of traveling Easterlings was possible, if planned correctly. Elves were skilled with the bow and Boromir could fight with the sword. He knew the Easterlings to be a divided army, with no proper methods of battle. If they could provoke fright or chaos, the Wild Men’s ranks would quickly fall into disarray.

He continued pacing, goaded on by his own buzzing excitement. To fight for Gondor again was an honor he had not dreamed of. And also in secret, with no shameful name or stained past. He could fight anonymously, protect his people without ever nearing his land’s ancient borders.

“Third One,” he said finally. “In groups of how many do the Easterlings travel?”

Third One peered into the distance. He shrugged. “Perhaps a hundred.”

Boromir grinned crookedly.
“Good, good. Those are fine odds.”

“Twenty-five to one? And that is counting you as a full soldier, which I would say you are not. Not when you will not even eat.”

Boromir bristled. “Give me the bread then.”

Third One removed a piece of *lembas* from his pack and tossed it to Boromir. The Man sniffed it suspiciously, made a disgusted face, and took a bite. He felt the instinctive bile rise up in his throat, but forced the bread down nonetheless. Third One watched him, waiting for his reaction. Already, Boromir’s stomach was rejecting the food – the sickness flourished through his body, making him light-headed, seeping through his pores.

“You did not answer my question,” the elf said as Boromir ate. “What strategy do you see?”

“None,” Boromir spoke with his mouth full. His legs wobbled. “I will think of it as we walk.”

“Very well.”

When Boromir choked down the remaining bread, he stood for a moment to regain his senses. The nausea ebbed and flowed like a foul liquid in his throat. When it became too much, and he felt certain he would be sick, he sat heavily on the ground. It did not ease the spinning of his head, nor the acid pressing against his throat, but it did relieve the weight from his weakened knees.

“I know it is a torment,” Third One said sympathetically. “Saruman’s poison has lingered in your person – it will continue indefinitely, for we know no remedy. Take comfort, however, for Radagast may know a cure.”

“I would ne’er eat again for the pain it causes,” Boromir confessed in a low voice. He shuddered as the nausea pitched him precariously close to emptying his stomach.

“And yet it is the one thing you must do, else you will ne’er heal.”

Boromir placed a hand against his brow. It felt cold and damp. He concentrated on breathing deeply, tried to think of a clever scheme for ambush rather than the sickening bread. Yet his limbs trembled and his stomach churned.

Second One wandered by from the other patch of ground. He was eating an apple and, as he strolled over, he studied the lands near Mordor. He walked ahead of the seated Boromir and Third One and stood with his back to them. A cool fog rolled over the hill.

“There they go,” the dark-haired elf murmured, bemused. “Third One, have you seen their numbers? Near nine hundred have passed since we noticed them. Think you it is by Mordor’s bidding?”

“I am sure of it,” Third One replied, and added, “Boromir would like to engage them in battle.”

“Naturally,” Second One chuckled. He turned to face them, and his smile faded as he looked upon the Man. “By the Valar, Boromir, your face is as grey as the storm clouds above us.”

Boromir, who was seated with his knees drawn up, and his head in his hands, muttered something about damnable elf bread before standing abruptly and stumbling off down the hill. Third One sighed in exasperation.

“Think you Radagast will help the Man’s sickness?”
Second One took another bite from his apple. “I hope so. For his sake and ours.”

With that, thunder clapped, and a fine mist of rain washed over the plains – creeping from southern Dagorlad and descending over them like a curtain.

After staggering to the base of the gentle hill, Boromir dropped to his hands and knees and vomited painfully. His ribs ached and his stomach burned with renewed fire. The rain, which had begun as drizzle, thickened into a torrential storm. He vomited again, feeling his eyes tear up and his nose clog. After a few miserable dry heaves, and a moment to regain control of his limbs, he forced himself back to his feet and staggered unevenly back up the hill. His garments were soaked in mud and water, and he hugged his raging stomach with both arms.

Further ahead, the elves had already packed everything and were ready to go. They watched him warily as he approached, and he forced his hands to his side. They would not see him so weakened. He jerked the hood of his Lórien cloak over his head, thankful for its privacy. The rain poured.

Without a word, First One turned and they continued their long trek. The rain did not lessen as they walked, rather it seemed to grow heavier with every mile they gained on the meeting point. Third One held out his water-skin to gather the rainwater. Boromir lingered at the end of the line, where he preferred, so that the elves could not study his every movement.

Now was the time to hide the pain. He could still taste the bile in his burning, scorched throat. He noticed more and more that his arm instinctively curled around his stomach. The walk was long, and he swayed on his feet. The lack of food, the persistent wound, the endless march; it all left him in a state of near-delirium. His left shoulder ached still from the arrow wound, though it was healing well enough. But the general hurts made for slow progress. He forced his feet to keep up with the elves, forced his arm to his side.

In these days, he had had little time to brood. All his will was focused on the pain, on hiding it, on keeping up with the elves. Whenever they stopped to rest, his exhausted limbs would disappear and he would fall asleep immediately. There was no time to think about Frodo, the Ring, the Fellowship, Gondor – enough! Enough! Boromir jerked his head, muttered something to himself. The elves said nothing.

The rain continued. The sky darkened. The ground became muddy, and Boromir slipped often. The elves strode evenly forward. Boromir spent much of his time driving his weary legs on with muttered insults directed at himself. The distance between he and Third One was ever widening, as he inadvertently lagged and was forced to jog after them.

Ah, Faramir, does your gaze reach this far? See me now. A miserable wretch, chasing after cowards, begging for their company. You shall be pleased. Father will look to you, now, with a kinder eye.

As you have always desired.

After an eternity of muddy, uneven ground, with the rain soaking through his clothes and bandages, Boromir was startled by a sudden cry. He looked up. The elves had stopped. They were peering up into the stormy sky. Boromir followed their gaze. The rain blinded him, but in the wet-grey blur, he saw a figure circling. A bird, larger than he had ever seen, circled – slowly, slowly, around and around, with each circle descending on the group. Boromir could hear little over the thunder, but he saw the elves motioning for him to join them.

As the bird descended, he saw it was a Great Eagle. Boromir stumbled and slipped up to the elves. Under his drenched hood, Third One smiled.
“Radagast is come!” the elf cried over the noise. “At last!”

Lightening flashed and Boromir caught sight of a figure perched on the Eagle’s back. Wind whirled around, causing the rain to shoot sideways. Boromir sputtered. The Eagle passed over their heads now, its wing brushing their hair, causing the elves to laugh. The great bird then banked left and, flapping its enormous wings, landed. A bleary figure dismounted from the bird’s back. The Eagle straightened to its full height. Beside it, the figure strode through the mud to them.

With arms outstretched, Radagast the Brown approached. Taller than Gandalf, and thinner too. White-brown hair and beard, all dripping-soaked curls, flattened against the head. Rags and robes of all the earthy tones – red, brown, warm yellow. A spring in his step, a face creased like old leather. Boromir noted also the gnarled staff, thicker and more rudimentary than Gandalf’s.

The elves bowed, hands upon their hearts. Radagast did the same. The Eagle shook some rain from its feathers.

“Ah! So I find you here, then!” Radagast bellowed above the rain. “And who is this? I knew naught of any fourth traveler!”

“This is Boromir of Gondor!” First One exclaimed. “He joined us at Amon Hen!”

Finding no suitable greeting, Boromir simply nodded. Radagast smiled. Lightening cracked nearby, loud and shaking.

“Welcome, then!” the elderly wizard yelled. “But, come! The Valar do mean to drown us in this rain! Come, come! Landroval and I caught sight of suitable shelter a hundred paces off!”

And so Radagast turned, motioned with his staff, and began to trudge down the hill and away from the group. The Eagle, Landroval, cawed loudly and took flight – though he did not fly far. Instead, he hovered over the group, flying slow, shielding them from the rain with one of his great wings. Radagast’s form was barely visible in the rain, he seemed to blend in with the earth’s brown. But Boromir let the elves guide him, and they soon found themselves in an area where many tumbled boulders lay. Huge slabs of rock had fallen to form an irregular cave. The Eagle perched himself on the cave’s roof, and the four travelers entered. As soon as they were inside, they heard him beat his wings and fly off into the stormy night.

Deep in the cave, the sound of the thunderstorm lessened. Boromir heard his own heavy breathing, the soft rustle of clothing, Radagast muttering to himself. It was very dark. Boromir shivered with the cold.

Suddenly, a spark flew and a fire ignited. Radagast’s form was visible, crouching over a pile of firewood.

“It is a good thing I am a wizard, my friends,” he chuckled. “You three – er, four – would have spent a wet-chilled night otherwise!”

“And for that,” Second One smiled, “we are grateful to have you as a friend, good Radagast.”

The elves began shedding their packs and cloaks. Boromir remained standing. He hovered at the edge of the firelight, studying Radagast. Now, in the calm of the cave, with the fire to illuminate, he saw the age and wisdom in the wizard’s face. A pointed nose, large ears, drooping eyes. Brown, curly hair graying at the temples and in the beard. All wild, unkempt. Garments filthy with mud, feathers, patches of fur.

At the moment, Radagast was rummaging through his pack. With gnarled, over-stretched hands, he
retrieved a bundle wrapped in linen.

“First, let me distribute your elven goods. Here is lembas,” he said and handed the bundle to Second One. “It is old, but it shan’t stale too soon, I hope.”

He then retrieved an oversized water-skin.

“Miruvor.” He gave it to Third One. “Enough to last you a very long time, indeed. Barring any unfortunate events.”

There was much in the pack – food, water, clothes – and each item was given to the elves with a smile and a courtesy. Finally, when everything was stored away, the elves busied themselves with making camp. They quickly shed their wet clothes and spread them evenly on the cave floor to dry. Then, donning fresh garments, they put away each gift and began to prepare a meal.

As Radagast and the elves talked and sorted, Boromir removed his shield and pack. He loosened his cloak and doublet, all drenched. Everything was wet, even inside the pack. He unrolled his bedroll, all slopping wet against the stone, and removed the dripping blanket.

Meanwhile, Radagast continued.

“And finally, there is something else,” he grinned. “The bees wished to send this along.”

The wizard unwrapped a jar of golden honey, handed it to First One.

“This is unexpected,” First One smiled. “Did you not say the bees are rare gift-givers?”

“Indeed!” Radagast replied. “But nonetheless, here it is. Now come, I promised also to bring news, and much news I have. But first, tell me of your journeys, for I always delight in hearing them. And also let us hear from this fourth walker, this new stranger. Boromir, you said? Come, Boromir, join us here. I am e’er curious to hear of new travels and new friends.”

Reluctantly, Boromir stopped arranging his things to dry. He approached the fire, but did not sit.

“We will tell you all in good time, but first we must thank you again for coming,” Second One said. “As e’er, you are our constant benefactor. And thank Landroval as well.”

“Ah, indeed, I shall, I shall,” Radagast said. “Landroval was kind enough to bear me forth since his brother, Gwaihir, was called away. Apparently, Gwaihir flew off not two days past to Zirakzigil. But, by the Valar, I know not what led him there!”

“Good Radagast,” Third One said, “before we begin our long tales, and you yours, our friend Boromir has wounds to be tended. We have helped him as much as we know how, but there is a poison in the injuries that we cannot heal.”

Radagast turned his eyes to Boromir. They all watched him now, and the Man raised his chin. He hoped to hide his shivering and swaying. But, judging by Third One’s compassionate look, he guessed his current state of misery was all too visible.

“Ah, and we have been here chatting idly! My apologies!” Radagast boomed. “So tell me, then, Boromir of Gondor, from where these wounds derive. I see by your dress and stance that you are a soldier. I see also, by your dress and stance, that you are of noble birth. Is this true? Strange to find a noble soldier traveling with the adraefan, so far from home. Tell me, by what paths and choices did you arrive here?”
“There is a lengthy tale, wizard, and I would keep it to myself for now,” Boromir murmured, ruffled. He cleared his throat. “Nonetheless, you guessed rightly. I am the first son of Denethor, Steward of Gondor, and Steward-to-be myself, were it not for much ill chance and ill will that has forced me into exile. The wounds are Uruk-hai arrows.”

“Uruk-hai?” Radagast frowned.

“We believe it to be Istari treachery,” Third One said. “The orcs bore the White Hand of Saruman.”

“This is worrisome news, indeed,” Radagast said.

The rain outside softened. The fire crackled. The cave was very cold, so that Boromir shuddered every so often. His hand had unconsciously drifted back to his stomach, and he forced it down.

“Well, come then, Boromir, let us see these wounds,” Radagast ordered. “We shall muse over wizard betrayals later.”

But Boromir was hesitant. In truth, he feared removing the bandages around his wounded stomach. He had not changed them since Second One had helped him, nearly four days past. But judging by the persistent exhaustion, dizziness and nausea, he guessed it would not be a pleasant experience. The fever may have broken, but the infection – whatever the poison was – surely remained.

“Let the elves speak first,” Boromir said. “I am well enough, for now.”

“Ah, come now, lad, it won’t hurt,” Radagast chuckled. “I admit I am not a skilled healer for Mannish ills. Ask me to heal the jay, the robin, the sparrow, and I can! But Men, a complicated race indeed. Come, the wounded cannot be fickle, let us see if there is not some simple medicine which can help.”

As Radagast occupied himself with retrieving various vials and bottles from his pack, Boromir – slowly, gingerly, doubtfully – removed his damp overshirt, doublet, chain mail, and undershirt. Under the curious gaze of the three elves, who had stopped making camp to watch Radagast work, Boromir lay down on the cool stone floor. He could help but squirm as Radagast tested the bandages, pressing lightly on each wound.

The wizard began to remove the bandages. The gauze stuck, Boromir gasped. Slowly, slowly, painfully slow, Radagast peeled each bandage off – but the cloth clung stubbornly, stuck to the wounds with infection. Boromir clenched his teeth, attempted with all his will to hide the pain, decided now was a good time to plan battle strategy. But he could not wrench his mind from the agony in his torso. Beads of sweat formed on his brow, his brow furrowed. A hitched grunt escaped him.

Finally, with one, gradual rip, the bandages came off. Boromir exhaled sharply, as if all the breath had been forced from his lungs. The wizard studied each wound in turn. Boromir was loath to look. He stared at the cave ceiling, recovering from the rip and breathing hard. The shoulder was healing well, that much he could tell without looking. For it ached persistently, but with the ache of healing. The stomach was another matter entirely. He could tell it was infected.

Boromir twitched and fidgeted as Radagast took a dull knife and began to scrape away the oozing yellow-green infection. He caught sight of the elves watching, each with a varying level of disgust. The pain was enough to make his eyes water, but he gave them a humorous look. Third One caught his eye and grinned in return. A grin of encouragement, of sympathy.
As Radagast worked, Second One cleared his throat.

“Know you what it is, Radagast?” the elf asked.

Radagast’s brow knitted. He continued scraping, very carefully, and Boromir nearly cried out when the knife caught on something dry, crusted, resistant.

“You said these were Uruk-hai arrows?” Radagast asked as he cleaned.

“Aye,” Boromir said, his voice wavering, his breath shaking. “I traveled with seven – seven others. Our company – mmph – was besieged by a g – great number of Uruk-hai. On – ah – on Amon Hen.”

“How old are these wounds?”

“Mayhap – a week. Nnch. I am not sure.”

“Hmmm.”

Apart from a bemused growl, Radagast said nothing else. Finally, after matting the wound with a wet cloth, it was clean. The old wizard retrieved a wooden bottle, uncorked it with a pop. He poured the liquid onto a piece of fresh linen, and Boromir felt something cool against his stomach. Like a balm to a burn, it soothed the pain, lessening it to a low sizzle rather than the usual roar. He groaned with relief.

“I did not realize Saruman had such powers,” Radagast rumbled. “A Morgul-wound indeed. You are quite the resilient Man, it could have killed a lesser Man by now. But I am sorry to say there is little I can do. In time, the pain will lessen. Or rather, you will get used to it. There are draughts which ease the revulsion, so that you will not starve yourself to death.” The wizard grinned slightly. “If I recall correctly, there was another Boromir who suffered very similar wounds.”

“Aye… Boromir the First.”

Radagast chuckled. “Ha! A suitable irony, I should think!” He lay more of the salve against the wound. “This will keep it clean until it scars over. Made by the tortoises, you know. Aye. Valar know what they use it for, but it cleans any and all Mannish injuries. Nay, meet any tortoise and he shall lie to you. I have had a most difficult time learning any of their secrets, for they are reserved, suspicious creatures by nature. Overly cautious, I should say.”

Boromir attempted to listen, though the balm, in its sudden cooling of the wound, sent a tingling chill throughout his body. His teeth chattered.

They dressed the wound, and Boromir was given a dry blanket. He wrapped himself in it and, inching over, sat up to lean against the stone wall. Warmed by the blanket and fire, with the wound finally clean and reasonably treated, he felt his eyelids droop. Radagast gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder and then moved back to the elves.

“Well, my friends,” Radagast began. “Let us begin with the talk now, for surely it shall last all night. I will tell you of the War in Mirkwood, and the War for Middle-earth. But those are dark tales, and they will surely draw tears and anxiety. Nay, for now, let us speak of your adventures. The last time we met was near five hundred years past, no? Come, come. Tell me of the strange lands you three have visited. I am eager to hear.”
Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

The elves and Radagast talked straight through the night. First, the elves told of their recent travels through Harad, South Gondor, Gondor and the lands around the Entwashes. Once all their journeys were recounted, and Radagast’s curiosity was satisfied, the wizard in turn told them of all the Dark One’s machinations through Mirkwood. They learned of Dol Guldur’s reawakening. Of wargs, orcs, trolls and even nazgûl. They learned of the brewing War. They learned of the Nine Riders, of the spy-beasts of Mordor, of Radagast’s meeting with Mithrandir on the road to Bree many months ago.

Boromir had fallen asleep only moments after his wound had been cleaned, and Third One, in sympathy, had lain two more blankets over him. The Man would stir or murmur as Radagast spoke of orcs and nazgûl, but he would then fall still. Only once, in the early hours of the morning, when Second One was asking of Haradrim roads, did the Man awake with a loud cry. But he simply looked about, confused, saw the elves and Radagast staring back at him, and shifted to his other side, already asleep again.

By morning, the stories were finished and both wizard and elves were much wiser about current events. The rain stopped a few minutes before sunrise, so that a fine mist lingered around the cave’s opening. They each leaned back now, tired of talking, musing over the acquired information.

Second One, in particular, was worried by Radagast’s news. For it was all clear now. The nazgûl abroad, the Eye reawakened, Boromir’s ranting. The Ring. It all centered on the Ring. They were all searching for it, and from what Second One understood of Boromir’s story, there was a Fellowship – somewhere in the wilds of Middle-earth, at this very moment – protecting it. But what their intentions were, he knew not. And it seemed that the Enemy was out to stop this Fellowship, and it was using any measure necessary. Which explained the regrouping of Mordor forces, and the Easterlings’ movement. It also explained Boromir’s position and role in the Fellowship – for who else but the Steward of Gondor’s son should go forth on such a quest.

Yet the more Second One understood, the more anxious he became. First One had been correct – Boromir had, inadvertently, pulled them into the heart of Middle-earth’s affairs. It was true enough that this mysterious Fellowship could continue without Boromir, but something about the entire situation unsettled Second One. As if the Valar had truly intended this meeting to have taken place. As if there was something the adraefan needed to do.

Which reminded the elf.

“Radagast,” he said, “there is one more thing which we have not yet mentioned.”

Radagast raised his eyebrows. He was leaning back, pipe in hand, staring into the fire.
“Two days ago, on the day Ragwing the Robin arrived,” Second One began, “we spied groups of Easterlings moving to the Black Gate. And since then, o’er a thousand have passed.”

“Indeed. It is all piecing together, the great puzzle,” Radagast mused. “They answer Mordor’s call. They will amass within the Black Land and, from there, make their attack.”

“Aye,” First One muttered, “and they lie between us and the East. ‘Tis inconvenient.”

“More than inconvenient, I should say!” Radagast said, ruffled. “For they aid a power which could be the doom of us all.”

“Boromir desires to fight them,” Third One said from further off.

The Man stirred at his name, but did not awake.

“That is valiant of him,” Radagast said. “But I know not how three elves and a Man can stop an entire army.”

Third One shrugged. “He was to devise a strategy.”

“…mmph,” a voice from within the blankets grumbled. “And I have devised one…”

“Ah! So you are awake!” Radagast said.

The wizard poked the blankets with his staff, earning a grunt in return. Boromir’s head appeared from the mound, and with bleary eyes and unkempt beard, he arched his head up to look outside. Seeing that the sun was up, he dropped his head down and began to shift and remove the blankets.

“What strategy, then?” Second One asked.

The Man pushed himself into a sitting position, ran a hand over his face. He pulled at the bandage on his stomach, peeked inside. With a slight grimace as he began to pull on the various shirts, chain mail and jackets, Boromir grunted. The elves were beginning to realize this was his usual form of communication.

“Surprise is often used in battle,” he growled as he buttoned his doublet. “If we can isolate a group – mayhap a smaller group of sixty or seventy – and attack them from some hidden spot, we could break their ranks.” He looked up, smiled crooked. “And then we can pick them off one by one.”

“You are over-confident,” First One said. “They outnumber us.”

Boromir shrugged. “I have often fought outnumbered.”

“Aye, and look how it has left you.”

Whether the last comment was meant as an insult or not, Boromir’s jaw set in irritation. He pushed himself to his feet, knocked his head on the cave wall, swore under his breath. The elves hid their smiles.

But the sun was up, and it was time to go, whatever the direction was. Second One moved to repack the things. The other elves joined him and soon, the camp disappeared, and only the evaporating smoke revealed their night-stay. Outside, the sun poked through the misty fog.

As Third One gingerly placed the miruvor sack into his pack, he looked to Radagast. “Good wizard, what do you think?”
Radagast paused. The long pipe dangled from his mouth, poking from the beard, as he thought. The elves stopped packing and waited. Boromir looked to each elf.

“Three thousand year have you spent in exile…” the wizard began, quiet, very quiet, almost to himself, “And for what? For honor, for cowardice, for strength and fear. For frailty in a time of need. For abandonment. Is this not so?”

The elves did not reply.

“What are these things? Eh? Words, ideas. Notions of what is right and wrong. Many died on those fields, but you chose not to. You three chose an immortal life, endless, but with the weight of a thousand guilts upon your shoulders. I know not which is better. I know not if it is an evil, or a good. But I know that what the Valar have set down is inescapable. You three may postpone fate, but ne’er change it. And so you three will follow, good or evil, to whatever end has been devised for you.

“This Boromir brings much change to your routine. Ne’er before have you accepted a fourth exile. And it all happens now, again, in the time of Middle-earth’s greatest need. The Man wishes to fight? And you ask me whether to join him in this seemingly impossible task? Well. It is all too clear, I think.”

The elves looked at each other. Boromir waited, very still.

Finally, First One looked to Radagast. “Ignore him?”

“No!” Radagast exclaimed, nearly laughing. “No! Ha ha! No, you must go and fight the Easterlings! I say, it is as obvious as an Age is long!”

Boromir cracked a smile now, broad and glinting. He was clearly pleased with the idea of elfish help.

“Now, as the elves accustom themselves to this new idea,” Radagast turned to Boromir, “you must eat something before we leave.”

As Radagast gave Boromir another draught of the herbal drink, the elves moved away from them to another part of the cave. They needed to think this through. And so they huddled close-close to discuss the new turn of events. First One and Second One both stood with arms crossed, while Third One sat, looking up at the other two. They kept their voices low, for they did not desire Boromir and Radagast to hear. Yet Radagast had already begun explaining the curiosities of squirrel mating rituals, and Boromir, judging by his rumbling comments and soft chuckles, was choosing to ignore eating and listen to the wizard instead. So the elves had privacy enough.

“Well?” Third One asked.

Second One sighed. “Radagast is right. It is all falling into place.”

“If we choose it, Second One,” First One muttered. “Do not forget choice. We could ignore this Man’s suicidal plans.”

“And let him go forth alone?” Third One asked, aghast. “Nay, we cannot abandon him. He is our friend.”

First One and Second One gave Third One a kind look, but did not comment. They turned around to look again: Boromir was pacing, toasted lembas in hand, while Radagast sat and smoked.
“Third One, are you so his friend as to follow him to your death?” First One frowned.

“I…” Third One hesitated. “Radagast thinks it wise to go.”

“And you would trust a wizard?”

“He has always helped us,” Second One said.

“He may advise, and I will listen.” First One said, “for I respect him. But to fight or not, that is my decision.” He paused. “Our decision. I will listen to your thoughts, brothers.”

Second One and Third One looked at each other. It was not often First One admitted to considering their opinions, and both elves knew this. The situation was serious. The road was splitting, here and now, into two very different directions. Yet each path was marred with possible defeat, enough to make the elves shudder with fear. For an endless exile they did not desire; indeed, they had always dreamt of ways to end it. But death? Death was even more repugnant. To lose everything, and go where? Away from Arda, away from life, away from all that the elves knew and cherished? Was honor worth such a risk? Were home and identity deserving of such a high price?

And did not every creature, mortal or not, have such basic rights as a name and a home?

Second One sighed. No. Not the adraefan. They had thrown it all away, so long ago. And now they were perhaps the only creatures who had to work for such inherent claims. Well, except Boromir. He had to work for it too. Though, where he may have lost honor and a home, he retained identity. Second One looked up. The Man was still pacing, though it seemed he had given up on eavesdropping and was concentrating on the bread instead.

“We could continue,” First One offered. “We could forget all of this and go into the East. We could remain there for as long as we desire, and none would know us.”

“But if we went with Boromir…” Third One swallowed, “would that not change everything? Would not the exile end?”

The other elves did not know. They hesitated, shifted their weight, grimaced.

“Brothers, did you not hear all that Radagast has said of Mirkwood?” Second One asked, growing agitated. “The realm is nearly spent; it might not e’en survive this War.”

“No Mirkwood?” Third One breathed.

“And so with Gondor, with Lórien, with all the realms of free people!” Second One hissed. “If Radagast does not exaggerate, it would not be our end, but the end of all the West.”

“Second One, e’en if we went with Boromir,” First One interrupted, “e’en if we defeated all the Easterling groups we could find, we would make but a dent on a mountain. The fate of Middle-earth does not hinge on us.”

“No,” Third One said. His brow knitted. “It doesn’t. But I do not desire to send Boromir to his death. I say we must go with him, regardless of everything. Else he will kill himself ere he reaches home.”

Second One nodded. “Let us go with him. If he fights, let us fight what little we wish. Enough so that he will either be killed in battle – as he desires – or forced to return to his home. Then we may continue East, if we wish.”
“As I said, I do not wish to see him killed,” Third One scoffed.

“I mean to say, let us fight with him – one skirmish or two – but let us not bind ourselves to any agreement. We will walk away at any time. Brothers, we could never desire to change the Greater Things. Nor can we ever expect any warm welcome from Thranduil. But…” he inhaled, “there is some piece of my mind that feels we must go. And Third One, in his ne’er-fading compassion, is right. He is our friend.”

“Yet we owe him nothing,” First One scowled. “We are not bound to help him.”

“And yet we did help him on Amon Hen,” Second One said, exasperated. “What led us to commit such kindness? It matters not, but now everything has changed. Radagast has offered us a choice – to follow again on the road to our fated ends, or to go on without reason as exiles.” He paused, smiled sadly. “And I, my friends, am tired of wandering.”

“Aye,” Third One agreed. He looked at the other two. “So am I.”

Second One and Third One looked to First One. The blond elf held his breath. Finally, under the steady gazes of the other two, he exhaled and nodded. “You know I am as well.”

“Then let us go!” Second One insisted.

“Very well,” First One muttered, “but only so far. We are not tied to his fate.”

“Aye, of course not,” Second nodded. “We shall be e’er free to walk away.”

“To change our minds…” Third One whispered.

“Yes,” the other elves agreed.

They turned, walked back to Radagast and Boromir. The sun was spilling into that part of the cave now, just gleaming gray-white against the stone. Boromir still had the bread in hand, he had eaten only half. Seeing the elves approach, he tossed it to one side. He brought himself to his full height.

“What is your decision?” he asked.

Second One looked from First One to Third One. They nodded – silently urging him to speak for them.

“We have decided to go with you, Boromir, and aid in the fight against the Easterlings.” The Man hid a creeping smile. Second One continued, “We guarantee nothing, for nothing holds us to stay. However, we consider you a friend, and therefore we will help you as much as our reason dictates. Once we are satisfied, and have had enough of battling Wild Men, we will leave you and continue our own journey. You are welcome to come with us, if you choose. But for now, we will remain here to help.”

An explosion of a smile burst from Boromir. He took Second One by the shoulders and nearly shook him, but instead controlled himself and squeezed fiercely.

“Good! Good!” He barked a laugh. “Good! You are better elves than I imagined!”

First One snorted. Third One chuckled.

“Come, then! There is much to plan!” Boromir beamed.

…When the elves had first found Boromir, he had been pale and gasping, a ghost of the clean-cut
images of Gondorian nobility. Now – after days of exertion and recovery and the ups and downs of mental thrills – with tousled hair, ruddy cheeks, days of stubble blurring the jaw, it leant a softer aspect to Boromir, a more welcoming feel. Second One would not have called him a friend until that moment, when suddenly the Man seemed a warm and laughing presence.

Second One smiled.

“Then it is settled!” Radagast exclaimed. “Come, are we all ready? We shall devise strategies as we walk.”

And so they gathered everything up and left the cave. Outside, the early morning fog was drifting away to reveal a clear day. It was not sunny, as the sun never shined in these Brown Lands, but it was reasonably cheerful. Boromir, in his revived confidence, inhaled deeply and set forth with long strides. The elves fell into step behind him, with Radagast following closely. They walked up the nearest hill, to its highest point, just a mound above the rest. There, Boromir stopped.

“See you any Easterlings now?”

Second One peered into the distance. He nodded.

“A group of a sixty or seventy. They are not very far. Perhaps a day’s walk, should we cut south.”

“What is your strategy?” First One asked, clearly skeptical.

Boromir stretched his neck, scratched the soft stubble on his jaw. He frowned as he thought. After a few moments, he turned to the elves.

“This is the plan,” he said. “We shall near the Easterlings, hiding ourselves from sight. We shall follow them, see where they go, and wait for them to rest. Once they have stopped, we shall make our attack. You three know how to handle the bow and arrow?”

Inadvertently, all three elves scoffed.

“Certainly!” First One sputtered.

“Good,” Boromir nodded, clearly not picking up on his minor insult. He was looking out onto the horizon. “Then we shall fight from the trees. Well. There are few trees here. From the bushes and shrubs. As I recall, elves can travel with great stealth. You three shall attack from your hidden spots, enough to frighten the Easterlings. For they will not be able to guess our numbers, and ’twould be wise to let them think us equal to them. Once the group is suitably scattered, we will confront the stragglers and dispose of them.”

The elves nodded. Radagast shifted his beard.

Boromir smiled again. He jerked his head.

“Come, then!” and he strode off down the hill.

“Boromir,” Second One called.

The Man stopped and turned around. Second One motioned to the right.

“They are that way.”

“So they are!” Boromir laughed.
He turned around, began walking in the right direction. The elves cast each other a humorous look and followed.

The group walked along this barren earth for a few hours. Boromir led them, marching on with such determination and energy that the elves were beginning to wonder if the wound in his stomach had somehow disappeared.

They stopped for a meal at Radagast’s bidding. There, Boromir drank another draught of the herbal drink, all the while complaining of its bitterness, and forced down another piece of lembas. Second One shook his head in wonder. Did all Men behave in such a way? Marching towards violence and death with a spring in their step? A smile on their lips? As if it was desirable! Had not this same Man been curved with grief and pain just yesterday?

Indeed, the idea of fighting had lifted Boromir’s mood to heights that made the elves wonder just what was in the herbal drink. He sat with them during the meal, smiled at them, joked about the gloomy weather or his wound.

As they marched on, Radagast confirmed their suspicions when he murmured to First One, “Aye, well… The draught can cause a bit of a light head and, ah, a numb mind, shall I say? Nay, but this Man is earnest in his desire to fight. It’s not just the draught. Though, he did drink more of it than is usually given. But, alas, poor soldier, that wound is obscene and it shall last him his life. A bit more draught will not hurt. A snail concoction, you know? Not with snails in it, goodness, that would be barbaric, but…”

As Radagast tethered another not-so-eager listener, since First One never had the courage to admit his boredom as the wizard droned, Second One jogged up to Boromir. The Man was marching, hand against the hilt of his sword, glaring forward. When he saw the elf at his side, he smiled.

“You join me at the front, Master Elf?” he asked.

“Aye,” Second One grinned. “We shall reach them tomorrow morning at this pace.”

“Ah, not this evening?”

Second One quirked an eyebrow. The Man was drugged, indeed. Did he desire to fight so soon? They walked on. The afternoon light glowed orange against the earth’s browns.

“How is your stomach?” Second One asked.

Boromir paused. And then he smiled. “Tingly.”

The Man laughed loudly at this, startling Second One. He had never even heard Boromir laugh before. The elf looked over his shoulder to Radagast, who shrugged with eyebrows raised. Boromir lowered his voice.

“Nay, forgive me, Second One,” he chuckled. “I admit my wits are somewhat dulled at the moment. ‘Tis that wretched draught. It works well, though. I feel naught but an ache. How are you?”

Second One was even more startled that the Man should inquire into his own state. But he shrugged.

“Well enough,” he said.

The ground sloped downward. Second One, elf that he was, glided down without problem, leaning
back against the earth’s steep gradient. Boromir, on the other hand, stumbled and jerked as he walked.

“You did not tell us you were Steward-to-be,” Second One said.

“Nay, indeed I did not,” Boromir said, slipping slightly on some loose pebbles. “Though it does not matter anymore. My brother will be Steward now.”

“You have a brother?”

“Aye. He is very dear to me.”

“Boromir, how much of the draught did you drink?” Second One laughed.

“Nay!” Boromir scoffed. “Ha ha! Nay! ‘Tis no herb-drug! I speak the truth. My brother is a wise Man.” He smiled slightly. Warmly. “He will be a good Steward.”

And so Boromir spoke, for the first time, of his home, his family, his past. Second One learned of all which the Man held dear, and all that motivated his current state of exile. Boromir spoke earnestly and idly, and their pace slowed. Inadvertently, the group slowed as a whole, since Radagast was also wearying. And Boromir walked ahead with Second One, chatting. He revealed more of his character in these moments than ever again.

They talked of Gondor and Minas Tirith. Of Mordor. Of the War. And Boromir asked Second One of his past. He asked again of Itarildë, of the other elves. The sun sank into the west. It grew late.

“Well, you three have already learned of the Ring,” Boromir was saying. “So I suppose I may speak of it freely. Aye, everything will continue its course. Even though I was e’er against it. ‘Tis folly, in my mind, to throw it away.”

“Nay, not folly,” Second One murmured. “Isildur should have destroyed it long ago.”

Boromir fell silent. The sky was darkening. They would have to make camp soon. During the afternoon, the Man’s giddiness had faded, and with it, his candor. Now, as he and Second One walked along, his expression became grim. Second One opted to leave the conversation be.

Behind them, a shout: “Ho! Shall we make camp, Captain?”

Boromir smiled slightly. He and Second One turned. The others – Radagast, First One, Third One – had stopped near a patch of large bushes. In the fading light of day, they were but three silhouettes standing against the hill. Boromir looked at Second One, half-grinned.

Second One called back to the others, “There?”

First One yelled back: “Aye!”

Boromir shrugged: “Aye!”

Boromir smiled and so they turned around and walked back. As they walked, Second One noted Boromir was again grasping his stomach. The elf lowered his voice, so that the others would not hear:

“All is well?”

Boromir nodded, gritted his teeth. He was growing pale.

“Aye, aye. It... seems the wretched draught’s effects are fading.”
“Fear not, I am sure Radagast will have more.”

Slowly, slowly, they stepped up the hill towards the group. The sky was a pale grey to the west. All else was dark. One of the other elves’ was already beginning a fire. Second One walked slowly, waiting for Boromir. The Man swallowed. Yet, in the fading light, Second One caught another wide smile.

“So long as the wizard has enough herb-drug to keep me on my feet and fighting, then all is well indeed.”

Second One rolled his eyes. *Drugged, indeed!*
Dawn. Boromir was the first to awake. For as he shifted his painfully stiff limbs, moving away the bedroll, he saw that the other elves and Radagast were still asleep. All was quiet. The sun – just a pale, orange sliver on the eastern horizon. In these bare lands, Boromir felt almost entirely alone. He removed his blanket, attempted to sit up. But the stomach wound was blazingly acute this morning. He fell back. Immediately, he wondered whether Radagast had the herbal drink. Yesterday, they had marched far, and Boromir had felt, for the first time in many days, somewhat light-spirited. Yet, as the herb-drug’s effects faded, he found his mind and body sinking inevitably into their usual, foul depths.

And so he did not get up, but simply lay there, staring at the sky, holding his stomach. Waiting, waiting, waiting for the nausea to reach the point when he could stumble off to be sick. At the moment, it was simply enough to render him comfortless. That unbearable halfway point, when it was too much to be ignored, but not enough to lead to the inevitable conclusion.

The sun rose. As Boromir heard one of the other elves moving about, he too forced himself to rise. Third One was gathering up his bedroll and pack. When the elf noted Boromir clambering to stand, he chuckled softly.

“Did you sleep well, Captain?”

Boromir straightened. His muscles felt sore from yesterday’s march, and standing sent sharp stabbing pains to his wound. He cleared his throat.

“Aye, well enough,” he murmured.

He looked down at the other elves and Radagast. Each stared with open, unseeing eyes. For a brief flash – a sickening moment – Boromir thought they looked dead. Yet he forced back this unsettling thought and busied himself with gathering his things. As he moved, it helped relieve his stiff joints. He heard the others awakening behind him. The sounds of shuffling, murmured good mornings, Radagast coughing. The sky was murky, but soon enough it became bright enough to call day. The elves noted Boromir’s drop in mood, and so they refrained from any early morning jokes or quips.

As Radagast raised himself from the ground, stretched large, he smiled, “Well, good morning! I trust everyone slept well?”

“Aye,” First One said. “And you, good wizard?”

“Very well, thank you.”

Third One began setting water to boil for tea. The other elves, Second One and First One, moved away from the camp, talking quietly and laughing. Boromir could not hear what they were saying.
And so, once his bedroll was stored away, he stood, walked several paces away from the group, facing the western sky. He heard First One chuckle about something. Water boiling. Shuffling. The peace of morning.

Movement from behind. Boromir twisted around to see Radagast. The wizard smiled kindly. He came to stand next to him, holding the gnarled staff in one hand.

“I see you are already prepared to march, Boromir of Gondor,” the wizard smiled.

“Aye,” Boromir said softly, staring west.

“You are anxious to fight.”

“It is my duty.”

Radagast grunted enigmatically. The sun was rising, illuminating the low fog.

“And the wound?” the wizard asked after a few moments.

“’Tis…” Boromir hesitated. His natural impulse was to lie and say he felt nothing. Instead, he spoke earnestly, if somewhat reluctantly, “’tis painful.”

“Mmm,” Radagast said sympathetically. “That is to be expected, considering how much of the draught you consumed yesterday. Its effects are somewhat reversed if taken in excess.”

Boromir exhaled. In a sudden flash of hopelessness, he wondered whether there could be any remedy for it. Or was he doomed to a life of torment, of endless discomfort? To a lost appetite, to a dreary diet of the bland and tasteless? Radagast seemed to read his expression, for the wizard rumbled a low, humorless laugh.

“Cruel, yes,” he said. “Such is the cruelty of Morgul-wounds.”

The elves were all talking now, and Boromir could hear them discussing their current location. They seemed to be disagreeing over how far east into the Brown Lands they were.

“They are nervous,” Radagast said in a low voice.

Boromir looked back. First One was shaking his head and pointing to a patch of woods further east. Second One seemed preoccupied with the morning meal, while Third One kept indicating a point to the south.

“Know you their crime?” Radagast asked confidentially.

“Aye,” Boromir said. “Second One told me they did desert the Last Alliance.”

“Aye, and know you their reasons?”

Boromir shrugged.

“He told me he did not fight for an elf-maiden.”

“Indeed. Itarildë.”

“I know naught of the other two.”

“Well, it is not very difficult to understand, eh?” Radagast murmured. “Cowardice, compassion and
love. You know that Second One is he who did not fight for the love he desired to protect. I may tell you that they have not changed in all these years of exile.” He leaned in, private. “Third One is he who did not fight for compassion and pity. He pitied all the lost lives. He pitied the orcs.”

Boromir scoffed. “The orcs? What pity is there to be had for such vile creatures?”

Radagast shrugged, but remained silent. A few moments passed.

“Then First One is the coward,” Boromir said.

“So he is.”

“They are not the most desirable of soldiers to fight with.”

“It seems you have little choice.”

Indeed. Boromir exhaled sharply.

He looked up, squinted in the bright grey-white sky. He imagined the view from so high. That he would be but a tiny dot, inching along the Brown Lands, a minute and insignificant blur. But no. Not insignificant. Boromir again felt the flicker of shame – a burning in his gut, on the back of his neck, in his hands. A burning fire. Shame. For he could prove significant for all of Middle-earth, indeed he could be its failing. For he had failed in his quest, failed in his alternative goal of obtaining the Ring, failed in everything. All he could do now was fight, fight miserably and desperately and hopelessly, waiting for the end. The end of Gondor and all of the West. The end when the Ring was found… Waiting for his own bloody end…

When he looked down again, he saw Radagast watching him intently. For a moment, Boromir wondered if the wizard understood his thoughts. But his suspicions were forgotten when Third One called to them,

“Breakfast, gentlemen?”

And so they ate. Boromir opted not to drink the herbal draught, for he needed his wits about him in the upcoming fight. Instead, he held a piece of lembas in his hands, watching the elves eat, pretending to eat when the others glanced at him, but only chewing and spitting. Even the taste on his tongue was enough to make him reel from nausea. And so he avoided the lembas, choosing instead to concentrate on the fight.

According to Second One’s estimate, they would cross paths with the Easterlings several leagues’ walk to the south. The Easterlings were marching steadily west, but the group was slow. So Boromir, the elves and Radagast had ample time to catch up.

“Good,” Boromir grunted. “Then let us go.”

They gathered up the camp and set off less than an hour after waking.

Walking, walking, walking.

A quiet march, for today was the first fight. And while Boromir buzzed with the usual anticipation, the elves were visibly nervous. They spoke little, stared at the ground, followed him without complaint or suggestion.

Hours passed.
Stiffness, nausea, shoots and aches in the stomach and shoulder. Boromir adjusted and readjusted his pack and shield-strap, always searching for and never finding a more comfortable position. Eventually, he resigned himself to the pain, which was now a tolerable throb, and simply marched. Marching, marching, marching. Letting his thoughts drift on into nothingness. No strategies, no musings, nothing. He simply concentrated on keeping one foot in front of the other, as if his only motive, his only goal as a being, was to walk. He had often used this tactic in his days as Captain-General, when the march became his only respite, his only entertainment. For the nights were often troubled with nightmarish visions, and the days were filled with war. But the march, the march was peaceful. The marches were the brief, quiet interludes between moments of intensity – moments of bloodshed and frenzy and violence and hate – moments when Boromir frightened himself with how easily he could kill. Yet the march was his escape.

And today, they marched, and he used this time to loosen the tightness in his limbs, to swallow back the bitter bile coating his tongue.

A call. Boromir flinched and halted. He turned. The elves and Radagast were staring east. The Easterlings were coming. When Boromir looked to his right, he saw a dusty cloud on the horizon, approaching steadily. Coming down the plains towards them. Boromir hastened back to the elves, beckoned them to hide themselves. By some chance or luck, there were some trees for cover, as well as bushes, shrubs, boulders and masses of dry-dead vegetation.

They decided to hide themselves in a dense mass of shrubbing bushes. There was an ancient well a dozen paces before them, and surely the Easterlings would stop to use it. Boromir crouched low, began removing his pack and bedroll. The elves did the same. He unfastened his cloak, removed his gloves, placed everything that was not needed – everything which stifled – back into his pack. Only the necessary remained. Sword. Shield. And he was ready.

Orchestration,
pulling the strings
to lift Boromir’s arm up as he signals to the elves,
as the adraefan-wizard-Man shift and crawl along the grasses
creeping along like children playing games of war…

Another string is pulled,
this one tied to the hinges of Second One’s mouth
so he whispers quiet, “They are a mile away.”

Up above, high up above Brown Land shrubbery,
a few Puppeteers linger to watch
though respectfully we call them the Aratar.

Tulkas the Valiant
is managing the strings now,
pulling loose a sword
unleashing a bow and removing an arrow from full quiver.
He beams bright energy, sunlight
strength and glory in battle, he lusts for these,
he is the Valar’s soldier, the warrior-god…
and he turns to Vairë the Weaver
(because she has stopped to play audience)
with a smile, booming:

“A new thread begins.”
Vairë, Mistress of Fate, snorts, “A new thread be-GAN, General Astaldo, back on Amon Hen when We kept that shaky non-hero alive!”

“Shaky non-hero?” Tulkas laughs and gives one string a jerk so that Boromir’s hands tremble with brief pre-battle jumpiness.

Vairë’s husband wanders by, leaving a trail of ghostly smoke, as always, leaving the Door of the Dead wide open, and Tulkas shouts a greeting:

“Salutations, Námo, Mandos-Keeper and Doomsman! How goes it?”

Grim Námo peeks down onto the living, breathing Middle-earth map sees a scuffle about to happen, and smiles sinister, “Hello, hello, General Astaldo. Any deaths today?”

Tulkas shrugs: “A few. Stay and watch.”

Are the Valar-Gods truly so frivolous in our fates?

The Easterlings arrived at the well perhaps thirty minutes later. A quick count revealed a group of fifty. Large, but not impossible. Boromir leaned against the grass, pushed his head through the bushes. Wild Men, indeed. Soiled garments, filthy with mud and soot. All greasy, frazzled hair and unkempt beards. True, his own appearance was somewhat less attractive as of late, but he liked to think that he still retained the noble quality of a Gondorian.

Beside him, the elves were also lying against the grass, spying. Radagast had gone off to another part of the woodsy thicket, saying that he would take care of the Easterling's animals. The Wild Men brought with them horses, dogs and birds for messages. Boromir and the elves had hidden amidst the thorny bushes, watching the Easterlings approach the well.

The well. Old, uneven stones, a chain pulley, cobwebs. It was clear that none had used this well in many years, centuries even. All the metal was rusted, the wood rotten, the stone eroded. And the Easterlings were wary to approach it. As the Wild Men circled the old structure, Boromir slowly withdrew his sword.

"Wait for the group to spread," Boromir whispered, "First One, Second One, hide yourselves amidst those trees there and there. We shall attack them from all sides. Wait for my signal."

The two elves nodded and went swiftly away. Third One inched himself over to Boromir's side. He had withdrawn his own bow and an arrow.

"Boromir, let us wait until they taste the well-water," the elf said softly. "It shall work to our advantage."

"Nay, nay, I am impatient. And what advantage is there in waiting?"

"Watch, and you will see."
Boromir raised his eyebrow, but said nothing. So be it. He crawled forward, winced when a thorny branch scraped against his cheek. His shoulder was not handling the exertion well, and so he leaned lopsided to his right. His stomach wound was relatively calm. Thankfully, his mind had cleared considerably since yesterday’s blurred giddiness. And now, adrenaline kept the pain at bay. For his mind was entirely preoccupied with the upcoming fight. He watched the scene:

A tall Easterling approached the well, pushing past his soldiers. He was clearly the leader, for he was older, scarred, and imposing. He yelled something at the younger Men, beckoned them forth. But all were hesitant to near the well. Finally, after the leader struck one on the shoulder, they began to move uneasily. A young Wild Man with ginger hair and beard doubtfully lowered the bucket. As he did so, he was speaking furtively with his nearby companions. They nodded, attempted to tell the leader, but to no avail. The elderly leader snarled something at them.

After hauling the bucket back up, now filled with water, no one wanted to touch it. Boromir could only see the bucket's edge, he could not see the water inside. But, when someone jostled someone else, and some of the liquid came sloshing out, Boromir was alarmed to see it was black. Black water? He looked to Third One for explanation, but the elf said nothing.

Finally, after much arguing and yelling, the leader shoved aside the young, ginger-haired Man and took the bucket. He tilted it back, drank deeply and swallowed. The other Men waited. Boromir waited. Everyone waited. And with only an anticlimactic sigh, the leader lay down upon the ground and fell asleep. There was a moment of silence. Someone laughed.

Yet after nudging and jostling and shaking the sleeping Man, the Easterlings began to panic. Anxious yells, harder jostling, rapid-fire speech. The black water. The black water was not to be touched. Poison!

"It is the water of the Enchanted River," Third One explained under his breath. "Any who drink it fall into a deep sleep, never to be awoken."

Boromir nodded. The leader was down. The soldiers were panicking. Now was a good time to attack. He raised himself to his knees and made eye contact with the other elves. Second One was further north, crouching behind a bush. First One leaned against a tree on the southern flank. When each saw Boromir wave his arm, they nocked their first arrows, lightening-fast, and began to fire.

And so the fight began. With vicious accuracy, the arrows flew through the panicking Easterlings and found this neck, that heart, those eyes. The horses neighed, the Wild Men screamed, everywhere was terror. Boromir began to laugh. Beside him, Third One was standing, nocking and releasing arrows - one, two, one, two, one, two. Boromir hauled himself to his feet, swung his sword around, readied his shield and charged.

Into the mess of Wild Men, into the blood and panic and chaos of the fight, he charged. The Easterlings were not expecting a single attacker, and, despite their greater numbers, they stumbled back, screaming in fear. He swung his sword around, roared savage, plunged it into an Easterling's heart. All the while, arrows streamed from all sides. But one stream of arrows stopped, and soon Third One appeared in the fight, sword drawn.

Easterlings were running, this way, that way, the braver ones remaining to fight. Boromir hacked, pushed forward, sidestepped blows, snarled and spat. He saw only his blade - slicing through tendons and sinews and veins - his blade - spraying blood back into his face and onto his tongue. He spat. He cried out. He moved to decapitate an Easterling, but the sword got wedged in the dead Man's neck. As he yanked at it, something struck him in the stomach.

And so all the pain came flooding back, intense, acidic, burning. Boromir crumbled to his knees,
squeezing his arms around the stomach, almost dropping his own sword. His vision blurred, he saw only a dim figure moving swiftly towards him. There was a rush of air, and the figure fell dead. But Boromir could not thank his ally, whoever had fired the arrow, for the pain in his stomach blinded and crippled him. He pushed himself to his feet, pushing against the curved stone to his right. Without realizing it, he was by the well.

And just as he was to look up, and get his bearings again, an agitated voice traveled through the air: "Boromir! Ware! On your left!"

Boromir snapped his head around and saw a Wild Man charging towards him. A jagged sword swinging down. Boromir raised his own sword, knowing already that his timing was off and that he would not deflect the blade, when another arrow appeared. With a sickening *thunk*, the arrow landed hard against the Wild Man's neck. Yet the Easterling's own momentum had launched him forward, so that even in his death throes, he stumbled into Boromir and both went toppling into the well.

*Valar!*

Boromir registered only this single thought as he found himself knocked against stone walls. Falling, falling, falling. Panic, fear, terror. Boromir reached out, desperate, and grabbed onto the chain rope. But his speed was so great that he continued down, knocking once, twice, hard, crushed against the walls. One particularly grisly collision slammed his knees against the stone, and Boromir was sure his kneecaps had been blown off. But he clung, stubbornly, painfully, his hands burning fire, to the chain. The Wild Men, by this time dead, fell with him, an extra weight pulling him faster down.

The basic survival instinct kept Boromir's hands against the chain. He flung his feet out towards the wall, grinding himself to a halt. A screaming crescendo of pain. Finally, they stopped. He disentangled himself from the dead Easterling, crying out with disgust. Crying out from the pain in his hands, in his knees, in his stomach. The Wild Man jerked over, fell forward, and, with a desperate kick from Boromir, disappeared down into the well. Many seconds passed before Boromir heard the sound of the corpse hitting water.

Sweating, bleeding, clinging ridiculously, Boromir hung with his hands against the chain and his feet against the stone wall. He looked up. His breath quickened. The well's opening was just a tiny orb of blue sky. He must have fallen nearly twenty meters. He could still hear the sounds of battle echoing down the well.

Hot blood trickled down his hands. He cursed himself for not wearing his gloves. He had thought, stupidly, that they were not needed, and, in the day's heat, he had shoved them back into his pack. Now, as his bleeding hands throbbed dully, he entirely regretted that decision.

But that was not the only injury. His right shoulder. His head. His left shoulder. The stomach wound. The knees - gummy with blood. As he hung there, he saw a mess of brown, white and red on his kneecaps. There was little discernable difference between his garments and his bare, broken skin.

He groaned.

And now what?

He tried shifting his weight against the wall, swinging to his side. But the diameter was too large, so that he could not lean back and rest against the stone. Above his head, the fight continued. Foreign cries mingled with swords clashing, horses baying, screams. Had anyone noticed his fall?
He cringed to think of calling for help.

Perhaps he could climb out.

Bracing himself for the inevitable surge of pain, Boromir peeled one hand away from the chain, tearing strips of flesh. He cried out. Yet once his hand was free, and the blood dripped down his fingers, he wrapped his arm in the chain and hoisted himself up. It did not work. His free hand burned and stung so fiercely that he could not grasp again the chain, and when he did, it slipped off with sweat and blood. He was loath to tear away the other hand, and his knees nearly gave out as he pulled.

No, he would have to wait.

And wait he did, for an interminable amount of time, listening to the sounds of battle above him. He did not dare move a muscle, for his grip on the chain was slipping, and any moment now, he would go tumbling down the well and into the black water. He controlled his breathing, closed his eyes, kept absolutely still. All the while, he felt the metal digging into his raw palms, digging, digging, slowly slipping.

Things did not improve after an hour or so of this tense waiting. There was a cry from above and Boromir looked up. A dark form, flailing and screaming, hurtled down at him. He braced himself against the chain. The Wild Men slammed into him with a crack. This Easterling was not dead, however, and, as he tumbled away, he screamed. He grabbed at Boromir's clothes and cloak, desperately searching for any hold which would prevent his fall. Boromir roared in pain, but that roar was cut short as the Man grabbed his cloak, cutting off his air.

As the Man's weight jerked to a halt, Boromir was ripped from the rope, backwards, to knock his head against the well wall. Both went tumbling down, and Boromir, eyes closed, not breathing, seized with his hands anything that would hold him. His nails scraped against stone, his knees hit, again, something very hard. As he fell, he was bounced off a wall and into the chain. As soon as he felt the chain's touch again, he grabbed it, frantic, snarling.

Again, he came grinding to a halt. The Wild Man had also attempted to grab the chain-rope, and there was much shaking as he became entangled in it. But Boromir heard at once the sound of water. The Easterling's screams died as soon as the splash did.

Boromir was much lower in the well now. His heart was pounding. Sweat drenched his clothes, poured down his face, into his eyes. Only a moment before, he had been flying down the well. Absolute terror. And here he was, once again, clinging to the chain. A tiny shaft of light filtered down this far, and, as Boromir swung back and forth, he saw his hands were all red. The pain was complete now, so that every beat of his heart sent a surge of fire through every nerve, exploding. He gasped for breath.

And in that dripping silence, he heard the first echo.

"Boromir!"

Boromir flinched. He arched his head back. But he could not see. His vision swam. He attempted to call back, but his throat was dry-parched, and he only made a sort of wheezing sound.

Again: "Boromir! Ho! Answer if you can!"

Finally, swinging back and forth, forcing his voice to rise up out of his throat, Boromir called hoarsely: "Aye!"
"Hold on! We shall pull you out!"

Before Boromir could properly hold on, the chain jerked up and he howled in agony. Slowly, slowly, miserably slow, he was pulled up, up, up. He wrapped his leg in the chain, for his hands were slipping off. *Sweet Eru!* An eternity! Pain in every form - clawing at his hands, drilling into his knees, swelling in his stomach. Pain so dizzying that he entertained the idea of simply letting go and falling into the water below.

Yet he clenched his teeth, swallowed the cries, closed his eyes, pressed his brow against the chain. The smell of dank air suddenly gave way to a breeze - so sweet and alive and fresh. He was out. Elf-hands grabbed him on all sides and pulled him the final measure, so that he was dragged across the short stone, landing on his feet. He opened his eyes, walked several dazed steps, and then fell back onto the grass. He had no time to register the number of Easterlings dead, what time it was, if any of the elves were hurt. He simply lay curled up, panting.

In the sun's glare, he saw the elves watching him in concern. Each was covered in a varying level of blood and dirt. They looked almost identical.

Boromir forced a gasping smile.

"I - see - you three - were not hasty."
AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

At dusk, they burned the Easterlings and gathered all the food or drink they desired. Boromir found the work difficult since his raw hands could not close or open completely, and he could not straighten his legs for the injured knees. But soon enough, the work was complete, and the five travelers went forth into the night to find a suitable hiding place.

They found a tussock in the plains to the northeast, with rocks and shrubs to lean against. There, a fire was lit and they made camp. Second One helped bind Boromir's hands and knees, while Radagast spoke with some birds in the nearby bushes. They ate the Easterlings food, Boromir least of all, and refilled their water-skins. Third One found a wineskin amongst his booty and they passed this around to drink. Boromir consumed the most and the elves the least, with Radagast being the only who consumed equal amounts of food and wine. Eventually, when their bellies were full and their heads swimming, they settled back against their bedrolls in companionable silence.

The wine numbed the burning in Boromir's raw hands and the stinging in his knees and gut, for which he was thankful. He lay with his head against the bedroll, his eyelids drooping, a soft alcoholic buzz caressing and comforting him. In the night, with the fire crackling nearby, and his companions' even breathing by his side, he felt a sudden peace. As if all the shame and dishonor his heart carried had melted away with the wine – or, rather, was it flung off during the fight? – and he was left now with only an empty head and weary limbs. He did not desire to move a single muscle, but rather wanted only to lie there, staring half-asleep in the fire, with his bandaged hands folded across his stomach.

Someone lit a pipe. The smell wafted to Boromir, shaking him out of his drowsiness and awakening pangs of old memories. He lifted his eyes and saw Radagast sitting against the rock wall, legs crossed, gaze distant. He was smoking a long, thin pipe.

"That scent is familiar to me," Boromir said, half-mumbling, half-slurring from weariness and intoxication.

"Oh?" Radagast lifted an eyebrow. "It is South Farthing pipe-weed, from a little realm to the northwest called the Shire."

"Aye, I know it."

"You have friends there?"

"I traveled with some halflings from that land. A fine, happy people. Much as tonight, we would make camp and the little ones would smoke their pipes. Aye, it was the weed of South Farthing they used… They were my friends," in the same breath, Boromir added, "but they are dead now. It is foolish to speak of them."
“Nay, Boromir, it is never foolish to speak of those we have lost.”

Radagast took another drag of his pipe. Silence again.

Boromir burrowed himself into his makeshift pillow. He did not want to think of Merry and Pippin. He would not think of them. Why did they haunt him so? Why could he not simply forget them, push them back to the dark recesses of his mind, as he did with all the dead he knew? The crowded cemetery in his mind, already full with the bodies of family, friends, brothers-in-arms, officers, foot soldiers, innocents.

Nay. He could not forget Merry and Pippin. Whenever he closed his eyes, he saw their faces – now clear, now blurry, weeping and laughing and eating and talking and weeping again, crying out to him in the darkness. Or he saw his brother’s face, heard Faramir’s clear voice chiding him and calling for him to return to Minas Tirith, to return home. Boromir’s memories crept like vines around his legs and into his torso, twisting around his heart and squeezing it shut, so that he longed only for release from this existence. Merry, Pippin, Faramir, Denethor – all asking for him, calling his name, grieving for him. Could they not simply forget him? Could they not allow him a peaceful exile?

The quiet was abruptly broken by a fair voice. It rose from the depths of Third One's throat and fell over the camp in a wave of melody, before rising up with the smoke and disappearing into the night sky.

The song was elvish, and Boromir did not know the words, nor the meaning, but the music enveloped him like a blanket. He recalled the lament for Gandalf heard in Lothlórien, how the voices had emerged from the trees themselves, echoing through the wood, at once ominous and beautiful. He had been so consumed by grief and despair in those days, that he had scarce paid attention to the music of the elves. All music was drowned out by the endless drone of the Ring's whispers.

But now the Ring was gone, too far away to be heard, and only its dark shadow still stained his heart. He could listen freely to Third One's song, melancholy and sinister and peaceful. A shudder passed through his body, and he felt the hair on his arms rise. It was unlike any mortal singing.

Third One finished and the song disappeared into the night sky, carried away by the wind.

"Were you not forbidden from uttering the elvish tongues?" Radagast asked after a pause, his eyes scanning each elf's face.

Third One looked away, abashed. "Forgive me. The desire was too great."

"Radagast, have we not earned back some honor today by fighting the forces of Mordor?" First One asked, looking pointedly at the wizard.

"Aye," Second One agreed. "Piece by piece, mayhap we can reverse our punishments?"

Radagast shrugged and did not speak. Without lifting his gaze from the fire, Boromir asked:

"What did you sing of, Third One?"

"A lament for our fallen enemy."

"Our enemy?"

"They were Men, like you, Boromir. Perhaps not all deserved to die. I cannot say. And so I sing for..."
those who were perhaps better than the rest."

Boromir did not stir. Had it been any other moment, he would have exploded with anger, accusing the elf of being blind and treacherous for even suggesting such a thing. The Wild Men deserved no pity, no mercy.

But Boromir did not say these things. He did not desire to quarrel. The wineskin, which rested against his hip, was near empty. He took it, finished the remaining dregs – a strong, heady drink of low quality – and waited for his body to sink further into its numb depths.

Second One roused him with a question.

"What now, then, from our master strategist?"

Boromir grinned.

"Let us rise before dawn and make for the eastern passes. I wish to fight a greater enemy. Today there were less than a hundred Wild Men. That is no challenge. Let us find a bigger group."

"With more wine?" Second One teased.

Boromir grunted a laugh. "Aye, with more wine. And mayhap an orc or two."

Scattered chuckles.

"Very well, but you must promise something, Boromir," First One said, grinning. "You must promise not to fall into any wells again, for you are the heaviest among us and it was truly taxing, even for three strong elves, to pull you out."

More laughter.

"Nay, I did not fall in. 'Twas your shot that pushed me."

"Pushed you? That poor Easterling would have fallen to his side, had you not leapt back and dragged him into the well with you."

"Soldiers of Gondor never leap back from their enemies. Only forwards."

"That is not a wise strategy," Second One chuckled. "Perhaps we erred in making him tactician."

Boromir raised his eyebrow in mock offense.

"I have planned many a battle in my career."

"As is expected from the son of Denethor," Radagast mused to himself.

The elves continued in their joking.

"Aye, planned them, but how many victories?"

Boromir's smile faded, and with it, the light from his pale eyes. "In truth, too few. Of late, Gondor has become more accustomed to defeat than victory."

The amusement dissolved and the group fell into a somber silence. A gentle breeze passed, leaving a chill. The fire crackled. The night insects buzzed. The owl – Radagast’s friend – hooted. Beyond the edge of the boulder, the night sky could be seen and a million stars glowed in silent
observation. Boromir watched them. The stars. Each with a story and a song. He could hear Faramir’s voice, pointing out the brighter ones, explaining who they represented or where they came from. But he did not want to think of Faramir.

"Once we have finished with the Easterlings," Boromir said. "I wish to continue eastward, beyond the borders of the Known Lands. You three have passed into those strange places, as you often speak of them, and I would like now to know what lies there."

The elves looked at each other, deciding who should speak first, until First One replied: "Very well. We shall tell you of the paths beyond Rhûn, for it is good that you have fair warning. It is a difficult journey, long and hard. The stars which you depend on for guidance shift and change positions upon reaching the Sea of Rhûn. And they will be of little help once past it.

"The Wild Men you know of, these Easterlings, mostly inhabit the forests and mountains just beyond Rhûn. It is a half-year’s journey through these villainous lands, and I would counsel wariness, for the Wild Men, as you know, are a belligerent people, ready to rob you and beat you if they see you are alone. Do not travel along the roads, but rather remain in cover of wood. Take heed of night-sounds.

"If you continue eastward, you will notice the villages and homes becoming more sparse, and the earth growing bare and brown. After a half-year of Wild Men and dangerous roads, all life will fall away upon reaching the Great Desert. The Desert is called by many names, though in the tongue of those closest to it, it is called Ceosolstów. You will see but endless sand, rising high and low in dunes. Here, the sun burns hot and close. Ne'er a cloud passes, ne'er does it rain. None live in the desert, for no creature survives the infernal heat and lack of water. You will walk under this unnatural sun, stumbling and thirsty, for what will seem like a lifetime.

"If the Valar bless you and you survive Ceosolstów, which is unlikely, you will be rewarded with the lands of Rinanholt. Here trees as tall as the White Tower of Gondor grow, and there are beasts of such might and beauty that you would tremble to look upon them. All is green and large, and the rains would drown the valleys of our western lands. Here, the Rinan trees grow so large, that a Man may never see the tops of them. They are as wide as five or six of your trees, with leaves the size of a full-grown dwarf. The land is oft flooded, and therefore you must travel by the branches."

"By the branches?" Boromir snorted. "I am no squirrel. I know not how to travel by limbs and leaves."

"You will learn, out of necessity. And fear not, for the Rinan trees grow so thick, that even their flimsiest limbs could sustain a heavy Man like yourself."

Some laughter. Boromir smiled.

"Nay, the rains are heavy there, and the forest floor is at times but a lake, where fish and sea-snakes mingle with the roots of trees and pick off the low nests of foolish birds. You will needs make camp in the top branches, or in the holes of the trunk, where it is damp, and the rain does not batter down through the leaves. There is fruit to live on, and your squirrel colleagues, if you are lucky, but they are crafty creatures. Continue eastward, if you wish, or, by this time, you may also move north or southward.

"Once out of Rinanholt, you will see the first of your kind. They are a foreign race of Men, and they will look strange to your eyes. Some dark as night's deepest black, while others with eyes of orange and red and yellow. Yet, fear them not, for the Strange Men share your ancestors, and mayhap even your shame. The lands east of Ceosolstów and further east of Rinanholt are lands of exile, where Men from Gondor, Arnor, Harad, Angmar, all the realms, fled from past shames.
These are the sons and daughters of cowards, criminals, or simply fools who lost themselves and traveled too far. But do not judge them in haste, for they have become a strong people, kind and just. They will help you, and lead you perhaps further east, if you so desire. But you risk walking off the very face of Arda, if you stray so far.

“And know also this: once going East, you may never return, for by some chance of magic, the desert stretches further for those who travel west, swallowing up even the doughtiest of Men.”

“Yet you three claim to have traveled so far?” Boromir asked.

“I remind you that we are not Men,” First One smiled. "An elf can brave an endless desert. He needs little to drink and less to eat."

Boromir grunted, feeling too weary to form a complete reply.

The group of four then fell again into silence. It was decided that Third One should take the first watch, while the others slept. They stifled the fire, lessening it to a slow burn, and each person wandered into his own thoughts.

Boromir did not shift in his position. His hands were curved into a bandaged curl, and he found that moving them was painful. His knees throbbed dully. He sighed inwardly, thinking of tomorrow morning’s stiffness, and drifted away into darkness.

…it is said the wine of the Wild Men breeds strange dreams. Dreams of prophecy and symbol, dreams where the lost and forgotten speak from afar, and time blurs.

Hear the halflings,
They cry, they cry, crying out, wails in the night.
Black red burning Eye on fire
searing holes into a Man’s heart
Man's mind
Man's tissue-thin spirit.
Losing - falling – collapsing onto burning knees,
gummy with blood,
arrow forcing him down, to the ground,
pushing his face against the mud,
breathe in the mud, breathe in the blood on the ground.
Limp arms pushing up, shaking for air,
(with the desire only to gasp open)
wind whistles foul,
more arrows like long thin jagged poison black nails
pinning him to the tree, to the ground, to the river.

“Where to, brother? Where does thy tread take thee?”

“Away from shame, brother, away from evil
away from the Eye, from Mordor, from the Fellowship, 
brother, away from the RING.
To the East, to the desert, to the trees,
up, up, into the trees with leaves as big as Gimli.”
(Gimli grunts: “Mayhap a dwarf can outlast a Man!”)
Choking in the desert, a sea of sand,
drifting through the still air is a clear voice:
"What are these blows, brother? Where is thy horn?
Speak, I see thee in my dreams.
Dead, brother, dead?"

"Nay, Faramir, living still,
but it is a half-life to end too late,
brother, do not wait for me,
wait only for peace, and when all this is done,
return to the White City with the White Tree and White Tower
and, there, beneath the White Clouds
crown our King Aragorn King.
Meanwhile,
I to the desert, brother, I to the trees,
I to Men of yellow eyes and black faces,
I to exile."

"Silence, brother, let the foresight of mine,
the legendary foresight of Faramir,
show you something:"

Boromir groaned, stirred. He shifted his position, fell again asleep. The elf who stood watch in that moment smiled, and wondered if the Man ever slept peacefully.

"See this, exile-brother,
heed this, if you are wise:
you see fire,
you see stone,
in the Black Tower of Barad-dûr you will dwell.
Frodo shall pass beneath you,
bearing the Ring to Doom,
and good life for all will spit from a volcano,
but not for the three elf-wanderers.
Two First Born shall pass into the remote lands of death,
one’s pass you will see, the second’s you will hear
again and again, forever
both you will mourn ‘til you yourself die – "

"What chills! What burns!
Faramir, stop!
Nay!
Do not foresee this!"

" - Easy, brother, let me finish:
For we all have destinies, brother, all of us, everyone
our stories written long before our birth
and we must but choose it, choose to fulfill fate
now or later, but it will be done inevitably
as originally planned
(keep this in mind with your adraefan)
it is all there, our short lives
with their loves, their wars, their quotidian joy
little vignettes or Grand Epics
all mapped out by Eru the Inconceivable
and set forth, accomplished with some helpful Valar device impossible to avoid, ecstasy to realize.

And I see now your fate, brother, let me continue:
…months of sorrow with Barad-dûr e’er echoing, and you drown out the fear in liquid haze, in goblets and tankards and sacks and bottles with mind blurred, honor forgotten, friends falling away.
But not all is black, the road curves with a new twist, not all Boromir has faded, some yet returns, and I Steward, Aragorn King, Minas Tirith restored, what we have dreamed of, Minas Tirith restored, brother, there is a happy end to all this, a final joy: peace
peace
(say it) PEACE!
Minas Tirith restored, the flowers in bloom, a final joy. Awake, now, brother, the light in the East rises, over your desert and Gimli-trees, it comes now to you, brother, awake.”

Boromir awoke with a snort. He squinted in the sun’s glare, which rose in the east and sent sprawling rays of light into their campsite. By the edge of the camp, near the largest boulder, Boromir saw the silhouette of a seated elf. The silhouette turned.

“How punctual, the sun has risen in this very instant. Did you sleep well?”
Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

“You seem more grim than usual, Boromir.”

“Is that possible?”

“My dear Second One, I do not know. But he seems it.”

“Hmm. I agree, First One. Very grim.”

“Probably stiff from falling in the well. Ho, Boromir, how are your hands?”

“Nay, nay, his head aches from the wine, I fear.”

“Third One, have you any left?”

“Not a drop!”

“Leave it to a Man to consume our entire supply in a single night.”

“Well, the next group shall have more.”

“Valar willing…”

“Aye, or he’ll dip into the miruvor when our eyes stray!”

“My eyes ne’er stray, Second One.”

“Very well, then First One and his ne’er-straying eyes shall guard the miruvor.”

“Ho, Boromir! Why so grim?”

“Aye, tell us! Settle our wager: is it the wine or the well?”

Open, barren fields. Dagorlad. Black storm clouds ever present. Boromir plowed forward, shield at his back, hand resting against the hilt of his sword. Behind him, the elves walked. Joking, talking, laughing amongst themselves. Radagast followed, with the spotted owl trailing behind. Boromir looked back, hid a creeping smile in his shoulder. He could not help it, but the elves were amusing.

And he did not know it in that instant, but this would become his fondest memory of the adraefan.

Forcing his tone to remain serious, ruffled even, he called back: “Is it the custom of elves to be so frivolous on grey mornings such as this?”

“Ha! Indeed!” First One laughed. “Our spirits are high today, high above the clouds, flying over us.
I do not know why. ‘Tis a happy mystery!"

“Perhaps you were thinking of the expression on Boromir’s face when he fell into the well?” Second One joked. “For I was and it never fails to amuse me.”

“Nonetheless, he did not answer our question,” Third One called. “Why so grim, Captain?”

Boromir snorted, turned his back to them, kept walking. “Is there a reason you three have chosen me as your particular target? I have not spoken a word.”

“Indeed!”

“Not a word since dawn!”

“That’s what worries us, Boromir. Usually you have a few muttered imprecations or gruff replies to give. And today, nothing. Is it not true, Radagast?”

Radagast’s low rumbling laugh traveled up the company. Like Mithrandir, Boromir mused, feeling a pang of nostalgia. The wizard chortled: “I am not getting involved. But do stop teasing the Man.”

“Good wizard, we three elves are noble elves,” First One raised his hand to his heart. “We do not tease.”

“We insinuate,” Second One ventured.

“We imply,” Third One added.

“We acknowledge the obvious. And mayhap we hope to lift Boromir out of his deep depression, for he has been a walking scowl since waking.”

Laughter. Boromir’s lips quirked, and he forced himself to remain unsmiling. Thankfully, they could not see his face.

“If you three are so intent on merriment,” Radagast suggested, “sing something, an elvish song perhaps, and leave the soldier to his marching.”

The elves chuckled, murmured agreement. But then First One raised his voice: “Nay, nay, let solemn Boromir give us a tune. For surely, years ago, all the fair maidens of Minas Tirith longed only to hear the sweet lilt of Boromir’s song!”

This caused howls of laughter among the walkers. Even Boromir felt a chuckle burst from him. He turned, and before he could contain himself, called back, grinning wolfishly: “Ah, but that is not all they desired from me.”

“Ha ha!” First One laughed, his voice pitched loud in joy. “What a common response! Men are e’er consumed by such base needs.”

“Elves as well, brother,” Third One giggled. “Though mayhap we can go longer without being satisfied.”

Everyone laughed at this, though Boromir saw that Second One’s smile faded. The other elves caught this too, and Third One dropped back in the line to speak with him. He spoke seriously: “Forgive me, Second One. This brings memories of…?”

Second One nodded, his eyes straying skyward. “Aye, it does indeed. She will have passed into the West by now.” He straightened his shoulders. “But ignore my slow smiles, let us not allow old
melancholy to tarnish a beautiful day. Come, Third One, sing for us.”

Boromir grinned, turned around, walked backwards. The day was not beautiful by any means. It was cloudy and grey and bitter. The ground was a patchwork of swamping fens and craggy tussocks. But nonetheless their joy seemed to create an orb of sun. A patch of light, of life. Third One cleared his throat, and obliged them all with a song. He sung it in elvish, for by now the elves felt they could honorably do so. Radagast offered no argument, and neither did Boromir. Quite the opposite, Boromir, in secret, enjoyed the elvish songs. He strode backwards, slowly, idly, watching Third One sing.

“A Fanuilos! Brennil gelair!
Athan Aear Annui, Bereth,
Calad ammen i reviar
Mi ’aladhremmin Ennorath!

A Elbereth Gilthoniel!
I chîn a thûl lîn míriel,
A Fanuilos! Linnam allen
Athan Aear min ndôr chae hen.

Elin i ned în ben-Anor
Go gam hîfol na hen rennin,
Mi dailf ’waerin lim a celair
Celwelyth lîn reviennin!

Gilthoniel! A Elbereth!
Min ndôr chaeron hen din gelaidh
Ve i dortham sí renim ui
‘ilgalad buin Aeair Annui.”

Boromir smiled to himself, not knowing why. He turned around, marched on. He did not understand the meaning, but the song filled him with a pleasant satisfaction. A subdued warmth. Even as the soft ring of Third One’s wavering voice faded, and only the tramping of their boots upon the ground could be heard, Boromir smiled. They did not speak for several moments afterwards, until finally, Radagast called:

“Well? Tell the Man what it means, Third One. Not all of us speak the elven tongues.”

“It is the Song of the Wandering Elves,” Third One said softly, his voice still carrying that trace of hidden melody. “It is sung to Elbereth, the Queen of the Valar, who scattered the stars in the sky. Mayhap it pleases her.”

“Mayhap she will bless us with a larger group of Easterlings!” First One laughed.

“With more wine,” Second One added, “do not forget the wine, First One. Boromir shall be most displeased if we find sober Wild Men.”

Scattered chuckles. Boromir did not comment, and the group fell into an amused silence. They passed a patch of wood, a small forest-like oasis on their left. The trees were dry and dead. The elves were grim as they passed, and would only say that a great evil lingered in that patch of wood. Boromir’s curiosity was piqued, but he did not press them with childish questions. Now was not the time for that. They needed to ready themselves for battle, not muse over passing trees.

Earlier that day, the elves had spotted another group of Easterlings moving slowly west. Perhaps
two leagues from where they were. Radagast had sent his bird-scouts away with messages to all the nearest beasts. The wizard expected the horses to arrive soon, followed by all the birds and insects willing to fight.

Boromir found the entire affair unbelievable. An army of beasts? He would not believe it until he saw it. And even then, he had little trust in irate bees warding off any Easterling swords. But he decided to humor the elderly wizard nonetheless. For had he not seen the unbelievable with Mithrandir? Aye, he had. Even against the foulest demons Middle-earth could conjure, Mithrandir had stood.

Boromir exhaled sharply. He did not want to see it, but again, there it was: *He cannot stand alone!* *Elendil! I am with you, Gandalf! Gondor!*

*Fly, you fools!*

No. Boromir pushed the Fellowship out of his mind. He was no longer part of that, he no longer played any part in the Ring’s fate. He had shed all of it on Amon Hen. He was an *adraefan* now, an exile.

On their right, several leagues off but still too close for comfort, the mountains of Mordor loomed. Boromir rarely looked there, and when he did, he averted his eyes. He imagined the Fellowship now, probably picking their way through those mountain passes, moving steadily into danger. How much longer would they last? He wondered how many still lived. Boromir imagined Aragorn, Legolas, Gimli, Sam and Frodo deep in the Black Land. Perhaps Aragorn could weather the Mordor fires, but Sam and Frodo would surely be overcome. Boromir did not know of Legolas and Gimli; they were foreign races.

And when Sauron found the Ring? What then?

Sometimes the tumultuous sky over Mordor would crack with unexpected lightening, and Boromir would flinch. Every time, he imagined it was that final moment, the moment when Sauron regained the Ring and Middle-earth fell completely into shadow. But no, it was too early. Boromir gave them a month. Minas Tirith would last another few weeks, at most. In a month’s time, Sauron would have the Ring again, the Fellowship would be dead, and Gondor fallen.

*Well. Perhaps not. *Perhaps he was being pessimistic. He was, after all, unaccustomed to hope.

Idly, Boromir wondered if the others had been tempted by the Ring. Or was he the only one? He imagined them now, in Mordor, perhaps in those very mountains his eyes avoided, discussing the lost companions. He imagined the conversation, how the remaining hobbits’ eyes would shine with tears upon remembering Merry and Pippin. Then they would clench their fists and curse him, for Frodo must have surely told the group of his betrayal. Perhaps they even thought it was his fault that Merry and Pippin had been captured and killed. He did.

With a quick jerk of his head, Boromir forced his thoughts out of their usual depths. Now was not the time for brooding. They would be upon the Easterlings in a few hours. At least in the fighting, he could lose himself and think only of swords and bloodshed. It was the easier path. To mindlessly defend his land, perhaps in vain due to the impending doom, but to defend it nonetheless. In those moments, with his fingers curled around the sword-hilt, and the shield weighing down on his left arm, he was free of thought. And that was what he desired most, for he feared that otherwise he would drive himself mad with thinking.

In that moment, Radagast let out a happy cry. Boromir turned to see the figure of a single horse galloping towards them. It was coming from the west. The group stopped walking and waited for
the steed to arrive. It was a brown stallion, riderless and without a saddle.

“Behold!” Radagast cried in welcome. “It is Fæstefot, the wing-tipped messenger of Shadowfax!”

“Shadowfax?” Boromir asked.

“The King of all horses,” Second One explained.

Boromir still did not quite understand, and he watched, puzzled, as the horse arrived. It was a noble mount, upright and strong. It moved purposefully towards Radagast and bowed to the wizard. Radagast bowed in return, as did the elves, so that Boromir, feeling rather foolish, mimicked the action. With the formalities exchanged, Radagast stepped forward and stroked Fæstefot’s neck and muzzle.

“What news from the horse-lands?” Radagast asked. “Are you alone?”

The horse snorted, clopped its foot. It tossed its head back and bayed. Boromir watched as the Brown Wizard cocked his head, listening to the horse’s nonsense talk. Once the horse had finished moving about, Radagast grunted. The wizard cast a mixed look back to his companions.

“What is it?” Third One asked. “What does he say?”

“Alas, that these times should be so full of war,” Radagast sighed. “Aye, he is alone. Shadowfax has ridden forth to Minas Tirith, bearing Mithrandir and a halfling. Now all the horses of his lands are preoccupied with Rohirric or Gondorian battles. They have no help to send us.”

“Minas Tirith?” Boromir asked, breathless. “Good wizard, do you jest? Mithrandir? Which halfling? When was this?”

“Hush,” Radagast hissed and leaned close to the horse. Fæstefot was whinnying something in his ear.

\textit{The halfling? The halfling!}

Boromir’s mind was buzzing. \textit{And Mithrandir!} Gandalf was alive, then, and riding to Minas Tirith with a halfling. \textit{Frodo!} Had they decided to take the Ring to Gondor then? Suddenly, Boromir felt ashamed, foolish even. For he had betrayed the Fellowship without need. They were taking the path to Minas Tirith anyway. But what had happened? How had Gandalf survived? And what new strategy led the Ring to the White City?

“Noble Fæstefot tells me Shadowfax has sent messages to all horses not engaged with Men,” Radagast explained. “They are to help us, but will not arrive for another few days. In the meantime, Fæstefot shall join us and help in whatever way he can.” He turned back to the stallion. “And for that, we are grateful.”

The wizard turned to the elves and Boromir, motioning for them to step forward.

“I believe you know the \textit{wrecca},” Radagast said. “Or at least know of them. Fæstefot, this is First One. Second One. Third One.”

The horse bowed his head and each elf nodded in return.

“That rather shocked-looking Man is Boromir of Gondor.”

Boromir closed with mouth with a snap. The horse eyed him for a moment and then bowed his
“Ha!” First One chuckled. “Boromir, you are dumbfounded. Have you never seen a horse before?”


“Nay, in truth, my friends…” he began slowly. “I am much amazed. For I did think we had little chance in the greater Scheme of Things, and yet… I see now there is hope. If the halfling rides to Minas Tirith, then there may yet be victory. This Fæstefot brings good news, indeed.”

The elves looked at him strangely, but did not comment.

“Come then,” Radagast said, “let us sally forth. We have less than a league and the Easterlings shall be upon us.”

And so they walked on, Fæstefot cantering along beside them. As they walked, Boromir felt a torrential conflict within his heart. Like he was a dying Man who, weary with toil and suffering, is told that he is to be reborn, and forced to do it all again. Boromir did not know whether to rejoice or quail with grief. For his people would yet continue, now that all had changed. With the Ring of Power in their hands, they could defeat Sauron. And he would not be there to see it. For he had already disgraced his name so much that exile was the only option.

Suddenly, a great envy filled his heart. Envy for Aragorn, for Faramir, for all the people of Minas Tirith. That they should be there to lay that final blow against Mordor – that they should wield the Ring and not he. For had he not labored for a lifetime to defend his people? Did he not deserve to be there for the Great Victory? He had the abrupt urge to turn around, there and then, and march back to Minas Tirith, straight to the gates, knock on the door, and demand to be recognized as the leader of Gondor. Not Aragorn. No more Denethor. Never Faramir.

*Nay, what madness is this?*

Boromir shook his head. He had already chosen exile, and to return now was folly. His thoughts were taking a stranger bent, and he wondered if it was still the Easterling wine’s effects. Or if Mordor had some hidden influence on the minds of Men, should they come too close. Either way, he forced the black thoughts away. He could never return. Gondor was barred to him, whether it survived the War or not. Aragorn was King, and the victory was his, not Boromir’s. He would have to swallow the jealousy.

Yet, on and on, his mind teased: *The Ring goes to Minas Tirith without you. The Ring. Glory, honor, victory, hope, joy, perfection – Faramir’s dream-prologue, and Minas Tirith in peace.*

*And the Ring.*

*The beloved Ring.*

He imagined Aragorn, holding it, standing before the cheering crowds. He imagined the flags snapping, the sun shining, the White Tower beaming. And he saw Mordor black, charred, empty. Defeated, finally, by the strength of Men. Boromir imagined himself, probably dead and rotting in some field, or stumbling away towards Rhûn.

He clenched his fists, nearly roared in frustration.

He almost cursed Aragorn and wished him to fail in his War, when he stopped short. *Nay, nay. Calm yourself. As much as Boromir envied and hated and Ring-lusted, Gondor still predominated*
his thoughts. And if the others failed, Minas Tirith fell.

Still. The black thoughts – *too much wine, too close to Mordor* – niggled away at him.

_The Ring... The Ring..._

*It is all falling into place, son of Denethor. Is this not what you desired? Or are you so selfish as to wish glory for yourself, even above the White City’s survival? Have you truly fallen so far? An exile, indeed.*

Thankfully, there was a distraction. Boromir had been so consumed by his ruminating that he had not noticed that they had arrived. The grey trees were behind them, a wide field was in front of them. Ered Lithui was much closer. And there, in the far distance, a large group of Easterlings marched.

Boromir sighed with relief. *Good.* He could focus on the battle now. He could forget about what the horse-messenger had said. He could forget about the Ri – _enough, you weak-willed fool!_

He looked to his right and left. The elves and Radagast were all looking at the distant Easterlings. There was some far-off yelling. The Wild Men had spotted them.

Boromir unsheathed his sword, dropped his pack. The elves gave their packs to Fæstefot. And then, they too began their battle preparation. Second One drew his blade. Radagast strode away from the group with Fæstefot. Horse and wizard whispered for a few moments, and finally Radagast gave the steed a curt nod. Fæstefot trotted away with the travelling supplies. The elderly wizard rolled up his sleeves, shook his staff, and turned to face the Easterlings. And then, he began to chant, low and rumbling.

“First One, may I borrow your daggers?” Third One asked.

First One obliged. He removed his daggers, handed them by the hilt to Third One. He then removed his bow and nocked an arrow. They were ready. It would only be a few moments now.

“And so we meet them head-on today,” First One murmured. “’Tis risky.”

“Radagast is calling upon the animals to help,” Second One said.

The elves and Boromir peered around, watched Radagast for a moment. The air was moving around the wizard, his robes and hair whipped up with unnatural wind. Boromir turned away.

“The group moves in the ‘V’ formation,” he rumbled. “Concentrate your arrows on the center. We must break through the point.”

The elves nodded.

“All ready?” Boromir asked.

“Aye.”

“Aye.”

“Aye.”

Boromir smiled. They were rather humorous, the elves; he almost laughed. His nerves were jumping. Yet he knew why. His body had not yet recovered from the shocking news from Minas Tirith. But he vowed to push all of that from his mind. He was never a Man to live in his thoughts.
He lived only in the present moment. And the present moment called for clear thinking and a swift sword. Not the Ri –

“Let them come to us,” he ordered, interrupting his own thoughts. “There is no haste. And we may judge them better from afar. They will be over-confident, I feel.”

To their side, Radagast’s voice was rising. Boromir could not understand the foreign words – all spoken quickly, furiously, rhythmically, over and over. But a quick glance revealed Radagast, bathed in the torrential winds, bound by them, arms spread wide, staff shaking. A menacing figure. Boromir inhaled.

The group of Easterlings. They were almost here. They were chanting as well, loud and vicious. A war cry. Again and again, trying to silence Radagast. They kicked up much dust as they walked. As they approached, Boromir made a quick estimate. Not over eighty. Twenty Easterlings per fighter, not counting Radagast. He felt the elves shifting slightly at his side.

Behind them, cawing. The birds had arrived. The army of beasts. Boromir clenched his sword.

“Very well. So we begin,” he muttered. “May our fight be blessed by the Valar, my friends. For much is changed in the world, and much honor is spared from the deserving.”

He heard First One chuckle to his right.

“Boromir, you have been passing strange these last few days.”
Chorus IV (Golradir)

Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

I. The battle begins…

I remember now,
my name is not First One,
not really, not as I have been called for these millennia.
Nay,
I remember now,
as the first arrows fly
soar through the air
initiate the battle
(the Easterlings bark)
I remember now.

My name is Golradir,
son of Oropher, a royal elf,
and royal myself all the same.
This is good news, indeed, noble!
I did not think to remember it ere the end.
(the Easterlings roar)
And perhaps this is it?

So it begins,
let my fingers be quick
and the arrow true
for this, I should have done long-long-long-ages ago.

The fight is on!
Bow singing, stringing the arrows, aligning,
and… (crescendo) gone! A perfect hit!
The fight is on,
and I am winning
(honor respect title name identity).
Eye the targets:
the crook of that one’s neck,
the space behind that one’s ear
the second rib up on the tall one.
Snap, snap, snap!
All fall away and I see beside me, in front of me, up ahead, behind, the others:
Second One to Third One to Boromir to Radagast,
blows over blows under blows under slashes by cuts.
There, look there! See that! See?
A whirlwind, a hurricane, but not air, not wind,
they are birds
(Does Radagast know what he is doing?)
coming to peck out Easterling eyes! What a sight!
…No pun intended.

Up ahead, on my right, there:
Third One with daggers (my daggers, I let him borrow them)
slicing through the Enemy of bramble-bush beards
he slides through the seething mass, and there is no hesitation.
Good, my brother, good! Well done!

Checking left: Second One whips around with his sword
Catches the sunlight, fla-ashes silver in my eyes, beautiful, yes!

Stumbling in the mess up ahead, there is Boromir,
he does not fight gracefully, no ease of movement, no agility,
only desperate swings and lunges
(alas, but he is just a Man, with short life and small mind)
Ho! Boromir! Ware! On your right!
Quickflash – I must do it.

Nock the arrow into place,
aim – but he shifts now, turns left
aim – but the view is blocked by sun and Wild Men
aim again and release.

Fly, fly, fly
through the air and follow that arrow
to another mind, enter it, and hear now its thoughts.

II. …the battle continues…

A jolt, a push, a blow to the back,
spin around and see the Easterling fall dead
no more a threat.

Jerk the sweat-soaked hair from the eyes:
search the field for the friend who guarded my back,
catch First One’s eye; there, arrogant as always,
grins nods yells: “You’re welcome!”
before continuing into the surging battle-thick.

A buzzing in the ears
locusts picking pulling stinging the Wild Men.
Radagast's booming voice,
trembling loud like marble columns falling:

“GO! GO! ONWARDS!
CAST BACK THE SHADOW!”

And Boromir thinks to himself, sees himself
as once a Captain-General of Gondor
leader of Men, favorite son
and Prince of the White City:
"Where has all that gone?"

*Sees himself fighting Wild Men in a dark place*
forsaken lands and forgotten home
and he says to himself:
"Why have I come here?"

*Remembers the dream-prologue,*
warning him of the future
telling him that tomorrow will get worse
and worse and worse
and after endless worse tomorrows:
"When will they get better?"

*But they will get better! But they will!*
Cut through another Easterling!
Push back the shadow, push it all the way back
into Mordor and then put a stopper on it
and let it implode on itself!

*Imagine the day!*

*The White Tower glowing like a beacon for all*
flags in the wind, the White Tree beaming
wide-blue skies and far-away clouds…
Remember Faramir's dream-words?
Peace peace (say it) PEACE!
That is what you fight for, Boromir:
you fight for peace.

*Now go!*

III. …the battle ends.

*Imagine the view from the clouds.*
No, higher still,
Imagine the view from the sun
so that the clouds are white specks
and the battle below,
just a dusty spot on Dagorlad plains.
But even from this height,
you can see the sweat trickling down Boromir's temple,
you can hear Second One holding his breath before releasing the blow,
all of this and everything,
you see hear know.

This is as the Valar perceive it,
(atop the Holy Mountain, Taniquetil)
at once up close and from afar
sensing the thoughts of all the players,
inserting instincts, manipulating impulses,
quickening one blow while slowing another,
all for one Ultimate Goal.

Now sit with Them, 
and listen to Their talk:

"See You yonder Boromir?"

"My gaze catches all."

"I know this, it was not meant to offend."

"Speak then. What with Boromir's fight?"

"Tis time for the elf-exile's end."

"Very well, 'tis time. 
As an aside, see thither his father go up in flame, 
in this moment, not one loss but two, 
for good-bad son of Gondor. 
Go, then, I will not do the dirty work."

"As You wish."

Soar down, ride the wind, 
passing first cloud then sea 
over rippling waves and storms and fair skies again 
pass into the lands…

Look: Pelennor Fields! 
See Meriadoc Brandybuck, 
with arm and vision fading from Nazgûl-chill. 
See Théoden good King of Rohan 
blink and whisper, "Éowyn..." 
See staff-less Gandalf riding Shadowfax wide, 
beckoning to Aragorn King: "They retreat!"

And now pass the waves and waves 
of orcs-goblins-Wild Men-Haradrim-oliphaunts 
with spears-swords-catapults.

Pass over the Anduin, the line of orcs continues, 
unbroken, like a vein from Mordor, 
pumping black blood continuous 
up to the very Tower. 
Now veer north by northeast, 
to another fight, 
that has yet to finish.

There are your players, 
there are your prey: 
First One (goodbye) 
Second One 
Third One 
Radagast
Boromir

Zoom in close close to Boromir:
see his chest rise and fall, his body expand
with each breath that sucks in the thick dusty air,
hear him cry out, sounds a bit like "Nraawwrgh!"
as he thrusts his sword behind him
always fighting for peace.

Now move five heads down
and find First One, the noble elf Golradir,
drawing his final arrow
loading it for the last time
aiming, his last aim,
and releasing - but not soon enough!

The Wild Man (now called Golradir’s Bane), arrow in chest,
continues forward, crude blade raised high,
and here are First One's thoughts as he sees
his end:

Let them know my name,
my name is Golradir.
I have earned my place
among the heroes of elf-kind.
Let them mark this place
HERE FELL GOLRADIR,
BRAVE ELF OF MIRKWOOD!

A hush...
Mourning

Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

When the elf's dead body hit the ground, Boromir did not cry out from shock or grief. He did not even gaze for more than a moment on the corpse. He looked briefly towards First One, turned back to his own fighting and bloodshed, stopped, turned, looked again at First One, and then reacted as any soldier would. He reevaluated the situation, considered a new strategy, devised a plan. There were perhaps a dozen Wild Men remaining. The whirlwind of insects had driven away most of the others. Second One and Third One could continue fighting, unhindered. Soon they could finish the last of the Easterlings. One less group for Mordor. There were no tears as First One lay dead.

But Wild Men were already swarming around the elf, grabbing at his clothes, his bow, his hair, his ears. The other elves rushed forward to protect their fallen comrade. Second One's voice, which sounded alien and suddenly mortal, like a wound rubbed raw, cried out to Boromir: "Let them not defile the corpse! Help us!"

At this, Boromir turned, sprinted towards them with sword drawn. He cut through the first Wild Men who were pulling at First One's arms. The ground before them was littered with corpses in an unending carpet. The bodies grabbed at him, stifled his progress, wrapped around his boots.

Further north, Radagast was nearing them as well. He galloped towards the center of the storm, staff held high. Boromir sliced through another Wild Man's arm, which was halfway through cutting away First One's hair, and whirled around in time to dive from Radagast's steed. Fæstefot reared up, neighing loudly. The horse kicked away the clawing Easterlings, giving the elves and Boromir enough time to hoist First One up and load him onto the saddle.

"Take him away, Radagast," Third One said, tears already cutting pale lines on his dirt-covered cheeks. "Bear him to safety. We will return shortly."

"Be not long," Radagast said. "There are few left to fight."

Boromir turned again, back to the gore, and scanned the scene. An Easterling was lunging forward at them, sword falling, and Boromir, more in reflex than in thought, thrust his own blade deep into the Man's stomach. When he pushed away the Easterling, he saw there were less than ten Wild Men left. He heard Radagast's horse galloping away, the beating of its hooves disappearing down the plain as it bore away the limp elf. And in that moment, the realization of First One's death slammed against Boromir, knocking him back, so that he staggered, tripped on someone's limb, breathless and dizzied.

…an echo: *Here fell Golradir, brave elf of Mirkwood…*

A rage arose in Boromir, a desire to see only blood, his own and his enemy's, drenching the grass and the dirt. He screamed. His voice magnified by the wind, it covered the land. The remaining Wild Men hesitated in their attack. But Boromir would not let them flee. Ignoring the elves by his
side, who were already retreating back into the trees, he charged forward. Howls and swords clanging, violence and death and red everywhere. Boromir cared not for any wound he received. He did not stall his attack when an Easterling dug a blade into his calf. He felt only an uncontrollable fury. All other noise, movement, pleas and cries were drowned out in his own dizzying energy. His muscles screamed to stop as they raised the sword another time, for another blow against an already-cracked skull, another stab into an already-pierced chest. The elves were calling to him, beckoning him back, and the Wild Men were fleeing or begging mercy at his blade. But he heard nothing, saw nothing.

It was only when Second One grabbed him by the shoulder, pulled him back, and he nearly stabbed the elf as well, did the foul trance break. The rush of pain flooded him, and he swooned. Second One bore him upright, helped him limp away from the battle. The elf was whispering to him, speaking calm words in his ear, soothing the violence in him. There was no one left. The field was empty of life. It remained now only a fresh cemetery. *Come, we must go. There is no one to fight. Come, Boromir. Back to peace. They are all dead.*

*Back to peace, Boromir. Back to peace.*

*There is nothing you can do now.*

*It is finished.*

*Come back to yourself.*

*Back to peace.*

And with a full-body sigh, Boromir allowed himself to be supported, pulled away from the battle and towards the stillness of the woods. Second One held his shoulders, kept him upright and moving, for surely had he let go the Man would have fallen and stayed in that spot forever.

Upon reaching the woods, they found Radagast, who had laid First One in a glade by a stream. Second One and Third One, both weeping, ran forward to their brother. They knelt beside him, brushed the hair from his face, dipped cloth in the stream and cleaned his wounds. They wept and cried and buried their faces in his chest, pleading and begging with him. *Come back, brother! Let it not end here, like this! Come back! Why do you forsake us so soon? Why, brother? Where do you wander now? You have left us!* They moaned and cried, and still, again. Boromir remained standing away from the others. His bloodied sword hung limp at his side, he had not the strength to sheathe it. Radagast stood by the horse with his head bowed.

With mute agreement, it was decided that they should bury him there, in the peace of the glade. They made a mound of earth and placed him in it, laying his bow beside him and the swords of his fallen enemies at his feet. The elves wept as they bade him goodbye, wept as they covered the mound with earth and the few flowers they could find, wept as they sang a lament for him. The sun disappeared and still they wept. Boromir did not, and while he helped them with the work, he remained silent and offered no consolation. He stood, his body and clothes soaked in brown-red-black-green, and watched dully. When the work was done, the lament finished, and First One gone from sight forever, the group of four, exhausted, continued into the woods to find a place to rest. Fæstefot left them, trotting off into the woods with promise to return.

They followed the stream until they reached a suitable site. The elves, now and then with tears falling afresh from their eyes, sat down on the damp ground and made no other move. Boromir dropped his sword and sat on a boulder by the water. Radagast, who seemed the only one with enough presence of mind to make camp, began making a fire.
No one spoke, but who can speak in times like these?

Upon finishing the fire, and after collecting water and placing it to boil, Radagast moved to the elves. He gave them bandages and miruvor, and they silently accepted, binding their own wounds with reddened eyes and hoarse throats. The wizard then moved to Boromir, who sat rigid on the stone, and offered him the gauze and drink as well. Boromir broke his stare, but reluctantly. He looked up at the wizard. The firelight illuminated the side of Radagast's face, making him look familiar and kind. He looked like Gandalf.

"You are wounded, Boromir," the wizard said softly.

Boromir searched his body. He felt little, and saw only red glistening against his hands and garments. Here and there his clothes were torn, and there was blood beneath the rips as well, on the skin, seeping in or oozing out. He formed no response. The wizard placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Go," he said, his voice like sand scratching against warm stone. "There is the stream. You must wash, for you are covered in the filth of battle. Go, bind your wounds. You bleed."

Radagast helped Boromir to stand, who obeyed and accepted the wizard's help with a weary gasp-sigh. The wizard then motioned Boromir to the stream, which trickled silently over the clean pebbles and earth at their feet. Beside the fire, the elves had fallen asleep against the bare ground with bedrolls and miruvor forgotten by their side. Radagast sighed in sympathy, and made no move to wake them. He handed Boromir the gauze and watched as the Man limped down to the stream, walking in the direction of the current, away from the light of camp.

Boromir continued until he found a shallow bank where the water passed like a sheen over the flat stone beneath. He dropped the bandages on the dry ground and, for a moment, stood with vacant expression, his stance lopsided as he favored the uninjured leg. The scene that had been but a flash during the fight now repeated itself like a drone in his mind. He heard again and again the ripping, tearing, thrusting of the Easterling's sword into First One. He saw again the dual glimpses - first, of the elf falling, face pale, blood spilling from his lips; second, the elf fallen, lying dead on his back while Wild Men moved forward to steal away the corpse. Again. Ripping, tearing, thrusting, falling, fallen, and lying dead.

He did not realize it, but he had sat down in his daze. He now looked over the stream, watching the moonlight glint against the water. He peered up through the trees and, here and there hid from the leaves, a marvel of stars peppered the black sky. A wind passed through. The branches bent and swayed with it. The stars danced with movement, fell still, wobbled. Silence, rest.

Back to peace, Boromir.

Boromir placed his face in his soiled hands and wept. After the last cries were spent and tears matted his face and beard, he remained still for some time, smelling the grime on his palms. He saw the nails broken in the moonlight, some blackened, some red with fresh blood seeping out. He wept again, bitterly and with heaving sobs, this time without tears for they would not come anymore. Again, the elf’s death replayed itself. And with each repetition, the weight of grief fell a little further, pressing a little more against Boromir’s chest.

Back to peace.

Forcing some sense into his bewildered and exhausted mind, Boromir leaned over and grabbed the gauze. The cut in his leg was deep, it needed stitching. He carefully pulled off his boot, emptied the blood and mud from its insides onto the grass and rolled up his breeches. Without washing the wound, he wrapped it in bandages. And when the white cloth reached his shin on the final turn, he
pinned it unevenly and rolled down the breeches, pulled on his boot and forced himself to his feet.

He washed his hands and face in the icy water of the stream. It cleared the fog from his mind, but it did not ease the weight from his heart. He gave another sob, but choked away any that followed. When sure that he would weep no more, he limped back upstream to the camp.

The elves still slept, and Radagast was smoking his pipe. As Boromir approached, the wizard cast him a questioning glance. Boromir took a seat on the stone beside him and warmed his chilled hands over the fire. Again, dancing in the flames, the drone: ripping, tearing, thrusting, falling, fallen, and lying dead. First One's soft groan as the life passed from his lips.

"They have earned their honor," Radagast mused, his dark eyes straying to the sleeping elves. "Perhaps e'en surpassed what was needed to return. I judge there is no more exile for them."

Boromir nodded slowly, letting the fire now singe the calluses on his hands.

"No, no, but they will not return now, not so soon," Radagast continued. "They will not abandon you. For you have awakened in them something which long slept. The desire to defend the lands they love. To see that Mordor's power is finished. This is well, for the time is ripe, and I feel our aid, however tiny, may yet play a role in the greater things to come. Ours is a noble effort."

Radagast paused, took a puff of his pipe.

"And you too, son of Denethor, have regained your worth. Will you return to Minas Tirith, ere this is all done?"

Boromir pulled his hands away from the fire. They were shaking.

"I wish it," he spoke hoarsely. "But I cannot; it is only a dream. Mayhap in death I will return."

"Nay, do not depend on an Easterling's sword to ease your homecoming," Radagast said, eyebrows bristling. "It is clear to all that you have elaborated a suicide plan. The elves say nothing to you, but they hope to live through this. And they hope you live through this as well, for I gather they have come to like you. They follow you in order to fulfill a pledge long kept undone, but not to die, son of Denethor, not to die."

Silence. The fire crackled.

"First One did not think today would be his last," Boromir murmured.

"Ah..." Radagast breathed, leaning back. "That is true, our friend would have enjoyed a few more breaths. But he fulfilled his destiny, and that was to die on the fields of Dagorlad as his father did, fighting the Enemy. He did not pass in vain, but rather as he should have years ago during the Second Age. Do not over-grieve."

He looked to Boromir and his dark eyes pierced the distance between them like a blade. At once, Boromir felt exposed.

"You see him in your mind, dying and dying again? You see the echo from hours past?" Radagast sighed. "Nay, let him be, my friend. Let him rest in peace. Do not remember him thus, in his last moments, else you will bury yourself with him. And that is exhausting. Remember instead the happier times, the days of mirth."

Boromir made a sound between a scoff and a sob. "His body is still warm and you bid me be mirthful?"
Radagast paused, opened his mouth as if to speak, reconsidered, shook his head. "You are right. I am not well trained in the ways of Men and elves and dwarves. Ask me to console the birds, the lizards, the foxes and snails, and I can! But Men are a different matter altogether. A very complicated race indeed. I am sorry. Pay no heed to these consolations, for they come too soon."

Radagast smiled sadly and took another puff. The even breathing of Second and Third One filled the camp, along with the fire snapping and Radagast's pipe smoking. Boromir clenched and unclenched his hands, hoping to ease the tremor which shook through them. He did not notice its beginning, but eventually saw that his hands were full of it. Wavering, trembling, like dry leaves on a branch, like an image in smoke. Embarrassed, he hid the unwanted movement by clasping his fingers together, curling them into fists, or picking at the dirt on his cloak.

"Come, that is a sign of weariness," Radagast said, indicating Boromir's shaking hands.

The tremor worsened.

"Get you to sleep. I will take the first watch."

Boromir offered no protest, for his body and mind all shook with the desire for rest. He stood, feeling his injured leg now stiff, walked several paces to a clear patch and fell onto the ground, intending to sleep on the grass as the elves did, with no bedroll and no blanket. He let his head fall, and immediately was asleep. Only then did the trembling fade.

When Second One awoke, his face felt stiff with dirt and dried tears. His muscles ached with the dull throb that comes with sleeping, exhausted, in the same position for hours. But the elf knew immediately that he had slept little. He looked to his side: a few feet away lay Third One, on his back, his face smoothed in empty dreams. *Good, he needs it.* Second One’s eyes traveled further up, to another patch of ground, where Boromir slept, stomach down, still filthy from battle. The Man’s back rose and fell quickly, indicating shallow breaths and light, troubled rest.

Radagast was sitting by the fire, his pipe spent, his eyelids drooping. Second One stood, stretched his arms and legs, rubbed his face with his hands. The wizard snorted at the sounds and sat up straight.

“Come then, Radagast, I will take the second watch.”

Radagast nodded, stood. He took Second One by the shoulder, looked at him pointedly, did not speak. Second One looked away.

“I am well enough, good wizard,” Second One whispered. “We elves are not accustomed to death as the mortal Men are, and the grief… weighs on my heart so that it might crush it. But I am well enough.”

“Nay, death is difficult for all,” he glanced at Boromir, “even for those who are doomed to it.”

The wizard gave Second One a few pats on the shoulder and then moved to his bedroll. As Radagast prepared his makeshift bed, Second One walked to the edge of their campsite, to where the firelight dissolved into shadow. He peered out into the darkness. *All dark, all empty.* No, but there were his friends, sleeping yonder. And realms of good people. Mayhap even a home for him. Then why did Middle-earth seem barren of life? Why did his friends feel like empty shells now, good only for grieving? With First One gone…

Second One sat, facing the dark wood which surrounded their tiny globe of light. First One was gone, forever. His brother-in-exile. And all that was First One disappeared – the laughter, the
arrogance, the natural leadership. Never more would there be days of walking, with First One’s blond head gliding in front of him, and Third One’s singing behind him. Never more would he play mediator to First and Third One’s bickering. All that was finished. Now only two remained. Only two.

For a moment of despair, Second One wondered if he should ever feel joy again. Was it even possible, after such sights and such loss? He looked to Third One. Young Third One – ever compassionate, ever the soft spirit and good soul. How would he fare, now that he had seen the ultimate end, now that he had breathed death on his brother and buried him?

And there, further off: what of Boromir? One so naturally grim would surely have encountered death before. Second One imagined mayhap the Man could advise him in his grief, tell him how one can cope with the loss. Second One sat, considering. Yes, Boromir would know what to do. He could offer true consolation, something to ease the pain, something to lighten the weight. Were there not methods developed by Men to understand death and accept it?

He considered waking Boromir, nearly stood, but quickly sank down again. Nay, let him rest. He needs it as we all do. Tomorrow – the grey, blank, empty tomorrow – there would be time to speak with him and seek his counsel. For now, let them all lie in peace.

Time passed. The moon waned, the stars danced. Arda was still beautiful.

After a few hours, Second One stood, walked to the fire. He placed stray tinder in it so as to awaken the flame. It was a quiet night.

Second One sighed, moved back to his spot on the edge of the firelight. Where are you now, brother? Where do you wander? Exiled even in death? Nay... nay... they will accept you in whatever lies there, I know this. After all the fighting has finished, I will go to Mirkwood, I will speak to King Thranduil, and all our shame shall be abolished. You fought well today. You defended the free folk of Middle-earth with courage and skill. An honorable elf. I miss you.

It was in those moments of silent musings that Second One heard it. His elf-ears pricked up, his attention focused. Again, there, the sound: soft tread, very soft, skillfully quiet. Not very far, perhaps three hundred paces from the camp. Moving slowly, cautiously. Step, step, step. Second One stood slowly, opened his mind to the world of sound around him. He allowed each rustle or sigh of wind to pass through his mind and be examined. But there was no doubt: there was a creature lurking in the shadows, coming slowly closer.

His heart began beating fast and loud. Second One moved back to his pack, slowly, slowly, picked up his bow and arrow – all the while tracking the near-silent movement of the lurker. He followed that sound now to a suitable position, it was coming from the southeast, from the stream. For one blazing-hot moment of fury, Second One thought: Would that this lurker respected the grave, if he passed it, else he shall have an arrow through the throat. But no, there had been enough death, and Second One was sick of it. He prayed that the grave had remained untouched. He prayed that he could control himself.

There it was again. The movement, very close now, close enough to be seen. Second One pried the darkness with his eyes, forcing his elven vision through the shadow. This creature was a Man, and Second One immediately understood: the Easterlings had sent scouts, assassins even. They were not so ill organized after all. He saw the shadow now – by the stream, near a shallow bank. It was an Easterling, yes. Creeping along the grass, his booted tread light, crouched down as if to study the footprints on the ground.

Second One drew his arrow, slowly, slowly. He pulled back the bow, arching it, letting the wood
creak with strain. He aimed: the left leg, below the knee. *Inhale, exhale, release.* Release.

There was a cry, distant and muffled. Second One turned to check on his sleeping companions: Third One had awoken from the sound, but Boromir and Radagast still slept. Second One beckoned for Third One to join him and together they hurried down the stream, moving like silent shadows.

The Wild Man was on his back, clutching his knee which now bled openly. The arrow stuck from it at an odd angle. Upon seeing the two elves approach, he spat at them and began crawling away.

“*Aftra galeithan, ubil-tojers!*”

Second One glanced at Third One and together, they hoisted the Man up onto his feet and dragged him back to camp. He fought with them the entire time, jerking back and kicking forward. The wound in his knee did little to dampen his strength, and the elves had difficulty in keeping control of him. When they arrived at the camp, the grunts, roars and occasional curses awoke both Boromir and Radagast.

Boromir pushed himself to his feet, eyes swollen from sleep. He immediately grabbed his fallen sword and moved forward. The elves pushed the Wild Man against a tree, pinning him. He resisted, fought, spat on them, bit them, did anything against being kept still.

“*Who is this devil?*” Boromir roared. He joined the elves and pushed the blade of his sword against the Wild Man’s neck. The Wild Man fell still.

Heavy breathing. A thick tension. Second One and Third One held the Wild Man on both sides, keeping his back against a tree, while Boromir’s sword rested against the Man’s neck. Second One noted, out of the corner of his eye, that Boromir’s grip trembled, so that the blade shivered.

“*Nichtagis, giban saiwala seina faur managans lun!*”

“What did he say?” Boromir’s eyes flickered up to the elves, frenzied, frantic, red-rimmed. “Second One, what did he say?”

Second One searched his memory. It had been long ages since he had spoken the tongues of the Wild Men. “He said… I believe he said he has no fear, for he gives his life for the lives of many.”

“Is he alone?”

“I have perceived no others.”

The Easterling looked to Boromir, his black eyes glinting like burning coals in a mask of grime and sweat. “*Dauthu-bleis, hraiw, baziabuks!*”

“He says you are condemned, Boromir. You are known to them as the ghost with a weakness in the stomach.”

Boromir laughed, strange and hollow. “That is an odd title! They mean to kill me? Eh? They mean to assassinate the four of us in the night? They believe they can do this? They are dangerously foolish! Second One, do this: Tell him he, and all his people, are to die, and will die, at my hand. Tell him I will kill his wife, his children, burn his home and his lands. Tell him Gondor shall stand tall, victor in all this, while his home, his family, his everything, will rot. And only when their corpses burn will I be satisfied. Only when the White Tree stands over all his scorched hills and wasted earth will I rest.”
The Wild Men did not fight now, but listened. He watched the expressions of the elves as they listened as well, unsettled, worried, staring at Boromir. The sword shuddered visibly under Boromir’s grasp. He looked at Second One, fierce, blazing.

“Tell him!”

Second One held Boromir’s gaze, shook his head. “I will not.”

“What? Do you not understand? It was he that killed First One! It is he that threatens my people! Tell him, now!”

“Boromir, be easy,” Third One said softly.

“Is this how elves honor their dead?” Boromir spat. “Will they not even avenge their own?”

He looked to the Wild Man, brought himself up close, so that his anger, his fury, his madness lay but inches from the Easterling’s face. Breathing heavy, teeth bared in an ugly snarl, he stared down at the Wild Man: “Very well, you will not tell him. Then he shall understand with this.”

A strangled cry, and the Wild Man crumpled forward, throat cut. Boromir stepped back, his sword stained, and spat. For a moment, the elves were too shocked to speak. They stood, the Easterling lying at their feet, and stared at Boromir. Radagast too did not speak, as he had watched the entire exchange from further off.

“Boromir, that…” Third One began, cut himself off. He stepped forward, palms displayed. “Do not let the grief blind you. You are a better Man than this.”

Boromir turned back to his pack and bedroll, grabbed them roughly from the ground. He looked at the others. “Aye, aye, better indeed. I am a better Man than that,” he jutted his chin at the dead Easterling. “Come, we cannot stay here. They will come looking for him. We must continue forward.”

The elves did not move, Radagast leaned against his staff.

“Very well! Do not join me. I need no company!” Boromir threw his shield onto his back, stuffed his sword back into its sheathe, all the while moving quickly, brutally. “I march to the Black Gate. To Mordor, to join First One and all the others!” He paused, collected himself with a deep breath. “That is the only end we can desire, my friends. I can tolerate no more and so I hasten to it. Will no one follow me?”

“Not to death, Boromir,” Third One said.

Boromir snorted, his eyes again acquiring that stranger gleam. “Aye, how foolish of me! Elves have no reason to follow, for they can enjoy a thousand happy lifetimes where Men suffer only through one. First One was senseless to have walked so far as to be killed – ”

Third One stepped forward, eyes blazing. “You speak ill of our friend?”

“Peace, Boromir,” Radagast said. “You are strained and your mind flies in all directions.” The wizard looked at the elves. “He is right, though, in that we must make away. The Easterlings know of our presence here, and they will surely send more scouts. Come, if I am right in my calculations, we are very near a suitable hiding place. We may rest there for the remainder of the night, and plan for tomorrow.”

Reluctantly, Second One moved to collect his items. He straightened. “Good Radagast, mean you
“You know of it, I see.”

“Aye, but I know it as an evil thing, not to be trusted.”

“We are in evil lands, I fear, and there is little here, so close to Mordor, that is not somehow tainted by the Dark Lord. For now, it will suffice.”

At Second One’s urging, Third One, who stood glaring at Boromir, also began gathering his things. They put out the fire, and the sudden darkness was cool and empty. Soon, all four stood, ready-packed and waiting. Boromir’s shoulders remained tense, his hands continued shaking, and Second One heard now the occasional mutterings as he spoke to himself. The elf sighed, adjusted the straps of his bow and quiver. *Have we lost Boromir as well? Lost him to grief, or madness? Perhaps it was the final push to send him falling. I do not know.* He looked to Radagast, nodded, and soon they set out, marching away from the stream and into the denser woods.

The lands above Mordor are sparse, and here and there one finds oases of wood and stone. These are cursed spots, where black magic lies tucked away in the openings of fallen trunks, under rocks, running with the foul water. Few animals live there, most only dwelling briefly as they move on to longer journeys. One of these spots, where the group now walked, was a wood where, at the center, a large-overgrown tree stood. It was commonly called the Great Tree by Moonlight, and its limbs sprawled large over the ground and into the nearby trees. Leaves grew and fell from it, yet it was grey and black, looming as a ghost. Since it lay on the very path connecting Dol Guldur to Barad-dûr, as the crow flies, it was a dangerous region. As with all vegetation that lay in this path, it was damned.

Led by Radagast’s sure steps, the group made its way deep into this wood, towards the Tree. No one spoke, and every step, every crunch of dead leaves, echoed ominously throughout the night. Radagast did nothing to illuminate their passage, letting only moonlight and starlight guide them.
AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus. And so they walked and walked, deep into the night-forest.

After some time, Boromir grunted an apology to Third One, though it was very low, barely distinguishable from a cough. Nonetheless, it was accepted with a grim nod. For did they not all understand? They did, and they could only hope that the suffering would pass and that this cursed night was the last of its kind.

But Boromir knew it was not. For the dream-prologue, Faramir’s warning, had told him:

Two First Born shall pass into the remote lands of death,
one’s pass you will see, the second’s you will hear…

Who was next? Boromir spent much of his time staring at the backs of the elves’ heads as they walked in front of him. Many times during the march, he wanted to scream out at them, tell them to leave, beg them not to fight. For while in the past he had never invested much belief in dreams, he now saw that they were clear signs, harbingers of doom. And walking beside a doomed individual, not knowing who it should be, when, where, or why, was unbearable.

And why should he live? Of all the creatures on Middle-earth, he wanted only to be rid of it. Walking with this in mind, Boromir closed his eyes, sucked in all the dry starry air, and, for the first time in his life, prayed:

Valar-Gods, larger than this earth,
who deal with fate, move it, manipulate it,
where we warriors are just pieces on a board
moving moving moving…

Valar-Gods, I am a Man.
And for this Manhood, for this race,
as it is a doomed race, a damned race,
I will die.
This is for sure.

Lay your holy gaze upon me, Valar-Gods,
and look on the elves before me:
the Exiled Elves of Mirkwood,
for whom I pray.
Cast your judgement as it may,
but they are to live forever,
past my life and the life
of my great-great-great-grandson’s son
They are good, they are wise,
they have honor and courage and strength in battle.
Valar-Gods, this I ask,
I plead, I beg, I desire
above all else:
abolish the dream-prologue’s warning
let them live out in happy days
let them return to Mirkwood
let them survive what is to come.
They are not meant to die,
I am.

For this is my prayer:
Hasten my end and remove theirs.
I can tolerate no more.
My heart is full, it shall burst soon
my mind reels, confused with grief
too many have I lost at my hands,
for clumsiness
slowness-of-sword
greed…
(I am sorry for the Ring,
for the Quest,
for my father and brother,
for Minas Tirith,
for Gondor,
for all tests failed.
Forgive me ere I die.)
But do this, Valar-Gods,
do this or I shall be cast down into madness.

That you may hasten my end,
and remove theirs.

With the prayer sent up into the inky sky, hopefully into the ears of the merciful Valar, Boromir exhaled shakily. And surprisingly, he felt better. Never in his life had he prayed, except during desperate times in battle, but those were quick, fierce pleas for help, never premeditated. But in this circumstance, the nagging guilt and ugly premonition had worked away at his heart so much that he knew it was beyond his control and he had to ask for help. Now a small weight had been lifted, and he walked forward knowing that perhaps this was his last, or penultimate, night, but at least it was his and not theirs.

“Ah, there it is,” Radagast whispered. “Behold, the Great Tree by Moonlight!”

The group stopped. Boromir looked up. The elves looked up. There, sprawling wide into the forest and sky, a silvery Tree, here grey, there black, with enormous limbs and drooping leaves. It bent and swayed, creaking and growling, though there was no wind. At once, the hearts of Boromir and elves grew cold with fear. Even if the Tree bore no signs of outward danger, its very presence seemed malevolent.

Radagast, however, seemed untouched by this fear. He stepped forward, arms spread wide. The
Tree let out a low groan.

“Beleg Orn an-Ithil: idh, Orn, idh! A men idh erin golfil, an men boe band.”

A few of the higher branches trembled, dead leaves fell. Radagast took a tentative step forward, but saw that the wood of the Tree faded mostly to black. He let out a frustrated sigh and turned towards the others, who watched him timidly, expectantly.

“Well, if we had one,” Radagast muttered, ruffled his beard. “Hmm… well, one never knows… Ware, close your ears back there: Bhûl-izgu fulaknar dhûl! Nalmâd-izgu lat!”

The elves stopped their ears at the Black Tongue of Mordor, and even Boromir was shaken by it. The Tree itself responded with an enraged roar as the trunk seemed to twist and vibrate. All except Radagast took a hasty step back. Third One retrieved his daggers.

The roar faded, leaving a horrible echo that bounced off the forest walls. Then it disappeared, and the silence was worse.

Boromir’s breathing was loud, raspy. He looked at the elves with wide-frightened eyes, and they looked back, equally rigid.

“No, then,” Radagast grunted. He raised his head, turned away from the Tree, and searched the other trees, all the while mumbling to himself. “Where is that bird… just when he is needed… Ah! There! Come, friend, we need your help.”

The three followed Radagast’s gaze and saw the familiar owl swoop down from a hidden branch. He arrived, perched himself on Radagast’s staff, and hooted once. The wizard whispered something to the owl, who raised his feathers at the suggestion, twisted his head around to look at the elves and Boromir, and finally hooted in agreement. The bird then spread its wings and flew up into the Tree.

Radagast turned to the others. He smiled. “Spotted grey owl. Very diplomatic.”

The elves smiled at this, a nervous laugh escaped Third One, while Boromir remained scowling. After a few minutes, with muted hoots every now and again, the Tree shuddered slightly, relaxed. The creaking continued, but its demeanor seemed more accepting. Radagast tested the trunk with his staff. He gave it a few taps, and then, satisfied, motioned for the others to join him.

They were loath to near the Tree, but finally, with Boromir taking some decisive limping-steps forward, the elves followed and they approached Radagast at the base. They stepped over huge, trampled roots, wary not to touch the wood. Once they were near, Radagast took Boromir by the shoulder.

“There, good, good, we can sleep here tonight,” the wizard grinned. “I must warn you all, however. The Great Tree by Moonlight bears a black fruit, and any who eat it suffer a very painful, very slow death. The orcs know about the Tree, so they steer clear of it, but some poor fool, now and again, has gone lost at this very site. And so I advise you all against trying the fruit. It should come naturally enough, since I’m told it tastes rather acidic. Also, no knives, daggers, or swords unsheathed. Keep everything hidden away, unless you want a broken head.” He turned, moved to make his way up the trunk, paused. “Ah, and mind the thorns.”

With that, the wizard gathered up his robes, gave Boromir his staff to hold, and climbed up the Tree. The trunk was thick and knotted, so that it was not difficult to find a way up to the higher branches. Once Radagast’s shadowed form disappeared into the first maze of branches, Second
One followed. The elf’s graceful movements vanished quickly. Then his face and arm reappeared.

“Radagast’s staff.”

Boromir reached up, holding the staff at its end, and Second One grasped it, disappeared back into the Tree. Boromir looked to Third One, who motioned for him to go first. The Man nodded, swallowed the cold fear fluttering about his stomach, and grabbed the trunk with both hands.

What he felt is difficult to describe. But it is near the feeling one has when one places their hands against another’s bare chest and feels the heart beating. Only that chest is paper-thin. Boromir felt this now, as if the Tree was more beast than plant. It pulsed rhythmically, warm and low against his palms. The bark was tree-like enough, despite its color. Boromir pulled himself up. He avoided the darker stains on the trunk, for he guessed they were better left untouched. His knees scraped the trunk and they stung since they still carried the wounds of his fall into the well. His injured leg trembled wildly from the exertion. His hands were still raw. But in truth, he cared more for the strange beating in the Tree than the pain in his hands, knees, calf.

He reached the first large branch and squeezed himself into a maze thicker limbs, all crisscrossing around, so that he had barely enough room to move himself forward. No light penetrated, and, in that complete darkness, Boromir knocked his head often against unseen limbs. He continued upward, his hands brushing past thorny overgrowth. The Tree groaned and swayed, its limbs bending imperceptibly. As Boromir moved through the Tree, he felt as a fly trapped in a web. He regretted entirely the size of his shield. His feet scrambled to find proper footholds, but often he had to drag himself forward with a knee pushing against a lower branch, a shin resting on another, and his hands grasping at whatever they could find in the dark.

Up ahead, he could hear Second One and Radagast also moving forward, or rather moving to the center of the Tree. He hauled himself in that direction, climbing through branches, under them, over them. There was no risk to fall here, for he could not even see the ground, much less anything else. There was, however, the risk of getting stuck in the interminable maze of limbs. At one point, as he was pulling his injured leg out from a thin opening between two branches, the Tree groaned, the branches closed, and he yelped with pain.

“Ho, Boromir! All well?” a voice further up called.

The branches loosened enough to let him pass, but he felt warm blood spilling down his boot.

“I can see nothing, ‘tis so dense,” Boromir replied, irritated.

“Follow the sound of my voice, we have found a clearing.”

A clearing in a tree? Boromir thought absurdly. He obeyed and clambered through, pushing and pulling, feeling his sword-hilt occasionally dig into his side, or thorns pick at his clothes. His shield got wedged against something, so that he jerked forward, the strap pulling at his stomach. The pain was instantaneous, flushing through his body, and he swayed. He swore an oath, gripped the branches and forced himself to continue.

When he was ready to curse this foul Tree and wished only for Gimli’s axe with which to hack it into oblivion, his hands found air and he fell forward onto a network of limbs which opened up onto a clear patch, like a hole within the Tree. Radagast and Second One were already there, balancing themselves. The branches grew so thick at the bottom that it resembled an uneven floor with random small openings to fall through. It was still very dark, but Boromir’s eyes had adjusted enough so that he could see the two silhouettes waiting for him. They moved forward, helped him stand.
“We cannot light a fire,” Radagast said, “for obvious reasons.”

His bloodied leg trembled uncontrollably, and so Boromir limped quickly, clumsily, to a free space and sat. A rustling of branches and leaves. Boromir heard Third One grunting as he pulled himself into the space. It was too dark to see, but Boromir was pleased to hear the elf stumble and knock his knee against the wood as he twisted out of the Tree’s grip. *If e’er I see Faramir again, I will tell him elves are not forever graceful.* Radagast and Second One helped Third One to stand, brushed him off. The elf murmured to himself in irritation.

They settled in. Quiet movements as the elves scouted the clearing, testing the limbs, pushing aside thinner branches. Boromir felt blood coursing down his leg and cursed himself for not binding the wound better. His torso ached with each movement, and he felt the familiar bile rising in his throat. *Not now, of all times.* He pulled off his shield and pack, felt around blindly, wrenched out some dressings, and began working on the leg. The wretched nausea remained, and he was glad now for the dark.

“Second One, see you anything?” Radagast asked, his voice coming from somewhere to the right of Boromir.

“Aye, but little, there are branches in the way. They near block my sight.”

“Wait, here is a spot,” Third One called from further off. Boromir listened to Second One’s gliding movements as the elf passed over him and joined his companion on the far end of the clearing. “See? There is a Wild Man. They have sent more scouts.”

The group fell deathly still. Even though all their movement and talk was easily muted by the surrounding Tree, they nonetheless held their breaths, waited. In that black silence, Third One whispered: “He moves now. I see him wandering northeast. He will not near the Tree.”

“Not if he is wise enough to keep his head,” Radagast murmured.

The elves continued peering through the dense branches. They watched for more scouts moving silently through the forest. Boromir bandaged his leg, feeling the wound with his fingers. He probed, it hurt fiercely. It was deep. He guessed the Easterling’s dagger had touched bone. But now there was no time to properly dress it. Instead, he wrapped it as tightly as he could, enough to stifle the bleeding. A morbid thought occurred to him: that it did not matter if he bound it well or not, that there was no reason to think in the long term.

“We still have a few hours ere dawn,” Radagast spoke. “I would advise that some of us rest while we can. Boromir, tomorrow you wish to march to the very borders of Mordor? Very well. A final confrontation, something to shake the arrogance out of them. It will do well. Mayhap it may buy time for our allies further west. I will begin telling my friends in the wood, and we shall have a formidable army of beasts by morning. There are still Easterlings moving towards the Black Gate, enough to satisfy all oaths of honor.”

Boromir finished wrapping his leg, leaned back against the branches. They moved and adjusted with his weight, until he found himself in a relatively comfortable position. He felt the thorns against his side turn outward, the branches at his feet groaning softly under the injured leg. Leaves brushed against his forehead. All beckoned him to sleep.

“And then to Mirkwood?” Third One’s voice asked. “Truly to Mirkwood? Radagast, think you in your heart that we may return? The exile ended?”

“I am sure of it.”
It was dark, but Boromir gathered the elf was smiling, beaming even.

“My heart dares not think of it,” Third One whispered, so softly it was difficult to hear. “The anticipation is too great…”

The elf cleared his throat, raised his voice, called to Boromir: “And then to Gondor?”

But Boromir was not fully listening. His head rested against the branches, his body nestled in them. At his hand, he had not realized it, there was a round shape. Something unfamiliar to the touch. He brought it up, tried to see in the darkness, felt it with his fingers. It was a fruit, irregular and strangely formed. It was the black fruit Radagast had warned about. Boromir looked at it, saw nothing, brought it to his face, smelled.

The effect was immediate. Like a drug, a wave of heat and then chill fell through him. His fingers fell numb, his hands disappeared. The odor of the fruit – acidic – gripped him, moved into his nostrils, into his head, down his throat. The drugged feeling washed over his limbs, bringing with it an intense lethargy, as well as a muted pain. He closed his eyes; his ears felt as if there were stoppers in them.

Distant and muted, a voice asked: “Boromir?”

Someone approached, knocked the fruit from his grip. The pain and sluggishness disappeared. He felt a hand against his shoulder. Second One clucked his tongue: “It is better not e’en to touch them, Boromir. Their presence unsettles me.”

The elf vanished back into the darkness, taking his place at the edge of the clearing. “The three of you may sleep. I will mind the Enemy beneath us.”

Third One settled down against some branches to the left of Boromir. Judging from the breathing of Radagast and Third One, Boromir could tell none could sleep so easily. All sat, leaned back, waited, lost themselves in thought.

Boromir slipped off into that state of half-sleep which he knew so well. He imagined Minas Tirith, dark pearly white against the deep-blue night sky. Tonight they would be preparing for battle with Mordor, unless that battle had already happened. He wondered for his father and brother, whether they lived, how they died. Had Minas Tirith fallen? Nay, it could not have fallen. For Boromir knew that his heart was inextricably bound to his beloved White City, and that should any harm come to her, he would feel it as a searing pain in the chest. No, no. Minas Tirith still stood.

As he drifted further into his sleepy thoughts, they became mixed up, jumbled. He thought First One was there in the Tree, waiting and watching. Part of Boromir’s mind wanted to warn the elf, because something was wrong with him, some evil had taken place. But he could not understand what it was. What was wrong with First One? Such an arrogant elf. Boromir smiled as he recalled the elf’s dry wit. He almost chuckled upon remembering that pitiful challenge he had forced upon the elf, weeks ago in the forests above Emyn Muil. The duel had been quick, indeed. But Boromir was drowsy now, and confused. Why did his heart tremble to think of First One? He was right there, in the Tree with them.

And then, like an ugly flash, everything rushed back. He saw First One falling, falling, so slow, unnaturally slow, hanging in the air without a sound. Bright crimson blood drooling from the elf’s mouth. The sword, the Easterling sword, cutting through the chest and tearing the elf’s immortal life from his body, so that he died as he fell. Boromir remembered now. And he watched in agony, again and again, as First One fell, dead.
When the elf slammed against the ground, Boromir’s body tensed and convulsed, so that he awoke with a startled, “First One!”

There was some light in the Tree, it was almost dawn. Boromir found his muscles stiff and his heart pounding. Third One placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Boromir, you dreamt,” the elf said.

Boromir, still quite shaken, could only manage, “Yes…”

Not wanting to stay in that Tree any longer, for it sickened him, and he could not but see First One’s death over and over again, he stood. His knees screamed from the movement, and his wounded leg nearly buckled under the unexpected weight. But he clambered, nonetheless, over to where Second One still stood, gazing through the thick branches. In the pale light of dawn, the elf smiled at the Man.

“You have not slept,” Boromir muttered.

“Nay…” Second One whispered, turning his gaze back towards the branches. “’Twas a short sleep, anyway, for you three. The sun will rise in a few moments, and we must make our way out of the Tree before it is light.”

Boromir turned to look at the other two. He could dimly see Radagast’s form, still and silent, sleeping. Third One was seated, organizing his pack and travelling supplies. The Tree was quiet. Was it asleep too?

“What have you seen?” Boromir asked.

“I have counted six scouts,” Second One said. “None ventured towards the Tree. Aye, they feel the evil of it. It is good that we made camp here, else we would have had a bloody night.”

Boromir sighed, leaned forward against the branches so as to relieve the weight from his wounded leg. He could not see through the maze of limbs, but he trusted the elf. Weak sunlight was already spilling over the topmost branches. Soon, it would be day. Boromir heard the rustle of robes as Radagast awoke, began to move about. In the meantime, Third One readied his pack.

“I trust we are all well-rested?” Radagast asked from the other side of the clearing.

“Aye, well enough,” Third One murmured.

“Good,” Radagast said. He searched for his staff amongst the branches and finally found the gnarled object. “We have overslept, I feel. The sun will be out soon and we must be out of the Tree before that.”

The elves nodded in agreement, though Boromir was perplexed.

“Why? What is there to the sun?” he asked.

Radagast did not answer, but simply motioned for Boromir to look at a corner of branches on the uppermost part of the tree, away from the clearing. Boromir followed Radagast’s gaze and, at first, saw nothing extraordinary. The sunlight was poking through, a golden shaft against the darkness of the limbs. But then, as Boromir’s eyes focused, he saw that the sunlight was not simply shining on the branches, it was burning through them. As any branch was touched by the sunlight, it dissolved into the air with a soft hiss. And, as the sun rose over the horizon, the light was moving slowly lower, lower, moving slowly to the clearing.
“So, you understand our haste,” Radagast said dryly.

But Boromir was already racing down after the elves. All four travelers wedged themselves back into the maze, moving through the thick web of limbs with clumsy haste. Once away from the clearing, the Tree was again dark, as if night still lingered in its limbs. Boromir, headfirst and with legs squeezing through the upper branches, was plunged into complete darkness. He grasped blindly for the branches, scraped his face against wood, pulled himself down. The elves slipped through the Tree with ease, for their voices were already considerably farther down. Behind him, Boromir could hear Radagast’s wizened grunts as the old wizard scrambled after them.

“Ho! Boromir and Radagast! On your right!” a voice warned.

Boromir, whose right hand was grasping a thick, thorny limb, had only enough time to look up and see a burst of sunlight burning through. It created a veritable tunnel through the branches, all hissing and snapping as they disappeared. Suddenly, the branch Boromir was holding dissolved into thin air, and his hand clamped down around itself. He lost his balance and nearly fell into the empty air. A hand gripped his cloak and pulled roughly, choking him and bringing him back into the branches. He looked back to see Radagast.

“Ware, down there! I will drop the staff!” Radagast called.

Boromir looked down and saw through the tunnel of disappeared branches. The ground was clearly visible, and it was very far down. Radagast retrieved his staff and pushed it over, into the gap. It plummeted to the ground, landed, bounced back a few times. Boromir caught a glimpse of Second One bending down to pick up the staff. He looked up, back into the Tree.

“Hurry! The sun rises! It will inch towards you in a moment!” Second One called.

Feeling a push from behind, Boromir began to scramble down in renewed haste. Had he not felt the rising panic, he would have found the situation comical. He was wedged between innumerable branches, an arm here, a leg there, pushing and pulling and struggling to get down before the sunlight found him. He heard rustling beside him and saw the Brown Wizard’s form pass, climbing sideways and hurriedly. Boromir followed suit. He yanked his foot free of a small gap, and stretched his arm ahead to grab a thin branch to his left. His heart was pounding madly and his hands slipped off the branches with stinging sweat. The ground was still very far off. If the sunlight caught him now, and he fell –

Perhaps the Valar found these things humorous. Boromir did not.

He heard the elves’ warning too late, and soon, there he was, looking up into the sky and seeing the ground directly below him. The sun glowed red with dawn light. It had caught him. The branches were gone. Disappeared into mist. He had only enough time to see his hands grasp at nothing, and feel the rush of air as he fell, before he slammed against the ground with a sickening crunch.

“Boromir!”

The elves rushed forward and knelt beside him. Suddenly, all the aching pains and stiffness which had been forgotten in his hasty descent from the Tree returned with new, blistering vigor. He lay for several moments, his head swimming and his eyes blind, not daring to move, for he imagined every bone in his body broken. The elves did not touch him, but waited, worried. Finally, Boromir managed to turn himself on his side with a groan and push himself up.

“Anything broken?” Third One asked, concerned.
Boromir sat up. His head pounded from the violent fall. His knees burned, his leg was bleeding again, his stomach churned, and he felt he would retch in a matter of moments. But no, nothing was broken. He was on the ground again, and for that, he was thankful. Never again would he climb a tree.

“Nay,” Boromir grunted. “Not more broken than it already was.”

As his vision swam back to itself, and he focused on the elves, he saw their faces twisting in thinly veiled merriment. He glared. A nervous, relieved laugh escaped Second One, and soon both elves were giggling with hysterics. Boromir did not find it amusing. Sitting up was too painful, and so he dropped back onto his back. The elves laughed even harder. There was some shuffling and muttered curses as Radagast lowered himself from the last branches still visible in the Tree.

“All well? Did anyone fall?” Radagast asked as he approached.

The elves stifled their chuckles. Boromir, who lay on his back staring at the sky, clutching his stomach in pain, saw the Brown Wizard hover over him.

“Ah, I see noble Gondorian fell,” Radagast grinned. “All well, son of Denethor? Anything broken?”

“Mayhap only my pride.”

“Ha!” Radagast burst. “Indeed! Well, come, we have no time to lie around. Do you not hasten to the next fight?”

Second One, still giggling to himself, stepped forward and, grasping Boromir by the forearm, helped him to stand. There was a general clatter as something came falling through the near-invisible Tree. Boromir saw with chagrin his shield and bedroll tumble out of the disappearing branches. They landed with a crash at the base.

“I believe those are yours,” Radagast said, amused.

Boromir exhaled sharply and hobbled off to retrieve them.
Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

Fæstefot returned to them at noon. He brought news of the other animals, and they were happy to hear that all the Eagles would join them for this final fight. So the army of beasts was truly coming together. A formidable challenge, indeed, for the forces of Mordor. Yet while this pleased and encouraged the weary four, Boromir and the elves could not help but dwell on their recent loss. For without the adventures of the Great Tree to distract them, the reality of First One’s death fell again upon their shoulders, so that their backs curved with grief.

Radagast attempted to rouse them from their melancholy with talk and occasional consolation. But it did little to ease the collective wound.

A large group of horses had returned with Fæstefot, and, after strategies were formulated and executed, four remained to carry the travelers. Radagast rode Fæstefot, while the elves and Boromir took their own mounts. It was decided that the remaining steeds should storm through the Easterling forces from the left flank. They were to be the first charge, the first blow against the Wild Men.

Third One rode in his usual spot in the line, third. His thoughts wandered far and wide, almost as if his mind was adrift on some open, blank sea. He would stare vacantly at Second One’s back, thinking dully of some particular Haradrim spice, and be surprised to see Radagast instead of First One at the front of the line. Then, with a sigh and trembling chin, he would bow his head and stare at the horse’s mane. First One. Third One did not want the others to see him weep.

They trotted along at a brisk pace. Third One swore that the chill winds breezed straight through his heart. He could feel the tattered remains beating irregularly. And yet even with the pain and the sorrow, he could still not believe it. First One was not dead. Impossible. Even as they had buried him, Third One had hesitated – for what if First One should reawaken in the earth? What if the wound was recoverable? Perhaps they were being hasty.

Third One wiped his eyes. This was happening too often. Unexpected tears. He could feel Boromir’s heavy gaze from behind. The Man had spoken little that morning. But he had watched his companions, gauging their reactions, listening silently to their subdued talk. And as the superficial amusement – borne mostly of anxiety and fear – had dissolved at the roots of the Great Tree, they had lost Boromir again to silent despair.

Every so often, as they trotted along, Third One would mentally list his companions. Radagast. Second One. Twisting around to look, Boromir. Every time, Boromir stared back at him, unsmiling. And Third One would turn around. Yes, they were all here. All surrounding him. But not really. It felt to Third One as if he were riding his horse alone, through some barren landscape, with no happiness or joy conceivable. His companions were lost to him. They were so quiet.

And how the elf desired to speak with them! How the elf desired to stop this senseless marching, to
end this foolish fighting, to lose himself in Valinor-escape! But he had long ago lost the right to the Undying Lands.

But how he hated the silence!

Only Radagast spoke and, even then, just quiet conversations with Fæstefot. Second One and Boromir were grim. They would sigh or shift in their seats. But never more than that.

Third One exhaled heavily. He did not fear the upcoming battle. A morbid part of him even wondered whether, should he die, he would see First One again. Nay, he did not fear the battle. He feared this march. He feared yesterday. He feared memory. He feared the idea that three thousand years of friendship could end so abruptly. Could end in a moment, a fraction of a second, so that he could blink and miss it.

He had not seen First One fall. He remembered only being pulled through the blur by Second One’s yelling. The other elf had beckoned him forward and there, he had seen it, and it had brought immediate, frightened tears: First One. The blood pooling, soaking his brother’s chest and the grass around. The Wild Men snarling as they moved forward. Boromir, further ahead, who kept looking back and turning around, as if he did not care.

And there, First One.

Third One had known immediately that his brother-in-exile was dead. Even as the life slowly ebbed from First One, and surely his spirit was drifting only inches above their heads, Third One had known. He had wept then, loudly and without shame. He had gone forth, pushed away the Easterlings, stabbed and hacked and defended his brother. He remembered Boromir arriving, narrowly missing Fæstefot and Radagast. He remembered watching First One, so limp, so silent, not himself, draped across the horse’s back as it retreated.

They had lost Boromir then. He had disappeared back into the blur, become a blur himself. Third One remembered violent howls and pained screams. He had not looked, he did not want to see. He did not want to see the Man take more lives. For one was enough, a brother gone was enough. But Second One had gone forth to retrieve Boromir.

How Third One hated this silence!

If he should survive the battle, if he should return to Mirkwood, he would make his home by a stream or a waterfall or whatever noisy thing he could find. Mirkwood. Home, again. Aye, he knew in his heart that the exile was ended. Even this final battle was not needed. Not really. He could turn around and return to Thranduil’s kingdom. But Boromir desired just one more fight, a final, desperate attack. Perhaps it was better that way. For Third One also feared returning to his homeland, and disliked the idea of returning without First One.

“Third One.”

The voice, hoarse and low, came from behind. Third One reined in his horse, dropped back in the line next to Boromir. The Man looked at the elf, his heavy-hooded eyes warmed with commiseration.

“How is your arm?” Boromir asked.

In truth, Third One had completely forgotten about the minor sword-cut below his shoulder. Every so often, if he shifted, he would feel it sting. But it was barely noticeable. He shrugged.

“It heals, naught more than a scratch now. How is your…? How are you?”
Boromir nearly smiled, though Third One imagined the action impossible for him at the moment.

“I am still upright, and that is the important thing. I am well enough to fight.” Boromir paused, inhaled slowly. Third One noticed the weariness in his posture. “We shall be upon the mountains of Ered Lithui this afternoon. Or whatever is called afternoon in this black land. Are you well prepared?”

“Aye. Well enough.”

“Good.” Boromir scanned the horizon. The Ashy peaks loomed in the distance, getting ever closer. “You fight well, Third One. You have great skill with the sword. I am not worried for you.”

Third One smiled slightly. He had never been considered a fighter, even before the exile. Nonetheless, he enjoyed sword fighting – the weight of the hilt, the momentum of his arm, the ringing sound the blade made as it cut through air. Although archery was valued above all else in his realm, he had always preferred the sword or dagger.

He murmured thanks.

Boromir nodded with a grunt.

After a few moments, Boromir spoke again. “The elves know little of death. Your thoughts linger on First One?”

Third One was taken off guard by the question. He nodded mutely.

“That is normal. Would that I could offer you and Second One some consolation. But we Men have little understanding of it. I can only say that the hurt will pass. In time, you will think of him with joy.”

“It seems impossible now…”

“Aye, it does.” Boromir squinted, looked up. “This dark land does not ease the mood, either.” He looked at Third One, and Third One noted a strange gleam in his eye. “My friend, let the dead pass. Many of us are doomed to die, and I would not have you weighed down by lost friends. It is as it should be.”

Third One stared back. He wondered why Boromir had chosen to say such a thing. The Man carried an expression of weary resignation, and he was looking at elf pointedly. As if his words were more than just a simple consolation. As if they were a warning.

“Boromir, of what do you speak?” Third One asked.

“I speak of… I mean, Third One, after this is all over, you and Second One will return to your lands. You will be welcomed by your people and have honor restored. This fighting, well… if something should happen, I want you to continue on without grief, without remorse or sorrow. That – that is what I mean.”

Third One shook his head fervently. He clenched his jaw.

“Nay, nay. Boromir, enough. I will not hear of it. All of us shall return to our lands after this is done. You will survive all this, I am sure of it.”

Boromir gripped the reins tightly.
“Third One, don’t be a fool,” he hissed. “They have near killed me, and e’en a lesser blow could now cut me down.” He looked at his hands, where the old bandages were unraveling. He began pulling at them, vainly trying to conceal the trembling. “Should this be my end, I desire only for you and Second One to go forth without regret. Mirkwood will surely welcome you back.”

Third One did not respond.

Boromir cleared his throat, murmured, “And – and know that I have been honored to travel with the *adraefan*.”

Third One felt the tears again. He shook his head, looked away.

“He, er’ the grim Man,” he joked, though his voice wavered. “First One was right. He, er’ the grim, self-pitying Man.”

Behind him, he heard Boromir laugh. But, like his own weak joke, the laugh was mingled with too much sorrow.

They trotted along quietly for long after that exchange. Third One resumed his place in the line. After an hour or so, a loud buzzing came from the left. Radagast turned and smiled. A black cloud, low and humming, was drifting along the Brown Lands towards them. The bees had arrived. And they brought with them locusts, wasps, fireflies, dragonflies, and any other willing insect. Second One looked to Third One, who shrugged, and looked to Boromir, whose jaw tensed. The army of beasts, indeed.

The leader of the bees, a plump bug, perched himself on Radagast’s outstretched finger. They stopped to speak quietly for a moment. Then, with a grim nod from the wizard, the bee flew off, back into the roaring cloud, and Radagast turned to his companions.

“Good, good. It is all coming together as I have planned,” the wizard said. “They will join us for the battle. The Queen sends her regards.”

They turned the horses around and continued the march to Dagorlad. The mounds eventually gave way to flat, dusty earth. It lent itself to a quicker march, easier riding. But still no one spoke. Now, with the persistent hum of bees around them, it was difficult to hear each other over the noise. So Third One let the insect drone fill his thoughts – washing away First One, washing away Boromir’s far-reaching misery, washing away everything. Third One desired only to be empty of thought.

The birds arrived shortly afterwards, led by the usual Spotted Owl. What a strange sight, indeed! Third One could not help but feel amused wonder at the situation. Here was the Brown Wizard, followed by two elves, a Man, and a cloud of buzzing insects and cawing birds. When Third One turned around in his saddle to look at the army trailing behind them, he saw Boromir wincing at the noise.

“They are quite loud!” Third One called.

Boromir squinted, gave him a confused look, but then nodded with understanding. “All of Mordor will hear our coming!”

Indeed, Radagast must have thought the same thing, for he soon turned around and urged them all to be quiet. This silenced the birds completely, though the insects continued a muted hum.

And so they continued forth, getting closer and closer to Mordor, so that the day darkened prematurely and all vegetation fell away. At a certain point, perhaps a league from the base of Ered Lithui, Radagast held up his hand. They dismounted there, let the horses gallop away to join their
companions further east. The insects and birds all landed, forming a veritable carpet on the ground. Meanwhile, Radagast, the elves and Boromir dropped their packs and travelling supplies. They removed their swords, daggers, bows, arrows, shield, staff.

Now, the wait. Second One peered into the distance, east along the mountains’ base. The Easterlings would not arrive for another two hours.

Inside Mordor, fiery lightening cracked. The black clouds swirled and moved with strange intention – as if some great hand in the sky was moving them aside, repositioning them. Radagast, Boromir and the elves all watched the Black Land for a few moments, as much transfixed as they were perturbed.

“’Tis a damned land,” Radagast growled. “To think that such evil could corrupt the land so.”

“And let us finish off that evil,” Boromir muttered, seemingly to himself. “Let us wash the ground in Easterling blood and clean away the filth. This War has gone on too long. My people have lived too long in fear.”

“Aye…” Second One said. “As has Mirkwood, apparently.”

“Enough,” Radagast said, turning away suddenly, “eat, my friends, build your strength. Aye, you too, Boromir. Come, I have the herbal drink for your stomach. We must all eat, else we will be miserable fighters.”

Slowly, one by one, the elves and Boromir turned their backs to Mordor and moved to Radagast’s pack. Boromir still limped, which worried Third One, but the Man assured him the wound in his calf looked worse than it felt. Further ahead, the army of birds and insects still fluttered anxiously over the land. All moving, twittering, buzzing, fidgeting. Third One smiled. Would his fellow elves believe him, if he should ever speak of these dark times? Would they believe he stood with an army of beasts beside him?


The wizard handed Boromir a wooden decanter. The Man smelled it, blanched. He knocked the drink back in one swallow. After that, he too took a piece of lembas and began to eat slowly.

“The Easterlings shall be upon us in an hour, I believe,” Radagast said. “As we wait, I will send a scout ahead. And a messenger to the horses to prepare themselves. Fæstefot will lead the charge.”

Second One sighed. “I have seen o’er a hundred. With the horses, all should be well. Let us hope there are no reinforcements, so close we are to Mordor walls.”

No one spoke. Time passed. They each began their own pre-battle preparations. Radagast sat down amidst the birds and insects, crossed his legs, closed his eyes, and fell into deep thought. Second One perched himself further off, staring East. Boromir began to pace, slowly, back and forth, back and forth, limping. Third One sat on the ground, facing Mordor. He brought his knees up and leaned forward.

Mordor. To think. Here he was, three thousand years too late. He had avoided this fight for so long. But now it could no longer be avoided. He had felt it for days, that this was part of something larger – something out of his control. He wondered what. Valar-influence runs deep, my son, do not forget that. His father’s words, uttered so long ago, now came back to him. Yes, this was something unavoidable. Even if Mirkwood could accept him already, he needed to remain and
fight this last battle.

He felt now as if the bees were not waiting behind him, but rather bouncing around the walls of his stomach. His nerves came alive with excitement. In less than an hour, the Easterlings would be here. And then the fight would begin. He could not help but feel a twinge of anxiety. First One’s death had shown him true risk, true loss.

And it seemed his companions felt much of the same nervousness – Boromir kept grasping his sword hilt, muttering and grunting in silent discourse with himself. Second One stood still as a statue, letting the wind play with his hair as he watched for movement. Third One stood still as a statue, letting the wind play with his hair as he watched for movement.

Third One breathed in, breathed out, closed his eyes.

_Thranduil sits on his throne, glowing. There is much singing these days, but not in the court. He looks down at me. I am nervous, very nervous. Like bees and butterflies bouncing around the inside of my stomach. I am waiting. I have waited very long, and now the decision is to be made._

_He inhales._

_I cringe._

“----, son of ----,” Thranduil begins. “I hereby banish you from the Woodland Realm and all realms of the elven peoples. You will be the third exile, to join the other nameless cowards, e’er to wander the lands with shame. You know your crime, and you know your punishment. Now, go. I will say no more. Disappear.”

Third One opened his eyes.

Every word, except his and his father’s name, resounded clear and vibrant in his memory. He wondered what the King would say upon his return. But Second One had already assured him. _All is well, young Third One, do not fear. All shall turn out well._ Followed by Second One’s typical, mild smile. A soothing smile. A diplomatic smile.

And it was in that moment, as Third One mused, and Boromir limp-paced, and Radagast meditated, that Second One uttered a cry. The Easterlings had arrived. Already, the clouds of dust they kicked up could be seen on the eastern horizon. The sky above Mordor snapped with a red bolt of lightening. Boromir twitched visibly, unsheathed his sword, picked up his shield. Radagast stood, and all the insects and birds rose into the air above his head. Second One removed an arrow, nocked it.

Third One unsheathed his daggers.

…He loved these daggers. They were a gift from First One. They were lithe, slim, elegant. Third One liked the weight of the hilt against his palms. He liked the momentum his arm gathered as it swung around. He liked the sound the blades made as they cut through the air.

_This is for you, First One. I will avenge you, my brother._
Chorus Silent (Barad-dûr)

Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

The sight for the final battle: three or four leagues east of the Black Gate, on the dusty wasteland north of Mordor. The ground was flat, very flat, until it rose unevenly up, up, to form the Ash Mountains. Grey and silent. Choking on the thunderous clouds of Mordor. Here, the last group of Easterlings marched slowly, coming to regroup and prepare with Sauron for another assault on Minas Tirith. They had heard news of a terror in Dagorlad. Of a group of elves, led by a brown devil and a Man-ghoul. Some called him the “ghost of Gondor,” for he bore the White Tree on his garments. But most knew him as a Man-ghoul, one meant to die but clinging desperately to life. An evil, cowardly spirit. Typically, Man-ghouls had one weakness: the weakness of the fatal wound which only half-killed them. For this ghost of Gondor, it was rumored to be his stomach. Strike him there, and he will falter.

The Easterlings tramped along the dusty ground, edgy. Their eyes strayed, glancing constantly to the north, where the previous attacks had come from. Many of the Wild Men remembered bitterly their brothers and sons lost on the way to Mordor, killed by the Man-ghoul and his elf slaves. These Wild Men, who were the last to part from their homes, clutched their spears tightly, for each harbored one thought: If I see him, he shall die. The Man-ghoul is mine.

But for now, all was quiet. The Wild Men’s leader – a grey-haired barbarian with a beard to his belt, tall and broad-shouldered, rumored to be descended from an Eastern Giant – led the way with sure, long strides. Every so often, he would rattle the spears of his soldiers with his own, beckoning them to make haste, and give no credence to wild claims of ghosts or elves. They were under the watchful Eye of Barad-dûr, and no harm could come to them.

A cry was sounded. Someone had spotted the Man-ghoul. Everyone turned to their right, facing north. With renewed vigor, they gripped their shields, swords, spears. A wave of terror passed through the group of Wild Men. They were nearly a hundred, surely they could fight off a single evil spirit? But doubt crept into their limbs, made their knees tremble, their guts tighten. Wild whispers were passed down the line. Where? Where is the Man-ghoul? Where is the ghost of Gondor? Keep steady, keep steady!

There!

They could see four figures approaching on the horizon, all evenly spaced. Off to the right, the brown figure of an old man – the wizard, the conjurer of spells – was raising his arms, shaking his staff. They were far, it was hard to hear, but his voice was booming and growing, acquiring an inhuman quality. Next to him stood a Man - there, the ghost of Gondor, the Man-ghoul with a gut weakness! - swinging his sword around, keeping his shield at the ready. On the left, almost identical in their garments and look, the two elves.

Thunder. Noise from afar. The Easterlings could see something in the distance, something moving toward them from the northern part of Dagorlad. It appeared only a cloud of dust, yet with it came
the noise of a hundred hooves beating against the rigid earth. Horses. Horses were galloping forward in a chaotic stampede, neighing fiercely. The Wild Men let loose a wave of arrows, but this did not forestall them. It seemed to only further infuriate the already wild steeds.

Soaring through the clouds, a mighty call was heard as an Eagle swooped by overhead. Four more Eagles passed. They began to circle around the Wild Men, with each turn descending towards the group. The Easterlings trembled.

But Mordor had sent reinforcements, and, coming from the west, a battalion of orcs was hurrying forward, chanting. The orc-song gave the Wild Men courage, and the leader stepped forward to bellow a war cry. All of his soldiers joined in the cry, and for a moment, their own yelling drowned out even the oncoming horses. Orders were hurled down the line, archers stepped forward, this time aiming for the four combatants.

Arrows in the sky, clattering against each other.

But not a single arrow struck. The elves stepped aside with speed and elegance, and the distant Easterlings saw the elf on the far left simply twist his torso, so that an arrow grazed his garments and fell innocently to the ground. The Man-ghoul of Gondor raised his shield and caught any arrows that neared him, filling the round shield as a pincushion with pins. On the right, the wizard was by now so consumed within a whirlwind of birds and insects that the arrows were but caught in this tornado and flung aside.

The orcs arrived, joined the Easterlings. An orc captain cried out to the Easterling leader in the common tongue: "Do not advance! Stay your course! If these devils are foolish enough to attack when they are outnumbered, then let them come to us. We move to the Black - "

But the order was never finished, since in that moment, an Eagle dived down and bowled through the company of orcs, sending the orc captain flying. To the Enemy's right, the horses had arrived, and the dust they kicked up enveloped everyone's vision. A few frantic arrows were sent into the cloud, but nothing could suppress the horses' charge.

Just so, the battle began. At first, it was only a battle between the beast and the Enemy, as if all the creatures of Middle-earth were unleashing their collective anger at Mordor. For every tree felled in Fangorn Forest, for every river suffocated, for every creature killed, the animals avenged it in this attack.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the barren field, the group of four stood. Boromir swiveled his shield around, looked at the arrows, looked down at the Enemy who was now victim to Radagast's army of beasts. His hair stood on end, and he smiled maniacally. The elves at his side cast him serious, expressionless glances. But Boromir's perverse glee could not be stifled.

"See that, elf brothers? See that?" he cried over the roar of fighting and Radagast's spells. "Our honor lies there, at the tips of those Easterling swords!"

He inhaled deeply, sucking in all the foul Mordor air, and smiled again.

"Today is a good day for fighting. I feel it in my bones."

Second One, who stood several paces from Boromir, shook his head as he readied his bow and arrow. "How can Men revel in such violence? My only desire is to see this finished. Boromir, this is our last fight. After this, we return to Mirkwood."

Boromir laughed. But it was not hollow or strange, as his laughter during the past few days had
been. It was loud and energetic and frenzied. "Indeed! My friends, after this you will be heroes among your people! My heart only grieves that none will travel East with me."

Third One’s brow creased. He was standing at the far end of their line, his daggers drawn. "Still East, then? Not to Gondor?"

"Nay, I fight for the White City," Boromir’s voice fell slightly, “but she will not accept me so soon."

Third One quirked an eyebrow, dodged a stray arrow that fell towards him. "Are you sure you do not simply fear returning?"

Boromir’s smile faded. He looked at the elf, offended. "What mean you?"

"Boromir, you have compensated more than enough for whatever past betrayal you committed. I say it is only fear which keeps you from Gondor now."

The battle below was spreading out, swelling like a wound. The Eagles swooped, the horses stampeded, the insects dug their way into orc and Easterling eyes, nose, mouth. On the far side, Boromir swung his blade around. He stared at the battle, and then spoke in a low voice: "Do not presume so much, Third One."

The elves cast each other a quick, knowing glance. But now was not the time for heartfelt discussions. The battle was moving, moving towards them, and it was their cue to enter. Without a word, the elves burst forward and ran towards the fighting. They quickly disappeared into the cloud of dust.

To Boromir’s left, Radagast shook his staff and summoned a rage in the animals, so that all the beasts on the field let out a cry of anger.

"Fight for your land!" Radagast cried, now in the common tongue. "Knock down the damned Enemy and free your people of fear!"

Boromir roared with the animals, let the thunderous noise fuel his fury and his strength, allowed the bloodlust in him to bubble forth and consume him. He thrust his sword high in the air, piercing the sky with it, and cried: "GONDOR!" And then, with the violent recklessness borne out of suicidal warriors, Boromir charged forward into the innumerable Wild Men waiting at the foot of Mordor’s mountains. He fell upon them in a blur of frenetic movement, moving into the Enemy without thought or plan or strategy. For this was meant to be his final assault, his last defiant stand, the ultimate roar of flame before the fire flickers out completely.

He did not know where the others were, but he could still hear Radagast’s voice, sinister and loud as it bellowed unknown spells behind him. All manner of beasts and insects were conjured up. Snakes twisted into view, emerging from the bare ground itself, to wrap around Easterling legs. A wave of stampeding horses plowed through. Boromir glanced back: he saw the wizard’s distant form, arms outstretched, and a whirlwind of insects and birds swirling around him, over his head, spanning wide. The animals could not discern between Wild Man and other, and Boromir nearly received a pair of hooves to the chest before he dodged out of the way.

And as he fought, as he swung his sword around, pushed with his shield, bit back gorge and surged forward, he had but one thought in mind, droning on like a chant.

_The final fight_
the final fight
the final fight
hasten my end
remove theirs.
Hear me Valar,
see me fight now
this is my last stand
this is my finish
honor my courage
and respond to my prayer.
Kill me if you are merciful!

He caught flashes of his companions in the heaving mass of bodies. Dust, dust, blood black and red, followed by a glimpse of dark hair and piercing blue eyes. The Wild Men were confused, frightened. They flung themselves towards the animals with rusted swords and alien curses. Boromir stumbled, felt his feet find soft flesh, and saw that the ground was alive and moving at his feet. A sea of snakes, all writhing around, sinking their fangs into Wild Men’s legs, pulling orcs down, suffocating them. They slithered past Boromir's legs without threat, for Radagast had instructed them in which Man was to be left untouched.

An Easterling slammed into Boromir, knocking the breath from him. Both warriors tumbled to the ground, scrambled about, retrieved their weapons. Snakes squirmed past Boromir’s face. He sputtered, pushed himself to his feet, ready to strike. A moment of examination – the Wild Man was taller, brown-haired, tangled beard and black eyes. He charged forward without hesitation, and Boromir, misjudging his opponent’s move, swung his sword around. The Man collided again, this time ramming his shoulder into Boromir’s stomach. It had the desired effect. Boromir, blinded and crippled by the pain, fell back. He was still dealing with the burning agony in his stomach when the Wild Man, seeing his opportunity, brought his sword forward.

A flash. An arrow sticking from the Wild Man’s chest. He fell backward. Boromir did not have time to thank his ally, or even see who it was. In an instant, he had forced himself back onto his feet. Back, back into the struggle. His sword flashed – a head fell to the ground, decapitated. He danced with the Enemy, surged forward, feigned back, struck, slashed, dodged. His garments were black and red, his face caked in dried blood and mud.

_Fight for Gondor, my son._ Denethor had once said. _You are our sword._

The fighting continued. Easterlings, orcs, animals, a Gondorian and two elves. All tearing at each other, ripping each other apart. Vicious snarls and brutal roars. Saliva and sweat and blood, all sprayed, soaking into the dirt and turning it to mud. Muscles and flesh bursting from heavy blows, bones being shattered. Limbs became entangled, visions blurred, screams confused, so that all the combatants seemed to pulse and breathe with the same breath, an entire entity heaving and pushing against itself, straining to destroy itself.

And looming above it all, goading the battle on and soaking up the violence, the Ash Mountains, Ered Lithui. The northern wall of Mordor.

Boromir pushed forward through the mass of heaving bodies, the whirlwind of locust insects, the stampeding of wild, maddened horses. He cut and slashed at whatever he could, taking off arms, legs, heads, hands of Wild Men. There was a cry and five Eagles soared overhead, their great wings blocking the silver sun in a stream of passing shadows. Boromir felt something brush his cheek. An arrow flew by, hit a Wild Men behind him. Another arrow, this time passing through his hair, flinging the greased strands aside, burning his temple. Then Boromir saw: Second One – nocking one arrow, pulling, loose, nocking another, pulling, loose. The Wild Men fell about him in erupting
spurts of blood. The boom of horses, the cry of human voices and the wail of inhuman ones. Boromir pushed forward, it was all he could do amid the chaos and rage and constant meeting-releasing of blows.

Something struck Boromir in the neck. He staggered forward, stunned, nearly fell, but turned in time to slice open the chest of an Easterling. He reached back, felt blood on his bare neck, but the wound was not deep. He could yet continue. He would yet live. And in that moment, the land shook beneath their feet, the beasts cried out in anticipated fear and Boromir looked up, to the Mountains of Ash, to the borders of Mordor, and saw this:

*The sky darkens, light fades. What little sun fell about Dagorlad disappears and is replaced by a roaring vacuum. There! There! Up there! Hovering over the mountain edge, the jagged peaks like a throne, black-ripped wings outspread, wide jaw cawing, and the wind carrying the voices of all its victims, all the voices in the wind are warning Boromir, telling him to run if he can, because look, there it is:*

Nazgûl!

Flee, because there is no defense!

Nazgûl!

The fight turns to chaos, disorder, panic, hysteria. Now all fight for themselves, there are no more boundaries or allegiances or sides. All are enemies, and all desire only to flee from the Fell Beast’s jaws claws wings Rider. Even the Wild Men fear him, they know he brings evil with him, the evil of Mordor itself. The battle falls apart and everyone is scrambling wildly, this way, that way, screaming, crying out, clawing at the earth.

But the nazgûl knows his target, he sights his target, and the beast roars. It is you, Boromir, you!

A great billowing of its wings, foul air pushed down and the Nazgûl-Fell Beast shadow rises further up into the dark clouds before spiraling down, straight down, straight to you.

Boromir stumbles backwards, turns, runs forwards, sees the animals of Radagast neighing-roaring-buzzing with intensity, all fleeing as well. Up above, the Eagles attack! But they are beaten away by Fell Beast jaws claws wings Rider. They cannot stop this evil. An Eagle falls to the ground – wings torn, lifeless. Another, another, and soon all the mighty birds surrender and retreat.

Down, down, the Nazgûl-Fell Beast swoops, opening its claws. Up, go the wild horses of Radagast’s army. Up, go snakes and earth and Wild Men, too. The Winged Creature snarls, rips away anything that moves, tosses it aside, continues forward, its claws now grazing the earth. And Boromir runs, pointlessly, desperately, anywhere. He catches a glimpse of his allies: Second and Third One, aiming arrows and releasing them. The Fell Beast staggers, falls, its wings flap, but still it falls. Before it hits the ground, its Rider screams – a shrieking call, answered by more mind-numbing howls coming from within Mordor.

The Beast collapses under more arrows, but these were the last. Now Second One and Third One run forth, long elvish blades drawn. The Rider dismounts, stands tall in empty black cloak, spiked armor. Boromir can already feel the Black Breath pushing against his neck – his eyes are dimming and he cannot see.

Meanwhile: Second One, Third One, courageous, defiant, blades drawn and raised, running forward to meet the nazgûl. They whirl past Boromir, who is still stumbling away. The Rider raises his sword, salutes them, waits for them to come to him. They scream. They charge.
“No! Stop, it is folly!” Boromir cries at their fleeting forms. His words are mangled. He drags his sword up, guts a passing Easterling, cries: “Flee!”

“Utúlie’n aurë! Aiya Eldalië ar Atanatári, utúlie’n aurë! Auta i lomë!”

An ancient war-cry, Second and Third One both yell it and their voices grow large and bring light, a piercing, blinding light that burns holes in the shadows. A light from the sky, from their blades, from their eyes. A white and holy light. Running, their swords raised high, glinting in the light, and the nazgûl cries out – again, a shriek of help, and the answers are closer now. Boromir’s eyes are dim, they are blurry, he cannot see, but he looks up nonetheless, there, there, up there:

More nazgûl! Nazgûl! Three, four!

Whirling down – one, two, three, four – cascading through the mess of Wild Men, beasts, confusing shafts of light and shadow. The Eagles regain their vigor, try to hold them off. One of the Fell Beasts flies low – its left wing passes over Boromir’s head – its claws reach out, reach out, reach out: and grasp Third One, knock him aside, pull him up by his hair. He loses his sword and half of the holy light fades.

“NO!”

Second One continues forward, and there is a sound of swords, vibrating steel, and then – and then – and then – an alien howl, a mix of noise, sucking in, exploding outwards! Boromir hears the chorus of victim’s voices rush past him, he sees the nazgûl crumple in, a light burning through his black torso, crumpling in with Second One’s fiery sword in his chest, and again the sound of past warriors, past souls, fleeing out into the sky and away. A crash! And he disappears.

Behold! A nazgûl is fell! There is more light in the land!

The surviving nazgûl cry out in anger, fury, rage. They bend over, turn aside, dive down.

“Boromir!”

A hand in the clouds of dust and blood; Second One has found a horse, mounted it, he rides up to Boromir and holds out his hand. Boromir reaches out, stretches his arm, not knowing how or why, but seeing only escape, seeing only a faint image… and suddenly something clamps around him, crushes his ribs, rips him away from Second One’s grasp. And he is going up, up, up, the ground is shrinking beneath him, Second One and the horse are disappearing, growing ever smaller, tiny spots amid a chaos of movement. The air pulls Boromir’s hair, he cannot breathe, his ribs are crushed, his lungs emptied of life. NO! NO! NO! He hears the cries – and they bring blood to his ears! – of the Fell Beast above him. He feels the Black Breath enveloping him. Another cry, another wail of nazgûl. Over Ered Lithui, the highest ashy peaks brush past Boromir’s fingers, and the Beast turns around to give him a better view of:

THE EYE!

Barad-dûr! The Eye of Sauron!

Laughing jeering goading roaring bursting with red-flame-rage!

Come, son of Denethor! Come!

Barad-dûr getting closer, closer, until the fires fill Boromir’s nostrils and his throat and he chokes and chokes. Closer, closer, the Eye is here, it is laughing jeering rewarding its nazgûl servants. The Beast roars, the fires widen crackle snap like sideways lightening, and Boromir’s eyes have seen
too much, they cannot accept these sights, his mind is spinning madly: Barad-dûr! Barad-dûr! His eyes ears mouth nose are all bleeding, all crying, all life pouring from him and the Beast tightens its grip:

Welcome to Barad-dûr!
Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

Clean, white, opaque.

“Mother?”
“Yes.”

“Why do you weep, mother?”

“I weep for you, my son. I weep for your father and your brother.”

“Why?”

“All three have fallen beyond my reach.”

“All dead?”

“Nay, my son, two still live. Yet both half-living, and slipping quickly away… Now, Boromir, my son, why do your pale eyes dim?”

“Is there no hope?”

“Yes, child, there is always hope.”

“…Will you linger a while? I am much confused and in fear.”

“Here: a blesséd kiss, to clean your mind and heal all wounds. I am with you, my son, forever by your side. Know that you have my love, and know that there is a final joy. Faramir told you this, remember his words that whispered in your sleep? There is a happy end to all this, there is a living peace. Resist now, and you shall see the white clouds and blue sky again. Resist now, and you shall one day taste clean, fresh water against your tongue. Resist now, and you shall hear the birds in the trees as they bid each other greeting. Resist, Boromir, I will lend you strength.”

“I see it now, I awaken… my sight returns, and yet grows dark. Mother, why do you fade?”

“Remember these words, my dear son. You are not abandoned yet. Resist to see life again. The darkness will pass.”

“Nay, I – mother, nay, wait – I – No! No! NO! PLEASE!”
The End of the Ring War

Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

Peregrin Took waited. He stood with an army behind him, his companions Merry, Legolas, Gimli, Aragorn and Gandalf beside him, and the Black Gate of Mordor before him. Thousands of Men waited with him; silent warriors ready to challenge the strength of Sauron. The air was thick with fear. It was the uneasy silence that falls before doomed battles, when Men know their days are finished and hope only to die honorably.

Pippin could feel Merry fidgeting at his elbow. They were both fully armored, Pippin as a soldier of Gondor, Merry as one of Rohan. Merry had complained about his arm during the journey, but nonetheless insisted that he should continue for this final attack. And although Pippin worried for his friend, he secretly wanted Merry beside him in this of all times.

Noise. The Black Gate of Mordor emitted a deep roar as its tall, wide gates slowly opened. As the doors parted, a shaft of unnatural light – a red beam – fell onto the awaiting forces. The source of this light was at the top of the tower of Barad-dûr. There! The Black Tower loomed in the distance, deep in the dark land, its height piercing the clouded sky while its roots lay imbedded beneath a swarm of orcs. And there, at the top, burning with visible malice, hatred, greed, Pippin saw it: the Eye of Sauron.

For a few deaf moments, Pippin stood transfixed – staring back at the unblinking Eye. Even from the long distance, the hobbit could see the fire whipping about the Eye, the electricity crackling. He had seen Sauron before, had felt the same fire and heavy air in the palantír, but this was much closer, much more real…

Pippin broke the stare and looked down to see a mass of orcs and goblins standing at the open gate. Huge trolls stood at the sides of the doors, roaring loudly. The Enemy filled the space before them, and an endless stream of orcs trailed, unbroken, back to Barad-dûr. Pippin felt Merry tense to his right.

The orc leader stepped forward. He extended his arm and two near-mutilated horses were led forward from within the seething Enemy mass. The horses were drenched slick with blood and their trot was an uneven hobble. On each horse, a figure was draped – Pippin could not see in the distance, but as they approached, he recognized a Man on the first horse and an elf on the second. The entire orc army laughed as Aragorn strode forward to meet the limping steeds.

“A gift!” the orc leader roared. “Behold! The last battle on Dagorlad!”

The orcs’ laughter rose to a new level, causing the bare, dirt ground to tremble beneath Pippin’s feet. He leaned in to Merry’s ear and whispered:

“Which battle? This one?”
“Shhh!” Merry hissed. “Let me see what Strider’s doing.”

Aragorn was standing beside the first horse, studying the unconscious Man and speaking quietly to Legolas and Gandalf. Merry and Pippin watched from where they were, but they could not see who the Man was, since both Gandalf and Legolas blocked his face from view. Finally, Legolas nodded to Aragorn and turned to the hobbits.

Both Merry and Pippin froze in surprise. They had not expected to be called. The elven prince’s fair face was an unreadable confusion as he whispered:

“It is Boromir.”

“Boromir!” Pippin cried and burst forward without thinking. He brushed past Legolas and pushed Aragorn and Gandalf aside. Merry hastily joined him.

Had Legolas not told him, Pippin would not have recognized the Man as Boromir. What remained of his old friend, the friend whom he had mourned and whom he had pledged to honor through serving Gondor, was little more than a skeleton. The waxy skin stretched across once-handsome features, a mess of lacerations left blue and black marks over yellowing complexion. A thick stream of blood oozed from the temple, matting the already wounded horse’s side.

Merry cried out in alarm and recognition. Pippin felt his throat close, he could not breathe from the sight. For a moment, he forgot completely of where he was. All he could think of was how different this Man before him was from the Boromir he remembered, and how he wanted now, more than anything, to have the old Boromir back. He could discern no familiar aspect beneath all the blood and gore covering this Man’s face. The network of scars and open wounds hid completely the memory of Gondor’s son. Pippin prayed he was an imposter, some pitiful anonymous soldier with slight resemblance to his friend. Because, deep in his heart, Pippin knew that, if this was truly Boromir, the startling change was not only physical. There would be grim surprises once he awoke, surprises which would lend themselves to wish for an honorable death rather than a dragged-out life. Pippin knew this, he could feel the dwindling spirit imprisoned in the Man before him. And so much blood…

A touch to the shoulder awoke Pippin from his thoughts. He looked up to see Aragorn hovering over them.

“Accompany them back to Minas Tirith,” Aragorn said softly.

Merry shifted his weight uncomfortably, not looking back at the horse and passenger.

“Strider, we can’t leave now,” he whispered, agitated. “I gave my word to King Théoden –”

“I’ll go,” Pippin interrupted. “I’ll take Boromir back.”

“Very well. You shall go, and Merry, I will have you by my side,” Aragorn said. “Pippin, I will call on you when all here is finished.”

Pippin marveled at Aragorn’s faith in surviving the doomed attack, but that was typical Strider. Never once had Pippin seen his calm, his control, or his strength, fail. Aragorn’s presence was reassuring, and the soldiers behind him felt it also. Pippin wondered if the Men could have followed another leader on such a hopeless campaign.

He turned to Merry and embraced him.

“Don’t worry, Pip,” Merry whispered. “I’ll see you back at the city.”
“Right,” Pippin’s voice broke. “Bye, Merry.”

Merry broke away and squeezed Pippin’s shoulders reassuringly. Pippin smiled weakly. It seemed strange, but also quite typical, that Merry should be the one to console and comfort Pippin – even now when it was Merry who stayed to fight the evil of Mordor and Pippin who fled to the safety of Minas Tirith. After a few encouraging pats from Gandalf, Aragorn and Legolas, as well as numerous alarmed looks in Boromir’s direction from the other Men, Pippin turned away from the Black Gate. He could hear the orc army behind him, still laughing and roaring as they prepared for battle.

Pippin mechanically led the first horse back towards an awaiting Rohirrim rider who helped the hobbit unload Boromir and transfer him to a Rohan mount. The Man’s broken body, limp and emaciated, bruised and bloodied, fragile, was wrapped carefully in someone’s cloak. Boromir’s companion, an unknown, but equally wounded, elf, was also clothed and moved to another Rohan horse. Someone prepared the Mordor horses to be killed – they were wounded beyond recovery. Pippin took his seat with a third Rohirrim rider and the three broke from the army and galloped away.

They rode away from the battle, away from the Black Gate, away from Merry, from Aragorn, Legolas, Gimli and Gandalf, away from the Enemy. Pippin registered that the Rohirrim was speaking to him, but he could not hear over the thunder of the hooves and the buzzing in his ears. He dared to look again at Boromir, who rode beside him. The Man lurched forward, unconscious, and Pippin felt a chill run down his spine.

Angry tears welled up in Pippin’s eyes. So long ago, the others – Aragorn, Gimli, Legolas – had assumed Boromir fled after attacking Frodo. But Pippin often wondered just how hard they had searched for their missing companion after the skirmish on Parth Galen, considering what they thought of him. They had imagined him a coward, one so weakened by the Ring’s temptations that he had attacked Frodo and fled from shame. And they had left it at that, with no questions asked. A furious sob escaped Pippin’s lips and was thankfully drowned out by the galloping horses. Boromir had been gravely wounded defending Merry and Pippin – how he had survived was a mystery – but it more than compensated for his weakness with the Ring, Pippin thought.

After a little more than four hours of riding, a great boom came from the east. The horses reared up, causing Pippin to grip the reigns tightly and turn. Beyond the Mountains of Shadow, Mordor was in turmoil. The black sky was red with erupting lava. Screaming voices filled the air – it sounded as if all the evil creatures inside were dying. There were loud explosions, fireballs hurtling against the mountain ridge. Pippin caught sight of a nazgûl atop a Fell Beast falling under a rain of fire. The deep rumbling culminated in a powerful explosion of sound. A foul wind rushed past the riders.

After that, the screams faded so that only the erupting Mount Doom could be heard. Although Pippin feared momentarily that something had gone wrong, he felt the air lighten. The whole of Middle-earth was eased.

“Frodo…” Pippin breathed.

And he wept, not knowing whether it was for joy or sorrow. The end? The End! Had Frodo and Sam survived? Was this really The End? And now, what? Could life truly begin again? Peace? He could not believe it...

The three Rohirrim riders bowed their heads in a silent salute. They passed a moment of respectful quiet before turning back to the west – back to Minas Tirith, which now seemed to glow like a distant star on the green horizon. Pippin knew his weeping eyes deceived him, the White City of
Gondor was too distant to yet be seen, but he felt its presence in his heart. The rider behind him urged the horse forward and soon they were again bounding towards Minas Tirith.

Night, day and night again.

They arrived at dawn on the third day. The city was alight with celebration. Despite its blackened, broken appearance from the Battle of Pelennor Fields, huge banners and flags decorated each circle of Minas Tirith. Flower petals cascaded from the open windows, white and pink and yellow. Pippin and his fellow riders trotted up the cobblestone streets. The people did not cheer as they passed, for they saw only the broken figure slumping forward. A hushed whisper passed throughout the crowds, coming from the walls themselves. *Boromir the Tall has returned. Boromir the fair is come. Hush, Boromir the Bold passes.*

And suddenly Pippin felt he was part of a funeral procession.

He looked at Boromir, at the yellow-white skin and hollow eyes, at the way the Man could not hold himself upright. In the morning light, his old friend looked like a bloodied ghost – only a pale, beaten reminder of his former self. It sickened Pippin. Hate boiled through his veins. The orc’s laughter haunted him. This was not fair, it was not right. The Ring was gone, Sauron defeated, only days ago, and Pippin nearly screamed in rage – why should there still be such suffering for his friends? It was supposed to end with the Ring’s destruction! Everything was supposed to be safe and good again! What peace was this?

They arrived within the sixth circle, to the street of green lawns and flowers. The three Rohirrim carefully unloaded Boromir and the elf onto awaiting litters. Pippin followed, lingering by the back. His legs were stiff from the ceaseless galloping ride. Healers bustled around the two wounded. Everyone’s face was bright with joyous tears, but it made Pippin’s heart sink. This did not feel like victory.

"Nay, it cannot be…” a Healer was saying as he lifted the dank hair from Boromir’s bloodied face.

"It is,” Pippin said, his voice pitched with anger. “It is Boromir, son of Denethor.”

Someone gasped.

“Quick, then,” the Healer said and moved to lift Boromir’s litter. “We may yet help them.”

Another Healer was leaning over the elf. He shook his head slowly.

"Nay,” he murmured. “The elf has passed.”

Pippin watched, numb, as they draped a sheet over the fair elf’s face. He was not so bruised as Boromir, and in truth, he seemed only asleep. Good night, goodbye. Two aides lifted the elf’s litter and walked towards the House of Healing, towards the door that Pippin recognized as the room for the dead. He flinched; he did not want to see what was inside.

The Healer and a Rohirrim rider carried Boromir into the Houses of Healing, towards the other door which led to the upper floors. Pippin followed, dragging his feet. People were celebrating upstairs, their cries of laughter could be heard down in the empty corridor. Everyone, the wounded soldiers and bustling aides, were speaking furtively amongst themselves. Everyone seemed so happy, Pippin felt out of place. A few watched the group of Healers pass with Boromir, but Pippin guessed they did not recognize him. Once they reached an empty room, the Healer turned to Pippin.

“You may wait here, Master Took.”
Pippin did not argue but slid to the floor with his back to the wall. The door closed. He waited.
Hours passed, and he listened idly as the chatting soldiers burst occasionally into song and
laughter. He wondered where Merry was. They were probably still marching south, away from the
Gate. They would for several days. With Frodo and Sam? Pippin sighed wearily, his shoulders
aching. He did not want to think about it. He did not want to think about Boromir. He did not want
to think.

No one had emerged from the room for many hours and he could hear no movement from inside.
The sun was already sinking, and Pippin’s eyelids drooped. Nearly three days without proper rest…

Just as he was about to fall asleep sitting up, the door opened and an elderly aide emerged. She
smiled.

“There are some spare beds upstairs, my little friend.”

Pippin stood hastily.

“May I see him first?”

The aide stepped aside and let Pippin enter the dimly lit room. A few candles, nearly spent,
flickered by the bed. The window was open, a cool evening wind breezed in. A ragged-looking
Healer arched his back, rubbed his face with both hands. And in bed lay Boromir, torso nude,
almost entirely bandaged. Pippin sprang forward to the side of the bed. He studied Boromir’s
unconscious features. They had cleaned the injuries, so that now his face was full of small
bandages and black scars. He looked so thin. Pippin placed his small hand on Boromir’s.

“Boromir?” he whispered tentatively. “Can you hear me?”

“He’s beyond any whisper, Master Took,” the Healer said. “And I don’t expect him to wake for
some time, considering the origin of his suffering.”

Pippin swallowed.

“And what’s that?”

“He comes from the very heart of Mordor,” the Healer sighed. “It is rare that we receive prisoners
back from the Black Tower. We know not the evil they undergo, what methods are used, but we do
know the results. Lord Boromir’s body survived, but his mind is another matter. Aye, another
matter entirely… It wanders in the dark places still.”

Pippin’s eyes clouded. He sat on the bed and looked away from the Healers, back towards
Boromir. The Man’s expression was not peaceful; Barad-dûr still lingered on it. It was twisted into
an unnatural scowl, frightened and pained.

“We must wait and see,” the Healer said. “Rest, Master Took. He will not awaken so soon.”

Pippin nodded, but did not look up. He was weeping, and did not want them to see, though his
shaking shoulders probably betrayed him. After a few moments of awkward hesitation, he heard
the Healer and aides shuffle out of the room. The door closed behind them, and Pippin was left
alone with Boromir. Once they were gone, he cried more freely, letting the sharp intakes of breath
and sobs echo throughout the room. He wiped his nose on his sleeve and crept closer to Boromir.

“Boromir?” Pippin asked. “Boromir, please. Can you hear me?”

He shook Boromir’s hand lightly.

Pippin choked back another sob and wiped again at his nose.

“Don’t worry, everything will be fine now,” Pippin said more to himself than to Boromir. “Everything will be fine. Frodo did it. The War’s over. And now you can come visit the Shire, just like you said. Merry – .” Pippin sniffed, feeling his breath come short, but forced himself to continue, “You know, Merry gave me some Longbottom Leaf – some of the weed we found at Isengard, we found a lot that time – and you can try it if you want. We don’t need it for the trip back. I mean, I’ll be happy to share.”

As he talked, the tears ebbed and his voice grew steadier. He squeezed Boromir’s hand every so often, hoping to elicit some form of response, but there was no movement. The only change, if Pippin was not imagining it in the fading sunlight, was that Boromir’s scowl eased.

“It’s good to have you back. We didn’t think… Well. Faramir is nearby. You’ll see him when you wake up. And, this may come as a shock, so brace yourself, but I swore my allegiance to Gondor and – and, well, now I’m a guard of the White City. Like you. And Merry fights for Rohan. I know, you’re thinking what in the name of Sam’s gaffer are two hobbits doing in Gondor’s Citadel Guard and Rohan’s army? Oh, I don’t know. It was a spur of the moment thing, you know?”

Pause.

“Boromir, can you hear me?”

No response.

“We met some Ents, by the way. Aye, we did. And let me tell you, that was a strange experience. Because they look like trees, only they walk and talk, but ve-ery slowly…”

Pippin’s eyelids were sinking, his energy was faltering. His rambling was not keeping him awake as he had hoped. With a great yawn, he hopped off the bed and removed the heavy chest-plate and armor, which he had forgotten he was still wearing, so that he remained in his usual trousers and jacket from the Shire, now soiled with sweat and grime. Wary not to make a sound, Pippin placed the armor in the corner and took a seat in the armchair by the window. After finding the right position on the large chair, he fell asleep instantly, the last rays of red sunlight illuminating the end of Boromir’s bed.
The Houses of Healing

Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

The days passed. And while the armies celebrated the end of the Ring War at the Fields of Cormallen, Pippin was left alone in the Houses of Healing to await Boromir’s awakening. It never came, and after three days of silence, Pippin went in search of help. The nurses assured him that Boromir would wake when he was ready, but this did not satisfy the hobbit. He began to speak with Boromir, just an endless drone to help dissolve the silence. He tried shaking the Man’s unwounded shoulder, poking his face, closing his nose to see if he would open his mouth – which he did. But still he did not awake.

Ever since his brother’s arrival, Faramir had also spent many hours waiting at his bedside with Pippin. The Man never stirred, and while Pippin would look for solutions by talking or light jostling, Faramir would lean back in his chair and stare. In the first instant Faramir had seen Boromir again, his heart had nearly burst with mingled shock, disgust and relief. His brother was alive. His brother had been tortured in Barad-dûr, and was so consumed now by scars and bandages as to be unrecognizable. But his brother was alive. And so Faramir, too, waited with Pippin. Staring. Trying, in vain, to accustom himself to this wasted-away version of Boromir. Occasionally, the Lady Êowyn would arrive and, casting sorrowful glances towards the wounded Man, coax Faramir from the room. In those moments, Pippin would sit alone.

It was really a pity, the hobbit thought, considering what beautiful days these were. Once the power of Mordor was destroyed, Minas Tirith had enjoyed a week of constant sunshine. These were warm, pleasant days when the smell of flowers drifted in from the open window, and Pippin would inhale greedily, filling his lungs with the sweet perfume. The smell of life. Of peace, of calm, of relief. He missed the Shire. But Minas Tirith was beautiful, in its own way, as it began its slow recovery from a lifetime of war.

Sometimes, when sure that Boromir would not mind, Pippin would retrieve his pipe. He would lean out the window, smoking lazily, watching the traffic into and out of the Houses of Healing. Bandaged soldiers, helped by maids and Wardens, limped around the gravel paths. Every so often, if Pippin recognized a soldier from the Citadel Guard, he would call down with a smile and a wave. Even with the smoke and shouted conversations, Boromir never awoke. Pippin became so used to the silent, bandaged figure in the bed that he often forgot it was a living being.

And so it startled him when Boromir finally moved.

It happened after eleven days, on April the ninth. Pippin was sitting in his usual chair, eating a meal of bread, cheese and sweetmeats that the nurses always offered him, when Boromir moved his arm with a long, soft moan. Pippin froze. He stopped chewing his sweetmeat and stared. The Man dragged his right arm around and seemed to come slowly awake, his entire body shifting and stirring. Pippin nearly dropped his food in surprise. His heart pounded. So long had Boromir remained perfectly still that to see him now, conscious and moving, was terrifying.
The Man grumbled something and knocked his hand against his head, as if he wanted to touch his brow but was unable to control his limbs. Pippin shoved the food away and dived from the chair. He rushed to Boromir’s side, almost stumbling in his excitement.


Boromir groaned again, attempted to pull up his other arm, which was heavily bandaged and pinned against his chest. He seemed to want to do something, to say something, but was having great difficulty. Pippin grasped the Man’s hand with both of his.


The Man’s eyes fluttered open. They roamed around the room for a moment before settling on Pippin. Pippin felt hot tears prick his eyes. He smiled, squeezed Boromir’s hand. He’s awake! Awake! Thank the Valar! A few tears fell and Pippin brushed them away. Boromir was staring at him, perplexed. Pippin suddenly felt ashamed. Does he even remember me?

“Boromir?”

Boromir’s face twisted. His chest began to rise and fall with short, quick gasps. Something was wrong. He stared at Pippin in absolute alarm as the hobbit moved forward, took a seat on the bed.

“Boromir? What is it?”

Whatever grasp Boromir had on his calm, it snapped in that moment. His breathing grew labored. He struggled away, garbling strange words that the hobbit could not understand. Pippin stood up in alarm. Boromir pushed himself back against the wall, clutching the bed with both of his hands. He looked completely terrorized, and Pippin did not know what to do.

Uneasy and growing scared, Pippin held his hands up.

“It’s Pippin… Pip. Remember?”

“Dead,” Boromir croaked. His voice sounded raw and unused. “You are dead. Why…? Stay back! I cannot tell you anything!”

The Man had his back to the wall, and Pippins saw the starved muscles trembling with exertion. Irregular red spots dotted the bandages around the Man’s torso and stomach, and when Boromir saw these, he began to scream with such ferocity that Pippin nearly screamed as well. The Man tore, he ripped, he thrashed at his bandages, trying desperately to undo the thick knots, all the while bawling madly. Pippin stood frozen, unable to move in his horror. Only when Boromir managed to rip off the bandage on his stomach to reveal a black, gaping hole, bloodied and infected and oozing, scorched and ruined, then did Pippin run from the room.

“Help! Help!” he cried as he dashed down the corridor. He collided with the wise-woman, Ioreth. “Come quick! It is Boromir! He has awoken mad!”

Ioreth said nothing but hurried after Pippin back to the room. On the way, she beckoned to two young guards. The Warden, who was just coming down the stairs, saw the group rushing towards Boromir’s room and joined them.

When they arrived, Boromir was cowering in the corner of the room. The sheets were stained with blood, and drops of it trailed from the bed to the corner where Boromir now sat, huddled. He had buried his head in his shoulders and was sobbing hysterically. Everyone stopped in the doorway.
Pippin nearly gasped. Boromir did not notice them for several moments, and, in that silence, they could hear his sharp intakes and whimpering pleas.

“Lord Boromir?” Ioreth asked.

His head snapped up and he quailed. He began to push himself further into the corner, as if hoping it should envelop him entirely. Ioreth stepped forward. Pippin trailed at her heels. He felt the desire to hide behind her, for the scene was too frightening, too alien. This is not Boromir! His mind raced. He remembered Boromir as he had been – sparring with the hobbits amongst wooded thickets when the Company rested; arguing for the Gap of Rohan, arguing to take the Ring to Gondor; proud, strong, noble, intimidating. This cowering, weeping figure was not Boromir. It could not be.

“Stay back!” Boromir howled as Ioreth and Pippin approached.

“My lord, be easy,” Ioreth soothed. “We mean to help you. You are in the Houses of Healing of Minas Tirith. Peace…”

Boromir shook his head wildly, pressed himself further against the wall.

“Where – where is Third One?” he stammered hoarsely.

“We do not know, my lord,” Ioreth whispered. She was moving closer, closer, and he continued to squeeze himself further into the corner, sucking in his breath. Pippin caught a view of the stomach wound again, and he looked away.

“My lord,” the Warden spoke now. “You are weary. Come, let us bind your wounds.”

Boromir’s eyes flickered madly from Ioreth, to the Warden, to Pippin, to the guards. He trembled, the sweat on his chest catching the light in uneven tremors. As Ioreth reached out her hand, Boromir snapped: “Do not touch me!”

Pippin stepped in front of Ioreth, crouching low. Boromir’s eyes locked onto his, and the Man’s brow lifted in threat of tears.


Chin wavering, eyes glistening, Boromir nodded.

“I remember.”

“Will you let the Healers help you? They will not do you any harm, I promise. If I stay with you, will you let them redo the bandages?”

Boromir stared at Pippin. He seemed very near tears, and Pippin realized the Man thought him dead, and felt guilty for it. Ah… Pippin knelt forward, placed a tentative hand on Boromir’s uninjured arm.

“Come on,” he whispered.

Together with the Warden and the guards, Pippin helped Boromir to stand. They led him back to bed, and immediately set to work on redoing the bandages. As they worked, Boromir watched Pippin, who averted his eyes as they cleaned the stomach wound. The hobbit tried a smile, though in truth his heart had withered away the moment they had found Boromir in the corner.
Aragorn will know what to do. Gandalf will fix this. Boromir is not mad. Not truly. They will know what to do. He is just tired. Worn out. He just needs some rest.

“Little one?” Boromir asked as they pinned his left arm again. “This is Minas Tirith?”

Pippin felt a lump in his throat. “Aye.”

“Where is my father?”

Pippin caught the quick glance between Ioreth and the Warden, but Boromir did not. The Man was focusing on Pippin.

“He is…,” Pippin faltered. “He is away. He has gone to meet with Aragorn. They are holding a great council as we speak. Because they need to – they need to plan and discuss many great things. Your father is away.”

This seemed to soothe Boromir enough. He leaned his head against the pillow. The healers still bustled over him as he spoke.

“And my brother?”

“Faramir is here, very close by. Shall I call him?”

“Nay!” Boromir grabbed Pippin, startling him. “Nay! Hush! Do you not hear? Where is Third One? What noise!”

Pippin strained his ears. He heard the birds singing, the wind, the healers working, the people outside. He did not know who Third One was. He did not know what even to listen for. Boromir was growing anxious, his manner strange.

“Faramir, alas, the elves are not fore’er graceful,” he gasped, flinging his head back. “Ai, ai, do you not hear? There he is again! Pippin, this is a dream, can you not silence his cries? I can do nothing and the Tree disappears, always and forever falling, the ground is too close!”

“What?” Pippin asked. He looked up and saw Ioreth shaking her head silently. No! No! Pippin could not accept this. He could not accept that Boromir was mad. And so he inched closer, asked again, “What is it? Boromir, who is Third One? What tree?”

“Silence!” Boromir barked. “Have you no respect! Ai, ai, and my face, they will tear it out, they say they will rip it off and give me a new one, ai, do not let them! I do not want a new one! Pippin, tell them what they want, anything. When e’er did I listen, not enough, Imladris holds counsel fair and wise and wise and fair, but all dead now. Third One! No! No, please! Leave him be!”

Boromir screamed again, thrashed around, so that the guards had to hold his shoulders. Pippin was pushed out of the way. But the Man calmed himself and fell again limp, breathing hard.

With violently shaking hands, he pressed the new bandage in the stomach and grimaced. Pippin inhaled sharply.

“Little one, this is a dream?” Boromir asked, testing again his wound. “Can you not make it stop? The hurt… ah… It has ached since Amon Hen, little one. Little Pippin,” he smiled, his eyes glistening. “I did see your face, and Merry’s, in those last moments, many times. Did you see mine? Did you remember? Ai, Boromir the Fool,” he stuttered with sudden, miserable tears. “Will they remember me as such?”
The healers were finished. Ioreth and the Warden exchanged a quiet whisper near the door. Pippin sat on the bed next to Boromir and felt the tears start again. Boromir’s mind seemed to slosh back and forth between the present and the past, the Quest and Barad-dûr, the hobbits and this mysterious Third One. It was difficult to follow him, but Pippin attempted to soothe him nonetheless.

“Aye, of course we remembered you, Boromir,” Pippin said with a half-hearted smile. “But not Boromir the Fool. Nay, we remembered you as Boromir the Brave.”

Boromir laughed with glistening-wet cheeks, shook his head. He dropped his hand from his stomach, closed his eyes.

“Little Pippin, and they will think me mad, gone forever, aye, but they are all mad here. Mad-dead, mad-dead, rotting dead. I do not remember what to tell them, they ask and ask and ask, but I cannot say. I do not know. Mayhap they are satisfied, they leave me be in this dream – I cannot hear Third One anymore, is he well? – I am so weary…”

As the Man sank down into his pillow, visibly exhausted, Pippin felt his chin tremble. He dragged his sleeve across his eyes to hide the tears. He forced his voice to remain steady.

“Sleep, Boromir, you’re safe. I promise.”

With his final, whispering breath, Boromir murmured, “The little one promises…”

And so he was asleep. Pippin noticed then, in the silence, that his heart was still thumping madly and his brow was cold. He did not know whether to rejoice or weep. Well, he was weeping already. He did not know whether it was even desirable for such a Boromir to awaken. But perhaps the Man’s disorientation was temporary. Perhaps, in time, he would come back to himself, and be as he had been.

But Boromir did not improve in the days that came. His condition worsened, so that he ever rambled and screamed and wept. Soldiers who had known him, served under him, would visit him only to find a completely different person. Rumors spread. *Boromir the Brave is lost. He has fallen into madness, just like his father.*

Pippin found it difficult to reason with the Man’s wild cries, and so he sat with him less and less.

And yet, once Faramir heard of Boromir’s awakening, he replaced Pippin beside the bed and waited obsessively. When Man and hobbit saw each other outside the Houses of Healing, they immediately lowered their eyes. For the first question which sprang to both their minds was always, *And how is he today?* The answer was always, *The same.*

Sometimes Faramir would rest his hand against Boromir’s brow in hopes of finding a fever. *He could be delirious, this could be an infection.* But no, the brow was always cold. And while Boromir’s physical injuries slowly healed, his mind deteriorated further into its own chaotic depths. No one knew what to do.

Once, Éowyn offered to sit with Faramir. Faramir was loath to let her stay, but after much debating and arguing – *she is too stubborn* – Éowyn remained. She did not last long. One half-hour she sat, naively trying to reason with Boromir, attempting to soothe his howls with calm words. *Be at peace, Lord Boromir. The War is finished. Try to rest.* It did not work, the Man was beyond reason. He cowered and shivered and flung vulgarities at her. Despite Faramir’s warning, Éowyn made the mistake of placing a wary hand against Boromir’s shoulder, and the wounded Man responded with
a sharp blow against her face. Faramir jumped forward, restrained Boromir and urged her to leave. She did, and never offered to sit with him again.

And so the cycle continued. Maddening conversations without reason, without end, without purpose. Hopeless consolations and miserable begging. Again and again, until Boromir was given up to madness completely, and his room was avoided by all.

“You speak of the elf? Is Third One what you called him? Brother, listen to me. Hear my voice.”

“Yea, the elf! The elf! Imladris holds counsel fair and wise, perilous quests, beware, but dead now, all dead. All black orcs and Uruk-hai twisting the gut, it hurts! Ai, it hurts! And what of Third One? Leave him be! Where is he? Leave him alone!”

“Nay, calm yourself, brother. The elf is well. He sleeps now in peace. Lie still, you will tear your —”

“Do you not hear his cries? It is a torment! I hear it all! Brother, brother, my blood is black. I feel its acid coursing through me, they mean to make orcs of us. Did not the Valar hear me? Have they forsaken this Dark Land, have they forgotten me? Lost, everyone is lost, and Imladris-dream is failed! Third One dies ah, forever, his final screams pry into me and open everything up and I hear it all! May I not die too? Why not? I did pray it, aye, pray me tell me the truth. Is there no silence? Brother! Brother! Brother, where are you?”

“I am here, Boromir, I am in front of you.”

“Can you not hear it? Ah, Faramir, I am sorry for it all – and there, he screams, again! There! Again! Silence him! Do something! Third One! NO! What are they doing to him? Faramir? I cannot see him, but I see First One – aye, I see him all the time, against the other wall, with the Easterlings, everywhere, always, the grass is red…”

“Nay, there is but silence. You are in Minas Tirith. The elf is well, he rests now. Come, Boromir, you are not listening to me. Try to remain still, ere the stitching comes undone…”

Sometimes the mad glint in Boromir’s eyes would fade, and he would shudder back to himself, or what seemed like himself. But those were difficult moments. Moments when whoever sat with him wished they had not. Moments when the suspicion of his madness was confirmed many times over. Moments when all those nearby shivered and hoped never to know what Boromir knew.

One clear afternoon, in the latter half of April, Faramir watched, grief-stricken, as his brother cried out from his darkness, eyes open and blind. But Boromir then fell still, as if awakening from a strange dream, and looked directly at Faramir.

“Brother?” Boromir asked. He moved his arms, the wasted muscles straining as he tried to push himself up. Faramir, fresh tears falling from his eyes, chin trembling, moved forward to help him sit.

After weeks of this, Faramir was near ready to give himself up to madness as well. His nerves were strained to their breaking point, and only recently did he learn, unwittingly, of his father’s passing. He was not sure how much more he could bear.

“Aye, Boromir,” Faramir said. He settled back in his chair and attempted a smile. “It is I.”

“What change is this? What sun? Where am I?”

His voice was so different. Dry, parched, wavering. But calm now, lucid. Soft.
"You are in Minas Tirith, as you have been for near three weeks past. The sun shines because it is three in the afternoon."

"Minas Tirith…"

"Aye, brother, you are home."

Boromir studied his brother. "My mind spins, Faramir. Is this a dream?"

"Nay, it is the truth, and you are awake."

Boromir dropped his gaze, lifted his hands, slowly, all bandaged, and rubbed his face. When he looked again at Faramir, his eyes clouded – his breathing grew fast. Sweat formed on his brow. Faramir brought his chair closer, took his hand.

"Nay, brother, do not do this. Stay with me – "

"Ai, Faramir, alas, you fade! How so? How is it I see you now and feel still the fires at my back? He is very near – his Eye burns blood in my head. Alas, I will fail, I cannot resist any more of this!"

Faramir shook his head, the tears again falling from his eyes. "Nay, Boromir, be at peace! Remain here with me! Do not give in so easily! All is finished and there is no more torment! You are in Minas Tirith, I swear it! What you feel is but an echo of things past – lie still and rest, please – "

Boromir’s eyes flickered back and forth, widened. "Foul liar! I hear their footsteps – they are coming, Faramir, they come close! Valar, please! Help me!"

And Faramir was forced to listen as his brother cried out again, screamed, tossed, wept and confessed everything. Boromir cried of Frodo, the Ring, the Fellowship – all the while begging for death, begging for release, confessing everything and anything he could tell. The Warden and the nurses arrived at the sounds of his screams. Yet they could only help Faramir hold him down, since there was no reasoning with the Man, no medicine which would heal this.

Faramir clenched his teeth, bared them, wept until his eyes gleamed red, gripped his brother’s bandaged shoulders. Everyone was shouting, all voices frantic, all desperate, all mixed together in a uniform chaos of noise. Ioreth, get the sleeping drugs! Brother, brother, wherefore, this is not real! Frodo! It is Frodo Baggins! Eru, I’m sorry! Lie still! Hold his arms! Peace!

In the blur of movement, Faramir caught sight of Pippin standing in the doorway. The hobbit was watching, aghast.

"Go! Away with you!" Faramir bellowed, sobbed. "You are not to see this!"

He turned back to the scene, held his brother, and with his cheeks soaked in tears, watched as the Warden forced Boromir’s head down, wrenched his mouth open, held by the teeth, and poured a drugged drink down his throat. Faramir watched and hated it as Boromir choked and gagged, managed drowned screams, sputtered the liquid everywhere. A few guards had arrived too – they held the injured Man’s head, shoulders, arm, legs. He still kicked, threw his head back, babbled incoherently, but Faramir saw the irises fade to black as the quick drugs spread. His cries, his strength, all diminished with the drink’s effects.

And with a long, soft exhalation, eyes closing, head rolling back unsupported, Boromir fell limp. The hands lowered him, all together, back onto the sweat-soaked sheets. Ioreth pulled the blanket gently over him, smoothed back the wet strands that stuck to his forehead, cooed something. His
last movement before falling still was opening his mouth, just barely, as if to speak, seeming too
tired, and closing it. Ioreth wiped away the sticky sedative around his lips and in his beard.

Faramir stepped back, drained. The guards, moving as quietly as their armor permitted, exited the
room, some casting Faramir sympathetic looks. When the Warden and aides had finished, they
looked back to Faramir, who motioned for them to leave. He did not look behind him, but rather
took again his seat, crossed his arms, bit his lip, and waited. Waited for movement, for change.
Waited for his brother, as he once knew him, to return.

Someone sniffed behind him. Faramir turned sharply, ready to banish the person from sight, but
paused. It was Pippin. The hobbit had not left but rather had stayed in his spot under the doorway,
watching. And Faramir knew why the hobbit stayed. It was unbearable to behold, but impossible to
walk away from. Pippin’s eyes glistened with falling tears, he wiped his nose on his sleeve.

“Go, Pippin,” Faramir said hoarsely. “There is nothing for you here.”

Pippin did not move.

“That happened a few nights ago, when I was with him. He seemed normal, but…” Pippin trailed,
voice cracking, unsteady. “I thought it was something I said.”

Faramir smiled humorlessly.

“Nay, Master Hobbit. We can say nothing, do nothing. It is always the same.”

Pippin took a tentative step into the room.

“Do you think Gandalf… do you think he’ll know what to do?”

“I hope so.”

Pippin walked forward, neared the bed. He took a seat at the end. His feet dangled off the edge.
The afternoon sun was golden. It warmed the room.

“I wish this would end.”

Faramir exhaled. “As do I.”

But it did not end, not that day, and not for several days after. April was spent waiting, watching,
soothing Boromir’s wild screams. He never awoke from his madness if not for brief, confused
snatches. Guards were soon placed outside his room on constant duty, ready to hold his arms, force
sedatives into him, or just give the Healers room to work. Boromir’s physical wounds were long to
mend, particularly his stomach, where the flesh was mangled, the scars deep, forever ripping open.
The Man’s constant thrashing did not help, and one elderly Warden suggested they bind his hands,
constrain his movements. Yet when Faramir heard this proposition – even with the knowledge that
it would help, that certain soldiers needed it, that it was no more sickening than binding a broken
arm – he prohibited it. Never would he see his brother bound like a madman.
Chorus V (Prayer Answered)

Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

Imagine this: the Holy Mountain, Taniquetil.
Far away, above the clouds, by the Sun.
It is hot here, very hot
(by the Sun, after all)
strangely comfortable
not really a problem.

The Valar sit, eat, drink, chat idly,
sometimes casting Their omnipresent gaze
down onto the world
to check up on things. Or rather
celebrating the fall of Sauron
and vicariously enjoying the peace in Middle-earth,
laughing.

Manwë, Breath-God, Greatest Valar, Súlimo,
etc. etc.
breathtaking indeed
handsome, fair, perfection
divine, one could say (safely)
wild hair drifting up and mingling with the Sun’s flames
He smiles now.

And Arda glows with it.

Beside Him, the Star-Queen Varda,
(known to some as Elbereth)
eyes twinkling, a galaxy in that gaze,
which is now turned downwards
gloomy
fixed on pretty-city Minas Tirith
(currently in reconstruction of many sorts).

Manwë will not tolerate gloom,
not when Great Evil has just been destroyed.
“Wife, wife, wife,
what sorrow dims your starry gaze?”

The other Powers
(who were in the middle
of arguing over who exactly who who
can best sing the Pelennor Fields Battle: Song)
hush look listen
in respectful reverence.

She sighs.
She points.
Everyone looks.
Manwë’s smile fades and it grows cold
even by the Sun.

“This is your fault, husband.”
Now only Varda, mightiest Valar-Queen,
would have the courage to say such a thing.
Silence silence,
the other Gods sit on Their hands, bite Their lips.

“No it isn’t.”

“Is too!
Look, husband, lord, Breath-God, look,
he prayed to Us, back by the Tree
a nice sincere respectful prayer

(he is an honorable Man, I like him)
and he said, he said if We didn’t listen
if We didn’t stop the death-guilt around him
if We didn’t save that elf-exile
he would go mad.
And look now!
He’s doing it!
He’s doing just what he said!”

Another sigh
(and below, lunatic screams wrenched from invisible torture).
It is sad indeed.

Varda: “It breaks my Heart!”

Manwë’s eyes
are so bright they hurt to look at
they glow with the Sun’s light filtered
through them and down into Arda.
Now the lids half-close
He cocks His head,
sighs as well.
But the Breath-God’s sigh
is a Mighty Thing.
Taniquetil r-r-r-r-rattles
hands c-c-clutch the table for s-s-s-support
g-g-glasses shake (one breaks CRASH).

“Well, it was a silly thing to wish for
…in the middle of an Epic War.
Good-bad son of Gondor
(yes, I like him too)
lifetime soldier, war-hardened, battle-scarred
should have known better.
You can’t deny fate!”

Murmurs.

Varda is unsatisfied.
No one wants to see her weep.
That is Nienna’s duty
one crybaby will do, thank you.

Manwë in a bind
and how does the old proverb go?
Marriage is love respect honor cherish
blah blah blah
and, above all, compromise.

So He looks down, stretches His arm,
stretches His arm down into Minas Tirith
a huge Sunlit golden muscular (big biceps triceps)
ARM!!!
that no one seems to notice
stretching down, further further
reaching into the sorry scene
and giving limp-mad-screaming-Boromir

a good shake.

Pulls His arm up and raises His wine.
Varda smiles, Manwë smiles,
the Sun brightens, warms,
the Powers smile

and go back to the retelling:
Pelennor Fields
(for the millionth time,
but who tires of such a great story?)
with only one question stalling Them:

Who shall play handsome Aragorn?

Me! Me! Me!
The Return of the King

Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

Aragorn, son of Arathorn, Isildur’s Heir, Dúnedain chieftain, Envinyatar the Renewer, Wielder of the Sword That Was Reforged.

Aragorn. For all his titles, for all his years, for all his wisdom and experience and strength, he rode now to Minas Tirith with an insecurity nearly all-consuming. He had ridden to the Black Gate. He had seen the Black Tower, in all its malice and awesome hatred, come crumbling down. He had spent two weeks at the Fields of Cormallen to celebrate this victory, enough time for the hobbits to heal. And now, in the last week of April, he was trotting along the Pelennor Fields, back to Minas Tirith.

The city gleamed white against Mount Mindolluin’s rocky grey. From this distance, it looked like a powerful beacon, reflecting the sun and nearly blinding those who dared enter. Aragorn could not help but feel the familiar twinge of fear as he rode back to the White City. He was riding back as its King. And, apart from the natural questions – would they accept him? Would he prove a worthy ruler? – apart from the natural worries – the rebuilding of a city torn by war, the rebuilding of a population’s sense of safety – he had the smaller, human concerns. For the wounded. For his friends.

Cantering along on their ponies, Frodo Baggins and Samwise Gamgee rode beside him. And behind the three: standard-bearers, Meriadoc Brandybuck, Gimli, Legolas, Gandalf, King Éomer of Rohan and thousands of Men. An army, limping home from the last battle. Returning home knowing that this would be their last march for a very, very long time.

Aragorn stole a glance at the hobbits. They were silent. They had spoken little since waking in the Fields of Cormallen. Apart from expressing their immediate surprise and natural relief, they had each then fallen into weary silence. Physically, each had his own share of scars and bruises – but, apart from Frodo’s hand, there was no significant injury. Yet they seemed exhausted, and so Aragorn stalled many of his questions.

And the others? Merry was well enough, his arm had regained all feeling, if not all strength. Gandalf. Legolas. Gimli. And the last Walker, the last Fellowship member, the one who had been dead until very recently: Boromir.

Aragorn’s heart lurched. If there was one concern which stung him particularly it was concern for Boromir. For the Man’s health, for the Man’s acceptance, for the Man’s forgiveness. Aragorn remembered that day clearly, the day they had abandoned him on Amon Hen, abandoned him to death or desertion:

“Boromir!”

“Boromir!”
"Boromir!"

"It is no use," Gimli grumbles. "He is gone."

Searching amidst the trees, the corpses, the messy after-battle. Sunlight splayed against dry leaves. Everything is a blur of brown, yellow, red, black. Bleeding mounds of dead Uruk-hai. And the three survivors, the three who still stand – Aragorn, Legolas, Gimli – are now all stooping, all crouched low, searching amidst this mess to find their missing companion. Searching frantically, anxiously, quickly. For there is no time, no time for this, no time.

Aragorn can hear the Uruk-hai band moving south. He even heard Merry’s call over the trees, calling for help, over an hour ago. But they had arrived too late, too late to stop the capture. They had seen the tracks – Boromir’s heavy tread, booted; the hobbits smaller prints, light and fast – they had followed these tracks, down the hill, slipping on dry leaves, down, down, passing dead Uruk-hai mounds, passing patches of black blood, patches of red blood, down, down, down. And they had seen a skirmish in the soil, where Aragorn had identified: "Boromir fell to his knees here."

And there the tracks had ended, blending into a uniform chaos until thinning into the recognizable prints of Uruk-hai running. So the hobbits had been captured.

But Boromir?

Imprints of his knees, and then again the boots. So he had stood. But here the soil grew confused, with shifts in the leaves, great sweeping gashes in the earth. A mess of dirt and soil and uprooted plants. As if Boromir had been dragged down by some great force, as if a Vala had swept a mighty hand against him, knocking him aside, pulling him across the slope. These were not the signs of a stumble, or even a clumsy, near-death fall. These were the signs of more struggle, as if Boromir had fought violently against some fatal surge pushing him into the ground. Burying him too soon.

"He is dead, Aragorn," Legolas says. "Come, we must hurry. We may yet catch the Uruk-hai."

"Nay, nay," Aragorn insists. "If he is dead, let us find the body. He deserves a soldier’s burial, at least."

"And yet did you not say he attacked Frodo?" Gimli grunts. "We waste time for a traitor!"

Aragorn exhales sharply. "We cannot blame him for his weakness – we all know the Ring’s power."

They do not speak. But it is clear this search is a hesitant, almost formal consideration. They do it for honor, they do it for respect for Gondor and its beloved son, but not for personal friendship. All that changed when Frodo fled from them. When the Fellowship fell apart as easily as a house of cards.

Legolas has given up the search. He perches himself on a low boulder, clearly listening to the retreating Uruk-hai, straining his ears. Aragorn continues to shift aside the leaves, the roots, the dirt. But the mystery will take time – and here Amon Hen slopes down sharply. It will take time to get down the slope, to search amidst the bottom, near Parth Galen. And they do not have time.

"They are running at full speed, Aragorn," Legolas hisses. And there is such haste in his voice that Aragorn stops searching, straightens. "If we leave now, we may yet catch them."

And so Aragorn must make a decision. He casts a glance at the steep decline, hoping to see some blatant hint of where Boromir is. But Gimli cuts in:
“Come, Aragorn,” the dwarf insists. “He has either deserted us, or he is dead. Either way, we can do nothing.”

Ah yes, fled from shame. Aragorn remembers Frodo’s face – bleeding, sweating, pale with fright – when he stumbled upon the halfling at the throne of Amon Hen. And there Frodo had related Boromir’s temptation, and there Aragorn had let Frodo go on alone – an act of folly, madness! – Sam as his only companion.

And Aragorn, with such a weight on his heart! He thought the weight should drag him to the ground, and, in a moment of confused thinking, he had looked down at his feet to see if he was sinking. Such a heavy heart! Alas, so the Fellowship breaks – smashed wide open with death, betrayal, impossible odds.

And now?

The Uruk-hai tracks were clear. They could be followed.

Aragorn opened his eyes, stared at some indistinct point up ahead. They had gone after the Uruk-hai, begun their three day pursuit over Rohirric plains, assuming that Boromir had abandoned them. And yet it was they who had abandoned him.

The guilt of such a choice had multiplied tenfold when Boromir was returned to them weeks ago at the Black Gate. Aragorn felt hot anger rise in his throat – boiling, searing, debilitating. Anger, shame, guilt, guilt, guilt. They had abandoned Boromir and Aragorn could only imagine how he had ended up in Barad-dûr. He envisioned various pitiful scenarios – had orcs come upon a wounded Boromir at Parth Galen? Had the Uruk-hai captured both the hobbits and the Man, only to split up and take the Man to Barad-dûr? But why Barad-dûr? For ransom? For information?

Aragorn swallowed.

Pitifully thin. Ruined. Aragorn had seen the wounds – smelled the vile stench of Barad-dûr, of torture, of bestial imprisonment – on the Man. And he had perceived the same lingering torment that he had sensed in the creature Gollum years ago. To think that such a noble Man – a leader of Men – the White City’s shining prince – could be reduced to a wheezing skeleton, bleeding so much as to soak his skin, a starving beast, and the whip-marks on the back…

Aragorn clenched his jaw. Nay, there was no use in ruminating.

And so he led the armies on, led them back home, while the White City gleamed ever brighter, ever louder, ever grander. As they approached, Aragorn could hear a great cry – a thousand voices lifted high in a collective spree of yelling, shouting, singing, laughing. Minas Tirith was cheering. The hobbits noticed the noise as well, for they perked up, squinting, trying to see what was making that distant roar. And the closer the army got, the louder the city cried.

Aragorn was amazed. The city was as he had never seen it. Crowds and crowds, a city swollen with cheering people. He could see the tiny dots massed on every wall, every balcony, every window. All waving their flags, all crying out. And as Aragorn approached, with the army trailing behind him, and the halfling heroes beside him, he heard a great call – trumpets, trumpets clear, blasting away into the sunny sky – beckoning home their King. Long, thin, silver trumpets bellowing out with a magnificent song – the Lord of Gondor has returned! The King! The King has returned!

Stealing a brief glance at the hobbits, Aragorn saw they were watching the spectacle wide-eyed. He forced back the nervousness in his stomach, smiled at the masses bulging against the city walls, waved. The cheers grew louder, reverberating, shaking, cheers and screaming delight.
And so he had returned, the King was home.

The great doors swung open, creaking wide. The Gate. And from that Gate, a small company, all gleaming silver and polished armor, rode forth with Faramir and Húrin of the Keys at the front. Aragorn stopped, the armies stopped, the cheering ebbed. All waited. The Citadel Guard rode up to them, smiling, while the trumpets blared loud in the background.

Aragorn could see their broad smiles as they rode briskly towards them. Faramir led the group, bearing the Steward’s Rod. Boromir was noticeably absent.

The group arrived. All dismounted. A great hush filled the city before Aragorn and the army behind him. Clanging armors, black and silver, the sun’s sharp glare. Aragorn smiled, and as Faramir walked forth, he murmured low:

“Welcome home, my King. It is good to have you back.”

Aragorn chuckled, and then Faramir turned back towards the city walls, raising the rod high above his head.

“Behold!” he pitched his voice loud, bellowing. “At last, the King has returned! Here is Aragorn, son of Arathorn, Captain of the Host of the West, Isildur’s Heir, victorious in battle! And look ye unto the lands, see the Shadow’s end, for he rides the tide of peace, so that our people may be washed in it! Shall he be king and enter into the City and dwell there?”

And such a cheer, such a loud, ecstatic, awesome cheer rose up from Minas Tirith that the walls shook, the mountain trembled, and the Valar smiled. The sun brightened, the clouds parted, and the resounding YEA! echoed over all the lands of Gondor, spreading wide. It is said they heard it even in Dol Amroth.

Aragorn took the rod from Faramir’s outstretched hands, beckoned him to rise, for he had knelt, but then raised his own voice in reply, turning back to the city: “Take this, Faramir, son of Denethor, that the office of Steward shall continue ere the ending of my line!”

And he returned the rod to Faramir, who bowed low and accepted it.

Again, trumpets. Again, cheering. And now the army was cheering as well, and Aragorn saw the hobbits laughing, awestruck. All remounted. The Guard took its position around the King, flanking him on every side, a halo of silver when seen from above, and Faramir dropped his horse to ride near him.

They entered the Gate. From within the city walls, the noise was deafening, so that Aragorn could see Faramir laughing, and see his lips moving, but could not hear what was being said. The streets were choked with people. And the sun, the sun, the bright, eternal sun, it was so bright as to blind Aragorn. He squinted, he smiled, he waved, and the people roared sweet delight, as dazzled as he.

They passed from the first circle to the second. Aragorn caught a brief snatch of conversation – he heard Faramir shouting over the noise, thanking the hobbits, blessing them, laughing with them. And, as the swelling crowds parted to let this great march of peace pass, Aragorn found tears blurring his vision. They rounded a corner – there, looking back, a glimpse of the army, all of Gondor, all of Rohan, snaking around the buildings, snaking in from the Pelennor, the Gate, the first circle, up, up, up. Laughing, joyous, an incredible sight!

And he too began to laugh, so that the tears streamed down his cheeks, and his gut ached, and his heart strained, the emotion all-consuming, and all that was fair and beautiful in the world seemed a
thousand times fairer and more beautiful! Yes! This was peace! Sweet Eru, sweet Children of Ilúvatar, sweet land and sky and Sea and sun and wind! Vivid colors, the magnificent song of peace! Let us sing it high, sing it until our throats ache and then sing it on, eternal, our hearts bursting with it, this is what we fought for! Blessed peace!

The third circle. The fourth circle. The fifth circle. And out of every window, hanging out, Men, women, children, everyone, leaning far out, dangerously far, to wave their banners, to call to their King, to welcome him home! And the radiance, the heavenly light, as if all the Valar had revealed themselves today as light, pure, wondrous, the light of peace!

Imagine this, see this, if you can: White banners with the White Tree, flapping in the warm, spring wind, so that the sun burned bright white through them. Gleaming silver helmets. All finely dressed. All clean.

And: Flowers, flowers, white flower petals, cascading, a thick rain, all white and soft. So that they brightened the day further, and fell in streams from the windows and the rooftops, and lodged themselves into the armor plates of each smiling soldier. Making the horses snort. Carpeting the cobblestone streets. White flower petals, washing down with the sun. White flower petals, singing. So that Aragorn turned in time to see Sam sneeze from them, and Frodo laugh because of it. And the eyes of the hobbits, indeed the eyes of everyone near him, were alight with awe and wonder and joy. But such a joy! Inconceivable for those who were not there, in that moment, on that glorious day! Inconceivable! So that even the Valar were amazed, and Their own divine rapture was fueled!

And now, hush…

The sixth circle.

A respectful quiet, for here were the Houses of Healing, and here were the wounded and dying. So that the noise faded, the cheer dulled to a murmur, a soft roar still reverberating from the lower circles. But here in the sixth circle, all was quiet, gently swaying. The crowds thinned, and by this time, all the army was dispersing, back to their homes, with the order to rest and love their wives, so that Aragorn rode with Faramir, the hobbits, Legolas, Gimli, Gandalf, Éomer and the Guard.

The clopping of their horses reverberated loud against the bleak stillness. Standing outside, in the gardens, at the windows, Healers and aides and drudges, smiling and weeping and pointing. Behold, the King is come! And young Men, soldiers, boys, all wrapped and re-wrapped in white, but this was soiled white, the off-white of old bandages.

Aragorn stopped, and the procession ground to a halt behind him. For he had seen a curly head in a window, just a flashing figure, accompanied by familiar yelps of joy.

“Pippin!” Merry cried.

Frodo, Sam and Merry all clumsily dismounted from their ponies and rushed forward, just as Pippin came bounding out of the House and into their arms. They fell into a laughing embrace, all speaking fervently, rapid-fire, weeping hot tears. Aragorn also dismounted, so that the Guard and Faramir did likewise. Legolas, Gimli and Gandalf watched him, waiting.

“Oh, Frodo! Sam!” Pippin cried. “I never thought I’d see you again!”

“Nor we you!”

“And Merry!”
“Pip!”

“Cousin!”

Laughter, cries, weeping embraces. Aragorn lingered in the street, looking up at the House. Faramir and Gandalf stood with him, with Legolas and Gimli further off. And all those who watched knew, knew what troubled the King and the brother and the wizard and the elf and the dwarf. And a hush fell about the crowd, waiting, waiting for the King to act, while the hobbits spoke loudly and joyfully. Eventually they too fell silent, and now all eyes watched the King.

And without a word, Aragorn crossed the lawn to the Houses of Healing. Faramir and Gandalf followed him, with Legolas and Gimli joining the group and all the hobbits hurrying after.

They entered the House, where all was a sterile quiet. The Healers and Warden bowed low, stepping aside and inadvertently showing Aragorn the path – three doors down, on the left.

He walked down the corridor. The rest – Gandalf, Faramir, Pippin, Merry, Frodo, Sam, Legolas and Gimli – all trailing behind. And indeed, this was Boromir’s room – for two guards flanked the door, which was left ajar, and through it Aragorn could see someone in bed, asleep. The guards bowed immediately, and Aragorn entered. Gandalf and Faramir followed, with Pippin squeezing in after them. The others stole only brief glances inside before letting the door close again. It slammed shut.

Silence. Birds chirping. Distantly, crowds cheered. And in this room, in this small, simple room, where the window was open, and the breeze wafted in, and all was bland and dim, Aragorn’s heart grew cold and, again, his guilt multiplied.

Boromir.

Remember? Remember the pride and scorn at the council of Elrond? Remember the arguments and frustration on Caradhras? Remember the strength and lightening-response in Moria? Remember the regret in Lothlórien, the silence on the Anduin, the disappearance on Amon Hen?

Eru!

Aragorn had forgotten the shock, the brutal impact, from the Black Gate. But now that shock replayed itself, and Aragorn again found himself looking at this disfigured, scarred, limp figure – trying, with all his will, to reconcile this figure with his memory of Boromir. It was not working.

Distantly, he registered Faramir speaking:

“…ever speaking of Third One, whom I believe to be the elf who was returned with him. But what paths and choices led Boromir and this elf to end their road in Barad-dûr… I know not.”

Aragorn tore his eyes from Boromir and looked to the others. He saw Faramir and Pippin watching him with barely hidden expectancy, while Gandalf’s eyes were lowered in sorrow. There was a silence as they listened to the crowds still cheering in the lower circles, as they listened to their own even breathing.

The soft wind.

“Is there anything you can do?” Pippin suddenly asked, almost pleading.

Aragorn nodded, smiled, felt his eyes burn with unshed tears. Aye, for was this not all his responsibility? Had it not been his final decision to abandon this Man – his Steward-to-be, his
brother-in-arms, his friend – to the horrors of Barad-dûr?

“I will do what I can, Master Took,” Aragorn murmured, rough. He looked up. “Though I should plead the assistance of Mithrandir.”

Gandalf nodded. “And I will gladly give it.”

And so they set to work. Athelas steaming. Windows closed. Bandages checked, wounds examined. Nay. But the physical injuries would mend – even though Aragorn was shaken by the stomach wound – nay, nay, the physical was not the problem. This wound went deeper. Deep, deep, cutting into the Man’s spirit. As with the Black Breath of Faramir – only stronger, more persistent, perverse.

Aragorn could not help the pounding in his heart as he and Gandalf attempted to rouse the Man. He found it difficult to grasp Boromir’s wrist for how prominent the bone was. But once he made contact, he closed his eyes, inhaled, and began...

*Flashes.*

*Fire, machine, dripping, blood. Someone screams out in pain.*

*Darkness.*

*A white scene? All white. Peace, superficial, fading…*

*To set the beast loose, let it slip in through the mouth, passing the teeth and tongue, moving down the throat, thick and swollen, moving down into the lungs, heart, stomach, infiltrating. Finding, digging, asking again and again and again and again and again…*

“*Mithrandir…”* Aragorn found himself saying. A stronger presence joined him.

*Skin stretched thin over prominent ribs and a broken gasp shuddering through. Bleeding ears, ears scratched raw, all raw, all bleeding, burning, but still hearing, and he does not want to hear. To hear the screams and the torment and the darkness of this prison, this foul prison and –*

“*Boromir.*”

*Dragged across the stone floor, pulled along by orc twisting grips, pulled along with limp legs, watching the blood and waste leave a wet stain on the black, glistening sick red red red in the flickering torchlight and the right leg – they are slicing away the fat and meat, slicing to the bone, cutting from the wound up up up over the ruined knees up up up to the thigh and the pain and –*

“*Boromir. Hear my voice.*”

Aragorn felt sweat on his brow. A prickling sensation in all these perceived wounds – not his, but of his patient – spreading through him, while Gandalf put a hand on his shoulder, steadied him.

After this gasp for air in the present reality, delving again…

*Confusion. A whirlwind of thought. Images swirling in disorienting anonymity, meaning nothing, save only fear. Haze. And then a clear face – a clear face – in the darkness – staring back.*

“*Boromir, awake.***”

Aragorn felt his voice resound loud in his own ears, as if he heard it doubly, twice over. And
suddenly the pulse in the wrist he held quickened, and pale, familiar eyes fluttered open with a
gasp. And as Boromir’s eyes opened, Aragorn found his own vision focusing, and taking in the
scene again, as if for the first time. Movement from behind. Faramir and Pippin had rushed
forward to the edge of the bed, crowding away the sunlight.

The Man looked up at the group in obvious confusion – a thousand emotions warring over his
scarred features. As Aragorn stood back, Gandalf rumbled:

“Awake to peace, son of Gondor.”

Boromir looked first to Gandalf, then Aragorn, then Pippin, then Faramir. And as soon as he saw
them all, and they all stared back open-mouthed, he sank down into his pillow, eyes rolling back.
Asleep. Truly asleep. Aragorn found himself suddenly equally weary and he swayed. Gandalf
steadied him.

Faramir moved to the side of the bed and knelt.

“My King…” he breathed. “It is done, then? Is my brother returnéed?”

Aragorn leaned on his arm, nodded, “Aye…”

And Faramir took Aragorn’s hand, and he kissed it, and Aragorn felt tears on his knuckles. Yet
Faramir was not ashamed, and soon Pippin was weeping as well, and the door flew open, and all
the Fellowship spilled in, rushing to the bed, asking, talking loud, gasping. Frodo let out a surprised
cry when he saw the wounded Man, while the others all stared, shocked. A silence fell.

Aragorn stood.

“What…?” Frodo breathed.

They all stared at Aragorn, waiting, but he looked to Faramir. The younger Man cleared his throat.

“So my brother returns from Imladris. You know of his time ere Amon Hen, and we know little of
it following,” Faramir murmured. “But he came to us from Barad-dûr.”

“Barad-dûr!” Sam exclaimed.

“I do not understand it all – his words were confused, without reason,” Faramir continued slowly.
“But he did speak of three nameless travelers – elves, at least, one was an elf – and a wizard, he
spoke of Radagast – ah, I know not what it all means.”

His shoulders slumped, his eyes locked on the ground. The others looked to each other, sharing
silent exchanges, studying Boromir. Gandalf laid a heavy hand on Faramir’s shoulder.

“Do not overburden yourself, Faramir,” the wizard rumbled. “The mystery shall soon unravel
itself. For now, let us enjoy this peace, and plan the days ahead, and rest. For there must be the
formal coronation, the King’s return, and the rebuilding of the glories of Man. Eh? Come, let us to
the Citadel. Our friend shall not reawaken so soon. He sleeps now in peace, and his mending will
be gradual. But he will mend.”

“If it please my King, I beg his leave for now,” Faramir bowed, and again his voice shook. “For I
much desire to linger in my brother’s company. Perhaps he shall awake again, truly, nigh the day is
done.”

“So be it, my friend,” Aragorn nodded.
And so they left Faramir at Boromir’s bedside, along with Pippin, who had also refused to leave, and continued out of the Houses of Healing and onto the sixth circle and up, up, up, to the Citadel. But no one spoke, nor cheered, nor laughed, in that final stretch – for the Fellowship was finally reunited, just as they had all hoped, but it had proved a grim reunion.
Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

A healing sleep. The sixth circle of Minas Tirith. Gardens, grasses, low trees. Peregrin Took sat in the usual chair by the window, dozing. The sky was grey, overcast. Faramir was away. After a night of sleepless waiting, he had finally relented and gone up, exhausted, to the Citadel.

Yet while the brother left, the hobbit stayed. After the reunion with Frodo and Sam, Pippin had promptly resumed his position back in the Houses of Healing, at Boromir’s bedside. He was not so much happy as relieved upon seeing Frodo and Sam alive, Boromir healed, everyone returned. Now, he could finally think not on life and death matters, but instead look to the future. With the War finished, there was much to rebuild. Aragorn’s crowning would be in a week’s time, on the first of May. Pippin hoped Boromir would wake before then, he wanted him to see the coronation. But Pippin also imagined that Boromir, like Pippin and every veteran of the Ring War, was exhausted. And so perhaps sleeping was not a bad idea. Boromir grumbled something, very softly, shifted his position. Pippin watched, waited for Boromir to fall still again. He did not act. He knew that the Man never slept peacefully. Perhaps it was impossible for him to sleep peacefully ever again. Yet so long as he awoke and was truly himself again, then Pippin was satisfied. That was the most important thing.

The Houses of Healing were very quiet these days. Most of the soldiers had gone back to their homes and families. Few remained, only the gravest patients, the abandoned, the dying. The guards no longer stood at Boromir’s doorway, for which Pippin was thankful. The Healers kept the windows and door open to let the air breeze in cool and fresh. And today, with the smell of rain and the sound of murmured conversations from outside, Pippin felt drowsy.

He had his chin in his hand, his head lolling sideways as he half-slept, when a strange noise came from the bed. Boromir had cleared his throat. Pippin snapped awake. He was surprised to see Boromir’s half-lidded eyes staring at him. The Man was lying against the pillow, his face grey and drawn as he watched the hobbit.

“Do you not tire of my company?” Boromir whispered.

Pippin laughed with a lump in his throat. He stood, approached the bed.

“I didn’t have anything better to do,” Pippin joked lamely.

Boromir chuckled – a soft, wheezing sound. It took much effort, and he was winded after it. Pippin’s brow creased. Never had he seen the Man look so frail.

Boromir, moving slowly and uneasily, adjusted his position, attempted to sit. With Pippin’s help,
he leaned against the headboard. Pippin half-smiled, Boromir grinned weakly in return. *What does he remember from the days passed?* The hobbit dug his hands in his pockets, kept his eyes averted. For some reason, now that Boromir was awake and lucid, Pippin found he could not look at him. The scars, the sharp cheekbones and red-rimmed eyes. The thin sinews which could barely hold him up. It was too different.

“You missed the nice days,” Pippin said, staring at his feet. “It was quite sunny a few weeks ago.”

“How long…” Boromir licked his lips. “How long have I been here?”

“A month, almost.”

Boromir was silent. He stared out the window. From it, one could see the edge of a Citadel wall, mouse-grey and smooth, like a quiet consolation. *Home.* The gardens were below. Benches, gravel paths, well-tended flowerbeds. The balconies which looked out over the city and onto the Pelennor.

“Everyone is back at the Citadel right now,” Pippin broke the silence. “They’re preparing for Aragorn’s crowning.”

“When…?”

“In six days.”

Boromir nodded. Pippin waited, expecting a barrage of questions regarding the Ring’s final fate, the War, Faramir, Denethor, Minas Tirith, the Fellowship. He braced himself, already preparing answers in his mind, but the questions never came. Boromir simply lay back, eyes vacant, breathing even.

“What are you hungry?”

Boromir paled at this suggestion. He shook his head slightly. Pippin understood. *The wound.*

The Man turned to look at Pippin. “Pippin, as I awoke, before, I saw Mithrandir here.”

Pippin smiled. “Aye. He lives. Gandalf the White, they call him now. All the Nine Walkers are here.”

Boromir nodded, satisfied. He began to move slowly, bringing up his legs, shifting his torso, turning to sit at the edge of the bed. The sheets slipped away to reveal soiled bandages, stitches, yellowing bruises and over-thin legs. Boromir stared at his body, transfixed. Pippin fidgeted. He was almost ashamed for him – that he should see himself so battered.

“Boromir, I think it would be better if you…”

Boromir exhaled, looked back up to Pippin.

“Nay, do not worry, Master Hobbit. I have slept enough. A walk would do better now.”

But the Man could not lift himself from the bed. He looked to Pippin for help.

“Wait there,” Pippin said. “I’ll get the Healers. You need clothes, don’t you? You can’t go out in an undershirt. Lie still a moment, I’ll be back.”

He jogged out of the room and down the hall. The windows were open, a few patients shuffled
along the marble corridor. Pippin could hear the birds chirping as he hurried towards the main area. He found Ioreth, the wise-woman, arranging some flowerpots on a windowsill facing east.

She smiled as he approached.

“Ah, Master Took!” she cried. “And how do you keep yourself today? ’Tis a fine day, is it not? Finally some rain! Aye, the flowers were near begging for it. Look here. ‘Tis a herb, a fine healing herb, good for stings. Squeeze it, there, now, see, rub that nectar into any sting, be it animal or plant-sting, and it will be gone in a day’s time. Ah, and it does well with the Men too, what with their helms and gloves and leg harnesses. That armor itches, I should say, for we have had many a complaint about it.”

Pippin attempted to interrupt, but found it near impossible. Once the woman was gathering her breath in order to continue, he cut in.

“He is awake, ma’am,” he said quickly. “Lord Boromir wishes to go outside.”

Ioreth stopped short, held her breath, raised an eyebrow. “Go outside? Ah, no, no, no. He will swoon ere he reaches the door. Tell him to lie down and rest. The King and the White Wizard may have healed his mind, but his body is still mending.”

Noise. A general clatter erupted from Boromir’s room, followed by a pained hiss. Ioreth and Pippin looked at each other.

“I think it’s too late,” Pippin said.

Ioreth huffed in irritation and strode down the hall back towards Boromir’s room. Pippin followed quickly. As they walked, Ioreth called to a young servant girl. The girl, not more than thirteen, had been dragging a mop along the floor.

“Child! Send for the Warden and aides. Also, bring us Lord Boromir’s clothes.”

The girl dropped her mop and hastened away. Ioreth and Pippin entered the room and found Boromir standing with legs bent and shaking. He was leaning sideways, keeping an arm on the bed to steady himself and the other arm curved around his bandaged stomach. As she saw him, Ioreth clucked her tongue.

“I see that you are up, my lord, and without permission,” she chided.

Boromir brought himself upright, lifted his chin. “Woman, I cannot stay in this room any longer.”

“So I see, my lord.”

Boromir glared at the wise-woman. Pippin waited. The girl arrived suddenly, her arms full. She stopped short in the doorway, seeing the half-nude Boromir, and blushed.

“My lord,” she mumbled, eyes lowered.

Boromir seemed equally embarrassed. He looked away.

“Leave it on the chair, child,” Ioreth ordered.

The girl did as she was told and then scurried away. Ioreth bent over the clothes, inspected them, handed Pippin a tunic and some breeches, and then turned back to Boromir.

“Very well, my lord,” she said. “You shall have your walk, and with Master Took to help you. But
only if you promise, my good lord, to return quickly and eat the porridge that is given to you. For you are as thin as a wood elf.”

“Nay, nay,” Boromir shook his head. “I will have no porridge.”

“You will, my lord, or else you will not leave this room.”

Boromir clenched his jaw, his shoulders tensed. Pippin held his breath.

“I will not.”

“You will, my lord.”

Boromir’s arm tightened around his stomach.

“That is blackmail.”

“Aye.”

Boromir’s fierce gaze flickered briefly to Pippin, who stood holding his breeches and tunic. The hobbit shrugged. He made an expression indicating that maybe it was better not to anger Ioreth. This seemed enough. Boromir relented, his shoulders slumped, and he nodded mutely. Pippin exhaled.

“Very good, my lord,” Ioreth chirped. “A moment, please.”

She exited the room, leaving Boromir and Pippin alone. They exchanged a look, did not speak, and Boromir leaned more heavily against the bed. When Ioreth returned, the Warden and an aide followed. She was talking madly as they entered, and the Warden raised his hand to silence her. He bowed to Boromir.

“Well met, my lord,” the Warden said.

Boromir nodded in return, though his grip on the bed railing was shaking. Pippin worried the Man could not remain upright for much longer. But Boromir straightened his shoulders, attempting the noblest stance he could manage.

“Healer, I desire a walk outside. To see my city, as they tell me it is a city in peace.”

The Warden smiled. Pippin realized he had never seen the elderly Man smile before.

“Then my lord will need his clothes. Boy.”

The young aide stepped forward and, together with Ioreth, helped to dress Boromir. It was slow work. He was too weak to lift his arms completely, and so, gingerly and with several grunts coming from the wounded Man, the boy and Ioreth pulled his tunic on, lifted his breeches, buttoned his doublet, pulled on his boots. They worked efficiently and without expression, though Pippin found the whole thing slightly amusing but mostly disheartening. Boromir, too, seemed embarrassed by the help, especially when his slow fingers could not clasp his belt to buckle it and they had to do it for him.

Once finished, they gave him a cane, which he accepted reluctantly.

“Master Took,” the Warden turned to Pippin, “I pray you, return in an hour’s time.”

Pippin nodded. “We will.”
The Warden smiled again. Then, exchanging the proper courtesies and respectful bows to Boromir, they all left. It had all happened very quickly, but nonetheless Boromir was wearied by the encounter. As soon as they were out of sight, and only Pippin remained, he sank down onto the bed with trembling knees. Pippin failed to hide his concern.

“Are you sure about this, Boromir?” he asked.

“Aye, little one. I have spent too much time in this House,” he grinned crookedly before adding, “as have you.”

Pippin blushed. Again, he wondered how much Boromir remembered of the last few weeks.

But Boromir was ready to go, and struggling to stand. Pippin stepped forward, helped the Man to his feet. Once upright, Boromir leaned heavily against the cane, swaying with eyes closed. Pippin kept a firm grip on his arm and, together, they walked out of the room and down the hall. Slowly, slowly, so slowly did Boromir walk that Pippin was often still, just waiting for the Man to take his next step. As they passed, guards and soldiers saluted. But Pippin caught also the curious stares. Only days before all had given Boromir up to madness, and now, to see him taking a meager walk around the hall was a surprise. Everyone seemed to be waiting. Waiting for Boromir to snap, for the moment when his frail grip on reality would dissolve again into screams and madness.

Pippin waited as well. He dreaded that moment. Valar, please. Let the madness have passed. By the time they reached the archway leading outside, Boromir had noticed Pippin’s discomfort. He stopped, lifted his arm, clumsily, and managed to ruffle the hobbit’s curls. Pippin hid his tears with a smile.

Outside, the air was cool. The sky was dark. Most people had gone inside due to the impending rainstorm. A soft breeze passed through the gardens, shifting the long-stemmed flowers. There was no sun, yet Boromir squinted. He stood in the archway for many moments. Head tilted, whole body leaning against the cane for support, he watched the still scene and said nothing.

Minas Tirith. Pippin remembered the first time he had seen it. The city was beautiful. White-grey, blackened here and there. Domes and spires and bell-towers. All of it blending into and complementing the natural rock face of the mountain, as if Mount Mindolluin had, sometime long ago, breathed out a city of its own accord. A city to embrace and love and protect. A city sitting against it, like a King on his throne, or a child on his father’s knee.

But Pippin also saw the black flags fluttering in the wind. Towers ending in abrupt, uneven bricks. Remnants of the Pelennor Fields. Holes through buildings, neat and tidy, as if they had always been there. Towers with the tops ripped off. And everywhere: fluttering, snapping, silent, the black ribbons. Death. Everyone had lost someone. It was a wounded and bereft city.

Boromir was transfixed. When he spoke to Pippin, his eyes did not leave the sight.

“Master Hobbit, think you we can reach yonder bench?” he breathed, barely above a whisper. “I should like a better view.”

With Pippin’s support, they walked slowly to the bench near the wall. Once seated, Boromir leaned back, closed his eyes, exhaled long. Visibly fatigued. Pippin sat beside him, kicking his legs forward, backward, nervously watching him out of the corner of his eye. The Man looked so weary. Never once, in their days with the Fellowship, had Pippin imagined the Man capable of looking so tired. As if his entire beaten face had been dragged down by an invisible weight, and his every breath was exhausting. It made Pippin feel uncomfortable. He had always looked to Boromir for strength. A great warrior. And now?
They sat, watching the city on this silent morning. Pippin peered down over the wall to get a better look. He liked the lower circles. He liked the intricate maze of alleyways and narrow passages, the drying clothes hanging on lines between each building. He liked the shouts from the windows as elderly mothers called down to their children playing in the street.

The upper circles were not so enchanting. They were grim, silent places. Places Pippin forever associated with the death of one soldier, the pounding of doors, the sleepless night before the battle. *It's the deep breath before the plunge.* The tension rose with each circle, so that Pippin found the Citadel the most uncomfortable place of all. He avoided at all costs the courtyard, the King's Hall, the Silent Street. And the smell of fire...

“Is Faramir well?” Boromir asked, breaking into Pippin's thoughts.

“Aye. He sat with you often these past few weeks.”

“And the others?”

“Everyone is well. Frodo and Sam... they're – well, nothing that time and healthy meals won't mend. Merry is fine. Legolas, Gimli, Aragorn, Gandalf. Everyone is - is fine.”

“Someday, I shall want to hear their tales. But not today. Today I am tired.”

“Yes...”

Boromir exhaled, closed his eyes again, leaned to his side. He worried Pippin.

“And my father is well?”

Pippin was silent. He could not say it. He did not want to think about it. Weeks ago, when Boromir had asked him the very same question, Pippin had been able to lie in the heat of the moment. The hobbit had only thought to soothe the screaming Man and nothing else. But now, in this grey silence, Pippin could not avoid the truth. His stomach grew cold to think of it again.

“He is dead,” Pippin muttered.

Silence.

It began to drizzle. Boromir made no move to get up, and so Pippin also waited. They sat in this soft rain for several moments. Boromir stared.

“I see by your countenance it was not an easy end.”

“No…”

“There is little to hope for anymore, it seems,” Boromir murmured, almost to himself. “Would that these dark days were finished, would that the noise of death fades…” he cleared his throat, “Pippin, how did I arrive here?”

“We... All the armies, we marched to the Black Gate. Before the battle, the Enemy sent two horses out carrying you and an elf. Both of you were very wounded. They said it was a gift from the last battle on Dagonlad. I came back to Minas Tirith with you. Frodo must have destroyed the Ring as I was coming back, because everything changed. That - that was at the end of March.”

“There was an elf?” Boromir looked up sharply. “Where is he? Is he still here? Is he well?”

Pippin found he could not say it, and Boromir understood immediately. His expression fell, and he
leaned back again, this time with eyes dim from cold grief.

“I’m sorry, Boromir,” Pippin whispered.

The Man exhaled, brought a hand to his face, covered his brow.

“And yet, that I hear him…”

“I know.”

Boromir looked at Pippin.

“Do you remember anything from the past few weeks?” Pippin asked.

Boromir shook his head.

“You…” Pippin swallowed. “We thought you lost. You kept screaming and – you must have thought you were still there. In… in Mordor. You kept calling out for Third One, and we didn’t know who that was, or what we could do to help. They said you were mad. I didn’t want to believe it. But you kept screaming – about how you could hear him, there, in the other room. You wouldn’t stop…”

Pippin could not help it, he was weeping. Boromir watched him with a look of mingled revelation and anguish. Pippin dragged his sleeve over his eyes quickly, ashamed.

“What happened after Amon Hen, Boromir?”

The question was quiet, plaintive.

Boromir lifted his face, let the rain run in rivulets down his cheeks as if tears. His arm wrapped itself around his torso, hugging it, protective. It was a gesture Pippin noticed more and more.

“Three elves did I meet. They helped me, we became friends,” he snorted with a humorless laugh. “Not at first. But… that is a long story. We fought the Easterlings. One of the elves… one died. But we continued, getting e’er closer the Dark Land. Finally, we battled Wild Men and orcs on the fields of Dagorlad. And there was I taken, with Third One, into Mordor,” his mouth twitched as he added, “into Barad-dûr.”

He tensed. Saying the Black Tower’s name had been visibly difficult. Pippin inched forward.

“Elves? But where did they come from? Why do you call him Third One?”

“Because that is his name!” Boromir snapped suddenly.

Pippin pulled back. “I’m sorry…”

“Nay, forgive me, Pippin,” Boromir hastened. He sighed. “I am… weary.”

“Come on, let’s go back inside.”

Pippin stood. He helped Boromir to stand, keeping a hold on the Man’s arm and back. The rain thinned and thickened, never pouring but never dry. They shuffled along the gravel path back towards the arch. Under the archway leading back into the Houses of Healing, Boromir had to stop. He leaned against the cool marble. Once the Man was able, they continued down the corridor.
Back in his room, Boromir lowered himself onto the bed. He let the cane fall from his grip and Pippin, in reflex, caught it. Before they could say anything, Ioreth bustled into the room with a tray of food.

“Very well, is my lord pleased?” she asked dryly. “He is cold and wet and has put his dirty boots on the clean sheets. Come now, it is time for a meal. You must build your strength, my lord.”

She placed the tray against the bedside table and moved to remove Boromir’s boots. The Man let his head arch over the pillow, his hands covering his stomach, his eyes half-open. Pippin felt his heart grow cold. Yet he knew that now he needed to be strong, he could look to no one for support. And so the hobbit stepped forward, leaned against the bed.

“Boromir? You must eat.”

Boromir licked his dry lips, blinked slowly. “I will eat tomorrow…”

“Nay, nay, my lord,” Ioreth said, flattening the sheets smooth with her hands. “You will eat now. It has been too long since you have had a proper meal. Come, sit up, my lord. Here, there is an herbal drink, a tea. It will soothe your stomach.”

Boromir pulled himself up to sit. He eyed the tray, blanched. A small bowl of porridge, a glass of water, a mug of steaming tea. Pippin found the meal bland. But he imagined that, had he been hungry, he would have nonetheless enjoyed it. Maybe with some bread and fruit, it would have made for a nice snack. Boromir, on the other hand, seemed entirely repulsed by it. He made no move to take the tea until Ioreth grabbed it and placed it in his hand. She clucked her tongue. He hesitated.

Then, under the scrutinizing gazes of Ioreth and Pippin, he drank.

When he removed the cup from his lips, Pippin saw that he had swallowed barely a drop. Yet already the Man was making a face and clasping his gut. He looked up to Ioreth, pleading silently.

“All of it, my lord,” she ordered, “if you desire to keep anything down.”

Boromir cringed. He took the cup, drank again. After an eternity, so long that Pippin was sure the Man was just holding the mug without opening his mouth, Boromir finished the tea. His hands trembled as he placed the empty mug back on the tray.

“Well done, my lord,” Ioreth said. Her voice carried no trace of sarcasm or condescension. “And now, the porridge.”

She moved forward and was about to take the bowl and spoon when Boromir lifted his hand.

“Lady Ioreth,” he said softly. “Leave us. Master Peregrin will see to my meal.”

The old woman hesitated. She looked at Boromir, looked at Pippin, looked back at Boromir. The rain was pattering against the windowsill. A soft, soothing drumbeat. Finally, she yielded with a sigh and a nod. Straightening, she gave Boromir a sad smile. Pippin was beginning to notice that everyone treated Boromir differently. There was no trace of the wary reverence they bore towards Aragorn, the warm respect for Faramir. They treated Boromir as if he was already dead. A ghost wandering through the Houses of Healing, never recoverable. Pippin saw the others’ expressions. Sorrowful half-glances and slight smiles. They pitied him. They mourned for him. They had lost their prince.

No! Pippin clenched his fists. Not lost!
Once Ioreth was gone, Pippin took a seat on a short stool by the bed. He watched the steam curl from the bowl of porridge. The wet granules glistened in the warm glow of a nearby candle. The more Pippin looked at it, the less appetizing it appeared.

“Well,” he said brightly, “the sooner you start it, the sooner it’ll be finished, as they say in my country.” He hesitated. “Do you need me to…?”

Boromir smiled slightly. “Nay, little one.”

With ever-trembling hands, Boromir leaned over, took the bowl and spoon. He laid the bowl in his lap and remained motionless, until Pippin prompted him with a cough. Finally, Boromir spooned some of the sickly grey cereal and ate. His expression was twisted in one of such disgust that Pippin was almost curious as to what it tasted like. With slow chewing, reluctant swallows, trembling hands, Boromir ate.

“Well, I suppose you’re curious as to what happened to Merry and I,” Pippin said, smiling, “after Amon Hen.”

Boromir’s lips thinned, his jaw clenched. He looked away from Pippin.

“Pippin…”

“Nay, Boromir, please,” Pippin hastened to say. He decided on a joke. “We would have been caught anyway, what with Merry’s yellow vest and all. It’s quite hard to miss.”

A weak laugh burst from Boromir. He nodded, lowered his eyes, half-smiled.

And so Pippin told Boromir all about the capture, the Uruk-hai, Treebeard, the Entmoot, Isengard. As the hobbit spoke, the Man would eat slowly, hesitantly. The tale took a few hours to tell. By that time, the porridge was finished and Boromir was leaning back, heavy-hooded eyes glistening.

Pippin let his sentences trail, thinking the Man desired sleep, but Boromir would always rouse himself enough to ask a question, enough to keep the story moving. By afternoon, when Pippin was sure the Man needed sleep, and moved to leave, Boromir beckoned him to stay.

But Pippin had finished the tale he wanted to tell. He had arrived to the point when Gandalf and he had ridden up to Minas Tirith for the first time. He did not want to continue. The wounds were still fresh. Those moments, still vivid in his mind. Boromir, too, seemed reluctant to hear the rest, knowing already its end, and he nodded vaguely when Pippin asked to continue the story another day.

“And now you owe me a story, as well,” Pippin said.

Boromir nodded. “Aye.”

“But… since we have all this time on our hands now, I guess it can wait another day.”

Boromir was staring out the window. He did not respond. Pippin waited.

Finally: “Is the elf still here?”

Pippin shifted uncomfortably.

“I’m not sure. I think they may – they might have prepared the coffin already.”

A ragged inhalation.
“I should like to see him.”

“Tomorrow.”

“Yes, tomorrow…”

That evening, Faramir rushed, nearly sprinting, from the Citadel to the sixth circle – for he had heard that his brother was awake. Yet when he came sliding into the room, ready to shout a joyous greeting, he found Boromir asleep, again. And Pippin as well.

He considered waking them, for he had waited so long for this moment, for this precious moment when a loved one should return to him, when he could spend the glorious first evening, talking into the night, talking, laughing, drinking with his brother. How often had he daydreamed of such a night? The night when the War ended, truly, when peace spread, and they would trade stories and scars. It had always seemed so unreal; always the thinking went, the War will never end. I will die before it ends. And recently, despair had multiplied, so that he had spent his hours only grieving for his losses, everyone gone, mother and father and brother, all gone, while his own life turned a dull grey.

But now – now a ray of light had sprung from this House, for Boromir had awakened under the King’s healing touch. And perhaps life was not as bleak as it had previously seemed. And perhaps now all could be well, and they could talk, and laugh, and jest, or sit in companionable silence.

But Faramir paused. Nay, for now let them sleep. They are tired.

And so he walked slowly, his boots squelching with rainwater, to the side of the bed, leaned over and studied his brother. Studied the sharp cheekbones, a scar over the left eye, the mangled ear. Everywhere, an aspect was changed in some way – as if his brother was wearing a grotesque mask over his sunken face. And Faramir was unnerved.

What are these blows, brother? Speak, I see thee in thy dreams…
Shadow and Thought

Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

The Legendary Fellowship
all pasted back together, gathered from each corner of the Middle-earth map reunited
back in the gleaming Citadel of Minas Tirith
Frodo, Sam, Merry, Pippin
Aragorn, Gandalf, Gimli, Legolas
and Boromir…

Now tell us, Chorus,
tell us of that persistent fear
creeping in like a snake
trough the veins, wriggling into the heart
and sinking its fangs deep
so that the terror-poison spreads wide
into every nook and cranny of thought
and poor Boromir can never forget:

The snapping click-click
of each rung in the orc’s torture machine
each grinding crunch
of something organic, hot-boiling pain
bursting white-red

…and the screams of Third One…

Alas, Boromir, let him lie in peace!
Why do you torment yourself so?

Noise.
Silence.
Noise.
Silence.

Noise – NO!
But the silence lent itself to louder memories, louder screams, so that Boromir would stand up and leave whatever he was doing, whatever conversation, whatever meal, whatever council meeting, to find the first window, the first hidden corner, and collapse with trembling legs onto the ground. His throat would grow parched, his lips dry. Cold sweat formed on his brow. His heart would rise up to his throat and beat loud. If he tried to stand, his legs would buckle. Everything was shaking, irregular, frenzied.

Sometimes a servant or an aide found him. And every time, when they saw his state, and started to call for help, he would snarl at them to leave him be, that he needed no help. Once or twice, a servant found him weeping in some forgotten niche. Whenever that happened, he would threaten the servant with imprisonment and banish them from sight. *Do not ever speak of it!* Glistening eyes, a stuffed nose, desperate.

It continued for many days. The days before Aragorn’s coronation, when all the Citadel was alive with activity, were days of black memories and tortured silences for Boromir. He could not endure quiet moments, he could not stand still. When one of the Nine Walkers found him, he would feel cornered, trapped, and find whatever excuse to flee their presence. At council meetings, he could not bear the sound of chairs scraping against the stone floor. He would hold his sword in front of him, both hands clutching it, as he sat staring at the blade, counting the seconds his nerve-wrecked limbs withstood the dusty quiet. When Aragorn, Faramir or a councilor roused him with a question, he would jump back, startled. Once, Prince Imrahil of Dol Amroth had placed a wary hand on his forearm and Boromir had screamed.

Again and again.

Noise.

Silence.

Noise

Silence.

All mixed together, so that one was never free of the other. In the noise – as his brother murmured, as Pippin joked, as Aragorn calmed – in that noise, an interminable vacuum opened up, so that Boromir was deafened, and he could hear nothing. But then, in the true silence that followed, he was sure that Third One was there – *there!* – beyond the wall, screaming. Boromir hated the sound of muted voices in other rooms. He fled any room where he heard it.

The nights were worse.

Because as everyone slept, the Citadel in bed, the city in bed, Boromir would wander the halls alone. He would pace, back and forth, walking quickly. His steps – soft boot-scuffs on the floor – fell into a rhythm, a marching beat. But still, it never cured him of the endless anxiety, the continual panic. And it never silenced Third One. Even when Boromir had seen the elf, seen the coffin, watched them carry it out of Minas Tirith to bear it to Mirkwood, still he heard Third One.

Once or twice, he thought he saw the elf. And it sent such a panic in his heart that he would scream, awakening all the others nearby in the Citadel. The guards would find him, struggling away from his own room, howling himself hoarse. *NO! NO!* He would see Third One passing through the darkened halls, or, when he opened his bedroom door, he would see Third One sitting in the chair by the window. And every time, Boromir cried out from absolute terror.

“What is it? Lord Boromir!”
“Peace, Lord Boromir! There is no one there!”

“The room is empty!”

But Boromir would stumble away, insulting the guards and demanding that they never touch him again. The nights were spent in this way, from the night he awoke in the Houses of Healing to the night before Aragorn’s coronation. And every night, in his terror and rising panic, he would stalk the halls until he collapsed, exhausted, after two or three days, onto his brother’s bed. Faramir would find him there, asleep and muttering, and wake him. The cycle continued.

Days of noise and silence.


Nights of wandering, nights of terror. Nights of Third One. A swelling quiet punctured by torture, again and again and again and again…

NO! NO! PLEASE! STOP!

Another night, it was very late, and Boromir was walking through the empty halls, reciting every realm and fiefdom of Gondor, trying to drown out Third One’s screaming, when he literally ran into Merry. The hobbit had been hurrying away from the kitchen, his arms full of scavenged food, when the two collided. Merry fell back with an alarmed cry, sending bread, sausages and cheese everywhere. Boromir had also cried out, his hands instinctively reaching for the empty scabbard. But he stopped.

Breathing hard: “Merry?”

“Boromir!” Merry cried cheerfully. He began gathering his food from the ground. He gave the Man a smile. “Don’t tell anyone, eh? They don’t want me taking things out of the kitchen like this.”

Boromir tried to listen and grin, but something had caught his eye. There! A passing form. Just a quick silhouette dodging behind a corner. Boromir’s pulse quickened, his breath came fast. Third One. Third One was there. Just down the hall. Third One, NO! Sweet Eru, no, no, no, leave me be, let him stay there, let him forget me, leave me be, I have said nothing, I said nothing, I told them, leave me be, please, Eru, no, no, spare me from this torture, please, I will do anything anything stop please just I know quiet quiet please screams and -

Merry noticed Boromir’s anxiety, and his smile faded. Once he finished picking everything up and stuffing it back into his pockets, he looked up at the Man in open concern.

“Is everything alright, Boromir?”

Boromir nodded. Forced calm. “Aye. Everything is well.”

“You seem…”

“Everything is well, Merry.”

But Boromir’s arms were bouncing at his side. His hands trembled. Sweat. And his gaze was fixed on that corner. He was waiting, waiting. Any moment now, Third One would turn around from that corner – the pale face, the elf’s pale, bloodied, dead face – would turn around, peeking out from that corner, and stare at Boromir with open, empty, accusatory eye-sockets. Any moment now. Any moment. Boromir stood rooted to the spot, staring, waiting.
Merry turned to look down the dim corridor. A few torches were lit. It was empty, save a guard standing at the far end.

“What are you looking at?” the hobbit asked.

Boromir tore his gaze from the corner. He looked down at Merry. Yet, even as he did that, he imagined Third One, not turning, no, angry now, Third One bounding down the corridor, running from that corner, running down the hall to Boromir and colliding with him. Boromir imagined Third One striding – pale, bloodied, dead – striding down and stopping in front of the Man, cupping his face in his rotten, decaying hands and saying –

“Boromir?” Merry asked, concern plain in his voice.

The tears came suddenly, unexpectedly. Boromir’s brow lifted, his hand searched for the nearest wall to support him, and he sank down to the ground, sputtering. He buried his face into his shaking shoulders, pulled his knees up, choked ragged. It was such a typical position – Barad-dûr back in Barad-dûr burying face knees up sobbing, and Third One begging begging begging! Tortured again and again and again and again AND AGAIN AND AGAIN!

Merry was kneeling beside him.

“Boromir?” A soft voice laced with agitation.

Akrum, pushdag golug?

“He is there, Merry, he is around the next corner,” Boromir whispered, all wavering, quiet, cracked.

Merry did not say anything. He understood. After a few moments, the hobbit stood.

“Do you want me to go check?” he asked.

Boromir looked up. Merry stood before him, looking down in forced solemnity. He was not serious. He was humoring him. But Boromir needed it, in that moment, and so he nodded.

The hobbit disappeared down the hall, hurrying towards the corner. He looked back to Boromir every so often, motioning that all was well. Finally, he reached the corner. Boromir watched. The hobbit leaned over, arched his head around, disappeared around the bend. He pulled himself back, turned around, and smiled at the Man.

“It’s empty,” Merry said as he approached.

Boromir was soothed enough. He straightened his legs, leaned his head back. With a shaking hand, he dragged the tears away, wiped the sweat from his brow. Merry hovered for a few moments beside him before taking a seat as well. The hobbit pulled his knees up, rested his arms against them.

They did not speak for several moments.

“Are you alright now?” Merry asked.

“Aye,” Boromir said, though he could not hide the shaking in his voice. “Thank you.”

Silence. Merry gathered up the remaining food which lay against the ground.

Finally: “Do you want to go outside?”
Boromir inhaled deeply. “Aye. Let’s go.”

Merry sprang to his feet, put out his hand and helped Boromir to stand. The Man continued to look – there! – at the corner, but also further down the corridor. For as the guard, marching at the far end of the hall, cast a shadow against the wall – Boromir was sure it was Third One again. But he swallowed his fear, clenched his fists, followed Merry out onto the Citadel balconies.

They found the nearest pair of doors and exited. Outside, the air was cool but not uncomfortable. A chill breeze. From this height, Minas Tirith lay still and silent below them. Everyone was asleep. Boromir and Merry leaned against the railing.

Outside, Boromir was slightly more relaxed. As he stared at the city, the Pelennor Fields, the mountain – never looking east – he would be relatively calm. The feel of the night air, it was soothing enough, for he could still feel that prickling, that sick burning his skin felt when it knew nothing but ash and fire and stone. But the cool wind calmed the burn, eased it.

Merry dug through his jacket pockets for something. Finally, he pulled out a bottle. He uncorked it with a pop, sniffed.

“Brandy?” Merry offered.

Boromir gave Merry a quizzical look.

“I found it,” the hobbit shrugged, though a sly grin played at his lips. “I found it lying around in the kitchens.”

“Well, you are our guest, little one,” Boromir said slowly. “I suppose I cannot argue.”

Boromir took the bottle, drank deeply. He returned it to Merry, who also drank. And on and on, back and forth. Once the bottle was half-empty, and Merry was giggling over some remembered joke, and Boromir’s head swam, they spoke again.

“So…” Merry slurred, “just two days until the big event, then.”

In truth, Boromir had completely forgotten about the coronation of the King.

“Aye.”

“Will you still be Steward?”

“I know not.”

Both took another drink. They were swaying uncertainly, and so they decided to find a nearby bench. It took longer than necessary, with much zigzagging and unexpected collisions, but soon a bench was found, and both Man and hobbit clumsily plopped down. Once seated, Boromir leaned back, gazed with half-lidded unseeing eyes. He felt somewhat calm. Merry was searching in his jacket for a pipe. He found it, began stuffing the weed.

As he stuffed, Merry cleared his throat.

“You-know-Boromir,” Merry began, stringing his words together and hiccuping slightly, “Pip was telling… telling me about that problem you have, with eating and all.” He finished stuffing the weed, retrieved some long matches from another pocket. “What is it they’ve – hic – been giving you from the Houses-of-Healing?”
Boromir shrugged. “I know not. A herbal drink.”

“Aye, probably giving you ginger and… and lemon. Maybe a bit of valerian as well. You know I wrote a book on herbs, once? Aye. Tell them to put some chamomile in it, instead of the valerian. It’ll taste better and you’ll be able to swallow the thing without holding your nose.”

Boromir nearly smiled. “Aye… ‘tis disgusting…”

As Merry lit his pipe, Boromir leaned his head against the stone. “I did not know you wrote a book, Merry.”

“Mmm.”

While Merry smoked, Boromir finished off the brandy. He slouched low in his seat, ran a hand absently over his beard. As he tugged lightly, however, a tuft of hair came out. He stared at it for a moment, confused. Yet he was too drunk to feel embarrassment at losing patches of his beard and so he let the hair drift away with the wind.

He had drunk most of the brandy, with Merry drinking much less. But still, the hobbit was small, and so less was needed. Both were suitably inebriated as to be candid.

Merry took a few puffs before turning to look at the Man. With a cocky half-grin, he slurred, “But Boromir, would you mind telling me what happened back there?”

“Where?”

“Back there, inside. Who did you think you saw?”

Boromir tensed immediately. He did not answer. He looked away, clenched his teeth. Merry waited. The grin faded, but the hobbit was still curious. Boromir said nothing.

After a few moments of waiting, Merry prompted, “Well?”

“‘Tis not your matter,” Boromir hissed.

“Fine. Just curious,” Merry shrugged. “No reason to get angry.”

But it all came rushing back, all of it, disgusting, violent, black-deadly, tortured and always always always screaming. Boromir moved his leg, shifted his arm, leaned forward, leaned back, and always always always Barad-dûr was there. Vividly there. He could feel the panic again, washing up, swishing back blearly with the alcohol – but the alcohol did not help as it should have, it was not enough, more was needed – and the panic, the panic, the terror, all of it, washing back up, up, up through his throat and into his head.

He felt blinded momentarily, as if sitting down was too similar to Barad-dûr, and so he stood suddenly. He paced, back and forth, back and forth, running again and again his hand over his beard, feeling the weak patches. When he whirled around, faced the bench again, he saw Merry staring at him.

“What are you doing?” the hobbit asked slowly.

But Boromir did not see Merry, no, no. What did he see? He saw the orc – that orc, that particular orc, yellowed-black teeth dripping red and clear ooze, dripping it onto the stomach wound, laughing, sneering, threatening, asking again and again and again and again and…
“What?” Boromir snapped.

Merry sat perfectly still.

“I asked what’s wrong…” Merry said carefully.

And what do we always say pretty little prince stretched thin longer lost the Ring laughing screaming please please NO! NO! NO! please begging mocking orcs and roaring and snarling and elvish screams in the dark with the corner of the cell always my corner that is my corner do not come near this is my corner you cannot come close the prince the prince a bone crashed CRACK under the CLICK CLICK CLICK crowding back tittering twisting CRUNCH something SNAPS and hot-boiling blood leaks out screaming with pain and whimpering and pleading and begging and mother where are you mother mother MOTHER! weeping again the orcs goblins sneering drooling over all wet all slick with something red and black and yellow and cracked open wide bones shattered blood-slippery intestines with screams spilling out –

“Boromir?”

“I have said nothing!” Boromir bellowed.

“Whoa,” Merry put up his hands. “Easy. You’ll wake everyone.” He frowned. “Come on, I think it’s time to go to sleep.”

The hobbit stood, walked unevenly to Boromir and was about to put his hand on Boromir’s arm when the Man threw up his hand. With a crack, he struck Merry in the jaw. The hobbit yowled in pain, toppled back…

Taste this glu-bûb prince stuffed mouth black orc medicine meat and shivering wet and icy and searing hot fire against the scarred stomach burned scorched black hiccuping sobs and vomiting gasps and smoke curling twisting sweating always that sick sticky sweat oiled on the jagged spikes burrowing into the shoulder blades and the mask the mask the mask everything closed and suffocating I cannot breath I cannot breath I cannot breathe choking suffocation –

Blurs. Movement.

A blow to the stomach. Crippling. Shouts. “My lord!”

Slipping burning knees a slim knife slid underneath and up up up pricking slicing away the fat and meat the mind twists around itself with A BURNING EYE an eye on fire crackling red pop hisses and there is someone else in my cell someone else someone else there is someone else too dark to see someone else fear this is my corner –

“Boromir!” Something hard slapping against the temple. Flashes of pain, blinding.

Anything anything Third One just tell them anything stop stop no NO! no anything tell them dead killing me dead the stomach ripped open and the heart slithering out and slipping out onto the black jagged stones breathing lungs and see them expand with waste the poisonous fumes remember the very air the very air the very air I breathe is a poisonous fume and just just just just say it:

FRODO BAGGINS!

FRODO BAGGINS HAS THE RING!

FELLOWSHIP ARAGORN GANDALF CARADHRAS AMON HEN MORDOR RING MOUNT
Boromir was in his room. He did not remember walking back to his room. He did not remember returning at all. With a pounding head and unwieldy limbs – *too much brandy* – he shoved himself off his back. He was lying at the end of his bed, as if he had fallen onto it. His knuckles were bleeding. As the scene before him swam into focus, he saw Merry hovering over him with a bleeding lip. Four armed guards were standing at the door.

Boromir blinked.

“I think he’s coming back to himself, gentlemen,” Merry said, looking back at the guards. “You can go. Thank you.”

The guards nodded and filed out of the room. Their armor clattered as they walked, beating loud against Boromir’s temples. He sat up, keeping an arm against the mattress’s edge to steady himself, and touched his brow. As his fingers traveled along his skull, moving above the hairline, they grazed a livid bruise and he winced.

He looked at Merry, confused.

“What…?” he croaked.

But Merry was hesitant to reply. The hobbit was being visibly cautious.

“Boromir, I’m going to go, now,” he said slowly. “I think what you need is a good night’s rest.”

“Did I…?”

“You just had too much to drink, that’s all,” Merry murmured. His lip was swollen.

“Did I strike you?” Boromir asked, aghast.

Merry chuckled slightly. Lopsided with the broken lip. “Aye, my friend. There was quite a scuffle. If it weren’t for the guards, I would have had to get my sword.”

Boromir groaned, covered his eyes with a hand. “I’m – Merry, I’m – it’s the, I did not see, I thought - ”

He could not finish. He could not say it. Merry did not reply. But, after a few moments, he muttered, “It’s fine, Boromir.”

Boromir nodded, looked up, tried to smile but failed. Merry remained hovering a few paces away, studying a particular tile. Finally, with an awkward inhalation, and a twisted grin of his own, the hobbit shrugged:

“Well, good night then.”

“Good night.”

“*He what?*”

Faramir stood, mouth agape, staring at the hobbit. They were all gathered in the Great Hall;
Aragorn, Faramir, Imrahil, Gandalf, Legolas, Gimli and Merry. Aragorn sat in his throne, for he had taken to doing so before the formal coronation, while Gandalf sat to his right. All the others – Faramir, Legolas, Gimli, Imrahil – stood surrounding Merry. They stared down at him with crossed arms, stern looks, knitted brows.

“He struck me,” Merry repeated.

Again, Faramir mouthed several words silently, before turning to the others with wide-shocked eyes.

“And then?” Aragorn prompted gently. “Do you recall what happened after that?”

Merry snorted with a laugh. “Oh, aye, I had some brandy on board,” he glanced at the others somewhat guiltily, “I mean, I found it in the kitchens, it was already open – but I didn’t have as much as he had. In fact, I’m not sure he’ll remember it if we asked him.”

“He struck you with purpose?” Legolas asked. “Are you sure it was not an accident?”

Again, Merry laughed humorlessly.

“I think he clearly intended to knock my head off.”

“And what did he do after that?” Gimli asked.

“Well…” Merry’s smile faded, and his expression twisted with embarrassment. “He went for his dagger, the one he carries here, on the side, but a few guards spotted us and they hastened to us. He kept…,” Merry shifted, nervous, lowered his voice, “he kept babbling to himself. Like in a fit. He wouldn’t let anyone near him, and he kept begging us not to touch him, to stop doing whatever we were doing. And then he cried out for Third One – ”

“The elf who was with him in Barad-dûr,” Imrahil said.

“Aye,” Merry nodded. “Well, the guards couldn’t get him under control. They tried pulling him along, back to his chambers, but he fought the whole way. He tried to strike one of the younger guards – I don’t know his name – and he nearly stabbed a second. Eventually, one of them just struck him on the head,” Merry swallowed. “He didn’t come around until an hour or so later.”

No one could form a reply to this, no one wanted to comprehend the gravity of this. But all knew what it meant. All knew what happened to the prisoners of Barad-dûr or Dol Guldur, all knew of the unrecoverable minds, of the former heroes whittled down to weeping skeletons. Of freed prisoners not recognizing their own parents, their own children, their own wives. Of freed prisoners wandering the lands, either as tools of the Dark One or as gibbering beggars who ended their own pitiful existences as soon as they found a dagger sharp enough.

“He has been passing strange, as of late…” Legolas murmured, his soft voice dissolving the quiet. “Not two days past I spoke with him, idly, of elven news from Mirkwood, and he did break down into sobs, begging me to still my tongue.”

“Aye,” Gimli concurred. “And he outright fled from me once!”

“And that time at the council meeting, when he cried out as I touched him…” Imrahil added softly. “Legolas,” Aragorn said, leaning forward, “know you of these elves he traveled with? Pippin has
confirmed this story, and he says Boromir calls them the *adraefan*. He says they are from your land; perchance you know of these exiles?"

Legolas shook his head. “In truth, I had ne’er heard such a tale. But my father did correspond with me recently, asking for news on behalf of this elf – this Third One – though he did not say who this nameless elf was, or what it meant. I have since sent the body forth to Mirkwood, as well as a letter explaining all that has happened since Morannon.”

“The *adraefan*,” Gandalf began, booming. Everyone turned to him. “The *adraefan*’s tale has long since been erased from the Mirkwood annals. They were the Three Cowards in the Second Age, the three elves who betrayed their kinsmen and deserted the Last Alliance in the time of its greatest need. I am not surprised you do not know of them, Legolas, though you’re father certainly does – as it was he who exiled them. They were to live as wanderers, without names, without identity. And Thranduil did everything to silence all talk of them – he ripped from the books their every trace. For theirs was a great shame, a great shame…”

The wizard shook his head.

“Nonetheless,” he said, perking up, “it seems that they have regained enough honor if Thranduil should recognize them – nay, even *ask* for one! I know not what is happening in Mirkwood, but mayhap their battles with Boromir have eased some of these ancient punishments.”

“Aye…” Faramir said. “When I sat with my brother this month past, he did oft cry out of Easterlings surrounding him. It seems he battled the Wild Men with these three exiles.”

“And that is what led him to be captured,” Legolas murmured.

“And that’s what they meant, at the Black Gate, about the ‘last battle on Dagorlad,’” Merry muttered.

“Yet he will say nothing to me,” Faramir continued, his voice shaking. “I have asked him of it, but he is e’er cursing and swearing oaths and damning. He will not speak of it.”

“Aye…” Merry said.

Another heavy silence. Merry imagined he could hear each heart, each heart thumping madly, as they all considered, evaluated, digested this news. His own heart had gone to thumping madly ever since last night, when Boromir’s control dissolved as easily as smoke in the wind. He had tried laughing it off, had then tried solemnly accepting it as a sad change in his one-time friend, but Merry could not help the fear crawling over his skin as he had walked back to his own room the night before. After a few steps in the darkened corridor, constantly peering back to Boromir’s door to see if the Man was coming after him with a knife, Merry had eventually broke out into a full run, sprinting back to his room.

Boromir’s eyes. Open and unseeing. And the way he trembled and jerked back, as if Merry was worse than any orc, any Uruk-hai, any villain. And he kept saying – Merry closed his eyes, he did not want to think about it – how the Man kept saying *forgive me, Eru, forgive me!* as if he had confessed everything in Barad-dûr.

Did he tell them? Merry suddenly wondered. Had he confessed everything? Well, it did not matter now, Merry told himself firmly. Whatever he had said, it had not affected Frodo’s quest. They had won. Everything was fine now. It did not matter.

“You do know he cannot be made Steward.”
Everyone looked up. Gandalf had spoken. The old wizard was looking at Aragorn, who was pinching the bridge of his nose. And suddenly there was a thick tension, with veritable electricity emanating from Faramir, as everyone waited for Aragorn to respond. Finally, he nodded wearily.

“I know.”

“Nay,” Faramir blurted out, “nay. My lord, please, my brother cannot be so far gone as to have his title ripped from him.”

“Still your worries, nephew,” Imrahil said. “No one shall see it as ambition on your part.”

“Aye, but he will.”

“Well…” Imrahil shrugged slightly. “You know your brother. He has e’er been jealous of his glories and fame. He will not suffer gladly this change – but, unless his mind is truly gone, he will recognize its need. That is,” he turned to Aragorn, “if my King does indeed choose Faramir as Lord Steward.”

“I cannot see it otherwise.”

“Then you think he is mad?” Faramir asked.

Aragorn opened his mouth as if to speak, closed it, sighed and shook his head. “I do not know…”

“But he is unfit,” Gandalf said brusquely. “Have no doubt of that.”

“Very well,” Imrahil looked pointedly at Faramir. “I shall speak with him.”
Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

…He had taken to carrying his sword with him. Always loosened in its scabbard, always ready to be withdrawn. Even though his hands usually trembled too much to hold it steady, he would rest his palm against the hilt, feeling its weight against his hip, soothing him. He thought it would help ease the fear, the panic. It did not, not entirely. And rumors spread and soon there were whispers of madness – aye, he heard them. And everywhere, everywhere, he walked fully armed. For he was a soldier – a scarred, blackened, battered, ruined, frail, thin, useless, old soldier – a soldier of Gondor – a soldier – he was a soldier…

Imrahil found his older nephew stalking through the halls at midday. He noticed immediately that Boromir was clanging around fully armed – his sheathed broadsword, two daggers. Imrahil nearly wondered where his shield was, and if he should suddenly take to wearing his armor and chain mail indoors. With a sigh, he approached.

Arms wide, forced smile.

“Nephew!”

Boromir jerked back, clearly startled. But his own scarred face broke into a genuine smile, easing Imrahil’s apprehension. They were in one of the numerous colonnaded corridors leading to the Great Hall, and servants bustled to and fro, busy cleaning, polishing, decorating for tomorrow’s festivities.

As Boromir approached, Imrahil’s mind blazed wild with plans and strategies. Be tactful. Be direct. Today we give bad news. Imrahil was a politician. He knew how to feign emotion, how to feign neutrality. Yet his nephew troubled him more and more – the scars, the red-rimmed eyes, the sudden screams – so that he found it increasingly difficult to maneuver around him. No longer could he be completely candid, for certain phrases yoked strange responses from Boromir. No longer could be entirely controlled, either, for he found his usual tricks – a raised eyebrow, a mild shrug – usually provoked unexpected, and undesired, reactions. Remember that time in the Hall…

And and and?

How then to proceed? Quick thinking.

Imrahil opted to temper his worry, to wear his most mild, appealing mask. Part of him ached at having to resort to such tactics when dealing with blood-kin, but Boromir had changed. Had changed enough to warrant this, Imrahil assured himself. And so he approached, pulled Boromir into a rough, somewhat artificial hug, and laughed. When he pulled back, Boromir was chuckling slightly – just a rumbling half-grin.
“Ah, I see you are in good spirits today, nephew!” Imrahil exclaimed cheerfully. “No doubt for tomorrow.”

Boromir shrugged loosely, lowered his eyes. “Aye, ‘tis the day we have been waiting for…”

“Well.” And here Imrahil employed an arcing of an eyebrow and a sideways look. It garnered the desired response, for Boromir flushed slightly, understanding. His grin widened.

“Have no worries, uncle, I have long since lost any such ambitions.”

Imrahil nodded, touched Boromir’s forearm, indicating they should walk. “That is good to hear.”

Boromir looked at him quizzically, but said nothing.

“Now, nephew, e’en though you reek of the drink – ”

Boromir grinned. “’Twas last night. I remember naught of it.”

Imrahil smiled.

“ – nonetheless, I would discuss with you some matters. Preferably away from these walls with ears. Shall we to The Tree and Tower?”

It was the usual tavern for nobles and Citadel dwellers. Sitting snugly in the arch leading away from the sixth circle and down into the fifth circle, many deals had been made and borders delineated in that very tavern. It was only a short walk from the courtyard – and it derived its name from the supposed view from the top floor, slightly hindered by the taller buildings surrounding it, of the White Tree and the Tower of Ecthelion.

It was quiet, calming. Exactly the type of environment Imrahil needed.

Boromir shrugged, nodded his assent, and soon they were walking away from the corridor, passing fluttering banners and servants oiling ancient suits of armor, passing tapestries being dusted and floors being cleaned, banners and flags and all turning black and silver, they passed all this, from corridor to corridor, until they reached the slim door leading directly into the sixth circle.

Outside, dazzling sun. A steep set of stairs led from the balconies down onto the street.

The street. They walked over the cobblestones, avoiding the passing wains and nodding to the various passersby. My lord. My prince. Good day, my lord. The Houses of Healing came into view. A sense of electricity – of excitement – burned clear through the sunny day. It was an air of revelry, a heady celebration. Being outside, out of that stuffy Citadel, one was suddenly flooded with all senses – everything – sight, sound, smell, touch, taste – everything indicating that tomorrow was a day a millennium in the making.

As they walked, Boromir cleared his throat.

“How then in Belfalas?” he asked.

Imrahil shrugged with a sigh. “The War has left none unscathed. I will leave for Dol Amroth the coming fortnight.”

Boromir grunted. He was squinting in the afternoon glare. Imrahil opted to continue, and so he spoke idly of the varying skirmishes throughout the fief. The fields laid to waste, the rising prices in the village markets. The spreading sickness in some of the port towns. Yet he fluttered over the
darker details, never quite elucidating the entire story, for he saw Boromir tense and scowl.

Once that topic was exhausted, they fell into silence. Imrahil took this time to study his nephew’s slight limp, the way his arm sometimes curled around his stomach when he thought none looked, the dim eyes staring vacantly ahead. And, for a moment, a brief moment, just a split second, Imrahil felt a wave of grief wash over him. Yet he shook it off, immediately conscious of his expression. Neutral, old boy, neutral.

Not ten minutes later and the arch leading to the fifth circle came into view. The Tree and Tower stood tall and clean, a notable difference from the lower circle pubs. Outside, several wooden tables and chairs had been set up, and a group of Citadel Guardsmen were seated, leaning back, drinking from their tall mugs. When they saw Boromir and Imrahil arrive, the entire group clattered up, bowing.

“My lord.”

“My prince.”

“Good day, my lord.”

Boromir smiled as he passed. “Beregond. Enjoying yourself, I see? No duties tonight?”

One of the Guardsmen, a tall, dark-haired sort, flushed slightly. He bowed his head.

“Nay, my lord. And you will find many more princes and lords inside,” he grinned slightly. “It seems few have any duties to attend to this evening.”

Boromir and Imrahil chuckled, nodded, weaved their way around the tables and inside. Inside. Smoke blurring, soft laughter, muttered conversations. The tavern of polite society, the tavern of the political, where all were quiet, calculating. Imrahil spotted several familiar faces, and he nodded in their direction, receiving the same blank nods in return. Together with Boromir, they took the spiral staircase up to the second floor, where hopefully they could find some privacy.

Indeed, few tables were occupied on the second floor. The sound of wood scuffing wood. Glasses clunking against a table. Deep baritones murmuring. Yes, this was just what Imrahil sought. And so he led Boromir up another short flight of stairs, to the third level, where the roof slanted and two great windows overlooked the street on one side and the Citadel on the other, and only two tables could fit in the small attic-like space. It was empty here, for there had always been a taciturn agreement that the third level was reserved for private discussions, which only certain ears could hear. And whoever held the highest rank decided whether the third floor was available or not.

Knowing this, Boromir gave Imrahil a somewhat quizzical look as they took a seat in the booth by the southern window. Yet Imrahil merely smiled, unbuttoned his doublet, crossed his legs. Boromir seemed to want to say something, but in that moment the barmaid, a plump, elderly woman hustled up the stairs noisily.

“Up here today, my lords?” she asked as she clambered up, flushed and breathing hard.

Imrahil smiled. “So we are, good Nindë.”

She hustled in, curtsied lightly to the two of them. Still breathless. “And what shall my lords have this evening?”

Imrahil looked at Boromir, who waved vaguely, indicating to order for him. “Well… ’tis a chaos in the Citadel, I doubt we will be missed for the evening meal. If it please my lord,” Boromir grinned
crookedly; Imrahil continued, “we shall have something to eat. But later. For now, just a bottle of Dorwinion.”

“Aye, my lords,” the elderly woman bowed her head.

Once she was gone, they sat in silence for several moments. Boromir stared out the window, watching the traffic in the street below, giving Imrahil a few moments to study him. And so Imrahil stared at the prick marks by the brow and temple. The uneven beard. The slicing scar against the side of his mouth, pulling the smile up further. What weapon would make such a mark? In truth, Imrahil did not want to consider it.

Eventually, Boromir noticed the attention, and he smiled. Uneven. The scar pulling up one side.

“You’ve chosen the top floor, uncle. Should I be worried?”

Imrahil opened his mouth to reply, but in that moment, Nindë returned carrying a dark, nearly black bottle of wine and two glasses. She set the glasses down before the two Men, and then placed the bottle on the table. After retrieving a bottle-opener, she set to work jabbing the screw in the cork, twisting down.

“’Tis a strong vintage, my lords,” she huffed. “3015.”

“Splendid,” Imrahil said.

She uncorked the bottle with a pop, and, as was custom, poured the Man of higher status a drop. The deep red wine slipped into Boromir’s glass, just a sliver of it, and he drank. When he nodded his approval, she filled both glasses. And then, quickly and politely, she bowed her head and left.

After the creaking of the stairs disappeared, Imrahil raised his glass.

“To peace.”

Boromir raised his own, “To peace.”

They drank.

Silence. Muffled street noises from outside. Imrahil refilled both their glasses, smiled, decided to begin. The first move was always important. It set the tone and the pace of the conversation. And now he needed something to immediately lower Boromir’s defenses, something to lighten his mood, to cement their bond of familial affection. And so once Imrahil had poured both of them a goodly amount, he leaned back in his chair, took the glass, and grinned.

“I remember the first time I brought you here. You were not fifteen, I believe.”

Boromir grinned slightly. “Aye… it was the day I joined the Guard.”

“’Twas a good day.”

“Aye.”

They both drank.

“Ah, but this is a dull tavern for a young lad. All brooding, old Men here.”

Boromir smiled, said nothing.
Encouraged by Boromir’s somewhat calm demeanor, Imrahil decided to move closer to his desired topic.

“Your companions have many adventures to relate,” Imrahil commented idly. “Why, the dwarf’s tales of Moria alone could fill a book.”

“We were there less than four days. ‘Twas not so epic.”

“Ah, but nonetheless, they are grand tales. Grand tales.” Imrahil sipped. “I have heard also that you passed through the Golden Wood.”

“Aye.”

Imrahil waited for more. Boromir said nothing. He held his glass, stared out the window. The silence was not what Imrahil expected. And so he shifted in his seat, considered the wine bottle, glanced outside, inhaled, exhaled, planned. After a few moments, when it was clear that Boromir was not intending to say anything at all, and indeed seemed to have already forgotten of Imrahil’s presence, Imrahil cleared his throat. He leaned forward, stared gravely into his glass.

“Boromir…”

Boromir looked up.

“Boromir, you know that, as my nephew, as my blood-kin, I have always your interests at heart. And this is regardless of title. You know this, yes?”

Boromir did not respond. Imrahil sighed heavily – yes, he could allow some candor now, indeed it would make this talk all the more authentic. He poured both of them a third glass, slowly.

“I will not ask you of… what happened.” Boromir tensed. Imrahil continued, “That is only for you to share, if you so choose. But… it is clear that you have been affected. And this pains me to see.”

Still, the other Man said nothing, and so Imrahil continued, smoothing and weighing and testing his every word, letting the tone remain low, earnest.

“And Faramir worries as well. Last month – ai, we thought you lost, nephew. Lost to us, ne’er to return. When the King did heal you – well… ‘Twas a miracle. But it is clear that there is still… much to heal.”

“What mean you?” Boromir asked bluntly.

“Boromir, you say you do not recall anything of last night?”

Boromir shifted his weight, his gaze flickering across the table, nervous. He crossed his arms.

“I remember little. I recall only the halfling and… nothing more.”

“That halfling came to us this morning, Boromir. There was a mark on his jaw, and he claimed you struck him.”

Boromir dropped his gaze, stared at the ground.

“I did not want to believe him – but one of the young guards confirmed his story – ”

“It is true.”
The muttered remark interrupted Imrahil’s train of thought, his flow of speech. He stumbled to a halt, looked up at Boromir. The younger Man had his eyes locked on the floor, his arms crossed. Rigid.

“I did not mean to…” Boromir continued, “’Twas a moment of madness.”

A pause.

Direct. Now. Now. Do it now. The timing was right. Imrahil raised his eyes, stared at Boromir until the younger Man met his gaze.

“Boromir, the King is considering Faramir to be his Steward.”

Silent explosion. Nothing changed physically, yet Imrahil could hear the very air charge itself with crackling energy. Boromir’s expression remained blank, yet he stared at Imrahil now so heavily, so fiercely, that Imrahil had to break away and look out the window again. They sat in this swelling tension for several moments, listening to all the other sounds, counting the seconds.

Finally, Imrahil spoke again:

“Give yourself time to heal, Boromir… Young Beregond has kept the Guard and Faramir has attended to all the Steward’s matters for the past two months. Nephew, we thought you lost – you had already been replaced. And when you awoke… I know not what the King intends, but think of yourself first, Boromir. Take this time to ease old wounds, to rest in a time of peace. Let Faramir bear the burden of the Stewardship.”

Boromir’s jaw clenched visibly. He drank his wine, finished it.

“So my brother usurped my birth-right as I was mending in the Houses of Healing?”

“Nay. Faramir played no part in this decision. He merely attended to what you could not in those days. And Boromir…” Imrahil lowered his voice as he heard laughter from downstairs, “we did not expect you to come back to yourself. The Healers said your mind was scarred beyond repair…” he added in a low hiss, “We did not e’en think you capable of living unattended anymore.”

Boromir’s expression darkened. He took the bottle, poured himself a full glass, ground his teeth audibly, slammed the bottle back down. Imrahil waited, focused and wary. All his senses came alive with warning – and so he watched cautiously as Boromir took the glass, scowling, and drank. Boromir did not look at him – he merely stared out the window.

Finally, he growled low:

“Tell my brother I shall not allow him so easy a victory.”

“It is the King’s decision. Not Faramir’s.”

Boromir clenched his jaw. “Then what do you suggest I do?”

“Accept it.”

Silence.

“Very well.” Boromir exhaled. He leaned forward, muttered very low: “Leave me.”

Imrahil hesitated. Boromir looked at him.
“Leave, uncle. You have played your role well enough. Go tell them of my reaction. Tell them I am digesting.”

Suitably chastised, Imrahil raised his eyebrows mildly, shrugged, and rose from the table. Now suddenly seemed the time to drop his political demeanor, to speak candidly, to console perhaps. And so he stood for a moment, struggling to find the appropriate words, but eventually surrendered to the silence and simply bowed his head formally. Boromir ignored him and did nothing save stare out the window until Imrahil was gone.

It was dark when Boromir exited *The Tree and Tavern*, and he found the Citadel Guardsmen still outside, but standing now, preparing to leave. And Minas Tirith – Minas Tirith, all the city, everyone, everything, it was alive with celebration. Even though the coronation was tomorrow, already the city was in revelry – and so the streets were crowded with people, and nobles were filing into *The Tree and Tavern*, jostling Boromir as he passed, nodding and bowing and saluting. And women and children were unfurling long banners of the White Tree from their windows, and someone was playing the lute from further off, singing.

This joy did not infect Boromir. Rather, he limped out of the tavern, scowling, feeling the pain in his right leg travel up his entire length, feeling the anger, the humiliation, the proud fury bubbling deep in his heart. Beregond of the Guard saw him leaving, and called to him three times, yet Boromir did not turn. Only when Beregond put his hand on the Man’s shoulder did Boromir note him.

“My lord!” Beregond cried, breathless. “Back to the Citadel so soon?”

Boromir turned, saw Beregond watching him expectantly. Behind the younger Man, the other Guardsmen mingled, talked, laughing. Boromir knew all of them. All these Men. His Men. His soldiers. Some had fought with him in his Osgiliath days, others he knew from his youth. And so, perhaps it was the wine, perhaps it was the company, whatever it was, Boromir’s tension was immediately eased when he turned to the group.

He smiled.

“Aye, Beregond,” he clapped the young lieutenant on the shoulder, “up to bed.”

One of the other Guards, the dark-haired Iorlas, younger brother to Beregond, laughed loudly. “Our Captain grows soft in his old age!”

He was elbowed by one of the other soldiers, but it was clear they were all a little drunk, for they chuckled and talked loudly and ignored the heavy looks from the elderly lords sitting further off.

…And how Boromir’s heart ached to hear them call him *Captain*, to see these young Men, these young soldiers, as he had once been, laughing and smiling and drinking and and and… And he was no longer part of that – they had ripped it away from him, Barad-dûr had ripped it away from him – Aragorn had ripped it away from him – but here was Beregond, and here was Iorlas, and there, further off, standing with welcoming smiles, were Amlaith and Ragnor and and and…

Boromir grinned.

“And what do you knaves have planned for the evening?”

“Ah… well, my lord,” Beregond clopped his heels together in mock formality, bowed his head gravely. “As you know, this fine evening is being called the King’s Eve. And, as everyone knows, King’s Eve is to be celebrated in the taverns! With ale!”
The other soldiers laughed, cheered. Some of the nobles – the lord of this or that fief, the minister of this or that matter – were also listening. Grey-haired Men smiling crookedly, watching the young soldiers banter.

“Join us, Captain!” Iorlas beckoned.

“Aye, grace us with your presence, my liege!”

“‘Tis been years since we have visited the Laughing Oliphaunt.”

“Or the Rose Garden!”

“Or the Skulking Squire!”

The names flew by Boromir too quickly to register properly and he laughed, and they laughed as well, and Beregond took him by the arm, pulled him into the group.

Still chuckling, Boromir looked around the young Men’s faces. “I know not of the Rose Garden.”

“Oh!” Ginger-haired Ragnor cried. “Oldest brewery in the second circle – ”

“So they claim,” Eomund interrupted.

“Aye, so they claim, my lord,” Ragnor ceded. “They claim they brew since the days of Eärnur.”

Boromir raised an eyebrow. “Let us to it then.”

And so he joined the Guardsmen, and they walked down the fifth circle, and stopped first at The Skulking Squire. And the night wore on, with much ale and mead and wine and sometimes brandy being poured, and songs were sung, so that Boromir laughed and told lewd stories and reminisced over the days in Osgiliath or Ithilien. And never once did Beregond, or young Iorlas, or ginger-haired Ragnor, or any of the others, ask him of his Quest nor of the War. Nay, they let it all be, and for this he was grateful.

Instead, much was as it had been in his youth. The streets and taverns were crowded with people, and the Guard was showered with praise and admiration wherever they went. And when the merchants or bartenders or passing groups of young soldiers recognized Boromir, they always insisted on clapping him on the shoulder, on shaking his hand.

And so Boromir drank. Drank enough to forget what Imrahil had told him, drank enough to forget that this was a time of peace, and his life with the Guard was finished, and his life now as a soldier, as a leader, was over. He drank enough so that when they all went stumbling out of The Skulking Squire and down towards The Laughing Oliphaunt, they slipped on the cobblestones, and laughed at each other for it, and had to stop often to relieve themselves in the nearest alley.

Beregond, Boromir dimly realized, held himself in check for most of the night – acting, even in the taverns, as the informal leader. Taking command. Relieving Boromir of his usual position. For Beregond, indeed, had often been Boromir’s second-in-command, and he had led the Guard since Boromir’s departure. He was a good Man.

The streets of Minas Tirith spun. The street lanterns wobbled, dizzy. Voices, loud and slurring, echoing in Boromir’s ears, so that when he spoke, his own voice sounded distant. And Boromir found himself stumbling sideways down the street – for it felt as if the ground pitched this way and that way, as on a storm-tossed ship. The Guard was all speaking loud, laughing, teasing, jesting, supporting each other. And Boromir heard also the buzz in the air – the conversations between
wives, calling to each other from one window to the next, discussing, gossiping. The children shrieking and running and they are still out, even at this late hour? And the elderly Men sitting against the marble benches with their pipes, smoking and talking and gesticulating wildly.

All the pain had faded. Boromir found himself smiling easily and chortling at nearly anything that was said. At one point, while Ragnor was telling a particularly obscene story, Boromir nearly tripped and fell, though immediately young Eomund swept in and caught him. He pulled Boromir’s left arm over his shoulders. Boromir felt only a slight twinge in the scar – in the old wound – but he was too slothful to comment on it and too numb-clumsy to walk without support.

“Easy on the cobblestones, Captain,” the blond Man slurred, snorting with a half-hiccup, half-chuckle. “They sway…”

Boromir could only nod his assent. Without his realizing it, they had already entered the thin alleyway which led to the Guard’s historical tavern of preference – The Laughing Oliphaunt. It had always been a military establishment, and Boromir had learned to drink here as a young lad. For it was just indecent enough for a soldier’s pleasures, but still respectable enough for the highbred. And so always the elite – the Guardsmen, the archers of Blackfoot Vale, the Rangers of Ithilien – they had always come to this tavern.

As the clumsy group clambered in, Boromir remembered something: once he had inadvertently run into his brother here, after years apart, when both had just returned from their respective battles, and both had come to relieve their sore muscles and heavy hearts with a quick drink before ascending to the Citadel. That was five years ago.

Now The Laughing Oliphaunt was vibrating with raw energy. Music. Laughter. Smoke. In Boromir’s already drunken state, it seemed to throb with such a force, such a force, to sway and spin, and the entanglement of bodies, that he was immediately grateful for his fellow Guardsmen on all sides who pushed through the crowd for him, who held him upright. And so they edged through this crowd, earning cheers and joyful shouts and happy cries, for many recognized this or that Guardsman, and most recognized Boromir amidst the heads. Indeed, someone thrust a mug into Boromir’s hand before he had even found a seat, and he smiled into the crowd, raising it.

“Ho! The Guard arrives!”

“The Lord Boromir!”

“Boromir the Tall is come!”

An explosion of talk. Music rising, rising, rising with every beat, every bellowed chorus. A large booth on the far side, against the wall and away from the seething mass in the middle of the tavern, was immediately vacated so that the Guard could sit. And so they all clumsily fell into the booth, giggling and steadying themselves against the table and jostling each other.

“Amlaith!” Iorlas cried over the noise. The bearded Guardsman, Amlaith, older than the rest, nearly Boromir’s age, looked over. Iorlas cupped his hand over his mouth: “Where did you find that ale?”

Amlaith shrugged, indicated Boromir, who was also holding a mug. The younger Iorlas blew his breath out in mock irritation, looked over his shoulder and strained to see over the mass of people. Finally, the barmaid arrived, and she took all the orders, and, after an indeterminate amount of time, Boromir found himself crowded behind steins and mugs and glasses and goblets. The mass of people surged forward, fell back, laughed, sang. Someone danced a jig. Boromir finished his stein, wiped the bitter drink from his beard. He swayed in his seat, blinked, attempted to focus on the
conversation between Ragnor and Eomund, but found he could not follow what was being said.

He found a solid presence beside him, and he leaned against it instinctively. It was Beregond. The dark-haired Man was leaning forward, arms crossed, elbows on the table, watching the scene with half-lidded eyes. When Boromir noticed him, he smiled slightly.

“What of your sons, Ber…” Boromir hiccuped slightly, catching a belch in his throat, “…Beregond. What of Bergil?”

Beregond grinned tiredly, ran a hand over his face. “Bergil is at home with his mother, but Borlas insisted on staying with his aunt this evening… She lives in the fifth, and she has a young son of the same age as he. So he is enjoying himself.”

Boromir nodded, not bothering to open his eyes, just listening…

And suddenly a toast was being made, and Boromir was jostled awake, for he had fallen asleep with his head against the wall, and all the commotion suddenly roused him, confused.

“To the King! To the return of the King!”

“Hear, hear!”

Boromir’s cup was inevitably pulled up with the tide, and he drank, as everyone else did. And Beregond shifted at Boromir’s elbow, lowered his voice:

“The younger lads… Iorlas and Ragnor… They still mean to go to the Rose Garden. Though I’d say it’s back to bed for all of us…”

Boromir roused himself enough to shake his head. “Nay, nay. One more stop, good Beregond. And then up to the Citadel – later. But come. It has been too long since we have all been out. This is a good day.”

Beregond gave Boromir a look, but Boromir ignored him, and instead struggled to stand. And so they all stood, all swaying now, the more sober ones helping the less, and the Guard filed out of The Laughing Oliphaunt and back into the alley. And after relieving themselves in the side alley, where a veritable line of drunken Men had formed, they stumbled back into the fourth circle.

It was late now, very late. The windows of each home were dark. The stars, crystal bright against the black sky. Stragglers in the street, most people had gone to bed by now. Beregond and Iorlas walked ahead, the two brothers, setting the slow pace, talking quietly. Behind them, Eomund walked alone, hands stuffed into his doublet’s pockets, his lanky legs striding on, zigzagging. Boromir, Amlaith and Ragnor followed, silent.

The city slept now, while the banners and flags and flowers were already prepared, waiting for tomorrow. With slow, lazy steps, an occasional grasp of a shoulder to steady himself, Boromir walked beside his soldiers, all formality long forgotten. They had often done this – in the past – the nights after returning from Osgiliath, the nights when a comrade had fallen, or when a particular battle had been won. The Men loved Boromir for it, that the battlefield’s captain would sit with them, drink with them, jest with them. And Boromir sometimes did it because he too needed the respite, or sometimes he did it because he knew the Men needed to see him there, amidst them, even when he was so weary from battle he thought his limbs should fail him ere he reached his bed…
But that was all gone now, all finished. There would be no more such nights.

Boromir sighed, leaned heavily against Amlaith. Stumbling steps. Murmured talk. Consciousness fading in and out.

*The Rose Garden.* Boromir suddenly found himself seated, leaning against a stone wall. A courtyard. Dark now, too dark to see, but he vaguely perceived wooden crossbeams strewn with roses above him. A gentle night breeze. And the light, a warm glow, coming from the tavern itself, while out here, in this small garden, all was dark. Soft conversations. Old Men smoking their pipes. Very quiet, calm.

Most of the Guard was too drunk to consider any more toasts, and so they drank sparingly, slowly. Boromir tasted ale on his tongue, felt the heavy glass in his hand. Just enough strength to set it down, just enough control to not let it fall… Boromir leaned back against the wall, nearly hoping to sink into it. It felt as if it were liquid, moving back and forth. He struggled to remain upright against it, to avoid sliding down onto the ground. Half-lidded eyes. A silent, muted buzz in his ears. Distantly, Ragnor chuckled softly over something Beregond was saying.

A young woman. The barmaid. Bending over him, and Boromir smelled the roses and thyme on her. Slowly, he looked up. Studied her. But his vision swam. And it was dark, and he was tired, and he felt he should sleep here, on the ground, and the nausea, too much ale…

But he desired her to stay, because he liked the smell, and how quietly she worked.

As an echo, a distant echo, for he was very drunk by now, Boromir heard her speak:

“And how is your wife, Lord Beregond? And your little ones?”

“Ah, they’re fine, Ana. Thank you. And your brother?”

“Mending, still mending, my lord.”

She removed Boromir’s glass. Boromir watched her dully.

“Though he did yell at me not to coddle him just yesterday – so that is a good sign.”

A soft laugh. “Aye, it is. He was a fine lad. I’ll come visit sometime.” Shifting. “Have you met our captain, Ana? This is Lord Boromir.”

Attention on him. Boromir pulled himself up, attempted his most sober look. He nodded gravely to the young woman. “Good evening, my lady.”

She smiled kindly. “My lord.” She looked at Beregond, eyes warm. “‘Tis not late, my lord? The sun will rise soon, and tomorrow I should say we are all busy with the coronation.”

Eomund, who had his head in his hand, tilted sideways, nearly asleep, looked up. “The coronation?”

Iorlas groaned, dropped his head into his arms. “And I have morning duty…”

“Aye, it is late enough. Indeed, let us to the Citadel, gentlemen,” Beregond said, standing. He chuckled slightly. “It seems our captain is ready for bed as well.”

And Boromir felt hands jerking his doublet, pulling him up, and a few pats on the back, and his arm around someone’s shoulder and and and… He swung his head around, saw a retreating form,
the young barmaid, Ana, carrying the tray loaded with empty glasses back into the tavern. Blurring into the warm glow.

“What is her name? Ana?”

But he did not hear the reply. Instead, all faded.

Jerking back to consciousness. A circle – which circle? Third? Fifth? Boromir pulled his arm from Amlaith’s shoulder, muttering, My own legs can carry me… Stumbling to the side. Hands on the wet cobblestones, breaking his clumsy fall. And then rough hands pulling him back up, back onto unsteady knees, while both his arms were pulled around two sets of shoulders. Again, nothing…


“All well, Captain? You are turning green.”

Darkness. Nothing.

An alleyway. Someone gagging him. Rough fingers pulling away from the mouth, away from the throat, just as Boromir jerked forward to vomit. And now a steady hand against his back. Amlaith’s deep voice, booming soft, There. Good, Captain, good. It was the King’s brandy at the Oliphaunt, I wager. That’s near poison. Trembling legs, leaning against the wall for support. A cat meowing. From further off, Boromir could hear the other Guardsmen talking, lingering, waiting.

Still shivering, but walking on his own legs. He recognized the circle now, they were in the fifth. The Citadel loomed ahead. Almost there. A hand against Beregond’s shoulder for support. The others talked.

“What time is the coronation?”

“Midday.”

“Oh, Valar…”

“The coronation starts at midday, or we must be ready by midday?”

“Shhh. Iorlas, you - you talk too loud.”

“How’s the Captain?” Ragnor turning around.

Boromir snorted indignantly as he took his uneven steps. “I am well, thank you.”

“Aye, you are now!”

“Captain, we half-dragged you since the second circle.”

“And what do you eat? Bricks? You weigh more than a horse.”

“A fat horse.”

Laughter. Despite himself, Boromir smiled.
Chorus VI (Coronation)

Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

Ahhh…

Breathe the eternal sigh, Aragorn,
you are our King.

Flocking birds burning away into the bright sun
sun sun sunlight splayed
all through the Citadel, joyous
and crowds, thronging crowds of Minas Tirith
cheering cheering cheering silent…

But you do not hear them, Aragorn,
do you?
As the heavy crown, tall, wing-tipped
glowing intense, burdened
is placed on your head
your head
the crown
pressing against your temples and brow
whispering to you with promises to weigh
to weigh you down with a kingdom…

And so Mithrandir blesses,
and Frodo bows,
and all bow now, all bow
bowing to you, Aragorn,
as you straighten, steely-eyed
looking out over the waves
of hair glowing in the fickle sun.

Look right, Aragorn:
You see Boromir, kneeling, smiling rare,
Eru, scarred and gaunt and red-eyed…
You see Faramir, kneeling, smiling broad,
Eru, pale and weary and…

Thoughts: I have inherited a wounded kingdom.

Look left, Aragorn:
You see Mithrandir, bowing, lips quirked,
A wizard’s counsel will be needed…
You see the hobbits: one, two, three, four,
Pallidistant Frodo, Loyalstout Sam,
Slywise Merry, Innocent Pippin…
And you see Gimli and Legolas, too
and Êomer and Êowyn and Imrahil
and and and…

The pale crisp sky over what-was-Mordor.

And the crown, the crown
living, breathing, buzzing
whispering
so that your royal blood quickens
and your ancient heart races
and suddenly you know it all
yes, yes
you understand now…

Aragorn.
All the Kings of Old,
all the West,
all the glory, silent.

The chant, almost mournful,
everyone’s breath is stilled.

“Et Eärello Endoreenna utûlien…
Sinome maruvan ar Hildinyar tenn' Ambar-metta…”

And this moment is locked away in time, forever sealed.
Coronation

Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

On the morning of King Elessar's coronation, Boromir awoke, still inebriated, nauseous, head pounding, and with such a pain in his knees that he could not walk but for a hobbling limp. The day was cloudy, and he felt it in his knees and shoulder, all of the old wounds tightening, as if the tendons had drawn together, stringing achingly taut over the bone. As if the fading alcohol was tensing his entire body – his sinews growing rigid, painful. He knew the old technique of easing the after-drink’s effects was to have a quick morning drink, he knew that would relieve him enough from this morning pain, and so he found his old flask, drank from it, even though it disgusted him to do so, and tucked it into his pocket for later.

Attendants. They bustled in, surrounded him, dressed him, cut his hair, trimmed his beard, nearly cleaned his ears until he barked at them to leave him be. The most ceremonial of attire was laid out - all black with fine silver embroidery, heavy cloak, polished black leather boots. The Steward's emblem – is it even needed anymore? – the suffocatingly stiff collar. Boromir endured it all until he felt the walls closing in on him, and then he roared an order to be gone, scattering the entourage.

An hour later, someone arrived from the Houses of Healing. Ioreth. The elderly woman bustled in at mid-morning, for Boromir had snarled at an attendant to find him some balm for his knees, and she had come as a result of this request, bearing a bitter draught.

"Something to smooth the day's edges," she said rather vaguely.

"Just give me something so that I may kneel when the time comes."

The draught worked quickly. It dulled his mind to a half-drowsy, half-giddy state; just enough for him to feel the pain as a throb, and not a sting, just enough for him to half-smile when King Elessar had been crowned. He passed the rest of the day - with all the Citadel cleaned and polished and fashioned in high celebration; and all the attendants trailing each figure, Boromir, Faramir, Aragorn, the halflings; and the swelling crowd amassed in the Citadel courtyards and beyond, further down, spilling out into the sixth circle and further; the entire ceremony, with its pomp and blazing silver trumpets - all of this Boromir had passed in a semi-drugged, residually intoxicated state, his mind clouded, his vision blurred. Barad-dûr had been silenced.

Yet, as day became night, and the celebration moved to the Great Hall of Feasts where a great revelry would take place, Boromir found his knees alive with pain, his stomach festering, and, once again, the stale torment of Barad-dûr itching at his every scar. As the draught faded, he grew more and more troubled, scowling so obviously that Pippin had jested with him when they took their seats, thinking Boromir was listening to their conversation. Ah, I'm sure they won't bother you, Boromir. I can tell them everything they need to know – and then think, the Song of Pippin! Ha! I'd like to hear it!

The Great Hall of Feasts. They all sat now, all the Fellowship, as King Elessar had wished it, at the
long wooden table, front and center. The King sat in the center, with Gandalf to his right, followed by Legolas, Gimli, and Boromir at the end. On his left, Frodo, then Sam, followed by Pippin and Merry. The other tables, filled to the brim with laughing, talking, excited courtiers and courtesans, nobles, governors, soldiers, elves, everyone, they were all arranged around the room, with a space left in the center for bards.

The feast. Venison, pork, quail, pheasant, fish. Bread and mead and the finest wine, aged to perfection. Vegetables of every sort - even the most exotic, coming from as far as Umbar. Spices and fruits and sweetmeats, everything. Each table was loaded with food, and there was much talking, laughing, singing.

“Have I yet told you of Helm’s Deep?”

“…and the ships, black sails, I cried, for knowing not…”

“Nay, Gandalf, unfair! You cannot stop there!”

Boromir could not eat. He could barely tolerate the stuffy Hall now that the draught had left him. Left him free to wander in his dark thoughts, left him free to grit his teeth at the pain. He prayed they did not ask him to rise and make a toast, for his knees blazed acute, the ache crawling through his legs, into every other old wound. He began to wonder how he would stand at all, and if they would have to drag him out.

“To the King! To Elessar Telcontar!”

“Hear! Hear!”

“And to the Nine Walkers, to the Fellowship!”

“Ha ha! Oh, sit down, you old fool!”

“…wait, of what was I speaking? I have forgotten.”

“Surely that is fiction! I cannot believe it!”

“Hear! Hear!”

And with each cheer, with each toast, with each song, Boromir felt the panic grow - the walls, the walls, the fire and the walls and so close, so close, all closing in, the mask, I cannot breathe - until he felt he would never be able to resist this night if he did not drink himself into numb docility. Yet he could not do that either, for tonight was as much political orchestration as revelry. And so he drank sparingly, ignoring his food, slouching low to relieve the pain in his legs.

“To Frodo of the Nine Fingers!”

“…nay, nay, they used a curved blade, such as the Haradrim prefer…”

“What wine is this? I could swear it be of the year 3015…”

At the end of the table, he had few to speak with. Gimli spent much of his time bantering with Legolas and Aragorn, or recounting, for the seemingly thousandth time, his adventures in Rohan or on the Pelennor. At the nearest table, perpendicular to his own, Boromir saw Imrahil, Faramir, Éowyn, Éomer and a slew of others. Occasionally, Faramir would turn his head and smile warmly at him, but the younger brother spent most of his time speaking with Éowyn. Looking further on, he saw Beregond, Iorlas and Amlaith seated with all the soldiery. Iorlas caught Boromir’s eye,
raised his goblet and made a humorous, disgusted face.

“Right ho, Pip! But tell them of the…”

“Ha! Perhaps they will, I know not, but in Umbar they have ever…”

“…three score, I swear, and the sun beating down…”

And so Boromir drank, slouching low, scowling, with nothing to tear his thoughts from the usual, empty void - that black place, where all was screaming dripping tearing thrusting dying and dying and dying again. Once seeing that he was, indeed, not needed for any toasts or conversations - *Imrahil is right, I have already been replaced* - Boromir allowed himself another goblet, another swallow of the only draught at hand, the only medicine to numb his pains. The noise of the Hall grew loud as the night wore on and tongues were loosened.

“Ha ha ha! I will tell you this one, but, my lady, close your ears, if you will…”

“A song! A song! Let the periann sing!”

“…aye, and what would an elf princeling know of *that*?”

The bards arrived. Songs. Songs for every Fellowship member, even himself, Boromir recognized dully, though by this time he was becoming too inebriated to follow the lyrics. But he saw others listening, smiling, cheering, nodding their heads in his direction, and so he guessed whatever the bard sang, it was a lie. Harps, lutes, the four-stringed guitar.

“…and all who cried, voices, all did cry,
Nay, not dead, villains speak but a lie – a lie – a lie,
Through smoke and fire
Our fair prince wanders
With shining sword and shining eyes
And shining smile burns bright the skies
Crying ‘GONDOR! GONDOR!’…”

“Oh, that’s enough, Sam, I should say…”

“…here’s a better one, if you do heed, this one will make even Prince Imrahil blush…”

“…three elves lost and gone,
Spreading ’round their weary song,
‘Exiles we are! Exiles free!
Free to roam and wander, ever free!’…”

“Are you going to eat that?”

“…it has been an Age since I have traveled through those lands.”

Blurs. Disarray. Confusion. Smoke choking the room. Yells. A dance. Boromir leaned forward, feeling his limbs suddenly loose and unwieldy, placed his goblet somewhat heavily on the table. A serving-maid arrived. She poured, she nodded. He smiled, he drank. The knees were silenced. Barad-dûr screams were softened. He drank again.

Suddenly, Faramir was before him. Boromir had not seen him stand from his table and walk over, but when he blinked blearily his brother was abruptly there, smiling red-faced.
"Ah, elder brother..." Was Faramir drunk as well? "How do you enjoy the feasting?"

"Well enough," Boromir shrugged. He felt a vague pull at his weak shoulder, but all was numb now, numb and silent and dull and tolerable.

"You sit apart."

Boromir blinked, looked around. Indeed, there was a crowd at the far end of his table, where the hobbits were. Gimli and Legolas had left their seats, and all the others were leaning over, talking, laughing, cheering. He could not see, but there was some sort of contest going on. The rest of the Hall was a mess of bards, acrobats, singers, people mingling and smoking and drinking. It was dizzying to behold, and Boromir could make little sense of it.

"I did not realize."

Faramir straightened, surveyed the scene. As Boromir's vision focused, he saw his brother's hair was somewhat damp near the temples and neck. Sweat. A face flushed with drink. Yes, Faramir was a little drunk. Yet he stood straight and tall, and so was in better condition than Boromir, at least.

"Come," Faramir said suddenly. "Let us out of this stifling Hall." He looked at Boromir with serious expression. "I wish to speak with you."

Boromir nodded his assent, struggled to stand. His knees nearly gave out in the exertion, but soon enough, with the help of the table and armrest, he was up, if somewhat unsteadily. And so they left the Hall, quickly, inconspicuously, Boromir limping diagonally and Faramir striding loosely.

The Courtyards. The moon waxed large, illuminating everything blue. Once outside, with the cool breeze and the clear air and the silence, Faramir slowed his pace, loosened his collar. Boromir too unbuttoned some of his doublet, feeling finally less constricted. And so they walked at a leisurely pace, passing the White Tree as it hung mournfully dry, passing the guards on duty, approaching one of the walls. And there they found a private spot, leaned against the parapet, peered down into the sleeping city.

They watched Minas Tirith below them for some time, until Faramir spoke:

"'Twas becoming intolerable. I thought I should swoon if I did not suffocate first."

Boromir snorted.

"Aye."

"The Lady Éowyn did leave some time ago, and I too would have left had not the good Éomer snared me into a ring of questions and talk and tales." Faramir sighed. "It is good to be outside."

Boromir remained silent.

"Boromir?"

"Aye?"

"You have been quiet this evening."

Boromir looked over his brother's shoulder. "Is there a bench nearby? I would sit ere my legs lose all their strength."
Faramir laughed. "Ah! Too much wine? That is the brother I knew. Come, there is one a ways down."

Yet Boromir, who limped and clenched his teeth and half-grinned, shook his head and said, "'Tis not only the drink." They arrived to the bench, where Boromir unceremoniously collapsed, adjusting himself so that he could stretch his legs. "'Tis these wretched knees." He grunted. "They have ached since morning."

Faramir eased himself beside him. "When did you injure them so?"

"You will laugh if I tell you."

"All the more reason to tell."

"I fell in a well."

"A well?" Faramir sputtered. He chuckled. "How – ?"

"'Twas during a light skirmish with an Easterling band. We came on them, in surprise, and, in the midst of the fighting, I was knocked in."

"This was during your time with the adraefan?"

Boromir's expression darkened, losing any trace of mirth. He nodded, muttered stiffly, "Aye..."

Silence.

"You ne'er speak of them."

"I do not wish to."

"Why?"

Boromir did not respond. Instead, he changed the subject, "What did you wish to speak of?"

At this, Faramir's expression fell. He became stony-faced. He looked away, sighed, crossed his arms, shifted his weight. Boromir immediately understood - for these were Faramir's typical gestures when he had poor news to deliver. It seemed every member of the Citadel had some wicked tale to tell him since returning home. Boromir waited.

Finally, Faramir looked down, picked a lint from his breeches, swallowed visibly. "Brother... what have they told you of our father?"

"That he died upon the walls of the city, during the Siege."

"Nothing else?"

"That is all I know."

"There is more to it."

...akrum, glu-bûb. Krank kul-matûrz, matûrz , matûrz sha ghaash...

Ai, no.

Boromir shifted in his seat. Trickling, trickling, trickling. Barad-dûr trickling, like the drip drip drip
in his cell. It was spilling in again. His vision swam back and forth, but he saw Faramir clenching and unclenching his hands, in obvious discomfort. And Boromir suddenly desired to stop Faramir, to tell him that he did not want to know, not now, for the black memories were spilling in, and soon he would be debilitated, soon he would be again - again - again - *do not think of it.*

"As you know..." Faramir began, his voice tight with emotion, "our father did slip easily into despair. More and more as the Shadow grew, he..."

Short breaths. Barad-dûr whispers. Boromir could not still the pounding in his heart. As Faramir spoke, Boromir began to search within his doublet. He shoved his hand in, searched, searched, finally found the cool, calming metal of the flask. This he pulled out, began to unscrew, only half-listening to what Faramir was saying. Nay, there was no need to listen. Boromir already knew, already understood, could already guess. And he did not want to listen, no, no, no. Could not his brother leave this to another day? Another moment? An easier moment?

...*nar rad, flogr-ufum garmadh...*

Faramir did not seem to notice the movement, he was entirely preoccupied, entirely focused, his brow knit in painful remembrance, his voice strained.

...*two arrows, so I knew nothing of this until Prince Imrahil told me. No one desired to tell me the truth of it. 'Tis an evil tale, aye, and – and I...*

Boromir drank from his flask, feeling the warm liquor burn through his throat, burn away some of the Mordor whispers, burn away some of the pain in his knees and prickling in his stomach. His vision swam, back and forth, back and forth, swaying, so that it nauseated him to focus on Faramir and listen to his brother’s murmurs. And the gibbering tongue, that gibbering whisper, fading in and out, pounding in his chest, his heart, blackening, and he could hear only – *Krank kul-matûrz, matûrz , matûrz sha ghaash!*

Yet, while Boromir’s discomfort grew, so did Faramir’s. For he was telling the tale now, telling the tale’s vile core, stumbling over his words, choking on certain memories, staring at his boots. Leaning forward, elbows on knees, face turned away.

...*burned himself alive...*

Boromir could not listen, not now. He would hear of it later. Now, panic. Now, short breath. Now, heart pounding. Now, now, now. Now was not a good time. He felt the sudden, childish urge to find the Guardsmen – to find his friends in the Guard who never spoke of such things. And as he held the flask, it began to shake and shiver and tremble in his wavering hands. Finally, Faramir noticed, for he looked up, tears in his eyes, and saw Boromir’s hands. And Faramir, poor Faramir, misread this reaction, and placed a comforting hand on his brother’s weak shoulder.

"I am sorry, brother," Faramir whispered.

Boromir stood suddenly, the pain igniting in his knees, the flask falling from his grip, clattering against the ground. He pulled his arm away, stood, stumbled a step or two.

"Enough, Faramir, enough!" he barked. "I will hear no more."

Faramir blinked. He still held his hand forward, where Boromir had been.

"What?"

"Why do you harass me with this talk?"
Faramir wiped his eyes, stood slowly. “What mean you?”

“Do not think you will yoke any pity from me!”

A distant part of Boromir’s mind registered vaguely that this was wrong. A distant part urged him to stop, to end this senseless ranting. This was his brother. And his father? What was it? Burned alive? A distant part of his mind was screaming.

Faramir’s face flushed. “Pity?”

“Aye, ’tis always been the same with you! E’er dwelling on whatever minor insult has injured you! Can you not see that perhaps I care not to hear these wild tales?”

Stop. Stop. This is madness.

“Wild tales?” Faramir’s stood, aghast. “Brother, it is the truth!”

“Well, I will hear none of it! You are only hear to torment me, and what have I done to you? Nothing! Is this the respect you - ”

“Boromir, are you mad? ’Tis our fath – ”

And in a sudden flash, a burst forward, an enraged roar, Boromir grabbed Faramir’s collar, twisting it viciously, strangling him, so that Faramir’s hands instinctively flew up. They slammed back against a wall, Faramir writhing away, Boromir pushing forward.

“Aye, perhaps I am mad, perhaps!” Boromir barked, pushed further. Faramir choked something, pulled at his fingers. “Perhaps, perhaps. For I hear screaming and now you tell me our father is dead by his own hand… Aye, perhaps we are all mad, and I… I…”

Father matárız dead glu-bûb by own hand sha gaash and and and…

And Boromir suddenly released his brutal grip on Faramir’s collar, stumbled away, feeling sick. And all the grief and horror and pain flooded his mind, relentless, pushing forward with the bile in his throat. Faramir watched him, holding his neck, gasping for air.

And in that moment, a group of laughing, drunken Men approached, coming from the Hall, crossing the Courtyard towards them. Boromir and Faramir both turned. And they saw Éomer and Elfhelm of Rohan, Hirlaeg the Tall of Pinnath Gelin, and Ingold of the Rammas Echor Guard.

When Éomer spotted the brothers, he raised his arm from Elfhelm’s shoulder.

“Ho! The brothers! The heroes! Left so early, eh?”

The stumbling group approached, and Éomer pulled Faramir into a sudden, crushing embrace. The other Man had little time to react, and so he simply wheezed as the air was slammed out. And without further deliberation, Éomer released him, grabbed Boromir and performed a similar embrace. Boromir was too stunned to do anything, and before he knew what was happening, he was shaking hands with Elfelm and Ingold and Hirlaeg was slamming his back. And they were speaking, the words slurring, loud, so that Boromir, in his own inebriation, could not understand.

“…Fellowship adventures, I say! Incredible!”

“Tell us of the mines, my lord!”

As he was jostled and encouraged and goaded, and the nausea pitched forward, sickening, Boromir
saw, over their shoulders, his brother staring at him. And with such an expression, such an expression, Boromir's heart nearly burst for it. Weary eyes, and a reddened neck, and a pained scowl. Yet before Boromir could disentangle himself, before he could say anything, Faramir turned and left, walking quickly away. Boromir watched, watched his brother walk across the Courtyard, disappear back into the Citadel.

And once Faramir was out of sight, Boromir threw up his hands, harshly, ripped himself away from the group.

Without a word, he fled them. Walking as quickly as his knees permitted. Walking away, away, another balcony, anywhere. Almost encouraging the pain as it shot up through his legs and into his stomach and everywhere, while, behind him, he could hear the voices calling:

“My lord Boromir?”

“Ho! Boromir? What’s this?”

“Sir, what offense?”
Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

Peregrin Took shuffled his feet as he walked sleepily along the wide, empty corridor. He could still hear the noise from the Great Hall – the sounds of merriment, laughter, drinking and song. He guessed they would continue until daybreak. The corridor before him, lined with torches and statues of the Kings of Old, stretched out in solemn darkness. Pippin walked diagonally, dizzied slightly by the heady wine, to the glass-paneled doors which opened out onto the Courtyards. The moonlight streamed in through the warped glass, its soft beams splayed against the stone floor in intricate webs of blue-white light. One of the doors was left ajar, and Pippin guessed immediately who stood outside.

As he approached, he saw the silhouette of a tall Man leaning against the balcony railing. He could hear the Man muttering to himself. **Boromir**, Pippin thought sadly and took care not to make any sound as he neared the doors. His friend was staring out over the wide plains of the Pelennor Fields, towards the dark gloom of what-was-Mordor. Pippin recalled how only months before he too had gazed east and seen the ominous fires and smoke. Yet now all was quiet in the Dark Land. Where there had been fire and smoke, now there hung only a fine mist, like the steam from boiling water splashing against cold stone.

Pippin opened the door carefully and stepped outside. Boromir did not turn, but rather continued speaking to himself in low tones. A breeze passed over the Court, and he swayed with it. Pippin approached, letting his footfalls echo over the silence in order to announce his coming, yet the Man did not turn. For a moment, Pippin was unsure whether to leave him alone or make his presence known.

Finally, when he was nearly at Boromir’s elbow, he cleared his throat loudly.

Boromir spun around so suddenly that Pippin nearly yelped, but not before the Man swung his hand back and knocked the hobbit to the ground. Pippin cried out in pain and fell heavily on his side. He strove to stand, but all at once something cold and hard pressed against his throat. Boromir was before him, his eyes wild and unseeing, the thick odor of alcohol lingering about his person. Pippin struggled in vain against the Man’s strength.

“It’s Pippin! No, stop! I’m your friend!”

Boromir pushed the knife further, nearly pricking Pippin’s skin, and the hobbit sobbed hysterically: 

“It’s **Pippin! Pippin the halfling!**”

The darkness in Boromir’s eyes faded slowly and he let the knife fall away. He then stood quickly, breathing hard, his face twisted in the pain of recognition. Pippin got to his feet as well, keeping his eyes on the Man, though his knees trembled and his heart pounded. His fingers grazed where the knife had been, the skin was not broken.
The change in Boromir was startling. Where moments before he had been uncontrollable, violent, he now cowered before Pippin as if it had been the hobbit to attack and not he. Pippin took a step forward, and Boromir put up his hands in defense. Neither would speak for the tension which hung in the air.

“I’ll go,” Pippin muttered and turned to leave.

“Nay,” Boromir called. “Forgive me, Master Hobbit. I did not see…”

His shoulders sank and he ran a shaky hand over his unkempt beard. He added softly: “It seems I cannot tell friend from foe anymore. I did not mean to strike you.” His gaze flickered nervously to the ground, to somewhere behind Pippin, to anywhere but the hobbit’s eyes. “Will you stay?”

Pippin rubbed his aching jaw uneasily. He did not take a step forward but also felt he could not leave. After standing uncertainly for a few moments, he thrust out his hand. Boromir understood and, with visible embarrassment, handed over the dagger. The Man then turned away to face the Pelennor again. Pippin sheathed the dagger and also moved to the railing, maintaining a safe distance between he and Boromir.

He placed his chin in his hands and watched the nighttime landscape before him. Directly below them, the seven circles of Minas Tirith curled around in dim blue uniformity. Beyond the city walls, wide fields – nearly black in the moonlight – stretched far into the east. And looming on the horizon, the mountains of Ithilien and the jagged peaks leading into what-was-Mordor. Pippin sighed audibly.

“Well?” Boromir asked.

Pippin held his breath, unsure as to whether the Man’s mind was with him or not, and whether the edge in his voice meant another attack. Pippin suddenly wondered if it was wise to linger in Boromir’s company. He thought of Merry’s warning only hours before: “He’s not himself, Pip, and he won’t ever be the same. They say the prisoners of Sauron go mad, and if you ask me, Boromir left a good bit of his mind back in Barad-dûr. You be careful around him.”

“You do not seem one to leave a party early,” the Man’s voice was soft, friendly, it wanted to please, and Pippin felt a shudder of relief pass through his body.

In truth, it pained the hobbit every time he met with his friend. For at times, Boromir was every bit his old self – proud, collected, strong, even with an acerbic wit. But most of the time, his friend was a different person – cowering from any who touched him, lashing out with unexpected violence at those who meant to help him, brooding, unapproachable, unrecognizable. Tonight, it seemed the drink had relaxed Boromir – if only slightly. But Pippin knew that the effects were temporary, even artificial.

“I wanted some fresh air,” Pippin replied and burrowed his chin further into his arms.

Boromir leaned against the railing, reeling forward unequally, and murmured, “Aye…”

Silence.

“Did you enjoy the reveling?” Pippin asked.

Boromir shrugged and did not answer.

“You drank quite a bit.”
Boromir smiled – a rare thing – and turned to the hobbit. He clasped Pippin’s shoulder – another rarity – and said, “It seems you nearly kept up with me, my little friend.”

Pippin chuckled. Indeed, he had lost count of how many times he had refilled his goblet, but judging by how loud the Green Dragon song had gotten towards the end of the meal, he presumed it was a lot. *Come to think of it*, he realized, *Sam fell off his chair twice, at least*. He smiled at the memory and glanced back at the Man beside him.

In the moonlight, as Boromir swayed with each breeze and looked down at him with kind, drowsy eyes, Pippin felt a sudden sympathy for the Man. Yes, this was his old friend. Perhaps the exterior had changed, but the smiling, sleepy gaze was vividly familiar…

_The barrel of pipe-weed is near twice and a half the size of Pippin. Its fragrance wafts around him, intoxicating and familiar and sweet. Thank the Valar! He is about to clamber up to the top of the barrel and stuff his pipe with the beautiful weed when a large hand clamps down on his shoulder and shakes roughly._

_The dream quickly dissolves, and his mind wails with grief. Why is it always the good dreams that are interrupted?_

_The barrel of pipe-weed is near twice and a half the size of Pippin. Its fragrance wafts around him, intoxicating and familiar and sweet. Thank the Valar! He is about to clamber up to the top of the barrel and stuff his pipe with the beautiful weed when a large hand clamps down on his shoulder and shakes roughly._

_Pippin pushes the hand away and tugs at his blanket. He buries himself deep into his pillow and lets his mind slip once more into the Shire, where the summer berries are coming in season and preparation for the Summer Solstice has already begun…_

_Again, the hand on his shoulder, shaking._

_“Awake, little one,” a familiar voice whispers. “It is your turn to watch the night.”_

_Pippin groans as his mind adjusts to the cold reality of sleeping outside. No, he is not in the Shire. It is not even summer. It is winter. And there is no ten-foot-tall barrel of pipe-weed. Actually, as Pippin’s senses return, he realizes that he smoked the last of the pipe-weed two days ago. He groans again. A shivering, wintry watch without even a pipe to smoke is the last thing he wants._

_“You do it, Boromir,” Pippin grumbles and pulls the blanket over his head. “I’m tired…”_

_The hand tugs at the blanket and shakes Pippin’s shoulder again. Irritated, Pippin opens his eyes and, squinting in the dim light of the nearby fire, sees Boromir bending over him. The Man is visibly drained. He seems almost desperate in his attempt to wake Pippin and get the other watch started so that he can collapse into his own blanket. With a tiny pang of guilt, Pippin recalls how Boromir and Aragorn defended the company from a pack of wargs only hours ago. Yet while Strider sleeps now, Boromir is still dragging on since dawn._

_“Come now, Master Took, it is your turn.”_

_But Pippin was never one to dwell on guilty feelings…_

_“No, go away.”_

_“Pippin!”_

_“Shhh.”_

_Pippin mumbles something about hobbits needing more sleep than Men and turns on his other side. For this, he receives a sharp poke in his ribs. He chooses to ignore it and feign sleep. Boromir pokes him again, harder this time, and Pippin shoos him away._
A few moments pass, and finally he hears Boromir straighten with a sigh.

“Very well. Sleep on, Master Hobbit.”

Pippin twists around.

“Really?”

The Man turns and, looking down at Pippin with kind, drowsy eyes, nods. Without a word, he turns back to the fire and takes a seat on the log beside it. Pippin smiles in thanks, and he receives a sleepy smile in return. Without further thought, he lets his eyelids sink and drifts back to his adventures with the pipe-weed.

“Boromir?” Pippin asked.

The Man arched an eyebrow.

“Remember the night after the warg attack when you took my watch and did double for yourself?”

Boromir’s brow creased. “Nay.”

“Well, no matter. I just wanted to say thank you for that, I appreciated it.”

Boromir laughed. He landed a heavy hand on Pippin’s curls and ruffled clumsily. “You’re welcome, my little friend.”

Pippin smiled to himself. Yes, this was the old Boromir. Perhaps the change everyone spoke of was only temporary. Maybe… Hopefully.

Unexpectedly, Pippin’s throat closed. Again, he felt as he had felt the day he brought Boromir to the Houses of Healing. For surely Boromir heard the rumors of his madness, noticed the caution and discomfort his presence caused. Was this the desired peace? Was this the reward after years of War? To linger around one’s home as a ghost, an unwanted reminder of darker times? With old nightmares that could never be shared, with disappearing friends and a body too torn and wounded to be of any use?

Pippin sighed. Well, if Boromir still had one friend in Minas Tirith, it was he. And if anyone could help the Man, maybe by just lending an ear, he would try.

“Boromir, may I ask you something?”

“Aye?”

“What happened exactly in Barad-dûr?”

Boromir stiffened immediately. His knuckles grew white with strain.

“I am condemned to find no peace this evening!” he hissed, and already his breath shook and his eyes darted frantically away from Pippin. “And what manner of vile questioning is this?”

“I’m sorry. I thought it would ease the burden if you spoke of it…”

“There is nothing to speak of!”

Pippin, thoroughly unsettled, decided not to press further. He did not dare move, did not dare glance at Boromir who know rhythmically tightened and released his brutal grip on the railing.
Instead, Pippin stood, frozen, with his chin in his arms, hoping that some interruption would ease the tension. *Stupid, Pippin!* He could hear Boromir again whispering to himself – yet he could understand only snatches of his mumbled speech. And when Pippin thought to excuse himself with a quick apology and farewell, Boromir suddenly turned to him.

“You want to know the torment of Barad-dûr?” he snapped, his entire frame vibrating. “Are you curious, halfling, about the evils that lurk in the Dark Tower?”

“Nay! I just – I thought, if you wanted to speak of…”

“And why should I speak of it? Because it haunts my every waking thought and tortures my night? Does this intrigue you? Or do you simply wonder what could drive both father and son to madness? For surely you too think me mad?”

“Nay!” Pippin lied, taking a step back.

“Then why do you recoil? You have my weapon, and yet you still fear me! Call to Faramir, Pippin, he shall save you!”

“Peace, Boromir!” Pippin pleaded. “I don’t fear you! I’m your friend!”

Boromir turned away from him sharply.

“My friend,” he grunted.

“Aye, your friend. Truly.”

Boromir did not speak as he stood with his back to Pippin. For several long moments, Pippin watched the rage fade as the Man’s shoulders dropped, yet the tension remained. He waited. Finally, Boromir spoke, and his voice had lost all trace of anger. He spoke so low that Pippin had to lean in to hear.

“My friend?”

“Aye.”

“And if I am truly mad?”

“Then you are my deranged friend. It wouldn’t be a big change.”

Boromir snorted with soft laughter, and Pippin felt a nervous chuckle escape him as well. A few moments passed, and Pippin waited for Boromir to speak. He watched as the Man leaned heavily against the railing as if it was the only thing which kept him standing.

Finally, Pippin tried again: “What happened, Boromir?”

Boromir looked at him, smiled slightly, a twisted, weary, empty smile, looked away.

“’Tis an evil tale.”

“I know.”

A sigh.

“And you wish to speak of it?”
“I – I don’t know, it… I just want to help.”

Boromir smiled again, and this time with over-bright eyes, and Pippin watched as he half-sputtered, half-chuckled, and turned quickly away, burying his face into his shoulder. There passed a few moments, and Pippin watched out of the corner of his eye, he watched Boromir remain very still and taut and silent. And Pippin was sure the Man was weeping, and so he felt his own knot forming in his chest, throat, and he felt his own eyes begin to burn. And he did not know what to do or say, so he just stood there, frozen, waiting.

Eventually, Boromir wiped his eyes quickly with one hand, turned to Pippin and ruffled the hobbit’s hair. In the moonlight, the hobbit could see the glistening eyes, the thin, pale lines against the cheeks.

And Boromir grinned crookedly, sucked in one congested snort, but soon that grin faded, and he looked ahead.

“I struck Faramir.”

Pippin blinked.

“I struck Faramir earlier, as he was telling me of our father. And they tell me I struck Merry,” he grunted, ran a weary hand over his face, “aye… he has the bruise to prove it. And now I have struck you…”

“You didn’t strike me.”

“Pippin…”

Pippin looked away. Boromir leaned forward, never quite straightening his legs.

“And you ask me of Barad-dûr…” he swallowed. His voice dropped to a harsh whisper, his gaze flickering back and forth. “I would tell you, Pippin. I would tell you. If I could. I cannot. ‘Tis impossible… ‘tis all… ‘tis impossible. I looked into a mirror the other day, and I did not recognize myself. And all of these…” he ran his fingers over his face, over the prick marks at his temple. “I know what these are. This was the mask.”

Pippin stood absolutely still. So still, staring ahead, his eyes watered. The sound of rushing blood in his ears.

“This was the mask,” Boromir repeated, tracing his brow and temple. “I could not breathe in it… And then there are scars I do not recognize, I do not understand. And when I see them, Pippin, I cannot look at myself in the evenings. There is the leg, it is ruined, and they… I know not what they intended to do, but…” he shuddered violently, abruptly, a passing wave which faded as soon as it began. “The memories I have, I would forget, Pippin… Do not ask me what happened in Barad-dûr…”

His voice trailed and he fell silent.

Pippin absorbed the words. He did not know what to say, so he just stood. Part of him wanted to reach out with a kind word, a consolation, something, anything. But he did not know what to say. So he waited, feeling useless and frightened.

Finally, Boromir let out a weak breath. Pippin watched, out of the corner of his eye, as the Man retrieved a slim flask from his doublet and drank. But Pippin pretended not to notice and let Boromir slip the flask back into his doublet without explanation.
“I’m sorry, Boromir,” he eventually whispered.

The Man did not respond but rather turned and slid into a sitting position beside Pippin, his back against the balcony railing. He straightened his long legs with a groan, leaned his head against the wall and closed his eyes. After crossing his arms and shifting his weight, his expression fell into a deep scowl of concentration, as if he were forcing his mind back from the depths into which it would instinctively settle. In the moonlight, his age and exhaustion were etched into every deep crease, every black scar, and Pippin shuddered. For the countless time, he wished to have his old friend back, and not this tortured ghost.

After a few moments of silence, Boromir’s expression eased.

“Tell me of the Ents, Pippin.”

“I’ve told that story at least ten times tonight!”

“Then tell me of the Shire.”

Pippin took a seat beside Boromir, feeling the cool stone against his back and legs and the warm air of an early summer night ruffle his curls. He drew up his knees and leaned his head back.

“Well, what do you want to know?”

“Anything. I would desire a peaceful memory to ease my mind into sleep tonight. Or no memory at all.”

“What? You want to sleep out here?”

“My legs will not carry me to a bed, I am so loaded with drink.”

The hobbit laughed.

“Well, here’s a happy one, then. I’ll let you borrow it for a while, but you must promise to give it back.”

“Very well, I promise. Now tell me the memory ere I doze on the spot.”

And Pippin spoke of the first time he and Merry had stolen crops from Farmer Maggot’s farm. It was a happy memory, something that, surprisingly, had helped him in the darkest hours of the War. The mix of excitement and fear – the way his belly ached after laughing so hard while running away – the dog that ripped off Merry’s favorite yellow vest. He told of how the sun glinted off the golden sea of crops, how they dropped most of the carrots and cabbages by the time they reached the safe side of the fence, how Pippin bit into a dirt-covered radish once they were on the road back to Hobbiton…

As he lost himself in the old memory, he glanced back at Boromir. The Man’s head lolled against the wall, and his mouth hung open as he slept. Pippin finished his tale – just the last bit where Merry had decided to go back and get his yellow vest – and then decided he too was ready for bed. As he stood slowly, careful not to nudge the sleeping Boromir, he heard noise coming from within the corridor.

Three familiar voices, drunk and giggly, approached. Merry, Frodo and Sam arrived, stumbling in the doorway. Merry and Frodo were carrying a very green Sam between them, and while Merry laughed red-faced, Frodo was considerably more solemn – ever since coming back from Mordor,
Pippin thought. Sam appeared very near losing consciousness.

“Hey, Pip!” Merry slurred. “There you are!”

“What’s this?” Pippin asked, indicating Sam.

“Sam was teased into a drinking contest with Gimli,” Merry laughed. “As you can imagine, he lost.”

“No I didn’… me ol’ gaffer…” Sam grumbled.

“What were you doing out here?” Frodo asked, slightly suspicious. “You left the feast more than an hour ago.”

Pippin hesitated. “I was talking to Boromir.”

This sobered all three hobbits. Frodo in particular lost any trace of mirth and acquired his usual grim expression. Pippin jabbed his thumb in the direction of the sleeping Man and the three hobbits leaned out onto the balcony to look. Boromir was lying, rather awkwardly, with his head against his slowly rising and falling chest. In the dark, he seemed only an indiscernible shadow.

Merry shifted his weight, adjusting Sam’s arm around his shoulder, and muttered: “Do you think we should wake him? He can’t sleep outside.”

“I’m not waking him.”

Merry nodded, understanding, but seemed reluctant to leave.

“Let’s go,” Frodo said, pulling Sam in his direction, away from the balcony.

“Aye…” Merry’s voice trailed softly as his eyes lingered on Boromir. “Come on, Pip.”

Pippin nodded and entered the corridor. He closed the glass doors behind him – catching a glance at Boromir, who was still fast asleep – and followed the others back down the hallway and towards their rooms. The noise from the celebration had died down, and they passed a few tired revelers shuffling off to bed. Pippin did not see any others of the Fellowship, and silently hoped none would come down this way. For he knew that Boromir’s sleep was a precariously light one, and perhaps for once an untroubled one, so that waking him on this night would be a cruel act.

A warm breeze. Distant banners snapping in the wind. As Boromir awakened, a rhythmic throbbing filled his head. He lay for a moment, disoriented, wondering why his head ached and his back was sore. He shifted his torso - feeling the cool stone beneath him; this was no bed - and moaned at the dull pain which blossomed in his stomach. A flash: low growling black face pulling an arrow, creaking bow, arching it back back back and letting go, the breath slamming out disappearing legs and a stomach on fire and one worry, one question, one thought of the little ones behind him, where are they, where will they go…

Boromir groaned, peeling his tongue away from the rough roof of his mouth. Screams screams echoed screams Third One is calling out to Boromir for help.

The familiar nausea and stale taste of alcohol immediately recalled the night before. Oh yes. Yesterday had been the crowning of Aragorn, son of Arathorn, as King Elessar. The first day of May in the year 3019 of the Third Age. The celebrating had surely lasted well into the second of May, though Boromir, naturally, did not remember any of it. He recalled only feelings of
embarrassment and then a fierce hurt. Pippin. Pippin had been present, it had something to do with Pippin. What had they spoken of?

"Some would find it unseemly for a Prince of the White City to sleep outside."

Boromir’s eyes flew open and he sat up with a start. After a few dizzying seconds, his vision cleared and he saw Aragorn, seated upon a nearby bench. The King sat low against the bench with his arms crossed, his expression relaxed as he watched the sunrise. Thoroughly embarrassed, Boromir staggered back to his feet, keeping a firm grip on the railing to steady himself. He bowed his head.

“Forgive me, my lord.”

Aragorn smiled, his grey eyes thin slits as he squinted in the dawn sunlight.

“Nay, Boromir, we are brothers and friends, let us speak informally,” he said. “And I was jesting. You are not the first late-night reveler I find asleep in the halls of the Citadel during my early morning walk. You are, however, the first one I find outside.”

Boromir felt his face heat.

“Will you join me? These are our final moments of peace before the new day begins. And hectic days are these to come…” he added softly.

Boromir looked away, still suffering from chagrin, and waited for Aragorn to rise from his bench. The latter stretched his arms with a satisfied sigh and motioned for Boromir to follow him down the southern way which wrapped around the Citadel and towards the shadow of the mountain. The sun had not yet risen fully, it loomed as only a rosy fire in the east, and a fine mist still clung to the city. As they walked slowly around the balcony, passing tall windows and airy galleries, they encountered no one. It seemed all had enjoyed the festivities until mere hours before daybreak, and so the city was still fast asleep.

Boromir silently longed for sleep as well, for the dreamless, untouched reality that only drink could induce. Iron mask clogging nose breath spit bile, iron mask hiding the fair Captain of Gondor. Ha ha ha! He had come to rely on his flask as a means of pushing away the black thoughts and blocking the vile memories of Barad-dûr which threatened to creep in from all sides, grab him by arms and legs and throat, and pull him into the depths of madness. Thankfully, this night had been an empty repose, one in which he desired to someday lose himself.

Aragorn walked beside him, surveying the circles of Minas Tirith below them. He did not speak, and yet his silence was a relaxed, comfortable one. There was no tension in his face but for the faint creases around his piercing eyes. His worries were eased this morning, in the early hours of the first day of his reign, and Boromir envied him. Not for his title – no, Boromir had long ago lost any fragment of ambition – but for his serenity.

“Did you sleep well?” Aragorn asked, hiding the shadow of a smile.

Boromir grunted and gazed at the jagged mountain façade which stretched out from the city walls.

“I have not slept well in a long time.”

Aragorn’s smile disappeared.

“That is understandable. Yet the War has ended, and a new life begins. Look to the coming years, Boromir. Look towards peace.”
“Peace?” Boromir bit the word.

They had arrived by the very edge of the mountain, where thin precipices gave way to a sharp, sudden decline. The southern lands glowed gold and pink in the morning sun, and, as the day was clear, one could see endless plains of grass and wood stretching out onto the horizon. Boromir rested his arms against the thick railing of stone and let the sun warm his face. He felt Aragorn take a similar position to his left.

“Your friends worry for you, Boromir. Your brother worries for you.”

“My brother? Faramir sees me only as an obstacle.”

“Nay, you judge him too harshly. He would have you find relief. As would I.”

Boromir barked a laugh. What did they know of his relief? What could Aragorn understand? With the Man’s endless, irritating, false tranquility – his ceaseless badgering and thinly veiled orders. Aye, for Aragorn spoke as a friend, but his words were commands. Boromir knew. He knew what they thought of him. They were embarrassed, disgusted, afraid. He saw it in every countenance, in the way the Fellowship acknowledged his presence with forced welcomes and forced smiles. He had heard the Citadel whispers ever since the evening with Merry – Boromir the Mad, they called him.

And what of madness? Mayhap when keeping the echoed screams from escaping his lips was an hourly battle – aye, that was madness, but an honorable madness. When the icy torrents of desperation flooded his veins and reminded him only of Barad-dûr. For life before Barad-dûr no longer existed, just as life after it was a half-life, a grey torment in itself. What did Aragorn know of the constant fight Boromir waged with himself, just to keep his fingers from curling around a dagger and ending everything, just to keep himself from losing control completely?

With such an end, then truly would he be Boromir the Mad, truly his father’s son…

“Where did you hear that name?”

Boromir was jolted back to reality as he realized he had spoken his thoughts aloud. Aragorn watched him intently, waiting for an answer. After swallowing his embarrassment, Boromir confessed:

“I have heard the passing servants use it.”

“They have no respect for their Prince,” Aragorn lowered his voice, visibly angered. “You have spent a lifetime protecting them. Where was it spoken? Do you remember?”

“I do not remember, and in truth, it matters not.”

The older Man’s anger gave way to genuine concern. He seemed as if he wanted to place a hand on Boromir’s arm, but decided against it. They stood in silence for several moments. Instinctively, Boromir’s hand searched within his doublet and retrieved the flask. He was slowly unscrewing it when he caught Aragorn’s eye.

“And this?” Aragorn asked.

“What of it?” Boromir muttered, sounding more hostile than he intended.

“’Tis early for such a drink. And you ate nothing from last night’s feast. Was it not to your liking?”
“My stomach churns at the very sight of food.”

“And does this,” Aragorn indicated the flask, “help?”

Boromir smirked humorlessly. “Somewhat.”

“’Tis a poor medicine.”

Boromir did not speak, and instead took a lengthy drink. *Akrum, glu-bûb, akrum!*

The effects were immediate – the warm liquid spread through his limbs, calming the various aches and easing his sore muscles. *First One falling under the sword falling falling still falling and he never touches the ground, he just floats.* It disappeared around his ruined stomach, leaving only a numb reminder of warmth. *What do they know of my relief?* Boromir thought bitterly. *This is relief.*

“Boromir,” Aragorn said, his tone turning formal. “The hobbits will be returning to the Shire soon.”

Boromir nodded, took another pull.

“I wish to send an escort with them.”

“See you any danger?”

“Nay, but one never knows what villains lurk in the shadows. I have yet to tell them, and I expect they will argue with me. They will say they need no escort.”

“Perhaps they are right.”

“But they will agree once they discover the identity of their fellow travelers.”

“Oh?”

“Aye. Gandalf will accompany them. Also, another. A Man. For I overheard Pippin once, long ago, telling Merry how deeply he desired his friend Boromir of Gondor to visit the Shire at least once, after the War…”

Boromir, who had been taking his third sip, choked momentarily, sending the drink into his beard, and jerked around towards Aragorn. The King watched the Captain shrewdly for reaction. He continued, still with that penetrating gaze.

“Master Took has feared telling his friend of this, for even though he had extended the invitation during their travels as a Fellowship, he knows not whether Boromir will come. For his friend is much changed.”

“I am changed…”

Aragorn waited for Boromir to continue. The latter was tugging nervously at his beard. *The Shire!* Although Boromir longed to leave the city, to simply walk away from all who knew him, this was not what he imagined. His relationship with Pippin was strong – indeed, Pippin was perhaps his only true remaining friend – but he knew the other hobbits and Gandalf would be reluctant to accept his companionship. And ever since the inadvertent scuffle days ago, Merry had drifted away, his demeanor becoming more and more formal. *Merry is wise,* Boromir thought dejectedly. *He sees Boromir the Mad.*
“Nay, my lord,” Boromir mumbled. “Do not ask this of me.”

“Why?”

“I am unfit for such a task.”

“Unfit?” Aragorn’s eyes glinted as he asked dryly, “And why unfit? Are you too old? Too wounded? Too mad?”

Boromir twisted around violently: “Do not make sport of me!”

Aragorn’s hands shot up in a sign of peace and he smiled. Boromir’s anger quickly dissipated upon registering his King’s humor. He half-smiled.

“My friend, I know you are neither old, nor wounded, nor mad. Those who see you so are the easily swayed, the unappreciative. Do not let their words pierce you. They are traitors that call you by foul names. Nay, you are a hero of the War, and you command the respect and love of all who fought with you. Did you not hear the songs last night? They glorified you.”

Boromir looked away.

“Much in those songs was invented.”

“And would you have them sing the truth?”

Silence. Boromir leaned against the railing, picking absent-mindedly at the small rocks and pebbles imbedded in the finely carved marble.

“Nay,” he whispered. “The songs do well to invent. Let them sing of victory and honor. Let our children know these years as happy times, when the city was revived and all was peace in Gondor.”

His chest tightened.

“Let them never know despair, nor fear,” and his voice failed him.

As he clenched his teeth in an attempt to stifle the treacherous emotion that threatened to push against his throat and pour out like an open wound, Boromir found a firm hand against his shoulder. He flinched and turned to see Aragorn watching him. Yet he did not feel embarrassed, for his King’s eyes glistened in the morning sun with their own unshed tears.

“Aye,” Aragorn spoke in a rough murmur. He gave his shoulder a squeeze. “That is what we fought for.”

Boromir cleared his throat, forced the emotion from his voice and shook himself free of Aragorn’s hand, “And why have I been chosen for this escort?”

“The hobbits much desire for you to visit the Shire.”

Boromir snorted.

“Nay, that is not true. You send me for you see that I am restless with disuse.”

“Disuse?”

“I have been little troubled by affairs of the state. Indeed, I have been little troubled by anything of
late, save my own company and my own thoughts. And it seems I will be little troubled from now on.”

Aragorn remained silent, cautious.

Before Boromir could stop himself, he seethed: “How have I been cast aside so easily? Was I not the heir apparent of Gondor’s stewardship?”

“Do you question my decision?”

Boromir turned away, shook his head silently.

“Faramir is a strong and just leader,” Aragorn continued. “He is wise, and he will be a good Steward. But neither he, nor I, would have his position disappoint you. Do you not understand the reasons for my decision?”

Boromir made a disgruntled snort.

“Aye, of course I understand. For who would have a madman as Steward?”

Aragorn’s eyes narrowed. “‘Tis unseemly to hear such self-pity, my friend.”

“Well, is it not true?” Boromir barked suddenly, his voice rising. “Why then has my right been usurped?”

“Upon my ascension to the throne, son of Denethor, it was no longer your right,” Aragorn said, his voice edged with warning. “It was a choice, left to the King.”

Boromir stifled his rage, visibly chastised. A few moments passed. Finally, his shoulders sank, and he dropped his gaze.

“Forgive me, my lord.”

Aragorn exhaled sharply.

“Nay, do not apologize.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Forgive me instead…” He sighed. “Boromir, truly, I need your blessing for all to go well. I shall call a council the coming fortnight, and there will we discuss the Stewardship of Gondor. For now, Faramir shall act as Steward. And you… My friend…” Aragorn lowered his voice, softened it, “I know the sting of old wounds… and the lingering torment, how it leeches the mind. Let your brother take the responsibilities of Gondor, and give yourself time to heal.”

“How?” Boromir asked suddenly, almost desperately. “My lord, how can idleness cure a stagnant mind? ‘Tis impossible! And there is no need to conceal what I know all too well – what everyone does think of me.”

“That is not true. You see ill will where there is none.”

“I have ears.”

“Come, Boromir, enough. You should not dwell. ‘Tis a difficult time… I understand. But think that you have been recovered, and you will recover, and all shall be well.”

“And the Guard? What of the Guard?”

Aragorn hesitated.
“That title as well?” Boromir asked miserably.

“Young Beregond has captained the Guard since your departure, Boromir, and he will continue to do so.”

“Neither Steward nor Captain-General nor… nor – nor anything,” Boromir exhaled, smiled slightly, strangely. “I am nothing.”

Aragorn responded with his own twisted grin. Again, he placed a hand on Boromir’s shoulder.

“Take time to heal, Boromir. You are still a Prince of the White City, a hero of your people. I understand you must accustom yourself to this new change, but trust in your King… all shall be well.”
Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

Mid-May.

A debate. Arguments. Speeches and testimonies. The crowded Hall closing in, growing smaller, smaller, uglier, with each passing hour.

*Lord Boromir has ever been our captain!* they cry. *And a brave captain, and a wise captain, ever the first to charge into battle* –

*Lord Faramir did lead us through the most trying of conditions, as the Enemy closed in upon us from all sides* –

*Not three years past, Lord Boromir did retake the bridge of* –

*Ever has Lord Faramir proved his valor, and he did save my life in* –

Loyalties on both sides. Guardsmen and Rangers. Politicians, governors – who currying what favor when from whom and, above all, why. Political orchestrations, for if Boromir was made Steward, he would favor the army and strengthen Minas Tirith above all the rest of Gondor. Political orchestrations, for if Faramir was made Steward, he would expand the city and the realm, and would favor the farmers and the merchants and the…

They seemed to have forgotten Aragorn was King; though it was, admittedly, a new idea.

Six hours. Six hours of debate, where the two concerned, the two quarreling brothers, the two competitors for Gondor’s Stewardship, hardly spoke a word. Rather, they sat, listening to each side, looking to King Elessar, watching each other for reaction. No one had expected it to take this long. No one had expected the veritable mutiny as the military leaders rebelled against the possibility of Boromir losing his titles. No one had expected the complex web of alliances and interests which suddenly revealed itself when the idle question was posed: *Who, then, shall be Steward?*

And on and on, they argued…

*And what of his madness? Have you not heard the tales?*

Finally someone mentioned the rumors. Boromir tensed visibly; Faramir looked away. Gandalf coughed lightly.

*Lies! Lies spread by villains and his enemies! For any enemy of Captain Boromir is an enemy of mine! And what should the city fall again under attack, Lord Faramir favors the taxes to be spent on the roads and leaving the defenses* –
Nearly treasonous. Shouting. Yet King Elessar could not yet wield too much blind authority, for he had been King less than a month, and to do so would cast a poor light on his reign, in a time when, above all, he needed to be sympathetic to all. He did ever say he would listen to any and all opinions, and he did indeed call this council in order to make a more just decision.

But the debate had long since dissolved into a shouting match. The nobles – Imrahil, the lord of Lebennin, Hirlaeg of Pinnath Gelin – sided with Faramir. The military commanders – Eumond the Tall, Beregond of the Guard, Amlaith, even the heavyset captain of Anórien’s soldiery – sided with Boromir. The Rangers were divided.

After a particularly explicit insult was thrown, Aragorn finally stood, raised his palms.

“Friends!” he called. Everyone fell silent. “I have heard enough, and it grieves me to see such rivalry. But, in the end, as you all know, the decision rests with the King. I believe we have gone on more than is needed – and so I will take my council now, with Mithrandir to advise – and will announce my decision within the evening.”

Muttered remarks. Bows. Outside, a crowd had formed.

And as Boromir and Faramir walked out of the doors, walking abreast, they immediately split up and walked in separate directions, weaving through the crowd, through their supporters. The debate continued outside. The soldiers jostled and clapped Boromir on the shoulder, speaking secretively with him, eyeing the other camp. And, on the other side of the crowded antechamber, Imrahil and the nobles and governors nodded to Faramir and murmured to him and whispered smoothly in his ear.

And in the center of this rivalry, the Fellowship. Some sitting, some standing, all in that state of agitated boredom. Arms crossed, kicking a leg forward, toeing a crack in the stone floor, eyeing each other.

“How long do you think it’ll be?” Pippin asked Merry, who sat beside him on the cold stone floor.

They had long since abandoned any sense of formality or proper comportment, as Merry had begun complaining – rather artificially – of the pain in his arm, saying if only he could relieve his legs for a minute his arm would be fine.

And so the hobbits, all four, had sat, with Gimli resolutely pacing before them and Legolas standing rigidly still. The elf seemed to be listening intently to the chaotic roars and buzzing whispers coming from the each side – Boromir and the soldiers to his left, Faramir and the nobles to his right.

Merry blew his breath out, leaned back on his elbows. “Oh, I haven’t the faintest idea, Pip. They were in there for hours, surely Aragorn’s nearly there with a decision. It shouldn’t be much longer, I reckon.”

“Well, I’m hungry.”

Sam dug through his traveling pack, which he had apparently brought, and tossed Pippin an apple.

“Here ye go, Mister Pippin,” Sam said.

Frodo, who had been leaning back against a column, perked up. “You brought food, Sam?”

Sam shrugged. “Always better to be prepared, eh, Mister Frodo?” His eyes narrowed as he glanced about the hall full of quarreling, discussing, debating Men. “Sides, this didn’t seem a matter so
easily resolved.”

At that moment, a cry went up from another part of the hall. A young Man with dark, curly hair, standing in the midst of Boromir’s supporters, a Guardsman, was yelling red-faced at one of the nobles standing beside Faramir. A larger dark-haired Guardsman was holding him back, but the younger Man could not be contained.

“I would swear here and now you have never even seen a battle!” the younger Man cried.

“Iorlas, Iorlas, calm yourself,” the older Man, Beregond, urged.

“And little use you would be on the field!” Iorlas roared, his face glowing red, spittle flying. “After what happened on the Pelennor!”

Boromir had appeared now, standing on the other side of Iorlas. The Fellowship could not hear well, but they saw him speaking quietly, urgently, in the young Man’s ear.

The nobleman Iorlas was shouting at, a tall, blond Man with a prominent nose and snidely curled lip, asked quietly, “Are you calling me a coward, Guardsman?”

Imrahil of Dol Amroth touched the other Man lightly on the shoulder. “Nay, Lord Hirlaeg, of course not. Gentlemen, please – ”

“And where were you, Lord Hirlaeg, during the Siege?” Iorlas continued, bellowing loud now so all could hear. And all listened, for the entire crowd of Men had fallen silent, as had the Fellowship. “Oh, we all know the tale, aye! You fling rumors at our Captain? Eh? What of brave Hirluin the Fair? What of your brother, Hirlaeg?”

“Iorlas!” Beregond urged, holding the younger back.

“Iorlas, silence, this will not help!” Boromir hissed, loud enough so that many nearby heard.

Iorlas turned to his two companions, the two at his arms, with wide eyes. Angry, blazing eyes. “Well, ’tis true, is it not? Captain? Brother? The man dares call you a villain when all of us know how he coveted lordship over Pinnath – ”

“How dare you!” Hirlaeg snarled. “What do you imply, sir?”

“Nothing, Lord Hirlaeg,” Faramir soothed quickly. “No one has questioned your – ”

“ – a villain!” Iorlas roared. “A villain who sent his own brother to death so that he could – ”

He was cut off by Beregond’s hand on his mouth.

More voices. Shouts. Enraged cries.

“Silence that cur’s tongue ere I silence it for him!” Hirlaeg bellowed, and the hobbits could hear the emotion shaking through his voice, see it vibrating through his entire body.

“’Tis how all the military Men are, my lord!” another noble snapped. “Their loyalties lie with themselves – with their own kind – for see how quick they are to turn against liege lord?”

“And what would you know of that, my lord?” another voice, coming from the group of soldiers, cried.

And soon enough the entire antechamber dissolved again into chaos and noise. Merry snorted with
soft laughter, shaking his head. Pippin pulled his knees up, tried to see over the crowd to Boromir. Frodo sat forward, straining to understand what was going on, while Sam ate another apple. Gimli kept starting forward and pulling back, his fists clenching, as if he wanted nothing more than to go plowing into the group of raging Men with his axe. Legolas, instead, remained absolutely still, his head cocked, his eyes closed, as he picked out each voice, listened for whatever it was only he could hear.

And so it continued. The windows dimmed. Night fell.

The quarreling Men soon enough fell silent, with many pacing with their arms crossed, while others gathered at the walls to lean against them, and some – soldiers, a few Rangers – simply sat in any free space they could find.

Boromir stood at one corner of the antechamber, his arms crossed, stance wide, staring at the floor. Listening as one of his Guard spoke quietly into his ear. The raging Iorlas had calmed, and he sat now with his older brother, Beregond, and a third Man, a red-haired Guardsmen. They were laughing quietly over a joke.

Faramir was leaning against another column, surrounded by the usual nobles, Imrahil constantly at his elbow, speaking with a still-angered Hirlaeg. A few Rangers lingered nearby, quiet. Mablung, Damrod. Faramir smiled at them, murmured something to them. Yet, Hirlaeg’s voice carried loud over their conversation. Apparently the Pinnath Gelin lord was still licking his wounds, for he cast several evil glares in the direction of the chuckling Iorlas. Judging by Imrahil’s mild gestures and slight smiles, it was clear his characteristic tact was currently employed to calm the Man. Faramir seemed to simply nod and agree with whatever Imrahil said, too fatigued to comment further.

By now, after so many countless hours of waiting, Frodo was leaning back with his head against Sam’s pack. Sam was sitting forward, smoking a pipe, lost in his own thoughts. Merry and Pippin had taken to amusing themselves with a game. One named a color and the other had to guess which stained glass window it came from. Even Gimli had surrendered pacing and chosen to sit, and he pulled at the braids in his beard in obvious agitation. The only sign of impatience or worry or anticipation in Legolas’ stance was the slight shifting of his weight every so often.

“Blue.”

Pippin inhaled, stared up at one of the countless darkened windows. He found a small, blue square in the upper left-hand corner. At least, it appeared blue against the night sky.

“Top row, up in the corner there. On the left.”

Merry sighed, lifted his head from his hand to look. He squinted. Then, with a shake of his head, he leaned his chin against the heel of his hand again.

“Try again.”

“That’s blue.”

“Wasn’t the one I was thinking of.”

Pippin sighed as well, looked again. After staring blankly at the tall window on the opposite side of the room, he snorted in surrender. Instead of searching, he decided to stand and stretch. Merry watched him dully.

Pippin jutted his thumb in Boromir’s direction. “I’m going to go talk to Boromir.”
This made all the hobbits, Gimli and even Legolas perk up. They all watched him warily. Finally, Sam began to struggle to stand.

“I’ll come with you.”

“No, lad,” Gimli put in, grabbing the hilt of his axe. “Let me.”

“Nay, it’s fine,” Pippin interjected quickly. He chuckled. “I don’t need a guard.”

Merry, leaned back against the column, folded his hands across his stomach, and grunted humorlessly. “Aye, wait until he strikes you, Pip.”

Pippin said nothing but waved them off and turned. Stuffing his hands into his pockets, he crossed the wide antechamber towards the camp of Boromir supporters. He passed a few scowling nobles, a few seated soldiers, one Ranger pacing silently around a column, a small group of elderly Men who seemed to be discussing some historical reference.

Boromir was seated against one of the low, wide windowsills. He was leaning back against the stained glass, drinking from his flask, while his usual Guard stood about him, talking. A chuckle. Someone nudged Boromir, indicated the arriving Pippin. Pippin waved, Boromir smiled.

“Come to join the treacherous curs, Master Hobbit?” Boromir joked. He took a long swallow from his flask.

“Aye, the *treacherous curs* who defended these soft-handed court *rats* from a quick death!” A burly Guard cried to uproarious laughter and cheers.

“Aye, the *treacherous curs* who kept the forces of Mordor itself at bay!” Iorlas concurred loudly.

Another cheer. Someone slapped Boromir’s shoulder, he grinned crookedly. A few nearby nobles looked up at this rowdiness, but they seemed too dulled by weariness and boredom to consider making any sort of response.

Pippin took a seat on the windowsill by Boromir. His feet dangled off the edge. Boromir handed him the flask, and Pippin leaned back – inadvertently imitating his friend’s slouched posture – and drank. When he gagged slightly and choked on his drink, the Guardsmen laughed again, loudly. Beregond took the flask from Pippin’s grasp.

“Aye, ’tis strong for a halfling!” Beregond boomed.

Once of the other Guardsmen and soldiers were suitably distracted, Pippin nudged Boromir.

“How are you?” he asked, voice low.

Boromir’s heavy-hooded gaze wandered over to the group of courtiers and governors and lords still surrounding his brother. Faramir was nodding slowly at something a very old aristocrat was saying, yet when he saw Boromir watching him, he held his eyes steadily.

Boromir looked away. A slow, ragged, nervous inhalation.

“How am I? My knees ache, my gut has pained me ere this evil debate began, and my head already spins with what little drink is in that flask.” He scrubbed his face with one hand, murmured quietly. “I am tired, Pippin, tired.”

“Aye, me too,” Pippin exhaled, leaned further back.
They sat in silence for a few moments. A young servant boy came by to open the windows above them, as the antechamber was begin to grow stifling with all the lingering bodies and lit torches. The servant murmured a polite *my lords*, which caused Pippin to smile, and they both leaned out of the way as the lad pulled at the jamb and pushed open the above windows.

Once they were again alone, with the Guard having moved slightly further off, all grouped in a circle, recounting some past battle or war memory, Boromir grunted.

“How think you Faramir fares?” he asked.

Pippin peered across the room, found Faramir standing amidst the group of courtiers, his weight on one leg, his hands on his hips, head bowed as he listened and nodded.

“He looks weary,” Pippin remarked honestly.

“Aye… ‘tis nothing so unbearable as this waiting…” Boromir rubbed an eye. He chuckled softly. “I should offer him the brandy.”

“Ah, indeed,” Pippin smirked. “At least you’ve got the soldiers on your side. They’re a much merrier group than those old lords and princes and such.”

Boromir grinned, nodded. He seemed about to lean his head back and close his eyes, when suddenly the doors leading to the Great Hall began to open and everyone looked up. Energy renewed, tension escalating again, soaring, boiling, searing. Pippin watched Boromir snap forward, his gaze suddenly fierce, almost feral. Everyone stood, hurrying to the center of the antechamber. Boromir and Faramir emerged at the front of each large group.

A royal attendant stood in the doorway. Inside, one could see vague flickering fires; Gandalf pacing, staff in hand; Aragorn seated in the throne, hand covering his brow.

“My lords, the King has made his decision.”

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Gimli, son of Glóin, was weary. It was deep in the night. The windows of Minas Tirith were closed; the lights of each home spent. A few torches lit the street, but apart from the crackling fire and the howl of mountain wind, there was no sound. Gimli’s chain mail clanged and clinked as he trudged along the cobblestone street.

He was loath to admit it to the elf, but today had been a tiresome day. The debate regarding the Stewardship of Gondor had begun in the morning and lasted well into the night. Aragorn had considered long and hard, seeking private counsel from Gandalf. Eventually, a decision was made and by midnight the noble governors of Gondor, as well as all those concerned, had assembled in the Great Hall. It was then that Aragorn announced Faramir as Steward of Gondor, to loud applause and murmured agreement.

Gimli sighed irritably. And it was then that the madman Boromir had sent the crowd screaming and the Citadel Guard running by exploding into a tirade of insults and threats which humiliated any who had once called him friend. The Guard had moved to restrain him, pulling him away and removing his sword, but not before he had landed a heavy blow on one of the younger guards. A certain Iorlas. And before the Guard had hauled him out of the room, Boromir had spit on the ground before Aragorn, sending a cry of shock and disgust from all those present.

*A traitor to the crown*, Gimli thought angrily. *And a traitor to his friends. Pity they didn’t throw him in the dungeons.*
The Dwarf decided to push the thoughts away before his temper ignited. He was too tired, and it was too late, to work himself up over the ranting of a lunatic. Even if that lunatic had once been a noble, fair leader of Men, a friend who had fought with Gimli and laid a consoling hand on Gimli’s shoulder at the site of Balin’s tomb. But that friendship, indeed that mind, had disintegrated long ago on the slopes of Amon Hen.

*How many circles more?* Gimli peered up in the night sky, trying to judge his distance from the Citadel and his bed. *Bah, inefficient city!* Dwarves never bothered with frivolities like sprawling streets that wound around the mountain, preferring instead the labyrinthine passageways of their underground dwellings. And it was better that way, if one asked Gimli. Better than toiling on, back and forth, up and around the endless semi-circles of Minas Tirith. Better to take the more direct route, going straight through the mountain’s heart.

He was dragging his feet along the fourth – or fifth? – circle when he saw, several hundred paces ahead, a chaotic scene. There was a tiny pub, squeezed in between towering walls and the archway leading up to the fifth – or sixth? – circle. Standing outside the pub, a crowd had gathered, some people jeering, some laughing, many yelling. Gimli exhaled angrily. *What mischief is this?*

He hurried forward, laying a hand on his axe’s hilt, and elbowed his way through the crowd.

“Ho!” he growled. “What noise? ‘Tis the very dead of night! Ho, let a dwarf pass!”

He pushed his way through the mass of bodies, earning several surprised glances and annoyed curses, until he reached the very center of attention. There, the source of all the noise, was a duel. Two Men fighting, both stumbling, waving their swords wildly, sweating and swearing. It was clear by their clumsy swings and near misses on the laughing, encouraging crowd that both were intoxicated. Gimli heard a familiar battle cry and closed his eyes. *Nay, sweet Eru, do not say it is the lunatic.* He opened his eyes to the grim reality. *It is he.*

“Boromir!” Gimli roared.

One of the Men stopped fighting. He staggered back, eyes bleary, and dropped his blade heavily against the ground. His clothes were disheveled, ripped and stained, and his hair hung lank against his brow. Gimli could smell the drink on his breath from where he stood, near fifteen paces away.

“Aye, ‘tis Boromir the Mad!” the opponent cried.

The crowd hooted and roared. It surged forward with cries both for and against the son of Denethor. Boromir raised his sword and hurled it around, catching the other Man in the thigh with the flat of his blade. Screams and cheers from the crowd. The Man howled in pain and flung himself at his opponent, bringing his elbow back and crushing Boromir’s nose. The crack rang loud.

Gimli rushed forward.

“What rascality is this?” he cried. “Stop! Cease! Both of you!”

Blood streamed from Boromir’s nostrils and the other Man’s thigh. Before Gimli could intervene, Boromir brought his blade down against the Man. The opponent raised his sword to deflect and, using his free hand, landed a heavy blow in Boromir’s gut. Boromir stumbled back, gasping for breath, his arms hugging his torso. The mob cried out in indignation. Someone threw a bottle of ale at the other Man. The Man ducked and faced the people with a laugh.

“Why so quick to defend him, friends?” he cried.
“Traitor!”

“Shhh, let him speak!”

“Dishonorable cad!”

“Let the dwarf through!”

“Eh? ‘Respect for our prince!’” the Man replied loudly to one of the crowd’s chaotic shouts. “He’s as mad as his father!”

Gimli rushed forward, axe unsheathed. Boromir was hunched over, holding his stomach, trembling with pain. In one swift movement, refined over years of battle, Gimli brought the axe up against the other Man’s throat.

“Speak one more word, treacherous villain, and I will cut your throat.”

A hush over the crowd. Someone giggled.

The Man froze. His smile faded and he watched Gimli with wide, shocked eyes. After a moment of silent fear, he growled: “‘Tis not your business, dwarf.”

“Aye, ’tis my business indeed. For I am friend to Aragorn, King Elessar himself, and,” he hesitated for a heartbeat, “your prince, Boromir, son of Denethor. And your treason disgusts me. What is your name, rogue?”

The Man swallowed without answering. Gimli pushed the axe further.

“What is your name?”

“Delhir, son of Dalhir.”

“Well, Delhir, son of Dalhir, you are coming with me. To the Citadel and to the dungeons!”

A hand on Gimli’s shoulder startled him. He turned to see Boromir standing before him, pale and still with an arm around his stomach. His nose was crooked, obviously broken, and dark circles already formed around his eyes near the swelling.

“Nay, Gibli,” Boromir said thickly. “‘Twas I who challenged him. Let him go.”

Gimli eyed the other Man suspiciously, considering his options. He hesitated for several moments. The crowd watched him expectantly. Finally, he raised his axe and nicked the Man’s cheek with his axe. The Man stumbled back, clutching his bleeding face. He glared at Boromir, but did nothing else save turn quickly without bowing. The crowd parted and he stumbled off.

Now all watched Gimli and Boromir.

“Well?” Gimli roared. “Disperse! Back to your beds!”

Mumbling and eyeing Boromir, the people soon drifted away, moving off in various directions, back into the pub, up the street, to their homes. A few bowed to Boromir, but most ignored him. They watched him out of the corner of their eyes as they disappeared into the night. Once all was silent and the street empty, Boromir hunched further and exhaled shakily, hugging his stomach with both arms. With bloodshot eyes he met Gimli’s stern gaze.

“And you!” the dwarf seethed.
Boromir said nothing.

“Drunk in the street, brawling with gutter rats!”

He grabbed Boromir’s arm and jerked him upright. The Man gave a cry of pain.

“A disgrace to the House of Stewards!” Gimli snarled and pushed Boromir forward.

They began the unsteady march up towards the Citadel, Gimli keeping an iron grip on Boromir’s arm, every now and again pulling him forward. Gimli was further annoyed since he had promised himself a calm return to the Citadel. But now his blood was up and his anger boiling. Every time the Man beside him stumbled or leaned against the wall for support, Gimli would twist his arm, wrench him straight and push him forward. He did not care if the Man had an ancient, troublesome wound in his stomach. Gimli’s evening was ruined, and he had little sympathy for mad, drunk royalty.

They walked in silence, making their way past the Houses of Healing on the sixth circle and up, finally, towards the Citadel. The courtyard, the White Tree glowing in the moonlight. The guards at the entrance of the main doors raised their axes.

“How! Who treads by the Citadel gate?”

“Gimli, son of Glóin, and Boromir, son of Denethor and Prince of the White City.”

A pause.

“You may pass.”

The guards could not help but steal glances at the reeking figure of Boromir, with his swollen nose and bloodied face, as he stumbled past. Gimli followed, glaring at each young guard until they resumed their formal stance of vacant stares.

Inside the Citadel, all slept. The torches burned low, every room and hall was dark and silent. As Boromir and Gimli passed, nocturnal guards saluted, their swords clanging loudly against their armor. A few bashful-looking attendants skittered out of the way as the dwarf and Man trudged up the wide, spiral staircase leading to the upper floors. But, excepting these few ghosts, none still walked the Citadel halls.

The main hall of royal bedrooms was empty, save for one silhouetted figure at the far end. Gimli, feeling finally a marginal sense of privacy, gave Boromir a glare and a grunt.

“Let us hope the drudges and watchmen hold their tongues, my drunk companion,” Gimli hissed angrily. “For tonight you are a shambling mess! Bah! Why, do you not remember the days of Imladris? You were once a proud, upright, honorable Man! And now? Eh! A stinking drunkard!”

Boromir, who had been in a sort of daze, turned with bleary eyes to Gimli and shook his arm free from the dwarf’s vehement grip.

“Gimli-son-of-Glóin,” Boromir slurred, “I did not ask for your help.”

“Ha!” Gimli barked. “I doubt you would have been able to find the path back up to the Citadel without aid! And I know what troubles you, oh aye, I do. I have a keen mind, Boromir-son-of-Denethor, nothing escapes a dwarf!”

Boromir watched him uneasily. He did not notice the silhouetted figure moving towards them.
“Think you are the first to return from the very depths of darkness? Why, the father of Thorin Oakenshield, Thrain the Second, was tormented by Sauron himself in the pits of Dol Guldur! Aye, he too succumbed to madness, wandering the lands, witless and lost. Think you to be the only one carrying scars of the Dark One? It is not an easy thing to forget, I agree, yet you disgrace us all if – ”

“Boromir!”

Both Man and dwarf snapped around to see Faramir, Steward of Gondor, approaching quickly. He was still dressed as he had been at the meeting during the day, and his red-rimmed gaze and sunken cheeks revealed much of his troubled vigil. He now neared them quickly. He stared, shocked, at Boromir’s appearance and cast a questioning glance at Gimli.

When Boromir turned to look at Faramir, the blood on his face reflected in the dim torchlight.

“Brother, you bleed.”

Boromir nodded vaguely, though his head was tilted as though he listened to other sounds. Without hesitation, Faramir took hold of Boromir’s shoulder and pushed him down the hall. The dwarf fell into step behind them, mumbling and muttering to himself in annoyance.

They reached a large bedchamber with tall ceilings and a huge, vacant bed. A solitary attendant, an elderly man with red hair and white beard, dozed in a nearby chair. As Faramir entered and closed the door behind the group, the attendant awoke and scrambled into a standing position.

“My lord?” he croaked, rapidly blinking the sleep from his eyes.

Boromir staggered forward and hit his knee against the bed railing.

“Get bandages and hot water, Rúnyafin,” Faramir ordered. “And then get you gone.”

The attendant bowed and exited hastily, shutting the door loudly as he left. As soon as they were alone, Boromir sank down into the bed, seemingly ignorant of his two companions. With a groan, he straightened and seemed to fall asleep on the spot. Faramir and Gimli glanced at each other.

“What has happened?” Faramir demanded.

“I,” Gimli began, emphasizing each word, “found… your brother… dueling-in-the-street-with-a-common-ruffian!”

“What?”

“Aye!”

“Where?”

“Outside a squalid drinking establishment in the fourth circle, under the arch.”

“The Skulking Squire?”

“I know not the name.”

Noise by the door. The attendant returned carrying a bowl of steaming water and some cloth. He laid them against a low table and then, without a word, bowed and hurried out. There followed several moments of silence, punctuating only by Boromir’s labored, gurgling breaths. Gimli placed his hands on his hips.
“Boromir, do you sleep?” Faramir asked.

“I do not,” came the muffled reply.

With a grunt, Boromir lifted himself off the bed and took some of the cloth. He dipped it in the boiling water, scalding his fingertips, and began dabbing at his nose. Wincing and occasionally missing his target, he looked up at the other two. Faramir and Gimli mirrored each other’s expressions of shock, annoyance, anger.

“Was he seen?” Faramir asked.

“Aye! Seen by half the city and heard by the other half!” Gimli exclaimed. “There was a mob to goad him!”

Faramir groaned. “It will be tomorrow’s gossip, and all of Minas Tirith will know of it by dusk.”

Gimli snorted, a sound which indicated agreement with the Steward’s comment and disgust at the predicament. Boromir had apparently given up with the cloth and collapsed back onto the bed. Faramir held his face in his hands in a gesture of helpless weariness.

“How was the other man?” Faramir asked in a low voice.

“Delhir, son of Dalhir.”

Faramir’s brow creased. “I know Dalhir. He is a butcher on the fourth circle.”

Silence.

“Have you nothing to say, brother?”

“Aye, I have nothing to say,” Boromir mumbled from the bed. “You are the Steward, the city’s gossip is your responsibility.”

“Zounds! Think you I have enjoyed today? They spoke of you as a traitor ere you left the Hall! I know not for what reason, but Aragorn defended you, and since all judgement rests on the King, the critics were silenced. But, brother, you have thrown off all honor and title you once carried! Is this how you wish to live your days?”

Boromir suddenly sat up with a scowl. “Mayhap I have lost my honor, but it were you and your King that robbed me of my title!”

“Pfft!” Gimli intervened. “What fool would trust you as Steward?”

Boromir stood, bristling. Despite themselves, both Faramir and Gimli took a step back. Gimli suddenly cursed himself for not confiscating the lunatic’s sword after the duel.

“Brother, you are unfit,” Faramir said, forcing calm into his voice. “You must accept this.”

“I have been labeled unfit by knaves and villains!” Boromir raged, his voice rising.

“Calm yourself! You shall wake the entire Citadel with this ranting!”

“Should have taken his sword…” Gimli muttered.

Boromir turned to the dwarf, “What say you?”
“I said I should have taken your sword ere you lop off both our heads!” Gimli responded angrily.

Boromir barked a laugh and unsheathed his sword abruptly. Faramir gasped and moved forward to stop him, but Gimli had already retrieved his axe and stood in defensive position. Before either could do anything, Boromir tossed his sword aside with a hollow laugh. It clattered loudly against the stone floor.

“Is this really how I am seen? Truly, a madman?” he whispered, almost to himself. “Brother?”

Faramir, who stood as if he was about to restrain Boromir, stepped back with eyes lowered. He did not speak. Gimli growled and sheathed his axe. The air hung thick with tension.

Finally, Boromir moved away and sat heavily in an ornate chair by the window, slouching down with legs wide. His pale eyes dimmed and his expression grew stony. Gimli shuddered. It was in these moments that the dwarf hated Boromir and pitied him as a wretch. Too often at meals or in the halls, he would pass the Man with this very same expression – grim, vacant, dead. He imagined the dark corridors the Man thought of, the snapping torches and whips and chains. He knew little of such horrors, but he well remembered the sparse tales from his father, Glóin, when he spoke of Thrain’s torment and death.

Feeling he could bear the heavy silence no longer, Gimli snorted gruffly and moved to leave. He cast a sidelong glance at Faramir, who was watching Boromir intently. Faramir caught his eye and, shoulders sinking, he too moved towards the door. As they opened it to leave, Boromir’s head suddenly snapped up.

“Ho! Where to?” he asked.

“To bed, that’s where!” Gimli exclaimed.


“I wish no more arguments,” Faramir murmured.

“Nay, not to argue,” Boromir stood quickly. “Mayhap – mayhap to talk idly. Come now, it is not so late.”

“It is too late for my head,” Gimli said.

“Brother, surely you will not leave so soon?” Boromir asked, stepping towards Faramir. Faramir looked away, failing once again to meet his brother’s gaze.

“Gimli is right, it is late.”

“Not so, not so!” Boromir said, his manner growing desperate. “Come, may we not speak of Gimli’s adventures over Rohan? Master Dwarf, I know you revel in the telling of those tales.”

“What? Now? How much have you had to drink, Boromir?” Gimli asked. “Soon the birds of dawn will begin singing. If you are so keen on hearing tales, we shall speak during the daytime.”

Boromir clutched Faramir’s arm. “And you? Will you not stay?”

“What chills your heart that you insist on our presence, brother?”

Casting a quick glance to Gimli, Boromir hesitated. “Faramir, do not leave. I hear them.” He lowered his voice. “Whispers in the night. Stay, let us talk a while – I am sorry for today. But stay,
“Speak of elvish tales or what have you, else the whispers consume me.”

“Whispers in the night?” Faramir repeated slowly.

“Bah!” Gimli exclaimed. “The common folk are right, Boromir the Mad, indeed! And I suppose ye want us to hold your hand and sing ye a cradlesong, eh?”


There was a moment of silence as Boromir shifted uncomfortably and the other two strained their ears, trying in vain to give credence to his claims. They could hear nothing save the occasional creak in the wood.


Faramir sighed, his expression fell. He placed a comforting hand on Boromir’s shoulder. “There is naught to fear, brother. Barad-dûr was destroyed, its evil perishéd.”

“Yea, but I hear it still.”

“And only you!” Gimli exclaimed before he could control himself.

“Gimli!” Faramir spun around, eyes flashing angrily. The frustration quickly dissipated and he once again resumed his weary posture. “Go,” he said softly, “leave us.”

Gimli looked first to Faramir, with his sunken eyes and strained expression, and then to Boromir, nose broken and swollen. For a brief moment, the dwarf imagined this to be the pitiful end of the House of Stewards. But he chided himself hastily for drawing such grim conclusions. The dark days have but passed, he thought, even if some are slow to recover. So be it, Aragorn will know what to do.

“Very well,” the dwarf bowed. “Good night, my lords.”

Faramir nodded in silent salute and Boromir lowered his gaze. Then, muttering to himself, Gimli turned and left. As soon as he closed the door behind him, his anger and frustration faded. Perhaps it was the weariness, or perhaps the elf’s influence was beginning to erode his natural stolidity, but he began to feel a new sentiment regarding the lunatic. Pity, but also sympathy. Mayhap even understanding. Aye, did not my father speak of Thrain with respect, even when there was no honor left?

They could hear the dwarf’s chain mail clanging noisily as he disappeared down the hall. Once all was again silent, Faramir turned to look at his brother. They did not speak, and in truth Faramir was weary of the day. He had spent the better part of the evening pacing the halls of the Citadel, ruminating endlessly on the events in the Hall. The announcement of his becoming Steward was not so unsettling as his brother’s reaction. Indeed, as Aragorn had commented, it would be difficult for all to adjust to this changed Boromir. But they could not judge him too brashly, nor condemn him too quickly. They could only hope that the former Man had not faded too much.

Still, Faramir was tired. He had no desire to remain and attempt to comfort the stranger before him. He met Boromir’s gaze, who watched him expectantly.

“Sleep, brother,” Faramir said. “You are strained and your mind clouded with drink. The day was
long, and ere I reach my own chambers, the sun will rise. Come, tomorrow we will speak of this.”

Boromir’s expression darkened. “Do you not believe me?”


“Come, then, we can yet drown them out. Tell me of the months in Ithilien. Or Osgiliath. Have you no adventure to relate?”

“Nay, not in the very dead of night. And my time in Ithilien and Osgiliath was not the happiest. I would not speak of it now.”

“Then what of other tales? Surely Legolas has regaled you with new elfish songs and myths from his people?”

Faramir smiled slightly. “Aye, that he did. But it was nothing I did not already know.”

Boromir returned the smile.

“You rival Mithrandir in lore.”

Faramir chuckled, but his laugh faded quickly.

“Good night then, Boromir.”

Boromir’s brow creased and he turned sharply from his brother. Faramir watched as he leaned against the windowsill and his shoulders tensed. Something beckoned him to linger, and he waited for his brother to speak.

“You are ashamed of today, during the King’s announcement,” Boromir muttered, his voice thick. A pause.

“I am.”

“Attribute it to the ramblings of a madman, Faramir!” Boromir turned from the window and laughed with over-bright eyes. “But do not abandon him so soon! The darkness closes in too fast for my taste, and I like not the sounds it brings.”

Faramir turned his head. He did not want to see his brother weep.

“They are but illusions, brother…”

He heard Boromir stifle a sob and sink again into the ornate chair. When Faramir braved to look at him, he saw Boromir holding his face in his hands, sitting very still, very quiet, taut. Faramir’s instinct was to leave the room immediately, to abandon this situation and force it out of his mind. But Faramir was ever a sympathetic soul.

Boromir interrupted his feeble consolation, however:

“’Tis such cowardice, I know.”

“Nay,” Faramir looked away. “Ne’er a coward. You have braved the very blackest of places, seen things we shudder to even think of. Ne’er a coward, brother. You have returned from Imladris much changéd, but you have returned, and that alone satisfies me.”
Before pulling his hands away, Boromir wiped his eyes hastily. He nodded. Crooked grin under crooked nose. “Go, then. ‘Tis late, and all my senses are spent. Get you to bed. We shall talk perhaps tomorrow.”

Faramir hesitated. He desired sleep, his bones longed for it, ached for it, and yet he knew his brother enough to sense the forced lightening of mood.

“For sure, that you are well?”

Boromir laughed, muffled by the bloody nose. “Aye, well enough to know that you are too tired to sit with a drunk brother. Nay, I mean that in jest. Go, go, in truth I am well. I did not mean anything about the whispers. It was nonsense.”

Faramir paused again. He watched his brother force another smile.

“Nonsense brought on by mead of poor quality, Faramir. In truth.”

“The Skulking Squire is a tavern of poor quality.”

“I shall avoid it from now on.” Boromir grinned again, pushed himself to his feet. “Go, the Steward of Gondor needs his rest. Get you to sleep.”

Faramir sighed. “Very well. Good night, brother.”

They looked at each other for a moment – just enough time for Faramir to see that Boromir was lying, that perhaps there was something more to be said. But the day had been long, and the night was almost spent. Faramir nodded once, forced his own empty smile, and left the room. He closed the door and walked quickly away.

And did the whispers return, once Boromir was left alone? Did they creep in from the walls, out of all the crevices and irregularities in the stone? Did they rattle with the wind, snap with the torches, creak with the bedsprings as he lowered himself onto it?

Aye, there they are…

Boromir grabbed his sword, laid it unsheathed by his side. He kept the windows open, the door closed, and his eyes scanned the empty room continuously. At every minute sound, his hand jerked towards the sword, raised it. He did not change his clothes, but chose to remain atop the bedcovers, dressed in all disheveled cloak and poorly done doublet. His vision was blurred at the edges and swam back and forth. His hands, his legs, all numb.

And yet he could hear them – yes, there. Skittering along the edges of the wall, so that when he snapped his head around, dizzied, they were already gone. He could hear the dim laughter – high-pitched, confused, tittering. Or the low, dull roar of the Eye, speaking the Black Tongue, whispering in his ear…

Throquûrz, gortag? Pushudg thlûn, akrum-uk, glu-bûb. Nûl-izgu golug, ashûk agh zogtark! Yet ulur-lat izgûr, glu-bûb!

In the silence, when the city slept, Boromir could hear them clearly. He hated it, wished only for noise, for something to drown out the cries of Third One in the other cell. He moved, shifted his position, sat against the headboard, waited. The sound of leather rubbing cloth, of the old bedsprings under strain. For a moment, the soft echo of Barad-dûr disappeared. But as soon as Boromir fell still, and only his heavy, ale-soaked breathing could be heard, the echo returned,
louder this time, as if offended that he should try to ignore it.

And who could ignore it? Boromir was sure he could feel an orc growling at his shoulder, even though his back was to the wall. But was it the cell wall? Irregular, black stone, pointed, spiked, burying into him, propping him up whenever he threatened to sink down. He felt again: when they removed the mask, and the foul air was too much, and he could not bear to hear Third One screaming, and so he would drag his face along the cell floor, rip away his beard, cover his head with his hands…

No, no, no.

Boromir forced the memories away, pushed them back into a far corner of his mind. He needed movement. He clambered off the bed, stood, swayed from the drink, steadied himself. Keeping his sword in his hand, he walked diagonally to the cabinet by the window. It was very dark out, still night. Checking over his shoulder, clearing his throat occasionally to break the silence, he fumbled with the cabinet doors, opened them. A few bottles, irregular in shape, short and fat or tall and thin. Which was the strongest?

...And there, coming out of the walls, the distant howls. Third One’s voice, that had been so young, innocent, untainted, now scraped and ruined from screaming. Elvish screams in the dark, and Boromir hears every word, every grinding of the machine the orcs use, every crack of the whip tearing into flesh. He drags his face along the jagged stone floor, digs his nails into his skull, begs for silence.

“One! Valar, please! I do not want to hear this! I cannot bear it!”

(The Valar-Gods fidget.)

And again and again, on and on, endless: Third One, screaming. Boromir, face bleeding, weeps, burrows himself into his naked, shaking shoulders. Eventually, there is silence. Blessed silence. And Boromir is hauled off the floor by rough orc hands, dragged away to the room Third One screamed from. And then there are his screams echoing down the Barad-dûr halls. And he is wishing for death instead of silence. He is coming close, very close. They drop him back into his cell. He feels that his face is cracked, he sees his own body, black and red and yellow, unfamiliar. And shaking, always shaking. Yes, he is very close.

Once, only once, but that is enough, the Eye comes. It pries into his mind, forcing it apart, tearing through it, thrashing here, probing there. As this happens, Boromir is as a beast, roaring with pain, base instinct, suffering, delusion. He hears words in his mind, not his own, questions. But he cannot remember what a ring is, he does not understand, he cannot answer. And so the Eye leaves him, the burning-ripping fades, and his mind is left in tatters, to piece itself back together in whatever way it can.

Boromir took the first bottle he saw – dimly recognizing it as strong liquor – uncorked it and drank. It spilled unevenly down his chin and over his hand. But the echoes continued, insisting. Boromir! Help me! Please!

He needed noise. He needed talk. Pippin, maybe. Pippin was always willing to talk, tell stories, laugh. Perhaps he was only person willing to talk with him. Was Pippin awake? Or Legolas, who never slept, it seemed. The elf could tell him of elfish history, songs, anything. Gandalf, even. Gandalf was surely awake. Anyone. Perhaps he should go look for them.

No, no. Don’t be a pitiful fool…
Boromir drank, took a seat in the chair by the window, drank again. He did not notice, as his mind was dulled and the whispers of Barad-dûr finally silenced, that the first light of dawn was glowing softly over the eastern horizon.
The forests around Minas Tirith were green with young life. A peaceful walk down the wooded paths was something unknown to the people of Gondor for the last few years, and now, on this gentle May morning, an elf and a dwarf, a strange sight in itself, enjoyed such a walk together. They talked idly, commenting on this and that, or bickering as old friends do. The day was warm, but not too warm as to be uncomfortable. The sun was shining.

The elf, blond and fair, smiled at a passing comment of the dwarf’s. He halted in his walk and turned to face the squat figure beside him.

“They should like a try,” he said.

“A try at what?” the dwarf asked.

“You claim an ‘elf princeling’ could never wield the axe as well as a common dwarf,” the first said smoothly. “Those are heavy words, and I should like to prove them wrong.”

The dwarf grunted with amusement. “Very well, Legolas, here. But be careful, I will be very unhappy if you manage to bend the blade or break the hilt.”

He removed his axe from its sheath and handed it to Legolas, who took it, grasped it firmly in both hands, testing the weight. As the dwarf looked on with increasing mirth, Legolas ran a finger over the sharp blade, careful not to cut himself, and then eyed the axe’s shaft.

“This is not straight,” Legolas commented.

“It is as straight as needs be,” Gimli scoffed. “It hits the mark.”

“So you claim. We shall see.”

Legolas turned and studied the surrounding trees. They were at a part of the path that was thick with trees of varying sizes. Thin wisps of infant walnuts stood amid the thick, older oaks and elms. Legolas walked several paces before finding his desired spot. He then pointed at a distant trunk, medium in width, with a paler swirl of wood amid the monotonous browns.

“There,” Legolas said. “See that pale spot on yonder ash? That is my target.”

Gimli peered into the forest, his hands on his hips.

“The one with the squirrels on it?”

“Nay, two trees to the right.”
“Oh yes, I see it,” he nodded. “Very well, princeling, let us see you hit it.”

Legolas took several moments to prepare, earning various sighs and impatient snorts from Gimli. The elf tested the axe, swung it around, tested it again and swung it high and low. He aligned the blade with the target, feigned as if to throw, feigned again, and then stepped back to reconsider. Gimli growled and crossed his arms. With a smile, Legolas stepped forward again, checked his balance, made mental calculations on the wind’s speed and humidity, checked the axe again, leaned back and finally – in a movement at once graceful and strange-looking for an elf – threw the axe.

After spinning several times, it slammed against the tree, sending bark everywhere and birds flying. It came to rest perhaps three inches above the pale swirl of wood.

“Ha!” Gimli barked. “See that, eh? Thought it was all too easy? Ha ha!”

Legolas clenched his fists in frustration.

“It is too short for my build,” he argued. “I have longer arms than you. The axe was too short.”

“Ha ha! Too short, indeed!” Gimli clutched his stomach. “If that was an orc, you would have but trimmed his hair!”

As the dwarf roared with laughter, Legolas stormed forward and jerked the axe from the tree. He stalked back, sending vicious glares at the still-chuckling dwarf, and resumed his position.

“I wish to try again,” Legolas said.

“Oh, go ahead, my blind friend, let us see if you can pierce the wind above the orc’s head. Ha! Shall I stand here, to your side, or am I in danger of being hit?”

Legolas bristled.

“After this throw, we shall see your talents with the bow,” he murmured.

Gimli made a noise as if to feign fear and waited. The forest audience hushed as Legolas prepared his second throw. He did away with the excessive testing and pacing, and instead eyed the target, letting his mind wrap itself around the trunk and embrace it. He felt the air against his fingers as they curled around the axe’s hilt. He envisioned the blade cutting through the swirl – he let loose with this vision in his mind – and the vision was realized. The axe hurtled through the air, whistling, and landed in the very center of the designated target.

Legolas turned, smiled.

And as Gimli was gathering his breath for a barrage of excuses, insults and reevaluations, a noise pricked up their ears, and there was movement up along the path. Both Legolas and Gimli turned, the latter instinctively reaching for the axe with now hung against the ash tree. There, further up the path, a group of elves on horses trotted along slowly. Their purpose, Legolas could not tell. He recognized a few by face, but not by name. Mirkwood. They approached, and all parties bowed.

The elf in the center, a tall elf with dark hair and bright eyes the color of the midday sky, smiled benignly at Legolas.

“Legolas Thranduillion, prince of the Woodland Realm,” he began. “I bring tidings from your king and father.”

“That is unexpected, and I am happy to hear it,” Legolas saluted. “But forgive me, kinsman, for I
know not your face.”

The elf smiled.

“That is understandable. I am Dínendal Edledhronadbar, the second exile of the elven kingdoms. I am a friend of Boromir, son of Denethor, and I ride to Minas Tirith to meet him, for I hear that he lives.”

Legolas and Gimli both expressed immediate surprise – Legolas with a slight widening of his eyes and Gimli with a raspy gasp.

“You are one of the elves who traveled with Boromir in the time after Amon Hen?” Legolas asked.

“I am.”

“This is news indeed! He has spoken little of his time in the wasted lands of Dagorlad, and we believed all his companions dead.”

“Two, alas, perished, this I know,” Dínendal cleared his throat. “But I lived and have remained for these months in Mirkwood, or Eryn Lasgalen as it is now called, to heal and to once again breathe the smell of my home. For it has been very long since I have passed the realm’s gates, and to be welcomed back, with name renewed, well… it was difficult to tear myself away so soon.”

Legolas smiled. “I understand. And, as a prince of that realm, you have my respect and friendship. What little Boromir recounted has shown me that you, and your two companions, have regained tenfold whatever was lost.”

Dínendal nodded in thanks.

“Bah!” Gimli snorted. “Enough of this prim talk. Will you walk with us, Master Elf? I’m curious to hear of these Dagorlad adventures.”

The elf grinned slightly, dismounted. Gimli gathered his axe, and soon the three were walking along the path, back to Minas Tirith. The other elves, two tall dark-haired types, also dismounted and led the three horses by their reigns. They walked several paces behind Legolas, Gimli, and Dínendal.

“Tell us, then,” Legolas said. “How came you upon Boromir? And by what paths and choices did you find yourself in Dagorlad? Is it true you stifled the progress of the Easterling army?”

“I see some of my tale has already been told,” Dínendal grinned. “Well, I should begin at the beginning. My brothers and I did ever wander through Middle-earth, without aim or home. Scarcely did we meet others, for we took cares to avoid all realms and settlements. As you know, we were forbidden from living as the Eldar, and so we walked without purpose, without end. We came across Boromir near the Rauros Falls, at the foot of Amon Hen. He was gravely wounded. Two arrows pierced his person, and near twenty Uruk-hai lay at his feet.”

Gimli and Legolas both felt their faces flush with guilt.

“Alas that we abandoned him so soon,” Legolas murmured. “How I regret our hasty decisions that day.”

“Aye…” Gimli muttered.

“Nay, nay,” Dínendal said. “Be not ashamed. For we three egledhron soon learned the origin of
Boromir’s guilt, as well as the reason for his abandonment. We too left him shortly after, for we feared that which he cried out for. We feared the Ring.”

Legolas and Gimli stared. Dînendal smiled.

“Aye, he was delirious from his wounds, and he did utter aloud his supposed crime. We learned much of his companions, his quest, his torment. He spoke often of the Ring. It was clear he had been tempted by it, though we knew little more. Nonetheless, we left him, and he did follow us in order to challenge us,” Dînendal laughed. “Needless to say, wounded as he was, he did little save injure himself further.”

Legolas sighed. Gimli cocked his head.

“That is the Boromir we knew…” Legolas murmured.


Dînendal raised his eyebrows.

“My friends, you are strange as I speak of him, and this worries me,” he said. “What with Boromir? Speak now, ere we reach the city. What is there to Boromir that makes you sigh so?”

Legolas and Gimli looked at each other, considering. Dînendal waited. Finally, Legolas spoke.

“He is not the same, Dînendal,” the elf said softly. “He returned from Barad-dûr witless and ruined. Much time he spent in the healing houses. I know not if the rumors have reached you on your travels. But they speak of madness…”

“Madness!” Dînendal exclaimed.

“I am afraid so, Master Elf,” Gimli growled. “He’s become no more than a pitiful drunkard.”

“Gimli,” Legolas hissed.

“I speak only the truth.”

Dînendal stared at the two, aghast.

“His brother, Faramir, has been named Steward of Gondor, even though the title was Boromir’s by birthright,” Legolas said softly. “And rumors fly around the city of his overindulgence and of his madness.”

“Nay…” Dînendal breathed.

They were nearing the walls now. Legolas, Gimli and Dînendal could already see the white stone glinting amidst the trees, further down the path. The sunlight splayed across the walls in intricate patterns. From just this corner of the wall, this small window, Minas Tirith was beautiful.

“And it is Barad-dûr which has done this to him?” Dînendal asked.

“So they say,” Legolas said. “Though we had hoped to learn more of his travels from you. If mayhap some trials along the way had not already weakened his mind.”

“Apart from the Ring, you mean,” Gimli muttered.

Legolas shot him a sharp look.
“He did suffer much grief,” Dínendal admitted. “For the Ring. For his home. And later, for the death of one of our companions. He had come with us seeking exile, for he believed Minas Tirith would no longer accept him.”

“Exile?” Legolas and Gimli asked in unison.

“Aye. We three egledhron had planned to abandon the West in favor of the Wild Lands of East. Boromir was to join us. But, when we caught sight of the Easterling armies, we chose instead to remain and fight. My companion, Golradir, the first exile of Mirkwood, did e’er say we were reversing our shame and regaining our honor.” Dínendal sighed. “Alas, that such a Man should fall to such low depths. I do e’er shudder to think of that day…”

“Which day?” Gimli asked.

“I expect he has not spoken of it, of our last battle on Dagorlad plains.”

“Never,” Legolas said. “‘Tis a dark memory for him, I fear.”

“Indeed. Five nazgûl overwhelmed us as we fought there… The Black Breath was already upon Boromir, and my brother, Amdîr, and I, we did raise our blades high and utter the ancient war-cry of Fingon. But there were too many. Amdîr was taken. The last I saw of him, he was being ripped from the earth by a Fell Beast. I charged on, and one nazgûl did I slay. But still, there were too many. Boromir was taken shortly after. I remember nothing else, for an arrow pierced my person in that moment.”

Legolas and Gimli walked slowly now. So slowly, their footsteps forgotten as they listened with rapt attention. So this was part of the mystery to Boromir and Barad-dûr. So this was the last battle. So this was the beginning of a madman’s torment, of his slow crumble.

“Come, then,” Legolas said. “Let us hasten to the Citadel. For your stories shed light on much that has remained in shadow. The King and Lord Steward especially will be doubly curious to hear of all this.”

It was one o’clock in the afternoon. The sun was shining, the birds were singing, and Rúnyafin was agitated. His job as Head of the Lord Boromir's personal chambers had always been an uneventful, monotonous affair - since his Lordship was usually out in wars or mysterious quests, there was little to do except maintain the chambers in decent condition for when, and if, he returned. There had been occasional mistresses or heated arguments with the Lord Faramir, but the minimal gossip these episodes produced usually fizzled out within a few days.

Yet, ever since the Lord Boromir's return to Minas Tirith, his person had developed something of a cult following among the servants, complete with endless gossip, speculation, and fabricated tales. His madness was well documented throughout the Citadel staff, as was his drunkenness. His loss of title, his muttered ramblings, his exclusion from Citadel society; all this had proved a morbid delight among the castle servants and common folk. And what will they think, Rúnyafin thought wryly, when they find I was awoken in the middle of the night and his Lordship, drunken and with broken nose, did stumble back to his chambers supported by a dwarf and the newly-minted Faramir Steward? Rúnyafin snickered, but stopped short.

*Unless, of course, I did dream that episode.*

Rúnyafin looked up at the ceiling – at the ornate stone carvings that wormed their way up into each arch - and prayed to the Valar that he had not dreamt it. For it was a piece of gossip too good
However, now, he was in a hurry. Rúnyafin had been sent by King Elessar himself to wake Lord Boromir and return him to the Great Hall, where a visitor was waiting. In the Hall, Rúnyafin had caught a glimpse of dark hair tied back to reveal a pointed ear. An elf! Thirty-seven years working in the Citadel, surrounded always by the usual drudges and attendants, with only the deterioration of Lord Denethor’s sanity to keep things a bit lively, and now Rúnyafin was practically swimming through a sea of elves and foreigners. The Queen, Lady Arwen, the young Prince Legolas, the famous Lords Elladan and Elrohir. Even dwarves! Halflings! And now here was another exotic specimen. For one brief moment, Rúnyafin felt as a boy again, full of wonder and excitement.

He rounded another corner, walking at full speed. A few passing servants cast him questioning glances, and he returned their looks with an exasperated shrug. All knew Rúnyafin was the Head of Lord Boromir's chambers. Rushing through the Citadel corridors at noon was self-explanatory.

He found a woman and a boy waiting for him by the entrance of Lord Boromir's quarters. The woman was young, perhaps in her early thirties, while the boy was a gangly thirteen. As Rúnyafin approached, he noted that the boy was wringing his hands nervously and a faint sheen of sweat covered his brow.

“Innwen,” Rúnyafin called. “Is this the boy, then?”

“Aye, sir,” Innwen bowed her head. “Master Rúnyafin, this is my son, Innrod. Innrod, this is Master Rúnyafin, Head of the Lord Boromir’s Chambers.”

“First day at work, I imagine?” Rúnyafin asked from the bridge of his nose.

The boy nodded fervently, staring at the ground.

“Speak, boy, are you dumb?”

“N - no, sir,” the boy mumbled.

“Very well. I do not know what nonsense your silly mother has told you, but it is my duty to prepare you for service in his Lordship's chambers. It is a great honor to wash his Lordship’s undershirts or clean his stables, remember that. When I die, or - Valar permit - when I am discharged from his services for old age, you will become the next Head of his Chambers. Your duties will be to manage his Lordship’s personal affairs – which means ruling over all the various aides, nursemaids, drudges, pages, squires and attendants in his Lordship’s entourage. His shirts must be cleaned, his apartments dusted, his arms polished. His boots must be counted, his cloaks pressed, his papers organized. You must oversee all that is menial and trivial, all that his Lordship cannot be bothered with. Do you understand?”

“Aye, sir.”

“Learn to be as a shadow. Your presence must be minimally seen, never felt. You must sink into the backgrounds. Never speak unless his Lordship calls upon you. Make no comments, have no opinion. Also, the mark of a respectful servant is to keep his tongue behind his teeth. Now. Today we must needs wake his Lordship, and quickly too, for he has a visitor waiting in the Great Hall. Ready, boy?”

Innrod nodded quickly and dragged the back of his sleeve against his brow. Rúnyafin smiled inwardly. How he relished the anxiety of these young upstarts! He decided to make the anticipation somewhat more painful by looking Innrod up and down with a disparaging eye.
“Polish your shoes. We always meet his Lordship in excellent dress.”

The boy gasped and lunged down to clean his black leather shoes. After rubbing fervently, he sprang up again. Rúnyafin smiled, adjusted the boy's stiff collar, glanced at Innwen over his shoulder, and knocked on the door.

There was no response.

“My lord?” Rúnyafin called, knocking again.

Silence.

Rúnyafin emitted a theatrical sigh and pushed open the large doors. The three servants were met with stale, dank air that smelled horribly acidic. Innrod scoffed involuntarily and held his nose. Fierce sunlight poured in from the large windows, the bed was disheveled, and a bowl of cooled water rested on a low table. So it was not a dream, Rúnyafin thought.

They found Lord Boromir lying in a crumpled heap under the window. An empty bottle lay strewn against a chair. A wide stain had formed on the cushioned seat where the drink had spilled out. For a moment, Rúnyafin nearly smiled. This was too good to be true. No one would believe this. Yet he maintained his serious expression and stepped forward, Innwen and Innrod trailing at his heels.

As they neared his Lordship, Innrod let out a disgusted cry. Vomit soiled the Man's tunic and beard, and a mess of it lay beside him. A black bruise had formed around the broken nose, and dried blood crusted into the beard beneath. Innwen gasped and brought a handkerchief to her face.

“Boy, see to the mess,” Rúnyafin ordered. “And you, woman, help me wake him.”

Rúnyafin and Innwen stepped forward, careful to avoid the mess, and crouched beside Lord Boromir. Innrod lingered behind, hovering over them uncertainly. With a sharp glare from Rúnyafin, he finally bent down with a handkerchief and attempted to clean. Meanwhile, Rúnyafin knelt on the other side of his Lordship.

“Lord Boromir?” he said, placing a wary hand on the Man's shoulder.

There was no response. The Man's head lolled back, limp.

“Wake up, my lord,” Innwen tried. “‘Tis day. Come now, my lord. You are needed in the Hall. King Elessar beckons.”

After much jostling and pulling, Boromir moaned and opened his glazed eyes. Rúnyafin managed to pull him upright, so that his back leaned against the chair leg, but the Man was both heavy and unwieldy. He blinked, leaned against his hand, grumbled something. All the while, Rúnyafin and Innwen cooed childish encouragement.

“There you are, my lord. Up and about,” Rúnyafin said. “Well done, sir. Good, good. Try and stand for me, yes?”

Boromir staggered slightly as his elbow buckled. Rúnyafin and Innwen moved forward to keep him sitting. Yet he pushed them away, his face paling considerably, and jerked forward to retch. All three servants jumped back, though Rúnyafin caught some of it on his sleeve. When he was done, his Lordship slid back onto his side, intending to lose consciousness again. They tried coaxing him back up, but he simply pushed them away with incoherent murmurs.

“Come, my lord, awake,” Innwen said anxiously. “They are waiting for you in the Hall.”
Boromir groaned and, with eyes closed, mumbled: “Let them wait...”

“Nay, my lord,” Rúnyafin insisted, failing to hide his irritation at having his sleeve vomited upon. “It is past noon, the sun is high.”

It was too late, his Lordship had already fallen asleep. His breathing was deep and even, if somewhat hampered by the broken nose. Rúnyafin threw his hands in the air and sat back with a frustrated sigh. Innwen continued to shake Boromir by the shoulder, but to no avail. After a few moments of disgust and despair, Innrod finally stepped forward. He crouched over Boromir and pressed his thumb against the bridge of the sleeping Man's crooked nose.

It worked. Boromir jerked back with a hiss, immediately awake. He fumbled to lay a backhand on the quickly receding boy, but, finding it too difficult, sat up instead to nurse his nose. He cupped it with one hand and shielded his eyes from the sun's glare with the other.

“By the Valar!” he snarled. “Idiot boy, I'll have your head for that!”

Rúnyafin hastened forward and, together with Innwen and Innrod, they hoisted Boromir onto his feet before he could resist. He stumbled sideways, reeled left and forward. Rúnyafin pulled the Man's arm over his shoulder and led him to sit at the low table.

“They are waiting, my lord!” Innwen was saying. “We must make haste!”

“F – forgive me, m’lord!” Innrod overlapped. “I did not mean to – ”

“There, good, up on your feet,” Rúnyafin said. “Here. We must be quick, my lord. They expect his Lordship immediately.”

Boromir slouched onto the couch, leaning his head over the edge. His nose was bleeding afresh, and Rúnyafin caught an ashamed flush from Innrod. Yet his Lordship seemed to have already forgotten the harsh methods used to wake him, and was instead covering his eyes with his hand and concentrating on the nausea. Innwen bent over him with the water and began to dab at his nose.

“Rúnyafin, close the curtains ere my head pounds me blind,” Boromir scowled. “Who calls me at this wicked hour?”

“King Elessar, sir,” Innrod burst forth, excited. “And they say one of the warrior elves your Lordship encountered during the War.”

Boromir struggled to raise his head. He stared with swollen eyes at the boy, who was again blushing furiously. “Boy, are you a lying dullard? Who told you such? All three elves I knew did perish.”

Innrod shook his head fervently.

“Nay, my lord, ‘tis a warrior elf from the Mirkwood kingdom. I am sure of it!”

Boromir’s lips parted slightly in shock while the servant woman cleaned away the mess in his beard. Innrod could not help but smile. Yet his Lordship’s reaction was not necessarily one of joy as it was one of haste. He sat forward, keeping a hand against his stomach and the other against the chair’s armrest.

“My doublet. I need to change.”

“Yes, my lord,” Rúnyafin hastened away.
Innwen laid a wet cloth against Boromir’s nose, and he groaned with relief. Rúnyafin returned with fresh clothes, Innwen set aside the bowl of water, and Innrod took a step back as they helped Boromir remove his soiled surcoat, overshirt and undershirt. Once Boromir’s torso was nude, Innrod nearly gaped at the scars – especially the black mutilation in the stomach – while Innwen and Rúnyafin diplomatically kept their eyes averted. Boromir loosened one of the new shirts and noticed the attention.

“An obscene wound, verily?” he smirked.

Innrod dropped his gaze.

“Nay, my lord. Forgive me, my lord. I did not mean to look.”

After the undershirt and overshirt were on, Boromir buttoned his doublet.

“There is nothing to forgive,” Boromir said. “You stare. So would these two, but they know enough to hide their half-glances and whispered comments. What is your name?”

“Innrod, my lord.”

“Innrod, bring me my cloak. Your elders will take care of the chambers.”

Innrod beamed. He rushed out of the room, grinning stupidly at Rúnyafin and Innwen. Boromir took the wet cloth from Innwen’s hand and pressed it against his nose again. They watched him, silent. Rúnyafin found it difficult to hide a rather evil glare, though Boromir did not seem to notice or care. The boy returned. He stumbled in with cloak and scabbard. Upon seeing the sword, Rúnyafin flushed, but Boromir simply laughed.

“Aye, good thinking, lad,” he said as he took it. “Always armed, always.”

Innrod smiled. Boromir fastened his cloak, turned to the other servants.

“Have the room cleaned ere I return. I would also request that you speak naught of last night’s adventures, but I know it would be a foolish request.” He turned, walked towards the door. “Come then, Innrod.”

With Innrod trailing faithfully at his heels, Boromir strode out of the room, leaving Innwen and Rúnyafin glancing at each other.

Outside, Boromir and Innrod walked quickly, zigzagging down the halls while Boromir fumbled with his belt. Innrod watched the Man with an intense mix of curiosity and unease. So this was Boromir the Mad. How his friends would envy him if they knew he was now in the Lordship’s service! Innrod smiled to himself, for all his friends still worked in the kitchens or stables. Ha!

“The girl, Innwen, she is your mother?”

“Aye, my lord.”

“Who is your father?”

“I know not, my lord, he was killed during the War, my lord.”

Boromir grunted. They turned a corner and began to climb a stone staircase. Innrod watched as Boromir, every so often, paused to grip his stomach and swallow with eyes closed. The various nobles, guards and servants all bowed to his Lordship or muttered respectful salutations. Innrod
soaked everything up with awe. He had never been in this part of the Citadel before.

They reached the top of the stairs and began a rushed walk down a long, wide hallway. Innrod had to skip forward to keep up with Boromir’s long strides. The Man was still relatively drunk, for he often shouldered passing servants or collided with the wall unexpectedly.

“My lord? May I ask a question, sir?” Innrod asked, childish curiosity consuming him.

Boromir did not respond, but did not say no. Innrod bounded forward, trying to keep pace and keep his breath steady.

“That – my lord, that wound, is it from your battles with Easterling savages?”

“Nay. ‘Twas a poisoned Uruk-hai arrow that did it.”

“My lord, is it true that the Uruk-hai are twice the size of Men?”

“That is an exaggeration.”

“Does it hurt still? The wound?”

“Mind your place, boy.”

“Yes, my lord,” Innrod said, barely audible and blushing.

After a few more strides, Boromir cleared his throat. Innrod felt himself being observed. They were walking the last stretch before the Great Hall, and there were no people in this part of the corridor. Innrod noticed how Boromir lowered his voice to a private growl:

“Aye, it does hurt, lad.”

“Is that why you drink?” Innrod asked, rather stupidly.

Boromir laughed strangely. “What do the servants think?”

“They think… nay, forgive me, my lord.”

“Well?”

“They say it is… they say you driven to it from evil memories.”

Boromir did not comment. They had arrived at the entrance of the Great Hall. Two guards pulled in their spears to salute. Boromir turned to Innrod. The boy wiped his hands nervously against his breeches. Had he said something wrong? Yet, his Lordship’s expression softened, not quite a smile but close.

“Well? Am I presentable?” Boromir asked.

Innrod smiled broadly, almost laughed. “His Lordship’s nose is black and he is very pale.”

Boromir shrugged, loosened his collar slightly.

“Aye, that will do for today. Just so long as I am not sick on the King himself.”

Innrod snickered.

“Off you go, Innrod. I will call on you if I have need.”
Innrod smiled, bowed slightly, and, before he could contain himself, beamed: “Good luck, my lord!”

Boromir laughed and nodded, and then he was gone, into the Great Hall. Innrod peeked in, he could see a group of Men and elves – even a dwarf! – waiting for Boromir. Innrod tried to steal a glance at the King, but the guards were eyeing him nastily, and so he hastened away.
AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

When Dínendal first saw Boromir enter the Hall, he did much to hide his shock. Only three months had passed since they had last seen each other, and yet the Man had aged so suddenly that Dínendal shuddered. Perhaps the scars were the most troublesome. Scars around the face, over the nose, cutting through the beard. A thin, pale face. *Is his nose broken?* Disheveled clothes. A loose, uneven walk, limping right, as if he was drunk or wounded or both. Dínendal soon realized the Man was indeed drunk, for he was rank with the stench of alcohol.

Boromir arrived, arms outstretched, all glinting smile, and pulled Dínendal into a laughing embrace before the stunned elf could react. Dínendal noted Aragorn, Faramir and Gimli looking on with visible tension.

“Brother, your sword?” Faramir asked.

Boromir stepped back, reeled almost, and bowed to Aragorn and Faramir with mock formality.

“Aye, my Lord Steward,” he said and shook his sheathe. “‘Tis my sword, indeed.”

Gimli gave Faramir a low growl, but Faramir ignored it. Boromir caught it.

“What say you, dwarf?” Boromir said. “Aye, I am still drunk, and I see you are still offended. But come, have the introductions been made?” He turned to Dínendal, smiled and breathed soft, “By the Valar, this is a welcome surprise… I did not think to see you again, Second One.”

“Nor I you, my friend,” Dínendal smiled.

Aragorn grinned. “Dínendal has told us much of your adventures, Boromir. You were e’er modest.”

Boromir’s smile widened. “Dínendal?”

“Aye,” the elf grinned.

“Dínendal, then…”

The joy and wonder which danced across Boromir’s marked face was enough to make all three spectators lose some of their tension. Dínendal noted how they treated Boromir with wary observation – as if waiting for some outburst or mental collapse. The elf also noted, in Aragorn and Faramir’s visages, a visible sadness. But all that was now hidden with half-smiles. Only the dwarf still displayed his open aggression and annoyance.

Boromir slapped Dínendal on the arm. “Well, come, Dínendal. Let not my brother and my King bore you, or the dwarf scold you. Have you eaten?”
Before Dínendal could answer, Faramir looked to his brother.

“Brother, do you desire a feast to welcome Master Dínendal?” Faramir asked.

“Nay, nay,” Boromir scoffed. “No feasts.” He turned to the elf. “Come, Second One, this Hall suffocates. Better to get away from it. To the kitchens!”

Faramir and Aragorn looked at each other, but did not comment. Dínendal had little choice, and so he bowed to the King and Steward. They nodded in return.

“We hope you shall linger in Minas Tirith, Master Dínendal,” Faramir said courteously. “You are our very welcome guest.”

“And I thank you for it,” Dínendal replied.

But Boromir was already out the door. And for all the questions that now drilled into Dínendal’s mind, for all the explanation and comprehension he desired – who is this Man? What has happened? – he relented and gave them only a smile. Aragorn and Faramir understood, and, with their eyes, promised him an explanation for this jarring reunion. But not now, as Boromir was standing by the door, waiting, visibly restless.

“Do not forget, Master Elf,” he called roughly, “that I am mortal!”

Dínendal’s shoulders dropped, he turned and smiled slightly.

“And impatient as always, it seems.”

They walked down a narrow set of stairs and down another spiral staircase. On either side, magnificent and ornate rooms, all stone and burning fires, loomed past. Dínendal followed his guide, silently examining all the sites and sounds around him. He studied the intricate designs on each arch and doorway, the tall statues of past Kings and Stewards, the tapestries of battles fought. He marveled at the beauty of the long, curved hallways which sometimes opened up onto great landings for staircases.

As they passed guards and attendants, everyone saluted Boromir and gave a respectful nod to Dínendal. The elf, however, also heard snatches of whispers as they moved away from each interaction.

“…duel in the fourth circle…”

“…spends most of the day drunk…”

“…aye, his father’s son…”

Dínendal forced his ears shut and concentrated on the carvings on a nearby wall. Occasionally, Boromir would check behind him and then smile, indicating a hidden door or passageway they were about to enter.

They stepped into a thin gap, narrow enough for only one person, which led to a poorly lit spiral staircase of grey stone. Walking down, Dínendal heard the familiar sounds of a castle kitchen. The crackle of fire, the clanging of spoons and the scuff of wooden chairs against a stone floor. He could already smell the stew and roast meat.
They arrived in the kitchen, a long room with a low ceiling. There were windows on the far side, constantly open to let the smoke out, and from them, Dínendal could see the outline of a mountain wall. Torches lined the walls, casting the room in a perennial gold glow and adding to the stuffiness.

As Boromir entered, many of the attendants and drudges bowed and stepped aside with whispers of “My lord…” They kept their heads down, and Boromir acknowledged them with a curt nod or grunt. Dínendal noted with a smile that many eyes watched him in curiosity as he followed.

At the far end of the kitchen, pots boiled and stoves were alight. Dínendal located the venison he had smelled roasting on a large spit by the window. Cooks shuffled in and out, passing out of Dínendal’s field of vision, and he assumed that behind the stone columns on the left, there were other doors leading to yet more corridors and rooms. The pantry, probably. Three long wooden tables with benches stood before their entrance, and two guardsmen were eating a simple meal at the center table. They immediately stood upon seeing Boromir and lowered their eyes in respect.

“My lord.”
“M’lord.”

Boromir raised his hand. “Eat, eat. Don’t let me interrupt a good meal.”

The guards smiled, relaxing slightly. They sat and continued eating, but Dínendal noted that they ate quickly and without comment. Within minutes, they had finished. They hurried out, again bowing to Boromir and casting quick, curious glances in the elf’s direction.

“Oh! Is that you I hear, lad?” a worn voice called.

Emerging from behind a cupboard, an elderly woman, plump and with hair like silver wire, smiled toothlessly and hurried towards Boromir. She showed no sign of respect, neither a bow nor a nod, but instead clasped his shoulders and gave him a quick embrace. A few of the girls and boys working the stoves smiled and whispered amongst themselves.

“Good evening, Azaelia,” Boromir said, a broad, glinting smile cracking his scarred face.

“Why, it’s been near three days since I saw ye!” the elderly woman, Azaelia, cried. She pulled her hands away, wiped the grease on her apron, and cupped Boromir’s chin. “By the Valar, what happened to your nose, love? ‘Tis all black and yellow.”

Boromir pulled away with a pained wince. “Aye, ’tis broken, and sensitive to the touch.”

Azaelia pursed her lips, her expression becoming serious. “So, what they say’s true, then? The rumors that were flyin’ ‘round the Citadel this morning?”

Boromir did not respond, but stepped aside. He motioned Dínendal forward, and the woman lowered her eyes in a sudden, unexpected show of respect. Hastily, she matted down her stray, grey-white hair and smoothed her stained apron. The other servants also appeared in overt awe of Dínendal’s presence. He smiled inwardly.

“If my old eyes play tricks on me, that is verily an elf I see,” she whispered, glancing sideways at Boromir. “For he’s as fair and as tall as the legends say.”

“It is an elf, indeed,” Boromir grinned. “Azaelia, this is my friend, Dínendal of the Woodland Realm. Dínendal, this is Azaelia. She has worked in the Citadel since my father’s youth, and she holds the hearts of all, especially of my brother and I.”
The elderly woman blushed furiously, avoiding Dínendal’s quizzical gaze. He smiled, despite himself, at her bashfulness, and, at the same time, caught a few hushed murmurs from passing servants.

“Oh, shhh, ye raise me from my rightful place, sir.”

“Sir? Come now, Azaelia, the last time you addressed me as ‘sir’ was near five years past, and that was only because Prince Imrahil was present,” Boromir chuckled. He turned to Dínendal. “Many a time in our youth, she scolded either me or my brother for stealing away with kitchen scraps. And my backside still aches from the rolling pin she so liberally used...”

All three laughed. Giving Boromir a quick slap on the forearm, Azaelia turned and moved back to the abandoned iron cauldron.

“Well, sit the fair Master Dínendal down, and sit yourself down as well, m’lord,” she called over her shoulder. “I’ve just put on a pot of rabbit stew. Is there anything else you’ll desire?”

Boromir motioned for Dínendal to sit at the nearest table, and the elf took his place on the bench. Boromir walked around the long table, spying the contents of the various cupboards as he passed. The young servants who worked the kitchen paused in their labor to let him peek in each jug or crate. A girl stepped aside, allowing Boromir room to tip open a small pot which she had just covered.

Azaelia spotted this, reached over, and snapped her wooden spoon against the Man’s knuckles.

“Tsk, now! That is not to be disturbed!”

“What is it, Azaelia?” Boromir asked, shaking off the ache in his hand, while the girl beside him blushed and stifled a giggle.

“Roasting sauce for the venison, and now get ye gone or it’s another rolling pin to the bottom!”

Boromir laughed, as did most of the others in the kitchen. It was a laugh Dínendal had never heard before. It was deep-throated, genuine, relaxed. The laughing Boromir cast Dínendal a helpless look before returning to the table, taking a seat opposite him.

“Well?” Azaelia asked, stirring the venison roasting sauce furiously.

Boromir eyed Dínendal for confirmation and then called back: “Let us have fresh bread, cheese, some greens, the pheasant scraps I detected in that cupboard there, and rabbit stew – ”

“The rabbit stew won’t be ready for another twenty minutes,” Azaelia interrupted.

“Then in twenty minutes bring it to us!” Boromir chuckled. “Also dried fruit, and a half-barrel of the strongest ale to begin with.”

“M’lord, you’ve near finished the ale!”

A few chuckles, a quick whisper between two serfs by the window. Dínendal ignored it.

“Nonsense, Azaelia! The night is long, the sun has yet to set, and today we must celebrate. Bring us the half-barrel then. No gripes, now, or it’s to the dungeons with you!”

Azaelia sighed, shook her head, and gave the youngest girl, not nearly ten, a pat on the shoulder. The girl hastened around the kitchen and brought plates and cups, piled high so that her face was hidden. She set them before Boromir and Dínendal. She then carried a small barrel, perhaps twenty
pints-full. Her thin arms strained to place it on the table. Dínendal helped her, taking it from her, and the girl nearly yelped in surprise.

“Go on, Poppy!” Azaelia called from the stoves. “Say thank you to the Master-Elf Dínendal.”

“Thank-you-Master-Elf-Dínendal,” Poppy murmured softly and curtsied. She then hurried away and returned periodically with all the requested food, until it crowded the space between Boromir and Dínendal completely.

They poured the ale, passed the plates and fell into companionable silence, listening to the sounds of the busy kitchen behind them. Dínendal noticed that Boromir left his plate mostly empty, with only some bread and cheese. The food lay forgotten in the Man’s plate as he instead took firm hold of his ale-filled goblet and raised it high. Dínendal raised his own.

“My friend, it is good to see you,” Boromir smiled. The firelight danced along his features, and in the warm glow, with a genuine smile across his face, he looked content. *Not entirely.* “I leave the toast to your wisdom.”

“To peace, then.”

“To peace.”

The goblets met, brass clinked brass, and were raised high again. The Man and elf then drank. Boromir finished his entirely and began pouring another, filling his goblet to the brim. Dínendal lowered his eyes. He did not want to comment. Instead, he picked at his food, beginning with the pheasant and some cheese on bread. He was not particularly hungry, but he could not offend his host. Part of him also wanted to avoid any bruised knuckles from an offended Azaelia.

At first, they did not speak, but ate in silence, enjoying each other’s company. In truth, Dínendal did not know where to begin. He was struggling to find the right words, and thus he opted to just eat and take in his surroundings.

There was some noise by the other end of the kitchen, in the pantry, behind the stone columns on the left. Pots clanging, small feet running.

A boy ran up to Azaelia and tugged at her sleeve.

“Away, child, not now.”

Boromir also watched as he sipped his ale. The child pulled again at her sleeve.

“Ma’am, ma’am,” he pleaded.

“Be gone, filthy mouse!”

“Ma’am, it’s the *periann* again, ma’am. Come, look! He’s rooting through the dried mushrooms!”

Azaelia gasped.

“Oh, the devil, he wouldn’t dare…!”

Without finishing, Azaelia grabbed a nearby rolling pin and, baring her gums in a sinister grimace, stalked out of the kitchen and into the other room. As she left, Dínendal caught Boromir’s eye, which twinkled expectantly. There was a howl and the sound of wood hitting soft cloth, followed by another cry and the sound of feet pattering against stone.
A halfling with curly hair and bright eyes barreled at full speed into the kitchen, weaving between the legs of servants and drudges, chased closely by a red-faced Azaelia with rolling pin held high. The halfling dodged another blow from Azaelia’s weapon, so that it caught instead on a pestle and mortar. The contents, a mixed spice, fell from the container, blossoming into a red cloud. Immediately, the nearest serf started sneezing. Someone elbowed someone else, there was a cry. Another slam of the rolling pin against stone, oaths and curses. Someone dropped something, a crash, more sneezes.

Beside Dínendal, Boromir was laughing so hard he made no sound, but only clutched his stomach, his face red and his eyes streaming. Seeing him so consumed with merriment only fueled Dínendal’s own mirth, and soon the two were howling at the scene. The halfling heard them and made a desperate dive towards their table. He scuttled under the benches and the table, and Boromir hooted suddenly, eyes wide, and brought his knee up to knock against wood. There was a heavy thump, followed by a pained hiss and mangled curse from Boromir. The clutter of plates wobbled noisily and Dínendal’s goblet teetered. He grabbed it with elven reflexes, sending only some of the ale onto his plate.

“Pippin!” Boromir cried.

“I’ve no desire to disturb the good prince’s dinner with his friend, Master Took,” Azaelia growled, keeping her pin held high. “Just hand back the mushrooms, and I won’ be touchin’ ye.”

The voice from under the table squealed.

“I don’t believe you!”

Boromir grasped the table with both hands and began shaking his leg back and forth, provoking more yelps from the hobbit which clung to him.

“Ai! Send her away, Boromir!” Pippin cried. “She already got me in the bottom – ooh, it smarts! Send her away, or I’m not coming out!”

Laughter from the kitchen. Azaelia stepped forward.

“Pip-pin! Off!” Boromir roared, shaking his leg furiously. Dínendal could hear muffled grunts and wails as the hobbit was kicked against the bench and table legs.

“Ai! Oh! Fine, fine!”

Boromir relaxed, now keeping a hand against his gut, and soon the hobbit – Pippin Took – poked his head from the table’s edge, revealing only hair and eyes. “Make her promise not to hit me.”

“Give her the mushrooms.”

The blue eyes flickered up to Boromir in a sign of disgust, shock, betrayal. Boromir sighed. “Come now, Pippin. You can have our food if your stomach is so empty.”

The hobbit eyes traveled from Azaelia’s rolling pin – which hovered in the air, ready to fall at any moment – to Dínendal, where they glowed with curiosity, and then to the food which was scattered along the table between he and Boromir. Pippin made his decision. He tossed a bag of dried mushrooms up over the table, and they soared straight into a nearby servant’s open crate.

“Very well,” Azaelia seethed. “But if I catch ye one more time – or any of your Shire-folk friends – I won’t be so forgivin’!” Softening, she bowed to Boromir and Dínendal. “My lords.”
Once she was gone, safe behind the stoves, and the rolling pin stashed away, Pippin raised his head and took a seat on the bench next to Boromir, who was already going back to his ale. The hobbit stuck out his small hand and gave Dínendal’s a hearty shake.

“Hello,” he said. “Peregrin Took, but you can call me Pippin. And you are?”

Dínendal smiled. “Dínendal, of the Woodland Realm.”

“Oh! Like Legolas, then?”

“Indeed.”

Pippin elbowed Boromir in the gut, causing the Man to choke on his drink and gasp suddenly. Pippin did not seem to notice. “Legolas’ home! Mirkwood! I didn’t know you knew any other elves, Boromir. Well, except for those three from…”

“This is one of those three,” Boromir muttered through clenched teeth.

Pippin looked back to Boromir, looked to Dínendal, looked back again. “Are you sure? I thought they all, you know…”

“So did I,” Boromir lowered his eyes, took a fast drink.

“Alas, I almost joined my brothers in death,” Dínendal said softly, “for I was gravely injured in our final fight with the Easterlings. I fell from my wounds on the fields of Dagorlad, beneath the mountains of Ered Lithui,” the hobbit shuddered, “but was saved by an Eagle, who bore me away and took me straight into Mirkwood. There, Radagast the Brown argued my case, and the case of my fallen companions, and we were granted full remission of our crimes. We were welcomed back into our lands, and I was once again given the honor of a name.”

“You didn’t have a name?”

“Nay, as an exile, it was forbidden I should utter it. And after thousands of years, one forgets.”

Pippin turned his bright eyes to Boromir. “Is that why you called him…?”

“Second One,” Boromir spoke from his cup.

“What sort of a name is that?” Pippin asked, disgusted.

“A poor one,” Dínendal admitted with a smile. “But one gets used to it.”

Pippin nodded, mouth open, eyes wide. He grabbed a plate of cold meat and began eating. “You fought with the Eagles? Boromir never told me that. Is that when you were,“ he turned to Boromir, cocked his head to one side, “when you… you know, is that when you were taken to – to the Black Tower?”

Boromir nodded wordlessly, poured another drink. Dínendal watched him in worry, making sure he kept his face smoothed and expressionless. He turned back to Pippin. “And are you the halfling everyone speaks of?”

“What? Who speaks of me? Ha! Maybe!” Pippin took another bite, spoke with mouth full: “Oh no, you mean Frodo Baggins, my cousin. He’s the one that saved us all from death and destruction, aye.” He swallowed. “A stout one, and with a fair amount of Took in him, thank you very much. I would say it was the Took side that did it, because the Bagginses aren’t a very adventurous sort.
Well, of course old Bilbo – ”

“Pippin,” Boromir cut him off sternly.

“What?”

“Don’t bore Dínendal with Shire politics.”

Pippin glared at Boromir, but did not argue, and so forced a mild shrug. He grabbed another plate, this one filled with dried fruit, and began eating. With mouth full and eyes gleaming, “So, how long were you in exile?”

“Three thousand years,” Dínendal said.

“Well, that must have been very dull.”

Dínendal laughed. “It was, indeed.”

“Did you travel far?”

“Aye, very far. We three adraefan traveled beyond the eastern and southern borders of all Known Lands. We passed through lands which have no records here. Where the Men are strange, and the elves distant. Where mountains meet deserts which lead into forests and back out into desert.”

“Well!” Pippin smiled. “That seems very far! I don’t think I’ve ever seen a desert, nor will I ever in this lifetime.” He turned. “Have you seen any, Boromir?”

Boromir shook his head. “The lands far south, in Harad, are at times desert. But no, I have never seen one.”

“And this Ranafast…” Pippin said, stuffing some dried berries into a sandwich of pheasant and cheese.

“Radagast,” Boromir corrected.

“Radagast. Is he a wizard like Gandalf?”

“He is,” Dínendal nodded. “They are of the same Council, but Mithrandir wields more power. Radagast has sway over the beasts of the land. He speaks with birds and deer and all the simple beings. He dwells in Rhosgobel, nigh the Old Forest Road in Mirkwood.”

“Old Forest Road? I think old Bilbo went down that once,” Pippin mused, taking a bite from his pheasant-berry-cheese sandwich.

“Pippin.”

Pippin turned to look at Boromir. “What?”

Without explanation, Boromir gulped down the remaining ale and rumbled, “Leave us.”

The hobbit did not argue, though he was visibly hurt. He inhaled sharply, pushed the seat back and stood. With a polite farewell to Dínendal, a grim glance at Boromir, and a quick snatching of some pheasant which he stuffed into his pocket for later, he left.

Dínendal watched the hobbit leave, watched Boromir empty the barrel’s contents into his goblet. He could feel the eyes of the kitchen staff watching as well. But he did not make comment.
Instead, he waited. He was beginning to wonder if Boromir had chosen this place as a means of avoiding the more sensitive subjects of their lost companions.

Yet, before he could comment, Boromir leaned forward, stared into his cup. “What were their names, Dínendal?”

“First One was Golradir, and Third One Amdír.”

Silence. Boromir’s expression darkened. He picked at the imperfections in the wooden table. Dínendal studied Boromir, and felt his own grief swell deep in his heart. The Man was ruined. Gaunt cheeks, scars, a weak, patchy beard. The drink makes the beard fall out. Dim, heavy-hooded eyes. The crooked nose. And what of Amdír? Did he die so beaten? Dínendal felt his stomach grow cold.

For the innumerable time since waking in Mirkwood, Dínendal regretted that he should have been saved, while his friends were not. The years of exile – shameful years, but also years of companionship and a hidden joy – were all gone. He was the last one, the surviving adraefan. All three, fearing battle, had chosen to postpone fate. Yet only two had been destined to die on Dagorlad. And he was the one destined to survive. Itarildë, my love, you were right. I was blessed by the Valar, I was to live. And what blessing was ever so bitter?

Azaelia arrived and began to remove the empty plates.

“Bring us something to drink, Azaelia,” Boromir muttered. “We have finished this.”

Azaelia looked pointedly at Boromir, but the Man was grave, his expression dark. She looked to Dínendal for help, and the elf leaned forward. “Nay, nay, I think we have had enough.”

Boromir’s head snapped up. He glared at Dínendal, but said nothing. Azaelia watched Boromir, waiting. But he did not argue, instead he went back to picking the irregular fragments of wood in the table. Dínendal noted that Azaelia’s shoulders fell with relief. She gathered up the plates, stacked them, and, giving the Man one final look, left.

Once she was gone: a heavy silence. Dínendal saw Boromir clench and unclench his jaw, saw his knuckles turn white with tension, saw his fingers shaking as he dug a nail into a splintered fragment at the table’s edge.

“Boromir…”

“Aye?”

The response was rough, quick, pained.

“A half-barrel is more than enough for one Man.” Dínendal hesitated before adding: “Too much, even, for one Man.”

Boromir’s expression turned vicious, his eyes hardened. He stared at Dínendal now as if the elf were responsible for all the crimes of Middle-earth. It was an expression of hate, suffering, fury. He ran his hands over his face, cracked his knuckles, muttered to himself. “Too much… too much, indeed… Third One was called Amdír? Amdír. He did not know it, ere his end. Nay, he did not have that privilege. Poor fool. Too much for one Man. And the elves are said to be wise…”

Boromir’s self-control was faltering. The conversation was sinking into depths Dínendal did not want to enter.
“I did not mean to offend,” Dínendal soothed. He could feel the attention of the kitchen staff, all listening. “Come, this room stifies. Let us to outside.”

Boromir nodded, jerked himself roughly from the table. He sent a plate of bread near him clattering to the ground, but made no move to pick it up. Without a word or look in Dínendal’s direction, he walked out of the kitchen and back up the spiral staircase. Dínendal met the eyes of Azaelia, who stood by the stoves. *Barad-dûr, it is Barad-dûr. Speak to him. To you he may yet listen.* And so he followed Boromir out. The other servants had pretended not to notice, though Dínendal heard a storm of whispers as he took the first steps out of the kitchen.

Upstairs, moonlight leaked into the dimly lit corridor through tall windows. Boromir’s stood silhouetted against the glass. As soon as the Man saw Dínendal emerge, he turned and walked. Dínendal hurried to keep up, for the Man stormed on without hesitation or pause.

“How, Dínendal said.

The Man continued walking. A few nobles passed and uttered a greeting. He ignored them.

“Boromir.”

“The good Master Elf Dínendal wants a walk outside?” Boromir muttered. “So be it. I have little patience. Do not drag your feet. Let us have your walk and be done with it.”

Dínendal was stunned into silence. *Lost, lost, he is lost! The rumors are true, he is no more than a drunkard. A beggar, saved only by his blood-right to live in the Citadel. Look at him, see his scars? All that was noble and fair is disappeared. And they say he is even mad! Lost! This is futile!* They walked for several tense moments until they reached a wide arch leading to the Citadel balconies.

Outside, the air was cool, fresh. The moon waxed large, the stars danced. Dínendal remembered similar dancing stars. *So long ago,* it seemed. Boromir did not slow his walk. Finally, Dínendal, in growing irritation, grabbed Boromir’s arm and pulled him to a halt. Boromir whirled around.

“Enough!” Dínendal hissed. “What manner of receiving friends is this? You act as if my very presence displeases you!”

They were standing on a jutting precipice of the Citadel balconies. No one was near. Distantly, drifting up from the lower circles, the sounds of a city going to bed could be heard. Someone was playing a guitar. A slow, melancholy song. Dínendal and Boromir stared at each other for several moments, glaring even.

“Mayhap I did not desire your presence!” Boromir snarled. “Mayhap your presence brings back memories I do not wish to remember!”

“Think you are alone? Think I do not also shrink away from the past and wish to forget those dark days? We have both suffered through it, and it is difficult for both to remember!”

“Suffered through what? Have you any idea what my nights are like? Every moment I spend in silence, my ears are filled with his cries! I cannot sleep, I cannot eat, I cannot lie still, *ere his noisy dying deafens me!* They shun me here, for they say my presence is a black one. Oh, they talk and chatter and gossip at my shoulders, thinking I am too drunk or too mad to understand. Aye, but I understand. I hear it all, and above everything I hear Barad-dûr. On and on, Second One, as if my body is in Minas Tirith and my mind is forever enslaved to that Black Tower. You know *nothing* of such torment!”

“I do not pretend to!”
Boromir roared, threw up his hands. “Ah, get you gone! You’ve come here only to torment me further!”

He began to walk down the balcony, so that Dînendal was forced to hurry after him. They walked back into the corridor. The passersby noted immediately Boromir’s temper and so many hastened out of his way. He rounded a corner, Dînendal squeezing on after him, until he found his target and cried out, “Ho! Boy!”

A young thirteen-year-old boy, thin and awkward, turned. His face lit up upon seeing Boromir and the elf, and he dashed towards them. He tore off his cap, smiled and bowed clumsily.

“My lords!” the boy cried, glancing back and forth between Boromir and Dînendal with delight.

“Why do you grin, Innrod? I have no need of a smiling idiot!” Boromir snarled.

Innrod’s expression fell, visibly hurt. “My lord?”

“Be useful and find him a room,” Boromir indicated Dînendal. “I go to my chambers.”

“Yes, my lord,” Innrod muttered.

Without another word, Boromir stormed off down the hall and out of their sight. Dînendal watched him leave. He saw the Citadel nobles and courtiers whirl around as he left, like in the wake of a passing ship, all turning to catch a glimpse of Boromir the Mad. As soon as he disappeared around a corner, all turned back to their companions with fervent whispers. Dînendal looked to the boy, Innrod, with a sigh.

But the boy was studying him with a peculiar expression.

“My lord, you are an elf?”

“Aye. I am Dînendal, of the Woodland Realm.”

“It is true then, you are one of the Three?”

“I am.”

Innrod’s face brightened.
Valanya Market

Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

The familiar taste. Acidic. Cracked lips. Pounding head. All the pain concentrating in the healing nose – throbbing intense. And the sun, the sun, burning fire against the closed eyelids. So similar to the Eye...

Boromir moaned, brought a hand to cover his face, moaned again as he inadvertently pressed against his broken bridge. He lay for several moments, feeling the bed beneath him, feeling the pillow lying lopsided to his left, so that his neck ached from sleeping bent. Feeling, surprisingly, his boots still on. He opened his eyes, hissed at the flash of blinding light, squinted at the blur.

His room. Empty. He rolled onto his side, looked over the edge of the mattress. No. He had not been sick. That was a reasonably good sign. Yet his mouth – cotton-full. And his stomach – aching, turbulent. Valar, never again. Never again would he touch the drink. Its very taste, which still lingered stale on his tongue, was enough to bring back a wave of nausea, enough to disgust him. Nay, never again.

Yet these moments of near-clarity always dissolved into the familiar depression when he realized where he was – Minas Tirith – and where he had once been, only for a brief period, they say only a brief period – Barad-dûr. And suddenly all the aches and pains of the after-drink dissolved into one, resounding thrum: akrum. The black days, still beating away at his heart, still.

He lay in bed, closing his eyes, wanting to sleep and yet fearing it. He forced his mind clear, forced the inevitable darkness from his thoughts. Valar, not a moment of peace? Not a moment of true rest?

Something else was pressing against his mind. Yesterday. What had happened yesterday? He felt inexplicably excited, anxious, but light-hearted. And also somewhat guilty. It was a strange feeling. Why?

Second One!

Boromir sat up in bed and nearly fell from it, as he had misjudged his position on the mattress. He stood clumsily, hastily, yelping in surprise. Second One! Second One! By the Valar, he had forgotten. Second One had returned. What time was it? The sun was high, but it was not yet noon.

Boromir stumbled quickly from the bed to the low table, where Rûnyafin had left a bowl of cool water. He splashed it on his face, careful to avoid his nose, shook it through his hair, his beard. And then, quickly, trembling with excitement, he began to unbutton his doublet, at times ripping through the buttons in his haste.

“Rûnyafin!”
Silence. He ripped off his doublet, threw it somewhere. He then checked under his arms. He did not smell exceptionally fresh, he needed to change his undershirt as well. As he was pulling it over his head, wincing at the pain in his weak shoulder, he bellowed again, irritated:

“Rúnyafin!”

The sound of footsteps running. Boromir was fumbling with his belt when the door swung wildly open. It slammed against the stone wall. His attendant, Rúnyafin, all white-red-haired and sweating, rushed into the room with a quick bow. The buttons on his jacket were mismatched.

“My – lord – called?” he asked, breathless.

Rúnyafin straightened and gave a quick glance – as always – to Boromir’s scarred stomach. Instinctively, Boromir turned his back to the other Man, picking up his fallen doublet as an excuse.

“I need a shirt and a fresh jacket.”

“Aye, my lord,” Rúnyafin bowed again and was about to hurry back out when Boromir stalled him.

“Wait! Is Second One still here? Know you his whereabouts?”

“Second One, my lord?”

“The elf, you old fool!”

“Master Díndedal, my lord?”

“Yes, yes, Master Díndedal! Where is he?”

“I believe he is touring the city with the Lord Steward. They left at the second hour after sunrise.”

“Good, then they will be returning this afternoon. Quick, Man, my shirt and doublet!”

“Yes, my lord!”

Rúnyafin bowed again and hurried out of the room. Once he was gone, Boromir wiped his trembling hands against his breeches. Vague flashes were returning to him from the night before, and he was beginning to think he had inadvertently insulted Second One. In truth, he remembered little of the reunion, and he feared having said something callous. And, by the Valar, if I lose Second One, I have lost all.

He needed something to calm himself. Something to ease the trembling in his hands, the ache in his shoulder. Something to drown out the Barad-dûr screams, to give him courage, to help him relax. And so he walked to the cabinet by the window, retrieved one of the bottles and poured himself something to drink.

He had just downed his third glass when Rúnyafin returned. The attendant bustled in with fresh garments draped over one arm. Boromir snatched the shirt from him, began to pull it on. The shoulder. The shoulder. The weak shoulder. It hurt this morning, and he stifled a pained hiss. Once the shirt was on, he awkwardly flung on the new doublet. Rúnyafin stood by, making no comment, waiting. Boromir winced, rotated his shoulder, massaged it with the other hand.

“I shall need a horse prepared,” he grunted, walked to his scabbard. “Know you their route?”

“I believe they intended to visit the Valanya Market in the second circle, my lord.”
“‘Tis Valanya already?”

“Aye, my lord.”

Boromir blinked, looked out the window. It was a sunny day. A nice day.

“The weeks fly…” Boromir breathed.

“So they do, my lord.”

Boromir snapped back to attention, glared at Rúnyafin, threw up his hand with a bark, “Bah! Get you gone! You have no reason to linger!”

Rúnyafin bowed quickly, and left the room as quietly as he could. Once he was gone, Boromir massaged again the shoulder. It ached fiercely this morning – a dull throb pulling his arm down, pinning it, so that he could not lift it more than a few, stiff inches. He tried raising it, but hissed and recoiled when a flash of pain – blazing, hot, acute – stabbed him in the scar.

Feeling suddenly very old, and suddenly very taut, he walked back to the cabinet and retrieved the flask.

And in the glugging liquor, as he tipped it carefully from the bottle into his worn flask, he heard the first whispers. Someone screaming. Very softly, far off. For a moment, Boromir peered out his window, looking down onto the courtyard and arching balconies. Was it coming from the dungeons?

But then he recognized it. And he groaned, closing his eyes.

*Even today, my friend? Even today?*

On the seventh day of every week, which is called Valanya, the Great Market was held in the second circle of Minas Tirith. Everything was sold - vegetables from the golden fields of Lebennin, fish from the Bay of Belfalas, spices from Umbar, fine embroidered cloth from Pinnath Gelin - everything, from every region of Gondor and beyond. All the city would descend onto the second circle on Valanya, everyone squeezing in between stalls and shops and spilling into alleyways. The market began at dawn and lasted until midday, so that by afternoon, it was finished, only the piles of abandoned rubbish indicating its recent dissolution.

For those unaccustomed to the city, the market proved an exhilarating, confusing chaos of sounds, smells, sights. Pickpockets thrived here, targeting the bumbling country boy as easily as a hawk may spy a hare, nearly a mile away. Everyone came - from the rich nobles of the fifth circle, to the soldiers and the Guard, to the tradesmen from the fourth and third circles, and finally even the poorer folk from the bottom. But not just from Minas Tirith - they came from every realm. And now, with the War finished, that diversity was only emphasized.

Haradrim mingled with elves squeezing between Rangers from the North. Lingering Rohirrim, sailors from Dol Amroth, giggling courtesans. Everyone, every swollen lip and almond eye and leaf-shaped ear and inky face and ginger beard, every feature was on display. And everyone looked on each other's strangeness with mingled shock, amusement, impassivity.

And the noise - the noise – Valar, it was chaotic! Chickens clucking, parrots screeching, pigs snorting. Horses neighing, guards bustling, Men haggling. Vendors bellowing out their prices, competing with each other, striving to out-shout each other. Mothers chiding, children squealing, noise, noise, noise.
It was a veritable cacophony - and often had the Citadel heard complaints from the second circle dwellers that they would be awoken nigh the sun's rise to this swelling symphony of buying and selling. How can one rest with this roaring noise? It is impossible!

Today, it was a warm day. By noon, the tang of sweat mingled with everything else, and the tiny taverns tucked away in each niche and corner were filled with patrons hoping to douse the heat with a pint of ale. There was no work on Valanya, and the construction of these lower circles was left half-finished - for wooden beams covered certain sections of wall, and scaffolding clothed the taller buildings. Tomorrow, the Men would return and continue rebuilding the wall, the tower, the windows, the street. Thankfully, the blood had been scrubbed away long ago - leaving pale, white patches of stone, glinting in the noon sun. That was always the first task. To scrub the gore off the doorway.

“They came in through there.”

Faramir and Dínendal strolled along the walkway leading up to the second circle's edge. The chaotic sounds of the market faded as they walked up this curved parapet. Finally they could speak without yelling. As they climbed higher, passing benches where elderly sat or children played, passing newly potted flowers, they could see the first circle clearly, rising into view. The Great Gate, the high walls, the Old Guesthouse.

Faramir indicated the Gate.

“They struck down the Gate, overtook the first circle,” he turned slowly, tracing the route with his index finger, “by this time, they also came in from ladders, climbing up over the walls, into the Lampwrights’ Street... And there,” he pointed to the narrow archway connecting the first and second circles, “there we held them for some time - I do not know, several hours - until our lines were broke and they did spill, continuing there,” he pointed to where the alleyway widened into the second circle's main street, “and up through there.” He pointed to where the surging market now pulsed.

Dínendal was silent. He leaned over the rampart’s edge, looking down onto the buildings of the first circle. He let his eye wander over the rooftops, down into the maze of dark alleyways, out towards the main square - the Great Gate - the main street - and then up, up, up - just as Faramir described. He followed the path of Mordor's armies up, up, up, halting at the second gate - half-covered in wooden planks, still in reconstruction - until continuing into the market.

A breeze passed, cooling them slightly.

Dínendal did not feel the heat, though he noted a trail of sweat trickling down his guide's brow. Faramir was gazing down into the market behind them, where all was movement, talking, yelling, laughing. A gang of children went chasing after a ball, disrupting the slow march of a company of Guardsmen. Someone threw a huge, slippery fish with a loud cry - the wriggling mass flashed silver between stalls, catching the sun - before being caught by another fisherman. Somewhere further off: the sound of a blade cutting through meat, slamming against wood.

“Unfortunately, I could not aid my countrymen in the city's defense - not in those moments, anyway,” Faramir continued after several minutes, leaning against the warm marble, watching the market's flurry of activity. “Nay... I was wounded in Osgiliath, and did not recover 'til King Elessar himself released me from the Black Breath.”

Dínendal had heard rumors - a tale of fire, and oil, and madness - but he did not press for more details.
“And now,” Faramir turned, flashed a small smile, “I know how susceptible the elves are to heat and cold - perhaps we can evade this infernal noonday sun and find a meal in one of the local taverns?”

Dínendal laughed. “Aye, let us make for the shade. And quickly too.”

Faramir grinned, nodded. He was squinting in the sun, his face flushed. With a slight loosening of his doublet's collar, he nodded and they set forth - back down the walkway - back into the jostling mass.

They weaved between stalls, hearing the cries of vendors, the laughing children. They weaved through this shaking, rattling mass - pushing through the crowd - while those who recognized Faramir bowed low and hastened to let him pass. He smiled at the people, nodded kindly, and Dínendal was impressed with the warm respect he commanded - with the blushing maidens and smiling soldiers - aye, it seemed Faramir was well-loved here.

But whatever love Faramir commanded, his brother commanded, as always, the attention. For a laughing cry went up in another part of the market, and soon there were scattered whoops and cheers, as well as shouted directions and the loud clopping of a horse approaching.

And then, bursting through the crowd, sending a crate of chickens tumbling, feathers flying, Boromir appeared - jerking the reigns of his horse back - causing laughs and exclamations and buzzing excitement. Beneath him, the obese vendor bustled over his fallen crates full of nervous, screeching chickens.

“Ho! I find you at last!”

Boromir swung his leg over, dismounted, handed the reigns to the nearest stable hand, and strode towards Faramir and Dínendal with a wide grin. He was breathing hard, sweating slightly. Dínendal caught how he kept his left arm lower then the right, moving it stiffly.

“Well met, brother,” Faramir nodded.

Boromir clopped his heels. “My lord.”

Faramir rolled his eyes.

“And Master Elf Dínendal,” Boromir smiled.

“Mae govannen, mellon nín,” Dínendal nodded.

“Ah... Nay, please, nay, my knowledge of the elfish tongues is superficial at best.” Boromir smiled. “Though I know it pleases you to speak them.”

“Aye, after so long, it does indeed.”

“Will you join us, brother?” Faramir asked. “We were just going in search of shade and a meal.”

“In truth? Well, if it is shade and a meal, I know a good place. Come, I will guide you,” Boromir grinned. “For I know every tavern and pub in this circle as if I had been reared here - come, come. ‘Tis too crowded on the main road anyway, and this is a small, comely place.”

And so they squeezed out of the market and the main road, and slipped into one of the many thin alleyways. They walked in silence; long, fast strides. Enjoying the cool mustiness of these hidden streets. Dínendal noticed Faramir looking wide-eyed at the passing windows - all cracked and
stained - at the lines of drying clothes overhead - at the rubble amassed in every corner.

In this maze, noise faded, and soon their footsteps grew loud. They could hear the occasional mewling cat, or the elderly woman calling down from her window. They passed a few beggars sleeping, a mangy dog, a woman sweeping. The sun spilled in, dazzling, between the taller buildings. Shafts of bright white sunlight, illuminating the dark, grubby doors.

They turned a corner, another one, a third. Left, right, left. Straight ahead. They passed a small square with a well. Some children were leaning over the stony edge, dropping pieces of rubble in. Listening for the noise. *Plop.*

“Ho!” Boromir called. “Ho! Rascals!”

The children scattered. Boromir laughed. They continued past this square, into another alley, where all was shadow. By this point, Dínendal had already made a mental map of the second circle - for they had ventured deep into its bosom, deep into its heart. The poor quarter. The modest homes. The hidden lanes and lopsided buildings.

Finally, Boromir stopped. There was a thin opening between buildings, narrow enough for one person to walk through at a time. On the main alley, there was no sign or mark indicating the name of this byway. But Boromir seemed well informed, for he slipped into it, so that Faramir and Dínendal followed in single file.

As they walked, the building on their left fell away, becoming a low wall just above their heads. And as they walked down this small, hidden street, they could hear glasses clinking, murmured conversations, soft laughter, smoke, all coming from the invisible courtyard to their left.

They reached a wooden door left wide open. Boromir stepped inside, Faramir and Dínendal followed. The doorway was low – Dínendal ducked his head.

A small tavern. Dark. It was a quiet place. A few elderly Men sat, lazy smoke curling from their pipes. A single barmaid stood behind the counter, scrubbing it clean. A thick aroma – pipe smoke, ale, roses – heady, intoxicating. Dínendal smiled inadvertently. And he caught a modest inscription over the door: *The Rose Garden.*

The elderly patrons gave no sign of having noticed the group of three enter, but the barmaid perked up. She was young, thinner than was considered fashionable, with fair hair and laughing eyes.

“My lord!” she called. She squinted. “Oh, your nose! My, ye have two black eyes!”

Boromir cracked a smile. “Ah, young Ana, don’t ask…”

They walked to the counter. Boromir leaned against the counter lazily, pushing his knuckles against the wood. Ana smiled, smoothed down her apron.

“Outside or inside today?” she asked.

“Outside, love,” Boromir smiled, leaned towards her. “In the shade, if it is possible.”

“Oh, ’tis not very crowded today,” the girl returned his smile. “Everyone’s still at the Market! Whatever table suits you, sirs.”

She indicated the door leading out into the courtyard. Boromir flashed a small smile at Faramir and Dínendal, and then led them outside.
And as they went outside, Dínendal’s senses were thrilled. A garden, spanning across, with large, wooden tables, and a low, stone wall encompassing it. Dínendal noted how the stone wall – all crumbling, uneven – divided this pleasant, enclosed courtyard from the alleyway they had just come from. Above their heads, wooden beams had been erected, a makeshift roof of crisscrossing planks, held up by six columns. For when it rained, they could put a canvas sheet on it.

But today, in the gleaming sun, Dínendal saw with a smile how The Rose Garden obtained its name – for thorny rose bushes, arranged like vines, were strewn about the wooden columns and beams, covering the courtyard, surrounding everything, so that the sun spilled in through this swirling, entangled painting of red and oak and thorns. The smell was divine.

They took a table by the wall, where Boromir preferred, and he took the seat with his back to the stone, while Faramir and Dínendal took similar positions, for they too delighted in the view of this courtyard. And so they all sat on one side of the table, inhaling the scent. There were few others outside – another pair of elderly Men in beaten clothes, engaged in a slow game of chess; a group of younger lads, surely veterans of the War for their expressions were serious and their voices soft, yet they were not older than twenty; a solitary ginger-haired Rohirrim who seemed to be waiting for someone, for he jostled his leg nervously.

Ana arrived within moments. She smiled at them.

“Always against the wall with you, ’tis your favorite seat,” she chuckled.

Boromir looked away, almost abashed, “Better to know what is behind me…”

She did not press the jest further, but rather turned quickly to Faramir and Dínendal.

“Well, good sirs, I have not seen your faces here before. And, by your dress, I see you are not of the lower circles at all. From the Citadel, like the good lord Boromir?”

“Indeed,” Faramir said softly, politely. “You have stolen the introductions from my brother – I am Faramir, brother to the good lord Boromir,” he smiled, “and this is our friend Dínendal of the Woodland Realm.”

Ana’s eyes widened. “Faramir? Ai me, my lord, forgive me! For – for thou art the Lord Steward!”

And she nearly bowed, but Boromir laughed and Faramir quickly intervened.

“Nay, nay, my lady,” Faramir urged. “Please, there is no need for formalities. Speak naturally, and as you would, and treat me as simply as you treat all your patrons.”

She blushed furiously, nodded quickly with a nervous smile. And when she straightened, she looked at Dínendal, already her gaze becoming curious.

“And my lord, you are of the Woodland Realm?”

“I am.”

“Forgive me, for I am ignorant, but that lies outside the lands of Gondor?”

“Indeed. It is in what was called Mirkwood, and is now called Eryn Lasgalen. It lies past the River Anduin, to the northeast.”

“Eryn Lasgalen? Ha!” Ana laughed. “’Tis a good and proper elfish name, aye.”
Dínendal felt his own smile grow. “Indeed, for it is an elven realm.”

Ana’s laughter faded, and she raised a skeptical eyebrow. But then she leaned forward a little, and Dínendal obligingly tilted his head, so that she saw his ear and nearly gasped, exclaiming:

“Oh! Oh, my lord! An elf, indeed!”

Boromir was laughing now, a rumbling chuckle coming from her other side.

“Next time I shall bring the dwarf and the halflings, my dear Ana,” Boromir grinned. “Your expression is priceless.”

“Ana…” Dínendal began, feeling himself relax in her friendly, casual company. “Is that your given name?”

“Oh, nay, my lord. ‘Tis simple, and short, and easier to say. Nay, my given name is Anaranë. Ah, and now I am embarrassed, kind sirs, for my mother did tell me it was an elfi – an elven name.”

“It is! It is indeed!” Dínendal said.

“Aye,” Faramir agreed. “It is e’en familiar to me – perhaps a tale I read as a boy – there was such a name in it.” His brow furrowed. “Would that I could recall its meaning…”

“Well, my Lord Steward, as you think, I shall take the orders,” Ana replied, obviously wishing to draw the attention away from herself. “And what will the good sirs be having this afternoon?”

Dínendal, Faramir and Boromir cast each other looks – waiting for who to begin – until Boromir raised his chin, “It shall be the usual for me, Ana.”

“In truth, I know not what to order,” Dínendal glanced around at his companions.

“They have a fine ale here,” Boromir shrugged. “They say it goes back to the days of Éarnur.”

“Then that shall suffice,” Dínendal nodded, “and perhaps whatever meal is ready.”

“Aye, the same for me, my lady,” Faramir said. “Cold meats, perhaps some fruit. Whatever is chilled, for the day is hot.”

“Very good, my lords,” Ana nodded with a smile, and, when Faramir’s back was turned, Dínendal saw Ana mouth an amused My lady? to Boromir, so that he too chuckled.

Once she was gone, Faramir unbuttoned his doublet, aired it out. Auburn locks clung stubbornly to his temples with sweat. The corners of Boromir’s mouth twitched.

“Brother, you have e’er suffered the heat,” he said.

“Indeed,” Faramir said, blowing his breath out. “The summer is by far my least favorite season.” He looked about the courtyard. “Nevertheless, ‘tis a comely place indeed. Where did you find it?”

“Young Beregond knew of it,” Boromir grunted, looked away. His voice dropped. “’Tis the only place where they do not call me Mad…”

Faramir gave Boromir a pitying look, and there passed an uncomfortable silence.

“’Tis a welcome respite from the market,” Dínendal interjected quickly. “For that was a veritable chaos.”
“Aye, indeed,” Faramir nodded. “And we have oft heard complaints for it – the poor fellows who live on the main street say they can get no sleep, nor rest, nor quiet for one full day every week.”

Boromir snorted with laughter, and Dínendal smiled. They fell into companionable silence. The sun glinted between the wooden beams and curled roses.

After some time, Ana returned with a loaded tray. Three tall steins were placed heavily on the table, as well as plates of cold meats, cheeses, fresh vegetables and bread. She tipped her head modestly at their thanks and then disappeared back into the tavern.

They ate. Dínendal watched Boromir pick at his food, managing only bread. The Man’s eyes traveled habitually to the tavern, and, when Dínendal followed his line of sight, he saw that Boromir was watching Ana work. The young woman bent behind the countertop, retrieved a rag, began cleaning. Occasionally, she would catch Boromir’s eye and smile. And Dínendal noted how Boromir would lower his eyes with his own crooked grin.

They spoke idly of the city’s reconstruction, of the summer days growing warmer, of Eryn Lasgalen’s recovery from the War. Faramir was ever curious to hear of the elven kingdom, and so Dínendal confirmed Prince Legolas’s stories and histories of the place, particularly when it was still called Greenwood. Boromir fell somewhat quiet, mostly drinking his ale or glancing around the courtyard. Dínendal kept an eye on him, gauging his mood, and was pleased to see that his friend was in somewhat lighter spirits than the night before.

Only once, when Dínendal was telling Faramir of the attacks from Dol Guldur, and the great losses Mirkwood had suffered, did Boromir’s hands begin to shake noticeably. He was placing his stein on the table when Dínendal mentioned the elves who had been taken into the prisons of Dol Guldur – we overthrew the fortress in the end of April, but we found none alive – and suddenly the stein was trembling in Boromir’s hand, audibly, so that it knocked against the table, jittering loud, and some ale splashed out. He placed it unevenly down, almost frantic, and was about to withdraw his hands, hide them, when Ana arrived suddenly – purposefully or not, Dínendal did not know – and quickly grabbed Boromir’s shaking hand, kissed it, feigning as if this were only a display of her usual, friendly affection and not a rescue.

“My lords! My lords!” she sighed musically, theatrically. “You three have near emptied our pantry. Whatever shall I do when all the Men return from the Market with empty stomachs, demanding to be fed?”

Faramir, who had finished his plate of food entirely, and had been chewing on some bread as Dínendal was speaking, looked up with full mouth.

He swallowed the piece hastily. “In truth, my lady?”

She laughed genuinely, releasing Boromir’s hand.

“Nay, I jest,” she said. “My, we would be a sorry tavern if only a few hungry gentlemen could finish off our pantry!”

“As you can tell, brother,” Boromir said dryly, “Ana enjoys teasing.”

Faramir flushed slightly, laughing. And just as the barmaid bent low to begin gathering up the empty plates, Boromir pulled her towards him.

“But come, love, do not tease…”

Boromir brought his hand up, grabbed her chin and pulled her into a somewhat aggressive kiss, so
that Dínendal worried again for the ale, and the rumors, and the scars, and the shaking hands, and all of it. But Ana did not seem overly fazed, for when she straightened, she said nothing but loaded another plate onto her tray and left, silent and hiding a smile.

Once she was gone, Faramir stifled a belch and looked pointedly at his brother.

“Boromir, do not tell me you and she…?” he began.

“’Tis not your matter, little brother,” Boromir growled.

Faramir shrugged slightly, let his eyes drift over the sunny courtyard.

“Well, I only say to keep in mind that – ”

“There is no need,” Boromir snapped suddenly, “for any forewarnings, my Lord Steward. I know all too clearly that I am not yet disgraced enough to choose any wife I please.” He slouched, muttered gruffly: “Nonetheless, it matters not, for she means nothing to me.”

Dínendal winced, for Ana returned in that instant to gather up the steins. Yet she gave no indication of having heard and instead removed the steins in silence, Boromir’s heavy-hooded gaze fixed on her. She ignored him, straightened, smiled at Faramir and Dínendal.

“Anything else, my lords?”

“Nay, thank you kindly,” Faramir said. “How much…?”

“Oh, ‘tis gratis, my lords,” she smiled. “’Tis rare we have the honor of serving the Lord Steward or an elf lord. Please, accept it as a modest gift on behalf of the house.”

“Very well,” Faramir nodded graciously. “You are very generous.”


She smiled at them, cast one rapid glance at Boromir, who quickly averted his eyes, shameful, and disappeared back into the tavern.

They left a few coins on the table anyway, and soon enough they were back in the alleyway, walking away, back towards the main street, to where the Market had all but disappeared, piles of rubbish blowing in the warm breeze. Boromir walked with them to the main street, but there he bade them farewell, inventing an excuse to return back into the alley.

“Ana…”

“Nay, my lord, nay. Do not think you can return here so easily. Not after what I did overhear.”

“Ana, I was jesting.”

“Well, I’ve tired of your jests, my lord. I’ll not be teased. Perhaps you should return to your Citadel and find a nice, prim courtesan to jest with.”

“You are cruel today.”

“I am honest, my lord.”

“Have you forgotten my name?”
“I wish I had.”

“Ana, come now…”

“Nay! Stop. I’ve heard the rumors, you know.”

“Come, do not…”

“Is it true? That you spat before the King himself? That you struck one of the periann? I do not want to believe it - ”

“Then don’t believe it.”

“They say that is why you’ve not been made Steward, as was your right. And I did hear you were brawling with some wretched soul in the fourth circle, not two nights past!”

“And what of it? Ai me, Ana, how you badger!”

“Well? Is it true? All that I’ve heard? Is it true you lie with other women?”

“Eru! Plague take you, woman, I am not here to confess my every crime! You imprison me with words!”

“Then why did you come back? I certainly did not seek you out!”

“So be it! I’ll to the Citadel, out of this contemptible place and away from such a lowly wench! Will that make you happy?”

“Lowly wench? Foul cur! I have been e’er kind with you! But I see it is true then – what they say – that Boromir has become as mad as his father, and Barad-dûr did make a villain of him!”

“Silence your tongue!”

“Ai!”


“Do not touch me.”

“Ana, please, I am sorry. Please.”

“Stop. Leave.”

“Ana, do not do this. Come. You know I did not mean to – did I hurt you? Forgive me, I did not mean to. Shhh, shhh. Dear Ana, love, I did not - ”

“Leave!”
Children of the Citadel

Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

She was Poppy. Or Poppy-seed, though she hated that name. She preferred Little Poppy. Among her friends in the kitchen, she was called Pop. Once someone called her Pip-Pop. But that had been a very strange person…

She was nine or ten years old. She did not know her exact age, but it did not really matter. All her life, she had lived in the Citadel, raised by the kitchen staff. She had known only the kitchen and the lower corridors of the Citadel. She did not even know what existed on the upper floors. But she imagined the rooms there to be enormous, all lined with gold and precious jewels.

Sometimes, if she was lucky, Azaelia would take her to the weekly vegetable market. But the elderly kitchen woman always insisted that the streets of Minas Tirith were dangerous for little girls, and so Poppy spent most of her time within the Citadel's safe walls. Poppy had no parents, but she had long ago decided that she did not need them. For she had Azaelia in the kitchens, Gregor in the storeroom, and everyone else in between. Granted, she did sometimes envy the other children who were embraced and spoiled and kissed by their doting mothers and fathers. But Poppy always reminded herself: parents are useless, nobody needs parents.

Today, she was walking along a hallway near the storehouse. Azaelia had sent her to get some spices - they had nearly run out of red pepper in the kitchens. She skipped along, waving to guards and other servants. They smiled as she passed. A few chuckled their greetings.

"'Lo, Pop."

"Watch your feet, little lady."

"Has Old Azaelia sent you on another mission, Little Poppy?"

And Poppy would smile and giggle and scurry away without answering. Up ahead, she saw the older boy, Innrod. He had grown very tall in the past year. Poppy remembered when he was younger and smaller and they would play together. But ever since Innrod started working on the upper floors, he had grown so tall and commanding that she was intimidated. But he cocked his head now and smirked as she approached.

"'Lo, Poppy-seed," he said.

"Don't call me that," she retorted. She stopped skipping and walked. “My name is Poppy. I am not a seed.”

"You look like one."

"Well, you look like a big old goblin!"
Innrod threw up his hands and snarled menacing. "Goblin, m'dear! Yes, yes, yes! And we likes the little girls, don't we, yes! We goblins cook them up, don't we! Mmmm!"

He licked his chops theatrically and roared again, stalking after Poppy. She squealed with delight and scampered out of the way.

"Inn-rod! Stop it! Stop!" she laughed.

He lunged again but only feigned to grab her. She dodged away.

"I can't play, Innrod," she said, suddenly assuming a more mature air. "I have kitchen business to attend to."

Innrod snorted.

"Aye, I have business as well. I was just going back up to his Lordship's quarters."

"Did he call you?"

"No," Innrod scoffed. "But I'm the Keeper of Lord Boromir's apartments, you know. I must always be ready."

"You are not the Keeper yet! Master Rúnyafin is!"

"Well, I will be Keeper, once Master Rúnyafin..." and Innrod drew his hand across his neck to mimic a beheading.

Poppy gasped. She struck Innrod against the arm. Innrod laughed.

"Do you ever see Lord Boromir?" she asked.

Innrod shrugged. "All the time. He often speaks with me. We're friends."

"Well, I saw him, too! I saw him once, a fortnight ago, I think. He had an elf with him, Master-Elf-Dínendal. And the elf touched my hand!"

"So?"

"So! Daft Innrod, if an elf touches you, you become immortal."

"That's not true."

"Is too!"

"It is not!"

"Is too!"

Innrod barked again like a goblin and lunged for Poppy. She shrieked and dived away. But she did not want to play. She smoothed her small, white apron and assumed again her adult air.

"I served them both," she wrinkled her nose, "I don't like Lord Boromir, though. Azaelia said he was a very handsome Man, but his face has all those scars and lines. And he is too strange."

Innrod rolled his eyes. "Poppy-seed, you are so stupid. Of course Lord Boromir has scars, he was in the War! And he was tortured by Sauron himself!" When Poppy cringed, Innrod chuckled. Then
he sneered wickedly. "Did you know he's mad?"

Poppy placed her hands on her hips. "Of course I do. Everyone knows that."

Not really. She had not heard that rumor yet. But she had learned long ago that it was always better to pretend to know, rather than be found as the last person on the Citadel's grapevine.

"I saw Lord Boromir talking to himself once," Innrod continued, "and he always drinks and then he yells at everyone. They say he went mad in the Black Land. They say he steals children and cooks them into pies! Do you know he struck one of the periannath?"

"So? Azrael hits them all the time. They steal things from the kitchens."

Innrod ignored that comment. He paused, as if to consider something, and then grinned wide, "Do you want to see him?"

"What?"

"Come on. We can sneak upstairs and we can see if he does anything mad."

"Innrod!" Poppy hissed. "You know I can't go upstairs! What if they catch me?"

Innrod shrugged. "Fine. I thought you were brave enough, but I guess..."

"I am brave!" Poppy cried, indignant.

"Well then, come on," Innrod laughed and went sprinting down the corridor.

Poppy hesitated for a moment. What would Azraelia say? But the opportunity to go upstairs, to see all the gold and jeweled rooms, to spy on Lord Boromir and maybe even see the King, it was too much for a little girl like Poppy. And so she checked to see if the corridor was empty and then scampered after Innrod, calling for him to slow down.

They ran and ran. Innrod led her, taking her through all the new and strange places. Tight staircases, trap doors, hidden rooms. Innrod kept checking behind him and grinning. And Poppy pretended that she knew of this route beforehand, that, in fact, she often used it. But she could not wait to tell all the other kitchen children about all these secret places.

On the third level, they found a dusty, abandoned hallway. Huge cobwebs laced around old, rusted armors. It was dark and quiet. Poppy's skin crawled, and she inadvertently walked closer to Innrod. He was inching alongside the wall, running his hand against the uneven stones. Finally, he found what he was looking for and stopped.

"What - ?"

"Shhh!" Innrod hissed.

"What is it?" Poppy whispered.

"I found this a few months ago," he said quietly. "It's a secret passage. I think the Steward uses it if the Citadel is besieged."

He pushed lightly against the stone and it gave way to a small, rectangular opening. It was just large enough for Innrod and Poppy to squeeze through, and Poppy doubted a large Man like the Lord Steward would ever fit inside. She giggled at the mental image of the Lord Denethor squeezing himself into the tiny opening, with his bottom and his legs hanging out.
There was a low, narrow tunnel inside, just big enough to crawl through. Once they were both in, Innrod pushed the stone back into place. Everything went black. He then began to crawl along on hands and knees, and Poppy heard him scraping away. She followed that sound. Her hands hurt on the dirty, stone ground, but she bit her lip. She did not want Innrod to think she was a little weakling and never take her on an adventure again.

And so they continued along this narrow passageway for what seemed like an eternity. They passed small windows – round and deep – and Poppy would catch sight of the wide, open air. Sometimes, they would pass by a room with people, for they could hear muted voices through the wall to their left. Poppy thought she heard the soft scuttle of rats further on. She shuddered.

The passageway sloped upwards. Their progress was slow, and Poppy heard Innrod say something foul as he placed his hand on a particularly jagged piece of rock. Finally, they arrived at the top of the slope. Innrod hit his head against the stone ceiling, and Poppy snickered.

"Hush!" he hissed.

All gangly and awkward, he twisted himself around into a sitting position. He motioned for her to join him, and then he pointed to a spot on the left wall. She crept forward, squeezing into the tiny space between him and the wall. There was an opening, a peephole, and if she pressed her face against it, she could just see a corner of a room.

The room was large, with ornate tapestries hanging against the opposite wall. Poppy saw the edge of a bed – it had fur covers and piled sheets. Resting against a chair by the bed was an unsheathed sword. It glinted with sunlight, and Poppy guessed there were windows above her and Innrod. She looked back at him. It was very dark, with only the light from the peephole, but she saw a faint smile.

"Where are we?" she whispered.

"Lord Boromir's room," Innrod said softly.

She looked again. It seemed empty, except for the soft snoring coming from the bed. Poppy held her breath. It was too late to still be in bed! She waited. Finally, there was movement. The bed creaked and groaned from some unseen weight. Then a Man appeared. He was dressed in his day clothes and his doublet was partially unbuttoned. She recognized him immediately – the Lord Boromir! His boots appeared first as he swung his long legs from the bed and stood. Then, muttering to himself, he walked diagonally, as if the room was rocking to and fro like a ship, towards their wall. Poppy froze. He approached, coming so close that she could see the scuffmarks on his boots.

"There's a cabinet with liquors right here," Innrod pointed to a corner above and to the right of their heads. They heard glass clinking, something being poured.

"What is he saying?" Poppy asked. "He keeps whispering to himself."

Innrod shrugged.

In that moment, the noise stopped, as did Boromir's talking. Both children froze. Slowly, quietly, Innrod pushed Poppy aside and took her place. He pressed his face against the peep hole. Poppy sat back, waited. She buried her mouth into her arms so as to stifle the sound of her breathing. She heard heavy, uneven steps as Boromir seemed to stumble away from the wall. There was a thump, like metal hitting wood. Poppy tapped Innrod's shoulder.
"He has his sword," Innrod mouthed.

Silence.

Finally, they heard Boromir's voice, loud and clear, yet wavering. "Third One?"

Innrod began shaking with silent laughter. Poppy giggled too, and both children struggled to stifle their mirth. Boromir asked again.

"Amdír?"

The children laughed silently again, covering their mouths with their hands. Innrod turned to Poppy with shaking shoulders. She pushed him out of the way. She wanted to look. Was Lord Boromir really mad? Innrod relented his position and let her peek through.

She saw Lord Boromir standing, sword in hand, staring at some other corner of the room. He was swaying, forward and backward, and he kept his other, trembling hand out, as if in defense. He stood for several moments like that, until, with a shudder, he dropped his sword and threw it against the bed.

There was a sudden clatter, which caused Boromir and the hidden children to jump. But as the Man turned, his shoulders dropped.

"Rúnyafin, you are to knock before entering!" Boromir snarled.

"My apologies, my lord," a voice to the left said.

Master Rúnyafin! Poppy looked at Innrod, and he stared back at her.

"What is it?" Boromir asked.

"Lord Elrond awaits, my lord."

"I shall be there momentarily," Boromir muttered.

There was a general shuffle as the doors closed again. Both children squeezed next to each other in order to see. Boromir passed to and fro before their vision. He strode back towards the hidden cabinet, retrieved something, backed away and walked quickly towards the door. As they watched, Poppy could smell Innrod beside her. He did not smell unpleasant. Working on the upper floors had certainly pampered him.

Suddenly, Poppy wondered if she smelled bad. But Innrod’s shoulder pressed against hers, and he did not seem to be recoiling from any stench.

They watched Boromir disappear from sight. A door slammed. Once he was gone, Innrod sat back and smiled.

"I told you he was mad," he grinned wide.

Poppy giggled. "Where else does this passage go?"

"Come on," Innrod jerked his head and turned around.

Soon, they were crawling away from that peephole and towards the next one. The passage became substantially larger as they continued, so that, eventually, they could stand and walk in a half-crouch. Poppy’s back hurt a little after walking in this stooped position for what seemed like the
entire length of the Citadel, but the passage continued to widen and widen, growing taller and more narrow as they walked on.

Soon it became tall enough to stand upright, though the walls were so close that they had to walk single file, and the uneven stone brushed against their arms on either side. Poppy giggled when it became so narrow that Innrod started walking sideways, almost squeezing himself through the impossibly thin tunnel.

“We can speak freely now,” Innrod said in his normal voice. “Right now we’re right on the edge of the wall to outside. I think the Silent Street is beneath us.” He continued scraping along the wall. “Or above us. I’m not sure.”

Poppy remained silent, smiling. She held her arms in front of her, tucking them in a little, since her shoulders continued to brush against the harsh stone on either side, and occasionally she would touch Innrod’s shirt just to make sure he was there. It was still too dark to see properly, but she was not scared. Quite the opposite, she was rather enjoying this safe, secure feeling of tight walls all around, with Innrod walking only a few steps away.

Eventually, though, she had to ask: “Where are we going now?”

Innrod made a disgusted sound when he took a step and was met with the enraged squeal of a rat. The rat scurried away. Poppy giggled. But then she asked again, “Innrod, where are you taking me?”

The tunnel was becoming shorter and fatter now, so that they had to once again kneel and crawl along.

“To the King,” Innrod replied as he stooped low.

Poppy must have made a particularly awestruck sound, for Innrod laughed. But then – and by now they were once again crawling on all fours – he turned around and hissed a loud Shhh! when the passage began to turn slightly.

They did not crawl far, thankfully. The passage began to slope downwards sharply, and both of them opted to sit back on their bottoms and scoot down, as it was easier. And there, at the bottom of this gentle slope, they found another peephole. Innrod was being extra quiet as he moved near the peephole now, and he laid a soft hand on Poppy’s shoulder to help guide her in the dark. Never mind that Poppy was blushing so hard she thought her head would burst when he touched her. She was just thankful for the dark.

This peephole was wide and thin, so that two people, if they pressed their cheeks together, could look through together. After a moment of awkwardness and some silent giggles, Innrod and Poppy both squeezed into the spot and saw this:

The King’s chambers. A large bed. Tapestries on every wall. Arms and chain mail and cases full of axes and swords and things Poppy did not know the name of. And in the center of the room, they saw the Queen. The elf-queen! Dark hair, and a flowing dress, and a sad, beautiful face. Both children shuddered to see her.

The Queen was standing now, staring down at an unrolled parchment which rested against a wide, oak desk. The children could see but the edge of this desk; they could not see what was on the parchment. Poppy suddenly wondered if Innrod was learning to read, now that he worked on the upper floors. And she was filled with a strange sort of envy to think of it.
In that moment, a door opened, closed. The Queen turned. The children could not see her face, but soon they saw the King – the King himself! – arrive, arms outstretched. The King and Queen embraced. For many long moments, they stood there like that, arms wrapped around each other, the King’s head nestled in the Queen’s neck, while she ran her fingers idly through his hair. Many long moments, and they did not move, or say anything, or breathe, it seemed. Poppy watched, enchanted.

Finally, the Queen pulled back. She took his hands in hers, smiled lightly.

“*Man gell, Estel, man gell*…”

At the sound of this new tongue, Poppy pressed her face further against the wall, straining against the peephole. Almost thinking that if she could see them better, maybe she could understand them as well.

“*Sen na mín sídh, meleth nín,*” the King replied.

The Queen’s smile grew. The King embraced her, leaned back to see her face, smiled as well.

“A *si mín na erui*…” the Queen cooed. But suddenly, her tone changed, as if she was remembering something, and she stepped back. “Have you spoken with my father?”

The King groaned, rolled his eyes skyward. “Aye…”

“Nay, I did not mean that…” the Queen smiled, her eyes laughing. “I was to ask you of Dínendal Edledhronadbar. Shall he dine with us this evening?”

“If you wish it.”

“I do. Many rumors have reached our ears, and father decided many leagues before Minas Tirith that he wished to meet this Dínendal.”

“Very well. I will send Legolas as messenger.”

The Queen laughed lightly, musically. “You hurt his pride.”

“It would do well to see him humbled now and again.”

The King and Queen chuckled, sighed. The King traced his fingers lightly over the Queen’s collarbone. They did not speak, and soon each fell again into a meditative silence.

But the Queen’s expression grew serious eventually, and the children shivered for it. They had never seen such an expression, they had never felt such light from a smile and such absence from it in a furrowed brow.

“My father tends to the Lord Boromir now,” she said quietly.

This sobered the King as well. He exhaled. “Aye…”

“If what you say is true, though… My father cannot mend such wounds.”

“I know,” the King whispered, and his expression darkened. He sighed. “I know, Arwen.”

They stood for several moments, each lost in thought, arms still entwined, when finally the Queen leaned in with a soft sigh, and kissed the King lightly on the cheek. His eyes brightened and he smiled at her, and then they kissed again, this time – and here, Poppy nearly gasped – on the lips.
And soon they were kissing only on the lips, and Poppy and Innrod were straining to see, and they saw the King open his mouth lightly, and a tongue and wandering hands and and and…

Innrod and Poppy could not breathe. They simply stared. Yet just when the King and Queen moved to the bed, hand in hand, the Queen’s gaze drifted over their wall and she smiled slightly. She bent close to the King’s ear, whispered something.

He straightened – they could not see his face – but when he turned he was scowling again.

“Spies?” he asked loudly. “My dear, you have perceived spies in the royal chambers?”

“Aye, my love…”

Poppy nearly shrieked, had Innrod not clamped his dirt-covered hand over her mouth. And the two children were now heaving with strained, frightened gasps, trying desperately to keep it quiet. They wanted to move. They wanted to scurry back down the passage. Yet they were each frozen in fear, and could only stare back at the King who was now squinting in the direction of their wall.

Innrod came back to his senses first. He grabbed Poppy by the arm and practically shoved her down the passage, scrambling after her, and so, without any more heed of how much noise they made, without looking back to see if the King was coming after them, ready to bash the wall in with one of his mighty weapons, they fled. Poppy thought she heard that musical laughter again as they struggled away.

Boromir emerged from the healing chambers with a dark scowl. Whatever the Lord Elrond had intended to heal, he had done nothing save force him to answer inane questions and relive moments he spent most of his time struggling to avoid. The elf had done nothing for his physical pains, had done nothing to relieve the numerous aches and stiff joints from which Boromir perpetually suffered. True, the ache in his knees was now reduced to a strange prickling sensation, but Boromir knew that it was only a matter of time before all the usual pains came washing back, acidic.

And so he strode out of the room without a second glance behind him, without seeing whether Elrond had another thing to say. He strode out of the room with the firm intent of returning to his own chambers and finishing off the bottle of brandy sitting on his cabinet. He prayed he would not see Dínendal or Faramir or anyone, for they would surely ask him, concerned, how it went. And he would be forced to lie, and smile, and find whatever excuse he could to flee their presence and close himself off in his chambers. Nay, he desired solitude tonight.

His intentions were forestalled, however, by an unfamiliar hiss.

"Pssst."

Boromir stopped, looked around. For a moment, he thought another fit was coming on, and his heart was already beginning to beat loud at the idea. Sweat beading. Short breaths. He looked around. The hallway was empty, save for a guard he had just passed.

"Pssst."

At this, Boromir spun around, intent on finding the source of this noise, already fearing there should be none. But thankfully - thankfully - thankfully - so that the thundering in his chest was muted - Boromir saw Iorlas standing guard at the entrance of one of the many antechambers leading to the Great Hall. The young Man was trying to hide a smile, and Boromir could not help but grin at the sight. All polished armor, laughing eyes, barely contained mirth. Iorlas was enviably
"Young Iorlas," Boromir rumbled, grinning. "I did not know you had guard duty today."

Iorlas cast a quick glance around the hallway before answering. Once sure that they were alone, he met Boromir's eyes and smiled, relaxing.

"Aye, Captain. 'Tis a punishment, I wager. For old Amlaith assigned the posts as my brother attended to other matters. And..." Iorlas was turning red as he attempted to stifle his chuckles. "And the good lord Amlaith has reason to be upset with me."

An anticipatory smile played at Boromir's lips. He crossed his arms. "Oh?"

"Aye..." Iorlas's shoulders shook. "For I may have neglected to mention, but I did dine with his family not two days past, and - and you know how the good lord Amlaith has a very weak stomach?" He sputtered, his voice shaking with merriment, "He cannot tolerate those fierce Haradrim spices..."

Boromir began to smile.

"Let us say that Lord Amlaith is indisposed at the moment." A burst of a chuckle escaped Iorlas's lips. "And will be for several days, I fear!"

Boromir laughed. "Iorlas, you are cruel."

Iorlas gave a small shrug. Once his giggling subsided, he asked, "And from where do you come, my lord?"

Boromir sighed, irritated at being reminded again of his pointless healing, of his residual aches. He jutted his chin in the direction of the healing chambers further down the hall.

"I had a meeting with the elf-lord Elrond."

"Lord Elrond, sir?" Iorlas asked, his eyes widening with curiosity.

"Aye..." Boromir shifted his weight. "'Twas time wasted." He gave a twisted smile, threw up a hand self-consciously. "Bah! I was to drink away the very memory of it."

"Ah, well!" Iorlas brightened further. "If you should desire to drink away any and all memories, my lord, Ragnor, Eomund, my brother and I were to take an evening of revelry tonight."

Boromir chuckled. "Does the Guard do no work?"

"Not past sundown, sir. Night duty is thrust upon the young and innocent, as is just and traditional, for they would not know how to use their spare evenings," Iorlas half-grinned, cocked his head to one side. "And I would say we have earned it."

"Aye..."

"Come, join us, Captain. We were to meet at the south doors an hour after sundown."

"The south doors to the sixth level?"

"Aye, my lord."

Boromir’s grin faded, hesitating.
"Come, Captain, we have not all gone out together since the King's Eve!" Iorlas insisted.

"Aye..." Boromir rubbed his beard thoughtfully. Valar, he wanted to.

"You cannot avoid it, sir. I have made the decision for you!" Iorlas clopped his heels, bowed formally. "And so with thy leave, my most noble liege-lord, I shall inform the others of your attendance, and I would request that you arrive promptly at an hour past sundown."

Boromir resigned himself with a laugh. "Very well, young Iorlas, very well. You have convinced me..."

Dusk.

His palms were sweaty. Over and over, Innrod wiped his clammy hands against his breeches and jacket, and yet never would they dry. At every minute sound, he would twitch, startled. And the drone, that horrible drone in his mind, it had continued since this morning: *Stupid Innrod, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid Innrod!*

The King. The King had seen him. The King and the Queen had seen Innrod and Poppy. They knew of the secret passage. They knew Innrod and Poppy had been eavesdropping on them. They knew Innrod and Poppy had been in the secret passage. No one was supposed to be in the secret passage. Ever. It was only a matter of time before those fierce, burly guards came for Innrod and dragged him away, kicking and screaming, into the dungeons. And then he would rot there, and they would torment him and ask him who was with him, but he would not tell them. No, he would protect little Poppy. For she was just a young lass, and Innrod knew it was his duty to protect her, whatever happened.

But Innrod could not help envisioning that rainy afternoon when the guards would drag him out of the cell and out into the courtyard by the dungeons where they held executions. And that rusted axe, hacking down into his neck, so that his bones would shatter - just like his older brother always enjoyed describing in gory detail - and all the blood and and and...

"Boy!"

Innrod jumped back with a startled yelp. When he turned, he saw Rúnyafin approaching. The old chamberlain was looking at him strangely, his head cocked to one side as he walked down the wide, carpeted corridor.

"Why do you tremble, boy?" Rúnyafin asked as he approached. "You have the look of a guilty mouse. Have you done something wrong?"

"N - no, my lord - sir - my lord, Rúnyafin, sir."

Rúnyafin continued to study him, brow knit. "Well... no matter. Whatever you have done, I am certain you shall eventually be caught."

Innrod swallowed.

"However, I have a task for you." Rúnyafin adjusted his tight, high collar. "What business did you have for now?"

"I - I was t - to the - the stables, my lord." Innrod wiped his hands against his doublet again. He could feel his ears burning.
"Well, you must go to his Lordship's quarters instead. The cleaning woman says 'tis impossible to remove the stain from the carpet, and so I want you to roll it up and take it down to the storeroom. We'll need to replace it."

"Aye - aye, my lord," Innrod nodded fervently. "W - which carpet, my lord?"

Rúnyafin clucked his tongue. "Daft boy, there's only one carpet in the main chambers!"

"Oh, I had - I had not noticed..."

"That is clear enough," Rúnyafin rolled his eyes. He took Innrod by the shoulder, turned him around and pointed him in the opposite direction. "Off you go, Innrod. Gregor in the storeroom says he will help you carry it down."

Innrod nodded, adjusted his cap, and was about to go striding back down the hallway when Rúnyafin called after him.

"Ah yes, and do be careful, Innrod!" Rúnyafin moaned. "His Lordship is already suitably inebriated as to cause concern. Remember that the guards are ever within calling distance."

"Aye, my lord. Of course, my lord."

Innrod nearly smiled when he said it. As if his Lordship should worry him! If Rúnyafin knew nothing of Innrod's crime today, then all was well indeed! The threat of being hacked to death by a raging lunatic paled in comparison to a life in the dungeons. And, further on the plus side, Innrod was quite fond of Lord Boromir. He did not truly fear the Man.

So once Rúnyafin was out of sight and around the corner, Innrod smiled to himself. His heart was still beating louder than he would have preferred, and his hands were still tingling with sweat, but if, by dusk, he was not yet condemned, then perhaps there was hope for him yet. Perhaps, at least, he could live as a free Man for one more night.

As he walked down the long corridor, taking the shortcut over a narrow flight of stairs which led to the northeast wing and then down again to the level of Boromir's chambers, Innrod's mind buzzed with plans and strategies. The best thing to do now would be escape. If he could find a way to steal a horse from the stables, he could go barreling out of the Citadel and out of Minas Tirith forever. Perhaps he could live as a goatherd in the Ered Nimrais, like in that story he had once heard. Or perhaps he could slip into one of the many hidden rooms and passages he knew of - certainly not the secret Steward's Way he had used this morning, but there were many others Innrod had yet to explore - and escape through there, scaling down the Citadel walls and out onto the city parapets.

Absent-mindedly, still musing over the image of him scaling down the rugged walls of the sixth circle, with Mount Mindolluin looming over him, Innrod arrived before the familiar oak-paneled doors and knocked. He was still formulating his escape plans - what about Poppy? He needed to warn her; maybe he could take her with him; perhaps she could cook his meals and wash his clothes... - when a gruff reply came from within.

Innrod snapped back to attention, enough to realize that he had forgotten to get Gregor from the storeroom to help him with the carpet. He sighed in irritation – too late now – and pushed open the doors.

The room was poorly lit. One of the lamps had gone out, and it seemed Lord Boromir, or whatever servant had last been here, had neglected to light it. Instead, his Lordship was standing over his case of arms, swaying. He held a bottle in one hand and a glass in the other, and seemed to be
gazing at the inscription on a particular sword. The red glow of sunset poured in from the tall windows, yet it was still quite dim to Innrod's eyes.

Once Boromir turned and saw Innrod however, he smiled broadly.

"Ah, young Innrod." Slurred. Innrod cast a quick glance at the bottle Boromir held and saw that it was nearly empty.

"Good evening, my lord."

Boromir backed away from the case, staggered to the nearby divan and plopped down. He began to pour himself, rather unsteadily, another drink. "Well, come in, come in. What news, Innrod? How are you?"

Innrod took a few steps into the room. He glanced around the carpet, trying to find the stain, but it was getting too dark to see properly. He did see, however, that the carpet was spread out under the divan which Boromir now sat at, the low table, and part of the bed. Innrod groaned inwardly at the task at hand.

"I am well, my lord," he said. "I was sent by Master Rúnyafin to retrieve the carpet, my lord."

Boromir blinked, took a long swallow from his glass. He looked around. "Why?"

"He says I am to change it, my lord."

"Now? Tonight?"

"Aye, my lord."

"But 'tis too big. I doubt a lad your size could carry it alone."

"Aye, my lord. Indeed, I was to call Gregor of the storeroom now, ere I came, but I – I forgot, my lord."

Boromir chuckled softly. He leaned back in the divan, stretched his long legs out. Cradling the glass close, he watched Innrod with a grin.

"Innrod, how old are you?"

Innrod raised his eyebrows. He was not expecting that.

"Thirteen, my lord."

"Thirteen…” Boromir drank. “I was just learning the blade at your age."

"Oh… I did not know, my lord."

"Do you take any lessons in sword fighting? Archery?"

"Nay, my lord."

"Nay, nay, of course not.” Boromir finished his brandy, winced slightly. He considered the glass for a moment before looking at Innrod. “Would you like to?"

Innrod shrugged. "I suppose so." He had never really thought about it.
"Good, then I shall find one of the Guard to teach you."

Innrod stared, stunned. This day was becoming stranger and stranger.

"What, my lord?" he could not help asking.

But Boromir was instead moving to stand. Innrod hurried forth to help him up and nearly stumbled over the table as Boromir got to his feet. The large Man slung his arm around Innrod's bony shoulders, leaning hard. He would not fully straighten his knees, and Innrod nearly cried out at the death grip Boromir was giving his shoulder.

With a scowl, Boromir hissed, "Wretched knees... Innrod, get the bottle."

"Aye, my lord." He leaned over and grabbed the square bottle from the low table. Boromir snatched it from him, drank deeply. He groaned with relief, released some of his vicious hold on Innrod's shoulder. "Damn these knees..." He chuckled softly, wobbling. "I shattered them with the Easterlings, lad, did you know that?"

Boromir pulled slightly at Innrod's shoulder, urging him forward, and the two went stumbling out of the room. Innrod had no idea where they were going, but he knew better than to ask. As long as it was not to the King or the dungeons, then he could relax. As long as he could avoid rolling up that enormous carpet, even better.

And Boromir, instead, seemed intent on rambling away about these Easterlings, every so often taking a swig from his bottle. Innrod tried to listen, though in truth he spent most of the time just trying to manage the heavier Man's weight, so that they did not knock against the walls or go clattering up against an old suit of armor.

"...a hundred meters, I know not. Nay, nay, a hundred and fifty, at least. For I did count the seconds - the seconds it took for that savage to hit the water - and it were..." Boromir belched. Innrod gagged, turned his face away. "...It were a full minute ere he hit the water."

Once Boromir was occupied with drinking, Innrod cleared his throat, tried to adjust the Man's heavy arm against his shoulder. "My - my lord, where are we going, exactly?"

"To the south doors, lad."

That was a good enough response. Innrod, however, thought it wise to mention: "My lord... I do not think I know where the south doors are."

"Straight ahead, lad. Straight ahead and then down the - ai, no, no," Boromir hissed. "Nay, let us avoid the stairs." He furrowed his brow. "Ah... take the first corner, Innrod. Left."

Innrod obliged, and soon they were walking diagonally - no matter how much Innrod tried to keep them straight - down a narrow corridor with tapestries on every side. Innrod had never seen this hall before, and so he could not help but cast quick, curious glances at the designs. Boromir's rather large arm against his neck impeded him from being able to look up fully, but he managed to catch quick glimpses anyway. The tapestries. Men in armor and chain mail. Men charging. A dragon. A map. A castle on fire. A great wave.

They turned another corner. Boromir finished his bottle and handed it to Innrod absently. Before Innrod could argue, however, and try to give it back to his Lordship, he saw an uncomfortably familiar figure coming down the hall towards them. Rünyafin. The elderly servant glanced with wide eyes at the bottle, at Innrod, and then at Boromir. Innrod cringed. Surely they did not make a good sight - stumbling down the corridors, Innrod waving an empty brandy bottle around, Boromir...
slurring his words.

Yet Rûnýafin only gaped for a few moments - demanding silent explanations from Innrod with his eyes - before finally bowing low as Boromir approached. "My lord."

"Ah, Rûnýafin," Boromir grunted. "Rûnýafin - see to the carpet, will you? I will be in the city this evening, Innrod has agreed to review a local tavern with the Guard and I. But the carpet…"

Boromir swayed, nearly swaying into Rûnýafin, causing Innrod to take a few clumsy steps. "I expect it changed ere I return, Rûnýafin."

Innrod's jaw dropped. Rûnýafin seemed equally shocked. Yet he closed his own mouth with a snap and nodded strangely. "Aye - aye, my lord. Of course, my lord."

Boromir smiled. He gave Rûnýafin's cheek a small slap. "Good Man."

And soon they were around another bend, and Rûnýafin was gone. Innrod was practically beaming with delight. He looked up at Boromir, smiling broadly.

"But - but, my lord, I was to - " He could not finish it, and so he simply smiled again, awestruck.

"Not tonight. Tonight you drink with the Guard, my lad."

"The Guard?" Innrod's heart did a small flip. Surely this could not be happening. Was this a trap? Had the King instructed Boromir in feigning drunkenness in order to lure Innrod away from the chambers - where, indeed, there was an entrance to a secret passage, to a possible escape - and into the Citadel Guard's clutches?

Yet when Innrod looked up at Boromir, and saw the older Man's glistening eyes, warm with laughter, he calmed somewhat. Nay, Lord Boromir would never betray him. They were friends, after all.

And so they reached the south doors, two slim doors which led out onto the balconies and, after a short, steep stairway, down onto the sixth circle by the stables. Outside, the lanterns were already lit, casting everything in a soft glow. And with the warm, summer wind, and the sky above him deepening to a dark blue, Innrod smiled, took a deep breath of fresh air.

He saw three Men waiting for them at the bottom on the stairs. They wore no armor - Innrod heaved a sigh of relief - though they were all large and strongly built - making Innrod feel small and gangly. The first Man, with curly, dark hair and a very wide smile, called forth.

"Finally the Captain arrives, and he is late!"

Beside him, a ginger-haired man with clear, blue eyes was smoking a pipe. He exhaled a puff of smoke, jutted his pipe in Innrod's direction.

"Who do you bring, Captain?" the red-haired Man called.

Boromir was clambering down the stairs, one hand against the railing and another against his stomach, scowling at the pain. He grunted.

"This is young Innrod - " Boromir staggered the last few steps, and the third Man, a tall, blond sort, caught him. "He's the son of an attendant of mine." He straightened, looked down at Innrod who had just descended the stairs after him. "Here, Innrod. Meet the Guard. This is Iorlas, Ragnor and Eomund."
Each Man smiled and nodded, and Innrod grinned awkwardly in return. He was still feeling rather short at the moment. The tallest he could manage was arriving a little past Boromir's shoulder - and that was only because Boromir was the shortest of the Men present, and he was currently half-hunched over in pain.

A warm, soft wind blew by.

"Well, I see Captain's already begun his own private revelry," Ragnor joked with pipe in mouth.

"Ah, leave off, Ragnor..." Boromir grumbled.

"Where to, gentlemen?" Iorlas asked, beaming. He smiled down at Innrod. "Is this your first time out in the taverns, young Innrod?"

"Aye, my lord," Innrod nodded.

"Let us to The Rose Garden," Eomund suggested. "They have pints for less every Orgaladh."

"Nay, nay," Boromir muttered. "Not The Rose Garden. Ana is angry with me..."

Iorlas laughed, clapped Boromir on the shoulder. "Where shall we go then, Captain?"

"So long as it is not The Skulking Squire," Eomund said. "I am indebted to the innkeeper there."

"The Tree and Tower?" Iorlas put in.

Everyone groaned at that.

"The Laughing Oliphaunt?" Ragnor suggested.

"Aye, so be it," Boromir nodded.

Innrod had watched this entire exchange with wide eyes, not knowing or understanding what any of these names meant, but eventually, once the decision was made, they all turned and began to walk down the sixth circle towards the gate leading to the fifth. Innrod followed, trailing after them, taking extra-long strides in order to keep up with them. He stayed at Boromir's elbow most of the time, leaning forward and listening to the other Men banter and talk and laugh, every so often smiling if he understood a joke.

They walked down the fifth circle - all was becoming dark, and the lanterns were being lit, and Innrod could hear the harsh boom of Men's laughter coming from the open windows - down, down, down - Innrod had never seen more than fleeting glimpses of this circle - until they reached the fourth circle. And here Innrod marveled at all the stores and shops, and the smell of leather coming from the shoemakers, and the young merchants standing under their awnings, smoking and talking. Innrod caught sight of a few grubby children dodging into alleys, and he swelled with pride at being seen with Boromir and the Guard. He was quickly forgetting his early morning crime.

They took a thin alleyway, where all was dark and the air was stale. Innrod walked with the very tall Eomund in front of him, who spoke with Ragnor, and Boromir behind him. The two Men in front stopped abruptly, so that Innrod ran face first into Eomund’s back. And he felt then a large hand clamp down on a shoulder and pull him away slightly. It was Boromir’s.

Ragnor held his pipe in one hand and the door with the other. He pulled it open, stepped aside to let the others pass.
"Aye, nice and quiet tonight," he remarked.

They entered. If this was quiet, Innrod wanted to know what was considered loud. Almost every table was full. The room was thick with heavy smoke, so that Innrod's eyes watered and he blinked. A loud buzz of conversation. Innrod saw huge, burly Men seated at the tables, drinking from impossibly large steins. A weary-looking barmaid threaded her way through all these tables, sometimes carrying five or six full glasses on her tray.

Innrod was squeezed in with this group of Men - pressed in between all these tall soldiers - with Eomund in front of him, Ragnor to the side, and Boromir's almost paternal grip on his shoulder from behind. They found a table in the corner. Innrod took the seat wedged in the corner, with Boromir on his left and Eomund on his right. Iorlas sat opposite him, and Ragnor, meanwhile, remained standing, holding his hand up to beckon the barmaid over.

Innrod must have had a particularly awestruck expression on his face, for when Boromir glanced down at him, he chuckled.

"You have never been in a tavern before?" Boromir rumbled, grinning.

"Nay, my lord."

The barmaid arrived. They all ordered dark ale, and Eomund ordered one for Innrod as well. When she disappeared, and Ragnor and Iorlas fell into conversation, Innrod stole a glance at Boromir. The Man was seated, legs stretched out, arms crossed, staring at some indistinct point on the table. Innrod looked around, studied the others - the easy smiles of Iorlas, the faint scar trailing over Ragnor's temple - when Eomund shifted at his elbow.

"You work in the Citadel, young Innrod?" the tall Man asked.

"Aye, my lord. I am an attendant in Lord Boromir's chambers."

Eomund made a neutral sound.

The drinks arrived. Five tall mugs were placed heavily on the table. Innrod loomed over his drink, staring into the dark, murky depths, seeing the foam cling to the mug’s sides. The others were watching him expectantly, and they smiled when he looked up. Ragnor raised his mug.

"To the King and Queen," he said.

The others murmured their toasts, with Innrod mumbling along, and then all four Men drank. Innrod saw Boromir and Ragnor finish theirs entirely, while Iorlas and Eomund drank nearly half. Innrod had not touched his. Once Ragnor had belched slightly, took a puff from his pipe, he smiled and motioned to Innrod.

"Go on, lad. 'Tis a fine brew."

And so Innrod grasped the mug with both hands, tilted, sipped. Cool, crisp, bitter. He made a face, causing the others to laugh.

"First ale, eh?"

"Ha! I fear it's not to his liking."

"Tis quite bitter," Innrod admitted.
"Ah, you won't notice after the first two or three," Ragnor chuckled. "Go on, lad, take a long swallow. This is the finest brew in the fourth circle."

And so Innrod drank deeply, eager to see if the taste changed after more than half of the mug. And he leaned back in his chair, unconsciously imitating the other Men's confident slouch, listening to them talk or watching the tavern's activity. Ragnor beckoned the barmaid over again, and they ordered a second round, though Boromir also requested a bottle of the King's Brandy.

After a while, Innrod began to feel light-headed. His limbs felt strange, loose and numb, as if he were some limp puppet without strings. His face felt warm, and he noticed that he would laugh more easily at whatever was being said. When someone - Eomund - asked him of his parents, Innrod candidly admitted that he knew nothing of his father - and while his mother oft told him it was because he died in the War - Innrod was beginning to suspect that maybe she simply did not know who the father was. The Men grumbled and offered their sympathies, but Innrod, feeling suddenly very adult, shook it off with a shrug and another gulp of ale.

Time passed. After his second mug, Innrod felt positively abuzz. Everything had gone blurry - with the candles and the lamps glowing soft and warm - and he was beginning to feel tired. The other Men were still talking loudly - telling some vulgar tale which Innrod could not entirely comprehend, laughing about someone named Amlaith who was apparently ill - while Boromir slowly finished his bottle of King's Brandy.

Hours. Things rocked to and fro, as if the room was tilting with the wind. And eventually, through the haze, Innrod realized that Boromir was talking to him, had been talking to him for who knows how long. But Innrod was beginning to feel strange, the gentle buzz was turning to a clumsier state, and his stomach was beginning to churn and clench, so that, in his own discomfort, he had not noticed Boromir was mumbling to him. But he turned, and Boromir was there, leaning forward, staring at the table, arms crossed, speaking softly:

"...fear. I know, I know, 'tis cowardly. And was I not raised in times of War, from a line of brave and doughty Men? And yet... And yet... Nay, you could not understand, lad. 'Tis impossible... But these Men here, aye, they fought with me, fought for me, and now they have found peace. True peace. But I... all my life, all my life I had lived for War. And now it is all finished... and look at me, these useless limbs..." Boromir snorted, covered his eyes with a quaking hand. "Useless. I can do nothing... Nothing. Nothing but hear that poor, wretched soul, over and over again." His voice shook, whispering, "Ai, me. You wouldn't know, Innrod, dear lad, you couldn't know... You are fortunate. But that poor soul, he was a good friend, and he did not deserve it... Nay, he did not deserve it. Ai, no, I did... not he... 'tis all my fault. And now I have his death on my soul..."

Innrod wanted to listen. He did. He still had sense enough to perceive Lord Boromir's wavering voice and glistening eyes, and he knew that, whatever his Lordship was talking about, he needed someone to listen right now.

But Innrod's stomach hurt. And the room was spinning, and he was beginning to feel sick and sweaty at the same time. Just looking at the half-full mug made him nauseous. And so he concentrated on Boromir's words first, tried to listen, tried to make sense of what the older Man was saying. But as much as Innrod leaned forward, keeping his elbows wide, trying to steady himself and hold himself upright, he could not focus. And so once he was sure that something bad was going to happen, and Boromir had paused to swallow his brandy, Innrod pulled at the man's jacket.

"My lord... I... my lord, I do not feel well."

Boromir set down his glass, wiped his eyes quickly, looked at Innrod. "Aye?"
Innrod nodded miserably.

Boromir turned to the three Men still deep in conversation. He interrupted them: "Ragnar. The lad's going to be sick. Help him outside."

Ragnar looked up, nodded, stuffed his pipe back into his doublet's pocket and stood. And before Innrod knew what was going on, he was being hauled up out of his seat and led stumbling out of the tavern.

Outside. The air had cooled. While Ragnar kept a strong hand on Innrod's shoulder, they went walking quickly down the alley until they reached a small niche. Further on, a dead end. There were no lanterns nearby, and, as dizzy as he was, Innrod could see very little. But Ragnar pulled at his shoulder, stopped him, placed a comforting hand on the back of his neck.

"Alright, lad, how do ye feel?"

Innrod could detect a slightly Rohirric lilt in the Man's slurred voice now. Something he had not noticed before. It made sense, he thought numbly, since Ragnar was a Rohirric name…

Innrod leaned against the wall. "I feel ill."

Ragnar smiled, ruffled the boy's hair softly. "Ah, that's not a surprise. Why, when I had my first ale, they had to carry me home. And you had three!"

Innrod smiled weakly, feeling a small glimmer of pride to hear this. He pushed the hair out of his eyes. "Verily?"

"Aye," Ragnar leaned his shoulder against the wall, facing Innrod. "And that was light ale. Dark ale's much stronger."

And just as Innrod was about to laugh, he began to feel a creeping tide, and, panicking, he doubled over to be sick. Ragnar was instantly at his side, keeping a hand against his back, murmuring soft encouragement. But Innrod did not retch. He spat, and he coughed, and he heaved, but nothing came. Eventually the wretched feeling passed, and he backed away, leaning hard against the opposite wall.

A few moments passed, and he felt the nausea fade. After waiting a little more, just enough to be sure, he wiped again at his clammy brow.

"I don't think I'm going to be sick," he said hoarsely.

"Well, come on, lad," Ragnar guided him away from the niche and back towards the brighter part of the alley. "Have a seat. If it comes, it'll come. Either way, a bit of fresh air'll clear your head."

They walked back towards the tavern and, a few paces from the entrance, sat on a wide ledge where some potted plants were being kept. The smell of soil and ceramic - the cool breeze which lifted away some of the alley’s dankness - Innrod felt somewhat better indeed. Ragnar, in a show of consideration, refrained from smoking, since the smell would not have been pleasant to one in Innrod’s state. And so they sat, quietly, both leaning back against the uneven wall.

Now that Innrod felt somewhat calmer, somewhat better, he could not help but think of what Lord Boromir had been telling him in the tavern. It had left him with a strange dreary feeling - a sort of detached sadness. But he did not know why. In truth, he did not understand. And he had not heard everything Boromir had said.
"Ragnor?" Innrod began, feeling more forward than usual.

"Mmm?"

"I think Lord Boromir drinks more than is healthy. He had already finished one bottle before we came."

Ragnor sighed, ran a hand over his face wearily. "Aye, that is no surprise... I've heard rumors as well. Vile things."

Innrod nodded, suddenly feeling a pang of guilt for this morning. Not for being discovered in the secret tunnel - nay, that had become almost trivial - but rather for delighting in showing off his Lordship as Boromir the Mad to little Poppy. Innrod scowled, angry with himself. *Stupid Innrod!*

He told himself sternly that he would make amends. He would go to Poppy tomorrow and tell her to forget everything he had said the last morning. And the next time Lord Boromir wished to speak candidly, Innrod would drink no ale and would listen as closely as possible. And then he would offer whatever advice he could think of, whatever measure of help he could give.

"He has changed much..." Ragnor murmured. "Aye, you did not know him ere the War, but he was - different." He sighed. "'Be content' they say. Be content that he has returned to us at all. Be content that he lives, and that he is not so ruined as to not know himself or his old companions." He gave a bitter smirk. "Ah... but there is little to 'be content' with. He is not the same Man who led us in Osgiliath..."

In that moment, almost as if speaking of him should summon him, Boromir came reeling out of *The Laughing Oliphaunt*, his face pale and damp with sweat. Both Ragnor and Innrod stood, and Ragnor quickly took Boromir by the elbow.

"My lord?"

But Boromir looked down and, seeing Innrod, shook his head, stumbled back. His voice was thick. "Nay, nay. Go inside, Innrod. The lad shouldn't - shouldn't see this..."

Ragnor understood immediately and pulled Boromir down along the alley. Yet they did not get far - for not ten paces off, Boromir stumbled, fell to hands and knees and vomited painfully.

Innrod sat on the ledge, drew his knees up, looked away, felt his ears burning. Once the sound stopped, and he glanced over, just enough to see Ragnor pulling Boromir up, while both went stumbling clumsily to the side, collapsing back onto the ground, Innrod looked away again. And waited.

And then he heard a strangled voice… shaking, high-pitched, and another voice, whispering, soothing, calming. And when Innrod looked again, he saw Ragnor kneeling beside Boromir, trying to pull him back to his feet, while the latter had fallen forward onto his hands, his face nearly touching the cobblestones, his shoulders shaking. Weeping.

And Iorlas and Eomund emerged from *The Laughing Oliphaunt* in that moment, both chuckling about something. Eomund strode into the alley and, before seeing the others, teased loudly, "You treacherous curs! Left me to pay the bill, once again!"

Yet once Eomund and Iorlas saw what was happening, saw Boromir with head in hands, on the ground, sobbing audibly now, they rushed forward, hastening past the seated Innrod, and quickly helped Ragnor in pulling Boromir to his feet. Yet the Man continued to weep, his chest caving in, pulling vainly away from all of them. Innrod watched now, frozen. He saw Eomund cup Boromir's
face in both hands, whispering to him urgently, intently. And at this, Boromir seemed to hush for a moment, listening, before dissolving again into shaking sobs and pulling Eomund into an embrace. And someone placed a hand on Boromir’s crown, and someone else gripped his shoulder, and he wept into Eomund’s shoulder, shuddering, clutching the taller Man's doublet, the fabric muffling his sobs.

And Innrod could hear snatches of talk:

"...rests now. He would not have wanted you..."

"...died as a soldier, ai, and not this, not this..."

"...do not say such things, Boromir..."

"...e'er our brother, I swear, nothing has changed, nothing will change..."

Darkness. Innrod did not know what time he finally returned to his quarters deep in the lower floors of the Citadel. But his home was dark, and he walked quietly across the creaking floorboards, tiptoeing. Feeling his heart heavy. Dazed and saddened and tired.

"Innrod?"

He stopped. Dead silence. A shadow.

"Innrod, what time is it?"

"Forgive me, Ma. I know not."

"Where were you?"

"Lord Boromir took me to meet the Guard."

"...The Guard?"

"Aye, Ma."

"What's that smell? Have you been drinking?"

"Nay, Ma. They were drinking, but not I."

A pause.

"Well, get ye to bed, Innrod. It's late."

"Aye, Ma. Good night, Ma."
Boromir the Mad

Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

The first days of July passed. As peace reigned in Minas Tirith, and the city finally settled down into a slow, contented rhythm, Boromir became – slowly and fundamentally – something of an icon. Boromir the Mad! Boromir the Drunkard! Not just a phenomena of the lower circles, but creeping up into every circle, every quarter, every shop and street. So that even Citadel courtiers inadvertently called him by his infamous epithet. Tales began to spread. Rumors flew. Each drunken collapse, each uncontrolled outburst, each stumble or slur proved an enormous delight to the people of Minas Tirith. When he rode through the city, they would laugh and salute him, offer him a drink, jest with him, insult him.

Soon, each tavern and whorehouse would claim that Boromir the Mad had once drank there, brawled there, slept there, lain with this or that courtesan or girl in this or that bed, booth, table. Children began playing games – games of orcs and Uruk-hai and Mordor villains against the brave soldiers of Gondor, and always, a lucky child would play Boromir the Mad, and he would shine above the rest as the colorful half-villain. And, in these games, the child playing Boromir the Mad would embellish the story – gory kills, theatrical oaths, psychotic rampages. But not just the children. Playwrights and poets began to compose pieces about him – always, as their protagonist, Boromir the Drunkard, Boromir the Mad, who raved and bellowed and laughed and retched.

The Citadel could do nothing to stop this surge of unwanted popularity. They ripped down the posters, imprisoned the playwrights, threatened the whorehouses. But always posters were redrawn, playwrights were freed the next morning, and whorehouses continued work.

And perhaps this was what the city wanted? What the city needed? Perhaps, after a lifetime of war, it was finally weary of glorifying its soldiers – its battles – its blood. Perhaps it needed a hero of another sort – someone who commanded love and pity and scorn and everything – someone to relieve the tension and the formality and the solemn memorials. And who other than the city’s former hero – now transformed and disfigured – Boromir the Once Long Ago Brave? Boromir the Previously Bold? It was quite ironic that Boromir, who spent most of his hours struggling with his memories of the War, should become the very figure who would help his city heal and forget it.

And what of Boromir indeed?

As summer passed, he reacted to this fame with either enraged outbursts or laughing self-deprecation, depending on his level of sobriety. The people enjoyed both performances. Stripped of his rank, stripped of his duties, he had much time on his hands. And so he would, indeed, descend to the taverns and remain there for entire days; or seek comfort in the arms of anonymous women, if not his chosen Ana, since she would not always tolerate his reckless drinking, his violence, his screaming nightmares. Or he would go riding out of Minas Tirith, unexpectedly, roam wildly, only to return one or two days later smelling of horse sweat and pine.

Eventually, the Citadel chose to ignore all of it, since there was no hope in controlling the crowds,
and one could only pray their inherent fickleness would let them forget Boromir the Mad and ease him from his undesired stage. They simply placed a watch on him, someone who knew where he was at all times. Someone who was close enough to him that they could prevent the more unfortunate incidents. Spies, essentially. But they did it for love – and so Boromir thought nothing of the strange coincidence, one particular evening, when Iorlas of the Citadel Guard was on hand to help him out of *The Tree and Tower*, sparing him a rather aggressive encounter with the lord of Lebennin. And Boromir did not question why it was Legolas who intercepted him in the second circle one night, guiding him away from *The Rose Garden* while, as the elf clenched his teeth to hear the young Ana’s stifled weeping, Boromir urged him drunkenly to let him return to her.

It pierced his friends. The Fellowship soon saw that while they equaled him in fame around the city, they did not equal him in its perverse affections. And they mourned for this change – they mourned for his loss of respect, his Barad-dûr imprisonment, his compulsions and probable madness.

Dínendal the Second Exile of Eryn Lasgalen became the unlikely spectator and reluctant witness to this sad spectacle. His time with Boromir ranged from the unbearably tense, when the elf was sure the Man would slash his throat, to the embarrassingly humorous to the downright strange. Days when Boromir confused Second One for Third One, or seemed to think Dínendal was Elrond.

Mad, indeed? It all depended on his mood, on how much alcohol he had consumed that day, on where he had slept or what the passing citizens had cried. And Dínendal learned soon enough to temper the swings in Boromir’s disposition, the sudden drops and stark peaks, with diplomatic phrases and mild expression. He learned to avoid him on the days when the servants whispered the most – when the long-suffering Rûnyafin would emerge from his Lordship’s chambers with a black eye and a broken piece of furniture.

Perhaps it was Dínendal’s shared Dagorlad experiences, or perhaps his inherently diplomatic personality, but the others found it much more difficult to control this thrashing, disgraced hero.

Faramir’s concerns, while genuine, were often delivered in more sensitive moments – when Boromir had just returned from his infrequent audiences with the King, or when he had just been dragged drunkenly out of the latest whorehouse – and this caused a problem. Too often the brothers would end their conversations with bellowed arguments, where Faramir too would yell red-faced, uttering things he always regretted as soon as they passed his lips. *Perhaps they do not seek the advice of a raving lunatic! And who would follow such a madman into battle? Of course not when you are too drunk to e’en stumble into the Hall!*

Once, loud cries and the crash of armor were heard in the northern hallway, and servants had hurried in to find the two brothers brawling. Fists, elbows, knees. Roaring, snarling, knocking against an ancient set of armor. The servants had pulled them apart – while Boromir had barked an insult, spat, offended the Lady Éowyn, and Faramir had charged forward so forcefully that three Men had to hold him back. Neither would say what the quarrel was about.

Aragorn’s interactions with Boromir were somewhat more controlled, if not more successful. At first, he had approached the Man as a friend, murmuring advice and what he had hoped was consolation for the old torment. Yet the Man was so lacking in respect, so openly hostile to his King, that Aragorn’s temper would flare, and he would grow cold. He could not charge Boromir with treason, he could not punish his insurgent scoffs and rude insults with a night in the dungeons, for, mad or not, this was Denethor’s son and he came from a noble line. And so Aragorn resorted to the coldness of royal summons.

Soon the entire Fellowship avoided Boromir, some even ignoring him if they passed him, raging, in the corridors. Only Pippin stubbornly remained a friend through it all. He sometimes went to
visit Boromir or offered to accompany him on his tours outside Minas Tirith, but the others were always loath to let the hobbit go alone – fearful that some lunacy would drive Boromir to harm him – and so guards always followed.

And yet…

Much changed the day King Éomer of Rohan returned to Minas Tirith. A sweltering, late July afternoon brought him and his entourage to the Great Gate, up, up, up, around each circle, and into the Citadel.

It was Faramir he met first.

The Lord Steward was striding down the halls, furious from a recent exchange with his older brother, clenching and unclenching his teeth until his temples ached. *That I should be like our father! When it is e’er he who has resembled him in arrogance, pride, greed, and now even madness! And Éowyn? What on Arda should he know of her and her preferences? As if I am some lesser Man, only because I know how to keep my breeches buckled and my head on my shoulders! Bah! Indeed, and I suppose he…*

Faramir walked down the corridor, jolting down the steps, hiding his irritation between placid nods and polite smiles to each of the passing noblemen and guards. He was descending the main staircase which led to the great door, with the intent of getting a breath of fresh air, when a joyous cry went up from the guards outside.

“Hail! King Éomer of the Mark rides forth!”

There were voices outside – a familiar accent – and the sound of horses clopping in, neighing, being dismounted. And then, striding in, tall, glowing, flushed, came Éomer of Rohan. Faramir had just taken his last step on the staircase when the Rohirrim spotted him.

“The Lord Steward!” Éomer cried, arms outstretched, walking towards him.

Faramir smiled immediately. He went to meet him. “Éomer King! ‘Tis an honor to have – ”

“Ah, come!” Éomer laughed, and grabbed Faramir into an informal embrace. He smelled of sweat and leather. “There are no titles, no formalities between us, good Faramir. You are e’er a friend of the Mark, and e’er a friend of mine.”

Faramir chuckled, half-coughed by the pounding blows Éomer was giving his back, “As – are – you, friend.”

“Brother?” a voice cried.

Both Men spun around to face the southern corridor, where the voice had come from, and both Men smiled immediately as Éowyn hurried forward. She quickly embraced her brother and kissed him on either cheek.

“We did not expect you so soon,” she said breathlessly.

“And when, dear sister, did you expect me?” Éomer laughed again, his tall frame shaking. “The journey is not so long, you know – or have you forgotten in all your time here?”

Éowyn and Faramir met eyes quickly, almost bashfully, and Éomer stopped laughing. He stared at either one.
“I know that look,” he said seriously, looking hard at Éowyn. “I know that look.”

“What look?” Éowyn asked as blandly as possible, though her flushed cheeks betrayed her, as did Faramir’s embarrassed swallow.

But whatever they were about to say was forgotten when Éomer looked up, his face suddenly splitting into a wide grin. He released his hold on Faramir’s shoulder, and cupped his hand over his mouth, bellowing:

“Ho! So it is true then?”

Faramir and Éowyn turned to see to who Éomer was calling and, surprisingly, they saw Boromir striding away, further down the hall. At the shouting he stopped, looked up, around, confused, and finally turned to catch Éomer’s eye. As usual, his doublet was only half-done, with his overshirt and undershirt spilling out, uneven, his collar rumpled.

“I swore my Men jested when they spoke of brave Lord Boromir’s Dagorlad adventures, for the ones who lingered in Minas Tirith said he had slain the entire Easterling army with the help of only three elves and a wizard! I said, ‘Nay! For Boromir is bold, aye, but he would ne’er be so foolish as to fight without his friends from the Mark! He has become greedy with his glories!’”

Boromir smiled slightly, walking back towards them, and murmured, “Aye, would that I had the bold Rohirrim with me, indeed.”

“It would have been a quick fight, my friend!” Éomer exclaimed, laughing, and pulled Boromir into a crushing embrace. He quickly released him, grabbed his shoulder. “My friend, they are calling you Rómendacil reborn in the Mark. Why did you not tell me of these grand adventures?”

“Rómendacil?” Boromir asked, somewhat bewildered.

“Aye, ’tis only accurate, I should think,” Éomer grinned. “Rómendacil the Third!”

“So my brother’s tales have reached Edoras?” Faramir asked slowly, hesitantly. Has his madness reached so far? Ai, no.

Yet Éomer seemed entirely unfazed. “And beyond, my friends! The poets have already composed the songs for him. You will needs set them straight,” he looked at Boromir in feigned gravity, “for surely what really happened is a much worthier tale than what the scop’s piece together from word-of-mouth and rumor.”

Boromir swallowed, avoided Éomer’s eyes, growled, “Nay, better the scop’s…”

“My friends,” Éomer said, quickly changing the subject, “my visit, as you know, is solemn.”

“Aye,” Faramir nodded. “And everything is ready. You may depart as soon as you see fit.”

“Good,” Éomer nodded. “That is good to hear and I thank you, Faramir. For, indeed, my people are impatient.” He looked at Éowyn, smiled. “They are impatient to see their Princess, they are impatient to honor their dwimlerlaik slayer.” He turned back to Faramir. “Then I should like to depart tomorrow, or on the second day. For I have great haste to see our valiant Théoden home.”

“Make it the second day, then,” Faramir suggested. “And let us dine with the King this evening, as he has been greatly anticipating your arrival.”

“Very well,” Éomer nodded. “To the great King Elessar, then! Lead on!”
“That went well.”

Faramir looked at Éowyn, raised an eyebrow. They were walking slowly, idly, down one of the numerous balconies surrounding the Citadel. Minas Tirith loomed below them, glittering with torches, humming with the gentle stirrings of a city going to bed. Up ahead, several paces off, the chaperone, an old woman named Brûnwen, walked. And Faramir and Éowyn strolled a hundred paces behind her, Éowyn’s arm hooked around Faramir’s.

“Aye…” Faramir snorted slightly. He lowered his voice, “Lord Elrond practically interrogated Master Dînendal from the first to last course… my forever drunk brother broke three glasses and nearly lost himself in front of the Queen… and I spent the entire evening pinned between your brother and Master Dînendal,” he sighed, placed his free hand over hers, looked away and added softly, “away from you.”

She blushed slightly at his candor, and she was thankful that this part of the walkway lacked a revealing torch. When he turned back to her, he smiled, and she faltered in keeping his gaze. Instead, she opted to shield herself slightly, lowering her eyes and moving the conversation away from them.

“Nay, I would say you are tired, and things appear worse when one is weary.” He was watching her now with warm, laughing eyes. She smiled, attempting to stifle yet another blush. Again, she stumbled over the topic at hand, struggled to hide a smile, “I – I know little of the elves, but I would say Lord Elrond and Master Dînendal were in good spirits as they talked. And your brother was well behaved. Did you not see how pleased Éomer was to see him?”

Faramir groaned genuinely at this, arched his head back to look up at the stars.

“Aye… and they are out to the taverns now. No doubt it is only a matter of time before I receive news of yet another lewd incident involving Boromir, if he himself does not come stumbling into my chambers at some unholy hour in the night.”

“Did you not send someone to watch him?” Êowyn blurted out and immediately regretted it.

Yet Faramir was not offended. Instead, he simply dropped his head, ran a weary hand through his hair, and nodded. “Aye, I sent Beregond…”

The chaperone turned a corner. And as they were to walk slowly after her, Faramir paused, moved instead to the balcony railing. Êowyn followed him – already her cheeks burning and her arm tingling from where it touched his. The chaperone was pretending not to notice, and, as Êowyn approached, Faramir leaned forward slightly, careful that they kept in shadow. With a ghost of a kiss over her cheek – so that she shuddered inadvertently and smiled – he pulled her hands into his, began kneading the knuckles, rubbing his thumb over her wrist.

“Ah, Êowyn, would that we could find some idle hour, some peace…” he whispered softly now, and she leaned against him, listening, hoping and praying the chaperone was tactfully keeping her back turned. “If I am not repairing the ills of my brother, I am e’er drowning in a sea of paperwork and tasks.” He pulled one hand up gently, kissed her palm, spoke against it. “Would that we could find some idle day… For I would spend my days with you, Êowyn, ai, and would we had but one idle day, and Gondor could tend to itself…”

She hoped he could not feel the sweat on her palms. She hoped her expression was not too wide-eyed and rigid. She hoped he could not hear the thundering in her chest. For she had been expecting this moment.
And he took her hand, pressed the palm against his cheek, so that she felt the rough beard, and murmured:

“Éowyn, let us be married.”

At that moment, somewhere in a nameless tavern of the third circle, amidst a throng of sweating, drunken Men, all yelling bawdy tales and shouting and spilling their drinks, Boromir pulled a barmaid towards him, forcing her into a kiss, gripping her from behind so that their hips met. And Éomer of Rohan came forward, half-laughing, red-faced, to pull him away. As Éomer urged Boromir away, the barmaid bit down, hard, so that as he was ripped away from her, stumbling bleary with a wrenching cry, he reached up and found blood on his bottom lip. He could hear Rohirrim laughter behind him.

“Foul whore!” he hissed, but she had already turned her back to him. Ignoring him. Disappearing into the blurred mess of this tavern, these crowds, this stifling chaos.

Boromir turned and sat heavily in his chair, nursing the cut on his lip. Éomer laughed again, slammed him roughly on the shoulder. The Rohirrim king then took a long swallow from his stein, wiped his beard with a satisfied pant. The other Rohirrim were speaking now, loud and jovial, in their own tongue, all rolling lilts and rapid-fire speech, punctuated every so often by raucous laughter.

Éomer jostled Boromir’s shoulder again, clunked their mugs together.

“In a fortnight, we shall be in Edoras!” he boomed. Everyone at the table cheered, knocked their mugs together. Ale splashed over the table, catching Boromir’s knee and Éomer’s hand.

Boromir did not partake in the toast. His drink stood empty, already finished, and he was too embarrassed now to ask for another from the barmaid. Indeed, he was still seething from her impudence, and a hollow ache had formed in his chest now, the ache of humiliation, of grim depression, of a swelling self-loathing, so that he wanted nothing more than to return to his chambers and finish his drinking there rather than entertain this group of merry, half-drunken, foreign Men.

His scowl was so evident that Éomer eventually shifted in his seat. He turned his back to the others, keeping an elbow on the table, and leaned close to Boromir’s shoulder, speaking loud enough to be heard above the noise but low enough to keep private. He smiled slightly as he asked:

“Boromir, do not tell me you brood over the wench?”

Knowing that it would only shame him further to admit it, he shook his head, but he could not force anything more than a twisted grimace.

“Nay…” he let the word trail, and he did not have the will or desire to find a suitable excuse for his melancholy.

For what could he do? Tell Éomer of that wretched Dínendal, and how he despised him tonight, for the elf had so easily explained the deaths of the two exiles to Lord Elrond at dinner while Boromir had gripped his wine glass so hard that it had cracked? Tell Éomer that he had watched his brother eye Éowyn across the table, seen them smile hidden smiles when they thought none noticed? And how he hated them for it? Tell Éomer how his love for Minas Tirith had turned to a painful loathing, how its beauty had turned ugly in his eyes, and he longed for nothing more than to turn away from its white towers and blazing silver trumpets and pomp and glory and the laughing
spectacle he had become?

He could not sit there anymore. For the hollow ache was spreading now, spreading to the very ends of his fingers, and the warmth of all the mead he had consumed was turning the ache into something fiery and hateful. He needed air. And so clambering – for the knees, ever painful, ever stiff – to stand, he muttered an excuse and left.

“I do not recognize him anymore.”

They sat against a marble bench, leaning back against the parapet. The chaperone had long since invented an excuse to leave and give them a few moments of privacy, and they sat now, with swollen lips and his arm around her shoulders and her head resting against his chest, leaning back against the white stone.

“What?” she asked.

He exhaled through his nose, a long hiss in the stillness of the evening.

“My brother… he is a different Man. And I fear the brother who left for Imladris shall never return.”

She raised herself from his chest, turned to him, cupped his cheek and drew him into a kiss. And she rubbed her thumb lightly over his cheekbone. “War changes many Men.”

“Aye…” he conceded softly, eyes lowered. “But his change pains me. Would that I could take it all back…” He paused, and when he spoke again, his voice was thick. He would not meet her gaze. “I should have gone. I should have convinced our father to send me in his stead. I relented too easily.”

She leaned forward, touched brow to brow, cupped his face.

“Nay, nay. Thank the Powers you did not go… Else so much would have been different.”

And here, he pulled back and raised his gaze to meet hers.

“Else I would have been like him, you mean.”

She was silent.

When Beregond told Iorlas the Lord Steward had sent him to watch over Lord Boromir tonight, Iorlas had urged him not to go. Nay, the Captain does not need spies and he does not need keepers. Brother, it is not right. It is the Citadel’s wrong – not yours, not ours. Don’t go. Spare our Captain that, at least.

But Beregond went, for as much as he wanted to believe Iorlas, as much as he wanted to believe that Boromir needed no spies, needed no keepers, he knew that Iorlas was wrong. And so he simply sighed impatiently with his brother, urged him to avoid their group if they crossed paths in the city that night, for he could not let Boromir know that he had followed him in stealth, and told him that – although Lord Faramir had not ordered him to do it, but had merely asked – he still felt obliged.

After the dinner, Boromir and King Éomer and a number of other Rohirrim, Men Beregond did not know, emerged from the Great Hall of Feasts and crossed the courtyards, heading for the gate leading to the sixth circle. Beregond had waited in shadow, marching idly, until he saw them
vanish beyond the gate. And then he went after them, striding on, out onto the main street of the sixth circle. By the Houses of Healing, Beregond spotted the group, and he fell into step a hundred paces behind them, keeping to the side of the road, near the buildings.

They stopped at the obligatory Tree and Tower first, where all the nobles and fief-lords and military commanders naturally congregated. Beregond had debated whether to find a seat in the courtyard outside, perhaps at one of the tables near the alley. But he could not see them from outside. And so he opted to enter the tavern, and he took a seat in a far booth, away from the common room.

Boromir, Éomer and the Rohirrim had found a place in the main room. Eventually, as Beregond had imagined, someone recognized him and so he ended up dividing his attention between a pointless conversation with the captain of the Anórien archers and his original task. He attempted to keep track of how much Boromir drank, but had lost count when the Anórien Man had begun tallying the number of Anórien soldiers who had fought in the Pelennor.

When the group left, Beregond excused himself quickly, bowing, and dropped a few coins on the counter before hurrying after them.

They stopped at another tavern, one deep in the third circle, hidden in some alleyway near a house of ill repute. The tavern had no name out front, and it was the sort of place Beregond would not have considered clean enough to frequent. But the Rohirrim were apparently familiar with it, for he could hear cries of their Rohirric tongue once the group entered. Beregond chose to linger outside for a while, hoping they would not stay long. He had not told his wife where he was this evening – he had promised to return ere dinner – and he was beginning to worry that Iorlas would forget to drop by his house and soothe her worries, as he had been clearly instructed to do.

Eventually, the whores began calling to Beregond, and so he went inside. It was, indeed, a very poorly kept tavern. Beregond noted immediately that he, as well as those he followed, was of considerably higher dress and rank than any of the other Men here. But it was a traditional Rohirrim tavern – that was certain – for they drank from steins and Beregond could smell the strong scent of Rohirric mead. The tiny tavern was entirely crowded, almost uncomfortably so. It was hot. But soon enough, Beregond found a single table in the corner where he could catch glimpses, from across the room, of his quarry.

He saw, at one point, Boromir jerk the Rohirric barmaid into a kiss, only to be pulled away by Éomer with a pained cry. Beregond guessed the maid must have bit him, for he saw Boromir curse and bring a hand to his mouth. Not long after that, Boromir left.

At first, Beregond waited, for he had seen Boromir mutter something in Éomer’s ear, and the Rohirric king had nodded. So Beregond assumed Boromir was merely in the nearest alley, and would return soon. After several minutes, with Boromir never returning, Beregond glanced over to the Rohirrim. They were all somewhat inebriated, so they had not yet noticed the Gondorian’s absence. And so Beregond paid quickly and left.

He jogged down the alleyway, casting rapid glances at each intersecting alley. After a while of searching, he found Boromir, further ahead, walking away. The Man turned a corner, Beregond followed. He followed him through this maze of alleys for a good half an hour, and it seemed that they were both lost. Yet eventually Boromir found his way back to the main street, and Beregond followed him. And then he followed him away from the third circle and, surprisingly, down towards the gate leading to the second circle.

*The Rose Garden.* Beregond followed as Boromir made his way through the familiar streets and narrow alleys of the second circle, passing the small square with the wall, on and on, before
slipping into the narrow alley which led to the tavern itself. Beregond paused here, at the corner, hiding himself in shadow and watching as Boromir went walking unevenly down this alley, at times knocking his shoulder against the walls, before arriving to the tavern’s door. Beregond could not see in the shadow of the other building, but he could hear it was closed, for Boromir began to knock, persistent, loud.

Beregond knew Ana since her brother, Lambain, had served with him in Osgiliath. Lambain was a young soldier who often went to the same practice grounds for archery. Therefore, Beregond and Lambain had known each other by sight for several years, and so Beregond knew Ana on a somewhat superficial basis. He had heard that she was to marry a young Man from the third circle, but that he had died in the Siege, in the very same parapet where Lambain had been wounded. Beregond often made it a point to visit Lambain, for he was a good soldier, and so he had sometimes had tea with Lambain, Ana, and their Aunt Lalaith. They were good people.

Indeed, he did not like the idea of a young woman like Ana having relations with Lord Boromir. For Boromir was his Captain, yes, and Beregond respected him and loved him, but Beregond also knew that his Captain had changed…

The knocking continued. Boromir began to call Ana’s name.

And just as Beregond was to go striding down the alleyway to find some way to maneuver Boromir back to the Citadel, the door creaked open.

Boromir leaned against the door, knocking. He had not realized the time, but apparently it was several hours past the tolling of midnight, for The Rose Garden closed late. At first, he knocked once and waited, leaning against the doorframe to support himself.

When there was no answer, he knocked again. Pounding, so that he could hear the door rattling in its hinges. Irritation quickly turned to a strange sort of desperation, where he began to knock continuously, loud, not caring if he woke the residents of this tiny alley. He wiped the sweat from his brow, rubbed his eyes with one hand. He felt grimy, rough. And he knocked and knocked, numbly, quickly, at one point growling into the wood, Ana, open the door, until – finally – he heard shuffling from inside, and locks being turned.

The door opened, and he squinted suddenly in the painful glow of a lantern. Ana. She wore her nightdress with a shawl wrapped around her shoulders, and she too blinked blearily at him, holding the thick lantern with one hand while keeping her shawl closed with the other. It was clear she had been sleeping.

Yet before she could finish uttering a confused, “Boromir?”, he entered and enveloped her in an embrace. Breathing heavily into her hair, leaning hard, feeling an unexpected, if familiar, burning in his eyes. He stroked her hair lightly, held her close, swallowed down the emotion.

“Ana…” he whispered. “Ana, I’ve missed you.”

She was still holding the lantern in one hand while awkwardly meeting his embrace with the other, and so she gently disentangled herself and closed the door. Placing the lantern on the tall shelf, she hugged the shawl closer. And, in the dim, blurred gold of the room, this swaying room where Boromir suddenly felt the quiet distance in his ears, he registered that she was watching him. Sternly. Brows lowered.
He approached her again, cupped her face, brushed his nose against her hairline. Struggling to keep his voice steady, struggling to speak clearly, without slurring. “Ana… let me stay here tonight. I desire you. Please. Forgive me for what I said last time.”

She did not respond to his touch. She stood still, arms crossed. When he saw that she remained immobile, he forced his breath to remain calm, forced his heart to beat slower. Yet he could not help the somewhat frantic gestures as he brushed lightly at her cheek, kissed her brow, stroked her arms with both hands.

Eventually, he dipped his head down, kissed her cheek, her temple, her hair. All the time, whispering: “Ana. Please.”

At the wavering in his voice, she finally met his eyes. Everything was so blurred in the dim light, yet he could see her eyes were dark. Wary eyes. She scowled, shifted her arms, hugging tighter.

“And if I say no, what will you do?”

His mouth thinned. And then his hands were empty, and he was standing awkwardly, struggling to hold her gaze, struggling to keep the hollow ache in his chest from snaking up into his eyes, into his ears, into his throat. Struggling not to bark some insult and leave, slamming the door off its hinges. For he knew that he could not do it tonight, he could not return to the Citadel, he could not sleep alone. And he knew that he could not spend the night in some anonymous woman’s bed, either. He needed something, some form of familiarity, some measure of warmth. And so he waited, tense, while she watched him.

Eventually, hardening himself, he spoke: “Say what you will.” He swallowed back the wave of nausea, the lump of panic rising in his throat. “I will not force you.”

She did not speak, but watched him for a few more moments. Unbearable moments, when suddenly all the drink soaked away, and Boromir saw it all clearly, with a pounding head, and that rotten emptiness inside of him, and a bubbling desperation, washing back, the desperation, that fear, the panic, pouring, so that his hands trembled. He hoped she would not notice in the dim light.

Ana watched him for a few moments, and then, with a sigh, took the lantern from the shelf and opened the door. She stood by it, waiting for him to leave.

No, no, no, no.

He did not leave. He could not leave. Instead he went to her, and gripped her with both hands, bruising, and crushed her to him, and pulled her into a kiss. Teeth dragging, a bite, pushing the tongue through, and he could hear her give a yelp against him, pushing him away. But he held her tightly, violent in his need, gripping her hair and her neck and keeping her pinned against him, pushing towards the wall. They clattered back against it. Pushing his knee forward, so that she was trapped. She tried to cry out, but the sound was quickly swallowed by another frantic, desperate kiss.

And when he finally broke away, so that both were left gasping, he murmured into her ear, feeling the heat in his gut fade, turn icy, he murmured, voice cracking, “Please, Ana, please. I cannot do it – you know I cannot – I would never – but please…” And suddenly all the energy was gone, and he sagged against her. And he felt his nose grow stuffed, and his cheeks cold and wet, so that, ashamed, he pressed his brow against the wall, looking away from her. He loosened his grip on her upper arms, moved instead to embrace her. She did not resist.

And when his shoulders went tense in an effort to keep still, and he held his breath, forcing his
entire body to remain rigidly still so that his emotion could not be betrayed, she, understanding, pulled her arms up, embraced him by the neck. With a gasping jerk, he let one sob escape before sucking in his breath, trapping it, pressing his brow further against the wall. He could feel the wood digging into his forehead. And she continued to embrace him now, keeping her cheek against his, running her hand slowly up and down his back, while he buried his face in her shoulder and struggled, struggled, struggled with all his will not to let the knot of emotion snap.

It did, however. When she reached one hand over to push the wooden door closed again, and then replaced her arm around his neck, threading her fingers through his hair, when she did this, he suddenly found himself fighting to breathe, fighting to keep quiet, as his shoulders shook and he pressed his eyes down into her shawl, dampening it with tears and snot and spit.


And she soothed him to silence with a soft, repeated *shhh*, all the while running her fingers through his hair, so that the shaking in his shoulders faded, and soon they stood quietly. He felt a kiss against his neck.

“Aye… you’ll stay.”

“Elven cloak?”

“Aye.”

“Summer weather cloak?”

“Aye.”

“Oil-skin cloak?”

“Aye.”

“Fur cloak?”

“Aye.”

“Ceremonial cloak?”

“Aye.”

“Standard boots?”

“Aye.”

“Riding boots?”

“Aye.”

“Ceremonial boots?”

“Aye.”

“Breeches?”

“Aye.”
“How many?”

“…Six, my lord.”

“Mmm. Add another pair.”

“Aye, my lord.”

Innrod stooped over the large bed, folding yet another pair of breeches as best he could. Once they were reasonably neat, he placed them in the designated breeches pile. Lord Boromir had not slept in his chambers last night, thus giving, what Master Rúnyafín had so aptly concluded, a very convenient place to organize all of his traveling bags. Innrod had been here for a few hours now, on this pleasant summer morning, as the birds chirped and the sun shone, folding and re-folding and, at Rúnyafín’s urging, re-folding a third time all the various cloaks and breeches and undershirts and overshirts and doublets and jackets and surcoats and everything the Lord Boromir could need on his travels to Edoras and beyond. While Innrod had hoped to pack away chain mail and maybe polish or hone down his Lordship’s arms, Rúnyafín had simply laughed at the idea.

And so here he was, folding Lord Boromir’s undergarments into neat little triangles, while Rúnyafín hovered over his shoulder. The old manservant kept making small notes on a piece of paper, muttering to himself on how many pairs of gloves were needed or which emblems to pin on the ceremonial surcoat needed for Théoden’s funeral.

Finally, when Innrod’s back ached at having stooped over the foot of the bed for so long, and he was folding yet another yellowing undershirt, Rúnyafín leaned back with an affirmative noise.

“Hmm. Very well, good,” Rúnyafín said. “I’ll to the stables then, I must advise Gadsúl on the saddlebags his Lordship will require. Meanwhile, I expect all of this packed by the time I return. And remember to polish all the boots before you pack them. Use the buffing comb.”

“Aye, my lord,” Innrod replied dully, silently urging the old manservant away. At least by himself he could work without having Rúnyafín hovering over his shoulder all the time. Perhaps he could get a closer look at that round shield he saw lying in the corner by the case of arms.

As Innrod tried to find a way to tuck too-long sleeves into a somewhat hastily folded undershirt, his last one for now, he heard the door close behind him. Finally! He listened to Rúnyafín’s brisk step disappear down the hallway before putting the shirt in the shirt pile and leaning all the way back, stretching his arms wide, arching his spine as far as it would go. With a contented grunt, Innrod walked over to the shield, stretching his shoulders as he walked.

The shield. Round, slightly battered, iron. Innrod tried moving it, but hearing the it roll against the stone floor sent him in a panic, so he immediately pushed it back into place, silencing it.

He went to the window, opened it. A nice, summer breeze. With his knees on the cushioned seat of a chair, Innrod climbed up and leaned against the window sill, crossing his arms and resting his chin there. He let the breeze hit him in the face, listened idly to the sounds of the Citadel courtyards below. Birds chirping. A few fluffed clouds drifting high in the deep blue sky. Clean. The sun glinted off the white stone and windows of the Great Hall on the opposite side of the courtyard, so that Innrod had to squint.

And then: Thump.

Innrod paused.

Thump.
Innrod looked around.

*Thump. Thump.*

“*Psst!* Innrod!”

The sound came from beneath him, right beneath his arms as they rested against the warm stone of the windowsill. He leaned back on his heels, looked down. He did not want to consider where the voice had come from, but –

“Innrod! Over here!”

With a groan, Innrod stepped off the chair and knelt beside the liquor cabinet. The peephole. He pressed his face up against the stone wall and was greeted with a huge, blinking eye.

“*Poppy!*” Innrod hissed. “What are you doing? Have you gone mad?”

He was rewarded with a fit of nervous giggles muffled by the wall. He leaned further, pressing his eyebrow against the peephole’s edge. The stone was deep, it was difficult to see, and he could discern nothing but darkness and the occasional blur within the secret passage.

“Wait, who’ve you got in there?” he asked.

More giggles. Poppy’s eye suddenly reappeared.

“I brought Eirien from the kitchens,” she said.

And suddenly Poppy’s eye disappeared and Innrod saw a mouth press up against the peephole. “Hello, Innrod!”

As the girls dissolved again into their tittering laughter, Innrod rolled his eyes. He looked over his shoulder, saw the pile of clothes on Boromir’s bed, waiting to be packed. He did not know Eirien well, he had only seen her once or twice in the kitchens. She was younger than Poppy. She would surely speak too loud and they would be caught.

“Innrod, Innrod,” Eirien hissed loudly. “Whose room is this?”

Growing increasingly nervous, Innrod put his hand on the peephole to muffle the sound further. Waiting a few moments, he released his hand and whispered into it, “Lord Boromir’s.”

“*Ooh,*” Eirien said, making Poppy laugh. “We were just at the King’s peephole, did you know that, Innrod? We were at the King’s peephole but he put something in it, so we couldn’t see through it. I think he put wax in it.”

Innrod groaned. He pressed his brow against the stone wall. “Well, get you gone!” he hissed. “Get back to the kitchens before someone finds you in there!”

There was more thumping, suddenly, coming from further along the wall. And then Innrod heard a new voice:

“*Oy!* Who’s there?”

This voice was a boy’s voice, deeper than Innrod’s. Innrod immediately recognized it as sixteen-year-old Gregor from the storeroom. And he could hear now a general fumbling in the passage, with some high-pitched squeals – from Poppy – and then a loud knock followed by a curse – from Gregor.
Innrod was sweating by this point.

“Gregor?” he whispered loudly. “Gregor, what are you doing in there?”

“Who’s that? Who’s talking?” Gregor’s loud voice asked. “Step aside, lass, let me see.” A brown eye appeared. “Oy, Innrod! Hello there! Look, Laerion, it’s Innrod from upstairs!”

The brown eye disappeared, there was more shuffling – Innrod was most definitely sweating now as he gripped the stone – and a blue eye came into focus.

“Hullo, Innrod!” Laerion said. Fifteen-year-old Laerion was from the stables. Innrod swallowed. Did everyone in the Citadel know about the passage? If it had reached the stables, which was usually the last place to receive news and rumors, then surely everyone knew.

“Nay!” Innrod said frantically. “Get out of there! If Lord Boromir finds you here, he’ll kill me!”

“Ai! Gregor! Watch yourself!”

“Ah, forgive me, Pop.”

“My name is not Pop!”

“Who’s room is this?”

“Boromir the Mad, Laerion.”

“I want to go see the King again.”

“Oy, Innrod, are you coming down to watch the procession tomorrow?”

Innrod gaped for a few moments, his heart pounding in his throat, before stuttering, “Well, I – I – think I must be there, since Rúnyafin wants me to see to Lord Boromir’s – ”

Before he could finish, there was a noise by the door. All the children inside the secret passage – as well as Innrod himself – yelped in surprise and then immediately fell silent. The door creaked open, slowly, slowly, slowly. It remained ajar for a few moments – Innrod could hear two Men talking in the hallway – before suddenly flying wide open. Lord Boromir came striding into the room.

Innrod jerked up to stand. He could feel the four children’s presence in the wall behind his calves.

Boromir strode into the room, saw the clothes all neatly arranged on his bed, on the floor, on several chairs, looked up and found Innrod standing by the liquor cabinet. He smiled.

“Hard at work already, lad?” he growled with a smile.

“G – Good morning, my – my lord,” Innrod stammered.

Boromir raised an eyebrow at Innrod’s obvious nervousness. He cast a quick glance at the bottles on his cabinet. And then, brows lowering, he placed his hands on his hips and shifted his weight.

“Innrod, have you been in the liquor cabinet?” he asked in mock gravity.

“N – no, my lord!” Innrod’s voice cracked.

Boromir laughed suddenly, a full-throated, rumbling, belly laugh. He stepped over the clothes on
the floor and walked over to the cabinet. Giving Innrod’s cheek an affectionate slap and ruffling his hair, he grabbed a tall bottle and uncorked it with a pop. As he poured, he chuckled again.

“Fear not, lad, I was teasing,” Boromir grinned. “Not after The Laughing Oliphaunt, eh? The Guard told me what happened.”

Innrod nodded fervently. Inwardly, he heaved a sigh of relief that Boromir remembered naught else of that evening. Meanwhile Boromir drank, knocking back the entire glass in one swallow. Innrod watched him, feeling his legs burn as they pressed against the peephole, hiding it. There was no sound whatsoever coming from the wall.

Once Boromir had finished his third or fourth glass, he slammed down the empty bottle and ruffled, again, Innrod’s hair. He then turned and walked over to the bed. In the few seconds Boromir’s back was turned, Innrod stepped away from the peephole, turned to it, and mouthed Go! Get out! before Boromir could see. The bed creaked, and Innrod spun around again to see Boromir sitting on the edge of the mattress, working to remove his boots.

As Boromir pulled at the stubborn boots, and Innrod could vaguely pick up a faint shuffling sound coming from the wall – if that was not just his hopeful imagination – Boromir spoke:

“Innrod, you seem nervous.” He looked up, frowned. “Is something amiss?”

Innrod shook his head wildly. “Nay, nay, my lord. I – I was simply…” Considering the clouds? Wondering about the inscription on that sword there – could you show it to me? Thinking on the mating rituals of finches – do you think I should get one? “I was…” Thinking about joining the Guard after all? Wondering how many shirts does my lord need? “I was… wondering about…” Innrod picked at a hangnail. “I was wondering about… the elves, sir. My lord, sir.”

Boromir looked at him strangely.

“The elves?”

“Aye, my lord.”

“Well… on what did you wonder?” He began to again work to remove his boots, yanking to and fro, creating a good amount of noise. “I have had dealings with the elves. Perhaps I can help. What did you want to know?”

“I wanted to know whether…” They live in caves? Mountains? Trees? “…they can…” Talk to animals? Read minds? “…swim?”

_Innrod, you are so, so stupid._ This always happened when he needed to lie under pressure. He cringed.

“Swim?” Boromir repeated, huffing. He had one boot off and was now working to remove the second.

“Aye, my lord.” Innrod thought he heard a faint, stifled snicker coming from the wall behind him.

“Well, aye, I suppose most of them can.” Finally, both boots were off, and Boromir tossed them aside. “’Tis a strange question, Innrod. Are you making sport of your liege-lord?”

“Nay, my lord! Never!” Innrod hastened to say. “I – I am simply curious – I should like to know many things of the elves, sir. I hoped you could tell me of them – anything, really – for ever since the Lord Elrond’s arrival, I have grown very… curious.”
Boromir grinned wolfishly. “Since the Lady Arwen’s arrival, you mean?”

Innrod blushed. Boromir stood, swaying as usual, and began to unbutton his jacket.

“Very well, Innrod,” he said. “Very well, I shall tell you about the elves, then. But not now, lad. Tonight, over dinner. You take your meals in the kitchen, no?”

“Aye, my lord.”

“So be it. I’ll bring Dínendal or Legolas down with me and let them tell you all you need to know on our fair elfish companions. But not now.” He indicated the bags and clothing scattered across the floor. “Now, clear some of this away, Innrod, and then go find your mother or one of the washing women. I shall need a bath drawn.”

“Aye, my lord.” Innrod bowed his head slightly. “Thank you, my lord.”

And just as he was about to go find his mother, he realized something. The peephole! And so he feigned cleaning up some of the shirts, and pretended to scoot the chair by the liquor cabinet to the right in order to create space. Instead, he moved it precisely over the peephole, giving a good, sound knock against the wood in order to warn the children to leave if they were still there –

“Easy, lad, that’s Pinnath Gelin wood.”

“Aye, my lord. Forgive me, my lord.”

– and then draping a shirt over the back so that absolutely nothing was visible. Once he had finished fussing over the area by the liquor cabinet, earning several curious looks from Boromir, he turned, smiled, bowed and rushed out of the room.
Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

What do You think?

“What do We think?
We do not Think.
We Know, Perceive, Comprehend, Consider.”

Exasperated Chorus.

Very well, what do You…
Know-Perceive-Comprehend-Consider?

Valar looking back and forth, to and fro,
Sizzling eyes glistening with thought
(good question)
Manwë leans forward, growls.
Varda hand in chin, sighs.

Finally, grim Doomsman
Námo
clears his ghostly throat
leans against the Door of the Dead, says:

“Kill him off, I say.
End his misery, it’s only fair.
Come, Sunny Brother Manwë:
Do it with a knife, sliding through skin and muscle and gut.
Do it with an arrow, thunking deep into the jugular, spraying blood.
Do it with a blow to the head, smash his brains in – what’s left of them anyway.
Or have him do it himself, nice and clean, sanitized
With one drink too many and yellowing insides.
Or have him do it himself, nice and messy,
Ripping away a neck –”

“Enough,”
Varda – blazing eyes, shining supernova – commands.
“Námo, you are greedy.”

“Fear not, Mandos-Keeper,”
Manwë drawls.
“Soon… soon…”
Námo huffs.

Meanwhile, swoop down with an Eagle, flying
the rush of air and wind in your ears, making your eyes water
nearly blowing you off the feathery back, hold tight!
Dive barrel-roll to the side, over and over, around
White Mountain peaks sparkling with summer snow
Nose-dive down, there they are, just dots on the rolling plains
A trail of dots moving slowly slowly on
With crowds of other dots to the sides, waving and cheering,
a muffled, faraway cheer.

Fly close now:
swoop past King Elessar Telcontar, Queen Arwen Undomiel,
swoop past Éomer King, Lord Steward Faramir, Lady Éowyn,
swoop past dead Théoden-corpse,
swoop past Frodo, Sam, Merry, Pippin, Legolas, Gimli,
Elrond, Elladan, Elrohir, Celeborn, Galadriel,
Imrahil, Lothíriel, and... and We don’t know who that person is, sorry, ha ha,
swoop past them all
down to Boromir and Dínendal, trotting.

A low hiss: “Muffle your voice.
You speak too loud and ill you speak.
Silence.
You are drunk.”

Reeling: “What ill is there in truth? Silence silence silence silence
silence to hear your foolish brother’s prolonged death, eh?
Damn you, Dinendal, damn you and plague take you
and drag you down to Mandos with the other two, rotten filth!”

“I will forget that. Friend.”

Disgruntled snort, swaying forward into the horse’s neck.
Edoras

Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

Meduseld. The Golden Hall. Now the fires flickering dim as all were silent, respectful. For today they had buried Théoden, noble King, brave and tall, slain on the Pelennor – so long ago, a lifetime ago, a lifetime ago when we were all at War. At least, so it felt to Boromir, who had watched the grim procession with a heavy scowl, listened to the women wailing and the Men uttering heartfelt speeches with an ugly grimace, stood always somewhat apart from the others.

For death…

Death was not so repugnant. It was a finish, it was peace; the only true peace one could desire. And so Boromir felt no sorrow for old Théoden as they placed him in the ground. No sorrow; only envy. He watched the casket lowered slowly into the mound of green and white as the warm wind whipped across the clearing. Edoras felt cooler than Minas Tirith. Perhaps it was Mount Mindolluin which reflected the sun, warming, warming, baking hot, until the stone burned to the touch. Perhaps it was the vast clearing and the solitary peak Edoras had perched itself on, where the winds were ever blowing, ever rushing past. Whatever the reason, Boromir noticed suddenly how free he felt out of Minas Tirith – out of those confining white walls, where he ever faced the bitterness of his disgrace, constant reminders of his torment – where he ever faced the maddening Peace.

Aye, he felt freer in Edoras. And so, once all had returned into the Golden Hall for the funeral feast, and as Éomer King made his speech to respectful nods and murmured agreement, Boromir drank his ale and watched the crowd and refilled his mug and raised it and drank again, again, again. Indeed, for what did it matter?

“…Eorl the Young; Brego, builder of the Hall; Aldor brother of Baldor the hapless…”

The Hall was full. As Boromir leaned forward, slouching, arching his shoulder blades and staring into his cup, he listened dully to the long list of Rohirrim kings. Few fires were lit, for it was too warm and stuffy, and so they chose to keep this Golden Hall cool and in shadow. The Rohirrim raised their cups and saluted each King, while Éomer stood at the front, holding his own cup, waiting, waiting. And what did it matter? Boromir thought. What of death, when death is the end of all – when the King like the beggar lies with his bones, worm’s meat and…

“…Léofa, Walda, Folca, Folcwine, Fengel, Thengel and…”

Boromir had seen Merry weep at the grave of Théoden, blubbery like a child. Théoden King! Théoden King! Farewell! As a father you were to me, for a little while. The halfling had never shed a single tear for Boromir, indeed no one had; and the hobbit had even begun ignoring him in the Citadel halls. And what was Théoden that Boromir was not? What honor did Théoden win over everyone? That he should be dead, buried, rotting away deep in the earth instead of rotting away above it? Boromir snorted inadvertently, stared deep into his cup. If to die was to garner love,
respect, admiration, all the more reason to do it, and quickly too. For Boromir once again, once again, once again… *this life is a half-life, to end too late…*

Boromir missed when they spoke Théoden’s name, and Éomer drained the cup, but he was jostled back to reality when the entire room began to boom: “Hail, Éomer, King of the Mark!”

Boromir just managed to finish the phrase, muttering only the last syllable, when they all drank, and he too. This mead was bittersweet, thick. It slipped down his throat, burning, and he welcomed that heat, for it meant it was heady. And so he finished his glass, waited for the serving woman to come by with another.

Éomer was speaking now.

“…fair folk of many realms, such as Meduseld has ne’er seen! My friends, I have news – a joy to brighten this day of grief…”

There were murmurs. Éomer smiled, eyeing the couple sitting at the far end of one of the long tables.

“Fair news indeed, my friends: Faramir, Lord Steward of Gondor, Prince of Ithilien, and my brother at heart, has asked the hand of my good sister, the Lady Éowyn.” Exclamations. Gasps. “And! And!” Éomer laughed, urging the crowd to quiet. “And she – after long deliberation and a lengthy establishment of preliminary codes,” more laughter, “has granted it!”

Cheers. Loud cries. Everyone stood, bashed their mugs together, toasted, laughed. Boromir was inadvertently pulled up with this tide, shaken, jostled, congratulated. He smiled, nodded, toasted with the others – yet his mind was in turmoil. They were to wed. And his brother, his brother, Eru, his brother beaming and laughing and granting a discreet kiss on Éowyn’s cheek.

Boromir heard nothing more of what Éomer said, but he saw a laughing banter between Éomer and Aragorn, which everyone else seemed to enjoy. Instead, he sank back into his chair, brooding.

The feasting continued deep in the night. And while the Gondorians found this smiling funeral strange, they could not help but be swept away in the ride of gift-giving, drinking, laughing, exaggerating and reminiscing. Indeed, by the time Éomer had announced Faramir’s intention to wed Lady Éowyn, most of the crowd had been too inebriated to fully evaluate the political practicalities of such a move, and so, instead, they simply cheered and congratulated and toasted. The Lord Steward himself was somewhat red-faced, though whether this was from ale or emotion, one could not be sure.

The funeral feast continued. Outside, the sun set.

The great hall of Meduseld was filled to the brim with Rohirrim, Gondorians, hobbits, elves and Gandalf. There was much shouting, dancing, sweat. Smoke, music, cheers. Mugs dropped to crash on the ground. Laughter. Pippin and Merry obliged everyone with a bellowed rendition of the Green Dragon song which, by now, many of the Rohirrim knew as well and so sang along. Other bards also appeared - silencing everyone with their bittersweet songs of Théoden, or enticing the crowd to roaring cheers and heartfelt exclamations with the songs of the Pelennor Fields or Helm’s Deep.

The hours passed, and Boromir found himself squeezed in a wooden table with Gimli and Legolas to one side, and Elrond and Gandalf on the other. He spoke little, but watched the dim, blurred-gold scene over the rim of his ever-present stein. Occasionally, he would catch Lady Arwen's eye across the room, watching him in concern, and he would look away. Meanwhile, Lord Elrond spoke
intently and seriously to Gandalf, while the wizard murmured bemused growls over his pipe.

Look. See all this? All for death. All because one Man died. As if his death should have been an accomplishment – old Théoden – and now they glorify and praise and forget his every mortal vice and weakness...

Boromir shook his head to rid it of these black, morbid thoughts. He decided to have more mead – more mead, perhaps, would ease his mood.

Jostling, mingling, dancing, yelling. The feasting, the feasting. Drinking and eating and singing, all loud, all raucous, and becoming more so. With each goblet raised and each bellowed toast, the Men’s minds fell further into disarray, further into the drunken chaos of unwieldy revelry.

Ai me, and what villain have I become? To envy the dead, to hate the living, to have found peace so repulsive?

The mead arrived. He drank.

Too much, it is too much. A villain, indeed.

At one point, Boromir saw his brother and Éowyn pushing through the crowd, hand in hand, making for the door. Boromir stood, swayed drunkenly, stumbled over to them.

“Faramir!” he called.

His brother turned, smiled slightly, though Éowyn’s expression grew somewhat cold. Boromir threaded through the crowd towards them and, with a warm grin, grabbed Faramir by the hair and kissed him on the brow. He then bowed, somewhat unevenly, to Éowyn.

“Enjoying the festivities, brother?” Faramir asked, placing his free hand on Boromir's shoulder to steady him.

“Aye, aye, good brother,” Boromir half-grinned. “More so since I heard the happy news.” He turned to Éowyn and grew solemn. “And, my lady, soon my fair sister-by-marriage, good Éowyn, I would beg your pardon.”

“What for, my lord?” Éowyn asked, bewildered.

“Ai,” Boromir leaned heavily against Faramir, “ai, for it all. For everything. You know what I intend. This past season - since the War – ’tis all been a chaos, and e’er bitterness, ne’er peace, as it should be...” he swallowed, seemed suddenly taken by a darker emotion.

Faramir squeezed Boromir's shoulder. “Nay, brother. There is nothing to forgive.” Boromir dropped his head, and Faramir placed his hand on his crown. “Let us not brood over the past. It is all finished...”

“Nay, both of you, e'er too kind,” Boromir muttered, looking down at the floor, leaning forward, backward. He looked up with glistening eyes, smiled wanly. “Know simply that I have no quarrel with either of you. Know that you have my love, and I wish you joy. Truly.”

Éowyn took Boromir's hand, squeezed it. “And know that you have our love as well, brother.”

Boromir nodded, looked away quickly, and, seeing his emotion, Faramir laughed and slung his arm around his shoulder.
“Come, brother, ‘tis time for bed. It seems you have enjoyed the merriment more than enough, for the
drink softens you and yokes tears from your eyes.” Boromir laughed, congested. Faramir
continued, “Come, we shall find you a bed. Walk with us.”

“Nay, I would be but the cart’s third wheel,” Boromir shook his head loosely. “Go on, I will remain
here a little while longer. Have no worries. We will see each other on the morrow.”

“Aye, indeed,” boomed a sudden voice. Old Imrahil of Dol Amroth came into view, emerging
from the blur around them. He held a glass of ale in one hand and, judging by his own loose steps
and reddened cheeks, he was in no better condition than Boromir. “Go on, my young doves. Out of
this seething mass, ha! I will see to it that this nephew finds a bed.”

Faramir and Éowyn laughed, nodded, and, after the usual, if somewhat clumsy, formalities were
exchanged of a kiss on the hand and a back-pounding embrace, they began to push through the
mass again, towards the door. Boromir watched them disentangle themselves from a number of
other drunken conversations and congratulations, until they finally disappeared out the great door.

He turned to Imrahil, who was watching him seriously.

“The King tells me you go to escort the halflings,” Imrahil murmured.

“Aye,” Boromir said. He swayed backward. A derisive snort. “A useless task. He gives it to me for
I am nothing but a weight on the Citadel now.”

“So I have heard…” Imrahil spoke into his ale, downed it.

“And what of Belfalas?” Boromir grunted.

Imrahil shrugged.

“The pestilence continues in the south,” he stifled a belch. “But things are brighter inland. Crops
are being sown, fields tended. We heal.”

Boromir remained silent.

“Do not linger there;” Imrahil murmured into his ear. He placed a hand on Boromir’s arm. “You
know it brings nothing but further torment.”

With a repugnant scoff, Boromir shook his arm free. “Aye, and what would you know of it?”

Imrahil did not speak. Boromir glared at the surrounding revelers. And he dropped his voice so low
that Imrahil had to lean in to hear; a low, rasping growl. “Aye… aye… would that I had died on
Galen fields or Moria mines. With all the glories of a soldier, and none of his scorn, none of his
brooding idleness. Aye… such was my end.” He swallowed, disgusted. “Now by a dismal death
must I be taken.”

The festivities continued. A nearby group erupted into laughter. Dancing.

“The drink makes you harsh, nephew.”

“Bah! The drink! Always the drink!”

And with that, Boromir threw up his hands, snarling, and left his uncle.

He pushed his way through the crowd, not caring for formalities or etiquette, and found the nearest
barrel of mead. He found a goblet, dumped the previous contents out onto the floor, and filled it
with mead. He drank this all, moved to refill. But a hand on his shoulder startled him.

“E’er the grim, self-pitying Man,” Dínendal said, appearing. He smiled slightly.

Boromir turned his shoulder, refilled his goblet.

“And is it the custom of elves to lay their pointed ears on words meant for others?” he muttered.

Dínendal shrugged. “I was near, and you spoke loud enough so that I could hear. ‘Tis no fault of mine if a Man cannot control his own bellowing.”

With refilled goblet and ugly scowl, Boromir turned, walked away. Dínendal followed.

“What mean you, Dínendal? Mean you to chide me as they all do? To advise in matters you know nothing of? Or only to mock?”

“None of it.”

They moved away from the crowds, passing King Elessar and Lady Arwen, who both nodded graciously, impassively, anonymously, in their direction. There was a darker corner, where the Men were somewhat quieter, calmer. Boromir sat at one of these tables, away from the others. Dínendal took a seat beside him.

“I mean to help,” the elf leaned back against the table, watched the laughing merriment. “Remember that I am your friend, Boromir.”

Boromir snorted. “Still?” He drank.

“Aye, still,” Dínendal’s lips quirked. “Despite all your attempts to offend me into disappearing back to my ‘elfish kingdom.’”

Boromir was silent. He stared into his cup’s contents. Here, in the shadow, the mead looked nearly black – orc’s blood – sloshing around in his cup.

“My brother goes now, content and respected,” he muttered, “with a fair wife, an enviable title, and all the love and affection Gondor can bestow…” he picked at the cup’s edge, “I am jealous.”

“Brothers oft are.”

“Aye.”

A long silence.

“…and you are still troubled by Barad-dûr?”

Boromir nearly started in his seat, snapping around, slamming the goblet on the table with a resounding crack.

“Plague take you, Dínendal, what manner of question is that? Pour salt in my wounds and call it a cure!”

“I thought only to say,” Dínendal held up his hands quickly, “that mayhap you dwell on it, and, in your own dragged out self-torment, you may not e’en see noble Faramir’s joy.” He placed a hand on Boromir’s shoulder. “Be happy for your brother, Boromir. And Imrahil is right – they are all right – you must learn to forget.”
“I try to forget,” Boromir muttered, took a long swallow.

“Aye, but that,” he eyed the goblet, “is temporary, and you know it.”

“Find me a more durable drug and I will take it.”

“I do not think there exist such drugs. No drug can heal a troubled mind.”

“Then how may a Man do it?”

Dínendal was silent.

At length, he spoke: “I know not.” He smiled. “I am but a pointy-eared elf.”

A short bark of laughter escaped Boromir, but that laugh nearly turned to a sob, for his hands trembled and his smile was an ugly grimace. But he choked away the emotion, placed the shaking goblet on the table, clasped his hands until the knuckles turned white and the trembling disappeared.

“Dínendal, why do you speak to me of this?” he asked, but he was not angry. Only weary. “Why can you not leave me be?”

Dínendal did not answer. Boromir glanced at him, saw the elf’s face was darkening with its own distress. Dínendal crossed his arms, looked away.

“You have ne’er spoken of it to me,” he said softly. “You have ne’er told me of Barad-dûr.”

Boromir inhaled sharply, his tremor growing worse.

“And why should you want to know of it?”

“You say you hear Amdír?”

Boromir remained silent.

“What does he say?”

The elf’s intensity grew, so that Boromir finally blurted out, shifting: “What manner of questioning is this?”

“I desire to know.”

“I do not wish to tell.”

“My friend, I would trade you all the silence in the world if you would but tell me one phrase.”

“Why?”

Pause.

Tension like sparks.

“Boromir, I must know,” the elf’s voice shook, and he lowered it, hissing, so that the others nearby would not hear. In another part of Meduseld, a dance, a new song started. More laughter. Dínendal continued, “Boromir, I fear I will forget him... Already I cannot remember the shade of Amdír’s eyes, the music of Golradir’s laugh. I try to recall certain moments – certain things they said, a
word’s cadence – and what was so vividly clear before has now grown muddy. And with each day, with each moment, it grows more and more blurred.”

Dínendal hesitated, seeing Boromir shifting, stirring, clenching and unclenching his hands, his chin trembling.

“My friend… I know it is a torment. I know you do but wish to forget. Yet I must know – Amdír was – he was a good soul, you know this – and you heard him, mayhap you e’en saw him – in those last moments…”

Boromir dragged his palm against his eyes, continued to clasp and unclasp his shaking hands. Tears. His nose grew congested. And the weight, the weight, the painful weight bearing down, pressing against his throat and pouring out like a wound…

Dínendal was watching him, the elf’s brow lifted, yet his eyes were clear.

“Boromir, tell me. I must know. I cannot bear it. You say you can still hear him. What does he say?”

Boromir’s breathing was ragged. Several long minutes passed.

Long minutes…

A group of Rohirrim erupted into boisterous laughter.

Someone began giving a toast.

Boromir turned his face, kept it in shadow, for the tears, the abrupt tears, soaking down and running along every scar like rivulets, spreading over his cheek in an uneven pattern, soaking down into his beard, chilling his neck.

He felt Dínendal beside him. Still.

“He calls for help…” Voice shaking, very, very low. Swallowing. “And then he speaks in elvish, I know not what he says. It – it is sometimes spoken low – like a chant, or a prayer – but quickly, because there is no time – just before they…”

Boromir stopped. He was leaning forward, elbows on knees, his every muscle tense. Dínendal waited beside him, making no move.

“We saw each other once or twice – I am not sure – he was beaten, but he did not seem… he did not cower – we called to each other… The orcs were foolish, they did not see our importance until, until I… once they learned of my part in the Fellowship, they – Amdír – they brought him before me – and – it – I think that is what killed him – I think I did – they asked and asked and he… but – I – I did not tell them…”

Pause.

“I do not think I told them.”

He held his breath – not trusting himself to speak further, breathe further, think further – no, no, nothing, it is nothing, only death, it is all finished, all finished, no more – and so he held his breath, clenched his jaw, gritted his teeth, and waited for the unbearable knot in his throat to unravel. Dínendal also waited, seemingly for more, but, seeing his friend’s distress, eventually eased his own rigidity. He placed a hand on Boromir’s shoulder, squeezed.
“Thank you, my friend.”

Boromir nodded, choked back another sob, ran again his hand over his face. He sat for several moments, waiting and waiting and waiting for the tears to ebb, the elf’s hand on his shoulder, strong. When his voice steadied enough, he spoke:

“Did you three not travel for an Age ere you met me? How is it that they are so easily forgotten?”

“Not easily forgotten, my friend… It is just that I desire something tangible, some way to hear them and see them again.”

“Well, it is no use, Dínendal, they are dead.”

Dínendal looked away, chastised. “I know.”

They sat. Boromir finally released all the pressure his elbows had been putting on his old knees, and he leaned back with a ragged sigh. He was thankful for the shadow to hide his red-rimmed eyes, for a moment later a maidservant arrived, loaded tray in hand. Away from the laughing, jostling, singing crowd, she spoke quietly.

“Will you desire anything, masters?” she asked.

“The strongest.”

She obliged and handed Boromir a filled mug. And then she smiled warmly at Dínendal.

“Nothing for me, thank you,” Dínendal murmured.

Boromir drank. He and Dínendal did not speak for the remainder of the evening. Rather they sat at this table, half in shadow, watching the merriment wax and wane, Boromir drinking and Dínendal silent, considering. Eventually, the feast began to dissolve – Men left, helped by their more sober companions, the few who remained chatting quietly, tiredly. Somewhere further off, Éomer, always the last, was telling a small group of Men a story of the War – for they laughed and murmured and nodded.

Boromir drank enough so that his legs were lost to him, and eventually he lost all sense completely. He did not register when Dínendal and a slightly drunken Imrahil dragged him out of the Hall, babbling and muttering, thanking them and urging them to go on without him, that he could manage. He did not hear Imrahil laugh, saying, *Ever courteous, nephew, after a barrel of ale!* He did not feel any preliminary nausea before his sudden retching halfway through the corridor, though, once he had vomited, some sense came to him. Enough to feel embarrassment at what he had done, but not much else.

He perceived none of this until, at some unknown hour in the night, when all Meduseld slept, he found himself leaning heavily against a door, knocking on it. How long he had been standing there on wobbling legs, knocking on this mysterious door, he could not say, but eventually it opened. And Faramir appeared, squinting in the dim light and bare-chested, for the night was hot. He held a candle.

“Boromir?” he whispered.

Boromir fell forward slightly at the loss of support, but he caught himself on his brother’s shoulder. Vaguely, he perceived someone else in Faramir’s disheveled bed. But the room was too dark to see who it was.
“Brother, what is it?” Faramir hissed. “’Tis deepest night.”

And without preamble, without reason, without explanation, Boromir dissolved into shaking sobs and pulled Faramir into a weeping embrace.

“Ai, Faramir, young Faramir, my dear brother,” he choked on his tears, grabbed his brother’s hair, “e’er the wiser, ai, e’er the wiser – ”

“Shhh,” Faramir urged. He disentangled himself from Boromir’s crushing embrace, helped the Man outside. Once they were in the corridor, Faramir closed the door quietly, held Boromir by the shoulder.

“Brother, what tears are these? What has happened?”

“I saw her, brother, know you I saw her?” He gasped for breath between his sobs. “Our dear mother – ai me – I saw her – dear Faramir, I ne’er told you this, but I saw her…”

Faramir kept having to pull and jerk the candle away from the swaying, unwieldy Boromir, and so eventually he placed it on the ground, straightened, gripped his elder with both hands. Boromir covered his face, wept again.

“Boromir, of what do you speak? What of our mother?”

“Ai!” Boromir pulled Faramir into another embrace, sobbed openly, wailed into his neck. “Forgive me, Faramir! Our dear mother, I did see her in those black hours, and she spoke of you and of our father and all our fates combined and she did bid me resist, resist she said, that I would breathe again and taste water again and see the birds – ”

“Shhh,” Faramir said, though his voice had softened. “You shall wake the entire Hall.” He adjusted himself so that Boromir’s arm wrapped around his shoulder. “Come, let us find your chambers.”

Boromir smiled through his tears, reached a hand up and grabbed Faramir’s chin. “Such a good brother, a good, wise brother.” He sputtered, hung his head, covered his eyes. “I told him, but what could I say? What was there to say? I know not what he cried – alas, poor soul! – and I cannot bear to hear it.”

“I know, brother, I know.”

They began the slow, stumbling walk.

“He is silent, now, but you are right – I linger too long there, alas, all for naught! All Imladris – nothing – all for naught…”

“Not all for naught. Come now, walk with me. I cannot drag you.”

“You know, I have sometimes thought the Valar did wield their influence – they did drag me away from my end – mayhap I offended them, that they robbed me of a soldier’s death. Now these wretched days stretch thin – ”

“You have ne’er been a religious Man.”

“Nay, I have not…”

“Nay, Boromir, come, you cannot sit – ”

Too late. Boromir slid to the floor, stretched his legs out, leaned his head against the wall. Chin
trembling, scowling, his face still wet. Faramir hovered over him for a moment. Finally, with a somewhat reluctant sigh, he took a seat as well, on the opposite wall, leaning his bare back against the stone wall. He drew his knees up, rested his arms against them.

Boromir sat for some time, half-conscious, breathing deep. A few minutes passed. He noticed Faramir again, smiled drowsily through his tears.

“Go, brother. Return to your woman. I will not keep you. ‘Tis late.”

Faramir sighed, ran a hand over his face. “Nay, I will wait with you. You cannot sleep here.”

“Good brother…”

Boromir’s smile faded as he fell once again into a light sleep.

Faramir roused him: “You say you saw our mother.”

Eyes closed.

“Aye.”

“In Barad-dûr.”

Boromir was silent, but he nodded.

“Will you speak of it now?”

“Because I am in such a state?”

“Aye.”

A pause.

“Perhaps.”

Fumbling within his jacket. The slim flask. He worked to open it. Clumsy, slow.

“You will kill yourself with too much drink, brother.”

Boromir snorted. “‘Twould be a sorry end.”

“Aye.”

Eventually, he gave up, dropping his hand. And on an impulse, Faramir stood, walked to the other side, took a seat beside his brother and took the flask from his limp hand. He began to open it.

Boromir spoke, slurring:

“I saw you once.”

“In Barad-dûr?”

“Nay, before. With the elves.”

“Mad, indeed,” Faramir joked, drank from the flask, winced.

Boromir smiled. He wiped his eyes. “Nay, not mad… ‘Twas a legitimate vision, for I did dream it.”
“Oh?”

“Aye, a dream of prophecy. The ‘legendary foresight of Faramir,’ you said.”

Faramir chuckled.

“And you foretold all that would happen – all that did happen – after Amon Hen.”

“That is strange.”

“Have we not always believed in dreams, brother?”

Faramir handed the flask to Boromir, who took it, drank.

“And…?” Faramir prompted.

A generous swallow. “And?”

“I know little of your trip to Imladris. I know little of the Quest, what little I have heard from the others. I know, again, little about the *adraefan,*” he took the flask from Boromir, drank, “and I know nothing of Barad-dûr.”

Boromir scowled. “‘Tis a long story.”

“Tell me only a part then.”

“Where shall I begin?”

“Wherever you will.”

A pause.

“Very well…”

And so they spoke, or rather, Boromir began a rambling monologue. And Faramir’s old dream, born in times of despondent youth, ripened over years of growing Shadow and despair, matured into bitter adulthood, the dream – the dream to speak with his elder, to share tales of the War, to trade scars, when all was peace – had finally come to fruition. And so Faramir learned much of his brother’s travels, though it was not always told in order, and it was at times difficult to decipher the slow, mumbled words.

There were also great gaps – of which Faramir either knew already, such as the death of Gandalf, the temptation on Amon Hen; or of which Faramir could guess, such as the death of First One, and the last battle on Dagorlad. Boromir, fumbling with his doublet and shirt, showed him the mangled knot of skin beside his bicep, right against the shoulder. And he confessed of his varying aches and pains, laughing bitterly that he had aged too soon.

Faramir spoke also. He spoke of Osgiliath and Ithilien and Frodo. And, knowing his brother would probably not recall this night, he spoke of Denethor’s cryptic, hateful remark, when all thought Boromir dead, and all were grieving for him. And this drew tears from the older brother, again his usual reservation softened by alcohol, so that he wept to hear of his father’s despair, his father’s moments of weakness, his father’s cruelty.

Faramir sighed, drank.

“I will not lie and say it did not pain me.”
“You are alone, Faramir, alone in a family of the madman and corpses.”

“Do not say such a thing.”

“Aye, forgive me,” a muffled snort. “Indeed, Imrahil is neither.”

Despite himself, Faramir smiled. Boromir choked back another sob, and this time Faramir slung his arm around his shoulder, gripped his hair.

“Enough of that, now. Come, you would drown us all in your tears tonight,” he smiled sadly, teased, “You have become soft.”

“‘Tis all been so trying…” Boromir gasped, his voice strangled. “What if our father knew what became of his firstborn son? A wretched, pitiful Man.”

Faramir sighed, squeezed Boromir’s shoulder, pulled Boromir’s head onto his shoulder. Boromir clenched his teeth at another bout of tears.

“Ah, but he was e’er an intolerant Man, you know this,” Faramir murmured. “Take comfort that I do not think you are a wretch. And neither does the King, nor Dinadal, nor any of the Fellowship and any who know you. Nay, we are just saddened to see your lingering torment…”

“Think you ‘tis weakness?”

“Nay,” Faramir whispered. And there was true sorrow in his voice. “Nay, not at all.”

Boromir looked at Faramir with red-rimmed, glistening eyes. He seemed about to say something, but instead shook his head and half-smiled, chin trembling. Faramir grinned warmly, gave Boromir’s shoulder another squeeze and then began to stand.

“Come, brother, you are tired. And if I tarry any longer Éowyn shall change her mind.”

Faramir stood, grabbed his brother by the forearm and pulled him up. Boromir stumbled, staggered, nearly fell, though Faramir caught him, steadied him. Soon enough they were again zigzagging back to Boromir’s chambers. The torches were not lit in this part of the Hall, and so they walked in darkness, listening to their muffled tread.

After a while, leaning hard against his brother, Boromir spoke:

“I too should find a wife.”

“That is a new turn.” Faramir’s voice sounded amused. “You have ne’er sought any delight in women – apart from the baser sort.”

“Nay, you tease, Faramir… but I do envy you – that you – that you have the Lady Éowyn. Would that I had such a wife waiting for me tonight.”

“Well, at least you have the hobbits.”

Boromir laughed at this, a congested, unexpected, full-throated laugh. Faramir smiled. He planted a kiss on his older brother’s hair.

“Good, that is the brother I wish to hear.”

They walked along the empty corridor, testing a few doors, until they found one which opened. The room was dark, but, in the shadow, they could see various still forms, sleeping. Snores.
Moving as quietly as Boromir’s drunkenness permitted, Faramir helped Boromir into the room and searched for a free bedroll. Sure enough, he found the hobbits, alternatively curled up in a blanket or splayed out with mouth hanging open. And further off, the loud snores of Gimli could be heard.

“There you are, brother,” Faramir whispered with a smile. He lowered Boromir onto the free bedroll next to Sam. “All the hobbits you could desire.”

Boromir chuckled softly, wearily, and collapsed onto the blanket. Faramir straightened.

“Good night, brother.”

But Boromir was already asleep.
AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

Samwise Gamgee awoke. With a hoarse yawn and a stretch, Sam slowly shifted away from his ale-scented pillow. The early morning sunlight glinted through the deep, cavernous windows, and Sam soon realized that it was only a little past dawn. He shifted in his bedroll, attempted to find a more comfortable position. It was too early to get up. Considering how much everyone ate and drank the night before, Sam did not expect Meduseld to seriously awaken until around noon. And so he snuggled down into his pillow, blinked his grimy eyes a few times, waited to fall asleep again.

A sore throat. An aching head. The summer heat was getting to Sam, and so he shoved away the blanket. He never could tolerate the heat. And recently the heat of certain rooms – that stifling heat when the sun beat down against the stone – Sam could not tolerate it at all. For it felt like that place sometimes. Yet now it was too early to rise.

He did not recall drinking that much the night before. Not like Merry and Pippin. But those two were great revelers. Unmatched, it seemed. Mister Frodo, on the other hand, had eaten little and drank less, earning several concerned remarks from Sam. But Sam had known that there was little sense in coddling the gentlehobbit, for Frodo was always resistant to his urgings and encouragements. And so Sam had resigned himself to listening to a Rohirrim Man tell hour-long anecdotes of the Pelennor – things Sam could either fail to conceive – how many oliphaunts? – or things which he did not enjoy being reminded of – such as the nazgûl.

But the evening had been pleasant enough. Sam had indeed marveled at the city of Edoras – he had even discovered a deliciously tart, aged cheese; something which he planned to take back with him to the Shire – and all the Rohirrim had been very kind and agreeable.

Still. Right now, it was hot enough as to be uncomfortable. Sam tossed and turned a few times, but eventually decided a walk was best. And so he pushed himself up, sitting forward, rubbing the crusts from his eyes. As his vision cleared, he saw the room was crowded with several sleeping forms. Someone was snoring quite loud, and Sam guessed it was Gimli since memories of a similar snore in the darkness of Moria came flooding back.

To Sam’s left, sprawled on his back, taking up much more space than was needed, Meriadoc Brandybuck lay. Jaw hanging open, arms and legs splayed, Sam noted with a chuckle that Mister Merry still held his pipe in one limp hand. Next to Merry came Frodo, who slept as he always did – on his stomach with his arms curled up under him, a fist nudging against his chin. Beside Frodo, lying diagonally across his bedroll, Pippin slept with one hand tucked under his groin and the knuckles of his other hand under his cheek. Sam smirked.

And when Sam turned right, he nearly jumped with shock, for there was a Man sleeping, on his side, turned away from him, but Sam immediately knew it was Boromir. He did not remember Boromir returning with them the night before, and he knew for a fact that Boromir’s quarters were further down the hall. Sam had lost track of the Man during the funeral and after, but he did
remember catching sight of Boromir staggering up to Faramir and the Lady Éowyn as they were leaving. He remembered feeling somewhat ruffled for them, and worried that Boromir would ruin their evening. But thankfully he had seen Prince Imrahil swoop in to deftly detach Boromir and prevent any incidents from occurring.

While he was considering Boromir, Sam noticed that his hand had instinctively floated to the hidden spot where he always hid his blade during the night. His hand rested on the pillow. Frowning, he withdrew it.

_Easy, Sam Gamgee, easy._

Sam would never admit it, but Mordor had left his nerves somewhat frayed. Not quite paranoid, but never quite easy or calm. If he was not fretting over Frodo, and how much Frodo ate and slept and if Frodo’s hand ached, he usually found something else to fret over. He could never quite shake the feeling that there was some hidden danger around the corner, that he had to keep his eyes open for it, that he had to stay alert at all times. Even when he told himself to be easy, that there was no more warring and no more journeying to distant lands and that the foul thing, that Ring, was gone forever, even when he told himself all this, Sam could not help but feel an itching sensation on the back of his skull, telling him he needed to _watch out._

Aye. He had to keep his head on his shoulders, he did. Frodo depended on it. Merry and Pippin depended on it. His old Gaffer depended on it. A lot depended on it. Depended on him. And so Sam constantly evaluated and re-evaluated every situation, scrutinizing it for possible dangers.

The War was over, yes, but there were still orcs roaming around. The Ring was destroyed, yes, but Frodo still felt its call – the distant echoes – that much Sam could tell. And so did he, Sam thought somewhat shamefully. Gollum was gone, yes, but there were other thieves and villains and foul people out there – waiting to strike. Everyone called this _peace,_ but Sam knew that all was not well. Danger still existed.

Part of him thought all would never be well, for him, since he distantly realized that some of this obsessive caution was all in his own head and not necessarily warranted.

Yet when Sam looked at Boromir, smelled the reek of drink on him, and remembered how the Man had struck Merry in those first months in Minas Tirith, he could not help but reach out to tuck his hand under the pillow and touch the hilt of his blade, if only for reassurance. Aye, Frodo had told him of the Man’s temptation on Amon Hen. And now the Man was mad, liable to strike at any time. A drunkard, a disgrace.

Enough of that, Samwise Gamgee. No sense in brooding, that’s what chickens do, not hobbits.

He decided it was time for a walk. And so he got up, deftly pulling the short sword out from under his bedroll. He sheathed it, put the belt on. For a moment, he considered staying, for he did not trust Boromir, even dead asleep. But eventually he convinced himself to leave. Aye, Gimli’s here and Legolas is nearby. There are guards and such everywhere. Nothin’ to worry about...

Outside, the corridor was empty. Quiet. Meduseld had that feeling of a house asleep, even though it was already an hour past dawn. Sam walked along the hallway, reveling in the cool morning breeze coming from the open windows. Their room had grown hot with all the sun pouring in, but out here the servants had kept everything open and so the air was fresh and cool. He eventually found a door leading outside, and he went to take a stroll around the walkway surrounding the Golden Hall. It was too early for a smoke, but a nice breath of fresh air was just what he needed.

The sun was higher in the sky now, burning bright over the fair White Mountains to the south and
east. Sam took a moment to enjoy the view before stuffing his thumbs in his suspenders and beginning an idle pace around the house.

He had just taken the first corner around when he unexpectedly collided with a tall Man. Both of them stumbled, crying out and fumbling – while Sam had to force his hand away from the hilt of his sword. But it was merely a baggy-eyed Prince Imrahil, and so Sam relaxed.

And then both of them, recognizing each other, bowed with a formal salutation, urged the other to straighten, and finally chuckled at the situation.

“– no need, Mister – er – Prince Imrahil, sir –”

“– ah, nay, please, Master Gamgee, allow me –”

“– oh, it’s more embarrassing than anything else, sir, if you take my meaning.”

Imrahil chuckled. And so they both straightened with mutual smiles. Sam noted how Imrahil’s eyes were slightly red-rimmed, and a shadow of stubble darkened his jaw. It seemed he too had enjoyed the festivities last night.

“I see we share a hobby,” Imrahil grinned.

Sam frowned and then, understanding, nodded. “Oh, aye, well, an early mornin’ walk does nothing but good for the mind and body, ‘least accordin’ to me old gaffer.”

“I’m liable to agree with him.”

Sam smiled, Imrahil smiled. A few moments passed. Awkward silence.

Well, no sense in forcin’ idle talk. And no sense in standing still; Sam hated that, above all. He nodded to Imrahil.

“Well, I won’ be keepin’ ye, sir.”

Imrahil opened his mouth as if to say something, but then closed it, smiled, and bowed slightly. “Good day then, Master Gamgee.”

…What does he say? Dinendal asks asks asks. Well what does he say? Does he scream squeal whimper cry out in pain blazing hot wild in the head heart limbs down down down into the fingertips and feet and rip away the lungs – what does he say, Boromir? What does he say? Tell us tell us tell us you can tell us for a secret’s a secret isn’t it and he won’t know no he’ll never know DEAD DEAD DEAD he is and always will be and now you too someday soon well not soon enough eh? Well what does he say Boromir what does he say? You can tell us you can tell us can’t you?…

Imrahil rubbed his jaw, feeling the rough stubble. Once the halfling was out of sight around the last corner, Imrahil allowed himself a wide, gaping yawn. Then – sure that none could see him – he raised his arms, stretched them with a grunt, nearly considered dropping to a squat in order to spring up again and stretch his thighs. But he was too old for that, and his right knee had been troubling him for several days. Probably all that damned riding. Nonetheless, another indulgent stretch of his long arms, an arching of the back as well as a second yawn, and he felt reasonably more awake.
It had been an enjoyable evening, Imrahil admitted. At least, he had permitted himself an enjoyable amount of drinking and reveling, enough for Lothíriel to chide him this morning as they had seen each other in the corridor. Honestly, father, you were nearly as bad as my cousin the Mad.

It had irked Imrahil to hear Lothíriel say that. Only three years ago she had been demure to the point of fawning over Boromir. But those were the days of Boromir the Bold, when he commanded love and admiration from all who knew him. And Lothíriel had been intimidated by her grand older cousin in those days, always ready to shower him with praise and flattery. But she was always one who sensed power…

With a snort, Imrahil reentered the Golden Hall, intent on finding the kitchens and finding a cup of hot tea for his headache. His daughter was right in that regard. Perhaps he had had too much last night. He was unaccustomed to Rohirric mead and – finding it sweet and enjoyable to the taste – he had consumed perhaps more than was advisable. His recollections of the evening were hazy at best – though he did recall the rather clumsy endeavor to get Boromir out of the main hall and into his room. After giggling like a fool at something his nephew had uttered regarding the horses of Rohan, Imrahil remembered telling the elf – Dínendal – to steady Boromir for a moment, long enough for Imrahil to bend over and hoist the drunken Man onto his shoulders. Hold on a moment, this is inefficient – let – let Dol Amroth find a way, eh? Very efficient, Dol Amroth, we are, ah yes. Boromir, stay still a moment, stop swaying… The elf had sternly advised against it, and Boromir had dissolved into laughter when Imrahil began tugging at his leg. Stop laughing, you halfwitted fool. Give me your leg for a moment. But Dínendal had urged them both to quiet, for they had grown loud.

Here, Imrahil’s memory hit a blank patch, though he cringed to remember Boromir becoming sick halfway through the northern corridor. Admittedly, he cringed to think of most of the night. He did not recall how they managed to get Boromir to his room eventually, though he did remember Dínendal helping him back to his own room – passing a very irate Lothíriel – mother would never have let this happen! – and then collapsing onto his bed fully clothed.

Sweet Eru, it was embarrassing to recollect. He had not indulged that much since the days of his youth in the Knights.

Imrahil made a mental note to find Dínendal and firmly interrogate him on all that had happened, and then, if need be, issue a formal apology to King Elessar. This morning Lothíriel had been no help at all – choosing instead to tease him and invent wild tales – or what Imrahil sincerely hoped were wild tales – about his supposed insulting of Gimli the dwarf, and his apparent bellowing of a Rohirric war song. And what had he done with Elfhelm’s horn?

Imrahil groaned. It was all too natural that he should be cursed with a daughter as inventive and manipulative as he. And Lothíriel was enjoying all too much today’s advantage over her father.

Imrahil turned another corner. And he smiled to see Boromir limping down the corridor towards him. The other Man seemed to be in no better condition than he, since he too was baggy-eyed and disheveled. As usual, Imrahil admitted with a slight twinge.

When Boromir saw Imrahil, he grinned slightly, squinting.

“Good morning, nephew,” Imrahil said, keeping his voice low for both their sakes.

“Imrahil,” Boromir grunted hoarsely.

“Join me in the kitchens? I was to seek out a herbal brew for a pounding head.”
Boromir gave a rasping chuckle and nodded his assent. Imrahil slowed his pace and they began to stroll down the hallway towards the stairs leading to the kitchens. Imrahil noted, out of the corner of his eye, that Boromir’s limp was somewhat more evident this morning.

“How is your leg?” Imrahil asked.

Boromir looked up with a confused grunt, but then dropped his eyes. “Nay, not the leg. ‘Tis the knees…” He swallowed, looked away, almost abashed. “When it rains, I say it is the rain which makes these old wounds ache. When it is sunny, I say it is the heat.” He chuckled, scratched at an eye. “Everything aches as it always does. I am glad we will not be riding come the week’s end.”

“Aye…” Imrahil sympathized.

They descended the staircase leading to the cellars, and there they found a small kitchen with long, wooden tables. The stone walls here were decorated with occasional columns of art – horses, horses twisting into and out of each other and galloping freely and everywhere. The kitchen itself was quiet – just soft shuffling, the gentle bubble of boiling water. It seemed others had had the idea to relieve their pounding heads and hoarse throats, for there were several tired-looking Rohirrim bent over steaming cups of tea. When Boromir and Imrahil entered, the other Men looked up languidly and gave them short, stiff nods.

They took a seat at an empty table, in the corner where it was shadow. Imrahil obliged them both and went to retrieve a pair of cups and a small kettle from the stoves. When he returned, Boromir was slouched forward, face in hands. He made a pained noise when the kettle knocked against the wood.

Imrahil sat, poured them each a full glass. Boromir removed his hands from his face, blinked a few times, thanked Imrahil softly and took his teacup. They sat in silence, each blowing on their tea, waiting for it to cool, staring forward.

After taking a small sip, enough to scald his throat, Imrahil winced and looked up.

“The elves leave tomorrow.”

Boromir made a low noise of affirmation, blew on his tea. Imrahil drank again. Whether it was his own nausea, or perhaps he had grown accustomed to the famed Belfalas teas, but he noted that this tea was weak and of poor quality. Nonetheless, he drank a little more, set the cup down.

“Does Dínendal go with them?”

“I know not,” Boromir took a small, tentative sip. “Why?”

“I was told they leave Edoras early. They make for Rivendell, where they mean to discuss his situation with King Thranduil of the Mirkwood realm. Or rather, the situation of all three exiles.”

“Oh?”

“Mmm,” a small smile crept across Imrahil’s lips. “It seems the ‘elfish’ world is in upheaval – thanks to you.”

Boromir scowled. “Me?”

“Was it not at your urging that they went forth to fight these Easterlings? That is why their exile ended, as I understand it.”
Boromir’s expression darkened. He cupped his hands around the small mug. “Aye… ‘twas at my urging that two of them went forth to meet their deaths.”

Imrahil shrugged slightly. “We are born to die.”

“Not them,” Boromir muttered. “Not elves.”

“Aye, not elves. But some do, anyway,” Imrahil drank again. “They made their choice, Boromir. I know you hold little belief in the fates, but perhaps this was all meant to happen. What little Dínendal has told me… he believes ‘twas their fate to meet their end fighting the Enemy. And now they are to be honored and praised among their people, as they should have been, long ago.” He smiled again, wanly. “‘Tis an honor, I should say, to have played such a role. You will forever be known as the Man who led the adraefan to their redemption. Elves will sing of you for ages…”

Boromir was looking at Imrahil with an expression of mingled shock and disgust. His tea forgotten, he stared at the older Man, brows lowered, eyes blazing. Imrahil realized he had long since abandoned his usual tact, and was speaking boldly now, perhaps encouraged by Boromir’s relative calm, but immediately he let his voice trail to a rather awkward halt. And for a moment, just a brief flash, staring at Boromir who watched him now with such an intensity, Imrahil wondered if he still had his dagger in his boot.

Yet before he could chide himself for the perverse thought, Boromir spoke, “‘Tis an honor?”

There was a tense pause. Imrahil swallowed.

“Does this offend you?” he asked, forcing his tone to remain mild.

Boromir snorted, gripped again his cup, knuckles white, drank slowly. “You speak as if what happened to First One and Third One was desirable.”

“Not desirable,” Imrahil crossed his arms, leaned back into the chair. He needed to keep control of this situation, and that meant appearing calm. “Never desirable, Boromir.”

“Then what mean you?”

“Well… I would say ‘twas an honor for you to have fought with them. It seems their exile ended at your urging. Indirectly, at least.”

“And this should please me?” Boromir grunted, scowling. “I should be honored that they died because of my poor foresight?”

“But do we not honor our fallen comrades? Cherish their memory?”

Boromir dropped his eyes, stared into his cup.

“You seem very keen on forgetting them, it seems. We knew nothing of these honorable elves until Dínendal told us what happened,” Imrahil paused. “And… last night was not the first time you have indulged more than is wise.” Boromir looked up. “Aye, well, the King has told me of… certain rumors. You do it to forget them, no?”

His nephew’s cheeks flushed. “Imrahil, do you imply that I disrespect their memory?”

Imrahil did not answer immediately. He inhaled, paused, let it out in a sigh. Forcing calm. What anger is this? Now is not the time… A twisted smile. And he watched his nephew with that characteristic look of mingled pity and sympathy – the kind of expression one would give to a child
who has foolishly cut themselves, and needs to be reprimanded for playing with sharp objects. Boromir stopped picking at his cup and stared at Imrahil, glowering.

Finally, Imrahil spoke. “Aye, I suppose I do.”

Boromir visibly clenched his jaw. His eyes flashed.

Imrahil sighed. “Nephew… I only mean to say that you cannot continue as you do now. You will kill yourself with the drink. You have already lost your title, how much longer until you can no longer live in the Citadel? How much longer until they banish you from the city altogether?” He lowered his voice. “By the Valar, Boromir, they are calling you mad. Or do you not hear the jeers through your –”

Boromir stood from the table, clattering. With eyes blazing, he left the kitchen. Yet Imrahil would not allow him such an easy escape. He immediately sprang up after him.

He caught up with him in the low corridor outside. Meduseld was constructed in such a way that this corridor ended in a pair of doors which led directly out to the stables. The doors had been left open now, and a breeze of fresh, summer air filled the narrow passage. The smell of hay, and horse manure, and summer fields. Imrahil strode after his nephew, finally grabbed him by the shoulder, pulled him aside. Boromir reacted violently, stunned, and he inadvertently slammed back against the wall.

“Leave off, uncle,” Boromir snarled.

“Will you not hear my counsel?” Imrahil insisted, sounding more aggressive than he intended.

“Nay, I will not. Remove your hand from my shoulder.”

Imrahil squeezed further. He saw Boromir give a pained hiss and pull away forcibly. Once Boromir was free, he immediately stepped forward. Inadvertently, Imrahil backed away.

“You join all the others, then?” Boromir said, voice shaking. “Every corner I turn and I am mocked or admonished by another clawing fool – eh? What say you, uncle?”

Suitably incensed, Imrahil straightened his shoulders, lowered his voice. He was taller than Boromir, and he used his height now to advantage, bearing down on his nephew physically.

“Clawing fool?” he hissed. There were servants, people milling about the stables outside. He kept his voice low. “Only because I mean to help? Aye, but perhaps you are right – perhaps they are all right.” He grabbed Boromir’s undone doublet, twisted. “For they say Boromir the Mad spends not a single day away from the drink – and he has become a disgrace to us all. Have you not even seen what pain you bring your brother? And your King?”

The anger in Boromir’s eyes faded immediately, replaced instead by a burning shame. He looked away.

“Aye, but you see nothing past your own misery, is that not so?” Imrahil continued. He struggled to keep his voice under control, struggled to stop, but the anger was tumbling out now, uneven. “It matters not to you what pain you bring others, eh? What shame you bring your family, your city? By the Valar, I have heard things, nephew, I have heard things which have made me ashamed we are kin!”

The last comment struck the mark, for Boromir flushed, his shoulders slumping, a flicker of raw pain flashing across his expression before hardening into a scowl. Imrahil let go of his doublet,
stepped back. His chest heaved. And the look on Boromir’s face, in his eyes – the look of shame and regret and weariness – sent a pang of guilt through him. He waited for a moment – enough to regain control of his breathing – enough to ease the tension burning through him – what brought this on? What anger is this? It was true that Imrahil had harbored some resentment towards his nephew upon hearing the rumors, but that he should lose control so easily? Imrahil swore under his breath.

Boromir was standing now, leaning against the wall, not looking at Imrahil.

“Forgive me,” Imrahil said finally, running a hand through his hair. “Forgive me… I know not what led me to say such things.”

Boromir met his eyes. “Well, you spoke freely, did you not?”

Meduseld. The upper halls. Noon. The Golden Hall had awakened and now bustled with merry activity. Laughter, occasional bursts of song. Rohirrim boasting, Gondorians telling jokes. Someone – someone sounding suspiciously like Faramir – called loudly, Ho! Watch your hands, Elfhelm! From somewhere in one of the corridors, Gandalf’s low rumbling laugh could be heard accompanied by the high-pitched chatter of Pippin.

Boromir turned, walked the other way. Away from the noise, away from the crowded Hall. He had left Imrahil in the lower corridor, excusing himself without a word, not wanting to speak further. And the shame – the hollow ache of self-loathing – burned through him now, blinding him to the salutations of passing servants or Rohirrim. Aye, so Imrahil was ashamed of him. And Faramir, and Dinendal, and the King, and all the others. Indeed, and who would not be? A pitiful fool, a wretched hopeless battered contemptible villain, more mad than anything else. And now a drunkard – an embarrassment to everyone. Imrahil was right. Boromir shamed them all, and he shamed the memory of the two elves. The elves…

Childish tears. Boromir angrily swiped them away, a part of him laughing bitterly at his weakness. Since when did tears flow so freely?

And when the rage had taken Imrahil – aye, Boromir always knew his uncle had a short temper – when Imrahil had grabbed Boromir by the doublet – and Boromir had nearly begged him to push further, to take a knife and end it all, to bring his hand up to his neck and squeeze. And how the crowds would laugh and jeer and heckle – Boromir cringed visibly – and all the fame of his youth – all his fame as Boromir the Bold – how it had become twisted, strange, vile – so that they all knew him now as Boromir the Mad. A shame to them all. A shame to Gondor. Aye, but perhaps you are right – perhaps they are all right. For they say Boromir the Mad spends not a single day away from the drink – and he has become a disgrace to us all.

His hand had drifted to within his doublet, his fingers grazing the cool metal of the flask. He immediately wrenched it away, cursing himself for his need. Imrahil thought him a drunkard. They all did. Boromir’s chest ached. Very well. He would not drink then – and he would welcome the foul, wretched memories with a smile and open arms – and then he would see what the others truly thought of him – and the others would see him as he truly was. And he would see if they even recognized his struggles, if they even deigned to acknowledge them. And he would suffer through it, suffer through all of it – scraping his nails, clawing his way back to some speck of honor – and he would welcome the hollow screams and Barad-dûr filth and – and all of it, all of it.

So be it, so be it, so be it. Today he would not drink.

And so Boromir went to his chambers – the private chambers down the hall where he had not slept
the night before – and roughly pulled the flask from his jacket before throwing it violently against the wall with an enraged howl. It knocked loudly, rebounded and slid back across the floor to him. He gave it a brutal kick. Then, without looking, he whirled around and stormed out of the room.

He collided with Dínendal at the door. They would have run into each other at full force had it not been for Dínendal’s inherent grace. The elf immediately sidestepped Boromir, dodging to his right, so that he inadvertently knocked against Boromir’s left shoulder instead.

Boromir swore loudly, harshly, as pain blossomed in the old wound, “– Dínendal, watch where you step!”

But Dínendal ignored his comment and instead looked over his shoulder into the room. “What was that noise?”

“‘Twas an orc I did slay – plague take you, elf, ‘tis not your business what you hear in my chambers!”

“It sounded as if you dropped something,” Dínendal’s eyes narrowed. “Or threw something.”

With a short sigh, Boromir let his shoulders slump and motioned behind him. “‘Twas nothing.” He felt his face heat. “I was angered and so I threw the flask.”

When he looked up, Dínendal’s eyes twinkled with unexpected merriment. Boromir scowled further. Dínendal smiled. He grabbed Boromir’s other shoulder, the right shoulder.

“Come, it seems you are restless then.” He urged Boromir down the corridor with him. “Let us delight ourselves in watching the preparations for tomorrow’s departure. I have forgotten what it is like to see elven tents and elven horses and elven packs. I nearly forgot how fastidious we elves are!”

They walked a few steps but Boromir pulled his arm away. “Dínendal, do you go with them tomorrow?”

Dínendal stopped, turned. His smile faded slightly, yet his eyes still retained a joyful glow. “Nay, I do not.”

“Oh,” Boromir murmured. He immediately cursed himself – had Dínendal already told him? And he had been too drunk to remember? Why was the elf so merry? “I – I wondered, for Prince Imrahil also inquired, and I knew not what to tell him. He asked why you did not go.”

“Why?” Dínendal paused, considered. “Well, several reasons. I preferred the company of a friend rather than the company of the King who exiled me.” Boromir seemed about to blurt something out, but Dínendal forestalled him with a raised hand and a smile. “Nay, of Thranduil I jest. But I have already spoken with Lords Elrond and Celeborn… it seems they all go to Rivendell to discuss the adraefan with Thranduil, and although I am sure they would welcome my presence, I felt it better to let them simply tell me of their decision once they have made it.” He smiled again. “And I suppose I am also a little afraid.”

Boromir’s brow lowered. “Afraid? Of what? What are they to decide?”

At this, Dínendal shrugged vaguely and turned to walk down the corridor once more. Growling in irritation, Boromir strode after him. Part of him cursed these elves for their subtleties – why could they not speak plainly and to the point, like Men? – and part of him smiled at being reminded of the other adraefan. For First One had ended a conversation in a similar manner – many months ago, a lifetime ago – when Boromir had asked whether the three adraefan had always traveled
together. First One had simply shrugged vaguely, made a joke implying not if he could help it, and had turned to go striding down the forest path. At the time, Boromir, delirious with wounds and hunger and disease, had nearly considered throttling the elf in his irritation, but now… but now Boromir found himself struggling to conceal a smile as he followed Dínendal down the corridor.

They were about to go out the eastern doors when a strange whoop whoop whoop went up in the hallway, off to their right. It happened in a flash – just enough time for Boromir to recognize the cry, something from his youth, an itch of memory – and suddenly the sound of footsteps fast approaching – and a woman’s laughter – and Boromir turned in time to meet a crushing embrace which knocked him back into Dínendal – tumbling – a flash of auburn hair, quick laughter, a jolting cry –

“Faram – oomph!”

All three went crashing to the ground. A pained half-yelp, half-grunt. A Sindarin exclamation. An entanglement of limbs, so that Boromir suddenly found himself on his back, with Dínendal below him and a flushed Faramir above him. His brother immediately disentangled himself, sprang to his feet, and grabbed Boromir by the forearm. Before the stunned Man could react, Faramir yanked him back up, pulled his jaw forward and kissed him on the brow. He was about to do the same to Dínendal but the elf was already standing and immediately pulled away in surprise.

Éowyn’s laughter drifted from further down the corridor as she walked towards them. “Forgive him, my lords, he has been giddy all morning.”

“And who would not, with such a bride?” Faramir called, smiling, breathless. He turned to Boromir, slung his arm over the older Man’s shoulders. “How goes it, brother? Did you just awaken?”

Boromir snorted indignantly. “Nay. I rose at the hour past dawn.”

“Earlier than me then,” Faramir chuckled. “Where to, gentlemen?”

“To the tents, my lord,” Dínendal said. “We desired to see the elven preparations.”

“Ah, indeed, indeed,” Faramir gave Boromir a rough shake. “Well, we shall see each other at the feast this evening, aye? The fair lady and I are to go riding this afternoon,” he looked back at Éowyn, “we shall see about these famed Rohirric steeds.” She pursed her lips.

And just as Faramir was to pull away, he smiled suddenly. Boromir turned to see what he was looking at – and he saw the hobbits coming down the other corridor. All four walked now, Merry and Pippin in the front, chatting, with Frodo and Sam behind. Faramir let go of Boromir’s shoulder and bowed low.

“My lords,” he said solemnly, a hint of a smile playing across his features. Boromir scowled. How could his brother jest so easily? Not many years ago, Boromir had always considered Faramir the serious one – and now? And now he could not conceive of all this laughing merriment, all this joy.

The hobbits stopped, and Pippin returned the bow. “My Lord Steward!”

Merry chuckled, also placed his hand on his heart and bowed, bowing lower than Pippin. “My Lady Éowyn!”

Pippin grinned, elbowed Merry in the ribs. He bowed to Boromir, sinking well below Merry’s previous attempt. “Good sir, Boromir!”
Merry bowed, nearly touching his forehead to his knees. “Good Master Dínendal!”

“Enough! Enough, please!” Éowyn laughed.

“Aye, you two’ve been competing all day, it seems,” Frodo said, smiling lightly.

“Only because Merry can’t accept losing – he’s very stubborn.”

“I don’t mind losing, Master Took,” Merry said. “I simply question your morals. You’ve been known to cheat.”

“How can someone cheat in a bowing contest?” Pippin asked incredulously.

“You cheated in the drinking contest.”

Faramir laughed loudly at this, and Boromir saw his brother’s hand graze lightly across Éowyn’s, so that the couple shared a momentary glance – a warm, loving look. And Boromir found himself frowning as he inadvertently saw these hidden moments.

Indeed, it seemed by this time, the only two who were still not smiling were Boromir and Sam. And Boromir began to realize that Sam was watching him, wary, cautious, was watching him glare at Faramir and Éowyn.

“Well, where were you all off to?” Pippin asked.

Faramir looped his arm around Éowyn’s. “The Lady Éowyn and I were to go riding this afternoon. We were just going to the stables to inspect the mighty steeds.”

As Boromir met Sam’s gaze, he let his eyes drift, down, down, and he saw that the hobbit was resting his hand against his sword hilt. When Boromir brought his eyes, shocked, up to meet Sam’s again, the hobbit gave him an almost imperceptible nod. They shared this moment of silent exchange – this warning, this threat – while the blood flooded Boromir’s ears – the realization – madman, indeed, so they all think – when Boromir was brought back into the conversation with Pippin’s voice. Even Pippin – the voice – mild, soft, careful:

“Boromir? What about you?”

By evening, Boromir surrendered to the need and returned to his room, found the dented flask lying on the floor, and drank it all in several long, hungry gulps. Panting, groaning with relief. For he could not stand it – he could not tolerate any more smiles or questions or mild conversation. And lucid now, all today, he had seen how the others treated him – cautious, wary – treating him like someone who was elderly or infirm or dull in the mind, a beast – and Sam’s silent warning, as if he was what? A madman? What had he thought would happen? – Boromir cursed them all. And Third One, Third One, Third One… His hands trembled, he had barely been able to force down what little of the feast he could without retching. Everything; weak, jittering, ill. And that constant echo – droning, distant – that constant echo of Third One’s last, sorry breaths…

Once he finished the flask, he let it slip from his hand, tossing it wherever. The drink was burning through his gut now, a foul burn. He went in search of more. Digging through his pack, he found a clear, square bottle in his traveling pack. For a moment, he studied it. Imrahil had given him this – years ago. To celebrate what? Osgiliath – a great victory at Osgiliath. It was the fine liquor of the Belfalas region. Belfalen aquavita. Clear, with no scent, no taste. Boromir studied the bottle. Six years, and he had never touched it. And now, to finish it in one night?
He locked the door.

Uncorking the bottle, he took a lengthy, desperate swallow.

The crunch of an apple. Peregrin Took looked down at the fruit’s perfect white flesh. By the four farthings, he had never seen such a perfect apple. He took another bite. Who knew that Rohirric apples were so good? And apparently Sam had discovered a wondrously tart cheese as well. After the feast, Pippin and Merry had helped themselves to a wheel of it, which they had promptly stuffed into Sam’s pack when he was not looking.

And now Pippin walked down the corridor, one hand in his pocket, the other holding his half-eaten apple. He wiped away some of the juice coating his mouth with the back of his sleeve. It was fairly dark in the corridor now as the sun was slowly sinking behind the White Mountains. The other hobbits had gone with Éomer to tour the city of Edoras, but Pippin had declined the invitation, saying he wanted to get an early start on his packing. That was partially true; though he was also feeling quite tired from last night, and had hoped to tuck into bed – well, bedroll – earlier tonight.

He passed an open doorway and, casting a quick glance inside, he stopped and smiled.

“Good evening, Master Dínendal!”

The elf was working by candlelight, polishing and honing down his curved blade. It seemed he was lost in thought, though, for his movements were sluggish and absent-minded, not the quick, precise movements of someone intent on their task. At the sound of Pippin’s voice, he looked up. Immediately, his eyes warmed.

“Master Took, you did not join the others to tour Edoras by night?” the elf asked. “Please, come in.”

“Nay…” Pippin replied, strolling in. “If you promise not to tell Merry, I was actually feeling a bit weary.”

“Ah, well, that’s natural,” Dínendal said. “You have been traveling for very long.”

“Aye, and you’d certainly know about traveling for very long, eh?” Pippin joked.

Dínendal smiled, dropped his eyes. Carefully, he sheathed the dagger and placed it on the table by the small whetstone. Fidgeting over his apple, Pippin shook his head.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Dínendal, I didn’t mean that.”

The elf looked up. “Why do you apologize? I took no offense.”

There was a soft knock on the door and a Rohirrim serving woman appeared bearing a small torch. It was true that the room was quite dim – with only a thin sliver of evening light coming in from the small windows, and a single candle perched by the bed.

“Pardon me, me lords, I was to light the lamps,” the maid said.

“Thank you,” Dínendal replied.

They were silent as she moved about the room, lighting each sconce. Pippin took advantage of the pause in conversation to quickly finish off his apple, nibbling away at the corner by the stem. For a moment, he felt a pang of memory – strange for it to hit him so vividly, at such a random moment –
but he remembered his father, who used to eat apples entirely, pulling only the saliva-sticky stem and seeds from his mouth when he was done. His father always chided him for being wasteful when Pippin left the cores largely untouched. But Pippin noticed – it must have happened sometime during the Fellowship’s travels, perhaps after all the mishaps and frigid hunger on Caradhras – that he had started to eat his apples entirely as well, biting through the tougher bits and leaving only the stem and seeds.

The woman left, leaving the room glowing soft and warm with firelight. Once she was gone, Dinendal smiled slightly – in the way elves smile – just a slight quirking of his lips and a brightening of the eyes.

“Master Took, you mean to devour that apple entirely, it seems,” he said, indicating with his eyes the seeds Pippin held in one hand and the nub of apple-core in his other.

“Oh,” Pippin blushed at being caught. “Well… my father always said it was wasteful to throw away perfectly good bits. Also, these apples are quite good. Have you had any yet?”

“I believe so, aye, at the feast last night. And aye, they are good.”

They sat in silence for a moment, and Pippin chewed absentely.

“And soon you shall be returning to your father and your home,” Dinendal said.

“Aye…” Pippin mumbled. He had not told anyone, but his stomach always did a small flip when he thought of returning home. He was torn between relief, a surreal type of joy, and an inexplicable dread. Encouraged by Dinendal’s reassuring presence, he spoke again, “Actually, I’m feeling a little… well, afraid, I suppose… of going home.” The elf met his eyes. “Did you – I mean – did you feel like that, when you went back to Mirkwood?”

The elf was silent for a moment, but he gave a small nod. “After the battle on Dagorlad, I remember naught until the day I awoke back in Thranduil’s kingdom. I suppose I did not have time to think on it excessively – except in a hopeful way, back with Boromir and Radagast, when Golradir was still alive – but aye, I did feel some fear when I returned.” He smiled slightly. “Though I had reason to fear, Master Hobbit, as my case was still being decided. And if Radagast had not convinced Thranduil… well, my comfortable recovery would have ended rather abruptly.”

Pippin nodded, leaned back against the wall. He gave a small sigh. “It’s just so much has changed… I’ve changed. What if home doesn’t feel like – well – home, anymore?” He shook his head abruptly. “Ah, what am I saying? I think I’m tired, after all, if I’ve started saying such nonsense.”

Dinendal smiled. Distantly, they could hear the serving maid knocking on a door further down the corridor outside.

“Not nonsense, Master Took. I would expect the Shire will feel notably different for you, once you return. But you shouldn’t fear the change. Not all change is bad. And soon things will become familiar again.”

Pippin raised his eyebrows, made a face. “Aye, that’s true…”

The knocking continued outside, louder now. And Pippin suddenly realized Boromir’s room was the next room over. Dinendal must have sensed it as well – for the elf was rigidly still, listening. They heard the maid knocking, knocking, until finally there was the dangling of keys, wood scraping and metal hinges creaking. When there was no further sound, both Dinendal and Pippin
Yet just as Pippin opened his mouth to say something, there came a short, startled yelp from the other room. Muffled through the stone wall, they heard something clatter to the ground. Without a word, both Dínendal and Pippin sprang up and rushed out of the room and down the hall.

They came to Boromir’s room. The door was open, and only one of the torches was alight. The elf and hobbit came barreling into the room, squeezing through the doorway, and they were relieved to find the maid, smiling shakily and dusting herself off, while a half-asleep Boromir was sitting, on the bed, resting against the headboard.

The maid laughed nervously. “Ah, forgive me, me lords, I didn’t mean to make such a racket. My lord Boromir startled me – I did not see him there.”

Pippin noticed immediately that a clear, square bottle rested lazily against Boromir’s hip. A twinge of guilt, of sorrow. He frowned, stared down at his feet.

“Boromir?” Dínendal asked softly.

“What?” Boromir grunted, bleary. “Thought you I assaulted her? That some madness overwhelmed me and I forced myself on – on the poor wench?” The maid reddened. Boromir snorted, shifted in his seat to lie on his side, away from all of them. His voice was thick. “Leave off. I have no need of light, and no need of elves and hobbits and wenches and any of it.”

The maid hesitated, her face a bright crimson, but eventually she lowered her eyes and hurried out of the room, brushing past Pippin and Dínendal. Once she was gone, Dínendal strode to the bed, took the bottle from Boromir’s hand without a word. He lifted it, sniffed, frowned. Pippin remained hovering by the door.

“And tomorrow?” Dínendal asked. “Boromir, the elves leave at dawn.”

“Aye, aye, aye… and you go not with them, though you won’t tell me why.”

At this, Dínendal’s expression softened. He smiled sadly. “You would not remember if I told you now.”

“All the – the more reason to do it. Or think you I am too – too mad to understand?”

“Not now, friend,” Dínendal said. “Now you shall sleep, and we shall hope that you are not so indisposed tomorrow as to miss the ‘elfish’ partings.”

Boromir grumbled something, but made no other move. Dínendal sighed, gave his shoulder a small pat, moved to leave. Pippin followed. After gently closing the door, they walked back down the corridor to Dínendal’s room. Pippin stuffed his hands in his pockets, stared at the floor, scowling.

Back in Dínendal’s room, the elf placed the bottle on a clear space on the table, sat in the chair. Pippin remained standing, pacing slowly, running his finger over the windowsill. They were silent for a few moments. The torches flickered. Outside, they could hear a woman calling to her children.

“I hate it when he’s like that,” Pippin muttered.

“Aye…”

Facing away from the elf, Pippin rubbed at his eye, forced down the constriction in his throat. No,
he would not think on it now. Instead, he fiddled with the edges in the stone windowsill, digging his finger in the tiny gap, and spoke again, forcing his tone to brighten.

“What did he mean, though, about you not leaving tomorrow?”

“Oh,” Dínendal chuckled softly. “I told Boromir the Lords Elrond and Celeborn are to meet Thranduil in Imladris to discuss the *adraefan* – yet I’ve chosen to accompany the Travellers instead. And Boromir knows not the decision they are to make.”

“Well, what is it?”

Dínendal smiled. “Ah, nay, Master Took. I am superstitious. I would rather not say.”

Boromir was not present at the departure of the elves for Imladris. The next morning, at dawn, all except him gathered at the front of Meduseld to see the elves off. The usual formalities and graces were exchanged – with several heartfelt words from and to Arwen – as well as encouragements and honorable farewells to a rather nervous Dínendal. The sun was glinting off the expanse around Edoras, a fierce red dawn, when the elves of Rivendell and Lothlórien left Edoras on the road to Imladris.

A week passed. Dínendal noted Boromir’s swinging moods – and it seemed that every evening ended in either a tense silence or a drunken insult. But soon enough the day came when the Travellers were to leave Edoras.

It was a clear dawn. The Rohirrim lords were assembled, as well as all the Gondorian nobility. The King’s banner, the King’s entourage, the Queen, Legolas, Gimli. And the Travellers – the four hero-hobbits – along with their Escort – Gandalf, Dínendal and Boromir – this group of seven moved slowly down the line of waiting people, exchanging their farewells before the great departure.

Boromir made his way down the line. Éomer nodded formally, his young face stern, though his eyes twinkled. Elfhelm bowed low, his eyes lowered. Imrahil nodded once, shortly, his eyes boring into Boromir as they exchanged the formal salutations. Young Lothíriel mechanically wished him a safe journey, though she seemed tired and bored, her eyes distant. Éowyn smiled softly, her eyes questioning. And when Boromir reached his brother…

“Safe journey, Lord Boromir,” Faramir murmured, hand on chest.

Boromir bowed his head. “My Lord Steward.”

With a swift smile, Faramir pulled Boromir into a quick embrace. And he murmured into his ear, softly, a hasty whisper, “Return to us whole, brother. Return to us in peace.”
Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

At Helm’s Deep, they toured the field and the keep and the caves. Legolas and Gimli delighted everyone with their adventurous tales – causing laughter and warm smiles at their continued debate over the final count on the number of enemies slain. After the two of them left for the Glittering Caves, the rest of the company inspected the memorials erected, the wide field where Saruman’s forces had marched, the reconstruction of the outer walls.

The days were peaceful, serene. Boromir spent most of his time with Dínendal, and they would wander away from the main group to lean against a parapet and stare in silence at the wide expanse before them. Sometimes, Dínendal would begin speaking about Itarildë and when they had met. Or sometimes he would reminisce about those first days the adraefan had spent with Boromir above Emyn Muil, occasionally earning stifled smiles from Boromir, who, despite himself, would laugh at the memory.

Boromir spent the days during and after Helm’s Deep drifting from painful sobriety to those few, hidden moments of indulgence. He found that he could resist with merely a few swallows of whatever was at hand in the morning, upon waking, and then nothing – or what he considered to be little – by nightfall. At least, he congratulated himself on never appearing drunk – no one knew how much he drank, if or when. They had been wrong to think him such a drunkard.

Yet however peaceful and dull the days were, the nights held their own trials.

At night, Boromir dreamt. Foul dreams, wretched dreams, vivid dreams. Dreams such as he had not suffered through since the days of Osgiliath – when if he was not dreaming of riddles and broken swords, then he was dreaming of plans and strategies and sudden orc attacks. Dreams that he could not escape from. Dreams that crawled through his throat like a snake, burrowing deep into the belly, infecting him with fear. Fear that lasted throughout the days following the dreams. He called them dreams but they were nightmares.

The first night after Edoras he had dreamt of his brother. They were children, and mother was alive. She was calling to them – calling to them to return from their War, return from their fighting. But they were too young, Faramir especially, to be fighting, and there were no battles. Boromir could not understand. But then – Osgiliath – the fall of the eastern bank was happening again – and now Boromir and Faramir were older, grown Men, wounded – and the winged Fell Beast was swooping down, claws outstretched, ready to rip his brother from the ground. But such a cry! And such a fear! Boromir heard it all again – heard the nazgûl scream reverberating through his ears – and his ribs, cracked and bruised and crushed, and –

He had awoken with a choked gasp, sweating.

From Deeping Coomb and on the way to Isengard, Boromir dreamt of fire. He dreamt of a fire consuming Minas Tirith – blackening it – and his father’s laughing face above it all. It was the face
Denethor had made after the Council had chosen Boromir for Imladris. Full of pride and a satisfied confidence and snarling anticipation. And the fire of Minas Tirith had turned icy, so that Boromir found himself clawing through an interminable white mountain – snow on all sides – seeping through his clothes and burning him with its frigidity. And a sense of urgency – a frantic urgency – for everything hinged on this task – to get through – and the fire in his mind, burning through the ice…

He had awoken and remained awake for the rest of that night.

As the days passed, the dreams became clearer. Boromir dreamt of Third One – blinded, blood streaming from empty eye sockets – stumbling forward, searching with his hands – and when Boromir approached him to help, to aid him – and Boromir placed his hand on Third One’s arm – he saw with horror that his grip crushed straight through the elf, squeezing, as if the elf was boneless, so that the blood seeped crimson between Boromir’s fingers – and it felt to Boromir as if he were squeezing down on a boneless, limp thing – for his hand eventually clamped down around itself, holding only a ragged tatter of skin, oozing blood.

He had awoken to hear his screamed echo returning to him.

The dreams continued, every night…

Laughing laughing laughing orcs as they scream through the bloodied wall spitted against burrowed spikes burying in the shoulder blades deep back into the shoulder blades and then a crisp CRACK of whip tearing into flesh and leaving fine white lines over the back – yes yes yes yes yes pretty little Gondor prince that’s how we like it yes yes yes yes – now scream for us so we can hear you asking questions telling lies and the poor poor poor poor elf leaves tracks of tears through his bloodied face stinging in the burns and cuts and bruises and tell us tell us tell us tell us or we shall let a nice clean CRUNCH bury down into the leg arm heart lungs spilling out slipping onto the black jacked ground and expanding expanding expanding with waste and –

AND

“Third One? Third One! THIRD ONE!”

“Boromir – resist, my friend, my brother, resist!”

“Ai Eru, Third One!”

“Look away look away look away do not look at me do not give in do not say it, Boromir, do not say it do not tell them there is nothing to tell nothing to say look away, Boromir, my friend, I was a good friend, wasn’t I?”

Blubbering through his tears so that he cannot speak, ha ha ha: “Nay, Third One – nay, nay – leave him – leave him leave him alone leave him be – ai ai ai very well very well very well very well I will –”

“NO! Do not do it, Boromir! Do not say it!”

Slipping down into the bloodied floor and grinding away from the machine pulling twisting away the wrists holding him down holding him down burning away the wrists and he screams and shudders and pulls away and weeps and sobs and cries out and the fire licking away at the wound in his stomach so that he cringes back back into the machine back into the machine pulling pulling pulling apart and the muscles stretching thinner thinning thin snapping away blood seeping through the skin and foul crying AI SWEET ERU HELP ME NOW and and and stop stop STOP
stop stop begging begging like a fool a fool begging burying down huddled weeping BURNING EYES in the mind red pop hissing with cackling cruelty –

Slipping on the cobblestones like a drunkard with Minas Tirith laughter cackling ha ha ha ha and Faramir’s neck livid bruising with a father on fire and the heckling SNAP of a CLICK CLICK CLICK torture machine grinding down like a pretty little prince yes that’s how he likes it doesn’t he likes it likes that yes yes yes yes yes doesn’t speak but cries and yells and whimpers like a little child in the GREAT EYE BURNING great eye burning burning indeed burning through everything and a heart on fire because please please please please please THIRD ONE NO NO NO NO no no no where is where is mother and father and Faramir can you help me help help forgive me for today, forgive me for the King, forgive but stay stay please VALAR DO YOU HEAR THESE CRIES?

(The Valar-Gods shift. Someone glares at Irmo, Dream-God.)

Breathing ragged with the head hanging down trembling on the side…

That evening, he awoke to see Dínendal hovering before him, the elf’s hand on his shoulder. He had been dreaming of Barad-dûr, of Minas Tirith, of something, and he was ashamed to find his face was wet with tears. They were in the tent which Boromir shared with Dínendal, Pippin, Merry, Legolas and Gimli. All the others seemed asleep.

“Boromir, you dreamt.”

“Aye…”

Boromir’s throat felt parched. Immediately, he thought to rifle through his things and find the flask, but he quickly chided himself. No. No, he did not need it. He did not need it. He sometimes needed it. Only at night, for during the day, they were often traveling, and the King was nearby, and Boromir kept his mind busy with studying the scenery, or speaking with Dínendal, or musing over his great journey a year ago through these same lands. Ignoring the pain in his stomach, begging him to drink it away. Ignoring the ache in his knees as he mounted the horse, telling him one drink would make the ride so much easier. The drink. He did not need it. Sometimes, he needed it. But he would fight it. Or he would not fight it, but none would know of his private failings, his silent surrenders.

Yet the nights were full of dreams, full of nightmares, so that always he found himself staring at the saddlebags. He had brought it all with him, the flask and the bottles. He had told the boy, Innrod, to pack it all away without Rúnyafin noticing, back in Minas Tirith. And he remembered searching through his bags the first night on the journey to Edoras, and counting the bottles, and wondering if they would last him the entire trip. And then he had wept – wept with bitter laughter, for he had taken to weeping as often as a maiden in these past few weeks – but he had wept nonetheless, not knowing or understanding why the tears streamed so easily down his face.

Now, he wiped at his eyes with one quaking hand and sat up. Dínendal sat back on his heels.

“You dreamt of – ?”

“Leave off, Second One, you can guess what I dreamt…”

Dínendal nodded, but did not leave. He stared at a patch of ground, his eyes glazed over with thought. Boromir suddenly wondered what he had exclaimed in his sleep. He did not want to know the answer. And so he stood, grumbling something, and left the tent.
He did not notice Dínendal had followed him until several paces out into the camp, into the fresh clean night air, when he turned and jumped back, startled, finding the elf a step behind him.

“Dínendal!” he hissed, fumbling for his empty sheath. “Make – make more noise as you walk!”

Dínendal smiled at this. “I shall try.” He clasped his hands behind his back. “May I walk with you?”

Boromir snorted, but did not say no.

And so they walked. The camp was quiet as they strolled. All the canvas tents, the King’s banners, the horses; still and silent. All asleep, with soft snores and the occasional owl hooting. Crickets. It was a clear night, and the sky was an indigo canvas peppered with light.

They walked away from the clear patch of ground where the great entourage had settled itself, and towards a gentle hill rolling towards some nearby woods. Away from the burning torches of the camp, the stars gleamed brighter against the blue-black sky. Boromir and Dínendal walked up this softly-sloped ridge, Boromir occasionally waving away a buzzing insect.

And there, at the top of the ridge, where they could see the dark forest to their right, and the rolling hills before them, and the silhouette of the Misty Mountains to the northeast, they sat. Dínendal sat first, without explanation, facing away from the camp. Boromir smiled slightly, but joined him, bending down slowly, careful of his knees, until collapsing clumsily with a grunt.

They did not speak, but rather sat in silence, enjoying the warm night air. Sitting on the ground was causing Boromir’s knees to throb dully at remaining so bent, and the wound in the right leg was also complaining. He leaned back on his elbows, but – after swearing and muttering to himself as he shifted, vainly searching for a more comfortable position – he found that his weak shoulder refused his weight. And so he surrendered and simply dropped back onto the ground with a grunt, flinging his arms above his head. Dínendal twisted around, smiled lightly.

The crickets chirped. On his back, Boromir stared up at the sky – the innumerable stars – and he remembered the nights when he and Faramir would sleep out in the wild, delighting themselves in these minor adventures, and every night Faramir would insist on playing a game. The game was to create a story using the stars, and while Faramir saw great battles and dragons and swords and tidal waves and ships hovering in the sky, Boromir had never seen more than a mindless jumble of tiny, white specks.

He sighed.

“’Tis always the same, Dínendal,” he mumbled. The elf did not turn. “’Tis always the same,” Dream, he wanted to add. Fear. “’Tis – ’tis so… tiresome.”

A few moments of silence passed, and Boromir began to wonder if the elf had heard.

“Today I did not see you drink,” Dínendal said finally.

Boromir snorted in offense. “Think you that I am so weak? That I have no choice in the matter?”

“The bottles you have in your pack, would you throw them all away? Or leave them with some farmer ere we reach Isengard?”

Boromir glanced down his chest. He could see the elf’s lithe silhouette, his back curved as he leaned forward, sitting.
Boromir did not answer immediately. No matter how comfortable he felt with Dínendal, he could not admit the fear. He could never fully acknowledge the panic, ever present at the edge of his vision, always threatening to pour in and consume him. The panic – the panic – the pain and trembling hands and the echoes which chilled his blood – he could not admit that the drink helped keep all of this at bay.

And so he did not answer, but let the question hang there, in the night air, lingering. Dínendal made no move, though eventually, after long, awkward minutes, he turned around and looked at Boromir.

He smiled. “Ah, I thought you had fallen asleep.”

Boromir chuckled, arched his head back. “Nay…”

“You simply did not want to answer the question,” Dínendal supplied.

Boromir remained silent. He closed his eyes, mumbled something about being weary, and pretended to rest. He could feel the elf’s gaze on him. A cool breeze traveled over the forest – a wave of noise, the soft rustling in the leaves – until it whispered over the hill and across their faces. Boromir inhaled somewhat shakily. He heard Dínendal shift, turning away from him.

“You hide it,” the elf said softly. “You think I do not see. But I have noticed.”

Boromir said nothing.

“I know not…” More shifting. Boromir cracked an eye open and saw Dínendal’s silhouette leaning an elbow on one knee, chin in hand. “I know not why you do not seek relief from your friends. And we are friends, you and I. I would help you. I do not judge you, Boromir, I have never thought you mad, nor a drunkard – nor any of those insults. Yet I see that you are ashamed when I speak of these… tendencies. Would it not be better if you simply spoke of what haunts you?”

Boromir shut his eyes, crossed his arms.

“What do you want me to say, Dínendal? I have told you enough, it seems. There is nothing more to confess.”

The elf was silent. After a few moments, he sighed. “Perhaps… you are right.” At this, Boromir opened his eyes, frowning. “It seems I have little effect, as well. Perhaps my help is not sufficient.”

Boromir shook his head, opened his mouth as if he wanted to find something to say, but Dínendal cut him off. “If only Radagast were here. He is wise. He would know what to do. And he always did say you were rather bullish – so perhaps he would know better how to manage you, as he has had dealings with such beasts.”

Dínendal smiled slightly, almost mischievously, and Boromir laughed, though he could not ease the strange ache in his heart. Dínendal’s smile and Boromir’s laugh both faded too quickly, and soon they were once again sitting in silence, staring up at the sky. Though now Boromir felt guilt pressing down against his chest – guilt and embarrassment.

He was about to say something, to blurt some gruff remark telling Dínendal not to coddle him so, that he needed no keepers and he did not need any of this so-called help, and that he did not have any bottles in his packs anyway, but any such thinly veiled apology was interrupted by the sudden arrival of a third night-walker. Boromir heard nothing behind him, but Dínendal looked up and, eyes alight, stood quickly and bowed. Boromir turned.
Aragorn walked up the ridge, a pipe in one hand, his gaze fixed on the night sky. When the King saw Dínendal bowing, he immediately smiled and shook his head. Boromir was still clambering to stand when Aragorn raised his free hand, “Please, my friends. ‘Tis too late… or perhaps too early… to begin with the formalities again.”

Dínendal relaxed, and smiled. “You are a most gracious King, Aragorn.”

Aragorn chuckled and met eyes with Boromir, who was still half-kneeling, half-standing. Boromir lowered his gaze.

“What brings my noble elven guest and my prince out here on such a night?” Aragorn asked, grinning. “Stargazing, friends?”

Boromir flushed, chuckling, and sat. Aragorn waved for Dínendal to seat himself and went to sit on Boromir’s right. He leaned back, brought a knee up, took a drag from his pipe.

*How unlike a King he is.* But what right did Boromir have in casting such judgements? Not when he too had changed so much, when his beloved city had warped into something intolerable. No, everything had changed. Everything was different. And there was something easing in Aragorn’s manner, so that, for once, Boromir found himself relaxed in his presence.

After a few moments, as Boromir listened to the steady drags of Aragorn’s pipe, smelled the familiar pipe-weed, Aragorn spoke, “Dínendal, know you any of the elven songs for Elbereth?” He smiled. “I should say the Queen of the Stars smiles down upon us this evening.”

Boromir could not help his sharply raised eyebrow and cynically amused snort, though Dínendal simply shrugged and crossed his arms over his knees.

“Aye, I know the songs,” he murmured. “Though I was never considered a singer among my people. ’Twas Amdír who delighted in such songs.”

“Forgive me, then,” Aragorn said. “Perhaps it is not so gracious, after all, for a Man to ask an elf to sing whenever he gets the chance.”

Dínendal laughed softly. “Nay… I meant it only as a warning; my voice is not as fair as young Legolas’, for example. But I have been musing over my friend Amdír these past few days… it would please me to reawaken his memory in song.”

And as Aragorn leaned back, pipe in mouth, and Dínendal was to begin singing, Boromir nearly exclaimed, *Stop!* But he bit back the cry, and instead lay back against the ground, arms and ankles crossed, rigidly staring at the stars, willing himself to remain calm and silent.

The song began…

“A Fanuilos! Brennil gelair!
Athan Aear Aennui, Bereth,
Calad ammen i reviar
Mi ’aladhremmin Ennorath!”

And were these not the words of Third One, one half-year ago, on the barren wastelands of the Brown Lands? When all about them there had been darkness and cloudy skies and a persistent gloom, yet the elves had laughed and joked and jested with Boromir?

“A Elbereth Gilthoniel!
I chîn a thûl lîn mîriel,
And did these three night-walkers – this King out of legend, this broken warrior and long-returned exile – know of the soft sigh that Varda, Elbereth, Star-Queen and glowing Vala, gave when she heard the elf-exile’s self-conscious melody? Did they hear the deep rumble of disapproval – Manwë, Ulmo, Tulkas – stirring through Taniquetil as the Valar saw one Valar Queen’s silent favoring of the troubled Boromir? The jealousy between gods…

And as Dínendal’s voice drifted away in the night air – just as Third One’s so often did; Dínendal was modest to consider himself a poor singer – Aragorn exhaled a long, silvery puff of smoke. He looked over to the elf and nodded. Dínendal smiled slightly, looked away.

As the song faded, Boromir relaxed, blinking several times, swallowing away the thick knot in his throat.

It was not long before Aragorn spoke again. He turned the pipe upside down, began to knock the ashes onto the grass.

“Well, tomorrow we shall part ways, my friends.”

“Aye…” Dínendal whispered.

“And so will come the breaking of the Fellowship.”

“It was broken long ago,” Boromir muttered before he could control himself.

Rather than being angered, or troubled, Aragorn grinned, more gum than teeth, and raised an eyebrow in Boromir’s direction. In a sudden gesture, he laid a hand on Boromir’s shoulder, squeezed.

“We shall not pursue that topic, though perhaps on your return from the Shire, we shall discuss at length all the cracks and fissures of the legendary Fellowship. But Boromir, you shall find that the Fellowship was never truly broken, nor shall it ever break, while we are all yet living. And I would venture that e’en upon death the Fellowship shall continue. The ties cannot be so easily severed, as I imagine the ties of the adraefan will ne’er break.” Aragorn paused. “Besides, you are too modest, and e’er too grim,” another pink grin, “Do not forget that you are a legend.”

Boromir snorted gruffly, though he could not hide the creeping smile. He crossed his arms, burrowed his chin into his chest.

“You are in a fanciful mood tonight, sire.”
Aragorn laughed. “Aye, perhaps I am. ‘Twas Dínendal’s song, it has raised my spirits.”

And with that, he stood, gave Boromir’s shoulder another friendly clap and then placed his hand on his heart and bowed to Dínendal. The elf returned the bow from his seat.

“Goodnight then, gentlemen. Until tomorrow.”

He left. A few moments of contemplative silence. And then Dínendal turned to Boromir, smiled.

“Perhaps I am not such a terrible singer.”

“…burárum, those evileyed-blackhanded-bow-legged-flint-hearted-clawfingered-foulbellied-bloodthirsty, morimaite-sincahonde, hoom…”

Boromir stared. The last hoom rumbled through the earth, startling the horses into nervous whinnies and the occasional clop.

“…well, since you are hasty folk and their full name is as long as years of torment, those vermin of orcs; and they came over the River and down from the North and all round the wood of Laurelindórenan, which they could not get into, thanks to the Great ones who are there.”

The mighty tree, that massive, lumbering, entirely unnatural Treebeard waved one gnarled hand – or what Boromir assumed was a hand, even though it seemed more like a tangle of branches – in the direction of the Lothlórien woods – before turning back to all of them.

Isengard. Gardens, rows of flowers, the black tower piercing the sky, empty. They stared up at the two great Ents, though the sun was in the way, and so the tall creatures were silhouetted against the glare. Boromir could not help wanting to nudge his horse around and to the other side, or request that they all move in the shade, if only to see these creatures better.

Beside him, the hobbits sat on their ponies, occasionally elbowing each other, or murmuring asides as Treebeard and Quickbeam spoke with Aragorn and Gandalf. The rest of the company stood behind them, all of them glancing back and forth, curious, taking in all the change and all the disappointing familiarity of Orthanc. The so-called Treegarth of Orthanc was alive with a rich variety of green vegetation, but everyone was still quite wary of the enormous, hulking tower beside them.

Nevertheless, Merry and Pippin seemed content in whispering the entire tale of their Ent meetings and Entmoot and Isengard battles, earning several stern looks from Dínendal as well as an uncharacteristic shush from Boromir. Aragorn and Gandalf seemed unfazed, however, by the group’s wandering interests, and they continued to discuss at great length all the recent happenings with Treebeard. Boromir was, admittedly, not paying attention as much as he should have been, since he too was somewhat preoccupied with the strangeness of Treebeard and Quickbeam.

One snatch of conversation, however, caught everyone’s attention:

“I observe, my good Fangorn,” Gandalf said, squinting in the sun’s glare, beard twitching, “that with great care you say dwelt, was, grew. What about is? Is he dead?”

Treebeard swayed before answering, peering up at Orthanc Tower, occasional leaves drifting from his head over the company.

“Is who dead?” Pippin whispered.
“Saruman,” Frodo said.

“No, not dead, so far as I know…” Treebeard rumbled. “But he is gone.”

Everyone started at this.

“Yes, he is gone seven days. I let him go. Though there was little left of him when he crawled out, and as for that worm-creature of his, he was like a pale shadow.”

Gandalf seemed about to blurt something out, but Treebeard raised one creaking arm. “Now do not tell me, Gandalf… that I promised to keep him safe; for I know it. But things have changed since then. And I kept him until he was safe… safe from doing any more harm.” He rumbled again, something unintelligible, and another cluster of leaves fell from his head. “You should know that above all I hate the caging of living things, and I will not keep even such creatures as these caged beyond great need… a snake without fangs may crawl where he will.”

He closed the matter with that, and everyone was left to brood over the news while Quickbeam presented the keys of Orthanc to Aragorn. Sam started shifting in his saddle, visibly troubled, and both Merry and Pippin were frowning with thought. The company decided to take its meal with the Ents here at the Treegarth. And so everyone dismounted, let the horses graze while they found a shady spot – on the other side of the great tower, under the fresh saplings of young fruit trees – and sat to take their meal.

Treebeard invited anyone who was interested on a tour of the entire, replanted Isengard, and Aragorn and Arwen obliged. Merry and Pippin also agreed, and Treebeard immediately lowered his great arms and picked them up without hesitation. Everyone laughed at this, watching the Ent place the two yelping hobbits onto his branches.

“Hoom, I have yet room for a few more if anyone is sore-footed,” he eyed the group.

Legolas smiled over his lembas, jutted his chin towards Gimli. “I believe the Dwarf would enjoy a ride.”

Gimli nearly jumped with shock when the Ent bent down to pick him up, and he hastened to disentangle himself from the limbs, grumbling. “Ah, no, no, no thank you, Master Fangorn. ‘Twould feel unnatural for a dwarf if he did not have both feet firmly set on the ground. Perhaps,” the dwarf’s eyes twinkled mischievously, “perhaps you should consider Boromir over there.”

Boromir, who had been idly chewing a piece of dried meat, looked up. Gimli began roaring with laughter as Treebeard took the single long stride over to where Boromir sat and, without letting the Man utter a single word of protest nor even swallow his food, bent down and yanked him unceremoniously off the ground. Boromir uttered a shocked shout and struggled against the limbs, but the Ent would not be forestalled. Soon enough the Man found himself sitting awkwardly against the swaying trunk, with Merry and Pippin chuckling nearby. A thick canopy of leaves obscured his vision. Down below, he could hear laughter.

“I pray, good Treebeard, that you shall spare my Queen and I,” Aragorn called. “We are quite content with walking.”

“If you think you can keep up, King,” Treebeard rumbled. “Though… perhaps it would be best if you took the horses.”

“Very well, that is indeed a good idea,” Aragorn agreed. Through the swaying leaves, Boromir, clinging to the trunk, caught a glimpse of the King’s face, smiling and looking up. “Ho, Boromir!
Have you found a comfortable spot?”

Boromir shifted his position. Something sharp jabbed him in the hip. “Aye, well enough! Though this mode of travel seems more adept to hobbits than Men.”

“Ah, well, I’ve got something sticking in my back,” Pippin said, arching away from Treebeard’s side. “But you get used to it soon enough.”

Treebeard growled something. And then, without warning, he swung his head around, nearly unseating Boromir, and raised an arm. Merry huffed, knocked the leaves out of his face.

“Quickbeam… you may carry some… Come, we shall make of this a… hoom, grand tour.”

And so the two Ents bent down and, much to everyone’s abashment, picked them up off the ground and placed them in random points about them. Soon enough they were carrying all the entourage – the hobbits, Dínendal, Legolas, Gimli, Boromir, as well as two royal guards – between the two of them. Gandalf had laughingly kept his distance, opting to ride Shadowfax instead, and the King and Queen had watched the whole spectacle, laughing and encouraging and jesting.

Boromir found himself wedged into a stump and several branches, his boots dangling off the edge, occasionally knocking against Pippin below him. The hobbit kept swatting them away.

“Boromir! Watch your feet!”

Above Boromir, a very nervous, young royal guard sat, clinging with both hands to the top of Treebeard’s head. So much so, in fact, that the Ent complained of being ticklish there and gave his head a jerk, jostling everyone riding him. The guard fumbled frantically before contenting himself with sitting very close to Boromir and holding onto a pair of flimsy branches. Boromir could see Dínendal and the others riding atop Quickbeam, laughing and conversing with the other Ent.

Dínendal had perched himself atop the highest point, leaning against it as easily as one would lean against solid ground, and when he caught Boromir’s eye, he waved. Gimli’s near-frantic complaining could be heard from somewhere within the lower part of Quickbeam’s leafy torso.

“Are we all ready then?”

“Everyone comfortable?”

A chorus of ayes.

“Lead on then, Master Fangorn!”

One lurching step, followed by an excitable and laughing, Whoa-ho-ho! Everyone scrambled to get a better hold, and Boromir, finding now the situation extraordinarily humorous, began to laugh. Laugh so hard, in fact, that he could barely hold onto the rough bark beside him. The guard behind him was now openly fist ing Boromir’s cloak, his face pale, and he stared at Boromir in disbelief as the older Man dissolved into gasping sobs of merriment.

Back and forth, the entire Ent pitched, swaying with each step. On the level of branches below Boromir and the guard, the hobbits kept up a lively commentary – laughing quickly, asking Treebeard questions, calling back and forth to each other. Sam was somewhere in the Ent as well, though Boromir could not see him, even though he did hear the occasional Sweet Albermira! or Well, me ol’ gaffer’d never believe this, hi!

They circled the great garden spanning around Orthanc, and then they moved into Fangorn, if only
to explore the closer acres. Boromir ventured to look down – though his stomach churned to do it – and he saw the ground passing swiftly beneath the tangle of branches and leaves – as well as fleeting glimpses of a white horse and rider, or the King and Queen trotting along. Quickbeam and all the others were behind them – since Boromir could hear the creaking wood and occasional exclamations as the second Ent walked. Once or twice, those in one Ent began to call back to those in the other:

“Mister Frodo! Got a good grip, eh? It'd be quite a tumble from this high up!”

“Aye, good enough, Sam!”

“Now don’t be rude, Sam Gamgee. Remember that me an' Pip traveled extensively with these fine Entish gentlemen, and never once did Treebeard drop us!”

“Ha, hoom.”

“Gimli, that is my leg.”

“What? Aye? Oh, oh, pardon me, Master Elf. ‘Tis – ‘tis difficult to keep hold! How it tilts and sways!”

“Ho! Boromir!”

Boromir turned, attempted to twist his neck around without letting go his grip on a tuft of leaves to his left. He caught a brief glimpse of Quickbeam, and he saw Dínendal leaning over the canopy, smiling broadly.

“Aye?” Boromir called, hoarse.

“‘Tis rather like the Great Tree by Moonlight, is it not?”

Boromir chuckled and cleared his throat. “Aye, it is indeed!”

They visited some of the newest saplings, which Treebeard introduced to everyone, and saw all the replanted vegetation and growing forest. And then they turned, made their way back to the open Treegarth and gardens around Orthanc. By the time they reached again the black tower, everyone was abuzz with childish excitement, talking and laughing and thanking the Ents for the tour. A few royal guards had stayed with the other horses and camp, and their envy was evident as they saw each giggling traveller descend from Treebeard and Quickbeam.

When they were all on the ground again, dizzy, and the King and Queen once again dismounted, the humor eventually faded, as it was time to leave. Everything was gathered up, and saddlebags were replaced, and soon it was time for the first partings within the Fellowship. For Legolas and Gimli were to begin their journeys together, and they bid farewell to each member of the group. The hobbits remained somber at the exchange, yet Legolas urged them not to grieve.

“Goodbye, but not forever, my friends,” the elf smiled. “We shall see each other again, I feel.” He looked at Boromir. “We are parting ways, aye, but the Fellowship is not broken.”

Aragorn stepped forward, placed a hand on Legolas’ shoulder. “Nor shall it ever, melon nín.”

But Legolas pulled back slightly and placed his hand on his heart. He bowed. “Farewell, King of Gondor.” And he bowed to Arwen. “Namárië, Arwen.”

Gimli stepped forward. He nodded gruffly, shifted his belt. “Aye, well, I suppose I will be seeing
all of ye soon, so no sense in shedding any tears.”

“Here then at last comes the parting of ways,” Aragorn sighed. “Though I hope that ere long you shall return to my land with the help that you promised.”

“Aye, that we will,” Gimli nodded. His voice thickened, and he turned quickly to clamber onto the horse behind Legolas. “Well, get on ye way, my hobbits. I won’t be kept awake with worry for you. Send word, and I suppose we shall see each other again someday. But I know not if we shall ever all be reunited again.”

And so the farewells continued. Legolas and Gimli eventually disappeared along their path, and soon the company took leave of the Ents as well. They made for the Gap of Rohan, riding swiftly now, with hearts heavy, and by evening there came time for another goodbye.

Dusk. The fierce red streams of sunlight burning against the uneven ground. Here, Aragorn turned his horse, and all stopped. Sharp winds burst through the Gap, flinging down from the mountain ranges on either side, so that everyone’s hair was whipped forward, backward, and the White Tree banners snapped, and Gandalf’s robes billowed and blossomed in great white balloons. They dismounted.

They stood in silence for several moments. The wind howled. Finally, Aragorn looked at each of them in turn, and without a word, he placed his hand on his heart, and he bowed to the hobbits. And then the Queen stepped forward, and she removed the glowing Evenstar from her neck and, gazing at it, she gave it to Frodo, who blushed crimson. The hobbit opened his mouth as if to say something, but Arwen simply nodded with understanding eyes.

“Farewell, my friends,” Aragorn said, and he spoke softly, even though the wind roared in their ears. “Remember that the northern kingdom is part of Gondor, and so we shall meet again. Soon, I hope. And we shall perhaps share a pipe in the Prancing Pony.” The hobbits smiled weakly at this, though Pippin’s eyes glistened. Aragorn placed a hand on the younger hobbit’s shoulder. “And do not forget, Peregrin Took, that you are a knight of Gondor, and I do not release you from your service. You are going now on leave, but I may recall you.”

Pippin smiled at this, a slow, feeble, teary smile, but he nodded.

And then Aragorn turned to Boromir and Dínendal and he gazed at them with serious eyes. They bowed.

“And go then, prince and elf-exile. For Boromir, you divide your heart now with the Fellowship and the adraefan, I feel. Yet I hope to see you in Minas Tirith ere the spring festival.”

“Aye, my King.” Boromir murmured, bowing again.

With a gruff smile from Gandalf, they made their final goodbyes and remounted. And so the final, stripped group – the Travellers and Escort – rode forth – just as the sun burned away into the horizon, blinding them from what lay ahead – and, after riding for a mile or so, they turned. And there they saw the King and Queen standing on the ridge, the banners of Gondor whipping in the strong wind, and Aragorn held up his hand, and there glowed a fierce, green light.
And so the great journey home began. The Travellers and Escort - Frodo, Sam, Merry, Pippin, Gandalf, Dínendal and Boromir - set out from the Gap of Rohan after their farewells with Aragorn and moved north. Their progress was slow, idle. They led their horses at a relaxed pace, as if this was nothing more than a stroll through the country. With the War over, there was no longer that sense of fatal urgency which had spurred on even the weariest of travelers. Now, in these days of peace, the only thing which kept them from napping outright in the open fields was the hobbits' desire to see the Shire again.

But the hobbits - as well as the others - were tired, and so they ate often, rested often, and slept long hours. Now began the full recovery, now began the true mending of Ring War wounds.

But some wounds were long, or impossible, to heal. During the journey, Frodo spent much of his time locked away in some hidden corner of his mind. His mood was grim, his expression blank. Despite Sam's attempts to coax him out of brooding melancholy, Frodo had closed himself off from the other Travellers. From the first day forward, the hobbit was taciturn, speaking only when someone asked him a question directly. His eyes would linger on the ground. He saw only where his pony trotted. Every so often, his hand would jerk up to his vest pocket or his bare neck. But, finding the Ring absent, it would then fall loosely to his side.

Frodo's daytime brooding was complemented by Boromir's vocal nightmares. Every night since Edoras, the Man awoke screaming in the middle of the night. His pained howls startled all the other sleepers awake, so that none could sleep with Boromir near. At first, the Man was embarrassed, sheepish even. He apologized and flushed and kept his eyes averted. As the nightmares continued and the nights passed, he would move off to some private spot in the woods, away from the others. His screams were somewhat diluted by the trees and distance, but still everyone was kept rigidly awake.

The other Travellers were sympathetic at first, but their sympathy quickly turned to impatience when the screaming never abated. A sleepless week passed; everyone became exhausted, irritable. So they allowed Boromir his weakness, allowed him the only medicine which soothed his wild cries. And they pretended not to see when he would bring the flask out with trembling fingers. And they looked away when he swayed or reeled.

He would drink, and drink, enough to fall into a dreamless stupor. Enough so that he became a stumbling mess, barely sober enough to hold the horse's reins. Of course, the drinking rendered him useless as an escort. But no one imagined any true threat to the journey. They could afford to baby-sit a drunkard. For it was much easier to tolerate the occasional insult or senseless collapse than the constant screams at night, the tension, the barely suppressed rage and the possible madness.
Now the nights were quiet, and everyone slept easy.

One day they walked through a wood; a dreamy, silent place. It had rained the night before, and moisture still clung to the leaves, the grass, the flowers. Peace. Space to breathe. And the feeling of being embraced by a scene, protected. Deep green with blue shadows. Wet grey. Trees here and there, the heavy sky sagging through the canopy. The forest floor dancing thick with ankle-high flowers, herbs, weeds, grasses. A soft carpet of green, buoyant and wet. Moss grew high up on the silver-scraped trunks. Echoed birdcalls, a dew drop on the nose. Mist curling around the Travellers. Someone commented on the beauty of it. And they were so tired, they could have slept there.

But no, it was only morning, too early to sleep. They would rest at lunchtime.

A rain shower. Pattering against the trees, very softly, just tip-tap tip-tap. Enough to send the fog swirling. A small creature shook its fur. Sam put up his face, opened his mouth and drank the rain. Frodo kept his eyes on the ground. Merry and Pippin were laughing at some hidden joke, some private entertainment. But those two were always in high spirits.

Dínendal threaded through the trees with his horse. Clopping lightly, he did not want to disturb the untouched grass, the perfect moss, the ivy and rosemary and sage. He sang softly to himself. The song stayed in his throat, barely whispering through his lips.

Gandalf lit his pipe, covering it with one hand, protecting it from the drizzle. He lingered by the back, thinking.

Boromir lost himself in the vibrant blue-green of it. His eyes stared, unfocused. He held the familiar flask. The flask was wet with rain, and he tasted some of the fresh water on the spout. The rainwater was cool against the alcohol's warmth. And he felt lazy, slow. He wanted only to lean against the horse's neck, feel the faint sheen of sweat and rain on it, feel the life beating within, the mane, the strength, and sleep for days. In his daze, Boromir nearly slipped off his saddle. But he steadied himself, continued.

They passed through this perfect wood out onto an open field. The rain lessened, disappeared. A light drizzle, thick air. Dunland. The sky was still black-grey, looming low with an imminent summer thunderstorm. Up ahead, the hobbits led the way with their ponies. They were talking now, even Frodo. Just inane asides, jokes, old stories. Sam recited a simple poem. Merry dug into his vest pocket for his pipe. Frodo finally looked up, took in the beauty around him. A distant mountain range, white and silent. Green plains, tall swaying grasses, the woods. A flash of lightning, somewhere northeast. After several moments, a crack of thunder. The hobbits felt their curls absorb the damp air, spring wild. Pippin ran a hand through his hair, it came away wet.

Boromir and Dínendal led their horses side by side, walking a hundred paces behind the hobbits. They did not speak, they only watched the passing horizon. It had started to rain in the northeast. A dark curtain of mist hung about the base of the mountains. The rain was moving slowly to them.

Gandalf dropped back in the line, his horse snorted. He aligned himself with the Man and elf.

"Gentlemen, we shall reach Rivendell in two weeks’ time," the wizard said.

Dínendal nodded; Boromir said nothing.

“It seems we shall see little of the Dunlendings; though it would be wise to keep a watch nonetheless. Aragorn was good to grant them the lands, but they are not all so peaceable.”

Dínendal squinted. "Aye. We should find some shelter soon, as well. It is warm enough, but a wet
night will be uncomfortable."

A breeze passed, shifting their hair. Up ahead, the hobbits had stopped and turned their ponies around. They seemed to be waiting for Gandalf, Dínendal and Boromir to catch up.

"Ah," Gandalf smiled. "Lunch."

They set up camp against the ridge of a rolling hill. They gathered no wood, for it was too wet. Dínendal had some stray tinder in his pack. They made a fire, put a kettle on, pulled out the frying pan. The winds picked up, the rain was drifting towards them. Sam managed the cooking, with Merry and Pippin consulting. Frodo sat leaning against his pack. He held the Evenstar in his hands. He was studying it. Boromir lay against the wet grass, his head propped up against his saddle. Dínendal tended to the horses. Gandalf sat apart from the group to observe.

"Ah, yes," Merry grinned. He was hovering over Sam's shoulder as the latter cooked. "Lovely, yes. Have you got any dried bacon, Pip?"

"Bacon?" Pippin scoffed. "It wouldn't go well with this, Merry. We need some mushrooms and a bit of parsley, that's what."

"Aye, Mister Pippin's right, Mister Merry," Sam agreed. "We've got the rabbit going, no sense adding bacon to it."

"What? Haven't you ever had bits of bacon in your rabbit stew? It goes very well."

Pippin made a face. Merry looked back.

“What about you, Frodo?”

They did this often, the hobbits. They tried to bring Frodo back into the conversation, tear him away from his dark thoughts.

Frodo looked up, bewildered.

“What?”

“Bacon with the roast rabbit,” Merry said. “Sam and Pip say I'm breaching some sort of culinary code.”

Frodo almost smiled. “I should think you are, old Merry. You can't mix game with pork. That’s common knowledge.”

Merry sighed theatrically. Yet it was clear that Merry, Pippin, and Sam were relieved to see Frodo talking, teasing even.

“Well, I'm off for the parsley then,” Pippin said, standing. "I think I saw some by those trees there."

He passed over Sam and Merry, who hovered by the fire, and walked to Frodo. But Frodo shook his head, he did not want to come. Pippin moved on. Dínendal was standing further up, on the crest of the hill, surveying. Gandalf was seated near Shadowfax, muttering to himself as he smoked a pipe.

"Boromir?" Pippin asked. "Want to come?"

Boromir's chin rested against his chest as he lay on the ground, he seemed nearly asleep. He
blinked, raised his eyes.

"What? Come where?"

"We need some parsley for the cooking. I was going to go off and get it."

"Very well."

The Man struggled to stand, heavy and stiff. His movements were slow. Pippin waited until Boromir was fully upright. Gandalf noticed.

"Do not wander far," the wizard warned.

Pippin nodded. Once Boromir was ready, they walked off towards the clump of trees down the hill. The grass was very green against the sky's grey. Down amidst the trees, it was dark. It felt like dusk, even though it was only noon. Pippin and Boromir wandered among the trees, bending down occasionally to gather the herb. Boromir bent slowly, rarely. He spent most of the time trailing Pippin at a distance and drinking.

When Pippin strode back to Boromir, hands full, he sighed lightly. "There, this should be enough. We don't want to overdo it."

Boromir nodded vaguely. It was clear he was not paying attention. Pippin wondered where his thoughts strayed, but guessed it was some darker memory, for Boromir was had been cradling the flask for hours. He took another drink, and Pippin held his breath. Say something. He feared Boromir's reaction, but as a friend, he had to say something. Anything.

Finally, he gathered up enough courage and blurted out, "Don't you think that's enough, Boromir? It's not very healthy... drinking that much."

Pippin clenched his teeth. It had been a much lamer consolation than intended. He had hoped to say something meaningful, something wise regarding the War, the Ring, the *adraefan*. But he had cowered away from such a statement, feeling foolish, and instead picked the more innocuous health concern.

Thankfully, Boromir was not angry. His expression softened. "It is enough, little one. Just barely enough."

"Would you like to try a day or two without?"

Boromir remained silent for a long time. They were taking long in gathering the parsley, but Pippin knew the others would not mind. The Man looked off, past the trees and towards the darker skies.

"It will rain soon," Boromir murmured. "Much aches on days like these." He looked at Pippin. "For now, I should like to keep my drink. Perhaps another day, we will try without."

"Alright," Pippin conceded in a whisper.

He turned and walked back to the camp, holding his parsley. Boromir followed, and they did not speak for the remainder of the walk.

Back at the camp, the rabbit was ready, and the thunder cracked much closer. Seeing that it would rain very soon, everyone ate hurriedly and packed up. Once everyone was saddled and ready, almost as if the rain had been polite enough to let them finish eating, it began to pour down in thick, splashing drops. Gandalf lowered the brim of his hat, the hobbits and Boromir yanked on
their hoods, Dínendal let the rain wash over him. They trotted on. The rain fell heavily, pushing against them, soaking through their clothes and into everything. They needed cover, a place where they could wait out the storm. And so they dismounted, led the horses to some shielded spot. The sky darkened. The rain poured as they walked through the forest, enough so that each traveler was hidden from the next. They could not see each other in these torrents of water. These great, wet curtains. Lightening cracked close, thunder shook the ground.

Hours passed. They waited under a ledge of earth, all bundled up, crouching back against the ground, sitting. The rain began to lessen substantially. Now it fell only in random drops. They remounted, began again to trot along the path.

At one point, Boromir’s flask, slippery with rain, fell out of his hand and onto the ground. He dismounted clumsily and retrieved it from the mud. Getting back on the horse took longer than it should have, with many false pulls and drunken stumbles. By that time, the other Travellers had already passed him and were further ahead. He managed to clamber back on and urge the steed forward, so that he was once again trotting alongside Dínendal at the back of the line. The elf gave the Man a look, but said nothing.

Finally, by dusk, the rain faded to a drizzle, and then disappeared. The Travellers now walked in silence, Gandalf occasionally rumbling something to Frodo, or Merry and Pippin chuckling sporadically. The woods were quiet, with a humid fog drifting like a smoky carpet over the forest floor.

It was this calm which Boromir wished to shatter. The other Travellers were beginning to notice that he always did this in the evenings, as if the drink and the darkness leant bitter malice to him, which always showed itself at dusk, always at the end of each day. They would need to make camp soon.

“You mentioned the Dunlendings, Mithrandir,” Boromir called suddenly. He wanted to argue. “What strategy have you should we come upon them?”

Gandalf lifted his head; the brim of his hat dropped some rain from the back.

“There is no strategy, son of Denethor,” Gandalf replied. “I very much doubt we shall come upon them. And if we do, I think we shall easily defend ourselves.”

“You invest much faith in the hobbits.”

All four hobbits tensed at this. Gandalf snorted.

“Ha, and rightly so, I should think! Only a fool would underestimate our halfling friends now, Boromir. I thought you would have learned that by now.”

This silenced Boromir. The horses walked at a leisurely pace. Boromir was at the end of the line with Dínendal, and he saw Pippin twist around in his saddle to give him a questioning look. Boromir ignored it.

After several more moments, he began again, voice loud, words slurred.

“Is it not strange what days these are? When halflings may best Men in fighting; stealing away their victories, and their honor, all of it. When the lands of Middle-earth should look to the Shire now – not Gondor, nay, not anymore – that – that they should look to the Shire for protection and – and praise.”
Dínendal, who was riding beside Boromir, looked away.

“But mayhap there is another battle, another fight, another war waiting in the shadows. You may see where others are blind, Mithrandir, and I... I would have you tell us. For what did drag us to Imladris but shadows and dreams, hidden threats? Yet to know in advance what future awaited us there, would we have gone? Nay... nay, not when it should have been but a halfling to finish it – to save us all – to steal our victories. 'Tis not strange – a lifetime spent defending their lands – ‘twas time wasted, it seems, for they knew how to defend themselves better than I could have imagined and – ”

“Do not speak such nonsense, Boromir,” Gandalf interrupted. “Your words are quarrelsome, yet you will argue only with yourself, for none of us will humor you.”

But this only egged the Man on. As he rambled, his voice shook and his hands fumbled with the reins, picking at the leather. Everyone ignored him, though Frodo, Sam and Dínendal were taut with barely concealed irritation.

“Nonsense, aye, for what has happened has happened. And it is finished, all our tasks complete. Aye, the Ring is destroyed. And here we are. But what peace is it if those who fought for it are ill recognized? What relief for the soldiers – to Men – if they are shunned and discarded in times of peace? There were many who did give much only to fall, nameless, in some forgotten place! And there are some, who for a lifetime of defense, their city – everyone – everyone has rewarded only with scorn and insult!”

Dínendal looked away from Boromir. Frodo, his shoulders tense, his eyes glaring forward, interrupted the Man.

“You speak as if you are discontent,” Frodo said harshly. “But none of us here prompted your current state of disgrace. You are arguing with the wrong people.”

“Frodo...” Pippin murmured.

“Well, he’s right, Mister Pippin,” Sam intervened. “It’s not our fault if the Man can’t hold his drink an’ he gets like this in the evenings.”

“Ah, is that it? You all see me a drunkard?” Boromir snapped, anger flaring. “You halflings were not so quick to judge when it was my sword that kept the Uruk-hai at bay!”

“Me and Pip didn’t say anything, Boromir,” Merry growled.

“Aye, but I see your minds! You think me pitiful, is that not so?”

“Boromir, enough,” Dínendal interrupted.

The Man fell silent, seething.

That evening, they made camp under the shelter of some large oak trees. The ground was still wet, so that the hobbits complained about the damp blankets, but soon enough a fire was made and the horses left to graze. Boromir said nothing for the rest of the evening, and the other Travellers ignored him. Yet they saw his gradual inebriation, as well as his aversion to eating. He fell asleep against his bedroll, flask still in his limp hand, scabbard still on.

“Ooh, there once was a hobbit from Tookland...”
“Who for’s lass’s marriage had prop’ly planned…”

“A feast for a Shire-full –”

“The best ale by the barrel –”

“Only to find she’d picked a Sand… -yman.”

“Ted, to be specific.”

“A-A-And then there was a horse from south Gondor…”

“Who came one day and knocked on the door…”

“Saying, ‘Hello, old chap!’”

“And with just one tap…”

“Promptly turned the Took into an adorable boar.”

“The horse was Radagast in disguise.”

“So Ted’s got his lass…”

“And the boar chews his grass…”

“And everyone says, ‘Meriadoc, you’ve grown!’”

Boromir scowled. The two had been at it since morning. Inventing limericks, seeing how long they could keep it up, inviting the others to join in. And while Boromir would have otherwise enjoyed Merry and Pippin’s relentless jocularity, he had awoken with a throbbing head and the old shoulder and stomach wounds blazing. He had stoically resolved to ignore the drink, if only because he was too nauseous to consider forcing down any more – not after last night – and his hands had fumbled uselessly when trying to uncork the cap. And so instead he had to grit his teeth and bear the stiffness and pain, riding as always at the back of the line, shoulders and back curved, hands clutching the horse’s reins.

But the endless banter was grating dangerously on his frayed nerves. They had been riding for hours, and while the pace was easy and relaxed, Boromir’s inexplicable pain seemed to grow as each league dragged by until he found himself hunched forward in the saddle, occasionally burying his face into the horse’s mane if only to regain his senses. He could not ask the others to stop – not after they had stopped the night before for him to be sick, as Dínendal had calmly explained this morning – yet Boromir was sure he would be sick again if he did not simply collapse first. The usual lightheaded sickness which came in the mornings after revelry had warped into a fierce, strange pain – his every wound prickling, hot flashes spiking through with each breath – so that he curled more and more into himself as the day progressed.

“Boromir?”

Boromir looked up. He saw Dínendal riding beside him. The others were a little further ahead. He could still hear Merry and Pippin’s drone. They were at the front of the line. Gandalf followed, smoking a pipe. Frodo and Sam came next. The passing woods, green and empty. Birds chirping. Sunlight.

Boromir attempted to straighten in his saddle, for he realized he was nearly bent double, the slow
trot jostling him awkwardly, yet he could not raise himself more than a few inches. Dínendal watched him in concern.

“Boromir, you are pale. Is all well?”

“Aye,” Boromir said, gruff. “’Tis but the usual sickness after drink.”

This had the desired effect. Dínendal’s genuine concern changed into a more long-suffering tolerance, and so he dropped the subject and, giving Boromir a stony-faced nod, urged his horse forward.

Once the elf was gone, and everyone’s back was turned, Boromir exhaled and leaned forward into the horse’s neck again, resting his cheek against the mane. He kept one arm tucked under him, holding his stomach, while holding the reins with his free hand. But he could not remain in such a position without the horse slowing to a crawl, and so he forced himself up and urged the horse into a trot – murder on the knees – to catch up with the others.

The afternoon light burned though the tall pines and evergreens. The land was uneven here. They were near the base of the Misty Mountains. It was still warm, though the air was cooler here in the woods, near the mountains. Up ahead, the hobbits had stopped to gather some fallen fruit – Stewed apples with our tea tonight, gentlemen, Merry abruptly announced – and thankfully the company ground to a halt. Boromir knew he could not have maintained even this slow pace, and he had been very near abandoning his pride and calling a halt altogether had not the hobbits done it for him.

They dismounted. Here, at the edge of the forest, they could see the red-pink sun fading into the horizon. It would be evening soon, time to make camp. Boromir silently thanked whatever power had made this day pass so quickly. He dismounted – reeled slightly from the residual dizziness; it seemed last night’s brandy had not yet faded – and limped up to stand by Gandalf. There were some gnarled apple trees nearby, and the ground was littered with bruised fruit. All four hobbits busied themselves with picking up the apples which were still salvageable. Dínendal stood by his horse, using his knife to quarter one of his apples and feed it to the steed.

The wizard was standing on the ridge where the forest ended and the ground sloped downwards. Before them lay open country. Rolling hills. Faraway streams. The mountains looming to their right, glowing pink in the fading light. Gandalf stared forward, leaning against his staff.

As Boromir approached, Gandalf’s eyes flickered briefly to see who joined him. And the bushy eyebrows knitted in concern when he looked upon Boromir’s face.

“My word, you are a sickly color.”

A short exhalation. “Indeed, I do not feel so rosy-cheeked.”

Gandalf watched him, studying.

“And I would imagine it has grown worse as the day passed?”

“Aye…” Boromir frowned.

“And it is not the aftereffects of last night,” Gandalf paused, his beard quirked, “At least, not only the aftereffects of last night.”

“Nay… it is the old wounds. The – the Amon Hen wounds.”

A bemused growl. “Mmm…”
Boromir did not question Gandalf’s behavior, he simply concentrated on the pain, on keeping it at bay. And he no longer cared that the others could see how he clutched his stomach, how he stood half-bent, how he measured each inhalation-exhalation. But the hobbits were distracted with the fruit now, and Dinendal was tending to the horses, so they did not notice.

“I have felt an uneasy presence ere we entered these woods…” Gandalf began. “And it seems my suspicions are confirmed. The Uruk-hai arrows came from Isengard, tainted with the poison of Saruman. Morgul-wounds indeed.”

Boromir attempted to raise his eyes to look at Gandalf, but he found the effort somewhat difficult.

“Saruman?” Frodo asked, walking over with an apple in each hand.

Gandalf frowned, nodded, pointed ahead. By now the others were listening. Sam was holding his pack open for Merry and Pippin to dump in their apples, and Dinendal had walked over to Gandalf and Boromir. Once Sam had closed his pack and slung it over his shoulder, the remaining hobbits joined the group.


And so everyone followed Gandalf’s gaze towards the path leading down the next hill and out onto a field.

Two figures, dwarfed by the distance. Beggars. Even from this far away, the group could see them both hunched over — unknowingly mimicking Boromir’s posture — wearing rags, dirty. One of them, the one in front, was leaning hard against a staff. Behind him trailed the second, who would nod quickly or shrink away whenever the first spoke to him. They were at the base of the shallow decline, within calling distance.

“Saruman!” Gandalf bellowed, startling all the others near him. The two figures up ahead stopped, turned. Without another word, Gandalf straightened his back, squared his shoulders, and went marching down the hill with long, powerful strides.

“Wa - ! Mister Gandalf!”

Sam hastened after him, drawing his sword. Merry and Frodo and Pippin followed, hurrying down the hill. Boromir saw the two figures turn and walk back to meet the others. The two groups met halfway down the slope. Boromir could see the other wizard — sunken eyes, gaunt, a hooked nose. Gandalf was saying something.

With one miserable glance at Dinendal, who had seen to the horses and was now hastening to the group, Boromir hobbled after all of them.

“…waited in Orthanc,” Gandalf was saying. “He would have shown you mercy, Saruman, and justice.”

“Bah! Mercy and justice – I seek neither!”

As Boromir approached, he saw clearly the two beggars. The wizard’s long beard — black near the mouth, yellowing at the ends. Tangled strands of white hair, rustling in the wind. Heavy, dark eyebrows, bristling in a frown. And beside Saruman, the other beggar: Wormtongue. A pale, pointed face. Too-wide eyes flickering back and forth with fright, from the hobbits to Gandalf to Saruman to Dinendal to Boromir and away. A curved back, hands clutching at tattered robes.

“What I do seek,” Saruman continued, muttering, “is the way out of this realm…”
Yet as Boromir approached, still stiff with pain, even if he had forced his hands down to his sides, the wizard saw him and bared yellow canines in a malicious sneer.

“Boromir!” Saruman exclaimed. “I did not expect to see you, son of Denethor. The last I saw of you, you were dragging yourself away from Amon Hen in pursuit of those three elves. But now I see one of them here as well.”

Dínendal stepped forward. “Aye.”

Boromir nearly crumbled under the wizard’s piercing gaze. For the wound in his stomach was burning hot now, and with every word the wizard uttered, the burn grew greater, blinding white. Yet he forced himself to remain upright, forced himself to meet the skeletal wizard’s gaze.

“And the other two?” Saruman asked.

Boromir felt himself trembling. His hand drifted up to his gut.

Dínendal stood stiff as a rod. “Dead, wizard. Dead in Dagorlad and Barad-dûr, fighting the Enemy to the last.”

“Barad-dûr?” Saruman repeated.

The Black Tongue. Only a name. And yet Boromir – a blinding force – stabbing – reeling back – and he could have sworn the wounds were bleeding, oozing, blistering – a flash: snapping red pop hisses Third One screams – and a choked grunt.

Fading white to black, and then seeing: dry, trampled, yellow grass. A hand on his shoulder. A face, hovering by. Saruman’s laughter. Sam yelling something. And Boromir realized he had doubled over, both arms hugging himself, and a sickly cold sweat crawled down his neck as his entire body shuddered convulsively.

“What did you do?” Sam was shouting angrily.

“Nothing, my urchins! Old curses and lingering wounds, but they don’t depend on an old beggar like me. Or have you come to throw stones at one for another’s wrongs? Not every hurt is Saruman’s fault! But come, let us throw stones at an old beggar and his pitiful dog, for there is no one else around to bear the punishment!”

“Save us your self-pity, Saruman,” Gandalf interrupted fiercely. “You know your wrongs. And we are not here to punish you for them.”

“Ha! To gloat, then, at my present misfortune, that is your purpose,” he glared at the hobbits. “So high and mighty, my selfish urchins. You think you have grown so tall! You have all you want: food and clothes, and weed for your pipe. Why, I wager you would not spare a pipeful for an old beggar, would you?”

Merry was standing by Boromir, keeping a hand on the Man’s arm as the latter slowly regained his strength.

“I would, if I had any,” Frodo said flatly, maintaining Saruman’s gaze.

“I wouldn’t,” Sam growled.

Merry stepped away from Boromir for a moment. “You can have what I have left, since you’re so miserable.” He dug into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small, leather pouch. He tossed this to
Saruman. The old wizard fumbled for a moment before catching it against his chest. “Take what is left. It came from the flotsam of Isengard anyway.”

“Ah! And so the thief returns a morsel of his stolen bread! And I wonder what else you haelfdons have stolen from me!”

Everyone stiffened at that. Merry immediately stormed over and pulled the pouch out of the wizard’s gnarled hands.

“And for that, I’ll take it back, thank you very much!”

Saruman spit on the ground. “Bah! Well, it will serve you right when you come home, if you find things less good in the Southfarthing than you would like. Long may your land be short on leaf!” He turned to Wormtongue, who had sat down on the ground, and gave him a swift kick in the side. “Up with you! Up, you idiot! Come, if these fools are going this way, we’ll take the other!”

And Wormtongue rose, cowering, wringing his hands. “Poor old Gríma! Poor Gríma!” With that, kicking and whining, grumbling, hobbling, the two gaunt figures shuffled away from the group. Everyone followed their departure with fierce glares. Sam kept clutching the hilt of his sword, his knuckles going white. Dínendal’s grip on Boromir’s shoulder grew more and more fierce. The two walked away, towards the Misty Mountains, the red dusk glowing against their backs.

And once they were out of sight, Boromir carefully lowered himself to the ground, any pretence of strength long forgotten. With a grunt, he crumpled down onto his side, clutching his stomach, eyes squeezed shut. The others turned to him.

“Boromir?”
AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

After the meeting with Saruman, Boromir’s condition deteriorated substantially. Dínendal and Pippin, being the only who truly tolerated the Man’s drunkenness, became his implicit guardians. They made sure he stayed on the road when his horse veered from the path. They went to find him after he would stumble away to be sick. They dug through his things to find the bottles which he hid in his pack and they secretly poured a little away each day, enough for him not to notice. Had Dínendal and Pippin not been there, the group would have surely left him at the first opportunity. For his endless insobriety had slowed their progress to a crawl. They had hoped to reach Imladris before the fifteenth of September, but at this pace, the hobbits imagined they would never reach Elrond’s House before Yuletide. It was already October.

It was a clear evening when Boromir staggered away from the group, green-faced, mumbling something, disappearing into the woods. Their walk ground to a halt with several impatient remarks and poorly concealed sighs. Gandalf leaned back in his saddle, exhaling. Frodo’s face hardened. Sam blew his breath out with visible annoyance. Merry’s brow knit in a twist of embarrassment and concern. Pippin set out after him, but Dínendal stopped him.

“I shall go,” the elf said.

“Oh, we should just leave him!” Sam huffed. “Beggin’ your pardon, but this is ridiculous! We’ve spent more time on this journey just waiting for him. I say we send him back to Gondor!”

“Do you think he’d find his way back?” Frodo asked caustically.

“I reckon he wouldn’t,” Sam shrugged. “But it wouldn’t be our problem, Mister Frodo. Not anymore.”

Merry and Pippin said nothing.

Back in the woods, Dínendal tracked Boromir until he found the Man kneeling against a tree. They were far from the path, so there was no risk of being heard. The elf stepped forward. The Man was being sick. He shoulders trembled in the moonlight. His hands grasped the trunk and grass for support. He coughed violently. Dínendal cringed at the sound. When the heaving ebbed, the elf approached.

“Boromir.”

Boromir looked up, sweating and pale. His bleary eyes blinked several times. His mouth hung open, and he swallowed.

“Third One?”

Dínendal held his breath. A stinging pain in the chest.
“Nay, Boromir. It is I, Dínendal.” Dínendal hesitated. “Second One.”

“Second One?”

“Come, drink some water,” the elf retrieved a water-skin from his pack. The Man sat back heavily, leaned against the tree. His head fell back, scraped the trunk. His arm hugged his torso. Dínendal avoided the mess and knelt beside Boromir. He guided the Man’s hands to the water-skin, helped him raise it. Once Boromir finished drinking with a pant, Dínendal leaned back on his heels.

Dínendal hated this. Only with Boromir could he speak of Amdír and Golradir, of Dagorlad battles and Easterling swords. Of all the grief that weighed on his heart and chilled his stomach, all the grief that had grown, inexplicably, with each passing month. They had died in the spring, and it was now fall, and the wound in Dínendal’s heart had grown and throbbed and stung more than it did in the first months in Mirkwood. He found himself thinking back to them more and more often, all the time almost. He found himself hating that Easterling, hating that battle. What little he knew of Amdír’s end, he would relive and relive and embellish and imagine in his dreams, in his nightmares. And, as the Travellers would walk, Dínendal often found himself fighting off the vision of Golradir’s body – embedded in the earth, somewhere to the southeast, somewhere in the Brown Lands – rotting away. But no, Golradir and Amdír… They were in the Halls of Mandos now, peaceful, waiting. Why did Dínendal let his thoughts become so morbid?

And how Dínendal often desired to speak with Boromir, to soothe his own worries, to heal his own hurts by hearing what Boromir had to say! But Boromir had closed himself off completely. He had retreated into his own indistinct haze. He had forced his own problems onto the other Travellers by virtue of his drinking. Forcing help, forcing pity.

Who, then, could Dínendal speak with? Mithrandir was wise, and always listened when Dínendal expressed his worries or troubled memories. But Mithrandir’s consolations were limited to philosophical optimism. Only Boromir could offer a true consolation, for only Boromir knew what Dínendal had experienced.

Dínendal decided to try to speak with the Man, for he had much on his mind. As they had neared Imladris, his agitation had grown. This would be the first elf realm outside of Mirkwood he would visit. And judging from his home country’s somewhat reluctant acceptance of his return, he was not sure what the other elves of Middle-earth thought of the adraefan. He was nervous. He was having dreams of Golradir and Amdír chiding him. And while Radagast could have offered Dínendal comfort through wisdom and Dagorlad-experience, Radagast was not here. Dínendal was forced to settle for Boromir.

The moonlight was shining, and Dínendal saw Boromir’s head rolling back against the trunk, eyes closed and mouth open. Dínendal inhaled.

“I am worried for Imladris,” he said softly. “I know not if they have accepted the adraefan’s end. The Lady Arwen was e’er courteous to me in Minas Tirith, but I know not what her father thinks. I spoke little with him. And I am worried they will be less than welcoming. What of the others?” He sighed. “I have spoken with Gandalf, he says to trust in Lord Elrond’s wisdom. But it is difficult. I am unused to travelling with a name and a country. I imagine they have held the council of sorts… Yet what if they should not recognize Thranduil’s decision?”

Boromir rumbled something. Dínendal waited. The Man made no other move.

“Boromir, do you sleep?”

A sluggish grin stretched across Boromir’s face. He did not open his eyes, but managed to slur,
“Then you shall wait outside the gates…”

Dínendal laughed, nervous, relieved.

“Come, friend, I do not jest. It has troubled me since we decided upon this course. The elves of Imladris are just and fair, yet… I cannot help but be apprehensive.”

But the Man was asleep. His soft snores echoed throughout the wood. No, Boromir could not help. Boromir demanded help, he could never give it. And so Dínendal was left alone, to sort out his own misgivings. He was, essentially, the surviving *adraefan*. For Boromir had changed so much as to be completely removed from his former self. This Man, drunk and sleeping against a tree, was not the proud, brave Man the elves had come upon at Amon Hen. And he could not help, or console.

Dínendal sighed, placed a hand on Boromir’s shoulder and shook. “Boromir, awake. You cannot sleep here. They are waiting.”


“The *periannath* and Mithrandir. Come, I will help you to your feet.”

Dínendal stood, grasped Boromir by his doublet and pulled the Man up. Boromir reeled, lost his footing, stumbled. Dínendal steadied him.

“Can you walk?”

Boromir snorted indignantly. He shook himself free of the elf’s grasp. “Aye…”

But he stepped back and caught his heel against something. The elf lunged for his cloak, saved him an embarrassing fall. Boromir kept a hand on Dínendal’s shoulder. He leaned forward, gripped a swaying knee.

“Standing does not sit well with me…”

“Wait a moment, the dizziness will pass.”

Dínendal knew it was a lie. The dizziness would not pass for several hours, but the elf needed the Man to walk back to camp. They had already spent too much time away from the group. Dínendal imagined what Frodo and Sam would say, for their irritation with Boromir was no longer concealed. Even Gandalf was, day by day, growing impatient.

And so, slowly, clumsily, with many drunken falls and uneven steps, they made their way back to the group.

The others had, indeed, made camp, and they stared at Boromir as he arrived. Dínendal was helping him, keeping an arm around his shoulder, but the Man shook free of the help. He stumbled towards the newly made fire, found his things lying neatly by the others – Dínendal guessed Pippin had put them there – and fell onto them. No one spoke.

Dínendal took a seat. The others had already set water to boil, and Sam, as usual, was managing the meal. Merry leaned back against his bedroll, smoking, pretending not to notice. Frodo was seated next to Gandalf, staring absently in the fire, scowling. Pippin and Gandalf were watching Boromir. And Boromir?

Dínendal sighed. The Man was already asleep, sprawled unevenly over his bedroll and pack.
Gandalf cleared his throat. The Travellers looked up.

“We will reach the House of Elrond tomorrow,” Gandalf murmured. “There, we shall find warm beds and warm meals.”

The hobbits smiled at this, even Frodo.

“Not that your cooking hasn’t been exceptional, Sam,” Merry smiled.

Sam snorted. “Now, Mister Merry, there’s no need to tease.”

“I don’t!” Merry laughed.

“Nay, you are a skillful cook, Master Samwise,” Gandalf smiled. “But Elrond’s House shall provide a welcome respite from all our traveling. And mayhap,” he glanced at the sleeping Boromir, “mayhap it shall ease the troubled minds.”

They fell silent. Once Sam finished preparing the meal, they ate. Dínendal watched Boromir out of the corner of his eye, but the Man did not awake, even when Pippin nudged him to see if he wanted something to eat. Dínendal sighed inwardly. He looked up, watched the stars.

And so time passed for the weary Travellers. The meal was finished. They packed everything away, and each rolled himself into his blanket and fell promptly asleep. Dínendal agreed to take the first watch, even if it was hardly needed. But he was not tired. And he enjoyed the peace of such clear, cool, autumnal nights. They were his moments of calm, of quiet.

Eventually, everyone seemed asleep and Dínendal took a seat on a nearby log, facing away from the fire. His usual position. He toyed with the idea of turning around to see Golradir and Amdír arguing over some point. A bittersweet game. Dínendal often let his thoughts drift back to his brothers-in-exile on nights such as these. It was always painful. But he could not help it.

He imagined Golradir and Amdír. How they argued, how they bantered, how they fell silent when they ate. He pretended they were behind him. The fire crackled. Perhaps they were sleeping. Dínendal sighed. \textit{Stop it, you are being naïve.} He could not conceive of the long years stretching out before him without his two most beloved friends. He turned around. Boromir had not shifted in his position. Nay, his friends were gone. He was alone. The last one. The one destined to live. Destined to live…

Dínendal was about to turn away when he caught sight of two bright eyes peering out from a mound of blankets.

“Pippin?” Dínendal whispered.

The hobbit shook away his blanket, sat up and leaned against his hand. He too was watching Boromir, rather anxiously.

“Dínendal, I was thinking…” the hobbit swallowed. He looked up at the elf. “We should throw it all away. Right now, as he’s sleeping. So he can’t stop us. It’s the only way.”

A moment of silence.

“He will be angry once he awakes,” Dínendal finally said.

“Aye, but…” Pippin stood slowly. “It’ll force him to stop.”
Dínendal turned around. He almost wanted to stop the hobbit in this childish endeavor. Even if they stole all the bottles from Boromir’s pack and emptied their contents, it would certainly not stop the Man’s compulsion. At this point, Dínendal even worried it would worsen the situation. Even if Boromir’s violence – the madness everyone spoke of – had ceased for several months, Dínendal always imagined it was simply the drink which rendered him docile. He did not want to admit that he feared what a relatively sober Boromir might do once he awoke.

But Pippin was already tiptoeing over to Boromir. The Man had fallen asleep with his head and arm draped over the pack, and Dínendal watched as the hobbit hesitated. Then, moving deftly and quietly, Pippin lifted away Boromir’s wrist and gently pulled the pack from under him. The Man grumbled something, stirred. He moved to his other side, leaving the pack free of his weight. Pippin pulled it away and hastened towards the elf.

“I’m going to do it,” he whispered determinedly as he approached. “Do you think he keeps it all here?”

“There’s also the flask,” Dínendal said. “But, Pippin, please, consider what you are doing. You are forcing him to relinquish something he cannot give up so easily. It will be difficult.”

“Well, he must stop drinking!” Pippin hissed. “I’m his friend and I’m worried about him. Merry thinks this is the only way he’d stop, if we just threw it all away when he wasn’t looking.”

“Pippin, I think Merry meant – ”

It was too late. Pippin went bounding away from the camp, into the forest. He disappeared into the darkness, hauling the too-large bag with him. Dínendal watched his faint silhouette dart behind trees and over bushes. Eventually, the hobbit fell out of sight. Dínendal waited.

After a short while, Pippin reappeared from amidst the trees. The bag was noticeably lighter, and he had slung it over one shoulder. He was smiling as he arrived. Dínendal frowned.

“There,” Pippin said. “All gone. All into the stream.”

He walked over to Boromir, still sound asleep, and laid the pack beside him. Then, with a beaming smile at Dínendal, he settled back down into his bedroll and fell quickly asleep.


Dínendal scowled as he imagined what tomorrow morning would be like. Yet, as he scanned the others, his eyes lingering on Gandalf, he felt reassured. Indeed, the only way for Boromir to stop drinking, would be to stop drinking. However difficult and ugly that would prove to be. And they were all here, all of them, and they could – Dínendal swallowed at the idea – they could restrain Boromir if need be. But surely he was not so far gone…

The hours passed and eventually Sam awoke and took Dínendal’s watch. The elf was wary to give up his shift to Sam, but the hobbit urged him on.

“Go on, Mister Dínendal,” Sam said. “I’ll take over from here. I reckon there isn’t much to look out for, anyway.”

“Indeed, it has been very quiet,” Dínendal said.

And so Dínendal relented. He found his bedroll, laid down upon it, gazed up at the starry ceiling and fell asleep.
Slowly coming awake. A haze…

The sun had not fully risen, and in the pale dawn light, Dínendal began to take in the blurred scene: an exasperated Merry standing beside a raging Boromir. The Man had dumped his entire pack’s contents on the ground, and was snarling something at the hobbit, who kept shrugging and murmuring nervously. As Dínendal’s mind came into focus, he saw the scene clearly:

Merry, Frodo and Sam were hovering at a short distance from Boromir, who kept picking up objects and flinging them aside. Gandalf was still asleep, as was Pippin. Dínendal stood quickly.

“We don’t know, Boromir,” Frodo insisted. “There’s no sense in dumping everything on the ground. They’re obviously not here.”

“What is it?” Dínendal asked and approached the group.

“Mister Boromir’s lost something, it seems,” Sam said dryly.

“Boromir?” Dínendal asked.

But the Man was entirely consumed by the missing bottles. Merry looked at Dínendal anxiously.

“I just woke him up a few minutes ago,” Merry said. “Gandalf said to get everyone up and ready before dawn, but – ”

“Dínendal!” The Man barked as he jerked himself upright. “Did you do this?”

By now, Gandalf was coming awake as well, while Pippin still slept soundly. That hobbit sleeps through anything. Dínendal held up his palms.

“Boromir, be easy,” he soothed.

“I will be easy, Master Elf,” Boromir roared, “when I find the thief!”

“Thief?” Gandalf rumbled.

Everyone turned. The wizard was laboring to stand. With disheveled beard and hair, he took in the scene and frowned.

“What is going on?” he asked.

Dínendal was about to respond when Boromir suddenly stormed over to the only hobbit who remained sleeping. With a vicious jerk, he grabbed Pippin by the hair and yanked him up. Pippin screamed himself awake. Everyone lunged forward, stumbling over the things strewn about the ground. Pippin wailed as the Man dragged him from his bedroll, twisting his hair.

“Where did you put them?” Boromir bellowed.

Pippin only howled in pain, and Dínendal managed to disentangle himself from someone’s bedroll and rush to the pair. He grabbed Boromir from behind and pulled him away from the hobbit. Sam had retrieved his sword, and both Merry and Frodo hastened to Pippin, who had fallen against the ground, clutching his head.

Dínendal struggled to restrain Boromir, who was by now furious and kicking. Tufts of curly hair, bloodied at the tips, fell from his hands as he swore and threw himself back and forward. The elf held fast, hugging the Man’s arms from behind, yelling madly.
“Peace! Boromir! Peace!”

“It was you, you grubby-handed thief!”

Pippin was seated against the ground, covering his head with his hands, rocking back and forth. Frodo and Merry were crouching over him. Sam stood with his sword pointed at the spitting, screaming, raving Boromir.

“Boromir!” Gandalf bellowed, startling everyone, and momentarily silencing Boromir. “Have you lost your mind?”

Boromir stopped struggling, though his lungs heaved and his face was red. Dínendal did not release his grip.

“The filthy *haelfdon* has been rooting through my pack!” Boromir snarled and lunged towards Pippin. Dínendal jerked him back.

Merry stood and stormed over. “*What did you call him?*”

“He’s a mad stinking drunkard, see!” Sam roared. He jerked his sword towards Pippin, who was still seated, nursing his head. “Gandalf, he’s as mad as his father, and he’s a danger to us all! I say we send him back to Minas Tirith! Once and for all!”

Gandalf raised his hands. “Everyone, please, I ask you to remain calm!”

Everyone fell silent and Boromir shook himself roughly from Dínendal’s grip. He began gathering up his things.

“So be it, if you do not desire my presence!” he barked, gasping for breath. “Better to travel alone than in the company of thieves and aging imbeciles!”

Sam was about to go after him for that comment, but Gandalf held his arm out. They watched as Boromir roughly reassembled his packs, loaded the saddlebags and placed the saddle on his horse. The horse whinnied and snorted with agitation, sensing his rider’s fury. Boromir buckled the saddle into place. Once everything was secure, he kicked his leg over, nearly toppled over the other side in his zealousness, and then galloped away.

And so Boromir left them. Once he was out of sight, Sam sheathed his sword and hurried back to Pippin’s side. Pippin was sitting cross-legged, staring numbly at the ground.

“Are you alright, Master Took?” Gandalf asked, kneeling beside the hobbit.

Pippin looked up, nodded mutely. He touched his scalp and winced.

“Aye, he got a good bunch of hair,” he said. With a sudden look of horror, he looked up at the wizard. “Will it grow back, Gandalf?”

Gandalf chuckled and patted the hobbit on the shoulder.

Boromir rode hard, fast, ruthless. He pushed the horse on and on, ignoring its enraged and exhausted cries. He galloped, down the path, away from the wood, back out onto the plain, on and on, loud, vicious, furious. Hours passed, and he galloped on. The thunder of hooves, the blood in his ears, the strain and anger and humiliating pain.

And then, as suddenly as he had ridden away from them, he pulled the reins in. The horse reared
back, startled, nearly flinging him from the saddle, and then clopped down harshly on its forefeet. They had reached a golden field. Tall grass swayed in the afternoon breeze. The sun. Emptiness, wide and lonely.

Boromir dismounted. The horse was stumbling unsteadily, its muscles trembling. Sweat. He had pushed it too hard. And he stood for a moment, feeling the anger bubble up through his chest so as to be uncontrollable. He screamed in rage. A hoarse echo. The horse neighed, shook its head. He threw the reins harshly with another infuriated cry, unsheathed his sword, searched frantically for something to strike. The horse, the grass, himself, nothing, nothing. He spun around, finally thrust the sword deep into the earth and screamed again.

And so, he stumbled forward, fell to his knees, dug his fingernails into his skull, gritted his teeth, bellowed.

Already, the anxiety, the fear, the absolute hopelessness, gnawed at his heart so that he should tear it out and bury it beside the blade. The need – yes, there it was – the need for that artificial warmth coating his throat and his mind and his thoughts, everything numb and dulled. He needed it right now, for he feared the madness was overwhelming him. In the blur of his anger, of his residual intoxication, of his chaotic mind, he noted the horse was trotting away –

But it did not matter now, nothing mattered, nothing, and he fell forward into the grass. Into the soil, pressing his face deep down into the earth. He howled into it, tasted the soil on his tongue and against his teeth, feeling and relishing the pain in his stomach. And there was another pain, the pain of immediate withdrawal – he brought his hands forward, felt the tremors shake through them. The cold sweat, the convulsions, the nausea – the desire, the need, the craving, the absolute and complete frightened rage. Already the idea of sobriety was terrorizing him.

Worthless halfling!

Boromir clenched his teeth.

Sweet Eru!

The panic was there, coming back in waves, returning, swallowing him whole and crushing his bones. He would have cried out again, but suddenly he felt a staggering fear. To face the days and the nights – to face the nightmares and visions and the true madness and the past and Barad-dûr, Barad-dûr, Barad-dûr – nay, it was impossible. He could not do it. The bastard halfling had stolen his only means of survival, that single thread tying him back to the real world. True, it was a half-reality, a constant state of subperception. But it was the only thing, it was the only anchor, the only support, the only help, the only help, it was the only help. And the halfling had ripped it away, so that now Boromir was left adrift in a sea of maddening thoughts. Echoes of torture, and they were already creeping back, so that Boromir shifted abruptly, backing away from his sword as if it were a living orc.

He rose up on his knees, unsteady, and looked out over the grasses. The plain. So large. A hollow wind whistling through. Alone. The horse was gone. Boromir began to shake, his every limb shaking, shaking, shaking. And he cowered in desperate fear, for traveling with the wind, he imagined there would be Third One and First One and Barad-dûr and orcs and Easterlings and the Ring. He waited, holding his ever-trembling hands against the ground, looking back and forth, dragging in breath after painful, burning breath, gasping for air, fiery, trying with all his will to still his shuddering bones.

The wind was silent. He was truly alone.
The coils in his chest – all tightly-bound, all straining against his ribcage – snapped and burst through, so that he trembled altogether and nearly suffocated sobbing. Tears blurred his vision, already hindered by the drink-remnants, and he felt no comfort in his shaking hands. Nor in his weak legs, now damp with the earth’s moisture. When he stared at his hands, amidst the tremor and the blur and his tears, he saw blood. Pippin’s blood. And his nails, red and broken.

He wiped his hands against the soil, desperate, scraping, grinding away the blood. And all the while, sobbing, shuddering, wailing with despair and rage and terror and Barad-dûr. He ground his hands against the soil, burning them, rubbing the heels raw, leaving great black and red marks, soil and blood. He could not breathe for a moment – with the sobbing and his stuffed nose, and so he snorted violently, panicking, fell back, placed his stained hands against his eyes and wept again. Great heaving sobs, so that his stomach clenched, the gut burning, and the bile rose, and his ribs felt they would splinter against his straining lungs.

Lucidity was death – it was intolerable.

And the screams, the screams, the screams.

He did not want to hear Third One, smiling and laughing in Dagorlad, shouting, Aye, tell us. Settle our wager: is it the wine or the well? He did not want to remember how unrecognizable Third One had been when they had seen each other – just a quick glimpse, enough to yell out to each other, to yell out, Hold on! Resist, my friend! Resist! – as they were hauled in separate directions through the Barad-dûr halls. He did not want to think about that. About the constant drip-drip-drip in his cell, and the way First One had said, so accurate, And so we meet them head-on today. ‘Tis risky.

And a new terror. Boromir quailed. He had struck the hobbit. His only friend, who had meant to help him, even. And now, banished even from the last, small group which had tolerated him.

He could not return to Minas Tirith.

And Pippin! Dínendal!

Valar! Valar! Ai, I am a fool!

Valar, I am a fool…

Boromir slept there, in the field, once his mind – tumbling through a mess of terror and fear and despair – finally settled, exhausted, into nothingness. He half-slept for three days and three nights. He awoke fully on the fourth morning with clothes partly damp from old rain and partly stiff from baking in the new sun. He did not move for many hours, but simply remained there, lying against the ground, feeling his throat tight as the nausea swept through him, feeling too frightened to move, to think, to truly come back to reality.

The drink was gone. He needed to resist without it. And yet the desire was so great that he pushed himself to his feet, swayed with a light head, his muscles stiff and aching, and began stumbling back towards where he had come from, back on the path to Elrond’s House. He guessed Pippin must have hidden the bottles somewhere, and, in his absurd thinking, he went in search of them.

After two days of searching without sleep, he collapsed in some unknown part of the woods. The days were feverish, and his rest did not last long. As soon as his bedraggled head hit the ground, and his mind retreated into sleep, the nightmares came. He awoke with a scream, and some nearby animal darted away.

Valar, help me! Help me now!
Hallucinations. Visions of Third One wandering up ahead, on the path, so that Boromir stumbled after him, dehydrated and starving, beast-like, babbling. Visions of Faramir drawing his sword, raising his head, and crying out, Nazgûl! So that Boromir would fling his own sword around, lose his balance and howl. Expecting, at any moment, to be ripped from the ground, to have his ribs crushed, splinters in the heart, as the Fell Beast wrapped its claws around him and pulled him up, up, up—and he is going up, up, up, the ground is shrinking beneath him, Second One and the horse are disappearing, growing ever smaller, tiny spots amid a chaos of movement. He howled in rage and despair, fought against it, jerked his sword. Another cry, another wail of nazgûl. Over Ered Lithui, the highest ashy peaks brush past Boromir’s fingers, and the Beast turns around to give him a better view of: tears, sobbing, collapsing onto the ground and wailing into it, begging for silence, begging for relief.

He did not care for himself in these days. He did not eat, drink, seek shelter. He did not mind his garments, his relieving, anything. Had any passing travelers come upon him, they would have run from the sight of the soiled, gibbering Man, stumbling over roots and swinging his sword at invisible foes. Or they would have pitied him, if they had stout hearts, and helped him. But none came upon Boromir in these days.

In his more lucid moments, he would stagger to a halt and look around, confused. And then the desire, the need, the craving, the fear and the visions and the dying wails returned.

After eight days of wandering in the wild, Boromir arrived over the high moors and was suddenly greeted by a deep valley: Rivendell. Cascading waterfalls, golden sun, the perfume of secret flowers. Boromir stopped. He stared. He swayed on his feet. A passing elf saw him.

“Ho! A traveler has arrived!”

And before Boromir realized what was happening, he was being supported on both sides by two identical elves, pulled across the bridge and up to the doors of Elrond’s House. His mind was spinning madly. Yet he had enough sense to realize that his current state was somewhat less than appealing, and so his tremor worsened as he grew nervous. The elves, everywhere elves, identical, a dozen Third Ones, a dozen First Ones, all of them, they all urged him on, helped him up the steps as if he was an old Man.

A knock. Lamps in the windows. The door opened.

A figure came striding across the courtyard towards him. Blurs, trembling hands, cold sweat coating him, but he managed to focus enough: Elrond. The elf-lord approached hastily.

“Boromir?” he asked, concern plain in his voice.

“We found him nigh the southwestern pass,” a nearby elf responded. “He had no horse.”

Elrond was staring at him with such shock that Boromir felt ashamed. He guessed his appearance was unpleasant, to say the least. And his hands, always shaking.

Clearing his throat, he croaked: “Have the others arrived?”

Ludicrous amusement mingled with the alarmed worry on Elrond’s face. He nodded.

“Come, come,” he said, breathless. “We did not expect you, son of Denethor. But come, you are—you are in need of help, it seems.”

Boromir did not argue. His legs felt weak. His stomach, revolting. Days without food and, more importantly, alcohol, had left him in a state of near-constant delirium. The hallucinations, the
continual blurring between dreams and reality, the lack of sleep. Was this even true? Or another
half-dream? And all the elves standing around him, he thought he should break down and weep for
they were all so much like First One and Third One as to shred his heart.

He felt himself being led through the courtyard, up stairs, down hallways and finally into a room.
There was a bed. There was a basin of steaming water, clean garments, a meal. All hastily put
一起, blurs. Elvish healers. Third Ones and First Ones and Second Ones and Elrond and Third
Ones again. Someone was talking. Boromir sat on the edge of the bed.

“Lord Elrond,” his throat felt very parched, “have you anything to drink?”

“There is water, and an herbal tea.”

“Nay, nay, I mean…”

“Sleep, Boromir. You are weary with toil.”

Boromir ran sweaty, shaking palms against his clammy face. His throat felt so dry, and his lips
cracked. He needed a drink. The figures moved quickly, stripping him of his clothing, leaving him
trembling in his soiled undergarments. He resisted, feeling little control over his limbs. In the
sudden comfort of a room with a bed, his muscles jerked in recovery. And he struggled weakly,
embarrassed, against the healers treating him – cleaning and bandaging the stinging cuts and dark
stains and yellowing bruises – pouring the drugged tea down his throat. And he struggled, trying
numbly to push them away with thick, clumsy hands, as they cleaned away the worst of the grime,
the blood. And as the wave of sheer exhaustion hit him, he struggled against it. He saw Elrond
standing by the bed, and he attempted with all his will to focus on the elf – the elf who swayed
now, back and forth, becoming foggy, dim.

“Nay, Lord Elrond, I cannot sleep – what – where are the others? Lord Elrond, please, is there
nothing to drink? My hands – they – Lord Elrond, I need something to drink. You know this.”

“I am sorry, my friend,” Elrond said softly. “Rest now.”

And, as much as Boromir fought against it, his eyes closed and he slept.
Chorus VIII (Varda Comes to Boromir in a Dream)

Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

*Whimpering panic*

a need swelling, perverse and complete
burrowing deep in the heart
twisting, clenching tight in the stomach,
only to vomit out
a drink, a drink, just one more
something to help the day pass
soothe the nights silent, please
(ai, me, Valar, do you listen?)
everywhere the thick terror dripping
down the walls and lingering in the corners
like a black jagged fog…

A dream passes
melts into another and convinces
slips past the teeth and crawls
down the throat and into the wounds
- that scream -
remember that wound and remember
all the panic burning through the mind –

Just one more, just one more
drink
something to ease the tremor
bring steadiness again
bring relief, please, Eru,
liquid relief passing through the veins
ai, Eru, ai, ai, ai, ai,
Eru, please, please,
one will be enough, just one…


Drift up
away from Elrond’s house
let us consider the Valar in all this,
seeing as They are primarily responsible:

Manwë.

Varda.
Husband and Wife
look at each other
communicate with a thought,
pass the message along
down the line of waiting Fourteen
down to Weeping Nienna, Dreaming Irmo,
Salt-Water Ulmo, Mandos-Keep Námo etc
until,

“Poor mortal.”

“Terrifying.”

“Shall I, or shall you?”

“It would be Estë the Gentle’s role. She is the Healer.”

Exasperated Estë: “Ah, but I have an entire Middle-earth to comfort!”

Varda: “Very well, very well. I will go.”

At night, when the stars blink bright, clean and very far away
when insects buzz and Men snore and elves stare unseeing
when everyone is asleep
Varda comes, She tiptoes around the House of Elrond
padding down abandoned hallways, all dark
the marble cool against Her soles
She walks invisible-stealth into the room
the room of Her preferred Man,
Boromir.

She enters, dripping stars, a supernova, a galaxy,
leaning close, leaning over the crumpled sheets
and gently gently placing Her hand, starry cold,
against his over-warm cheek,
She lays two kisses
one, two
against each heavy-hooded, closed eye
breathing in the smell of his mortality
the vivid scent of something finite
bright and short-lived
She breathes in
smells
and then rests Her lips against his
just as he sleeps
he dreams quiet now, all peaceful, so quiet
and She feels his warm, cracked lips –
such a dazzling smile when he has the chance! –
and She hesitates
(because husband-Manwë might be watching)
but whispers soft in good-bad, divine-beloved Boromír’s ear,
the Valar’s plaything,
She whispers in his ear, so only he can hear:
“Seek you relief in a drink
or hope in a hand held out from dusty battle-clouds?
You know it does not work, my mortal love.
You are being foolish,
and we have not pumped hearty Númenórean-red
through your veins to see you dribble
it all away and dilute it with some mead.

Listen, my to-die love, listen close:
For your fame has reached the heavens,
stunned Us
such a Brave-Tall-Warrior, beaming bright sword in hand,
cutting down the Enemy and taunting Evil
with your reckless bravery, right up to the Black Gate
it has intrigued Us
good-bad prince, with some Valar cheering you on
others straining to destroy you…
all this failed Ring-temptation and repenting,
suffice it to say you have piqued Our interest.”

She smiles, and some of Boromir’s suffering is relieved.
Again, She speaks:

“Ah, my sweet mortal Man,
all rugged and ragged and ruined and scarred
long have I favored you, loved you as a babe,
the stars smile at you, wash you in perfect white-light,
and I will reward you after your toil,
(yes, a handsome reward,
enviable)
with a wife and son,
love so absolute, complete, all-consuming,
that it will wring envy from the heavens. I swear.

You will have peace, fine joy,
pearly white smiles and searing passion,
love
yes, I promise, love
and you will die a happy Man
old, wise, white-haired,
beloved by his son and grandson’s son
a peaceful death after a long-hard life, like sleeping –

But…

You must stay the course, Boromir!
Abandon the fears, the die-hard wounds
simmering torment of the Dark One
abandon the drink, the nightmares, the panic
fight free of this ghost-grasp, loosen
your heart, your mind, your shaking hands,
climb up over it
scaling high up
and there will be your reward:
a sweet and easy life,

as I, Varda, Elbereth, Queen of the Valar, Who-Scattered-the-Stars-in-the-Sky,

hereby Proclaim.”

And so She pulled herself away from his cheek,
laid another gentle, warm kiss against his scarred lips
so that he returned it, even in dreaming-exhaustion sleep
and let his own hot breath linger in Hers, so cold,
pulled himself up, seeking Her in the dark
as She drifted away
back to the Home of the Valar
while he sank down into his pillow
snoring.
Recovery in Imladris

Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

Boromir awoke to darkness. It was well before dawn. Someone had pulled a blanket over him. The sheets were damp, and he felt himself covered in a thin film of cold sweat. Disgusted, trembling, with already a loud-beating heart, he shifted in the soft bed, pushed himself onto one shaking elbow. *Imladris*. The room was simple. Tiny engravings on every arch or windowsill. His clothes, cleaned and folded neatly against a chair. All was quiet.

He swung his legs around, stood. The marble was cold against his bare feet. Light-headed and dazed, he felt his head ache for a moment, his vision dim. Swaying. There was a large basin on the table. He looked down at himself. Bare torso. Scars – the black stomach scar, darkened veins spreading out – scars. Ribs, too visible. Ribs to count. One, two, three, six… Very pale in the moonlight which streamed in from the window. Bandages here and there.

He walked to the basin. The water was tepid. He washed his torso quickly, shivering. And then he cupped his palms, collected water, washed his face. Alarming himself, as always, with the unevenness of his skin – the innumerable scars, open lacerations, indentations on his face – the newly trimmed beard. There was a mirror, and he avoided it.

He removed his breeches, washed further, dried himself quickly and donned the fresh garments. With several shirts and jackets on, as well as two pairs of breeches and his boots, he felt reasonably warm. He nearly considered putting his gloves on, seeing his hands tremble so much, but decided against it. For he knew his hands did not tremble from the cold.

Outside his window, Imladris was still. Quiet, all asleep. The frosty chill of an October morning. There was a low-burning fire in his room, but Boromir still felt cold. Or rather, felt ill, weakened, and in severe need of something to drink. If only to soothe his stomach.

There was a simple meal on the table. A mug. Boromir took the mug, sniffed. It was the tea – the usual herbal variation that he had been drinking since Radagast and Dagoth. He was beginning to loathe the herbal drink. Even if it relieved his nausea, and allowed him the ability to eat, he had grown to despise its taste. He left the mug. What else? Bread, cheese, dried meat, autumnal fruit. It looked repulsive.

And now?

So early. An entire day that had not even begun. A difficult day. He would see Pippin again. And Dínendal. Gandalf, Merry, Frodo, Sam. How would he face them? His heart gave a lurch at the thought. His stomach nearly revolted. Nausea. Fear. And, as usual, any present fear led inevitably to the black memories – to Barad-dûr. So that Boromir feared silence. Between hiding in his room, avoiding the others and tolerating the unbearable quiet, Boromir decided to move. Better to face them than to face the silence. Surely someone was awake. Elrond. He needed to find Elrond, thank him, and ask promptly for a horse to leave with. Perhaps then he could avoid seeing the others.
altogether.

But first, something to drink. Just something to soothe his nerves, to give him courage enough to face the day. The eternally long day. He checked the soiled breeches he had just removed. The flask was not there. He checked his own doublet, now cleaned. No. His jacket, the hidden pocket in his cloak, the side of his boot. Nothing. The flask was gone. The elves must have found it as they had cleaned his clothes the night before. Surely they had disposed of it.

And something else was nagging at Boromir – a burning, low and intense, in his gut. A shame. Shame at his weakness, at his compulsion, at his fear. As if the old Boromir, the one who had set forth from Minas Tirith for Imladris nearly two years earlier, was struggling to return. Was struggling to loosen the chains of Barad-dûr. Anger replaced shame. What sort of pitiful fool was he? All had fought the War, and he had been a soldier all his life. Why now should he become some craven weakling? Why now should he be the one to have nightmares? To fear the dark and the silence? To fear peace?


Boromir shook his head with a jerk.

Nay. Even without title, even stripped of rank and respect, he was still of noble blood. He was still a born and bred soldier. He would overcome this weakness. They had all fought, had all seen their abundant share of grotesque and terrible sights. They had all lived through it. That he should be the only one – even Frodo continues on! – to clean away his anxieties with alcohol reflected a weak spirit, a cowardly soul.

And so Boromir sat on the edge of his bed, gripped the mattress, and waited for dawn. Constantly drying and re-drying his sweaty palms against his breeches. Constantly swallowing back the nausea which crept up his esophagus like a rising tide – sickening. An hour passed. Once the sun rose, and the birds chirped, Boromir stood again, hoping his knees had acquired some new strength. He walked several paces around his room, his gut twisting in agitation, his anxiety building, until, finally, he moved to leave.

As he reached the door, his eye caught his scabbard leaning against a chair. Part of him considered taking the sword with him – if only to have something with which to occupy his ever-trembling hands. But he decided against it. For surely they all already thought him mentally unrecoverable. And to go around Imladris wielding a blade would probably give a poor impression of his mental health. So he left it.

Outside, the hallway was quiet. Yesterday, he had passed this same corridor in a frightening state of shock, and had understood little to nothing. But now, on this cold, empty morning, he saw the clarity and familiarity of these halls. The carpeted floors, the elven runes, the tall windows. The columns with their designs worked and re-worked, smoothed to perfection.

He stepped out into the corridor. Again, the pounding heart. The shaking hands. The cold sweat. He walked as lightly as his footsteps could permit, knowing already that an elf would find him sooner or later. He moved, constantly adjusting and readjusting his tunic and his belt, hoping that none would see him. And hoping that someone would see him, if only to talk. Whoever it was, as long as it was not Pippin.

Boromir walked. He arrived to a wide, oak-paneled room. The library. He remembered this library. How long ago was it? The Fellowship had left Imladris last winter. It was already autumn. And to be here again, in this same library where not a book had moved, not one particle of dust had been
blown off the shelves, while Boromir, instead, was a completely changed Man – it was unsettling, to say the least. He entered. Uniform shelves, uniform stacks. Irregular books. Some dusty, some polished. All kept in perfect condition, with yellowing pages as the only sign of age.

He wandered amidst these shelves, feeling secure in their weight and authority. Feeling hidden. Outside, the sun was rising. Enough to give light to read.

Noise. Someone had cleared their throat. Politely, softly, mildly. And yet Boromir jumped nonetheless. He jerked around. A tall elf stood before him, leaning against another bookshelf, holding an open tome. The elf had dark hair, pale eyes, a fair face. He looked as all elves did, so that Boromir nearly mistook him for Second One. For Dínendal, rather.

“Good morning,” the elf said.

Boromir’s hands began to shake violently. He could not help it. He struggled to maintain his composure – his heart secretly rejoicing at social interaction, yet quailing at it as well. But the silence could not be tolerated. And so he mustered his every reserve of nobility and grace, and bowed, hiding his hands.

“Good morning…” he murmured. After stumbling over a proper title, he blurted out: “Forgive me, but I know not your name.”

The elf smiled.

“We know each other, Boromir of Gondor,” he said. “Though mayhap you have forgotten. We saw each other little in the time I spent in your fair city, even less in the journeys to Edoras. I am Elrohir, son of Elrond.”

The twins. Even had Boromir remembered, he would have had no hope in identifying which was which. But he nodded.

“Aye, I remember now,” Boromir said. “Forgive me.”

The elf nodded graciously. “There is no need, friend.”

He closed his book, placed it neatly on a shelf.

“Enjoying an early morning walk?” Elrohir asked with a smile.

Boromir hesitated, unsure whether the elf teased or was in earnest. Was this the elf that had found him yesterday? He cringed to think of it.

He looked away, out the window. The dawn light was streaming into the room now, casting long pink shafts against the floor. Birds chirping. And outside – all fiery reds, subtle golds, occasional greens. Autumn.

“In truth,” Boromir replied, “I had no destination in mind.”

“Come then. Join me. I was to take my morning meal.”

“Very well.”

And so he followed Elrohir out of the library, back into the corridor, outside into the open courtyard. Dry leaves carpeted the fine marble and stone, all dull whites and silvers. Elrohir walked slowly, hands clasped behind his back, occasionally glancing at Boromir and smiling. And
Boromir knew not what to say – he had forgotten sober social graces – and so he simply walked, staring at the ground, his cheeks occasionally burning with an embarrassed flush if he saw another elf in a balcony, or someone further along the path.

Passing the courtyard, they entered a colonnaded gallery. A soft wind blew some of the leaves in, and Boromir shivered. They passed no one else, though distantly, very distantly, Boromir could hear music – a morning song – gentle and calming and… A feeling of weariness enveloped him as some of his tension was relieved.

“‘Tis my favorite season,” Elrohir remarked. “Perhaps. Sometimes it is. For the past few years, I have enjoyed the autumns.”

Boromir said nothing.

“I recall – how soon it was, and yet it feels so long ago! – last year’s great Council,” the elf continued. He smiled. “Yet, better now, where we may once again enjoy the turning of the leaves. Do you not agree?”

“Aye…” Boromir concurred lamely.

They entered a slim door which led into a short hall with a tall ceiling. Torches were lit. And from another door, further on, left ajar, Boromir could hear the soft clinking of plates and glasses. And a very familiar voice – louder than the rest – speaking furtively, joyfully, earning musical laughter in response. Pippin. Boromir stopped in his tracks, and Elrohir walked several paces ahead before stopping too. He turned.

“Lord Boromir?”

“I should prefer… a walk outside – I am not very hungry – thank you, Master Elrohir – but I…” Boromir stammered, backing away instinctively.

Too late. In that moment the door swung wildly open and Peregrin Took, looking flushed and content, biting down on a half-eaten apple, emerged from the kitchen. Boromir’s entire body went rigid, and his heart skipped. His mind screamed to flee, to run, to get away from this – yet he had no control over his limbs, and so he simply stood there.

As soon as Pippin turned away from the kitchen and towards the Hall, he saw them. The hobbit also froze, equally surprised. His cheek, still stuffed with apple. With wide eyes and a slow swallow, he stared at Boromir. Boromir nearly quailed under the scrutiny.

“Boromir…?” Pippin breathed.

Boromir could not form any response, his mind had gone entirely blank, with only a sickening sense of panic overwhelming him. He did not want to hold Pippin’s gaze, yet he could not force his eyes away.

And without a word, without explanation, Pippin burst forward, arms outstretched.

“Boromir!” he cried and threw himself into the Man.

Completely unexpected, Boromir stumbled back as the hobbit embraced him fiercely, squeezing his arms around his waist, pressing his cheek against his stomach. In the blur, Boromir caught a warm smile from Elrohir.

“Oh, Boromir!” Pippin pulled back, looked up, his eyes glistening, hugged him again. “We didn’t
– I thought – oh, we were worried sick! Where did you go? What happened? Are you well?"

The hobbit’s voice, muffled by tears and cloth. And Boromir brought his hand up, tentatively, placed it gently on the curly head before him. And he felt his own eyes prickle, his chest constrict, his chin tremble. Embarrassed and ashamed, he quickly pulled his hand away from Pippin’s hair, brought it to cover his mouth, for he felt the threat of losing his composure. The hobbit looked up, smiled through his own tears, stepped back to wipe his nose with his sleeve. Boromir swallowed, hoped his voice had regained some strength.

“Pippin, I – forgive me, Pippin, ‘twas – ‘twas madness and – ”

“Nay, not madness, don’t say that,” Pippin chuckled with a stuffed nose. “It’s all finished. Water under the bridge, as they say in my country. Oh, I’m just so glad you’re here! Everyone’s been fretting for days!”

And once again he lunged himself at Boromir, embraced him, squeezed. Elrohir laughed lightly.

“Were you expecting anything less than such a welcome, Boromir?” the elf asked.

Boromir looked away, again self-conscious of his overbright eyes and trembling chin. He struggled to find a response – but instead Pippin detached himself, grabbed his hand and began to pull him along the hall towards the kitchen.

“Come on, you’ve got to see Dínendal – he’s been so worried…”

Yet Boromir resisted the tug.

“Nay, Pippin – I…”

Once again, coincidence conspired against him, for Dínendal emerged from the kitchen in that moment, carrying what looked like Pippin’s jacket. He was smiling, and he seemed ready to shout a joke, yet when he saw who Pippin was pulling along, he stopped and stared. Again, Boromir felt the impulse to turn and run, to escape all this. Yet Dínendal, who recovered very quickly from his shock, smiled so warmly, so openly, that Elrohir laughed again.

And Dínendal approached, arms wide, and pulled Boromir into a laughing embrace. He leaned back, grinning.

“Blessed by the Valar, mellon nín,” he breathed. And then his eyes grew sorrowful, though his smile remained. “We worried for you.”

Boromir did not understand. He was beginning to think they were teasing him, or this was another vision and was not happening at all. But Dínendal was truly there, stepping back now, gripping his shoulder with a wide grin. Pippin was truly there, embracing him yet again, squeezing his side and laughing.

“Oh, will you forgive us, Boromir?” Pippin exclaimed.

“Forge you?” Boromir sputtered, and the tears came then, no matter how much he fought against them.

When Pippin stepped back and saw his glistening cheeks, he chuckled and gave Boromir’s side an affectionate punch. Boromir waved him away, covered his eyes with one hand.

“Give – give me a moment,” he choked.
But Pippin grabbed his free hand and urged him out of the hall and back outside. Dínendal followed, and Boromir could hear Pippin yelling, voice shrill with his own laughter and tears, “We’ll give you a moment later, and you can have all the moments you desire, but right now I’m taking you straight to see Merry and the others – they’ll never believe – Ho! Merry! Look here!”

Boromir was weeping openly now, unable to control himself, and so he simply let himself be pulled, Dínendal’s hand on his back, Pippin’s laughing cries ahead of him. Once the hobbit released him, Boromir hid his face in his hands, shoulders shaking. But he choked back anymore tears, wiped his nose quickly, saw a blurred Merry standing before him.

“Boromir…” Merry whispered. He was holding his pipe. Boromir covered his eyes again, clenched his teeth. Yet seeing the Man’s embarrassment, the hobbit quickly added, “Ah, don’t worry, Boromir. Pip tends to have that effect on people.”

It was a feeble joke, and Merry’s voice was thick, but Pippin laughed.

“Aye, well the poor Man missed me, Merry!”

Merry stepped forward then, and took Boromir’s hand, giving it one firm shake.

“It’s good to have you back, Boromir.”

The Man, not trusting himself to speak further, only nodded. Eyes glistening, a fragile smile before once again breaking down into sobs.

“So that is the infamous Boromir of Gondor?”

A window. Looking down from the House’s upper study to the open courtyard below. The windswept ground – dry, dead leaves cluttering, shuffling. And there – in the center – a shabby Man, nodding, speaking softly. The hobbits standing by. And now Mithrandir, walking forward, arms outstretched, laughing, a low rumble. Dínendal the Returned Exile smiling, keeping a hand on the Man’s shoulder.

The elf at the window toyed idly with his goblet of wine. Elrond approached from behind.

“Infamous?”

“Well. I have not heard all good things.”

“Thranduil, you are too harsh.”

The elf shrugged.

Dínendal sensed that Boromir was still embarrassed about his bout of weeping from that morning, even though the others had been far too surprised and happy to see him to care if he blubbered like a child. Indeed, the Man had crumbled with Pippin and Dínendal in the hall leading to the kitchens, and had continued for quite some time – eventually babbling apologies and explanations to Frodo, Sam, Gandalf, all of them. Boromir had even apologized to Bilbo, Dínendal recalled with a smile, which had caused the elderly hobbit to pat the Man’s hand, nodding and cooing, There, there, lad, no sense in shedding oliphaunt tears – before pulling Frodo aside and murmuring – Frodo-lad, forgive an old hobbit’s poor memory… but do I know this gentleman? Dínendal had laughed out loud at that.
Once Boromir had regained control of himself, nearly an hour later, he had been abashed and reserved, answering their questions with eyes averted. And slowly, slowly, they had learned of his days of madness, of his senseless wanderings. He did not elaborate much, but Dínendal pieced together the tale from what little Boromir said and what Elrond later whispered to him in the corridor.

All the travelers – Pippin especially – had exhibited a collective guilt since the departure of Boromir. For they had gone forth on the road to Imladris, bickering and arguing over the fate of the Man, and whether they had abandoned him to some harsh fate. Pippin had, ironically though not entirely surprisingly, championed Boromir’s cause – urging the others to turn around and search for him. He’s not well! We can’t just leave him to the wolves! Gandalf had reminded Pippin that Boromir is a doughty warrior, Peregrin – Was, Frodo had absently corrected – and Sam had chided him angrily. Beggin’ yer pardon, Mister Pippin, but do ye want ‘nother chunk a hair missin’? I know ye mean well, but the Man’s mad, so he is, and there ain’t no way ye can help him, nor any of us. The arguments had continued all the way to Elrond’s house, and then on and on, at times involving Elrond as well. The hobbits had not told Bilbo about their missing companion, if only so as not to alarm or disturb the hobbit. But they had discussed the events at great length with Gandalf, Dínendal and sometimes Elrond; eventually coming to the conclusion that the Man was ill and not to be blamed and perhaps they should have gone after him. Even Sam had, in the end, reluctantly agreed.

Now, the sun was setting over the towering peaks, so that the valley of Imladris darkened to a gentle blue. The hobbits – already anticipating dinner – had gone off to their rooms to get prepared. At Merry’s urging, they had decided Boromir’s arrival warranted a festive dinner – something which required proper attire. Boromir had naturally begged them not to, but it was clear the hobbits were also giving the Man space to rest, for Boromir – not having eaten or slept properly for many days, apparently – was visibly tired.

Dínendal sat with Boromir now, at the table in the center of the Man’s room, overlooking the Rivendell gardens and courtyards below. An elf had brought in a tray of sweetmeats and hot tea, though neither Dínendal nor Boromir had touched it. Instead they sat, speaking of the days of Minas Tirith, the days of Dagorlad. Occasionally, Boromir’s mood would slip – and he would bark some gruff remark – but then, wearily and softly, he would apologize. And Dínendal watched, watched as the hours passed and the Man shifted restlessly – visibly yearning for a drink – yet never once had he spoken of it.

Finally, when the sky darkened to a deep blue, and the bells of dinner would soon begin to toll, Boromir raised his eyes to meet Dínendal’s. They had been speaking of the hobbits, and the coming journey to the Shire.

“It has been a full day, Dínendal.”

Dínendal held his gaze. “A full day?”

“Since I have touched the drink.”

“Aye.” Dínendal spoke slowly.

“I did not…” the man swallowed, licked chapped lips, “I did not think I needed it so.”

Dínendal raised an eyebrow, questioning. Boromir dropped his eyes, smiled self-consciously, quickly. He dragged his palms against his breeches, stopped to pick the fabric at his knee. The smile vanished.
“Perhaps young Peregrin was right… Perhaps I shall try without?”

Dínendal stared. The Man’s voice – choked, cracked. His hands trembled.

“Boromir, are you going to weep again?”

Boromir laughed abruptly, loudly, and shook his head. He leaned back in the chair, still chuckling, rubbing at an eye.

“Nay!” With his free hand, he gave a dismissive wave before crossing his arms in mock petulance. “Bah! Dínendal, how you tease!”

Dínendal snorted. “Forgive me. Sometimes it is too easy with you.”

The Man’s laughter faded, and he stared, bemused, at an edge of the table.

“First One said the same thing once.”

“He ever delighted in teasing others. We faulted him that, though in truth it is one of the things I miss about him.”

“Aye… aye, I miss him as well. And I did not know him so long.”

“Fellowship grows quickly, when it is true.”

“Aye… so it does.”


“Well, I suppose I should tell you the long-awaited decision,” Dínendal said.

“What decision?”

“The lords of Eryn Lasgalen, Imladris and Lothlórien were to make a decision regarding a certain – privilege – and whether it should be afforded to me.”

Boromir winced. “Aye, you spoke of it in Edoras, forgive me – I had forgotten.”

But Dínendal waved a hand. “’Tis nothing. As you know, the Lord Celeborn left Imladris not two days ere your arrival, which is unfortunate as he was most curious to speak with you, nonetheless I am sure you will be able to tell Lords Elrond and Thranduil everything that needs –”

“Valar, Second One! Just tell me! What is this decision?”

Dínendal’s smile broadened.

“They have decided to grant me passage along the Straight Way. I shall go West.”

Boromir stared, confused. But then, as comprehension dawned, he smiled – then frowned – brow knit, thinking – then smiled again, this time understanding. A slow, sad smile.

“And you shall see Itarildë again?”

Dínendal nodded. But, noting the sorrow in Boromir’s eye, he quickly added: “Though not immediately. I may yet tarry in Middle-earth.” At this, Boromir smiled genuinely, causing
Dínendal to quip: “If only for Radagast’s sake.”

At dinner, the long table was crowded with plates of varying sizes, all manner of cutlery and crockery, three glasses in increasing size. Elrond sat at the head of the table, with Elladan and Elrohir flanking him. And then Gandalf, Frodo, Sam and Bilbo on one side. Thranduil at the other end. Coming back up to Elrond’s end: Dínendal, Boromir, Merry and Pippin.

Various elves swooped in and out, bearing trays of food, baskets of bread, jugs of water, wine.

An elf came by, moving slowly down the table with the fat bottle of Dorwinion wine. Gandalf accepted. Frodo and Sam declined. Bilbo accepted, giving Boromir a cheeky wink. Thranduil accepted. Dínendal declined.

And then, there, hovering at Boromir’s shoulder, the elf stood. The bottle of wine, tipped at an angle, waiting.

Boromir looked around. The hobbits were watching him. Gandalf was pretending not to. Dínendal, sitting at Boromir’s elbow, made no move.

Finally, a mutter:

“Nay, thank you.”
Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

The days slipped by without notice. For Peregrin Took, being in Imladris again was a welcome respite. As the days grew colder with the late autumnal chill, he spent much of his time exploring the valley of Rivendell with Merry. Or he sometimes sat with Bilbo, Frodo and Sam, while the latter two recounted their long adventures and trials as the oldest hobbit dozed. Pippin had heard some tales many times, such as the meeting with Faramir, while others, such as Shelob, he knew little of. And so he would sit and listen, sometimes with Merry as well, while Frodo and Sam, mostly Sam, explained the journey to Mordor and back. Sometimes Pippin and Merry were asked to supplement the story, adding their own individual adventures, and they did this with relish – embellishing certain details, omitting others. Pippin still did not like to talk about the pyre.

If he was not sitting with the other hobbits, or out taking long walks through the winding paths of Rivendell with Merry, then he was by himself, idly exploring Elrond's House. By the second week, Pippin knew where all the stores of food were kept, and he often visited these secret pantries and hidden kitchens. He knew where everyone's room was, and often, late at night, he would pass Gandalf and Elrond in the great elf-lord's study.

And they would be sitting there, silent, though the wizard's face would sometimes twist into an expression of shock or humor or concentration, so that Pippin wondered just what exactly was going on.

Once they caught him eavesdropping on their silence, and Gandalf had pulled back with a laugh, "Ho! It seems Master Took has come to listen!"

Pippin had blushed furiously, wondering if they were teasing him, for he could hear nothing at all. And he had quickly gone padding down the corridor, slipping into the nearest door which led outside.

Sometimes Pippin would go sit at the Dagorlad camp, as he called it. For Dínendal and Boromir frequently drifted away from the others, usually sitting together outside on one of the many marble benches along the paths leading away from the House. And Pippin would join them, bearing hot tea or cider or apples or simply a joke. And if he was bringing apples, he often amused himself with juggling them as he walked, so that once or twice he had to put aside a bruised apple for himself. And sometimes he would toss them to Dínendal and Boromir with a shouted greeting, though he stopped doing that, for Boromir's shaking hands always fumbled and ended up dropping his apple.

Boromir. Boromir had grown very quiet in Imladris. Pippin saw that he flushed with shame every time he passed Frodo, Sam or Gandalf in the halls, and he would stumble and falter as he spoke. But mostly he murmured and was ever mild and silent. Pippin was no expert, but he could tell the Man wished above all to be ignored. Yet he was far from ignored. Quite the opposite, everyone in Imladris was well-attuned to Boromir's movements, and there was ever an elf keeping an eye on
him. He seemed to notice, for he would smile crookedly with eyes lowered, visible chagrin, when they called a greeting to him or offered him food from the kitchens. The elves took very good care of Boromir - Pippin noted - nearly coddling him in his stay. They would insist he rest, eat, drink the herbal tea for his stomach. No one ever spoke of the condition they had found Boromir in - though Elrohir had told Pippin shortly after Boromir's arrival.

Soon enough Pippin realized that Boromir was struggling to forsake the drink. For he was pale and ill-looking and often his hands trembled enough so that Pippin, embarrassed for him, would look away and pretend to study a nearby tree. Yet once Pippin realized what was going on, once he perceived the Man's silent war, he grew positively proud of him. And he too began to take only water with his meals, subconsciously showing his support for Boromir's decision. And he would sit more and more often with Dînendal and Boromir, listening to Dînendal comment on this or that bird, or recount his romance with the elf-maiden, Itarildë. There was no bitterness in the fair elf’s voice; though perhaps nostalgia, and love, and sorrow, and a renewed joy. And Pippin always pulled Boromir back into the conversation with a smile and a joke, for the Man tended to retreat into his own thoughts too often.

They never spoke of Dagorlad, though Dînendal began to tell Pippin, little by little, whenever Boromir was not around, all that had happened. How they had found him, tending the wounds, the duel with First One, Radagast, the Brown Lands, the Easterlings, the death of First One, the final battle right under the Mordor mountains. The moment when Third One was ripped from the ground by a nazgûl, and Boromir had reached out to Dînendal, and their fingers had brushed just as the second nazgûl had swooped in and torn the Man from Dînendal’s sight. And then the arrow, thudding deep –

Dînendal told Pippin enough, so that when Pippin would wander by Boromir's room, late at night, and hear the choked cries and whimpering pleas, Pippin would hurry away, blocking out the sound, for he now knew everything that had happened, and he could not bear to think on it. He could not bear to see the scars now - for he was beginning to understand their origins more and more. And the limp and the stomach and the shoulder…

Once he had considered stopping, and going in, and waking the Man up. But he had cowered from that idea, inexplicably, and so he had hastened away.

One day, Pippin came strolling down the usual path, listening to the crunch of leaves as he walked, humming. He had some walnuts with him, and he was tossing them up, one by one, into the air and catching them in his mouth. He stopped doing that when one went down the wrong pipe, causing him to choke and gag and cough it back up, but he still entertained himself with throwing it up with one hand and catching it in the other. Juggling.

After eating the last one, he began to hear Dînendal’s voice amidst the trees. The soft cadence, the musical laughter. And there was another elven voice as well. Pippin recognized it immediately as Elladan, son of Elrond.

Indeed, when he came into the clearing, he saw that Dînendal and Elladan were speaking in the Common Tongue, gesturing animatedly, while Boromir seemed to be only half-listening. However, once the Man spotted Pippin walking down the path, his eyes warmed. Pippin smiled.

"Hi! What's this?" Pippin cried.

Dînendal and Elladan looked up.

"Ah, Master Took joins us today," Dînendal grinned.
Pippin arrived, plopped down at Boromir's side on the bench. He unbuttoned his outer coat, leaned back. "Aye. Just came from the Shire Camp up in Bilbo's room. It was getting a bit drafty in there."

Elladan chuckled. "So you chose to come outside instead?"

Pippin shrugged. "No sense in catching half a cold. It's like the Old Took said: 'either everything or nothing at all!'"

Dînendal and Elladan laughed at this, and even Boromir grinned as well.

And so they talked for a little while more, for the elves had been discussing the lands above the Iron Mountains, and what it was like there, and so Pippin listened and sometimes commented on this or that. Mostly *oh* and *really?* and *that sounds quite cold.* Boromir said nothing, though he would smile slightly, wanly, if one of the elves or Pippin teased him into the conversation. But apart from a rumbling retort, Boromir did not join their talk.

Eventually, Pippin pulled out his pipe. The cold weather, nipping at his ears and nose, made him itch for a good, long drag of Southfarthing's finest – which thankfully Elrond's House had provided in great barrels. *We leave it to you hobbits and Gandalf to smoke all of this, Master Took,* Elrond had said, *for we elves take no delight in such pleasures.* What joy! Pippin could not have conceived of a happier task!

Both Elladan and Dînendal arched an eyebrow and cleared their throats mildly when they saw the pipe, and so Pippin rolled his eyes and, resigning, stood.

“Well, then I’ll go for a walk, my intolerant elf friends,” he sighed. “Want to come, Boromir?”

Boromir looked up, for he had been leaning forward, elbows on knees, staring at his hands. He shrugged slightly, stood.

After bidding the elves farewell, the two of them began to take one of the winding wooded paths which led deep into the forests around the gentle springs and waterfall. The trees stood tall and dry, the sky was grey. The ground was slippery with mud and melting frost. For a long while, they just walked, Pippin smoking contentedly, Boromir strolling. The only sound was the occasional lilt of music carried with the wind, or the soft drag of the pipe, or the shrill caw of a winter bird, or the crunch of their feet as they walked along the narrow, winding path. They did not speak.

The days had become remarkably colder since their arrival in Rivendell, and Pippin began to feel his eyes watering and his ears and hands aching with the cold. Boromir must have noticed the hobbit’s shivering.

“Pippin, are you cold?”

Pippin took a drag of his pipe, exhaled with a laugh, teeth chattering. “Aye, just a t – t – touch.”

Immediately, Boromir began to unfasten the clasps of his fur-lined cloak. Pippin made to protest, but the Man hastened and simply dumped the huge, heavy garment on him in one swift motion, so that Pippin staggered under the weight. Boromir then busied himself with arranging the cloak around the hobbit, tucking it in as a father would to his child, until Pippin found himself wrapped several times over in heavy fur, with part of it pulled over his head like a hood. Boromir slapped his arms a few times and then smiled quickly, eyes laughing, shivering from the cold.

Pippin struggled to find an opening, and then promptly pushed out the hand which still held the smoldering pipe.
“Thank you,” he said shortly, and Boromir laughed out loud.

“Can’t have chilled halflings, can we?”

“Nay, of course not. But what about you?”

In response, Boromir straightened, ruffled the hobbit’s hair. Yet he stopped abruptly, and pulled his hand away with a pained expression, as if burnt. Awkward, he gave an embarrassed smile and turned around, moving to walk again along the path. Pippin hurried after him.

“Hi! Ho, wait, what was that all about then?” Pippin asked.

Boromir looked down at him, clearly taken off-guard by the question, but he made a face, shrugged. “What was what about?”

Pippin realized he may have looked somewhat silly, hooded and wrapped in an enormous cloak, dragging it behind him, but he frowned up at the Man. Serious. Boromir feigned ignorance. In truth, the Man looked just as silly, for he was wearing only his doublet and surcoat with his thick, leather gloves.

“We’re friends, Boromir, like we’ve always been,” Pippin said. “Nothing’s changed. You don’t need to… treat me formally or anything.”

Boromir nodded absently. “Aye, I know.”

“And you have nothing to be ashamed of,” Pippin continued. “So stop acting like you do.”

And here Boromir stopped, shifted his weight, sighed. He crossed his arms, looked off. Pippin watched – studied the scowling profile he knew so well – and waited. Small clouds of breath, fast evaporating. Boromir stood rigid for a moment, and he did not meet Pippin’s eyes when he spoke.

“Aye, there is shame. And much to regret, as well.” The Man turned to meet Pippin’s gaze. “I know you would forget all of it, little one… but you are too forgiving.”

Pippin opened his mouth – already prepared to cry out *I am not!* – but there was movement up ahead, followed by a booming exclamation, interrupting them:

“Ho! So I find you at last!”

Both Man and hobbit turned, maybe too startled. Up ahead, further along the grey forest path, a figure in brown robes, gnarled staff and a pointed hat was striding along. An owl, hovering overhead.

And although Pippin had never seen him before, he guessed immediately that this was Radagast the Brown – for the wizard’s clothes were a mess of twigs and fur, dangling lines of teeth – and his white-brown beard was frazzled and curled and it looked as if he was housing several small nests in it. He had a spring to his step which Gandalf did not – at least, not Gandalf the White – and a certain humorous expression which both Saruman and Gandalf lacked.

“Radagast?” Boromir asked, high-pitched, bewildered.

The wizard approached, ignoring Pippin altogether, and swiftly grabbed Boromir by the jaw. He tilted the Man’s head, first to the right, then to the left, studying him, finally poked him in the stomach with his staff so that Boromir doubled over, hissing in pain.
“Ah! So you are Boromir the Man, indeed!” Radagast exclaimed. “Forgive me, I was not entirely convinced it was you… my, you are looking as fit as Ragwing the Robin! And that is giving you a compliment.”

Pippin snorted inadvertently, catching Radagast’s attention. The wizard turned.

“And you have a hobbit with you!” He smiled, gave Boromir’s shoulder an affectionate pat. The Man was still hunched over, hugging his torso. “Come, Boromir, the introductions.”

With a pained swallow, Boromir straightened a little, motioned with one hand. “Peregrin, son of Paladin, this is Radagast the Brown, wizard of Mirkwood — ”


“Eryn Lasgalen,” Boromir sighed. “Radagast, this is Peregrin Took of the Shire.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you, little Peregrin!” Radagast said, bending down and grasping the hobbit’s hand.

“Oh, the pleasure’s mine!” Pippin laughed, shaking the wizard’s hand. Still smiling, he glanced at Boromir. “Who’s Ragwing the Robin?”

“A bird-friend of Radagast’s,” Boromir explained. “I am surprised you did not send him ahead with a message heralding your arrival.”

“Oh, I couldn’t,” Radagast said. “He’s dead, I’m afraid. Poor fellow. Died last August.”

Boromir stared.

“Well, there’s no reason to stare, Boromir,” Radagast continued, huffing. “Wretched creature was well past his due, you know that. He rests in peace now.”

“I am more shocked that you compared me to a dead bird, I suppose…” Boromir muttered, scowling.

“What, what? You are shocked? Why, I am the one who is shocked! The birds and the bees have been telling me all manner of wild tales coming out of your White City – all summer long – and I tell you, I could not believe them! I thought they jested with me, or had some quarrel with you to mar your name so,” Radagast huffed. He straightened, raised his staff, poked Boromir again in the stomach. The Man yelped, pulled away. “But I see that it is true then – for you have that pasty look of the drunkard that I hear you’ve become. And what’s this about Boromir the Mad?”

At this, Boromir looked genuinely pained, and he averted his eyes, keeping an arm curled protectively around his stomach. Pippin thought for a moment to intervene, but decided against it when Radagast’s expression softened. The wizard gave Boromir’s shoulder another rough pat.

“Ah, and now you have the look of a wounded deer,” Radagast rumbled, smiling sadly. “Apparently I have been brusque, once again. Forgive me.” He turned to Pippin. “I have had very little dealings with Men, you know, and they are quite a sensitive and proud race. Very difficult to interpret. Worse than the tortoises.”

“Tortoises are difficult to interpret?” Pippin asked, momentarily distracted from the rather grim turn of conversation.

“Very,” Radagast said.
Inexplicably, Pippin smiled. He liked Radagast already. But when he caught Boromir’s eye to confirm this fondness, he found the Man glaring at the ground. Radagast, however, seemed unfazed.

“And I hear Second One is here as well?” he asked.

“Aye,” Boromir mumbled. “Dínendal is he called.”

“Dínendal! Aye, of course!” Radagast nearly slapped his forehead. “And the other two – what was it? – Amdír and Golradir, aye?”

Boromir winced. “Aye.”

Radagast turned to Boromir now, grasped him by the shoulders, smiling broadly. “Indeed I am glad to see you… come, take me to Dínendal. We shall discuss much of the *adraefan*, and though it grieve us, I would have you tell us all that passed between you and Amdír after the two of you left us on Dagor –”

“There is nothing to tell!” Boromir barked. He pulled away, rough. “And what manner of speech is this? You disrespect their memory by – by speaking so lightly of them!”

“Now, Boromir, there is no need to be snappish,” Radagast frowned. “And you know I would never disrespect their memory intentionally.”

“Well, you speak as if their deaths were mere trifles!”

“I do not.”

“You do!”

“Boromir…” Pippin interrupted.

At Pippin’s voice, the Man flinched, startled. But then with chest heaving and a trembling hand against his brow, he nodded, eyes closed. Radagast was watching him closely.

“Nay…” Boromir muttered through clenched teeth. “Nay… I did not mean that. Forgive me, Radagast.”

“‘Tis nothing, friend,” Radagast said slowly.

“Come… shall we to Elrond’s House?”

“Lead on.”

And so Boromir nodded, once, a jerking nod, and turned, walking back along the path. Radagast and Pippin exchanged a look before following.

“Ha! Radagast the Brown, my old friend!”

“And what is it now? Gandalf the White?”

“Indeed. I see your bird-spies are everywhere these days.”

“Bah! Only to provide gossip for an old fool.”
“Ah, well I am sure you have had ample of that.”

“Aye, particularly from the White City.”

The White Wizard’s expression darkened.

“You speak of Boromir?”

They were in Lord Elrond’s study: Radagast, Gandalf, Elrond and Thranduil. Outside, already the early darkening of a winter evening. A fire burning in the hearth. A kettle of tea, which everyone except Radagast had politely declined.

They had come straight from dinner to the study, for Gandalf had muttered in Radagast’s ear that there were many matters to discuss, and Radagast had replied likewise. Of course, the Brown Wizard had means to learn almost all that went on in Middle-earth, if only with a fair amount of delay since most birds were loath to travel north in the cold months, and most insects could not survive the trip. Deer could be trusted – well-meaning if ignorant creatures – but they usually misunderstood messages. And foxes usually spread the news sooner to all the forest before telling Radagast himself – if they were not shot first by wandering archers.

And so Radagast was ready to be updated.

“Indeed, I do,” he said. “The last I had heard, he had become a public disgrace! They told me he was being called Boromir the Mad in Minas Tirith.”

Gandalf sighed, nodded. “Indeed, he was. And still is, I would presume.” The White Wizard clucked his tongue. “Barad-dûr has ruined him.”

“Though where it has ruined one, others have gained,” Thranduil added. “The surviving edledhron goes West.”

“I do not think it is so much one losing and another gaining, as different paths and different ends,” Gandalf said. “They are not so comparable, Thranduil.”

“Aye, but had it not been for Boromir, Golradir, Amdîr and Dînendal would still be wandering the lands to this day, and until the ending of the world. He spared them many years of shame, and torment.”

“Unknowingly,” Gandalf said shortly. “And Barad-dûr regardless.”

Silence. Gandalf and Radagast were seated, while Thranduil paced and Elrond leaned against the window. Radagast leaned forward, frowned.

“And they tell me young Amdîr met his end there?”

“Nay…” Gandalf shook his head solemnly. “The Third One died of his wounds later. In Minas Tirith.”

Radagast nodded. A scowl.

“But nonetheless it needed to be done,” Elrond spoke from the window, his back turned to them.
“For reasons beyond us, such were their fates… and such will our fates be, whatever they are, when they come to it. The exiles merely delayed the inevitable, whereas Frodo’s destiny has just come to fruition. And though these fates may be painful, they must come to pass, sooner or later.”

Pippin walked down the darkened corridor. He had nearly finished packing, he just needed to find his one scarf. He had left it in the kitchens – at least, he hoped he had left it in the kitchens. His older sister Pimpernel had knitted it for him, and if it should have survived the first journey to Rivendell, an embittered and malevolent tree, a demon in the dwarf-mines and all the other numerous near-death experiences with the Fellowship, an orc kidnapping and an Ent rescue, followed by an Ent battle which led to more journeying and eventually tarrying in a burning White City while Mordor pounded at the gates, or rescuing wounded sons from crazed fath – no, do not think on that. Well… if it had survived all of Pippin’s adventures only to be forgotten on a bench in a Rivendell kitchen – his sister would not be pleased.

And so he took the stairs leading down to the floor level, and he found a door leading outside and crossed the open courtyard – skipping, because it was cold and he was only wearing his vest – before slipping into the antechamber leading to the kitchens. The torches were spent, no one was about. Pippin walked up to the door, pulled at the latch. Slowly, heavily, groaning, it opened.

The kitchen. Dark. Long, wooden tables. Abandoned cauldrons, kettles, pots and pans. It was cold, the fire was out. Pippin went to the bench where he thought he left it – it was not there.

“Oh, no…” Pippin groaned.

He looked under the bench. Nothing. Under the table. On the other bench, where Merry had sat. On all the other benches, and under all the other tables. Nothing. Behind the stoves, near the hearth, in all the cauldrons. At one point, he saw something dark and possibly green catch his eye in the corner, by the wine barrels, but it was just a trick of light. He kept searching. On the windowsill, outside in the bushes under the windows. Back in the kitchen – Pippin looked around, shoulders slumped, dismal.

He had lost his sister’s scarf.

How would he explain this? He did not have the heart to lie – to say an orc had snatched it from him and gagged him with it when he and Merry had been captured – or perhaps he had used it to flag down Legolas and Gimli when they were in Lothlórien – or he could have also lost it while trying to fan out the flames on a wounded Faramir’s side while his father – nay, nay, nay. How many times must you think on it? Regardless, Pippin could not tell Pimpernel that he had lost it on an adventure. He would simply have to admit that he had misplaced it in Rivendell, only a few weeks before he could have returned home with it.

Dejected, Pippin left the kitchen, crossed the courtyard, found the door inside and took the stairs back up to the floor where his room was.

_Hullo, Nellie. Oh, yes, the scarf? I’m sorry – unfortunately I misplaced it in Rivendell on my way back. You know, where the elves are. Very kind, the elves. They promised to send it along as soon as they found it. No, no, I won’t need another one, thank you._

Or would that be rude?

_Oh yes, thank you, I’d love another one. Though only if it’s no trouble to you. It was really quite silly of me – considering all the places I had visited – to lose it in Rivendell. It was quite a nice scarf. So… did you hear about Frodo?_
He was just passing the library on his right, when, at the end of the corridor, coming from the bedroom there, muffled by the closed door, he heard the familiar cries. Boromir.

Pippin hesitated. He stopped in his tracks, locked, frozen. He was still quite far from the room itself, but he knew that he would not be able to pass it. Not when the Man was yelling like that. And so he decided to wait. He would wait until there was a pause in the Man’s nightmares, just a brief moment of silence, and then he would go dodging down the corridor, closing his ears and blinking back the tears.

And so he waited. He put his fingers in his ears – though it did nothing to mute the sound – and waited. All the while, his chest aching and his insides twisting.

Finally, when it seemed like it was not getting any better, Pippin decided to just move. He looked a fool, standing there in the hallway only because he was too frightened to walk past the door and hear the screams. It was better to just force himself past it and go.

And so he walked. Slow, jerking steps. He wanted to run, but his body was not responding to his commands as it should have been. And he stared at the door as he walked – listening to the screams as they became louder, clearer; Pippin began to recognize places, names – and then he recognized one name, which forced him to stop:

“No – no… no… Merry! Pippin! No! Run!”

Another strangled wail. Pippin’s heart – thundering in his chest. He guessed the nightmare, some Amon Hen scene, probably shifted and surreal and worse and – aye, he had had those dreams as well. Sometimes Boromir was in them, where the Man had dull, unseeing eyes and yellow-green dead-looking skin, dragging along with bleeding wounds and the arrows – Pippin hated those dreams. He hated dreaming of the others – dreaming of Merry, Sam, Frodo, Boromir, the Shire – all of them, in danger, dying, slipping away from him.

Tentatively, he knocked.

Babbled pleas, screams through the wood. Pippin swallowed, turned the knob, pushed.

He could just barely see the thrashing figure in bed. The shutters had been pulled, blocking the moonlight. But Pippin saw Boromir there, twisting, throwing his head back. A vivid reminder of the days in the Houses of Healing.

“Boromir,” Pippin called. He walked forward, clenching his fists, kneading a corner of his vest in one hand. “Boromir, wake up.”

Nothing. The Man nearly pulled away from the voice with a mangled cry. Finally, Pippin placed a hand – fearful – on the Man’s shoulder – the wounded shoulder, it was closest in the dark – and squeezed.

Immediately, Boromir came awake with a snort. The screams, disappearing into the night. Pippin’s hand was still on his shoulder.

“Bad dream,” he said.

Boromir stared at him, breathing hard. In the dim light, Pippin could just see the faint silhouette, could hear the Man’s gasps, feel the twitching muscle underneath his palm. He pulled his hand away.

I know what it’s like, Pippin wanted to say. Don’t worry about it. Things will be better in the
morning, they always are. Maybe you should talk to Elrond, he might have something to help you sleep better.

I’m sorry about the elves, Boromir. I’m sorry about Third One, and how you heard him in Barad-dûr, and how you still hear him.

But when I think about things like that, and people I miss, and people that... when I think about Denethor, and that day, sometimes I like to imagine that he can see what Minas Tirith has become, and that he sees you and Faramir and all of his loved ones and maybe me, too, and that he’s at peace and happy and he’s sorry about how it ended and everything that happened. So maybe you could think about Third One that way. Maybe. If it helps. It might, you could try.

But instead, all Pippin did was mutter, “Sorry.”

He turned to leave. And he walked a few steps, hastening to leave, before stopping abruptly, and turning back. He returned to the side of the bed.

“You didn’t happen to see my green scarf lying around, did you?”

The departure from Imladris. The first of November, a frigid blue dawn. Everyone was bundled up, their exhalations crystallizing in tiny clouds. Bilbo had come down to see them off, and the hobbits all crowded around him, saying their goodbyes. Radagast would be traveling with them until the Old Forest at least, where he intended to visit Tom Bombadil. The Brown Wizard stood by his horse now, whispering to it, complaining about the cold.

Boromir and Dínendal stood by their horses. Boromir clapped his gloved hands together, frowned, squinted. He hated mornings, if only because they felt like a perennial recovery from his months of drinking, and every morning he awoke to a throbbing head and nausea. Dínendal stood by, speaking with Elrohir and Elladan, laughing quietly.

Pippin walked back from the hobbit group. He was smiling. Boromir grimaced. How the hobbit could be so chipper on a freezing November morning was inconceivable.

Pippin tugged at the dark green scarf around his neck.

“Found my scarf. I had already packed it. Ha!”

He gave Boromir a quick laugh and rolled his eyes before trudging off to his pony. Boromir shook his head. They should be saying Pippin the Mad, not Boromir the Mad.

“Valar, would that I had a drink right now...” he muttered to no one in particular.

After nodding and bowing to the twin sons of Elrond, Dínendal returned to his horse. He mounted. Boromir walked to the side of his own steed, paused for a moment to allow his knees time to accustom themselves to the idea of riding for the next few days. One, two, and –

Once saddled, Dínendal smiled at him.

“Do try to be less merry in the mornings, Boromir. You shall sprain something if you carry on like that.”
Ill News at Bree

Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

"Well then, what would I be, Radagast?"

The wizard paused for a moment to think.

The day was overcast, bleak. Grey skies looming low. Rolling hills in the distance. They would pass Weathertop soon – this evening or tomorrow. And then further along the Great East Road, passing the downs, and onto Bree. And then further and further - passing through Buckland with the Old Forest to the South, and then across the Brandywine Bridge and Hobbiton and home at last.

All of Pippin's nervousness had long since evolved into a bubbling excitement. And each day seemed to drag by so slowly that he thought they should never get home. To think, he would be seeing everyone again! His parents, his sisters, his cousins, the Brandybucks, even those wretched Sackville-Bagginses! He could not wait, if only to see again the green hills and rolling country and sun-drenched homes. If only to once again have an ale in The Green Dragon or The Golden Perch, all of them together, Merry and Sam and Frodo and him.

And so to pass the time - or rather, to urge the time along as quickly as possible - Pippin had taken to talking with Radagast. For where Gandalf was acerbic and dry and mostly taciturn, Radagast was quite happy to prattle on about his birds or his home or anything else which struck his fancy. Today, the Brown Wizard had suitably offended Gandalf by saying he was resembling a boar more and more as he aged. Gandalf had harumphed, saying perhaps Radagast had forgotten social graces, but he did not take kindly to being called piggish. Radagast had promptly defended his opinion, sustaining that there was nothing wrong with boars, and being called boarish was not the same as being called piggish – but that, come to think of it, he was being rather piggish as well.

There had followed a lengthy bout of bickering and arguing, much to everyone’s entertainment, until finally Pippin, overwhelmed with curiosity, had simply asked the question. This had silenced Gandalf, who shook his head, laughing, and the others had perked up, interested in hearing Radagast's answer as well.

Finally, the wizard looked up.

"Well, Master Took, in truth I have not known you for very long... but you have the air of a rabbit, I feel."

"Ha!" Merry guffawed. "Hear that, Pip? I'm not surprised."

The others laughed as well, and Pippin felt his face heat.

"Now there is nothing to be ashamed of, Master Took," Radagast continued. "For rabbits delight in
games, and they are quite content to lead a peaceful, simple life - they do not pose themselves excessive philosophical questions, not like the over-wise toads. Nay, they are bright, happy creatures."

"Well, that's nice, I suppose," Pippin said.

"What would Merry be?" Frodo asked. He was riding his pony further ahead, but he reined it in slightly so as to join the conversation.

"Hmm..." Radagast rubbed his cheek with his pipe. "From what I see, and from what I have heard of Master Brandybuck, I would say he most closely resembles a fox."

Merry beamed.

"Just as frivolous as the rabbit, but, if needs be, also quite cunning. A very sly creature. As I'm sure you will all agree with all, judging from all that I have heard of this Master Brandybuck."

Laughter.

"That certainly sounds like you, Mister Merry, if you'll pardon me sayin'!" Sam chuckled from further ahead.

"And Frodo?" Merry asked.

"Oh, that's quite simple," Radagast said. "A donkey."

This provoked roars of laughter from all around. Frodo appeared stunned. Boromir, who had been riding behind them at a distance, came trotting by, slowing his pace as he heard the laughter.

"A donkey?" Frodo repeated, mystified.

"What did you expect?" Radagast asked, equally mystified.

Merry seemed entirely consumed by giggles now, and Pippin was watching Frodo with a smile. Sam was chuckling to himself, shaking his head. Up ahead, Gandalf and Dínenadal were speaking.

"I'm not sure," Frodo admitted with a shrug. "Perhaps I imagined myself more a bird... or, or perhaps a deer."

Merry howled with laughter at that one, and a small, embarrassed smile tugged at Frodo's lips, but Radagast simply shook his head.

"No, no, at least I do not know what you were ere the great journey you made, but you have most assuredly acquired the hanging head and burdened shoulders of a donkey."

At that, Frodo's smile faded and, solemn, he nodded. Merry spoke quickly:

“And Sam? Do Sam as well.”

Sam seemed to cringe under the wizard’s shrewd gaze. Boromir pulled the reins of his horse, guided it so that he was trotting alongside Pippin. The hobbit smiled up at him, and then motioned for him to listen since Radagast was about to make his decision.

After several long moments, Radagast nodded to himself. “I have come to it. An ox.”

“An ox?” Sam repeated.
“An ox,” Radagast said.

The others did not laugh, rather each fell into his own thoughts, interpreting.

“For like the donkey, you may carry the heavy burden,” Radagast explained. “Yet you have also firmer ties to the land than the donkey, and perhaps a harder sense of home. I expect you shall be the first to settle down among these bachelors, Sam.”

At this, Sam blushed bright crimson, and the others smiled warmly.

Radagast met eyes with Boromir. “Ah! And Boromir, I would assume you are quite aware of your closest animal relative?”

Boromir grinned crookedly, rolled his eyes. “So long as it is not a squirrel or some other measly creature, then I am satisfied.”

Radagast guffawed. “Nay! Ha ha, nay, you are by far the most bullish Man I have met in many years. Quick to anger, reluctant to seek help, one who delights in battle, thick-headed –”

“I am *not* thick-headed,” Boromir interrupted, annoyed.

Pippin laughed.

“Very well, very well,” Radagast ceded. “Perhaps I am teasing you. But, truthfully, you are very much like the bull.”

Weathertop. From ill luck, they passed Amon Sûl much later in the day than intended, so that they had to make camp with the dark hill still in sight. The other hobbits fretted over Frodo, who had gone pale and quiet for several hours, but he, with forced smiles and forced shrugs, urged the others away, encouraging that they enjoy their dinner and sleep without worrying too much about him. Gandalf and Radagast had fallen into a deep discussion, quiet, so that the others could not hear.

A cold, clear evening. Trees. The darkness of impenetrable forests, surrounding their patch of ground, their orb of light.

Boromir sat by his pack, knees up, staring blankly into the fire. Sam, Merry and Pippin were eating. They had offered him some, but Boromir had honestly said he desired none, and that it was better for them to eat it rather than let it go to waste by giving it to him. Dînendal sat across the fire, and Boromir had to smother a smile, for the elf was rigid, distracted, clearly eavesdropping on the wizards. They were standing several paces behind him, away from the group.

“I shall be happy once we leave this place.”

Boromir turned. Frodo arrived, pipe in hand. He sat on his bedroll, a few paces to Boromir’s left, stared into the fire. Watching the flames lick up into the night sky. He looked pale, with dark rings under his eyes.

“Tomorrow morning,” Boromir said.

“Aye. Not soon enough.”

They sat in silence, the fire crackling. Boromir’s expression darkened.

“Yet I can understand…” Frodo looked up. Boromir motioned vaguely, “…why you – I mean, the
unease you suffer.”

Frodo nodded. “Aye, more than unease… ‘tis like a heavy weight – ”

“ – pressing against your shoulders.”

“Yes. And my neck, like the – the…”

“…like the Ring is still there.”

“Aye.”

Silence. Boromir shifted.

“And you feel – ”

“ – as if no one could ever understand.”

They met eyes, smiled. Frodo chuckled. And both, unconsciously mimicking each other, sat back against their bedrolls, leaning their heads against their packs. Boromir folded his hands across his stomach, careful of the old wound, straightened his legs with a stifled groan. The other hobbits had gone to sit further off, facing away from the camp, and Boromir could just see the clouds of pipe-smoke drifting up in the moonlight. Murmured conversations. Dínendal was still eavesdropping on the wizards.

Frodo was looking at Boromir, wide eyes questioning.

“Where did you injure your knees?”

“With the Easterlings. I fell in a well.”

A muffled snort. “I’m sorry – forgive me – ‘tis just… it’s rather funny…”

“I know, you need not feign a scowl.”

“And they still trouble you?”

A pause, awkward.

“Sometimes.”

“That must be a pity, with all this riding.”

Boromir shrugged noncommittally, embarrassed by the questioning. Frodo seemed to understand, for he nodded, though with a soft smile. They sat in silence, listening to Pippin’s high-pitched laughter drifting over, followed by a cheerful exclamation by Merry and some murmured comment from Sam. The wizards had moved to the fire now, where Radagast was picking out sausages from the frying pan and placing them in the plate which Gandalf held out. Dínendal seemed distant, thinking, but when he met Boromir’s eyes through the flames, he raised an eyebrow.

When the wizards moved off again, moving to sit with the hobbits, and Dínendal had since settled down, staring up at the sky, seemingly asleep, Frodo spoke again.

“Does it hurt, sometimes?”

For a moment, Boromir thought he meant the knees again, or some other wound, and when he
turned, he saw Frodo was not looking at him, but was looking away, arms crossed, embarrassed.

“Does what hurt?”

“Gandalf said you have Morgul-wounds.”

A slow response. “Aye.”

“And do they hurt – I mean, sometimes – does it feel like…” Frodo shook his head, inhaled. “Oh, I’m not making much sense, am I? I mean – just sometimes it feels as if the blade is still there,” he pressed the heel of his palm against his left shoulder, “as if… it’s happening again. I suppose it must be passing this place. But… has it happened to you? Something similar?”

Boromir gave a bitter smile. “Do you remember our meeting with Saruman?”

“Aye. In Dunland?”

“Aye…” Boromir shifted, crossed his arms, entirely conscious of his own hand drifting up to knead the wound in his own left shoulder. “I suppose that is what you mean.”

“Oh, when you…?”

A nod.

A half-smile tugged at Frodo’s mouth. “Oh… I see. Forgive me, but I had thought you were just ill from the night before. Because you had had too much to drink.”

“Nay,” Boromir said, abrupt, offended.

Frodo nodded quickly, muttering an apology. An awkward moment.

Finally, Boromir, huffed, grunted, “Well… ‘twas also the drink.” He cleared his throat. “But I think ‘twas also that… thing of which you speak.”

“Aye,” Frodo said. “Well, it makes sense. For it was Saruman – ”

“ – who poisoned the arrows. Aye.”

The hobbits sitting further off had fallen silent now, and the sounds of the fire and the crickets and the owl and the wind and Dinendal’s even breathing could be heard. When Boromir looked over to the others, he saw the three smaller silhouettes – Sam, Merry, Pippin – sitting next to the two taller ones – Radagast, Gandalf.

“That is comforting, I suppose,” Frodo said. He smiled slightly. “Well, good night, Boromir.”

Boromir muttered his own good night and waited for the hobbit beside him to shift down into his bedroll, adjust himself, and fall still. Once Frodo had fallen asleep, he let his eyes wander to Dinendal. The elf lay on his back, hands folded across his stomach, gazing up at the sky, glassy-eyed.

For a moment, staring at Dinendal, as if that should trigger some Minas Tirith memory or Dagorlad thought, Boromir felt the strong and inexplicable desire for a drink. The numbing heat. The quick, easy sleep – thoughtless – without nightmares echoing. And yet no matter how much Boromir repeated silently that he did not need it, that he did not desire it, more and more did that desire, that need, grow, so that after what felt like several hours – though it was surely only a few minutes – he thought he should go, take his horse and ride to Bree tonight. If only to find a tavern and sacrifice
himself completely to the burning relief.

He was already considering plans – ways to explain it to the group – means of escape – when the elf’s eyes flickered, awake, and met his. Boromir flinched, Startled. The elf pushed himself up, smiled. The others were returning from further away. Pippin was stretching his arms with a yawn.

“Boromir, you are not weary?” Dînendal asked.

Boromir shrugged. “How is it that you always manage to startle me, e’en asleep?”

“I was not asleep,” Dînendal said. “I was thinking.”

Immediately, Boromir cringed to think if the elf had heard his conversation with Frodo. He did not want another layer of pity to coat the elf’s already painfully merciful and forgiving behavior towards him. Yet Dînendal gave no indication of having heard. Rather, he stood, walked over to Boromir’s bedroll.

“Seeing as you are still awake, I would speak to you in private.”

The others were beginning to settle down into their bedrolls. Boromir looked up quizzically. But Dînendal’s smile was gone, and he was serious now, frowning almost. He gave one meaningful glance to Gandalf and Radagast – enough for Boromir to blink, confused – and then went off towards the woods without waiting for the Man to rise. Boromir scrambled up, followed him.

They did not walk far. Once they were suitably out of sight and earshot, Dînendal turned, waited for Boromir. Without the light of the fire, the forest was pitch-black. The moonlight disappeared amidst the leafy canopy, and Boromir nearly stumbled over the roots of a tree. He held his hands in front of him, brushing away the low branches. And there, waiting against a tree, was Dînendal.

“What is it?” Boromir asked, somewhat irritated at having to rise from the comfort of his bedroll. Whether he would ever admit it or not, he was not as young as he had been in his first journey north – little more than a year ago – and more and more did he find himself wearied in the evenings. Shivering discussions in the deep night-forests he did not desire. Better the warmth of the fire, his blanket, empty sleep.

“There is some darkness in the Shire,” Dînendal said bluntly.

A pause.

“Oh?”

“Aye. I overheard Mithrandir and Gandalf speaking of it this evening. And my own unease has grown with each passing day. The War is not yet finished.”

A heaviness in his gut. Boromir scowled.

“And the little ones? Do they know?”

“Nay,” Dînendal shook his head. “And Mithrandir plans to leave them ere they reach the Shire.”

“What? Why?”

“I know not.”

Boromir growled, paced back and forth, back and forth, running again and again his head through his beard. Finally, with an incensed grunt, he sat on the ground with a thud. His knees hurt.
Dínendal frowned.

“And what means this?” Boromir asked.

Dínendal shrugged. “I do not know. ‘Tis only what I have overheard.”

Boromir ran a hand through his hair, exhaled sharply.

“And why did you listen? ‘Twas clear the wizards did not wish it.”

“Would you have preferred I had not heard?”

“Aye! I would have preferred it!”

Dínendal was silent. After a few moments, he spoke again.

“Whatever it is, I trust Mithrandir. I will not tell the hobbits. I thought only to tell you so that we may be prepared, whatever should happen ere our arrival in the Shire.” Dínendal paused. “I did not mean for it to anger you.”

“Of course I am angered…” Boromir seethed, quiet. “The wizard persists in hiding from us what we should know. ‘Twas the same in the dwarf mines.”

“Mithrandir perished in the mines, I was told.”

“Aye, and yet he walks with us still. I do not think Samwise knows such tricks.” Boromir swallowed, lowered his voice. “Nor Pippin.”

“What do you imply?”

“I imply that he keeps from us what should be known! I imply that he puts lives at risk with his secretive ways! And now you say he means to abandon the little ones to some black fate awaiting them in their Shire? It is madness!”

“Hush!” Dínendal hissed. “You shall be heard.”

Boromir bit back anything more, but he could not help slamming his fist into the ground before pulling it back up, kneading the knuckles, pressing his brow against the bruises. Heavy breathing. And the bubbling pain in his gut, the agitation before battle. For a battle awaited him now, some violence. And again – again – again – the desire to drink. To escape.

He cursed Dínendal silently.

“Of course…” the elf began slowly, whispering, “perhaps I am mistaken. I may have misunderstood.”

Boromir smirked in the dark. “Aye, perhaps.” He exhaled. Slow, shaking. “’Tis strange. All this time… I thought it should be peace which I loathed. That if only – if only I could pick up the sword again, hack through some vile creature – then all this darkness in my heart would flee.” He lowered his voice. “Yet now I tremble at the thought. What is there in the Shire that should draw evil there?”

Movement. Dínendal came, sat down next to him.

“I know not,” he said. “But I too am aggrieved by this news.”
“Would that it were not the hobbits. Not the little ones…” His voice trailed, whispering, and then suddenly he barked; a half-laugh, half-sob. “To have come all this way only to be cut to pieces ere they reach their beds!”

A hand on his shoulder.

“Not if we are there to aid them, friend,” Dínendal said.

Boromir clucked his tongue, leaned forward, covered his face in his hands. *I am not the fighter I once was*, he wanted to say. *I have no mind for battle-strategy, no strength for the broadsword, no spring in my legs. ‘Tis likely even Samwise could cut me down in a contest of strength.* And the cold sweat, like a layer of ice, coating his back, trailing down the spine. Ever since Imladris, the nauseating climb back to sobriety. And the slow, slipping desire… pushing against his throat, beckoning him to allow himself at least one night of numb oblivion…

Yet Boromir gave only a heavy sigh. “Aye. Not if we are there to aid them.”

“Now, beggin’ yer pardon, Mister Boromir, but yer face is as long as yer horse’s, if ye don’t mind me sayin’.”

Boromir silenced the cheerful hobbit at his side with a rough growl, telling him to leave off and mind his own. All day long, the hobbits – especially Sam – had been talkative and in bright spirits. Between Merry’s exaggerated tales of Rohan, and Frodo’s easy laughter, and Sam’s constant repetition of *Couldn’t a been sooner, so it is! Why, it’ll be puttin’ my heart at ease to see the old gaffer safe an’ well again!* their excitement had grown to a near giddy state. All day, all day – Pippin’s hysterical laughter, Frodo’s occasional singing, the constant cloud of pipe-smoke, and – and – and *we are not even come to Bree yet!*

Boromir and Dínendal had placed themselves one at the front, one at the back, already setting up some sort of defensive position should any attack come on the road. Gandalf seemed entirely serene, occasionally smiling at the hobbits’ enthusiasm. *‘Tis so easy for him to smile and hide the grim tasks to come?* Boromir glared. And riding beside them, a light trot, Radagast.

The sky was overcast. Grey storm-clouds. Icy November winds.

Boromir shrugged his fur cloak further, scowled, grim. Occasionally, he would meet eyes with Dínendal and they would share a private look. And the lands – bare, brown, barren lands. Rolling hills – yellowing, grass-less. Muddy slopes. The hobbits seemed blind to this harsh landscape.

They arrived at the East Gate of Bree by dusk. The grey clouds had dimmed to a smoky black, and just as Sam strode forth and knocked on the doors, the first clap of thunder sounded. Moments later, great curtains of rain, washing over them. The wooden gate swung open and, one by one, the travelers trudged through the mud into the town of Bree. Boromir heard, over the crashing noise of the thunderstorm, Pippin holler a joke to Frodo – saying they were doomed to always visit Bree on rainy evenings. And indeed the town was almost entirely hidden from Boromir – for all he could see were passing shadows, blurred, in the torrent of rain.

Hooded, drenched and muddied, the Travellers and Escort arrived at *The Prancing Pony*. And here, they dismounted, knocked, waited, occasionally yanking at their hoods, pulling further to shield themselves from the wind and rain. Again, Boromir and Dínendal had placed themselves in strategic positions – flanking the group – looking back and forth, back and forth. Boromir was surveying the empty roads so fervently, occasionally flinching back if the horse shook its head, that Radagast, who was standing next to Boromir, eventually commented, “Heavens, Man, calm
down! You are as agitated as a headless chicken, and you are working on my nerves! Do you always get this way when you are wet?"

Boromir gave Radagast a long-suffering look and did not answer. He too can jest so easily? Does he not recall what Gandalf told him? The horse gave another whinny, threw its head back, brayed.

The tavern door swung open. A small figure poked his head out before pulling it back in with a shocked yelp and slamming the door shut. The travelers shared irritated, slightly comical looks. After a few moments, the door opened again. And this time a large, heavyset Man appeared.

“Oh! Nob, you idiot! You gave me such a fright, and for nothing! And look who it is? Well if it isn’t those fine hobbit gentlemen! And Gandalf as well, hello there to you too!” He arched his head out, squinted. “Though I don’t know these fellows!”

“This is Dínendal of the Woodland Realm!” Gandalf yelled over the rain. “And these are Boromir, son of Denethor, and my colleague, Radagast! Gentlemen, this is Barliman Butterbur!”

“Well, it’s a pleasure making your acquaintance, fine sirs!” Butterbur hollered. “I expect you’ll be wanting to get out of this rain!”

The tavern-keeper beckoned for Nob to take care of the horses, though both Gandalf and Radagast insisted on tending to their own. While the wizards went tramping off towards the stables, all the horses and ponies in tow, the rest of the group entered the tavern.


The group entered this warm, dry place, shaking off their drenched cloaks, rubbing their hands together. All four hobbits were flushed from the cold, their curls plastered against their heads. Dínendal looked the same as he always did, only glistening wet.

“Well, we’ve the same room from last year, little sirs,” Butterbur said, taking each cloak in turn and hanging them up on the many-knobbed coat-hanger. “As well as several larger rooms for you gentlemen – I’m sorry, I’ve no head for names, what was it again?”

“Dínendal,” the elf said.

“Boromir,” Boromir grunted, still surveying the Common Room.

The door opened, bringing with it the noise and rain, before slamming shut again. Nob came barreling in, loaded with several saddlebags and packs.

“Upstairs, Nob,” Butterbur instructed. He turned to the hobbits, shook his head. “All the rooms are free, y’see. It’s been that way fer almost a year now – hard times, aye, hard times we’ve had.”

The door opened again, closed. And the wizards arrived, grumbling to each other, rough laughter, shaking their cloaks. Butterbur hastened to take each cloak and place it over the others on the hanger.

“What hard times, Mister Butterbur?” Frodo asked.

“Oh, I won’t dampen your spirits just now. I expect you’re all right hungry, aye? We’ve got some
nice broth stewin’, as well as some bread and cheese.”

“That sounds lovely,” Pippin nodded.

“Aye,” Merry agreed. “We’ll take our meal in the Common Room, then.”

“And we would like you to tell us all the news, Barliman,” Gandalf said, adjusting his belt. Beside him, Radagast was wringing the rainwater from his beard. “Especially everything you know of Bree, and of the Shire.”

Boromir stared. And what did the wizard need to know? He knew all of it already, it seemed. Why does he insist on feigning ignorance? Boromir shared a look with Dínendal.

But Butterbur simply nodded, moustache bristling.

“Aye, that I will!” he said. “I’ll join ye in the Common Room, fer as ye can see, there aren’t any other customers to keep me busy. Aye, and there haven’t been, for quite some time now. None but them ruffians that started coming in – not long after you little sirs went off with that Strider fellow – oh, they’ve been coming in swarms ever since then. But I’ll tell ye all of this in a minute – Nob!”

The halfling had just come down the stairs. He looked up, questioning.

“A round of stew and bread and cheese for these fine gentlemen. Also, any of the scraps of meat, if there are any left. Something to warm them up!” He looked at the group. “And a round of ale, sirs?”

“Maybe just tea for now,” Pippin said.

“I will have an ale,” Boromir announced.

The entire group turned to look at him, staring, and he met Gandalf’s gaze, challenging. The wizard frowned. Meanwhile, Butterbur simply nodded and turned back to Nob – stopping the hobbit mid-stride.

“Nob! Bring a kettle o’ tea and some ale as well. Just a pitcher for the gentleman here.”

“Aye, Mister Butterbur,” Nob called and went hurrying off to the kitchen.

Everyone was still looking at Boromir, though eventually they became distracted as Butterbur ushered them into the Common Room. They took their seats at the long table by the fire, and once they were all settled in, Butterbur excused himself to go help Nob in the kitchens.

Once he was gone, no one spoke. Boromir slouched low in his chair, stared at the table. He was sitting at the head of the table, with Radagast on the other end. And then, coming from Radagast: Sam, Frodo, Merry, Pippin, Gandalf. On the other side, facing away from the fire: Dínendal. Occasionally, Pippin glanced at Boromir, sideways, but the Man did not return the look. Dínendal sat beside him, staring blankly. And slowly, in several trips, Nob returned with plates, knives, forks, mugs. A tray full of steaming bowls – the broth. Wide platters of cheese. Butterbur returned. A basket of bread. A wicker pad and teakettle. One by one, Nob poured them tea, skipping Boromir. Butterbur meanwhile brought a large pitcher, poured Boromir a foamy ale. Merry also accepted a half-pint, and the innkeeper allowed himself some ale as well.

And so, they all set to eating, quietly, while Butterbur stoked the fire and took a seat in one of the chairs nearest to the table.
Not having yet touched his food, Gandalf leaned back.

“Tell us then, Master Butterbur. What is this news of ruffians passing through Bree? And you say the Prancing Pony has had poor business as well?”

“Oh, aye – ” Butterbur began and in that moment, Boromir took a sip of ale.

He nearly groaned with relief in that first moment. And his stomach, bubbling with a steady anticipation. As the innkeeper spoke, recounting his tales of missing Rangers, ruffians passing west to the Shire, the steady decline of Bree, the loss of business and the slow exodus of decent folk, the violence in the streets, everything, Boromir drank. Letting the heat wash through him, burning low in his gut. Long swallows, generous. And all the while, the others talked with Butterbur – only confirming what Boromir and Dínendal already knew – that there was some darkness in the Shire and apparently it was called Sharkey.

Boromir finished his mug, moved to refill. The others shot him sporadic looks – they were all keeping an eye on him, gauging the amount he drank. Let them look. Between chiding him his only drug and hearing what this fat barkeep had to say – they were speaking of Aragorn now, and the days when he was called Strider, and the Northern-kingdom – the others chose the latter. And for this Boromir was grateful. Aye, for it let him drink. Even when Dínendal met his gaze, causing Boromir to pause as he lifted the mug to his lips, even then it was not enough. Two pints, finished.

Sam. Sam was agitated now. Boromir poured himself his third drink.

“Oh, now this is bad news an’ no mistake,” Sam said, looking anxiously at the other hobbits. “I don’ know about all of you, but I’d say we hitch up and get going right now – tonight. Me skin’s gone all a-prickle to hear this Mister Butterbur’s talk, an’ me ol’ gaffer always said it was better to get things done sooner rather ‘an later. What do you say, Mister Frodo?”

“Let’s not be hasty, Sam,” Frodo said. “If we left now we’d be riding all night, and the roads don’t seem to be very safe for those traveling by night.”

While the hobbits were speaking, Butterbur noted Boromir’s drinking. He leaned in.

“Can I get ye anythin’ else, good sir?”

“Have you anything stronger?”

“Aye. Shire brandy and a fine whiskey from the Southern lands.”

“The whiskey then. A bottle.”

“So it be, sir.”

Butterbur scooted out, swept the empty pitcher out of the way, as well as several empty plates. He offered them some of Nob’s mother’s apple pie, and Radagast happily accepted. The Brown Wizard was seated across the table from Boromir, at the other end, and when Butterbur bustled out, Radagast met Boromir’s eyes sternly. Boromir ignored him.

Meanwhile:

“I don’t doubt that we could fend for ourselves for one night, Sam,” Frodo was saying. “But I think we should sit down and think about what we want to do before we go barreling off to the Shire with swords unsheathed.”
“Aye,” Merry concurred. “We don’t even know what we’re up against.”

“And I’d like to know who this Sharkey fellow is,” Pippin said. “Butterbur said he’s the leader, apparently.”

“And I’d like to know who this Sharkey fellow is,” Pippin said. “Butterbur said he’s the leader, apparently.”

“Indeed,” Gandalf rumbled. “Though perhaps a good night’s rest is what is in order. The Shire shall remain intact come tomorrow, I would think.”

The last comment was meant to be a feeble joke, for the hobbits laughed, nervous, but Boromir scowled and felt the strong impulse to stand up and confront the wizard. And what does he intend with these half-truths? He makes light of the situation, when he knows full well the gravity of it! Boromir pressed the palm of his hand into the wooden edge of his chair’s armrest, gritting his teeth. The whiskey arrived. Good. At least he could drown the impulse, throttle it in his throat. For he could not betray Dínendal’s confidence, and he could do nothing save accompany the hobbits to the Shire and aid them in whatever battle needed to be fought. But that was tomorrow. Tonight he would drink himself into silence, or at the very least babbling docility.

And so he poured himself a hefty glass of whiskey, drank. Across the table, Radagast pulled his sleeve up, held it with his free hand, took the fork and edged it through a slice of pie. The fire flickered, crackled, snapped. Outside, the winds howled, rattling.

“Well, Nob’s set up everything in the rooms upstairs, so whenever you sirs feel weary, you’re welcome to go on up. An’ I must say, tonight’s talk has been a bright spot in a month of Mondays. Now, ye’ve given me a lot to think of – and look towards – an’ so I’ll leave you kind sirs to yer dinin’ an’ rest. Good night, gentlemen.”

A chorus of good nights and thank yous. Downing the glass with a pant. And finally, finally – the faintest of buzzing in his ears, the lightest loosening of his limbs. Boromir suppressed a groan, leaned back in the chair. The hobbits had fallen to talking – Sam was constructing a strategy, moving saltshakers and forks around, shaking his head, instructing – but Gandalf and Dínendal, both of whom flanked Boromir, turned to him.

“By the Valar, son of Denethor,” Gandalf whispered harshly, “what are you doing?”

“Leave off, wizard.”

“And what do you intend with all of this?” Gandalf gestured to the bottle, mug, disgusted. “Have you learned nothing since Imladris?”

Across the table, Radagast finished his pie and stood, walked over. He took a seat beside Dínendal, leaned in. Boromir suppressed a groan, leaned back in the chair. The hobbits had fallen to talking – Sam was constructing a strategy, moving saltshakers and forks around, shaking his head, instructing – but Gandalf and Dínendal, both of whom flanked Boromir, turned to him.

“By the Valar, son of Denethor,” Gandalf whispered harshly, “what are you doing?”

“Leave off, wizard.”

“And what do you intend with all of this?” Gandalf gestured to the bottle, mug, disgusted. “Have you learned nothing since Imladris?”

Across the table, Radagast finished his pie and stood, walked over. He took a seat beside Dínendal, leaned in. Boromir rolled his eyes, huffed impatiently, shifting in his seat.

“And what is this?” Boromir asked, muttering. “A committee of caretakers? Can you not leave a Man in peace?”

“Aye, caretakers indeed!” Gandalf huffed. “You force us to be with this behavior!”

“Leave off, wizard!” Boromir snarled. He slumped back. “I weary of your scolding…”

“Boromir…” Dínendal said. He placed a hand on Boromir’s forearm, but the Man shook it away, reached for the bottle. He poured himself a full glass, shakily, slammed the bottle down. Taking the glass. Drinking.

“Boromir,” Dínendal repeated. “Stop this.” He lowered his voice, a private mutter. “It will not help.”
“Nay, indeed, it will not!” Radagast interjected loudly. Further down the table, Merry was lighting a pipe. Frodo and Sam were still discussing tomorrow’s plans, but Pippin’s attention was drifting towards Boromir’s end of the table. “Seek you relief from Barad-dûr? Still?”

Boromir attempted to suppress it. With all his will, gritting his teeth until his head should burst. But it could not be helped. He slammed the glass down with a crack, stood abruptly from the table, knocking the chair back.

“Nay, indeed I do not! For what relief is there to be had in such constant torment?”

Someone was holding him back. Dínendal. And Gandalf’s hand on his arm, a vise cutting away his circulation. Radagast was leaning back in his chair, staring wide-eyed. Everyone – the chairs pushed back as if they had all quickly moved away from the table. And Boromir saw then that the mug was broken – had he broken it? – and his hand was bloodied. Pieces of glass, lying shattered against the wooden table. A sharp sting in his palm. The hobbits, yelling. Sam, Pippin – standing. Frodo. Merry scrambling for his pipe, for he had dropped it in shock. And Boromir’s lungs – heaving, burning breaths. Butterbur came bustling into the Common Room.

Boromir quickly wiped his hand on his surcoat, heedless of the cuts, dragging away the blood. He could tell – he was red-faced, breathing hard. Butterbur glanced at the group, stunned.

“T – trouble, good sirs?” he asked. “My, but I heard a noise…”

There was a long pause; ragged breaths. Slowly, imperceptibly, Dínendal loosened his grip on the Man. Gandalf maintained his. Sam and Pippin began to sit down, watching Boromir or staring at the ground.

Finally, Frodo shook his head. “Nay, nay, no trouble. ‘Twas an accident. We have broken a glass.”

“Oh!” Butterbur hastened to the table. “Oh dear, I’ll get Nob in here to clean this up in a minute. I’m sorry to hear that! I’ll get ye ‘nother one right now.”

“Nay,” Boromir said, and his voice sounded hoarse. “Nay, there is no need, sir.”

Another lengthy pause. Gandalf let go of Boromir’s arm, muttering to himself, and sat. Butterbur nodded slowly.

“Very well…” he fumbled for a moment before adding, “I’ll get Nob in here. Just a moment, please.”

And he was gone. They listened to his movements outside, the floorboards creaking, shuffling footsteps. Nob’s name being called. Boromir was the only one left standing. And he looked down at all of them, all of them who would not meet his eyes now. Without a word, he took the bottle, pulling it from the table, a sharp sting in his hand where the alcohol seeped into the cuts, and walked out of the room, nearly colliding with Nob at the door.

“I’m on pins an’ needles, Mister Frodo, an’ no mistake. I can’t sleep like this. Me head’s spinnin’ with all these thoughts – why, the mornin’ couldn’ a come sooner.”

“Just lie still, Sam. Lie still and think on nothing. Sleep will come soon enough.”

Frodo could not help but smile as he heard the bedsprings creak as Sam once again tossed and turned. They were in their room, each in his own bed. While Merry had complained briefly about the mattress being too soft, he had eventually fallen asleep. Pippin, Frodo and Sam had talked long
into the night, first about Boromir, then about the news from the Shire and what they would do when they arrived, and who this Sharkey could be. But the moon had waxed high in the sky, and soon the sounds from downstairs and down the hall had disappeared, so that it was clear that *The Prancing Pony* was asleep. And so they had blown out the last candle and settled down.

But despite the late hour, Sam kept shifting restlessly in his bed, keeping Frodo wide awake. Not that Frodo slept well anymore – his sleep had become a light, fragile thing, easily dissolved with the slightest noise; not to mention Boromir’s strangled howls or Sam’s incessant mutters. And so he had spent the last half-hour lying on his back, staring at the shifting moonlight reflected on the ceiling, listening to Sam grumble.

“I can’t sleep either,” a new voice announced. “We should just talk until morning. Only Merry’s managed to fall asleep anyway.”

In the darkness, Frodo could just see the dim silhouette of Pippin sitting up in bed, leaning back against the wall. With a resigned sigh, Sam turned over, propped himself up one elbow.

“Aye, it’s no use,” Sam said. “Ever since Mister Butterbur gave us that warnin’, me blood’s up an’ it won’ come down.”

Frodo raised his arms, tucked his hands under his head. But his right hand ached – another reminder of the wound, of the Ring – and so he pulled it down, laid it against his chest, fingering the Evenstar lightly with his middle finger. Quiet. Merry’s soft snoring.

“Well,” he whispered, “what do you want to talk about, Pip?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Anything. Preferably something light and funny. I’m tired of all the ill news we seem to get.”

“Aye…” Sam concurred. “An’ even the pipe-weed’s gone out? By me ol’ gaffer, I’ve never heard of a pipe-weed shortage. Why, it’s never happened before, that’s for sure. What do ye think it means, Mister Frodo?”

“We’ll see tomorrow evening,” Frodo sighed.

“I can’t even imagine,” Pippin said softly. “Tomorrow evening and we’ll be sleeping in our own beds…”

“And back to double breakfasts with proper tea,” Frodo added.

A snort. “Aye…”

Silence. They fell to thinking. Even breathing. Frodo let his thoughts wander. He remembered mornings with Bilbo, and the sweet tea Bilbo used to make. He remembered mornings spent in the study, reading elvish books or studying maps with yellow edges. Evenings at *The Green Dragon*. Cheese biscuits. Litheday festivals. Visiting cousins in Buckland. Bilbo’s eleventeenth birthday, the youngest Blackfoot child’s high-pitched giggle.

There was a knock at the door which caused all three hobbits to jump. Immediately, Frodo’s heart pounded and his wounded finger throbbed. He heard Sam scramble for his hidden sword. Pippin was gasping for air. The pounding continued. Frodo thought absurdly: *A nazgûl doesn’t knock.* Ruffians? Slowly, Sam edged out of his bed, tiptoed to the door. He looked back to Frodo and Pippin, nodded. Merry muttered something in his sleep, turned over.

All three heaved a great sigh of relief when Sam swung the door open and had to dodge out of the
way as Boromir stumbled in. Even in the dark, Frodo recognized the Man’s large figure, reeling. His heavy tread. And he saw the Man stumble forward, arms outstretched, before knocking his knees against Sam’s disheveled bed and cursing fluently.

“Boromir?” Sam asked, whispering.

Frodo leaned over to his bedside table, grabbed a match, lit the candle. Boromir hissed at the flickering candlelight, shielding his eyes. He looked bleary, rumpled. Sam came forward, took hold of his arm to steady him.

“What’s Pippin?” Boromir slurred, speaking loud. “I must speak with Pippin.”

“I’m right here,” Pippin said. He had moved forward and was sitting on the end of his bed. “What is it?”

At this, Boromir straightened, staggered the few steps to Pippin’s bed before leaning forward, clumsily, taking the hobbit’s face in his hands and kissing the curly head. Frodo chuckled. And then Boromir, hobbling, uneven, knelt. He cupped the hobbit’s face in his hands.

“Little one, think you ever of Amon Hen? Little Pippin?”

Pippin glanced uncomfortably to Frodo. Acknowledging the call for help, Frodo climbed out of bed, joined Sam at Boromir’s side.

“I suppose I do, sometimes,” Pippin said, and Boromir promptly enveloped him in a hug, burying the hobbit’s face against him so that Pippin’s smaller arms flailed helplessly at the side.

“Ai me, so do I!”

Laughing slightly, Frodo stepped forward, pulled at the Man’s shoulder.

“Come on, Boromir, I think it’s time for bed…”

“Frodo!” Boromir turned – and Frodo was surprised to see trails of tears glistening against his cheeks. Voice cracking, the Man pulled Frodo into the embrace as well, shoving him next to Pippin. A kiss against his hair. “Frodo! Forgive me! ‘Twas madness – aye, when they say Boromir the Mad, if they only knew! Forgive me for that day!”

His face stuffed against the Man’s doublet, Frodo smelled all the harsh whiskey and sweat and leathery scent rubbed into the cloth. He gave Boromir a few comforting pats with his free hand, all the while trying to wriggle himself free. Beside him, he could feel Pippin also pushing away from the Man. But Boromir simply squeezed further, burying his nose in their curls, rocking back and forth.

“Do not forget that I love you as brothers, all four of you, and that Gondor shall ever – ever see you as her sons…”

“Come on, Mister Boromir…” Sam said gently. “Let’s go.”

Reluctantly, and with a final kiss on each curly head, the Man allowed his grip to relax on Frodo and Pippin, so that the two hobbits were left gasping. From the other side of the room, they could hear Merry mumbling to himself as he came slowly awake. When Boromir knocked against something as he stood, nearly stumbling to his side, Merry snorted, jerked awake. The hobbit stared at all of them, still half-asleep.
“What in the name of Sam’s gaffer is going on?”

“Nothing, Merry, Boromir’s just assuring us Gondor’s loyalty,” Frodo chuckled.

With a grunt, Merry flopped back down into the pillow, turned to his other side. “Oh, mother of Belma, enough’s enough, Boromir! Don’t you think so?” He muttered several more imprecations before falling again asleep.

Frodo and Pippin exchanged a look, smiling, and Pippin mouthed a humorous *Mother of Belma*? Meanwhile, Sam was still tugging at the Man, coaxing him back onto his feet and out of the room. Blearily, Boromir stumbled forward, bent down over Sam’s bed, clearly intending to collapse onto it.

“No, no, no,” Sam said quickly, vainly trying to pull the Man away. Frodo stood, hastened over to help him. “No, that’s a hobbit-size bed, Mister Boromir. Come on, we’ve got to get you to your own room, to a Big Person bed. A bit o’ help, Mister Frodo?”

“I’m right here, Sam,” Frodo said, and he took hold of Boromir’s arm. “Come on, Boromir. It’s time to go. We need to get up and going – Aragorn’s waiting, Boromir. Come on, Legolas and Gimli are already making camp.”

Boromir nodded loosely, pulled back long enough to ruffle Frodo’s curls with a clumsy hand and a clumsy smile. He then fell forward, nearly toppling over Sam. And so, slowly and colliding often with the doorframe, the door, the corridor wall, other doors, Sam and Frodo pulled, urged, tugged Boromir along, at one point helping the Man back to his feet when they all went stumbling to the ground outside his door. The two hobbits attempted to whisper and keep the noise down, but Boromir often spoke loud, laughing harshly or softening to his usual tearful apologies.

Finally, they reached the free room – apparently Boromir’s, for Sam nearly fell when he stepped on an empty bottle, rolling on its side, and slipped. The moonlight streamed in from the open window. A cold wind. As Sam helped the Man into bed, fully clothed, Frodo hurried over to the window, worked to close it.

“I need – where is Second One?” Boromir was struggling to get up. “I need to tell him of First One – ai, First One!” Tears.

“Now jus’ settle down, Mister Boromir, yer as drunk as a Sandyman,” Sam said, attempting to keep the Man down. “Mister Second One’s fine – an’ so’s Mister First One and Mister Third One and Mister Fourth One, too…”

“Nay, I – I need – ”

Frodo understood just in time to dive forward, pulling Sam’s hand away. “Sam, I think he needs to – ”

Boromir pushed them both away, jerked to his side and retched over the side of the bed. With a startled yelp, Sam jumped back, colliding into Frodo. Once he was finished, the Man fell back with a groan. Moments later, he was asleep. Silence. Frodo and Sam looked at each other in the dim light.

Sam sighed. “We’ll be needin’ that window open again, I’m afraid.”

“Sam…”

“Oh, I don’t feel right leavin’ all this for ol’ Nob to clean up. And I’d wager Mister Boromir’s not
quite finished yet, if you take my meaning. Looks like we’re here for the night.”

Frodo shrugged, walked over to the window. In the east, he saw the faintest glimmer of light.

“Almost dawn,” he said.

From behind him, he could hear Sam dragging over a bucket, searching for some towels. “Aye?”

“Aye…”

“Well, thas’ a relief. I thought this night would never end.”

“We’ll be leaving in a few hours.” Frodo touched the Evenstar at his neck again. And then, from the bed, a choking sound, coughing. He turned to see Sam helping Boromir to his side.

“Easy, easy now, Mister Boromir, that’s it…”

Once the Man heaved the rest of last night’s meal, and flopped back down onto the bed, mumbling about First One again, Sam began pouring the water from the basin into the bucket. He dipped a towel in, knelt down. Frodo meant to help, but despite himself, he hesitated. After a few moments of indecision, he stepped forward, took the second towel, dipped it in the water.

“Oh no, no, Mister Frodo, not you. This ain’t work for a gentlehobbit like yerself. Just keep an eye on him, I’ll take care a the rest.”

“It’s a foul business, Sam, I’d rather help you. Two will finish it sooner than one, anyway.”

He knelt down, began scrubbing at the wood. Meanwhile, the light – a soft pink. Dawn. They would meet the others outside, in the frigid morning air, shivering beside their horses. Frodo frowned at the smell, but he smiled inwardly when thinking about their departure. It had become such a familiar sight, especially in the last few months, of Merry and Pippin standing next to their ponies, stamping their feet, rubbing their hands together, whispering some inane quip or carrying on with Shire gossip while Gandalf pretended not to listen.

“Guh, what we’d need here are some pinchers,” Sam said, wrinkling his nose. “Now, I’ve got a lot a respect for the Man – despite everything – but when it comes down to it, he’s become a rank stinking drunkard an’ no mistake.”

Frodo sat back on his heels.

“Aye… but it will be a pity to see him go. Merry and Pippin have always been rather fond of him,” he added with a smile, “despite everything.” A pause. Frodo turned his head, looked out the window. Already, the pale light was spreading. “Minas Tirith has nothing for him now.”

Sam shrugged, kept cleaning.

“Can you imagine that, Sam? Coming back to find your home unrecognizable? Everything different, the Shire changed, and for the worse?”

“Now, Mister Frodo, there’s no sense thinkin’ like that. That’s those dark places talkin’, not you. I’m sure Minas Tirith is the same as it was before Mister Boromir left it, and I’m sure the Shire is just the same as we left it too. It’s not the places that change, Mister Frodo, it’s us. An’ so they just look different.”

“And feel different.”
“Aye, that too. But it’ll be the same old Bag End once you’re back in it, you’ll see. I jus’ hope the old gaffer’s kept the garden in order – I don’ want a be pullin’ weeds out fer the next month.”
A throbbing head. Harsh light. The sounds of town traffic – horses, wagons. People talking. For a moment, still confused with sleep, Boromir wondered if some furry animal had crawled into his throat in the night to die there. And then, when his senses focused – and he heard a harsh knocking on the door, the pain focalizing behind his eyes – and all the vague, incoherent flashes returned from last night – arriving at *The Prancing Pony*, the news of ruffians in the Shire, breaking the glass, closing himself in his room, nearly slamming his fist through the window – Boromir let out a long, inarticulate groan.

He heard the door creak open. Someone entered. Glasses clinking. Boromir’s nausea rose as he smelled the hot tea.

“Ah, you’re awake then, sir!” It was Butterbur. “Beggin’ yer pardon, but ye seemed well nigh dead this mornin’.”

The innkeeper chuckled softly, politely, and Boromir’s stomach churned. He focused on lying on his side, keeping his eyes closed, fighting down the urge to be sick.

“Here ye go, Nob fixed up some lemon tea and nice, dry toast – good for sore heads and an upset stomach.”

At hearing the words *lemon tea, toast* and *upset stomach*, Boromir had to crack open his eyes, if only to grab blindly at the basin beside the bed. He fumbled for it, while Butterbur hastened to set the tray on the bedside stand and help him. Heedless of the embarrassment, Boromir grabbed the basin, ducked his head, and vomited. He was vaguely aware of Butterbur’s cooing encouragement and a hand against his back. After spitting, wiping his nose with the back of his sleeve, he handed the basin, shaking, to Butterbur and fell back into bed.

“What time is it?” he croaked.

“Why, it’s well nigh afternoon tea, sir.”

Boromir nearly shot up in bed, but thought better of it as his vision swam and the bile rose. He braced himself with one hand, blinked furiously.

“Afternoon?”

“Aye, sir.”

“And the halflings?”

“Oh, they left this mornin’ at dawn, sir. With Gandalf.”
Boromir swore sharply. He swung his legs over, stood unevenly, pushed himself from the bed, and lurched out of the room. Knocking against the wall, Boromir paused for a moment, leaning, hoping to regain some strength in his limbs. Once the nausea and dizziness passed a little, he continued down the hall. He kept one hand against his stomach. His back, curved.

Stumbling down the stairs into the Common Room. It was empty except for Radagast and Dínendal. They were seated in a booth in the corner, enjoying some tea and biscuits. It was still raining outside. There was a fire burning low in the hearth.

When they saw Boromir arriving, Radagast glared openly and Dínendal’s eyes narrowed. Keeping his gaze averted, Boromir went to their booth, took a seat, slouched low. Hunched over as pain rippled through the wound in his stomach.

“The hobbits have left,” he muttered through clenched teeth.

No one replied. After several moments, Dínendal shifted in his seat.

“Aye.”

Boromir swallowed. “You should have gone with them.”

Dínendal met his gaze. “I was reluctant to leave,” he said simply. Boromir exhaled, nodded.

“Well, Boromir, are you pleased with yourself?” Radagast asked, bristling.

“Radagast… please.”

The wizard *hmmpphed*, crossed his arms, scowled.

“We cannot leave until tomorrow morning,” Dínendal said. “The Men of Bree have reported groups of ruffians, more than usual, in the lands surrounding the Shire. It is not safe to travel by night.”

Boromir clucked his tongue in annoyance. Sitting upright did not seem like a very good idea anymore and so, knowing that they would not be leaving today, he excused himself, stood, avoided their eyes, and staggered back out of the Common Room and upstairs.

His room. Butterbur had left a fresh basin by the bed, and the sheets were half-pulled out, disheveled. The barkeep had clearly intended to change them, and had probably just left the room a moment before Boromir arrived. Dragging himself the last few steps to the bed, hugging his torso and swallowing convulsively, Boromir unceremoniously dropped himself onto the bed, not bothering to remove his boots or anything, and lay there, breathing. A few moments passed, the nausea ebbed. He fell asleep.

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_Tulkas: Give us a battle! A mighty sword!_

_Námo: Give us a death! A soul to judge!_

_Nienna: Give us pity! A flower for a grave!_

_Manwë, His Mighty Hand, raises_  
silencing the Thirteen others  
resting on the throne of Taniquetil, blazing light._
Varda sits motionless beside him
silent
supernova gaze locked on the northwest corner of the northwest corner of Middle-earth.

“Shire-deaths will be accounted for later,” Manwë declares.

Námo opens his mouth.

“After,” Manwë adds, “I have made my decisions.”

Námo closes it.

“These are the stories which have been, will be, and always are, Sung:
Hobbits arrive to the Shire, finding difference and loss.
Night.
Hobbits enter the Shire, finding Sharkey and Saruman, one enemy in two names.
Everyone else, away!
The Drunkard cannot interfere. No wizard-confrontation for him.
His story bubbles on elsewhere, a solitary thread of Music which I will weave now as you others focus now on halfling arrivals…”

“What? I’ve never heard a the Shire closin’ the gates on wet and weary folk, an’ it ain’t even sundown! Now you open up there, before I climb on over an’ do it myself!”

“We don’t want no trouble, Sam Gamgee, an’ thas’ the truth. But we’ve got ta follow the Rules, y’know, ye can’ jus’ – ho! Which one of ye ripped down the sign?”

“I did! And if there’s another one, I’ll rip it down as well!”

“Well said, Merry.”

“Thanks, Pip.”

“Look, we can’ jus’ let ye in, there’s the Rules that say, as clear as day, that – Hi! – Hi! Stop! Wait, what - ! Oh, once the Chief hears about this, you’ll be sorry!”

“Chuh, I’d like to see this Chief! An’ I’d like ta know jus’ what in the name of me old gaffer does he think he’s doin’ settin’ up these Rules. As far as I’ve been on two feet, we ain’t never had any such nonsense in the Shire!”

“Did you hear that, Frodo? We’ll be sorry, he says.”

“Ha! Well, I don’t know about you gentlemen, but I’d like a nice meal and a rest after all this riding.”

“So do I, Pip. I suppose the gatekeeper’s will have to put us up for the night.”

“Would you look at that house? Why, I’ve never seen something so ugly since…”

“Orthanc?”

“Wormtongue?”
“Orcs?”

“Oh, all of them together. And right here in the Shire, too!”

“Mister Frodo, I don’ like the look of this place, nor do I like the look a that ol’ fool at the gate. I say we ride straight to Hobbiton, tonight, see what’s goin’ on. Me heart won’ sit still ‘til I see the ol’ gaffer and put this all to rights.”

“All right, Sam, all right. I’d wager you’re right. Back on the ponies, lads, and full gallop too!”

It was night when he awoke. Silence in The Prancing Pony. Silence outside. The creaking bedsprings. Shifting sheets. The ache behind his eyes. But finally sober. And with sobriety came the ice-cold realization that they had gone ahead – the hobbits had gone ahead, to whatever trouble was in the Shire – and Gandalf had surely left them – while Radagast and Dínendal had been forced to wait for Boromir to recover from last night –

“Fool!” Boromir hissed, shooting up in bed. Now – because of him – the hobbits would fight this battle alone. And what if something should happen to one of them? An image flashed: Pippin, bloodied, dead. Or was it Merry? Frodo? Sam? “Contemptible fool!”

Boromir stood, reeled for a moment, but then moved quickly and quietly to the window. He began to gather up everything, making no sound, stuffing clothes and bedroll and everything into his saddlebags and pack. And then he found his belt, his sword – checking for its sharpness – everything buckled and into place. If he arrived too late… No, he would not think of it. Yet, there it was – that image – pushing against his thoughts. Very well, if they were harmed – if he arrived too late – he would never forgive himself.

And so he sent a silent, furtive prayer up to the heavens: Let no harm come to the little ones. Forgive me my constant error – last night was the last time, I swear by my blood.

At least, he hoped it was the last time. Else he truly was the drunkard everyone thought him. And as he worked to put away the last items, he scowled. Aye, a drunkard, and a fool, and a coward! Bah! Worth nothing! You would do well to be killed tonight, and save Dínendal and Radagast much trouble –

“Hush!” he told himself aloud. “Enough.”

Enough indeed. Once everything was ready, and he had managed to adorn himself with both saddlebags and the pack, he moved to the door. Hissing a curse as the sheath knocked against the doorframe with a loud thunk. Yet before the noise faded, he left.

**Awake! Awake! Fear, Fire, Foes! Awake!**

**Fire, Foes! Awake!**

The Horn-cry of Buckland, a high ringing note exploding out into the night-sky, startling awake a sleepy Hobbiton. Before Merry had finished blowing the horn, the first red-eyed hobbits emerged from their homes, some of them clearly having scrambled to clothe and arm themselves in a hurry. And Pippin and Sam were already setting to work to get a fire going, since that Shirriff had said earlier that fires were not allowed anymore.

And the hobbits all but poured out of their homes; Sam’s gaffer had been right, the time was ripe and their return to the Shire this afternoon could not have been sooner. For tonight would be the night that those of the Shire took but what was theirs – that they ran out the ruffians once and for
all. *We’ve just been itchin’ for a chance to fight back, lads,* Hamfast Gamgee had said. *Ever since that fiasco at the Bywater Bridge – when they lost the poor ol’ Cotton boys – Jolly and Nick – why, ever since then we’ve been waitin’ for the time to strike.*

And so it was – the time to strike. Once the fire was stoked enough to get a nice, solid blaze, Pippin turned back towards Frodo, Sam and Merry.

“Well, my lads, I’m off to the Smials. If things go well, I’ll have an army of Tooks for you by morning. We’ll drop by once we’ve cleared Tuckborough of all the filth, and see about those Lockholes as well… But don’t leave all the work to us! I expect you all to have cleaned up Hobbiton by then, as well!”

“We will, Pip,” Frodo said. “And be careful.”

“Oh, I will, don’t worry. Until tomorrow!”

And just as Pippin went to get himself saddled on the pony, a great cry went up from the eastern side of the road. The fast-gathering crowd of hobbits hurried to make a path for a pony – galloping at full speed – as it came thundering down towards the four at the center. The pony reared up, and the hobbit astride – Sam recognized him as a cousin of Merry’s, though he could not remember his name – this hobbit, breathing hard, gasped:

“By my stars, there y’are, Meriadoc Brandybuck!”

“Hi! What’s this?”

“Bad news from Buckland, Merry! You’ve got to come quick!”

“What? What is it?”

“Ruffians passing through, making a mess a things. They’ve set aflame some farms in Newbury and Crickhollow, we need – ”

But Merry did not allow the messenger to finish. He rushed to his pony, clambered on. For a moment, he hesitated – looking down at Frodo and Sam.

“Go,” Frodo said.

“Until tomorrow, then,” Merry said. And before he left, he nudged his pony beside Pippin. They grasped each other by the forearm. “Until tomorrow, Pip.”

“See you, Merry.”

And then they were off – Pippin west and Merry east, with the messenger in tow. There was much chatter coming from the crowd which had formed behind Frodo and Sam. And then, there, coming from down the road which led to the Party Field: the first cries of Men – the distant flames – torches – a small army of Men, moving like a shadow down the hill.

Dínendal awoke. He thought he had heard a vague knock come from further down the hallway, and now he could have sworn he had heard a distant horn-call. Frowning, he swung his legs over the side of the bed, scanned the room. The dead of night. Moonlight streaming in.

Another dream?

Nay, his sleep had been relatively easy, except for the occasional, warped dreams of the Undying
Lands. Yet he usually awoke from those full of expectation and a strange sort of glee. But now – now something else had awoken him, he knew that much.

Sitting perfectly still, he closed his eyes, focused on the sounds around him.

And soon enough there it was – footsteps, the crunch of frost-bitten mud. A Man’s soft muttering. A moment of silence followed by the faint creak of a rusty hinge – *the stables make such a sound*. Dínendal had noticed that sound in the morning, when he had gone to feed and brush down his horse. And who was going to the stables at such an hour?

More noise, vague: a rustling in the stables; the snores of Radagast, muted by the wall. And then the distinct sound of a horse – the heavy breathing, muffled snorts. The clopping of hooves, moving slowly before picking up the pace and breaking into a fast trot. Dínendal had just enough time to rush to the window and see the figure of Boromir barreling down the main street of Bree, gaining speed – galloping west.

Dínendal swore sharply. Hastily, he repacked his things, not caring for the noise he made since he knew the wizard slept heavily, and then, packing just enough to last him through the night, he grabbed his bag and rushed out of the room and down the stairs. Running to the stables, straining his ears to hear the Man’s distant riding. And as he ran, he sent one, heartfelt prayer to the gods: *Elbereth, hinder the fool ere he kills himself!*

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*A tiny voice, so familiar: “Elbereth, hinder the fool ere he kills himself!”*

*Varda smiles,*  
*and a new galaxy in some distant corner of the universe is born.*

*She dips her gaze – glowing bright stars*  
bent rays  
finds Boromir, Beloved Man, and his horse,  
barreling  
full-speed, on on on,  
and She hears his private mutters, his private prayers:

*“Not the little ones – a wretched fool, not worth his name – ai, not the little ones – keep them safe – safe – safe – sweet Valar, keep them safe – idiot fool! – I promise anything, Valar, anything, take anything of me – Eru, too late – please - !”*

*Varda clucks her tongue,*  
*humorous:*  
*“Foolish love,*  
*you know not,*  
*but all of this is preordained.*

*“But hush now with your furtive prayers. Jealous Manwë will hear.”*

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“So it is true! All today I had been hearing of trouble and tussles – it seems the so-called heroes of the Shire have returned!”

*“Saruman!”* Sam bristled.

The old wizard laughed. He had changed much in appearance. His beard was shorter, yellower. Like his skin. There was a wild, raving look in his eye. His clothes – ragged tatters of old robes,
soiled breeches, used and re-used shirts. Wormtongue looked no better, groveling there beside him. The pale Gríma was nearly skeletal now, and he was clinging to the wizard’s robes wretchedly. Saruman gave him a kick, shooing him away.

And surrounding the four – Frodo, Sam, Saruman, Wormtongue – the two groups on either side. Hobbits behind Frodo and Sam, and the ruffians and Wild Men behind Saruman and Wormtongue.

The great fire burned.

“Aye, though I am Sharkey here,” Saruman said. “It is a term of endearment, I fear. But evidently you did not expect to see me here.”

“No, we didn’t,” Frodo admitted. “Though I might have guessed. Gandalf had given us warning enough to watch out for you. He said you might have been up to what little mischief you could still wreak.”

“More than a little, my urchins!” Saruman laughed. He raised his voice. “Ha! You make me laugh, you hobbit-lordlings, riding around with the great people; so pleased and secure with your little selves. Never thinking that maybe your precious home was not so safe? That you had left it to fend for itself!”

There were murmurs in the crowd.

“They have already started in Buckland, so I have instructed them: A house burned for every Rule broken by these selfish lordlings!”

Cries of outrage. Sam was about to turn to the crowd and yell something back when Frodo forestalled him with a hand on his shoulder. The older hobbit glared at Saruman.

“That is enough, Saruman!” Frodo said, loud enough so that all could hear. “I will not have you turn hobbit against hobbit – and I will not have you intimidate us. Everything that you have struck down, broken and fouled, we will rebuild and re-grow! You cannot wound us so easily! Meriadoc Brandybuck has gone forth, now, to Buckland – he shall see to your threats. And I’ve also heard about these Lockholes – well, know that Peregrin Took is going to Michel Delving as we speak to free the prisoners.”

There was more talk amongst the crowd of hobbits.

“We outnumber you, Saruman!” Frodo continued, and for this he turned to look back at the crowd of hobbits standing behind him. “You cannot defeat us, not anymore! Now, I am asking you, and all of your Men, to leave the Shire. You are no longer welcome here!”

Loud shouts of agreement. Someone began crying, *Kill him! Kill him! He’s a villain and a murderer!*

Frodo held up his hand. “This shall not come to blows! He may be so, but we will show him mercy first.”

“*Mercy?*” Saruman sputtered. “Oh aye, mercy from the little ones – that is what I seek! You are truly so sure of yourself, Lord Baggins? You may not be as invulnerable as you think!”

And with that, the wizard pulled something from his robes and lunged for Frodo. Sam moved quicker, however, and he rushed forward, ready to stab Saruman with his sword, until Frodo grabbed his arm, pulled it back. A great cry of surprise went up from both sides.
“No, Sam!” Frodo exclaimed.

Yet Sam had clipped the wizard on the forearm, and Saruman was clutching it now with his free hand, hissing in pain. Blood seeped red from between his fingers.

“Careful, my urchins, careful!” He shouted, and his voice shook, desperate. “Whoever strikes me shall be accursed! And if my blood taints this ground, these lands shall wither and never be healed!”

Both sides were restless now. Tensions rising to a boil, ready to snap. Taut bowstrings and shivering swords. The crowd of hobbits were speaking loud now, calling to each other, gasping with fear or roaring their outrage. The Men were calling jeers to them, raising their arms, rattling their weapons.

“Do not believe him!” Frodo cried. “His power is no –”

And in that moment, an arrow was loosed, and it struck Frodo in the side before clattering down against the ground – for he was wearing his mithril coat. And in that moment, the hobbits and the Men, both sides, charged forward, heedless, and all fell to chaos and violence.

“War now!” cries Astaldo, rattling the table.

“Death!” cries Mandos-Keeper, wisps of smoke flying. “Time to die!”

A chorus of gods, heads ablaze:

“Give us blood, Manwë, give us the body’s thick-syrup wine!
Just enough to wash the face in it,
yes!
Violence-lusting, yes!
Please! Please! Please!”

“So be it, I will give ye blood,
and madness too,” Manwë responds, ruffled.

Riding furious. Muscles screaming with exertion, the horse’s hoarse cries of fatigue. Blood thundering and Boromir broke out of the woods at full gallop, tearing down an open field, fueled on by the gut-twisting thoughts – by the fear – and if I lose one more, I shall ne’er rest, I shall ne’er – a fool, a wretched fool – and if only you had not drank the night before, you fool!

And then, a sound: the ringing blast of a horn. A Rohirric horn. Merry!

Boromir kicked the horse, gave the reins a harsh snap, leaned forward and raised himself from the saddle. Keeping the moon behind him – traveling west along the East Road. The thunder of the hooves, the lands flying past him.

And then, he saw them: shadows, figures moving in the night. And behind them – a fire – a farmhouse aflame. Three figures – Men – ruffians! – crossing the field, moving northwest, without horses, coming from Boromir’s left, running. Screams in the night, screams from the fire. Fields of crops, fallow fields. Edges of the Shire.

Immediately, Boromir jerked the reins, kicked, leaned his weight to the left, forcing the horse to move off the road and take to the fallow field by the road.
The figures – coarse Northern Men, bearded, wild – scattered with bellowed shouts as Boromir charged them, and then Boromir – without thinking – dismounted and ran towards the nearest Man. The ruffian had no time to react, he was still fumbling with the dagger at his side when Boromir lunged, drove the sword into the Easterling’s – no, no, no, the ruffian’s – stomach. An enraged howl torn from a dying throat.

From behind, the other two, moving forward fast – screaming – Boromir jerked the sword out, spun – a slashing swipe, blood spraying back, washing his face in it – but not before something – something – something glancing off his shoulder, and then a hard blow to the head – blinding pain – vision dimming…

Boromir was on his knees when he heard the strangled cry as the third ruffian fell forward. Vision returning – a familiar voice:

“Boromir!”

But as soon as his vision cleared – and Boromir caught a fleeting glimpse of Dínenald’s form, riding forward with his horse, bow still in one hand – Boromir staggered to the nearest ruffian who was still moving – the Man writhing on the ground. Choking sounds. Boromir saw now that he had cut the Man’s neck.

Limbs shaking, grabbing the Man’s jacket, pulling forward. The ruffian gave a gurgling cry.

“Went you to the Shire? Where is your captain?”

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“Went you to the Shire? Where is your captain?”

“Boromir! Stop!”

In the corner of his eye: Dínenald was running forward. Boromir gave the dying Man a shake.

“Speak!”

Dínenald’s hands on his arms – pulling him away. A stabbing pain in the upper arm. His skull felt as if it was broken, cracked open. A pain, blinding white. “Boromir, stop, this is madness! He can tell us nothing now – we must to the Shire! Come! There is a great chaos! Come quickly!”

Staggering up to the horse, feeling sticky blood trickling down behind the ear, pulling the reins and saddle and up, up, up, back on. Giving the ribs a kick and – GO!

Chaos. Fires burning. Eyes watering, Sam could not see. Pushing, pulling, fighting through the crowd. Swords and blood and he roared as he dug his short sword into the side of a Man. Roared for the Shire, and what had become of his home, that he should find war here as well. Roared with all the despair and sorrow that tore through his heart, ripping. And he did not want to think of the others, of Merry and Pippin and…

Frodo! Frodo!

He could not see Frodo, but every so often, he heard him, yelling above the noise, urging them to stop, before his voice was drowned away by the screams and yells of a maddened battle. Everyone was running, this way, that way, and Sam saw Men strewn about the ground, hobbits lying lopsided. Someone let loose an arrow – it burned past him, struck the Man in front of him. And just as he whipped around to see who had shot that arrow, he saw this:

Saruman, fighting, dragging his sword around before plunging it deep into a hobbit’s chest – Young Tom Cotton! – and then Sam saw Wormtongue, nose broken, on the ground, pulling a
dagger from underneath himself, weeping.

And in that moment, just as Saruman turned away from Young Tom Cotton’s body, Wormtongue rose to his knees, stood, charged forward and dug the blade deep into the wizard’s gut. And in that moment, two arrows plunged through the crowd and struck Wormtongue in the back, so that both villains fell to the ground, to screams and cheers and bellowed, panicking cries.

And in that moment, Dínendal saw Boromir pull the reins of his horse in with a harsh cry, as if he had been struck, and then, curling in on himself, go toppling off the side. He hit the flat, frosted ground with a thud. And Dínendal sensed the rippling wave of corruption wash over the lands – like an invisible explosion, sucking in before pushing outward.

The first rays of dawn. Dínendal urged his horse forward, galloped the last stretch of distance between them before dismounting hastily, hurrying to kneel by the Man:

“Boromir!”

Boromir could utter nothing more than a harsh, animal sound – a stilted cry of pain. He lay on his side, contorted, his hands clutching his gut, beads of sweat vibrating against his brow. Jaw clenched tight. Dínendal hesitated to touch him, and when he did, laying a tentative hand on the Man’s shoulder, Boromir kicked out with a gasping cry.

“Boromir! What is it? Speak!”

And for the first time since the Ered Lithui battles, Dínendal began to panic. The evil in the air – the corruption, the vile scent of something base – they were within sight of a hobbit farm – but what was wrong? What was wrong? Boromir could offer no help, for he was fiercely concentrated on whatever pain he felt, his face pale, his every limb trembling with the effort of keeping it at bay.

Without thinking, Dínendal ripped the Man’s surcoat open, tugged at the overshirt and chain mail and undershirt. And he saw there the wound – the stomach – black scar, black veins spreading out, and now all reddened, as if it had been newly struck. Boromir bellowed hoarsely as Dínendal placed his cool hand against the searing-hot wound. And when the elf pulled his hand away, frightened, he looked at the palm: black, soaking. Orc’s blood, Dínendal thought absurdly. He turned, ripped a piece of fabric from the Man’s cloak, placed it hastily against the wound. Black on black. And Boromir bucked away from him. Another choked cry, pushing through.

“Don’t – ”

“Stay still – I do not know – I know not what – try to stay still…”

And then and then and then…

And then a wave of silence, muted – where Dínendal swore he could feel the very air move, shift, and some presence pass – dissolving the corruption he had felt, so that all of that invisible evil, whatever foul presence, disappeared as easily as smoke in the wind. And just as that unease disappeared, Boromir’s entire body relaxed, so that he was left gasping, slumped back against the ground.

Dínendal kept both hands clutching the fabric against Boromir’s stomach, but the Man waved him away and clumsily took the cloth from him. He raised his head, looked at the wound, now grotesquely smeared, hands shaking. And then, moving hesitantly, gingerly, he wiped with the cloth, cleaned away the black-bloodied mess, his stomach twitching away from him. Dínendal thought it should pain the Man to do such work, but Boromir dropped his head and whispered,
“Aye... better now.”
The Shire

Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

“Can you walk?”

Boromir nodded slowly, and Dínendal reached down, grabbed him by the forearm, helped him up. The horses stood by each other, waiting, exhaling harsh little clouds. The sun had risen fully now – hovering like a red orb over the horizon – melting the frost. A misty silence covering the hills.

Once Boromir was standing, he remained hunched over, cautious, before tentatively straightening. And when he did – squaring his shoulders, a hand against his stomach – he smiled. Yet when the Man took his first step, his leg folded underneath him and Dínendal immediately grabbed him, took his weight before he collapsed. They stood for a moment like that, Boromir’s legs shaking, before the Man swallowed, loosened his grip on Dínendal’s shoulder and arm.

They did not know what had happened, what was still happening. Yet they spoke not of it. Instead, they looked at each other, confused. And Boromir was also grinning strangely. Dínendal frowned.

“The wound, it – ?”

“Nay, I know not…”

“Come, lean on me. We shall find some help from the nearest farm.”

Boromir simply looked at Dínendal, nodded again, and began to walk, slowly, feebly. Dínendal remained constantly at his elbow, and he turned quickly to give the two horses – Radagast’s friends – a cluck of his tongue. They began to follow, a gentle trot.

Walking at this sluggish pace – for it seemed Boromir’s legs had lost all strength; and he had gone strangely pale, though his expression had eased – he no longer wore his usual scowl – they crossed the level field until it sloped gently down. A fallow field. The farm was not very far away, it was getting closer. Dínendal could already see the cottage itself, smoke billowing from the chimney, candlelight in the windows – whoever lived there was awake.

When they were about twenty paces away from the fence, two small figures stood up from behind a bush. A hobbit farmer and his wife. The woman held a pitchfork and was waving it dangerously, and the farmer had a rock in one hand and an apple in another. Dínendal waved his hand, hesitant, ready to cry out a request for help. Yet the hobbit farmer preceded him:

“We’ve run out the lot of ye! Come one more step, and by my head, I’ll chase ye off the farm and out of Buckland meself! Yer not welcome here anymore!”

Boromir and Dínendal shared a confused look. Dínendal raised his voice:
“Peace, stranger! We seek help. This is Boromir of –”

Before Dínendal could finish the introductions, the farmer bent back and threw the apple. It soared high up in the air before hitting Boromir squarely on the forehead. The force of it knocked the Man’s head back and he let go of his hold on Dínendal, toppling backward with a grunted *oomph*.

“Thas’ a warnin’! Now get off our lands! I said it once an’ I’ll say it again: Yer not welcome here anymore!”

The hobbit-wife waved the pitchfork again. Dínendal turned to Boromir, who was on the ground, laughing. For a moment, the elf thought the Man was in pain, some strange repetition of the earlier fit – though Dínendal sensed no evil in the air, except perhaps the hobbits’ hostility – for Boromir was clutching his gut, and tears streamed from his eyes as he bared his teeth. Yet the Man pulled in one harsh breath before breaking down again. Laughter.

“It’s gone, Dínendal, it’s gone!” the Man gasped between his hysterics.

“What is?”

Boromir could say nothing more, he was still laughing too hard, and so he indicated his stomach before clutching his forehead, grimacing through his merriment. He looked up at Dínendal, shuddering.

“Ai, but the halflings have a true aim –” his eyes widened, “oh, Dínendal, ware –!”

With a sickening crunch, something hard collided with the back of Dínendal’s head. Flashes – a searing pain. He fell forward with a yelp.

“I warned ye!” came an enraged voice from the fence, before muttering, “Go stick ‘im with the fork, lass, I’ll get me sword.”

Stars swam before Dínendal’s vision, a great ache filled his head, but he managed to clamber back to an upright position, arms held out in a gesture of peace, saying quickly:

“Frodo Baggins! Frodo Baggins! We seek Frodo Baggins! We are friends of his!”

The farmer and wife had been running up to them, but they slowed their pace abruptly at the mention of Frodo’s name, their pitchfork and sword falling slightly. Boromir, who was still on the ground giggling, nodded, repeating, “Aye, Frodo Baggins. Frodo Baggins.”

Dínendal’s vision had returned, and he saw the two hobbits clearly now: unruly, curly hair; simple clothes of green and yellow and other earthy tones; the pointed ears. A waistcoat bursting at the buttons, an apron still stained with flour. Silvery-white hair, curious eyes.

The hobbits had fallen silent at the mention of Frodo’s name, and they were watching the Man and elf warily.

Finally, the farmer spoke:

“You know Frodo Baggins?”

“How’s that head a yours, Samwise? Would ye like some tea?”

“Oh, it’s jus’ a bump, Rosie, thank you. Why don’ ye go look after Frodo, there?”
“Ha ha, I’m fine, Sam. Nothing more than a few scrapes and bruises.”

“Well, I’ll take the tea then, seeing as you two won’t. Thank you, Rose.”

Bag End bustled. Exhausted, bruised, but grateful, they had taken to Bilbo’s home a little after dawn, moving away the wreckage and cleaning away the signs of decay. For Lotho Sackville-Baggins was gone, lost, and they had been told that Lobelia had passed away in the Lockholes three weeks ago. Bag End had been empty since then. And apparently Saruman’s forces had used the smials as hoarding-grounds for their arms and shields, so that it took Frodo, Sam, Pippin, the Gamgees, and the Cottons several hours to clear everything out.

Now, just Frodo, Sam, Pippin, Rosie Cotton and Hamfast Gamgee remained – the others, wearily, had gone trudging home to their beds. The late-morning sunshine spilled in from the window in the study and the kitchen, and finally Bag End was looking somewhat more familiar. Of course, the cupboards were empty, and all of Bilbo’s books had disappeared, and some of the furniture had been moved around – but the worst of the change was gone.

Not for Sam, it seemed. Frodo watched as the other hobbit stood in the doorway, leaning on the frame, hands stuffed in his pockets. He was staring at the remains of the garden outside. Everything had been burnt away, blackened. Plants left sick, tainted, dead. Withered reminders of a happier time. What had been green and vibrant one year ago was now muddy.

Frodo admitted he was not as hurt as Sam was to see the Bag End garden destroyed. We will simply replant it, he had sensibly told himself. It was a task, anyway. Something to wrench his mind away from the grief his heart would inevitably feel once the shock of all this faded. Something to do, rather than sitting in the study to brood. Indeed, he had promised Sam earlier that he would help him with the labor – it would give him something physical for him to forget himself in. Yet Sam had simply shrugged blankly, not meeting Frodo’s eyes, dabbing thoughtlessly at a cut on his forearm.

Frodo glanced around the table. Rosie Cotton had whisked away most of the dust and had managed to scrounge around the kitchen and find some ancient, dried tea leaves. The kettle sat, now, in the center of the table. Largely untouched. Pippin had taken a cup – he was sitting across from Frodo – but the younger hobbit was clearly exhausted, for he was pale, and his eyes were drooping, and he kept nodding forward into his cup so that Frodo began to worry he would spill it all over himself. Beside him sat Hamfast Gamgee, his left eye swollen black. He was leaning forward on his elbows, his back to the window which overlooked part of the garden. Sam had not moved from the open doorway.

Rosie bustled in and out, carrying cups and platters of stale bread and aged cheese that the Cottons had left for Frodo and the others. Pippin perksed up slightly at the food, and he picked out a yellow-white piece of cheese and began nibbling lazily at it.

Time passed. Eventually, at Frodo’s urging – oh, you should both go home, you two, I thank you for everything, but I can take care of Bag End for now – Ham and Sam went home. It took Sam a moment of rigid hesitation to cross the garden again, but he did so, eyes lowered, and, with muttered goodbyes, the gardener and son went home.

Rosie left soon after, serious-faced and quiet, with promise to return with some fresh vegetables and meat for tomorrow.

Frodo and Pippin were left alone.

“We’ve cleared out the guestroom, Pip. You may as well catch some rest here before going back to
Tookland, else you’ll fall sleep on the road.”

Pippin did not argue. He stuffed the last of the cheese in his mouth, chewed slowly, rose. Pippin had told Frodo much of what had transpired in Michel Delving the night before – the small skirmishes in the trees, the Took’s already-established militia – though he had been strangely quiet regarding the Lockholes, having uttered only the barest shred of vital information before dismissing the subject. Frodo knew not to press. Not so soon.

And they were all tired now, so he simply bade Pippin a sleep well as the latter shuffled off to the main hallway.

Alone, Frodo busied himself with stacking away the teacups and kettle and cheese and bread. He was tired. Surreal quiet, calm. The sun blazed bright outside. Birds chirped. Hobbiton lay quiet. Everyone asleep. And home at last. As he wrapped up the cheese, gazing out the kitchen window, he made a mental count of how many months he had spent away. Yet his mind worked slowly, so that it ticked off the months, one… two… three…

The clopping of horses outside. Frodo peered out the window – saw three figures arriving. Two on horses, and beside them, a smaller person on a pony. Boromir, Dínendal, Merry. Frodo hastened to pack away the cheese before wiping his hands on the tea towel and going to the front door. He opened it before any of them had dismounted yet.

“Good morning, Frodo!” Merry called. “Look who I found!”

Frodo walked forward. The front yard of Bag End lay in cool shadow in the morning, and the three riders were silhouetted in stark relief against the bright blue sky.

Merry looked well, unscathed if not also somewhat worn down. He had dark rings under his eyes, but he was smiling. Dínendal looked as he always did, and Boromir looked strangely bemused, pale-faced, with dried blood spreading over one ear.

“Welcome to Bag End, gentlemen,” Frodo said. He glanced them over. “But what has happened? Tell me.”

Both Dínendal and Boromir swung their legs over at the same time, yet when Boromir took his first step, his leg gave way underneath him, and he nearly fell. He fumbled for the reins, held himself upright for a few moments until, with knees visibly quaking, he straightened again. Dínendal hastened forward, but the Man waved him away.

“’Tis a long story, I fear,” Boromir said. “Tell me first: are Sam and Pippin well?”

“Aye, well enough,” Frodo said. “There was some trouble in Hobbiton and Tookland, but they are both well.” He looked to Merry. “And Buckland?”

“I’ll tell you all about it, Frodo,” Merry said and dismounted. “But first, I think we could all use some food and rest first, if you don’t mind putting up a few weary riders.”

He had been half-dreaming, dozing, his mind wandering over all the serene beauty of these lands – how they had seemed like a peaceful dream to his tired eyes! – his thoughts, never dwelling on the darker moments of the night before, of the days-weeks-months-year before, for everything was well now, this was relief, and he could rest. And so he did, dozing, his sore muscles too tired to move, while his mind wafted in and out of a dream. And the soft mattress, and the pillow which smelled of dusty linen, and his booted feet dangling off the end of the too-short bed.
But someone was knocking on the door, rapping loudly, so that Boromir’s head began to throb again with the wound at his temple. For a few moments, he simply listened, idly – waiting for one of the hobbits to go and answer the door. But no one did – they were all asleep now – and so, mumbling to himself about the decency of letting the weary sleep, Boromir pushed back from the bed, stood, groaned, dragged a hand against his face.

A step towards the door and his head met the ceiling with a harsh thump. This awoke Boromir completely. He ducked, hissed a curse. The knocking continued outside.

Fumbling with the round doorknob for a moment – for he did not understand how these hobbit-doors worked – he finally pushed out of the bedroom, walked down the corridor, head bent sideways. He could not see who it was from the parlor windows, though he caught the edge of a brown robe as it whirled around. There was another knock, and then some muffled grumbling from the other side of the wood. Familiar grumbling.

Boromir pulled the front door open, looked up from his semi-crouched, shoulders-bent position. And there, standing tall and scowling, visibly ruffled, was Radagast. He held his staff in one hand and a traveling pack in the other.

“I would not have dwelled on being left behind,” he said, voice loud enough so that Boromir squinted, “however, it is rather annoying to find that one’s elf companion has forgotten their pack.”

Boromir stared. The wizard shook the traveling pack to emphasize his point. And behind him – Hobbiton was awake again. Hobbits walked along the street, greeting each other. Smoke from the homes and hobbit-holes. Work. Tending. Healing last night’s hurts. It was late afternoon.

Boromir stood for a moment, dazed, but then he stepped back slightly, pulled the door further.

“Well, you may as well come in.”

Radagast grunted and stepped inside. “Thank you.”

The Party Field, a cold November evening. Banners decorated the poles, tents were erected, fires lit. The barrels were rolled out, the food – copious amounts of food piled high on wide platters – was scattered around the long, wooden tables. Pumpkin served in various forms, mushrooms, roast suckling pig, green vegetables, fresh and aged cheeses, all manner of apples and other autumnal fruits, cold meats, dried fruit, pies of assorted varieties. Stacks of fireworks piled in the corner by a familiar-looking wagon. The Field was crowded; the entire Shire had turned out.

And the music began. The band played, the conversation blossomed into a loud roar. Laughing, excited talking, children squealing. There was dancing in the central grassy patch. Hobbits young and old congregated in groups, ate, drank, told old stories and invented new ones. The first firework was lit – off it went! Up, up, into the night sky and exploding into the image of a tall mountain with a dragon’s head poking out from it. The children yelled for more. And the request was fulfilled – more fireworks, a spectacle of lights illuminating the night.

Perhaps it was the cold, perhaps it was the victory at Hobbiton, perhaps it was simply typical hobbit behavior, but the party was surging with merry excitement. No one checked the time, and no one cared. Everyone joined in the dancing, or the drinking contests, or the eating contests, or the tales being told. The children screamed with delight at the fireworks displayed, played games, chased each other around the legs of the adults.

This is what Gandalf loved about the hobbits. This perennial celebration of life, this joy, this
rejuvenation after hard times. The White Wizard had attended countless hobbit festivals during his time on Middle-earth, but they never ceased to enliven his spirits and teach him something about what it meant to live, and to enjoy it. And they had never before been like this – a hard-earned peace after a length of dark and terrible times. When Gandalf had come to the Shire, four days after the Travellers, he had received news of hobbit-deaths and homes burnt to the ground and Saruman, the traitor betrayed, and… And Gandalf had looked up to the skies and sent a silent question, asking why so much loss in this Middle-earth? Why such dark times?

But he knew now that they were truly ended. Peace, at last.

He sent up another firework, watched it blast against the ground and spiral upwards, high up into the night sky, before exploding into a familiar White Tower. Most of his recent firework collection, with the help of Bilbo, the Rivendell elves, Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin, had extended to include recent scenes of the Ring War. Scenes of glory, of valor, scenes which twisted the heart with emotion they were so enduring. Of course, little of that could be conveyed in a few sparks of light, no matter how much magic Gandalf loaded into them, but they were beautiful nonetheless.

He checked his companions, spotted them at various points throughout the crowd. There, playing his fiddle and winking at the ladies in the crowd, Peregrin Took – the hopeful fool; Gandalf chuckled – stood on the low stage. Pippin was talking to a young maiden at the foot of the stage, his neck stretched out as he spoke with her, laughing and nodding fervently. No doubt he was trying to impress her by doing two things at once.

Down in the center of the Field, dancing a jig with a pipe in one hand and a mug of ale in the other, was Meriadoc Brandybuck. *Merry the Magnificent*. Still with yellow vest, raised eyebrow and self-confident smirk. Merry took a puff, locked his arm with a lady to his right, and spun on into the dance.

“Do the butterfly one, Gandalf! The butterfly one!”

Gandalf smiled down at the hobbit children hopping at his feet, tugging at his robes. He grabbed his staff, tapped it three times on the ground, and a flock of silver-white butterflies appeared, flapping their wings briefly, enough time for the children to chase them for a moment before they disappeared. The children laughed, shrieked with joy and fascination. They scattered through the Field, followed by anxious mothers or fathers pretending to be trolls.

Another firework into the sky, a mug of hot cider gratefully accepted, and Gandalf searched for the remaining companions. Sam was nowhere to be seen, but the wizard imagined, with a smile, that he was tucked away in some private corner with Rosie Cotton.

He found Frodo at one of the tables furthest from the noise, at the edge of the field, eating and talking with Radagast. The Brown Wizard was moving his arms around, surely explaining some intricacy of squirrel mating customs, and Frodo was leaning in to hear, smiling at his jokes or asking questions. Yet Frodo looked somewhat distant, as always; half-present and half-lost in his own thoughts, his blue eyes vacant as he nodded politely. Gandalf sighed, and for the countless time, regretted much. *All because I sent him*, Gandalf almost thought but quickly banished the idea. Now was not the time for regrets or melancholy.

He searched the party and found finally the last companions: two heads poking above the rest. At one of the inner tables, nearest to the music, on the edge of the dancing and filled with food, sat Boromir and Óínendal surrounded by a crowd of hobbits. Most were listening to Óínendal, who appeared to be telling a story. The elf, with graceful, fluid gesticulations, kept a rapt audience as he recounted his tale. Every so often, he was interrupted by a quick aside or a collective gasp. Gandalf
noted with amusement that not a single hobbit had not studied Dínenadal extensively upon his arrival at the party, for surely this was the first elf many had seen. He did not seem fazed by this intense scrutiny, but then, Gandalf had rarely seen an elf fazed.

Boromir was at the other end of the table – drunk and red-faced, unfortunately – but also laughing genuinely. A group of hobbit children had gathered around him, sitting at his feet or leaning against his leg. Among all the curly heads and tiny frames, he seemed a giant, grinning and benign. He kept his mug in one hand and, with the other, ruffled the hair of the nearest one every so often. Gandalf could not hear over the music and dancing, but he could tell Boromir was not recounting any tales, but rather answering an endless stream of questions. Every so often, the Man would laugh, and the children would giggle, if a particularly bizarre question was asked. Or his smile would fade a little and he would answer with his head cocked to one side and his eyes looking away. Telling them of the battles fought, of the darker times, now finished. Gandalf also noted that Boromir’s plate was full, and his demeanor reflected one who was almost uncomfortably full. This was a notable change. So finally a wound is healed.

“Gandalf, Gandalf!” Small voices from the ground.

“The dragon one, Gandalf, scare us!”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes! Yes!”

“Very well, then…”

And up went the dragon, golden-red and roaring, wings exploding outward, as it soared through the sky, lights flashing bright before dissolving. Gandalf watched and smiled.

At the inner table, by Boromir, the fireworks had distracted the children so that they all sprang up to race away. He watched their small forms disappear into the crowd. Light-headed and, for the first time in nearly a year, full to bursting, Boromir stood, went in search of more mead. With the absence of the pain in his stomach, his appetite and ability to eat revived, it felt to Boromir that he was lighter, that a great weight had been lifted. Well, figuratively, Boromir thought wryly. The other aches and pains remained, that was expected, but they were minor and easily dissolved with some ale.

He made his way through the crowd, careful not to step on any feet, was nearly pulled into a dance by Merry and a few other hobbits, but disentangled himself enough to reach the wooden barrel at the other table. After refilling his mug, he took a seat on the nearest bench, guessing that to cross the party again was more than his clumsy legs could manage. He watched the scene before him.

But he did not see the party, the laughing joy and drunken exaggerations, nor did he hear the band, playing now a slower, wistful tune. He was not watching, not really. His mind was elsewhere, in its typical place. First One, Third One. I know your names... Golradir and Amdír. Boromir sighed. Golradir and Amdír, my brothers in exile, where do you wander now? He could see Dínenadal at the far table, still recounting elvish tales to his eager audience. This was as it should be: peaceful.

“They did not need to die.”

“They fulfilled their destinies, Boromir of Gondor. As do you.”

Boromir took another sip of mead. His limbs were fading to a dull ache, he relaxed, grew lazy. A familiar face emerged from the blur of dancing hobbits before him. Merry appeared, pipe fizzling
and face gleaming with sweat. Golden curls stuck to his brow and temples. He stumbled forward, clapped Boromir on the shoulder and took a seat beside him.

“Meriadoc Brandybuck, put this on before ye catch a cold!” a female voice cried, tossed Merry an extra jacket.

“I don’t feel a thing, ma’am,” Merry laughed. “But thank you!”

He pushed his arms clumsily through the jacket, holding his pipe with his teeth. The jacket was too large, but he did not seem to notice. Boromir grinned.

“Well?” Merry asked.

“Well?”

“What do you think?”

“Of the merriment?”

“Of the Shire!”

Boromir smiled, lowered his eyes. Merry leaned in.

“It is a fine realm, Merry. They are lucky who live here.”

Merry laughed. He raised his glass and clinked it with Boromir’s mug. “Thank you, Boromir, son of Denethor-and-Prince-of-the-White-City. I completely agree.”

They drank. And then Merry leaned forward, uneven, giggling slightly, and he jabbed Boromir in the ribs. Boromir raised an eyebrow.

“Now – now Boromir – Pip told me… and Gandalf… both of them told me to tell you,” he paused, gulped down his ale, finishing it, “they said you need to drink less, old boy, so they did.”

Boromir snorted. And almost in reflex, he drank some of the mead, a long swallow.

“You were doing fine in Rivendell,” Merry continued, leaning back, wobbly. “I don’t see why you needed to start up again…” And before Boromir could utter a complaint, Merry shook his head. He clapped his small hand on Boromir’s shoulder, shook. “Oh, well, let’s not talk about it now, dampen an… a pleasant evening. I’d say take comfort where you find it – eh? I certainly will be spending most of my days with a nice warm bottle of – of – what’s this? Well, whatever this is.”

Boromir snorted, Merry chuckled. They drank, watched the crowd. Pippin was nearby – he was standing with an elderly hobbit – head bowed, smiling, nodding, listening. His hands in his pockets. Not such a little one anymore, Boromir realized, for tonight Pippin’s smiles were slow and kind, and his voice was soft.

The hobbit wandered up to them now, smiling faintly, hands still stuffed in the high pockets of his jacket.

“What are you two rascals up to?” he asked.

“Drinking,” Merry belched and set his mug down with a clatter.

Pippin’s smile became somewhat forced, but he did not let it fade. He walked up to them, took a seat to Boromir’s right. Leaning back against the table, crossing his ankles. He did not speak for
several long moments. Drunk enough, Boromir thought dimly, and he placed his own mug behind him on the table. Drunk enough, or perhaps he would stop because Pippin was there, and the hobbit was being so serious.

Pippin piped up, however, when two familiar faces drifted past their table.

“Oh!” Pippin sat forward. “Look who it is, then.”

Sam and Rosie. They had been walking together, hands nudging, speaking about something, and both of them immediately took a step apart at Pippin’s holler. Sam turned a bright shade of pink, and Rosie smiled, though she kept her eyes down.

“Samwise Gamgee, you scoundrel,” Merry wagged a finger, “where do you think you’re going with this fine, young lass?”

“Nay, Mister Merry, don’t tease now,” Sam grinned. “Just off to bed, so we were. It’s late, ye know. I was goin’ ta see to Rosie an’ then off to the gaffer’s meself.”

“Well, you watch him, Miss Cotton!” Merry exclaimed. “He’s a ruffian, and no mistake. Keep your eyes open and don’t be afraid to lay a good wallop on him, should the need rise.”

Rosie laughed, full-throated, and Sam blushed a deeper hue, though he smiled as well.

“Oh, I will, Mister Brandybuck,” Rosie said. “Don’t worry.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to hang around, Sam?” Pippin asked. “It’s quite early.”

Sam huffed, shook his head. “Aye, well it may not be late for you three, but it’s late for us still with our wits about us.”

“Ha!” Merry barked. “Indeed, Samwise, indeed!” He turned to Boromir, gave him a sharp poke in the ribs. “I reckon that was an insult.” And then he leaned forward, bowed illustriously to Rosie. “I do beg your pardon, kind Rose, and hope you excuse our current states.”

Rosie laughed again. “Oh, I do, Mister Merry!” And she raised her eyebrow at Pippin. “Just see to it that he gets home safely, Mister Pippin.”

Pippin grinned slightly. “I will, Rosie. Good night.”

…Some time later, halfway up the hill, away from the Field, Boromir lay back against the grass, cradling a bottle to his hip, staring at the stars. His knees drawn up, his head swimming. He could hear the festivities ending – the tables being carried off, most of the fires being put out, families leaving. There were still some groups of hobbits, here and there, smoking their pipes and speaking quietly.

Boromir could not see where the others had gone – probably back to Frodo’s home – but, from where he was, he could see down the hill to where Radagast and Gandalf were speaking at one of the tables.

Zigzagging up the slope, a hand against his knee, Pippin arrived. He looked tired. Boromir lifted his head. He smiled, and Pippin returned it. Walking the last few steps, the hobbit came to stand beside the Man.

“Back to Bag End, then. Seems you’re one of the stragglers.”
“Nay, Pip. Go ahead. I wish to linger here a moment. Don’t worry – I can pick my way back. I am not so drunk.”

A snort. “Well, you don’t know which home to look for.”

“Yea, I do. ’Tis… ’tis the hole in the ground. By the large tree.”

At this, Pippin laughed outright. And he shook his head, pointed up the hill, behind and left of Boromir. The Man arched his neck back, looked up. It was very dark – a chill night. And – upside-down – he saw the shadow of a tree, and a rounded earth beneath it. The moon, hanging low, bright white.

“It’s just behind you, Boromir, up the hill. Frodo and Merry may still be up – but we’ll leave a lamp on anyway.”

“Aye, thank you… where is Dínendal?”

Pippin shrugged.

“He disappeared some time ago. Probably went off somewhere to sing to the stars; you know how elves are.”

Boromir laughed softly.

“Either way,” Pippin stifled a yawn, pulled a hand from his pocket to cover his mouth with a fist, “I’m quite tired. I’ll see you tomorrow morning then.”

“Aye. And we shall see about this famed double breakfast.”

“Famed, indeed. But off to bed for you too, or you’ll sleep straight through elevensies.”

“Aye, aye. Just a moment longer. Good night, Pippin.”

“Good night, Boromir.”

A hobbit’s sleepy smile. Soft tread, pressing against the grass. That sound disappeared, and Boromir could just hear the wizards’ low laughter drifting up from down the slope, and he could smell the pipe-weed. He considered the bottle – a deep stout – holding it up to see the stars gleaming through it, wobbling and yellow in the glass. And then he lifted it, and drank the dregs of his starry stout, and swallowed the warmth.

The sun had not yet risen; all was a blue dawn. A lone figure walked silently along a path. His movements were slow, subdued, quiet. He held the reins of a trailing horse. In the cold morning weather, the horse and walker's breaths formed small clouds of warm moisture. The ice was still clinging to the grass as they walked. The last stars of night gleamed with distant singing. In the east, a pale light grew. The Shire was asleep.

The figure gazed out over the houses, all covered with night-frost. His eyes lingered on a larger house, a mound of earth under a large tree. His friends slept there. Something warm pricked the corners of his eyes, and he brushed it away with a gloved hand. The horse snorted softly, clopped its foot. It was time to leave.

"They’ll be quite offended," a voice said softly, "to see you've left without saying goodbye."
The figure jerked around. Before him, walking idly along a path, barefoot and wearing only a thin jacket, was a familiar, if unexpected, friend.

"Frodo."

Frodo, hands in pockets, pipe in mouth, planted himself a few paces from the horse and figure. He did not look at them, but instead stared east, towards the growing light.

"I don't blame you, though," Frodo said distantly. "To steal away in the night, before anyone can stop you."

"It is easier."

In the pre-dawn light, Frodo was just a blue silhouette. His steps crunched against the frozen earth. He looked now to Boromir, studied him, but made no comment.

Finally:

"To Gondor, then?"

Boromir looked away. It was a good question. The Man sighed, and his sigh appeared momentarily before him as a cloud before evaporating.

"Gondor has little need of me," he murmured.

Frodo shifted his weight. He said simply: "Yes, that's true." He looked at Boromir; bright blue eyes. "But it is home nonetheless."

The Shire was peaceful, quiet. All slept. The sun crept over the horizon, appearing as a thin sliver of red-white. The frost. *Days of peace*, Radagast had said the night before. *Now we may all enjoy them.*

Boromir felt his chest tighten. A sharp pain, like fear or love or longing. Suffering and loss. He saw their faces, the faces of those he would never see again, all mixed together and jumbled, all laughing, speaking, glaring, shouting. He saw again First One, in his final moments, as he fell to the dusty ground. But he also saw First One grinning, teasing, insulting, fighting. And then Third One, bringing Boromir water, helping him drink in the early days by Nen Hithoel. Or Third One rifling through his war booty to find a ragged bottle of Easterling wine.

He saw Second One, Dínendal, as a black shadow standing on the gnarled roots of the Great Tree by Moonlight. Or Second One's hand, stretching out in the brown clouds of battle. He saw Pippin in the days of the Fellowship, a curly head, bright eyes, laughing and telling jokes or picking fruit from trees. Later Pippin, with his innocent, confused, pained stare as he led Boromir out of the Houses of Healing for the first time. And there was Merry, jostling for space. Boromir remembered Merry's face as he was carried away by the Uruk-hai on Parth Galen - a weeping, desperate distress; no longer humorous, no longer confident. And then Radagast, conjuring up a whirlwind of animals. Gandalf, the first face Boromir had seen upon waking from his madness. Faramir, his dear brother… Faramir as they argued, red-faced, bellowing angrily, slamming Citadel doors, crashing closed.

They all came tumbling now. Aragorn, Ana, Imrahil, Beregond, Iorlas, Ragnor, Eomund, Innrod, Legolas, Gimli, Éowyn, Éomer, Ioreth, and all the faces of Minas Tirith, and Imladris, and the Shire, and...

Boromir turned to Frodo. It was bright enough to see each other now, and the Man did nothing to
conceal the tears which lingered in his eyes, stalled. The sun had almost risen.

“Tell them goodbye for me, Frodo.”

Frodo nodded. “I will... Goodbye, Boromir.”

“Farewell.”
AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

Years later
Thain Pippin, little minstrel-hobbit-lord, would always say,
“Oh, aye, Boromir,
I knew him well.
Boromir the Brave we called him,
or Boromir the Mad.
Either way, a true friend.”

Years later
Meriadoc the Magnificent would blow smoke rings, and laugh,
“Oh, aye, Boromir,
I knew him well.
Boromir the Fair we called him,
or Boromir the Drunkard.
Either way, a good Man.”

Years later
Dínendal, Returned Elf of Eryn Lasgalen, would shrug, and sigh,
“Oh, aye, Boromir,
I knew him well.
Boromir the Bold we thought him,
or Boromir the Exile.
Either way, a noble spirit.”

Years later
Gimli, son of Glóin, Lord of the Glittering Caves, would snort and grunt,
“Oh, aye, Boromir,
I knew him well.
Boromir the Tall they called him,
or Boromir the Fool.
Either way, a doughty warrior.”

Years later,
Aragorn, King Elessar Telcontar, would nod-sage, and whisper-wise,
“Oh, aye, Boromir,
I knew him well.
Boromir the Strong we thought him, or Boromir the Changéd. Either way, a light to Gondor.”

Years later
Faramir, Prince of Ithilien, would sigh and murmur, “Oh, aye, Boromir, he was my brother. Many names they called him, e’er our argument, our honor, our embarrassment, e’er our leader, our fallen soldier. It matters not now, all that has passed.”

And the suns rise and set
burning away into the horizon
flattening out, melting with it, red
casting everything in gold
from the green corners of the Shire
to the White Towers of Gondor
and deep into the scorching deserts of Harad
all melting gold
everywhere rising and setting suns
days stretching thin into long weeks
months years
the mortals age…

Boromir…

Where did this all wisp away, Valar-Gods?
You left us hanging on a hinge
the story’s fabric suddenly unraveled into a single thread that we hold onto now.

Well?

Back home, hard-drinking hopeless,
living like a Begging Prince?
Or away, disguised, adventure drifting
blown away by winds and whims
so that, eventually, Minas Tirith resigns
its good-bad son, its former hero, its fast-becoming-legend
to some unknown fate?
(Ah, if e’er there was a Man born for pain, it was he!)

Well?

Valar, it all depends on You,
the Mighty Fourteen
which way You shrug
and cast the Omnipresent Gaze
to shift away from This onto That
making Boromir’s heart swell
with such emotion, such searing burns of love
of hate, of violence and stagnating torture
of peace and the glittering wide joys
of this and that
the tragicomic
the INCONCEIVABLY MORTAL –

Well? Well? Well?

Back home or cast adrift?

“Ah…”
Manwê smiles sly.
“That is another story entirely.”

The End
Author's Notes

Chapter Summary

AU. One less arrow at Amon Hen and things go much differently for beloved good-bad son of Gondor. A veritable odyssey for Boromir ensues, complete with manipulative Valar, exiled elves, Radagast the Brown, and a helpful chorus.

Notes

My sheer destruction is certain. Three time and four time happy those Danaans were who died then in wide Troy land, bringing favor to the sons of Atreus, as I wish I too had died at that time and met my destiny on the day when the greatest number of Trojans threw their bronze-headed weapons over me, over the body of perished Achilles, and I would have had my rites and the Acheans given me glory. Now it is by a dismal death I must be taken.

The Odyssey, Book Five, lines 305-312

The protean man, that is Odysseus: he is the father crying in the embrace of his son; the son coldly deceiving and testing his father; the husband spurning an amorous nymph’s gift of immortality to return to the bed of his wife; the lusty lover whose comrades must force him from yet another woman’s bed; the man pretending insanity to escape his military obligation; the wise military leader and the soldier of exceptional strength and valor; the liar, as some would call him; the storyteller, the maker of fictions, his admirers say; sailor, navigator, shipbuilder; hated by many, respected by most; doubted, suspected, not exactly liked except by women.

pp. 1-2, Odysseus: A Life, Charles Rowan Beye

First things first. The word adraefan – or, as it should be spelled, adraefan – is an Old English verb: to exile. The noun of exile is actually wrecca, though this is rarely used in my work. The reason for this is because adraefan is more euphonic than wrecca, I feel, and Tolkien often emphasized the linguistic aesthetic in his work. Also, it is naturally Old English rather than the Sindarin equivalent (egledhron, pl.) since one of the elves’ punishments was to never again speak their native tongue – and so we can assume they adopted the Mannish word for exile early on and used it ever since.

The three elves are original characters.

In Radagast the Brown, some of you may have caught that Gwaihir is away at Zirakzigil rescuing Gandalf after his fight with the balrog.

In Honor Rekindled, the paragraph describing Boromir’s “soft aspect” is directly inspired by an
identical passage in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*, where the author is describing Caravaggio – a previously clean-cut, immaculate gentleman, who, after years of war, begins to become quite shabby in his beard/hair/attire. And this grey shabbiness is pleasing. I believe Ondaatje describes Caravaggio as being a “softer human being.”

In **Chorus III (Dream Prologue)**, the areas east of Rhûn are original inventions. Ceosolstów is Old English for “sand place.” Rinanholt is Old English for “wet forest.” Desert and rainforest. Get it? Hahaha!

In **The March to Another Battle**, the song used is a Sindarin translation of a song sung in the Peter Jackson films. It can be found at [this website](#). Fæstefot’s name is Old English for “fast foot.” He is an original… horse.

In **Chorus IV (Golradir)**, First One is revealed to be Golradir, the son of Oropher. While Golradir is an original character, Oropher is not. Tolkien is somewhat contradictory on Oropher. All we know for certain was that he was a royal elf who died with two-thirds of his army on Dagorlad in the Second Age. Some sources say he was the father of Thranduil, and thus Thranduil inherited the Kingship of Mirkwood from him. This would make First One (Golradir) the uncle of Legolas.

In **Mourning**, the Easterling scout is speaking Old German. Or Anglo-Saxon. I honestly can’t remember anymore, and if any linguists out there recognized it, please let me know! All I recall is that *ubil-tojers* was “evildoers.”

In **The Great Tree by Moonlight**, Radagast says (more or less) the same thing in both Sindarin and the Black Tongue. In either language, he should be saying: “Sleep, Great Tree, sleep! And let us rest in your branches, for we need safety!” Of course, I’m no Sindarin expert, and so it’s a very rudimentary transliteration, so that an actual elf would probably understand, “Rest, Tree Big, rest! And we rest in branches your, desire security.” But the Black Tongue transliteration is even worse. He’s literally saying: “Accept us safety sleep! Let us slip you!” The Great Tree is an original creation.

In **Chorus V (Prayer Answered)**, the banter between Manwë and Varda is inspired by Christopher Logue’s poetry in *War Music*, where Zeus and Hera banter in much the same way. If any are curious, Logue’s original back and forth, arguing-between-gods, goes like this:

> Picking a cotton from his sleeve: "Pa-pa," Athene said,  
> "This is not fairyland. The Trojans swore an oath  
> To which You put Your voice."

> "I did not."

> "Father, You did. All Heaven heard You. Ask the Sea."

> "I definitely did not."

> "Did-did-did-did - and no returns."

-p. 125, *War Music*, Christopher Logue

In **Imrahil and the Guard**, the characters of Amlaith, Ragnor and Eomund are original characters. See [The Laughing Oliphaunt](#) for more of them. Also, all the pubs – *The Tree and Tavern, The Skulking Squire, The Laughing Oliphaunt, and The Rose Garden* – are original creations. *The Rose*
Garden is based on a similar pub in Oxford, England.

In Long Day and Longer Night, Delhir and Dalhir are nonsense names. The Black Tongue of Mordor that Boromir hears is a transliteration of the following: Hungry, madman? Stinking stomach, drink all, piss-pig. We hurt the elf, [he is] alone and naked. Now scream for us, piss-pig! (English-Black Tongue dictionary found here.) Most Mordor dialogues are variations of the previous quotation; though, in Coronation, they are repeating the words of Faramir.

In An Unexpected Arrival, Rúnyafin is Sindarin for “red-haired,” Innwen for “wise woman,” and Innrod for “wise stone.” They are original characters, as are Poppy and Azaelia, featured in the next chapter.

In The Reunion of Two Friends, Third One’s name is revealed to be Amdír. Amdír is, indeed, a very minor Tolkien character – an elf who purportedly died during the Siege of Barad-dûr in the Second Age. We can assume, therefore, that Amdír’s destiny was to die in Barad-dûr.

From Valanya Market, Valanya is Sindarin for “Powers-day,” or the Gondorian equivalent of Sunday. (Or, said in Sean Bean’s accent, Soondeh.) What Faramir can’t recall is that Anaranë could mean “to the Sun” – a construction from the Sindarin Anar (Sun) and an (to) with the usual feminine –ë ending. Ana is an original character. She is the Mary Sue Representative for this fic.

In The Children’s Perspective, Aragorn and Arwen’s (rather butchered, but thankfully short) Sindarin dialogue is:

Aragorn: This be our peace, my love.

In Boromir the Mad, Rómendacil the Third refers to the two kings of Gondor who successfully defeated the Easterling wainriders in the early Third Age - called Rómendacil the First and Second, respectively.

In Saruman and Degeneration, haelfdon is an original term – a construction from Old English – which is used here as a racial slur in reference to hobbits.

In Ill News at Bree, Frodo’s similarities to a donkey – according to Radagast – are homage to another fic.

In the Final Chorus (Another Beginning), the phrase, If ever there was a man born for pain, it was he, is Odysseus’ typical epithet.

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Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!