Heirs of Arda

by Darkriver

Summary

The One Ring is destroyed, the great evil has been vanquished and peace has come to Arda. The brave heroes who saved the world have settled down and started families. This is the story of Elboron, son of Faramir and Elfwine, son of Eomer and Eldarion, son of Aragorn and the great adventure of their growing up.

Notes

The characters herein belong to J.R.R. Tolkien, not me and appear without the author's permission, of course, since he's all dead and stuff. For anyone wondering why Amrothos is living in Rohan, it's because this story takes place in the same AU LOTR universe I made up for "Wicked Games," an NC-17 slash story that will be posted to AO3 soon. For now, just accept that he is a very dear and close relation to Eomer. Other than that, all the continuity you should need is in the movies. That being said, this is basically book canon, but I filtered in a little of the movie continuity for extra flavor.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter One

DISCLAIMER: The characters herein belong to J.R.R. Tolkien, not me and appear without the author's permission, of cours. Feedback is welcome!

Year 13, 4th Age

Faramir slouched in his favorite chair, contemplating the staccato rhythm of the pounding of his head and the way it throbbed in counterpoint to his pulse-beat. They made a dully unpleasant harmony together.

His bearded chin rested comfortably and somewhat wearily upon his hand, which was propped up by the elbow on the armrest. One of his long, slender fingers tapped his cheek as his gaze hardened to something approximating boundless frustration.

The unfortunate object of his vexation stammered, stuttered and trembled as he offered up his best explanation of the events that had led him here.

"And how did you arrive at the idea that wriggling into that armor—an irreplaceable family heirloom—was a good idea?" Faramir finally asked.

Elboron quivered, his slight frame reflecting the terror he felt at facing his father's wrath. "Well, uh, sir, we were playing Last Alliance, you see, and we didn't want to cut ourselves on the swords —"

"Naturally."

The boy winced at his tone. "So, we saw the armor and...."

"And you decided it was much too far to walk to go and get some practice padding and wooden swords."

"Well, it would hardly be the same, father."

Faramir felt a familiar nervous twitch coming on. The headache and the twitch were woefully common occurrences, and their singular source was his wild-hearted son. He took a deep breath and plunged onward. "And so, of course, once you had your Uncle's armor on, you felt that you had to properly complete the set and make your reenactment that much more authentic, you took your grandfather's sword out of its case, is that correct?"

Elboron studied his shoes very intently. "Yes, sir."

The headache increased its tempo. "And the case containing my old helmet?"

"I tripped, sir."

"I see."

"I didn't mean to!"

"I should think you didn't."
"It was Thormir's fault!"

"Ah, yes, there is the problem, my little prince."

Elboron flushed at the nickname he had repeatedly insisted his father cease using on him. It was all well and good for a boy of five, but for a young man of ten, it was mortally embarrassing.

Which was why Faramir saved it for special occasions.

"You see, Thormir may be the guard captain's son, but you are the heir to Ithilien. I'm sorry to tell you, your responsibility exceeds his by a fair amount."

"But father—"

"Ah ah."

"But—"

"No."

"Father—"

"Hush." Faramir gathered the last of his tattered patience. Elboron had been wild since birth—a fact he blamed entirely on Éowyn. He reminded her constantly that the horses in her bloodline had made their son wilder than the wind.

To which, of course, she would laugh and say he had known full well what he was getting into when he had married her.

Faramir could not keep the love from his eyes if he tried, but his son had done much damage to things that were important—not just to him, but to the posterity of their family. And he had broken at least a dozen rules along the way.

The boy gave him a pleading look that would have melted any heart not prepared to withstand it. Faramir raised an eyebrow in response, parrying his son's blatant emotional play with an ironic smile. He was prepared after all, since he had faced that look on many occasions.

He never raised his voice in anger to Elboron. He had learned from his long-departed father's mistakes and the legacy of pain that they had left behind. Anger did not make the lesson stick. It only made the lesson hurt.

"I'm in a great deal of trouble, aren't I?"

"Oh yes." Faramir sighed heavily. "You can more or less forget about those fishing trips we had planned. And don't even look at me like that."

Elboron aborted his injured look and slumped. "Yes, father."

"Go on, then. I'm sure I'll think of other ways for you to suffer later on."

The boy gave him one more look of exaggerated penance and then quietly shuffled out. Faramir rubbed his temples, wondering if he had ever been so much trouble in his youth. It wasn't likely. If he had, then perhaps his father would have noticed the boy standing in his brother's shadow.

A side door opened and Éowyn glided in. She wore a simple dress—as was her habit—of a deep green color. Her long golden hair was tied back in two braids seemingly on the verge of
disintegration. Though she had adapted to her life at court with ease, there was always the hint of the rough-cut girl he had fallen in love with.

"So, what was it this time? Slaying Smaug in Laketown? Facing down Gothmog perhaps?"

Faramir laughed and pulled her into his lap. Just the sight of her lightened his mood. It astounded him, sometimes, to think they had been married for over a decade; she still took his breath away.

"The Last Alliance."

"Was he Isildur or Elrond?"

"I forgot to ask. I'm hoping he wasn't Sauron."

She placed a hand on his chest and looked into his eyes. "The servants tell me the damage is not irreparable. The smith is looking at the sword as we speak."

His father's sword was missing two inches off the tip. It was all he had left of the man who had raised him; sometimes with love, often with cruelty and derision. It was also the sword of the Stewards, an artifact that needed preserving. Faramir was very serious about the preservation of history.

"Thank you for seeing to it. Though I noticed how quickly you excused yourself from speaking to the young Lord of Gondor."

She giggled and kissed him. "It was a matter between father and son."

"You are fond of that excuse."

"As you are quick enough to escape when one of the girls acts up."

"True, but then, you know I crumble the moment their eyes start to well up." He wrapped his arms around her waist and leaned his cheek against her shoulder. "Sometimes I don't know what to do with that boy."

"Children need to play."

He frowned at that. "But he doesn't respect rules or boundaries."

She ran her fingers through his hair. "He is a bit wild. I suppose I take no notice, because all the children I grew up with were the same. But it's easier to deal with rambunctious children on the plains."

Faramir looked up at her. "You know I love him, right?"

"A blind man could see it," she assured him.

He relaxed, wrestling the old doubts back into their cages. It was a constant struggle, especially with a boy like Elboron. He wanted to be the best father in the world, but that was a desire his clever son often exploited. The boy needed discipline, but the whispers of a ghost caused him to hesitate every time it came to punishing his son.

"Maybe I'm not spending enough time with him."

"Fishing trips, camping, riding.... You spend more time with him than you do with me," Éowyn said with a fond smile.
"Then maybe I'm not listening very well to him?"

She took his chin between her fingers and looked into his eyes. "I've said it before and I'll keep saying it until you believe me. You are not your father."

Faramir gave her a helpless look. "I know.... But sometimes, I.... I just worry.

Her eyes positively glowed with love. "And that worry will keep it from ever happening. Not to mention the fact that I won't tolerate it for a moment."

He grinned and kissed her. "I love you."

"Good," she replied with a smirk.

Faramir looked away, thinking. "You say such children as he are common in Rohan?"

"Are you back to blaming me?" she asked archly.

He winked at her. "I know you're at fault."

She smacked his chest. "Slander, it is, and the worst kind."

He laughed at his wife's mock ire. "My point was that maybe we should think about sending him to your brother. Elfwine is about the same age. Might be good for them both. Elboron can race the rivers until he's calmed down a bit and he can teach Elfwine to use silverware."

She smacked his chest again, laughing in spite of herself. "Sometimes you can be impossible."

He winked again.

She pondered it. "It might be good for him, being out of the city and all."

"It will be good for the city as well. There's a lot less to break in Rohan."

"And can you bear to be without him?"

Faramir fidgeted, not really willing to meet that question head on. "If it's for his own good, I will have to. Besides, if the word from King Elessar is to be believed, I won't have as much time for him as I'll need."

"But father!"

"Boro...."

The boy stared at him with betrayal in his eyes, tears threatening. "I swear I'll be good. On my honor."

Faramir swept a hand through his hair, unable to bear the anguished look in his son's eyes. He settled on the stone bench beside him and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. The garden around them, dormant now in the autumn, filled the air with an earthy scent.

"This isn't punishment, Boro."

"You don't want me around," the boy said sullenly, a tremor in his voice.
"Now you know that's not true."

"Then why are you sending me away?"

"I am sending you off on an adventure," Faramir said with a wink. "A great adventure where you will learn lots of things and make your mother and I very proud."

"But I don't want to go."

"Now that's no way for a prince to act. You're supposed to be brave, remember?"

His son looked down, swinging his feet back and forth. "I guess."

"Come on, buck up. You'll love Rohan. Your uncle has lots of horses to ride and streams to swim in."

Elboron did perk up at that, if only slightly. "But everyone I know is here. All my friends.... You, Mam...."

"We'll be here when you return. It's just for a few years, and you can come back for visits. And your mother and I will come see you as often as possible."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

His son sagged against him. "I didn't mean to break granda's sword," he said quietly.

"I know, son."

"Lots of horses you say?"

Faramir chuckled softly. "On my honor."

The young Prince let out a heavy sigh. "Fine.... I'll go."

"Good boy!" Faramir squeezed him tightly, feeling relief wash over him. He mussed Elboron's hair and kissed his forehead. "I love you, son."

"Father...."

"Oh I see. Moments ago you were terrified I didn't want you around and now you whine because I say I love you."

Elboron squirmed uncomfortably. "I love you too, Da. But the kitchen women are watching and I think they're laughing at me."

"I'm sure they're not."

"Will you have them beheaded if they are?"

"No, I don't think so," Faramir replied with a wry smile.

"Flogged?" the boy countered with an impish look.

"Boro!"
His son laughed, breaking the last of the chains of sadness. "What?"

"Flogged indeed. You're as bad as your mother."

They shared a laugh, both feeling a good deal better.

"Son, come on, you've got to come along to meet your cousin," Éomer reasoned.

Elfwine, nose in a book, shook his head adamantly. "No, sir, I really want to finish this passage."

The King of Rohan folded his arms. His son should have been doing saddle tricks at five, and yet here at nine he could barely ever be cajoled onto a horse's back. It was baffling and a trifle frustrating. It was made much worse because his painfully shy son did not seem to want to talk about it.

"Don't you want to meet your cousin?"

Elfwine smiled angelically, his wild blond hair hanging in his eyes. "I'll meet him when he comes here, sir."

Éomer raised an eyebrow. "Son, there's more to life than maps and books."

Elfwine sank deeper behind the tome in his hands. "Really, sir, I'd much rather just stay here."

The King shook his head in frustration. It was a depressing fact to discover he had no idea how to talk to his own son. Something certainly had gone wrong in the last few months, but none of his inquiries had yielded a clue as to what it was. Accustomed to problems he could attack, Éomer felt frustration at his powerlessness.

"All right, then. We'll expect you down at dinner."

"Yes, sir."

Éomer stalked away, angry with himself for failing once again to find the right words. He caught an unoffending braid in his fingers and ground it mercilessly, wondering for the thousandth time what was bothering his son. Had he said something, done something to inadvertently hurt Elfwine?

The King fretted over it as he stormed through the hallways. It was true he spent months away from home, visiting the various towns and villages and seeing to their concerns—not something he enjoyed, but something he insisted on doing. He had vowed that his reign would not be marred by a lack of involvement or a failure to watch over his people. And, of course, he had to answer King Elessar's call when evil stalked the borders of Gondor.

But when he was home, he made a point of spending time with his family. There had never seemed a problem before, but something had gone awry during his last trip. For upon his return his son — always rather introverted—had withdrawn in upon himself.

So consumed was the King by his worries that he nearly trampled Amrothos when he came around a corner. He drew up short and stammered an apology.

"He's not coming?"
Éomer shook his head. "He's buried in a book again."

The Prince furrowed his brow. "I wish I knew what was bothering him."

"That makes two of us."

"Should I speak to him?"

"Do you remember the last time he got the impression the adults were ganging up on him?"

Amrothos nodded unhappily. They walked together down the hall. "The greeting party is ready to go. Oh, and my sister is in foul mood."

The King smiled faintly. "That's normal these days."

It was, too. His sweet, delicate wife transformed into an absolute shrew when she was pregnant. Somewhere about the sixth month, she announced her deep-seated resentment of Rohan in general and Éomer in specific. From then on, everything the King said was heard as a hidden barb, and every attempt to reconcile was met with a most un-ladylike string of curses.

"Was she suggesting she'd drop this one on its head like a proper herd animal?"

Amrothos laughed. "As a matter of fact, yes. She seems to think three daughters and a son are quite enough."

The King laughed ruefully. "She said mostly the same thing last time. And yet she was the one who wanted another baby."

"Perhaps she likes the attention."

"Perhaps she enjoys having cause to castigate me at the top of her lungs."

Amrothos grinned. "That's possible too."

The King and a handful of men, along with Amrothos, rode out shortly, moving swiftly to meet up with Faramir's party. They encountered them just after noon, finding them taking a leisurely picnic under the spreading bows of an elm tree.

Éomer barely dismounted before a blond flash streaked over to him. He laughed and opened his arms to receive his sister. Éowyn hugged him tight enough to make him wince.

"You've gotten fat," she announced, dabbing at her eyes.

He grinned. "You're a might padded yourself."

Her eyes flashed fire and he stepped back with a grin. "I've had three children, what's your excuse?"

"An excellent cook. Hello, Faramir. Well met."

The Gondorian shook his hand warmly. "You are looking well."

The King grinned back at his sister. "I see you've not managed to dull his manners."

"It's all that horse-manure Gondorian etiquette," she explained. She looked past her brother and smiled warmly. "Amrothos, I presume."
"Filling in for my sister, who informed us we were not getting her onto a horse without the use of winches and pulleys—an indignity we felt wisest not to inflict upon her."

Éowyn snickered. "And where is my nephew? Did you lose him already?"

Éomer's face fell. "He ... stayed behind."

His sister read his concern and frustration on his face and her look clearly told him they would speak of it later. "Probably wisest. I can't imagine the effort it would take to control two boys out here."

"Mother...."

Éomer started. The boy he looked upon had a very familiar face, though he realized it was but an echo of a distant memory. Dark hair, well-kept, hung in a small tail over his collar. Grey eyes, full of a child's excitement, completed the unsettling image.

Faramir caught his look and nodded, a twinge of sadness crossing his features.

_He's the spitting image of Boromir, I'd swear it_, he thought, recalling a long-ago visit to Minas Tirith when he had met the Steward's heir.

"Elboron?" He knelt before the lad, who was wary at suddenly being the center of attention. "The last time I saw you, you were attached to your mother's teat."

The boy instantly went flame red.

Behind Éomer, his sister laughed. "I'm afraid my son isn't quite used to the Rohirrim habit of honest speech."

The King grinned, gripping the boy's shoulder. "Apologies. I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"I'm not, Uncle." Elboron's cheeks were still flaming.

"Ah, of course." Éomer stood. "Shall we ride on to Meduseld? There's quite a table being laid for such fine guests."

"That means he's laying out napkins and keeping the dogs in the kennel," Éowyn murmured to her husband.

"The Royal treatment indeed."

The King gave them both expressive glares. "Remind me never to invite you to my home again."

They laughed. The two parties mounted up and set off at a brisk pace. Éomer rode beside his sister, bantering with her and gauging how much distance had grown between them. More mature in many ways, and with her edges softened by city-living, she was unmistakably his sister. Her laugh, the mischievous twinkle in her eye, even the biting comments harkened back to their childhood.

He had dearly missed her.

"Hello."
"Er, hello."

The two boys sized each other up, awkward and uncertain. Elfwine saw a boy taller than himself but skinnier; dressed in more layers of clothing than he would have thought could ever have been put on a human being, with perfectly combed hair that was tied back in the beginnings of a tail. His grey eyes were like smoke and his posture was that of someone always poised to run into or out of trouble.

Elboron saw a boy that was both pensive and uncertain, broad at the shoulder for his age and with knobby elbows and knees. His blond hair was a mess and the stained tunic he wore was a disaster. Had he not been told this was the heir of Rohan, he would have guessed he was a servant's child.

"So..."

"Um..."

They shifted awkwardly from foot to foot. The adults had left them to themselves, not wanting to hover. It was something both boys were grateful for. The last thing they needed was one of their parents cooing over how cute they both were—or worse, attempting to suggest things they could do together. Adults were tiresome that way sometimes.

"You, er, ah... That is... I could... if you wanted to, that is... you want me to, uh, well, show you around?"

"You took all those words just to say that?" Elboron asked with a laugh.

Elfwine went beet-red. "Ah, er... Well...."

The Gondorian shook his head at his cousin. "I'd love to see the place."

"Okay. Um, do you want to change first?"

Elboron looked down at himself. "Into what?"

"Er... Something, less, well... That is, into something not so... heavy...?"

Elboron compared their two modes of dress and decided that if it was acceptable for a Prince to run around like that, it was certainly preferably to the itchy, hot, miserable thing his mother had stuffed him into.

"All right."

Elfwine ducked his head and shuffled along a winding corridor. Elboron ambled along beside him. "So, uh, what's Ithilien like?"

"Boring." Elfwine laughed nervously. "No, really, there's nothing to do there."

"Hey Winer!" a boy called suddenly. "Who's that? Your new valet?"

Elfwine went red to the roots of his hair.

Elboron rounded on the speaker, fists clenching at his side. The boy was perhaps two years older, more evenly proportioned than either of the Princes. His blond mane was tied back in a scraggily tail and his blue eyes were sparkling with meanness.

"Who are you?"
"Hama, son of Haleth," the boy replied with an indolent smirk. "You?"

"Elboron, Prince of Ithilien."

"Do all princes dress like girls where you come from or was that dress all your mommy could find to put you in."

"Dress...?" Elboron looked down at his formal clothes.

He considered punching the infuriating boy, but he knew how badly that would go for him. Getting into a fight just minutes after arriving would earn him a blistering scolding and who knew what further punishments. It wasn't worth it—almost, but not quite.

He looked to Elfwine, who was staring at his feet. There was no help to be found there.

Hama laughed. "Well, I'll let you girls go find some dolls to play with. I'm going to go riding. I'd ask you to join me, but, well…." He gave Elfwine a pointed look, who visibly trembled. Then he walked on past, bumping Elboron hard in the shoulder.

"Who is he?" Elboron demanded of his cousin.

"Stablemaster's son," muttered Elfwine. "His grandfather was Doorwarden and his father was at Helm's Deep. Very important family."

"And he's a complete goat turd."

Elfwine shrugged. "Just ignore him. Come on, I'll show you where you're staying."

Elboron followed, disgruntled by the encounter. He didn't want to do anything that would get his Uncle and Aunt angry with him, but he wasn't sure he could keep his temper in check. It occurred to him that he should talk to his father, but he didn't want his father to think he couldn't handle a little teasing.

His room turned out to be nothing like his own room back home. Smaller and draftier, it hardly seemed appropriate quarters for a Prince. The walls were covered in very old, musty-smelling tapestries depicting young Kings of Rohan learning swordcraft and romping with horses. The bed was a weathered wooden frame containing a mattress of fresh straw.

Elboron looked dubious. "Er….

Elfwine glanced at him. "What?"

"Nothing."

His clothes were in saddlebags at the foot of the bed. He rummaged through them until he found an old tunic of his fathers that he cherished. He tugged at the laces his mother had bound him with, grimacing over at his cousin.

"Is it always so, well, drafty in here?"

Elfwine cocked his head in thought. "Uh…. I.... We can, um, well, you know, find you another room."

Elboron couldn't help but laugh. "I was just asking; not declaring war or anything."

Elfwine cracked his first smile … a nervous, shaking thing. "I don't notice it much, really. And you'll be grateful in summer, because it can get so hot you feel your skin's gonna melt off."
"Huh.... It's almost always cold around Ithilien." He finally worked the laces loose. "So, where's your room?"

"Down the hall—thankfully."

"Thankfully?" he asked, wriggling like a snake to rid himself of the doublet imprisoning him.

"Well...." Elfwine stumbled, clearly uncertain he should continue.

"Well what? Go on."

Elfwine stammered awkwardly for a moment. "It's just that I spent a lot of years down the hall from my parents' room...."

"Always an eye on you, eh?" Elboron remarked knowingly. The woolen leggings and heavy shirt went next and he felt like he could finally breathe for the first time in days. He slipped the overly-large tunic over his head.

Elfwine nodded, flashing a conspiratorial smirk. "I kept asking to be moved, but there was always some excuse. They finally had no choice. They needed another room for the new baby."

"Now you're free to raid the kitchens at will, hmm?" he murmured through miles of cloth as he wormed his way into the tunic.

Elfwine gave him a startled, guilty look. "Um...."

"I do it all the time at home."

He cinched the over-large tunic about his waist with his belt and rolled up the sleeves. "Shall we?"

Elfwine stifled a giggle.

"What?"

"Your legs are the color of milk."

Elboron blushed and glared at the same time. "Well, I don't run around like a savage, do I?"

The Rohirrim Prince fretted, worried he had offended. The smile tugging at his cousin's lips, though, set him at ease. "Well.... You'll get your chance, living here. You don't want to be wearing your best if you're suddenly called to help deliver a lamb or something."

"Deliver what?" Elboron let his panic show.


"Almost never...?"

"Come on, I'll show you around Edoras first." He winked mischievously. "If you can keep up."

Elboron grinned and chased him out of the room, down the corridor and around a corner. The fleet Rohirrim boy was barely able to stay ahead of his long-legged Gondorian cousin as they pelted through Meduseld at full speed. Only his knowledge of the keep aided him; he knew where to expect turns and was prepared while his cousin, unfortunately, had to scramble to keep from smashing into walls.
Outside Meduseld, it was a brisk autumn afternoon. Thunderheads loomed overhead, threatening and ominous. The boys dashed along the main road, laughing breathlessly. Putting on a burst of speed, Elboron launched himself at his cousin and tackled him into a pile of hay.

"Ack!" came the muffled protest.

Elboron sat back on his heels, straw sticking in his now disheveled hair. "Can't keep up, eh?"

"Simple mistake," panted Elfwine. "Come on, there's sweetmeats to be had at Goodwoman Thaster's shop."

The Rohirrim Prince stood and plucked straw from his hair. His cousin brushed himself off as well and fell into step behind him. Edoras was cold and bitter to the Gondorian boy's eye. The whistling wind and tired faces of the citizens made it mournful at first glance. But with the Prince beside him, the city transformed. People shouted greetings with bright smiles, asking after the King and Lady Lothiriel and inquiring about Elboron. Elfwine folded in upon himself, returning the warm greetings with nervous ones and the smiles with forced displays of cheer.

Elboron noticed, but did not know how to ask about it, so he just let it go. They were given sweetmeats by Goodwoman Thaster, whose bakery provided the city with most of its few pleasant smells. She was a sweet old woman with the spark of youth in her gray eyes. Without their asking, she loaded them up with candies and sent them on their way.

"How many?" the Rohirrim King asked.

"Five thousand at the least," replied Faramir.

"So many...."

"Orcs spawn like insects and the wastelands of Mordor are still a haven for them."

Éomer shook his head wearily, gripping his goblet angrily. His sister and his wife had gone to look in on the girls, leaving them to talk of the more serious matter Faramir had come to discuss.

"And just the year before last, we had that invasion from the south. I begin to wonder if I will see peace in my lifetime."

Faramir paused in his pacing to give him a sympathetic look. "There is always the hope of that. Can I tell King Elessar that we can expect you in Ithilien come spring?"

"Of course, with a thousand men at my back. I will also send Amrothos to speak with his brother. I'm sure we can count on troops from Dol Amroth as well."

"Then this encampment shall surely be destroyed."

Éomer smiled viciously at the thought. "I am curious, though. Does this shadow on your border have anything to do with you bringing Elboron to the plains?"

Faramir threw himself into a chair. "I admit. I'll feel better knowing he is far from danger. But, no, honestly, I think he just needs a less constrained place to grow out of his wildness."
The brooding man swirled his finger in the pool, banishing the image. Around him, the darkened hall was still, save for the scraping footsteps of his servants. None dared approach him while he was using the scrying pool. It took immense concentration on his part and interrupting him was certain to earn the transgressor a lashing at the least. The incredibly rare artifact was fading with the rest of the magic in Arda, but he could yet wring some images from it.

"So...the sons of both my enemies are in Meduseld. Perhaps there is an advantage there." He tugged his wolf-skin cloak tighter about himself. There seemed to be no banishing the constant chill of his stronghold.

"Agar!"

An orc shuffled forward. "Yes, my Lord?"

"Send for Utuk. I need to get a message to our spies in Meduseld."

"At once, my Lord."

He slouched back on his throne, irritated. Orcs were incredibly stupid and that he had to rely on them irked him. His blood was rich with royalty. He should be holding court in Edoras, not in this dank, forgotten place.

He pondered the new events he'd seen in Edoras. It was a strange turning, to suddenly have both Éowyn and Éomer's sons together. The heir of Rohan had never figured very heavily in his plans, but with his father leaving in the Spring for a year's campaign...opportunities might avail themselves.

But he would be patient. That was his strength; the ability to wait out his enemies and strike only at his choosing. Long had he lurked in shadow and secrecy. But the time was drawing nearer—the time when he would destroy the heirs of Rohan.

"Is it ever going to stop raining?" Elboron asked with a despairing look out the window.

Elfwine diverted his attention briefly from his book. "Maybe. Or maybe we'll sink like Numenor."

"Like which?"

"Numenor. You know Numenor."

Elboron shrugged. "Of course. *Everyone* knows about that old wreck," he said dismissively, glaring at the rain again.

The choking laugh from Elfwine brought his head around. His cousin was red-faced from the effort of stifling a fit of giggles. "Numenor wasn't a ship, muckbrain. It was an island."

Elboron was caught between irritation at being talked down to and intrigue at the image of an island sinking. He decided to yield to curiosity now and save the irritation for a grudge later.

"How does an island sink?"

"I can't believe you don't know.... Well, it's just the best story ever. You want to hear about it?"

"Sure beats staring at the rain." Elboron sauntered over to an old divan whose stuffing was
coming out in places and flopped onto it bonelessly.

"Okay, so, back in the day.... That is, a really really long time ago, Sauron got himself in good with the Numenorian King, Ar-Pharazon, and was his most trusted advisor."

"What kind of moron do you have to be to make Sauron your advisor?"

Elfwine huffed impatiently at him. "They didn't call him Sauron the Deceiver for nothing, you know."

"I didn't know they called him that at all."

"Honestly, how can you not.... Oh, never mind. Do you want to hear this or not?"

Elboron shrugged. "Yeah."

"All right, so, what happened was Ar-Pharazon captured Sauron—well, he let himself be captured, really—and Sauron used his powers of persuasion to worm his way into the King’s trust. Well, of course, once he had the King's ear, he started corrupting him and through him all the rest of the Numenorians. Except Amandil and his son Elendil and Elendil's sons—"

"Isildur and Anarion!" Elboron put in excitedly.

"Oh, you do know a little history."

Elboron made a rude gesture. "So, what happened?"

"Well, it was almost no time at all before the King started worshipping Morgoth—you know who that is?"

"Ancient Elven King?"

Elfwine gaped at him.

"Kidding! I know, evil Vala, scourge of Middle Earth and so on."

Elfwine gave him a disgruntled look, as if wondering if he was being mocked. "Yes, right, so this Ar-Pharazon person starts doing all kinds of bad things—building temples to Morgoth, having people sacrificed, attacking other people for slaves and sacrifices and other nasty things."

"Why didn't Isildur just kill him?"

"Because that would be treason."

"So? Arferzan was a bad man."

"It's Ar-Pharazon and that didn't matter. Men of old took their oaths very seriously."

"But Isildur, he got him in the end, right?"

"No, he didn't."

"Was it Elendil, then?"

"Do you want me to tell you this or not?"

Elboron fidgeted. "Okay, but there'd better be some fighting or something coming up."
"Well, sort of. Amandil went to plead with Manwe to spare the faithful Numenorians from their King's blasphemy. No one ever heard from him again. Elendil and Isildur got ready to run if things went wrong. Oh! I forgot. You know the white tree in Minas Tirith?"

"Yes," Elboron said impatiently.

"Well, the first tree was in Numenor and it was absolutely sacred and stuff. The King chopped it down, but not before Isildur stole a fruit from it. Oh, but before he could get away he was attacked!"

"Attacked?"

"Yes, by twenty of the King's best men."

Elboron stared at him in horror. "What did he do?"

"What could he do? They demanded he surrender what he'd stolen, but he refused!"

"Of course he did," Elboron said fiercely.

"He fought with them for a day and a night without rest. The ground was red with his blood and the pieces of his enemies. Even in the moonless night he did not fall," Elfwine intoned, reciting from memory. "They say he was favored by the Vala. No one knows. They only know that Isildur returned with the fruit, and he was coated in blood and barely able to stand."

Elboron was hanging on his every word.

"So, then, the Vala got very angry with all the things Ar-Pharazon was doing and they sent down all this fire and lightning and stuff onto Numenor to punish them and warn them of what would happen if they didn't change their tune. The air was thick, they say, with the stench of burned corpses.

"But Sauron, being all powerful and so on himself, deflected their fury from himself and that made the bad Numenorians brave so they sacrificed more and it got really bad and then, the King was convinced to do the worst thing of all. You know how the elves sail into the west?"

"I've heard."

"Well, the Numenorians were forbidden from doing that. Well, Ar-Pharazon was old and he was afraid to die and Sauron convinced him that he could get away with it if he went into the west. Well, that was the torch on the funeral pyre of Numenor. They'd broken just about every rule they'd been given. So, Manwe goes to Illuvatar and tells him he's had it and that Illuvatar could do whatever he wanted with the Numenorians."

Elfwine couldn't quite remember the next piece, but he was not about to admit that. Instead, he filled in the gap with his own embellishment. "So, er, this huge monster looms up out of the sea and attacks the fleets of Numenor. It bit ships in half, it swallowed men whole, it breathed fire and spat lightning!"

Elboron swallowed hard, staring.

"Before long, the whole fleet was under the waters and the island was covered by the sea. Sauron wasn't killed, but his body was destroyed and only a few, led by Elendil, survived."

"But what happened to Ar-whats-it?"
Elfwine lowered his voice to a whisper. "He was entombed in the undying lands, trapped there until the end of time for his crimes."

Elboron gasped. "Really?"

"So it's said. Though no one really knows for sure."

Elboron stared at him for a long time, and then he broke into a grin. "You made that all up."

"I did not!"

"Did so."

"Take that back!"

"Make me!"

"All right."

Elfwine pounced, but Elboron was faster. The Gondorian lad darted out of reach, laughing. Elfwine nearly tripped over his giant feet trying to turn, but he surprised Elboron with a quick grab. The dark-haired boy danced aside again and then bolted, flying out of the chamber recklessly.

He stepped on something soft and slick and went skidding across the hall with a panicked yelp. His arms pin-wheeled helplessly, but to no avail. In the next second, he crashed face first into the unyielding stone wall.

"Ow...."

Elfwine was doubled up laughing.

"Hey, you shut up. I slipped."

Elfwine was laughing too hard to respond properly.

Rubbing his sore temple, Elboron got up and looked to see what he had stumbled on. A smeared line of mud ran from where he had first slipped to the wall he had crashed into. Beyond the smear he saw more mud in the shape of footprints.

"That's odd, don't you think?"

"What, that you still don't know a wall from a doorway?"

Elboron glowered at him. "No. Muddy footprints. The mud should have come off a man's boots by the time he got this far into Meduseld, don't you think?"

Elfwine shrugged. "I guess. But Edoras is a muddy place right now."

Elboron, son of one of the finest human trackers in Gondor, frowned thoughtfully and knelt to examine the footprints. Heavy boots, certainly, and big. Scoring on the stone suggested metal-shod boots.

"Come on, I think I smell apple cobbler in the kitchen."

Elboron's ears perked. "Apple cobbler, you say?"
"Race you. I'll even give you a head start, since you're such a clutz."

Elboron shoved him and took off running, the footprints forgotten in the face of the challenge. When they returned to their rooms later, chambermaids had washed away the mud, and Elboron worried over it no more.

"It's rutting cold!"

"You shouldn't swear."

Elboron glowered sourly. "My fingers are going to fall off."

Shivering, Elfwine nodded, looking around his cousin's room. "I know! We could build a fort. That's what I usually do when it gets this cold."

"Fort?"

"Yeah. We gather up all the blankets and pillows we can find and make a fort out of them."

Elboron was plainly dubious. "That works?"

"It sure does. Come on, I'll show you."

They stripped the bed of all its blankets and pillows, pilfered a trunk by the wall and then snatched a pile of furs by the door. With their materials in hand, they made their way to Elfwine's room where they gathered up more coverlets. Not satisfied yet, Elfwine got his cousin to go with him to unoccupied guest chambers to thieve more items.

"Okay, now, put that chair over there," Elfwine ordered, dragging a high-backed seat to a position far from the window.

With a curious look, Elboron did as he was asked. Very shortly, the skeleton of the fort was arranged to Elfwine's satisfaction. The Prince of the Mark then began meticulously laying out the foundation — covering the floor in coverlets and pillows. Then he got Elboron to help him arrange the last of the blankets over the frame, creating a dense tent of woolen comforters.

"There, see?"

Elboron grinned. "I guess all those books aren't totally useless."

Elfwine shoved him, smirking. "Go on."

They crawled into the space they had created, and it was indeed far warmer than either of their rooms. It was also surprisingly comfortable. Elboron flopped and stretched out, totally relaxed.

"So?"

Elboron yawned.

"So?" Elfwine asked again, poking him in the ribs.

Elboron yelped and cringed. "Hey!"

"Oh I see! Ticklish!"
Elfwine pounced, fingers tormenting Elboron's ribs. The Gondorian boy shrieked with laughter and retaliated, pinning his cousin and glaring at him. 

"I hate that!" he complained, still grinning. "Give up?"

Elfwine struggled ineffectually. "I suppose."

Elboron flopped again, breathing hard. "All right, this is pretty good."

"Thank you."

They stared at the woolen ceiling in silence for a moment.

"Hey, cousin?"

Elfwine propped himself on an elbow and looked at him. "Yeah?"

"I'm glad my father sent me here."

Elfwine smiled. "I am too. Hey, did you want to here another story?"

"Has it got Isildur in it?"

"What is it with you and Isildur?"

"I don't know, I just like him. He did defeat Sauron."

"Yeah, and he took the Ring instead of destroying it."

Elboron glared at him, also propping himself on his elbow. "Yeah, but the One Ring made him do that."

Elfwine rolled his eyes. "I suppose."

"Who's your hero, then."

"My father," Elfwine said without hesitation.

Elboron huffed impatiently. "Of course, but besides him."

Elfwine lounged back and stretched. "I hadn't really thought about it. I suppose I should pick somebody from Rohan history...Helm, probably. I really like the way he dealt with Freca."

"Okay, tell me. I know you want to."

Elfwine smiled to himself and closed his eyes, recalling the story to his mind. "Helm was our king almost three centuries ago. Fierce, brave, no one crossed him. Until one day, this powerful landowner made a play for the throne. Oh, he didn't come out and say it, mind, but everyone knew what he was about.

"Freca was the man's name. He wanted to marry his son Wulf to Helm's daughter Theolen. That would give his son a claim to the throne, and if Wulf did ascend, well, he certainly wouldn't deny his father anything he asked for. Well, Helm, he was wise as well as strong and he saw right through Freca. They argued a lot, mostly in private, though. But then one day Freca made the mistake of defying Helm in public.
"A King can’t allow that for a second, you know. Freca had gone way too far. So Helm took him outside, challenged him, and killed him with one blow of his fist."

"Really? One blow?"

"That’s what history says. That’s why they called him Helm Hammerhand."

"What happened then?" Elboron asked.

"Dark times. Wulf actually did take the throne and drove Helm out of Edoras. Theolen became his prisoner. Some of the stories said she married him to have her people spared.

"Helm died during a brutal winter. He had gone out looking for food and had frozen to death — but on his feet. His sons Hama and Haleth also died. It was Helm's nephew who eventually got Wulf and took back Edoras."

Elboron yawned mightily. "You know the best stories. All my tutors ever taught me was boring stuff like who married who and when and who their kids were."

"I’m lucky. My grandfather collected quite a library. Brought a lot of them over from Gondor."

"What was your grandfather doing in Gondor?"

"He was born there, muckbrain. Surely you know that."

Elboron lazily threw a pillow at him. "I fell asleep when my tutors started talking about you mud-herders."

"Mud-herders?" Elfwine protested with a giggle. "Your own mother's Rohirrim."

"Well, she's become all civilized like. I guess she likes the idea of walls that aren't made of twigs and clay."

"That's it!"

Elboron laughed as his cousin pounced on him again, grappling clumsily and giggling all the while. Finally, spent and sore from laughing so hard, they subsided beside each other.

"Mud-herders indeed…." Elfwine muttered, eyes closed.

Elboron laughed softly, feeling more safe and content then he had yet since his arrival. A quiet fell over them and they both began to drift off, their dreams filled with adventures and peril. Neither had the slightest inkling that their own futures were filled with dangers.

"What happened…to that Theolen girl…in end…?" he asked his cousin sleepily.

Elfwine’s quiet snores were his only response, and, drained, Elboron succumbed to the pull of sleep as well.

"You're going to behave yourself in my absence, yes?"

Elfwine nodded to his father. He wanted to beg his father not to go, wanted to tell him he was desperately frightened for him, but he knew better. He could not shame his father before his men.
"And listen to your mother."

"Yes father."

"And not avoid your riding lessons?"

Elfwine went red to the roots of his hair. "No, father."

Éomer hugged his son fiercely. "I love you, boy. You know that."

"I love you too, father. Um...come home soon."

Éomer mussed the boy's shaggy mane and turned to Lothiriel. Their youngest daughter, Finduilas — a bundle of blankets and pink skin — was clutched to her. She smiled bravely at her husband. What worries she had he had heard the night before.

"Give my love to my brothers. And don't forget to put Elboron's letter into his father's hand the moment you arrive."

"I will, beloved," he told her, coming to stand before her and holding her hands. "I will return to you. My vow on that."

She smiled away tears and kissed him. Then the King of the Mark swung into his saddle. Those warriors from Edoras that would accompany him were saying their goodbyes as well. The company would meet the rest of the éoreds out on the plain.

In a cloud of dust and with the clatter of gear, the men of Edoras galloped away from their homes for a year of fighting. Lothiriel watched them until they were out of sight, her son under her arm. Then she turned and, with a somber expression, headed back to the keep.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

While cousins Elfwine and Elboron investigate mysteries around Meduseld, their fathers are off at war.

*Year 14, 4A*

Elboron woke at the sound of a rooster's cry—an experience he was still getting used to. He yawned sleepily and decided not to move for the moment. The weather was gradually improving, true—but as yet, not by much. The blankets were awfully comfortable, after all, and the day was so young.…

He awoke again a moment later, remembering today was his first riding lesson. The chance to be trained by the legendary horse-masters was simply too incredible to pass up. He wiped sleep from his eyes and nudged Elfwine, who slept like the dead.

Since that night in the blanket fort, the two had wordlessly agreed that it was more comfortable to sleep in pairs than alone. They slept like puppies, tangled together in Elfwine's sizable bed. It eased Elboron's homesickness and helped Elfwine sleep without nightmares—which occurred with some frequency.

"Come on, dogface, it's time to get up."

Elfwine batted sleepily at him and curled the blankets tighter around himself. "Go 'way."

"No, no oversleeping today. We've got riding lessons."

Elfwine tensed. "Oh."

"I don't want to be late," Elboron said excitedly, throwing off the coverlet. He slipped out of bed and stretched.

Elfwine sat up, yawning. "But...."

"What? You've been mousy about these lessons since we were first told about them. I thought you horse folks loved to show off for us foreigners."

Elfwine winced and swung his legs out of bed. "Yeah, I guess so."

They slipped into their riding breeches and then pulled on mostly-clean tunics. Then they shuffled down to the dining hall in search of breakfast. Elboron babbled about the riding lessons he had taken, what he hoped to learn and what he had heard of Rohirrim horses—never noticing how quiet Elfwine was about it all.

They reached the stables just as full light was washing over Edoras. The sounds of the stable-hands could be heard; low-murmured conversations, the jingle of harnesses and tack, as well as the horses themselves; whickering over their breakfasts.

Hama intercepted them. "There you are. Thought you lay-abouts would sleep 'til noon."
Elboron glared at him. "Well, we're here now. Who do we see about our lessons?"

"Me," replied the sour-faced youth.

Elboron's eyes bulged. From his cousin's silence, he guessed that Elfwine had been expecting this. He fumed silently for a moment. "But you're barely older than us."

"My father's the stable master, isn't he? And since he's off to war, it's up to me to teach the royal brats how to stay in their saddles." He gave Elfwine an ugly smile. "Don't know if that'll be possible with you."

The Rohan Prince went scarlet and made no reply.

"Well, come on then, Melefel is waiting for you. Shall I get some ropes to tie you to the saddle with so you don't fall off, Elboron?"

The Gondorian Prince also went red, but his color was from anger. Hama was taller and probably stronger, but hitting him seemed so appealing. Forcibly reminding himself that he was a guest here, he just sneered back and said, "No, but you can get a gag for yourself."

Hama's smirk faded. "Follow me," he snapped.

The practice ground was a large circle of packed earth surrounded by a fence. A sedate black horse with a white spot on his nose and a matching one on his chest awaited them, looking supremely bored.

"Who's first?"

Elboron was prepared to yield to his cousin, but Elfwine was looking furtively around like he would rather be anywhere but here. Baffled by that, he nonetheless stepped forward and thrust his chin at Hama.

"This should be fun," the older boy mocked. "Go on, mount up."

Elboron swung easily into the saddle, settling himself a bit. "The stirrups are too long," he said, expecting Hama to shorten them as his trainer back home had done.

"They look fine to me," Hama said instead.

"I'm telling you, they're too long."

"This isn't some dandified country-road riding you learn here, dungheap. This is the right way to ride."

Several nearby stableboys laughed. Elboron flushed crimson, feeling awkward and uncomfortable. "I rode here from Ithilien, fart-breath. I think I know a little bit."

"Well, it's wrong. Now, straighten your back. Come on, square those shoulders."

Elboron clenched his jaw but did as bade. As much as he hated Hama, the boy was Rohirrim. From his mother's stories, even a child of the Rohirrim knew more about riding than many Gondorian cavalry. And he had been anxious to learn, to make his parents proud the next time they saw him.

"Better, now guide the horse to the ring with your knees. Knees! Not the reins, you stupid cow-turd."
Elboron heard the stableboys laughing again and he almost cried from sheer embarrassment, but he would not shame his father. Extremely self-conscious, he nudged the compliant mare towards the ring.

"Your posture is slipping. Get your shoulders back! How many times am I going to have to tell you? Are you deaf or stupid or what?"

Elboron seethed with anger and misery. The unrelenting stream of abuses continued, and it was soon apparent to him that he could do nothing right. Hama derided him again and again for his posture, for the angle of his legs and, most especially, for relying on the reins instead of his knees.

"Do you think you have hands free in a battle to play with the reins, you rutting moron?" Hama demanded, to the delight of the watching stableboys.

Elboron decided that enough was enough. He slipped from the saddle and stomped over to Hama, trembling with anger and embarrassment. "Fine. You win," he snapped and brushed past the older boy.

Hama laughed at his back. "Look, Winer, he's off to cry even faster than you were."

Elfwine trotted over to his side, looking anxiously into his face. Elboron's cheeks were flaming, but his eyes were hard as agates. "So, that's why you hate riding lessons."

Elfwine ducked his head miserably. "I'm sorry. I didn't think he'd be cruel to a guest of the Mark."

Elboron fumed impotently. "I may not know as much about riding as him, but I know my stirrups were too long."

"They...did seem a bit...but I thought...he knows so much."

"Knows how to bark like a hound with a bur in its foot, it seems to me. What does your father have to say about the way he acts?"

Elfwine cast his gaze away. "Um...."

"You haven't told him?"

Elfwine shrugged uncomfortably. "I.... Er...."

"Why not?"

Elfwine looked down at the ground and kicked a stone. "I just thought.... I figured...." He puffed a long blond lock out of his face. "I thought it was me, all right?"

"What?"

"Look, I don't want to talk about it."

Elboron chewed on his lower lip, pondering. "You mean.... That rutting swill-sucker made you think you can't ride?"

Elfwine blushed and said very quietly, "I know I'll never be as good as him."

Elboron wanted to go back and beat Hama into the dirt for the look that now adorned his cousin's face, but he held his temper in check. "What happened?"
"I said I don't want to talk about it, all right?" Elfwine had a wary, hunted look on his face.

"Yeah, I heard you, muck brain. I still want to know. Or I could go ask Hama….

"No!" his cousin squeaked, gripping his arm.

"Well?"

Elfwine sulked for a moment. The two walked down along the path that would lead to the gates of Edoras. The morning was bright and clear, bathed in a golden warmth. The streets were teeming with Rohirrim, going about their daily chores. Some paused in their doing to hail the two youths. Neither boy was of a mind to more than nod in response.

"I fell ... off," Elfwine told him, still blushing furiously.

"Off what?"

"My horse. I fell off my horse," the Prince of the Mark snapped.

"So? Doesn't everyone?"

Elfwine glowered at him.

"How many times did you fall off?" Elboron demanded, undaunted by the continuing glare. "I'm not going to go singing it in the Great Hall. How many?"

"Three times."

"That's all?"

Finally pushed past tolerance, Elfwine growled at him, "That's three times too many for the son of Éomer."

Elboron did not understand at all. "Falling is part of learning, or so my father says."

"You don't understand," Elfwine complained. "After the first time, I was terrified of making a fool of myself—of shaming my father. After the second, I could barely hear Hama 'cause of how hard the stable boys were laughing. The third fall was too much. How would it be if my father, the hero of Rohan, came by and saw that his son could barely stay on his horse and all of his people were doubled-up laughing?"

Elboron sensed his cousin's pain, but he was at a loss as to what to do about it. "I think Hama would make anyone nervous enough to fall out of their saddle."

Elfwine shook his head. "I'm just never going to be.... I don't know...."

"As good as your father?" Elboron finished for him, starting to understand.

Elfwine shrugged wordlessly.

"Well, I think it's rutting stupid to let a muckhead like Hama convince you that you can't do...well, anything, really."

His cousin was glancing furtively at him, as if not quite believing what he was hearing. "You.... You don't think it's my fault, then?"

Elboron snorted. "Not by half, Win. Look, my mother taught me a lot of what I know, and maybe
I can help you."

Elfwine looked away again. "Hama will be there."

The Ithilien youth considered that and shook his head. "We'll take Melefel out tomorrow, out beyond the city. Then no one will bother us."

Elfwine smiled for the first time that day. "All right. That.... That actually sounds like fun."

"Good. So, now what do we do?"

"We could go see if the kennel master would give us leave to take out one of the younger hounds. He usually lets me do that, give them some exercise and stuff."

"Great!"

They changed direction and headed for the kennels on the east side of Edoras. The kennel master was an old man with very few teeth named Galamund. He welcomed them into the yard with a merry smile.

"Haven't seen you in a fair bit, Prince. Who's your guest?"

"My cousin, Elboron," Elfwine said politely. "How have you been? Mother told me your leg was bothering you again."

Galamund waved his hand dismissively. "That wasn't nothing, but tell the Lady that I thank her for the herb-soaked wraps she sent over. Nothing cures that ache faster than that Dol Amroth remedy of hers."

"I'll tell her, sir. I was wondering, uh...."

"Ebros has a cyst on his paw, lad. He won't be running anytime soon. But Fellfang could sure use some fresh air."

Elfwine beamed at him. "That would be wonderful, sir."

Galamund smiled back and lead them over to a pen where a very excited black hound was pawing at the gate. The only part of him that was not black was his left ear, which was pure white. The dog's tongue lolled out in happy anticipation.

"Now, here's some treats for him," Galamund said, pressing a leather pouch into Elboron's hand. "And here's some water. Don't you let me see him come back thirsty, you hear?"

"Yes, sir," both boys said quickly.

Fellfang shot out of the pen and raced happily around the yard, seemingly attempting to go in every direction at once. He shot over to the kennel gate and then ran back, barking excitedly. He pounced on Elboron, bearing him to the ground and licking his face.

Galamund laughed. "I think you've made a friend, lad."

Elboron giggled and wrestled the dog off of him. "All right, you, just because I'm holding the treats...."

"We'll be back in a few hours," Elfwine promised.

"Don't let him run you too hard," Galamund said with a laugh.
The two boys left with Fellfang bounding along at their heels. Very quickly, they passed through the gates of Edoras and ran headlong into the fields beyond. The view was breathtaking, a vast panorama of towering mountains, rolling hills and tall grasses all under a great canopy of a blue sky.

"I meant to ask you, what are these hillocks?" Elboron asked, pointing to the mounds lining the road to the city. He picked up a stick and threw it as hard as he could. Fellfang barked loudly and raced after it.

"Those? They're howes. We bury our Kings under them. That row is Eorl and his descendents. When Helm's sons died without heirs, that second row was started."

"Really?" Elboron said, gazing at the seventeen mounds in awe.

Fellfang charged back, the stick clamped between his teeth. Elfwine grabbed it and tried to extract it, but the hound resisted, tugging backward. The two struggled back and forth, the boy laughing and the dog growling in a false show of ferocity.

It was a fun morning.

Once exhausted, they began winding their way back to the city. Elboron stared at the howes again, impressed how it seemed that the Kings of old warded the gates to the city. Far from the mournful graveyards in Gondor, this was actually peaceful and comforting.

He frowned and strayed over to one of the barrows. The earth did not seem quite right, and as he drew closer he became certain that the ground had been disturbed. Eyes alight with curiosity, he circled the howe and studied the ground.

"What is it?"

"No one should be digging here, should they?"

"I should say not," Elfwine responded, kneeling down and studying the ground along with him.

The grass has been pulled back like a blanket and replaced, for certain. The ragged lines of dark earth could still be seen around the seams. There were also boot prints all around—heavy boot prints. Elboron was reminded of the tracks he had seen in the hall.

"Whose barrow is this?" he asked.

Elfwine had to look around him to be sure. "This is Helm's."

"Why would anyone be digging around in an old grave? Was there treasure buried with him?"

"None to speak of," Elfwine said thoughtfully.

Fellfang, who had been sniffing around the area, suddenly growled low in his throat. This was not the playful sound of before. The hound had sensed something not to his liking.

Elboron knelt beside the dog and traced the boot prints with one finger. Something was definitely wrong here. And he wanted to know what it was.

"Go on, boy. Hunt!" he urged.

Fellfang bounded off, sniffing at the ground as he went. The boys followed, excited by the mystery. They were led along the outer wall, past the gate and towards the north edge of the city.
They had to run to keep up with the bounding hound.

Fellfang whined suddenly, circling one spot and scenting the air. Frustrated, the dog started pawing the earth and barking.

"He's lost the trail," Elboron said in disappointment.

Elfwine shrugged. "It was probably nothing. Let's head in for lunch. I'm starving."

They returned to the kennels in silence, both pondering the mystery of the howe and the footprints. Galamund greeted them as warmly as before, scratching Fellfang's ears fondly.

"Have fun, lads?"

"Yes, sir," Elfwine said with a small smile. "Maybe we can take him out again tomorrow?"

Galamund laughed. "Come by after lunch, lads."

"Sir?" Elboron spoke up.

"Yes, what is it?"

"I was just wondering. What are you training Fellfang to hunt?"

"Him? Why, he's an orc-hunter. And a finer one I've never raised."

Melefel looked quite offended at the notion of being saddled, bridled and warmed up before sunrise. If it were possible for a horse to sulk then that would, in fact, be what she was doing as the two boys conferred on the fields before Edoras.

They had awoken this early to circumvent Hama. If the belligerent boy had seen them trying to sneak off with a horse, he surely would have stopped them. They were gambling that he would not be spiteful enough to come looking for them.

"All right, so, um.... What was that goat-turd supposed to be teaching you?" Elboron asked.

Elfwine was nodding off on his feet. "Vaulting, I think."

"That's not so hard. Um.... Let's see...."

Elboron rooted around until he found a long stick and a few large rocks. He arranged his findings into a makeshift obstacle. Once he was satisfied, he went over to Melefel and, after a friendly rub on the nose, swung into the saddle.

"All right, first thing is to get the stirrups right. Could you lengthen them a bit?"

Elfwine darted over and adjusted them slightly. Elboron tested them and then settled himself in the foreign saddle. Once he was as comfortable as he could hope to be, he lead the sleepy horse to a starting position.

"All right. Now, just watch me first."

Elfwine nodded, staring intently.
Elboron patted the side of Melefel's neck and then put his heels to her flanks. The mare launched forward like an arrow from a bow. He was plainly amazed how instantly she moved for him. It was as if she were responding almost to his thoughts rather than actions; she flew over the pole and landed gracefully.

He circled around to his cousin and slipped off. "Your turn."

Elfwine nervously mounted up, looking almost fearful. "I think the stirrups, um, they need, well...."

"Adjusting, right. Relax, will you?" Elboron lengthened the stirrups and stepped back. "Better?"

"Much," Elfwine said gratefully.

Elfwine's terror was a tremendous obstacle that tested the limits of Elboron's (admittedly limited) patience, but he really wanted to bolster his cousin's confidence (and thwart Hama's cruelty) and so he kept at it. Finally, after a few successful jumps, he was able to lay back on a hummock and watch lazily as his cousin practiced.

"I've been thinking about yesterday," the Ithilien Prince said with a blade of grass between his teeth.

"Oh?" Elfwine asked as he circled around.

"I've been trying to figure out what those orcs were looking for in Helm's howe."

"I told you, there's no way they were actually orcs. Fellfang is still learning, mind, his nose can be fooled."

"Maybe," Elboron conceded. "But what if they were?"

"Then I reckon someone would've seen them by now and the filthy things would be dead."

"Unless they've got a really good hiding spot," Elboron mused. "Was there anything special to Helm? Anything he was known for that he might have been buried with?"

Elfwine completed another jump. "No. Anything of his would have been passed on. I'm sure he was buried with his armor and sword, but those would just be rusted wrecks by now."

"Well, whoever they were, they were after something. And I'd bet my father's sword that they were the same people who left the muddy footprints in the hall last winter."

"I think you're trying to create some sort of adventure out of nothing 'cause you're bored," his cousin joked.

"Maybe." Elboron glanced askance at him. Elfwine was showing much more confidence now. "You're doing good, by the way. Keep your back straight. I'm not sure why it's important, but I know you'll get a thumping if your father sees you slouching."

Elfwine's answering grin was as bright as the morning sun that glinted off his golden hair.

He watched the battle with a gleam in his eye. Riders of the Mark, men of Gondor, archers from Ithilien, all converged on the orc host—a host he had gathered through much negotiating and
cajoling. But only half their strength was known to the men of the West.

Spring had waned and now, as the first days of summer brought dry heat to Ithilien, the battle was joined at last. Bright pennants whipped and armor gleamed; the massive throng was a confused dance of death.

He sat back, smiling blissfully. His father would be proud, he liked to think, of the delicate orchestration that had brought this day about. For he had inherited more than dark hair from his sire; wisdom, cunning, patience—these were the tools that he would use to bring his plans to fruition.

A glance at the pool showed him that his hidden forces were even now assailing the flank of Elessar’s men. Panic swept through the ranks of the King's army and confusion seized them. Like a hand crushing an apple, the orcs were closing in around the forces of men.

Now, if Utuk would simply find the relic he sought, all would fall into place nicely.

It was the hottest day of summer so far. The cousins had decided that swimming was the only possible escape for them. Elfwine had only to inform his mother; now that he was actually leaving Meduseld for hours on end, she was keenly interested in his comings and goings.

Leaving Elboron in their room, he went to the garden, where she could usually be found of a morning. As he approached, though, instead of the dulcet sound of one of her maid's singing, he heard a man's voice, low and urgent. Curious but not wanting to intrude, he cautiously approached to hearing range.

"Osgiliath, my lady. It was the most defensible position."

"But my husband is alive?"

"He was when I left, my Lady. He and the King and the Prince of Ithilien have been all that keep the men from breaking and running."

"Oh Haleth... How could this happen?"

Elfwine started at the familiar name.

"I come here to ask your help in answering that. Your brother, have you had any word?"

"No.... Why...?"

"No men have come to aid us from your fair city. The King's messages go unanswered."

There was an anxious pause. "I will send word myself at once. And I'll send word for Thaedenbrand to come back from the west."

"The King did not wish to leave the west unguarded, my Lady," Haleth reminded her gently.

"We'll have to risk it. Now, you need food and rest..."

Elfwine skulked away before he was discovered, shaking slightly. A terrible disaster had befallen the army, but his father was alive—for now. A terrible, sick sensation knotted his stomach and he had to pause to catch his breath.
He's fine. He's coming home, he told himself, wiping angrily at a surge of tears he felt were childish.

Elboron was sprawled in a chair by the window, fanning himself, when he arrived. "What happened...?"

Elfwine stared stupidly at him for a moment. "Something went wrong at the front."

Elboron blanched. "Our fathers...?"

"All right, for now."

The two boys were silent for a moment, lost in worry and shock. It was agonizing, not knowing the whole story. Elfwine doubted his mother would give him anything but the most honey-dipped version of the truth. In her eyes, he was a child unable to bear the news.

Some part of him, at that moment, agreed with her.

"My mother is sending Thaedenbrand to help. He's the Lord of the West Fold—every bit as much a terror on the battlefield as his father, Erkenbrand, was."

"That... That's good."

More silence followed. Elboron looked out the window blankly, a numb look on his face. "What now?"

"There's nothing we can do but wait."

Elboron nodded in acknowledgement of the words, his expression unchanging. Elfwine went over to the window and looked out at the Mark. He found himself regretting all the times he had turned down his father's offer of a race around Edoras or a deer hunt by moonlight.

He'll be fine, he told himself adamantly. He promised mother.

"Drop your breeches and bend over," Faramir ordered with a grin.

Éomer smiled back. "Well, I've been wondering when you'd get around to asking, but won't you at least offer me a drink first?"

"We don't hold with your foppish courtship where I come from."

"And they call my people barbaric!"

"Do I have to bind and gag you first?"

"Will you ladies knock it off? Or, if not, give me something worth listening to?" Elessar protested.

The two glanced over, looking like a pair of pages who had been caught getting up to no good. Then they laughed sheepishly at the grinning King. Elessar shook his head and went back to studying the crude sketch of the city.

The leaders of the army of the west had taken over a circular room within a ruined tower of Osgiliath. It gave them an excellent view of the river and the enemy encampment. The detritus of years had been cleared away, leaving only dust and a few cobwebs that were out of reach. The
camp chairs had been brought in and a rudimentary table had been set up using a few stone slabs. Éomer winked at Faramir and undid his breeches. Faramir waited with a smirk on his face, arms folded. The King of the Mark pushed down his battered breeches and leaned over a table.

Faramir approached with needle, thread and a vial of alcohol. "This will make it hard for you to sit easily in your saddle," commented the Prince of Ithilien.

Éomer shrugged. "Horses are no good in this forsaken ruin, anyway."

"I was rebuilding it, you know," the King told him. "I can hardly be blamed for the infestation of orcs which diverted my tax dollars."

"Excuses, ex— Ow! Do you actually know what you're doing?" he demanded of Faramir.

"It so happens I do. Now stop being a child and stand still. Unless you want your ass sewed shut by accident."

Éomer laughed, yelped when the needle dug in again, and subsided. The spear had not gone in too deeply, but the blood soaking the back of his left leg had been more than a little alarming. And, of course, embarrassing. Faramir had only just stopped laughing long enough to tend to it.

"Do you think Haleth will get through to Rohan?" Elessar asked.

"If anyone can do it, Haleth can," Éomer replied through clenched teeth.

The King gave him a sober look. "That was not what I asked."

Éomer sighed, winced and gave Faramir a dark look. "You're spearing me worse than that orc."

"I never knew you were such a baby," returned the Prince, driving the needle through again.

"Ow! Goat-buggering-horse-thief!" he swore. The King of the Mark looked back at the King of Gondor, whose expression was still grim. "No, I don't think he will, my friend."

Elessar grinned incongruously. "Then we shall have to make do with what we have. Now, if Faramir is done groping your ass, would you pull your pants up? I can't take you seriously with your breeches around your ankles."

The three friends shared a warm laugh. Outside, amidst the broken buildings and cluttered streets, the army had settled down. Fear and doubt crept through their ranks, weakening them. Only their faith in Elessar held them to their oaths.

For death stalked them from the other side of the river.

The response to Lothiriel's message arrived three weeks after she had sent her most trusted herald to her brother. The rider was on an exhausted mount; and barely still in the saddle himself. He was not the man they had sent. He bore instead the swan symbol on his shoulder.

Both cousins made sure they were within listening range when he delivered his news from Dol Amroth. Hidden in an antechamber, they waited and listened with thundering hearts.

"Plague, your majesty. Half the city has it. The other half are consumed with giving aid to the others. Your messenger was showing signs just before he left and was taken to the Prince's
personal infirmary. I've survived it, but it was cruel hard. So they sent me with the reply. Your brother wants you to know your man is receiving the best care possible."

Lothiriel sank into a chair. "Plague… The troubles do fall hard upon us these days. Are there no men there who can fight?"

"No, your majesty."

Lothiriel swore in a way that would have made her husband proud. "Then there's naught to do but lend what aid we can to Dol Amroth to speed her recovery. The sooner her people regain their strength, the sooner hope returns to us all."

Elboron rested his arms on the stone shelf that made up the edge of the deep end of the pond and brooded over his helplessness. His father was in terrible danger and he was trapped in Rohan, unable to do anything at all to give aid.

The medicine caravan had left early this morning, a slow train of wagons and horses loaded with all the healing herbs, fresh linens and ripe fruit it could bear. They would be in Dol Amroth in a month, and who knew how long after that it would before the people of the Swan banner would be ready to fight.

His cousin swam over and sidled up beside him. "That frown of yours just gets worse every day."

"Like you're not worried. I know I heard you sniffling this morning."

Elfwine fidgeted. "But we have to accept we can't go charging off to the rescue."

Elboron wanted to cry it was so frustrating. "I know." He forced his mind away from the troubling thoughts. "You said there were fish in a stream somewhere nearabouts?"

"Well, not near, really, but not impossibly far."

Elboron ducked as Fellfang suddenly flew by overhead, touching down in the pond with a tremendous splash. He came paddling back with a recently-thrown stick clutched in his jaws.

"He's having fun, anyway." The Ithilien Prince splashed water at his cousin.

"Hey!" Elfwine protested, splashing back.

They shared a brief laugh. "Let's go fishing, then," Elboron decided, climbing out of the pond and sluicing the water off his body with his hand. It was nice to be cool for a change.

Elfwine nodded, climbing out after him. He swept his soaked mop of blond hair out of his eyes and grinned.

"What? Hey!"

Elboron was seized and tossed back into the pool. He came up sputtering, just as Elfwine jumped back in after him. They laughed and wrestled back and forth, Fellfang barking and yipping from the bank.

When they finally subsided, they climbed from the pond and collapsed on the grassy bank to dry. Elboron pulled some hard rolls from his pack and tossed one to his cousin.
"I, uh, think I forgot to say thanks. For, well, ah, for helping me get my nerve back up."

Elboron grinned at him. "Well, I didn't want you to be the first King of Rohan who walked everywhere."

"I'm serious, goat-face."

Elboron shrugged slightly. "It wasn't anything, really. We'll need to get someone to train us who knows more, but that'll wait."

"I... Ah, never mind."

"What?"

Elfwine fiddled nervously with a lock of his hair. "I've never really had a friend before. Most of the boys my age follow Hama around, and he's hated me as long as I can remember."

"He's a dung heap. I'd have knocked him flat by now if I wasn't so worried about getting in trouble."

"Oh really?"

Elboron scrambled to his feet, eyes wild with surprise. Hama and a couple of the stable boys had come upon them quietly.

Unable to take back what he said, and unwilling to embarrass himself in front of his cousin, Elboron sneered at him. "Yeah."

Elfwine was beside him, his expression showing both terror and anger.

Hama laughed. "It's too rutting hot, girls. Are you done with the pond? I don't want to be around while you girls are holding hands."

Elboron picked up his clothes and started dressing. "We were just leaving."

Hama shrugged indifferently and began tugging his sweat-soaked tunic over his head; his friends followed suit. The cousins finished dressing quickly and went over to where their horses; Melefel and another mare, Thornshoe, awaited them, eating grass.

They set off at a lazy pace, Fellfang racing ahead of them and then back again. The sun was high in the sky, its heat brutal and unrelenting. Though the swim had done wonders to cool them, it was still oppressive and miserable.

They had traveled almost an hour when Fellfang started barking excitedly. The hound was circling one spot and digging at the earth.

"I think he's found a rabbit," Elfwine said with a smile.

Elboron grinned as well, but his eyes were watching the dog curiously. "A rabbit should have bolted by now... Come on, I want to see what he's found."

"Boro.... It's too hot to play ranger."

"It will just take a second, Win," the Ithilien Prince argued, turning Melefel towards Fellfang's find.

"Oh, fine," Elfwine complained and followed.
The hound was whining and circling a small patch of dirt that stood in the lee of a small tor. The boys dismounted and approached, bemused looks on their faces. "Very well, boy, what is it?"

The frantic digging sent a small object bouncing their way. Elfwine picked it up, looking puzzled. "Chicken bone. Looks pretty fresh."

"There are tracks here," Elboron told him. "The same sort that were around the howes."

"You're not on about that again, are you?"

The Ithilien Prince threw a glare at him and went back to examining the earth. He helped Fellfang dig a bit, finding the dirt looser than it should be. "There's a fire pit here. A deep one. Whoever built it didn't want it to be seen."

Elfwine knelt beside him. "Or they just didn't want the fire to spread."

"There's been no wind in this country for a week," Elboron argued.

Elfwine shrugged and started skirting the camp. Most of the tracks appeared to have been deliberately swept away, which was a bad sign—but what he did find chilled him down to his very core.

"Orcs...."

Elboron joined him and they stared for a moment at the print made not by a boot, but by a foot—a foot with long, clawed toes.

"We need to find out where they went," Elboron said quietly.

"We need to warn my mother," said the Prince of the Mark in response.

They exchanged a long look, weighing their options. Elboron knew it was not his decision to make. His cousin was Prince of this land. It was up to him to pick their course. The Rohan Prince seemed to know this too, and in that moment, he took his first steps towards accepting his responsibilities. With a resolute expression, Elfwine made his choice.

"We'll ride back to Hama and get him to take word to my mother."

"You think he'll do it?"

Elfwine's eyes hardened. "He will. He has to."

They swung back into their saddles and thundered back towards the pond. At a full gallop, it took barely a quarter of the time to retrace their steps. Elboron watered their mounts while Elfwine approached the pool and the lounging boys.

"Pond's ours, Winer. You had your turn," Hama said lazily.

"There are orcs in the Mark, Hama."

The stablemaster's boy stared hard at him. "Is this some kind of stupid joke?"

"No. You need to go to my mother. The city needs to be closed up and the watch put on alert."

"And what are you going to do?"
"Boro and I are going to see where they went and count their numbers. The captain of the house guard will need to know what he's facing."

Hama stared at him for a long time, reading the gravity in his eyes. "Yes, highness," he said at last. He surged from the pool, his friends close behind.

"Thank you," Elfwine told him and swung back into his saddle.

The cousins rode even faster back to the orc camp, fearing what this meant for Edoras and the people of the Mark.

Once they had arrived, it was easy for Fellfang to pick up the scent again. Barking excitedly, he led the boys east and south, closer to the mountains. The trail did not swerve or deviate. It only turned, at last, when it crossed another more obvious trail.

"Ancestors' ghosts.... They're after the medicine caravan," Elfwine murmured.

The two boys exchanged panicked looks and then pushed their horses to follow. They did not wonder what they, two stripling boys, could do to help or consider the peril they were going into. They just knew that, if it were at all possible, the caravan must be warned.
Chapter Summary

The boys go on a long journey to save their family, venturing into danger and mystery as the resurgence of evil spreads across Arda.

Year 14, 4A

The caravan stood in ruins.

Wagons were upturned. The desperately-needed supplies were strewn about like a mighty wind had struck them. Horses ran about, trailing harnesses and snorting in panic. And everywhere there were bodies. Some were pinned to the earth by spears, other lay where they had been savagely cut down. No one stirred.

Both boys went pale at the sight, feeling their stomachs churn. Elfwine was first to move past the shock and horror, sliding from his horse and going to check on his people. The Ithilien Prince recovered more slowly, glancing about for any sign of movement. As if in a terrible dream, he walked Melefel around the site of the tragedy.

"There are strange men laying here," he commented dully.

"I saw them. Dunlendings. Helping the orcs, no doubt."

Elboron nodded, though there was something odd about the bodies of the dead attackers, something that was causing him to stare a great deal more than was probably healthy for him.

"Everyone's dead," Elfwine murmured sadly.

Still staring, Elboron asked distractedly, "The caravan guards, were they well-trained men?"

"No. That's the worst part. They were just citizen volunteers. I doubt a one of them had more than a summer's training."

"Then doesn't it seem kind strange that these Dunlendings were killed with precise, lethal blows?"

"That would be strange, I guess. Are you sure?"

"Well, I've only had a few sword lessons, mind, but the first thing I learned was where you want to aim for on a body. Both of the, uh, bodies here.... They're stabbed through the heart."

Elfwine stood and frowned at him. "But then..., If the caravan guards didn't kill them, who did?"

"The orcs, would be my guess."

The Rohan prince's frown deepened. "But ... then.... Wait, are you saying the orcs left them behind on purpose?"

"Well, it makes sense. Try to throw the folks who came here off the real trail."
Elfwine looked deeply worried. "Orcs aren't smart enough to come up with a plan like that."

"I know. I think we need to get back, tell your mo—" He stopped abruptly, catching sight of movement in the grasses.

"Win, get on your horse. Now."

"What? Why?" Elfwine looked around warily.

"Because I think the orcs haven't all left yet."

His cousin's eyes widened and he made quickly for Thornshoe. The hidden orcs slipped from their concealment and pursued. Elboron shouted in alarm, seeing a half-dozen of the things chasing Elfwine. Fleet as his cousin was, they were sure to overtake him before he reached his horse.

Elboron shouted, "Gondor!" at the top of his lungs and charged the gang of orcs. The confidently murderous looks on their faces transformed to panic as the boy on the large horse bore down on them. With dismayed cries, they scattered before him.

Elfwine was in his saddle, but one of the fell creatures had already reached him. The boy shouted in panic as the orc pawed at his leg. Then there came a black flash and the orc was brought down by Fellfang. There was a sickening crunching sound as the hound tore out his prey's throat.

"Let's go!" Elboron shouted, but his cousin hardly needed to be told. He kicked Thornshoe's flanks hard and she shot off at a gallop. Fellfang ran along behind, barking and growling threateningly at the orcs.

The Prince of the Mark put his fingers to his lips and let out a piercing whistle. The confused horses milling about turned and galloped after. Elboron crowed and urged Melefel into a full run. Orcs afoot could never catch anyone on a Rohirrim horse.

They did not stop for a long time, not until they dared not push the horses any further and felt they had gained a measure of safety. They stared at each other in wide-eyed shock for a moment before breaking into boyish grins.

"We did it!" Elfwine said with a gleam in his eye.

"You should have seen them when I rode through them! I thought their eyes would fall from their heads!" Elboron laughed merrily.

They set about watering their exhausted mounts, flush with the thrill of having survived such dangers. They both had broad grins on their faces, feeling quite brave as they did. Once the horses were tended, they began checking them over for any signs of injuries--the smallest hurt could turn dangerous if not caught quickly.

"That was a nifty trick you pulled with the whistling," Elboron said as he examined a hoof.

"Thanks," Elfwine said, blushing at the compliment. "I heard Master Haleth do it once. I was hoping the horses would be confused enough to want to listen but not so scared they wouldn't pay any attention. I didn't want the orcs to get them."

"It was quick thinking." Elboron grinned at him. "I didn't think you had it in you."

"Goat-face," Elfwine retorted distractedly, glancing around and chewing his lower lip.

"What?"
"Well.... We're in the Dunharrow Valley."

"If you say so."

"Valley, muckbrain. See? Mountains to the left, more mountains to the right."

Elboron patted one of the horses' flanks and gave his cousin a bland stare. "I know what a valley is, fart-breath. I just don't see why you're so agitated."

"Because the only way out is back through the orcs!"

Elboron paused and stared at him. "Oh..."

"Yeah, 'oh' is right. We have no idea where they are, but you can bet they'll be lying in wait for us."

"Well.... Won't your mother send Riders to come find us?"

"Do you want to wait and hope the orcs don't find us first?"

Elboron leaned back against Melefel. "So, what do we do?"

Elfwine said nothing, opening saddle bags and checking their contents. Feeling panic building at the idea that they were now cornered, Elboron rapidly ran out of patience.

"What are you doing?"

"Confirming something. My people rarely put all their eggs in one basket, as the saying goes. The saddlebags on these horses are stuffed with some of the linens and medicines Dol Amroth needs."

"Great, so, we can sew ourselves up after the orcs have chopped us to pieces."

Elfwine was looking infuriatingly calm, though. "We're not going to get chopped up, Boro. We're going to get these supplies to my uncle."

The Ithilien Prince gaped at him. "You've gone daft, right before my eyes."

Elfwine grinned. "We can't go back the way we came, so we go on. On to Dol Amroth. We deliver the medicine, help the city, get them to send aid to our fathers and we're heroes."

"That still doesn't answer the question of how we get out of this valley."

"Estel's Gate."

"Win, if you don't stop acting so smug and tell me what you're talking about, I will pound you into the dirt."

"There's a tunnel under the mountains. We call it Estel's Gate, because the King used it to during the War of the Ring."

Elboron stared at him. "Wait a minute. My mother told me this story. Wasn't this tunnel the Paths of the Dead?"

"It used to be."

"Used to be?"
"It's perfectly safe now. It's how most everyone reaches Dol Amroth from the Mark."

Elboron's expression was a study in incredulity. "So, you want us, by ourselves, to go through a haunted tunnel, out the other side, across leagues and leagues to arrive at a city suffering from plague."

"It will be an adventure. And the tunnel's not really haunted anymore."

Elboron smirked. "I've been a bad influence on you."

"Yes you have," Elfwine agreed.

"What about food and water?"

"The spare horses are carrying plenty."

"And your mother? Won't she be worried sick?"

Elfwine looked ill-at-ease. "She will, but her scouts will be able to tell her we're not dead or captured."

"And you're sure we're not going to have our brains sucked out by ghosts?"

Elfwine laughed. "I'm sure."

Elboron looked back at the mouth of the valley, wondering where the orcs were lurking, waiting for their prey. They had been lucky to escape the first time. Luck would probably not favor them so again. A single arrow or thrown knife and it would be over. Neither of them could fight, certainly, so running was all they had.

"What do you think, Fang?"

The hound was resting on his bellying, tongue lolling out contentedly. Seeing Elboron's attention fall on him, the dog barked loudly and excitedly.

"I guess we're off to Dol Amroth, then."

"Excellent. I'm worried about Uncle Amrothos, to tell the truth, and I'd like to see how he is for myself. I didn't listen long enough to hear how he's doing and we've no word from him since winter when he went to see Uncle Elphir about mustering troops. I hope he's all right."

Once the horses were thoroughly checked over, the boys took a little bread and cured meat and drank some water. The afternoon sun was beginning its descent. But there were many hours of daylight left.

They mounted up and, with Elfwine leading, they headed deeper in the valley. Farms dotted the horizon, and herds stood in great fields and milled about aimlessly. The hot, still air was cloying and filled with the stench of animals and manure.

At an easy canter, they reached the opening to Estel's Gate before dusk. The opening in the mountain-side stood like a maw ready to swallow them. Elboron looked at his cousin dubiously.

"It will be fine," Elfwine said confidently.

The horses were wary, but not impossibly so. In the end, Elfwine had to lead them in, cajoling and soothing as best he could, and Elboron followed with Fellfang. Very soon, they were enveloped in darkness. Even though the tunnel seemed large, they both felt as if the walls were closing in
around them.

"Um…" Elfwine whispered, stopping the column.

"Yes?" Elboron asked tersely.

"Are you good with flint? I found a torch, but I can't light it."

The Ithilien Prince could not help but laugh. He edged forward in the murky darkness and came at last to his cousin. Between the two of them, they succeeded in lighting the torch, which helped somewhat.

They started off again, subdued by the feeling of the mountains above them. Only Fellfang was unaffected, running around happily and barking at anything that moved.

Time passed slowly. It was a miserable experience. For all his bravado, even Elfwine was uneasy so far from the open sky.

Exhaustion crept over them. They stopped more and more frequently to take water or rest their sore legs. Only the terrible notion of sleeping in this fearful place forced them along as the hours plodded by. Just as Elboron was convinced he could take no more without screaming, they say a faint light ahead. Shouting in relief, they heeled their horses and charged for the exit.

Starlight greeted them. They panted and looked around uneasily. It was just before dawn, near as they could figure. The wind was brutal on this side of the mountain, as well. They looked out over the valley below and shuddered. It was a long way down into darkness.

"So… Now we find a place to camp, I guess," Elfwine said.

Elboron nodded, too relieved to be out of the murk to form an intelligent reply.

The Prince of the Mark cleared his throat. "It's a shame we don't have the son of one of the most famous woodsmen in Gondor about."

The innocent barb woke him from his trance. "Oh. Right."

They descended a little from the cliffs until they found a secluded nook amidst the boulders that was just large enough for the horses, a hound and two weary boys. After seeing to the animals, they took a little food and water and nestled down among a pile of blankets, Fellfang between them.

They woke late and made it down to the valley below and traveled south, following the Morthond River as it made its meandering way to the sea. Neither trusted their intuition to find a quicker path, and the idea of getting lost terrified them.

By the third day, the gleam of the adventure had grown dull. The travel rations were quite tasteless and they found themselves dearly missing the kitchens of Edoras with their pastries fresh from the oven and the mutton simmering on the spit. Their only consolation was that they were doing something important.

Even if their parents would murder them once they found out.

On the fifth day, they succeeded in catching some fish. Despite the fact they were horrendously burned in some places and raw in others, they tasted like the finest feast from a King's table to the boys. Their spirits were bolstered and they pressed on.
The land through which they rode was flat and empty. Only Tarlang's Neck to the east offered any variance to the plane, but it was covered in the same dry brown grasses they were themselves surrounded by, and so offered little distraction from the desolation.

The Morthond gave them ample water, but it also exposed them to swarms of mosquitoes. Very soon, they were covered in tiny bites that itched endlessly. It was an ignominious fate to be suffered by great adventurers, they felt. The great tales they had imagined creating were turning out to be an almost comical travesty.

On the evening of the eighth day, they smelled the strangely salty air of the sea. Spent and grateful they were nearing the end of their quest, they made an early camp and slept long and deep.

The next day they reached the coast and the Cobas Haven. Elfwine pointed out the dot that was Dol Amroth, but for the life of him Elboron could not see it. They picked up their pace, but they did not reach the city at the end of that day either. Despairing and miserable, they made camp once again.

They rode their hardest yet the following day, and by noon, they could make out the alabaster walls and sculpted towers of the city. They let out a hoot of joy, relieved and amazed that they had made it.

"We'll sleep in proper beds tonight," Elboron told his cousin with a smirk.

But Elfwine drew them up as they came within a league of the city, his gaze full of bafflement.

"What, did you forget something back home?" Elboron asked, stretching cramped muscles.

His cousin shook his head. "Do you know what the first thing you do in a city when plague is discovered?"

"Run?"

Elfwine gave him a vexed look. "You lock down the city."

"Right, that's why our fathers are without their reserves."

"Exactly. So, why are ships sailing in and out of the harbor?"

Elboron looked again at the harbor and noticed that tall ships were indeed being allowed in and out. So intent had he been on their goal that he had not realized that what he was seeing was completely out of place.

"Maybe they're bringing aid to the city?"

"Maybe. But this whole business has been too strange for my liking. I think we should go in and look things over before we make our presence known."

"And you accuse me of having too wild an imagination," the Ithilien Prince remarked, but he, too, was clearly troubled. "There was a cut in the cliff-face a ways back. We can leave the pack horses there."

Elfwine nodded his ascent and they turned around. Back from the strand, the ground rose steeply into a rock-wall that loomed over Cobas Haven. The sheer rock was broken in places, and one was a narrow opening just large enough for a horse to fit through. With much cajoling and bribery, they managed to get the pack animals through. Beyond, the cut widened and there were tufts of grass to keep them content.
"Will they stray?"

Elfwine shook his head. "Our horses do not stray."

With Fellfang running along beside them, they rode hard for the city, determined to find the truth of how things stood. If something clandestine were occurring, they would need to get word to the Lady Lothiriel that she could inform the King.

They arrived at the harbor and dismounted, leading the horses into the city streets. Far from the morbid, mournful city they should have found, the streets were teeming with sailors and street vendors. There was no sign of sickness anywhere, and that was very strange indeed.

"What can it mean?" Elboron murmured to his cousin.

"Nothing good. There's far too many Haradrim about, to my eyes," replied Elfwine, watching a group of swarthy men as they crossed the busy street.

They warily made their way deeper into the city, expecting posted signs warning of disease, or wagons conveying the ill to infirmaries or even the sickly smell of corpses being burned. The city was as normal as could be, and that was profoundly odd.

"Even if the plague stopped spreading, it would take months for the last cases to disappear. At least, that's how it always was in the histories."

Fellfang growled suddenly, low in his throat. The hound was glaring balefully at a gathering of cloaked and hooded folk on a street corner. The strange men noticed, and their cowled heads turned to follow their progress.

"Fellfang, heel," Elboron said sternly, a cold knot of fear twisting his stomach.

The dog gave one brief, truncated bark and was quiet. Elboron furtively checked over his shoulder and was relieved to see the group had returned to their conversation. Letting out a breath he did not know he had been holding, he quickened his pace.

"Win?"

"I know," his cousin said lowly.

"They're not supposed to be here, are they?"

"No. And in the open streets! My father would break his tether!"

The boys darted down an alley and gave themselves a moment to let their pulses slow down. They exchanged worried looks.

"We need to let your mother know," Elboron told him.

Elfwine nodded. "But, if they've taken the city.... I need to know how my uncles are doing."

"Are you out of your mind?" Elboron hissed. "If anyone discovers we're here, we'll be orc fodder for sure."

"No one will recognize us. Who knows who we are?"

Elboron had no argument, but he was mightily dubious. "What do you have in mind?"
Elfwine considered it. "Let's get a look at the palace. See if we can get inside."

"Inside?" the Ithilien Prince quavered.

Elfwine's expression was pleading. "Boro.... I've known Amrothos all my life. I have to know if
he's.... If they've...." He wiped angrily at his eyes.

Elboron chewed on his lower lip. "All right. Let's find the palace."

It was not terribly difficult. Artistic as the buildings of Dol Amroth were, with their sweeping
arches and marble columns, the palace was by far the largest and most opulent. It could easily be
seen from just about everywhere in the city. Great spires soared to the sky, dotted with stained-
glass windows. The sun gleamed off the tile roof, making it glow in the daylight.

As they approached the building, the vast columns—with their intricate carvings and multiple
shadings of color—showed themselves to be truly awe-inspiring. A vast series of steps led up to a
gaping archway and beyond they could not see. A fountain, carved in the shape of two elf
maidens dancing, stood before the palace.

The boys froze, gawking.

"Win?"

"I know. It's too dangerous."

"No.... I was just going to ask what we do with the horses."

Elfwine gave him a startled look. "You.... You're willing to go on?"

Elboron feigned nonchalance. "I understand the importance of family."

The double-meaning of his words were not lost upon the Prince of the Mark. He smiled gratefully
and looked about. "We'll tie them up outside that inn over there."

They did that quickly, pausing to give the animals water before they departed. Then, with
shoulders squared, they approached the palace. Elboron followed his cousin's lead, masking his
fear as best as he could. They ascended the stairs purposefully, moving on through sheer force of
will.

"The doors are open, so visitors are welcome. The trick will be avoiding whatever is in there
waiting to pounce on travelers and such," Elfwine whispered.

"Then what?"

"We'd never be able to sneak into the audience hall—even if everything was as it should be, it
would be too well guarded. So we'll go into the dungeons. Might be someone in there who can
tell us what is going on."

"And jailers, too, I'd imagine, with little kid-sized shackles," Elboron said morosely.

"Boro...."

"And kid-sized hot pokers and flails too."

"Will you stop?"

They reached the foyer and drew up short. There was a small man behind a great desk at the far
end. He was very old and had only wisps of his hair left. His hearing was quite good though, for
without looking up from his record book he asked, "Name and business with the Prince?"

Elboron looked to Elfwine, who gave him a helpless shrug. Realizing that deception escaped his
Rohan cousin, he desperately racked his brain for a convenient story.

"Message runners, sir."

"For?"

"The, ah, chamberlain, sir."

"Names?"

"Ah.... I'm, er, Thael and this is ... um, he's ... Mae ... res."

The man looked up from his book, clearly irritated. He scrutinized them heavily for a moment, and
both boys braced to flee. Finally, the man grunted sourly and said, "Tempests, you runners get
denser every year. To the left and last door on the right."

They nodded, stunned by their luck. There were three corridors leading away from the foyer.
They dashed down the left one, anxious to be away from the agitated recordkeeper.

"Now what?" Elboron asked. They were in far deeper than he wanted to be.

"I don't know. I've no idea where the dungeons are."

"Down, I'm guessing."

Elfwine laughed nervously. "Maybe we can ask someone for directions."

"All we need to do is say who we are. I'm sure they'd be happy to show us the way."

They listened at doorways and, when hearing nothing, poked their heads in. With this method,
they found numerous storage closets, coat rooms and antechambers. At a loss, they crept along the
passage, past the door they were supposed to go through and around a curve as it angled steadily
right.

Fellfang growled and his hackles rose. In the next moment, a door behind them opened and the
harsh, guttural voices of orcs could be heard. The boys stood in horror as the foul folk came into
view.

The orcs spotted them instantly, but stood frozen for a moment, clearly confused by the boys'
presence. Then one pointed to Fellfang and said something in his snarling tongue, patting his
ample paunch.

His companions laughed and one pulled out a long, curved knife.

"Run!" Elfwine squeaked and dashed away.

"Fellfang, come!" Elboron ordered.

The dog started to advance on the orcs. Panicking, the boy wrapped his arms around the hound's
shoulders and pulled, futilely. Fellfang was stubbornly holding his ground.

"Fellfang, yield!" Elboron pleaded.
The orcs were laughing harder now. The knife-wielder stepped forward and thrust hard at the dog. Fellfang lunged from Elboron's grip and bit down hard on the weapon-arm's wrist. The orc screamed and dropped his knife.

"FELLFANG, COME!" Elboron screamed.

The hound, licking blood from his lips, looked back at him and lolled out his tongue. The orc's fellows had drawn weapons as well and were nearly upon Fellfang. Elboron almost cried as the first weapon came down.

But Fellfang was quicker. The dog leaped aside, barked, and dodged again. Then, yapping excitedly, he ran down the corridor to Elboron. Shouting a cry of relief, the boy scrambled to his feet and ran.

Elfwine, who had turned around and come back when he had noticed his cousin was not behind him, gaped at the pack of orcs now chasing them. With a panicked look, he turned again and ran like the wind.

They pelted along several intersecting corridors, not knowing or caring where their steps took them so long as it was away from the orcs. Smaller and not weighed down by armor, they pulled ahead every minute. But still the foul folk trailed them, intent on revenge.

The boys skidded to a halt before a spiral staircase. Exchanging quick looks, they started for it. Then, with a flash of inspiration, Elboron opened a nearby door and slammed it hard. Now the orcs would be looking behind doors for them instead of down a staircase.

He hoped it would be enough.

They raced down the stairs, all the way to the bottom and finally paused, gulping in lungfuls of air. Elboron pushed his sweat-soaked bangs from his face and leaned heavily against a wall.

"Lucky ... we're ... just a couple ... kids," he gasped. "Otherwise, I doubt they would ever let up."

Elfwine nodded, kneeling and scratching between Fellfang's ears. "That was ... a narrow scrape."

"Any thought on how we're going to get out alive?"

"I was thinking we'd dig our way out."

They exchanged smirks. Once they had recovered, they picked their way down the corridor leading off from the stairs. It was lit by torches, but they offered little warmth and the dust in the air was cloying and the walls too close for comfort. They shuffled down the passage, ears pricked for the slightest sound. It branched here and there, but they feared getting lost, so they continued straight ahead.

Elfwine stopped them with a raised hand. Ahead, somewhere, the barest hint of voices could be heard. Breathing hard, they crept towards the noises. It was definitely the sound of men, low and worn, speaking to someone with an odd accent.

They came within sight of an iron door with a small, grated window in it. Silent as burglars, they padded forward and looked through the portal. Beyond was a small circular room, the walls lined with iron doors. A huge man was sitting at a table, carving up apples and devouring them messily.

"Now you take these apples, see," the man was saying. "Much sweeter than the apples we have back home. I think it has to do with the soil. Or the climate. It's brutal hot, back where I come from."
"So very sorry to hear that. Let us out and I'll give you all the apples you want."

Though faint and raspy, it was undoubtedly the voice of Amrothos.

"And I'll see you have the best quarters in the palace," an unfamiliar voice said from another of the cells.

"Oh really? I'll bet. Quarters like the ones you lot are currently enjoying. No thanks."

Elboron tugged his cousin back down the corridor until they were out of earshot. His face was pale but determined. "I have a plan."

"I'm listening."

"The keys are on that table. I'll taunt that fat dungheap out of that room and lead him on a chase. You slip in after, unlock your uncles and come to my rescue."

"And if they're not in any shape to rescue you?"

Elboron grinned. "That fat goat-turd will never catch me."

"Maybe I should be the runner. I'm faster."

"Yeah, and the fastest one needs to get into that room quick, doesn't he?"

Elfwine nodded mutely. "You're willing to risk a lot for my family."

"Hey, your family is my family. Now, you hide in that side corridor there..."

Elboron, with Fellfang at his side, approached the iron room brazenly this time, laughing and encouraging the hound to bark. By the time he arrived, the fat guard was already peering through the portal.

"What's all this then?"

"Messenger, sir."

"What message? From who?"

"From the kitchen staff, sir. Told me to tell you that they've nothing left. You've eaten it all, you big fat son of a rutting pig."

The man's face flushed red. "They did, did they? They won't find it so funny after I eat their rutting messenger!"

The lock on the door rattled and Elboron backed off a dozen paces. The voluminous guard threw the door open and loomed like a troll. "Come here, brat."

"No, sir, don't eat me," Elboron whined mockingly. "My scrawny hide won't add much to that great belly of yours."

flushing angrily, the man advanced. Then he paused and looked around uneasily. His eyes glittered with suspicion.

"I guess I'm lucky you're so fat. That way you'll never catch me!"
"You think not, boy? I'll have you and your dog for dessert!" With that, the chase was on. Elboron gave out his best panicked cry and ran, darting through side passages and around corners, never getting too far ahead. The man had to believe he had a chance of catching him.

In minutes, he was pretty sure he was lost, but he was having far too much fun to be worried. The guard was growing more furious every second, bellowing great threats at the top of his mighty lungs. Elboron laughed in response and kept running.

"I'm starting to feel bad for you, pig-gut. I'm worried you'll run yourself to death."

The guard came around a corner, purple with rage. "You've picked a bad way to die, brat."

Elboron laughed and darted away again. His arrogance finally caught up with him though; there was a forgotten crate around a bend in the corridor. Gasping in surprise, he tripped and crashed to the hard stone floor. Wincing in pain, he got to his hands and knees.

"Not laughing so hard now, are you?" came the man's voice directly behind him.

Elfwine saw his cousin race past, followed by the ponderous guard. He counted to ten to be sure they were out of sight and then ran to the now-open room. Deftly, he scooped up the keys and ran to the nearest cell.

It was empty.

The next was also, but in the third he found his Uncle Erchirion. Beaten and chained, he was still the proud man that the boy knew from childhood visits to this city. The second Prince looked up through a curtain of his dark hair, eyes full of disbelief.

"Elfwine?" he gasped.

The boy rapidly set about unlocking his shackles. "We don't have long, maybe only minutes."

Freed, his Uncle hugged him fiercely. "You are a miracle-bringer," he whispered.

Elfwine was so deeply afraid for his cousin, he could not even muster a smile at the praise. He watched as his Uncle opened another cell. Within was Amrothos, in a similar state of mistreatment. After he was freed, he stumbled over to Elfwine with blatant disbelief in his eyes.

"Is your father here at last?"

Elfwine shook his head. The story spilled out in a rush of words. "It's just me and my cousin Elboron. We came here to deliver medicine because the caravan got destroyed by orcs but then we saw there was no plague in the city and we got into the palace and now Boro is being chased by that horrible man!"

Amrothos tried to absorb this, but he was still so astounded to be free that he could process little else. Erchirion joined them, a young man beside him. Elfwine recognized his cousin Alphros, though it had been several years. Blond and fair as his father, at seventeen he was just coming into his height and girth.

His eyes were aflame with anger. "What did you just say? Someone's being chased by that pig?"

Elfwine nodded, wanting to cry in helplessness. "He led the man away."
The three men exchanged astonished looks. Erchirion took a short sword from the table and twirled it experimentally. "Then we'd better find him fast."

Elboron cried out as he hit the wall. Stars danced in front of his vision—vision that was already blurry and becoming marred by a swollen eye. The man was relentless in his anger and need for vengeance.

Fellfang was nowhere to be seen. A terrible kick from the man had flung the dog off into the shadows. Elboron scrambled away from an angry grab and tried to run. The man, slow at running, was impossibly fast standing still. He struck the boy in the back of the head and sent him tumbling.

"Not so funny anymore, is it?"

Elboron had no more jibes to throw. He cringed and waited for the next blow. But a black bolt shot from the darkness and knocked the man flat. The guard swore vociferously, struggling to rise.

Fellfang rolled free, but when he came up, he yelped in pain.

Elboron saw him lift his left forepaw. Something in the boy shifted, some part of him that was indelibly part of his boyhood. Seeing that Fellfang had attacked this horrible man to protect him, even though he was himself hurt—it moved him to an anger he had never known.

As the man started to rise the boy ran at him and leaped, smashing his full weight into him. The guard toppled hard once more. Elboron quickly rolled free and ran over to Fellfang. The hound whined and looked piteously up at him.

"Come on, I'm not leaving you."

The dog weighed entirely too much for him to carry very far and he knew it, but he would not abandon the noble hound. Mindful of the injured paw, he cradled Fellfang in his arms and staggered away as quickly as he could.

He heard the man rise and curse him. He heard the shuffling footsteps drawing ever closer. His injuries pulsed at him, refusing to allow him to speed up. Tears coursed down his cheeks as he anticipated the pain that was coming.

There was a startled cry and then a grunt of pain. Elboron turned slowly, eyes widening in astonishment as the finale of his plan finally came to pass.

Erchirion slashed once more and bright blood flew, spattering the boy. The man groaned and toppled, like a great tree felled by a woodsman's ax. Elboron stood, trembling, watching the man die.

Amrothos stepped over the guard, eyeing Elboron in alarm.

"My dog is hurt," was all Elboron could think to say.

"Looks like nothing's broken. He'll be fine," Amrothos said after a moment's pause. He reached for the animal, but Elboron drew back. "I'm not going to hurt him or you. You remember me?"

Still in shock, the boy nodded blearily. "Yes, sir."

"Good, now, give me the dog. Alphros will see to him. I need to look you over."
Elboron saw a young man he did not know approach. Beyond him, Elfwine could be seen at Erchirion's shoulder. His cousin was staring at him, wide-eyed and worried. Nodding mutely, he gently handed Fellfang off to Alphros. He scratched the hound's ears reassuringly. The dog whined and licked his hand. "It'll be okay now," he soothed the animal. He looked gravely at the young man. "Careful with him. He saved my life."

Alphros nodded, unnerved by Elboron's manner.

Amrothos knelt and gently checked him over. "You've got some bruised ribs, looks like, and some other things that probably hurt like a curse. But you'll be fine." He gently wrapped an arm around the boy's shoulder, feeling him shiver like a leaf in a wind.

"What's wrong with him?" Elfwine whispered.

"He's just in shock. He'll be okay," Erchirion assured him. "Now, you need to explain exactly what you're doing here."

Still glancing worriedly at his cousin, Elfwine launched into the story of how they had wound up here; from the pleas for help from his father to the falsified reports of plague and the subsequent attack on the caravan. His uncles listened in wonderment, exchanging amazed looks.

"You risked a lot, coming in here," Amrothos said gravely.

"I was worried ... and ... and my father desperately needs help."

Erchirion gave him an encouraging smile. "Rest assured, once we set things aright here, we'll go help your father."

"What's going on? Who locked you in prison?"

"There's a lot to tell on that subject," Amrothos told him. "And we are hard-pressed for time. I will tell you that the Haradrim and their orc allies took my brothers' families prisoner and held them hostage against Elphir's cooperation. When I arrived, he tried to send me away with feeble excuses, but I persisted and soon found myself in chains."

"We need to find my mother and the rest," Alphros said insistently.

"I'll bet they're in one of the towers," Erchirion replied. "We can move easily enough through the palace via the secret passages."

"Our escape will be noticed soon. We cannot tarry further," Amrothos added.

Elfwine looked to his cousin, who was hunched over and silent. "Boro?"

"Yes?" came the dull response.

"We have to move."

"Oh. All right."

Alphros carried Fellfang and Amrothos supported Elboron. The three crept through the narrow passages and slipped into a small storage closet. Beneath a barrel there was a trap door. Stairs lead down into darkness, out of sight.

Erchirion pulled two torches from the walls outside the room. He handed one to Amrothos and then led them down into the tunnels below. The trapdoor was pulled shut and the bar slid into
place, cutting off any but the most adamant pursuit.

Erchirion led them without hesitation. The musty smell of stale air was all around them, and the darkness was alive with the unsettling scuttling sounds of rats. Elfwine stayed close to his Uncle Amrothos, his nerves scraped raw by the harrowing rescue.

They stopped in a wide opening that lay in the intersection of several tunnels. Erchirion lit several torches that hung in sconces on the walls, illuminating the room enough to ward off the rats. There were four wooden chairs in this room and a stone bench, all coated in dust.

"The Swan Lords used to meet here," Erchirion said with a wistful smile.

Elfwine frowned, confused. "Who were they? Some sort of secret society?"

Amrothos laughed. "Secret, yes. If our parents had known how much time we spent skulking around down here, they'd have had all the secret doors bricked up."

Erchirion grinned faintly. "Especially if they had known that their perfect Lady of a daughter was also a tunnel-rat."

"Like we had a choice. She would have tattled on us if we hadn't agreed to let her join our club."

Erchirion shook his head fondly at the memories. "You boys will be safe here. Stay put and wait for our return. If we don't come back within a few hours, follow that tunnel there—" he pointed to his right—"until it ends. Climb the ladder and push through the trapdoor, you'll be in the stables. Get back to our sister and tell her everything that has happened. Understand?"

Elfwine nodded, feeling ill at ease. "Is it safe?"

"Neither the Haradrim nor the orcs know of these tunnels," Amrothos assured him, settling Elboron on the bench.

"And there aren't altogether that many of them; from what you've said, they want to keep up the illusion of normalcy, here," Erchirion put in.

"We'll be back before you know it," Alphros murmured, settling Fellfang beside Elboron. The hound whined and rested his head in the boy's lap.

"Remember, that tunnel there," Erchirion said, pointing again. "Just in case."

"Yes, uncle."

The three smiled at the boys. "Whatever happens, you've done a brave thing today that we shall not likely forget," Amrothos said.

The three hurried down a tunnel then, leaving the boys in silence and shadow. Elfwine flopped wearily in one of the chairs, which creaked unsteadily. He brooded for a long moment, fretting over his cousin's listlessness and his own fear of something going disastrously wrong.

"That was really brave, what you did," he finally said. "I'm sorry you got hurt."

"It wasn't brave. It was stupid. The only reason I'm not dead is because Fellfang saved me.... And he nearly died doing it."

His cousin's voice was alarmingly downtrodden. His face was contorted in pain that was both physical and emotional. He scratched behind Fellfang's ears absently.
"It was brave. I don't care what you say," Elfwine said defiantly.

Elboron shrugged wordlessly.

"Is there anything I can do?"

His cousin shook his head, eyes tracking on nothing. The silence that followed was oppressive. Elfwine did not know what to say or do; his cousin was the expert on ill-timed humor. And he felt so bad for having let Elboron go into danger that he could not think of anything to say that would not be trivial.

Times passed ponderously. Elfwine occupied himself with trying to think of a way he could explain all of this to his mother without being locked in his room for the next Age. No matter what good came of it, no matter what noble or brave reasons he had to offer, there was no way she would excuse worrying her half to death.

After what seemed like hours but was barely more than half of one, voices could be heard coming down the same tunnel the three men had left through. Elfwine felt a brief moment of dread, but he quickly recognized the voices as human.

His aunts and cousins came into view, all looking haggard and weary. Aeloth, Elphir's wife, was the one who truly stood out. Tall for a woman and severe of expression, she swept ahead of the group and headed instantly for Elboron. Clearly, she had been told of the boy's injuries.

Elfwine's other Aunt, Rian, was slender as a willow reed and possessed of eyes so dark they seemed to be made of obsidian. She shepherded a flock of girls, ranging in age from a child of seven to a young lady of fifteen. They were huddled together like a pack of frightened herd animals.

"We were lucky. Their guards were few and had grown quite lax," Amrothos told the boys.

"I don't count it as luck. I've much vengeance to wreak and will require greater sport for my honor to be satisfied," Alphros said fiercely.

"Alphros," Aeloth admonished him, fussing over Elboron. "If you're going to fantasize about blood and death, please do it outside the presence of the girls."

"Sorry, mother."

The three had collected more weapons and were now all armed. None appeared injured, though much blood stained their clothes. Amrothos leaned on a heavy, curved sword and grinned rakishly. "We're going to go upstairs and disappoint Warlord Kaeliz. He's probably lording his superiority over Elphir even now."

"I'm sure he'll be happy to meet with us," Erchirion said with an equally devilish smile.

"Oh, certainly. Let's go free the palace garrison first, though. I'm guessing they'll be in the forward dungeons. Aely, we'll leave you in charge down here," Amrothos told her with a flourishing bow.

"Mmm," was her only response.

The three disappeared again, though this time with a much lighter air. Elfwine watched them go, worrying silently.

"Let me have a look at you, dear," his Aunt Aeloth murmured to Elboron.
"My father said you came all the way from Edoras to save us," said a girl of ten whose name Elfwine simply could not remember.

"Well..." He shrugged uncomfortably. "We, um, sort of."

She hugged him and kissed his cheek, making him flush crimson in embarrassment.

"He's a real hero, all right," Elboron murmured, a ghost of his old smile flashing on his face.

Elfwine gave him a sour look. "I see you've found your tongue."

"Never lost it—Ow!"

"Sorry, dear. We'll need to get some salve on that scrape there," Aunt Aeloth told him.

Elfwine felt measurably better, hearing his cousin's humor again. The awful chasm of guilt that he had fallen into suddenly vanished. Elboron would heal, his uncles and cousin would take the city back and Dol Amroth would send troops to the King's aid. All that was wrong would be made right.

If there was enough time yet to do so.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

The conclusion of the great battle in Gondor. The aftermath of the boys' adventure. And the introduction of a new character into the story.

"They'll take the bridge within the hour," Faramir told his King with a despondent look. He was grimy and blood-splattered from the battle, and his breathing was labored from the hurried rush that had brought him here.

Elessar nodded wearily. The army of men had fought long and hard, and many great deeds had been done. But days and weeks had passed with no aid and no word from their allies. It was high summer now, and his mighty army was being broken.

"Shall we make for Minas Tirith?" Éomer asked as they surveyed the battle from a broken tower.

It was the most sensible step. They had held Osgiliath far longer than should rightly have been hoped for. Now was the time to pull back, retreat behind stronger walls where they could withstand the enemy forces. The White City had a strong force which would bolster their flagging might.

"We do not know that this host will follow us to Minas Tirith. Their tactics have been too keen, too methodical. We've not seen this sort of organization from the foul kind since the War. They could just as easily cross into Rohan and wreak all manner of mayhem and destruction."

"But, surely their aim is to annihilate us?" Éomer objected.

Elessar's dark eyes sparked with anger. "I do not know what their aim is. But, as I said, they are being ordered by someone of intelligence. Therefore, we cannot expect them to behave like average orcs."

"So.... What do we do?" Faramir wanted to know.

"We charge them." His friends stared at him. "Either they break or we die. It must end this day."

Éomer broke into a mad grin. "Like the charge of Eorl at Celebrant. They shall sing of this day."

Faramir arched an eyebrow. "You're both insane. But, if death is to come, let it come to me with my friends beside me."

Elessar laid his hands upon their shoulders and gave them a great smile. They descended from the tower and took up long spears from the ground. They shouted orders to their men, commanding all to come with them. And such was their love for the King that the weary, the infirm, and even those whose lives were rapidly departing rose and joined the throng.

Soon the whole of the army of men was behind Elessar and his two friends. They stared across the great bridge at the orcs, who were themselves preparing for the final assault. Angry war cries rose
up from both sides.

"For Gondor!" Elessar screamed and led his men across the bridge and into the mass of enemies.

"Can we go sailing now?" Elfwine asked his cousin.

"No," Alphros snapped in a surly tone.

"Why not?"

"Because."

"Because why?"

"Because...Because I said so."

"But you promised to take us sailing."

The youngest Prince of Dol Amroth glowered at his cousin. It was true, he had promised. But the promise had been extracted only after a persistent stream of harassment. The truth was, he was in no mood to entertain the boys and did not anticipate being in such a mood any time soon.

"When?"

"When what?" Alphros demanded.

"When can we go sailing?"

He pinched his eyes shut. Clearly, there would be no evading his promise, and by rights he should have no desire to do so. It was a beautiful summer day, the skies were clear and the wind was up. Sailing was his passion, and on most days nothing could prevent him from scrambling aboard Windskipper, his personal racing ship, and venturing out to challenge the waves.

But this was not most days, for he was still deeply offended over being left behind by his father.

He scowled at nothing. The palace had been retaken with relative ease; the advantage of surprise had won them the day. Though Warlord Kaeliz had escaped, the Haradrim garrison had been destroyed and the orcs occupying the city had been slaughtered.

With the city secure, Elphir had quickly summoned every available man, ordered them on to the ships and, with his brothers by his side, sailed for Osgiliath. Alphros, to his complete disgust, had been left behind.

"Not all the Princes can be in harm's way, my son. And someone must look out for our young rescuers," his father had explained.

Three days later, he was still stewing over being left behind. Though he was unimaginably grateful to the boys for the rescue, he was quite infuriated to have to play nursemaid to them.

"Fine. We'll go now."

"Yay!"

Elfwine dashed off to find his cousin, hooting excitedly. Alphros watched him go, amused despite
himself. With the danger passed, his cousin had turned to the pursuit of fun and mischief. It was not how he remembered Elfwine, but then, he had never paid much attention to the boy.

He tracked down his friend Raelus, locating him in the gardens chatting up one of the kitchen girls. His friend was short and broad of shoulder. A junior Knight in the service of Elphir’s house, he had grown up alongside Alphros. Catching sight of the Prince, he grinned and called out a greeting.

"Good morrow, Rae."

His friend swept unruly dark bangs from his eyes and shook his hand. "Good morrow to you, Prince. This is Maelis. She works in the kitchens."

The comely girl curtsied. "M'lord."

Alphros winked at her. "Is Rae trying to get you to sneak him pastries from the kitchens?"

She laughed nervously. "No, m'lord."

"I hadn't even considered that," Raelus said thoughtfully.

Alphros laughed. "I'd wager you had. May I speak with you, Rae?"

"Of course, Prince. Mae, will you excuse me?"

The girl nodded. "Of course."

He winked at her. "But I would like to pursue our conversation later."

She blushed slightly. "As would I, sir."

Raelus gave her hand a courtly kiss and then walked off with Alphros. Birds were carrying on a boisterous argument in the trees above them, adding contrast to the soft gurgle of the small brook that ran through the garden.

"I hope I wasn't interrupting."

His friend grinned. "You were, but that is a hunt that will take a while to end. I am only too anxious to be diverted by you. That is, if you are quite through sulking."

Alphros glowered at him. "I was not sulking."

"I'm sure you have a more courtly term for it, but we peasants call it sulking."

"I belong on the front with my father."

"He seems to disagree. I was left behind too, you'll notice. Someone has to remain here to make sure Kaeliz doesn't try to return. Maybe not the most glorious duty to pull, but we don't always get to choose the wind that directs us."

"Your peasant wisdom is as cold and uncomfortable as ever," Alphros needled.

Raelus laughed. "Call it what you will, I don't waste my time brooding over things I can't change."

"Point taken," the Prince replied. "You feel up to a morning of sailing?"
His friend's expression brightened. "Absolutely. I assume this is to amuse your young charges?"

Alphros sighed petulantly. "I am hoping it will quiet them so I can get some peace."

"Well, then, by all means."

The preparations were quickly made. Elboron and Elfwine were almost vibrating, they were so excited. There was a brief disagreement over Fellfang, but eventually the Ithilien Prince was convinced that the dog needed to rest his strained leg for the journey home. The boys then tramped off to the quay, lunch supplies tucked away in knapsacks.

Windskipper was small, sleek and beautifully crafted. Alphros' chest swelled with pride at the sight of her. "My father gave her to me last year. Her hull is new, but her bones and her appointments all come from previous family racers. She's the fastest in the harbor."

"If she could talk, she'd be a worse braggart than you," Rae joked.

Elfwine and Elboron sniggered. The Amroth Prince punched his friend in the arm and leaped onto the racer's deck. Raelus winked at the younger boys and followed his friend. The two proceeded with a meticulous check of the vessel, looking for any flaw or possible problem.

Bored, Elfwine and Elboron could only watch and wait.

Once the two were satisfied, they ran up the sail and set up securing lines. The younger boys were quickly pressed into service, scrabbling all over the ship, straightening ropes and tying knots as they were instructed.

After an interminable delay, the boat was away from the dock and meandering towards open waters. When they were clear of most of the harbor traffic, Alphros unfurled the sails. The boat took off like a shot.

It was great fun, racing the wind and riding the waves. Even Alphros forgot his grudge as he guided the craft expertly. The sun was high, reflecting off the perfect blue of the ocean. Wind and sea spray assailed them, tangling their hair and whipping at their tunics.

After an hour, Alphros brought the sail down and Rae loosed the anchor. The sea was calm, rocking them gently as they looked out on a vast, empty expanse.

"What now?" Elfwine asked as Alphros shucked his tunic.

"Swimming," came his older cousin's response. With that, he shoved Elfwine overboard.

The Rohan Prince came up sputtering and laughing. Raelus and Alphros laughed, stripped off and dove in after him. "I imagine you've never been in water this deep," Raelus murmured, wiping droplets from his eyes.

Elfwine shook his head. There was another splash as Elboron joined them. "Rutting pig dung! It's cold!"

The three laughed. Elfwine crawled back to the boat long enough to wriggle out of his sopping tunic—he had no desire to be dragged down by it. Then he returned with an ungraceful sploosh. The older boys showed them how to swim proper, instead of flopping around like dogs.

Then the dunkings began.

Elboron was the first victim, dragged under by Alphros. But the younger boys disadvantage of
size was compensated by Raelus' treacherous nature. The Swan Prince often found himself the victim rather than the victor.

Once they were exhausted, they crawled back aboard *Windskipper* and flopped upon its deck to dry.

"You'd never know you two were just a couple of grassland kids, the way you took to the water," Raelus commented.

"He's the grasslander," Elboron corrected. "We have trees in Ithilien."

"Oh, sorry, my mistake," Raelus returned with a grin.

"Who's hungry?"

"Me!" said Elfwine instantaneously.

Over bread and cheese, Alphros broached the subject of what had brought them to Dol Amroth.

"You said a caravan was attacked by orcs?"

"That's the saddest part of all, really. They were coming here with medicines that you didn't really need," Elfwine told him. "But I guess the men who controlled Dol Amroth hired the orcs to stop the caravan so no one discovered what was going on here."

"But that's what's really odd to me," the Amrothian prince returned. "If one caravan was sent, another surely would have been. Or fast riders on good horses. There's no way Kaeliz could have hoped to keep his take-over secret for long."

"So what was he waiting for?" Raelus asked. "That's a disturbing thought."

"That's not all that's strange, in my opinion," Elboron chimed in. "Some of the orcs that attacked that caravan were the ones that have been lurking around Edoras."

"Orcs have been lurking around Edoras?" Alphros' alarm was plain.

"Boro has this wild idea that orcs are spying on Edoras," Elfwine broke in, glaring at his cousin. The Ithilien Prince frowned at him. "You saw the tracks as clear as I did, Win."

"I saw tracks, but I'm not as sure as you that they were orc tracks."

Elboron shrugged. "The tracks at that orc camp came in from two directions: north and west. One group came from Edoras-way. They tracked the caravan, met up with the second group and attacked."

"You guess."

"If you're right, Boro, then this whole thing stinks of someone plotting wickedness," Alphros pondered. "But the question is still why."

"Seems pretty clear to me," Raelus commented. "Assuming all these things are connected—and this many odd things can't be coincidence—they immobilized Dol Amroth and they put a watch on Rohan, all while the King is fighting foul kind in the east. Whoever this is, they're trying to kill King Elessar."

They stared at one another. It was a frightful conclusion, but all the evidence lined up. It hit them
hard, because each had grown up under the belief that evil had been vanquished and that good had triumphed. The days of terrible deeds and encroaching doom were supposed to be over.

"We have to tell the King," Elboron spoke up.

Alphros shook his head. "We don't know anything. What should we say? That his life is in danger? He already knows that. It's always in danger. We don't know who is coordinating all of this or even if we are right. Our warning would be meaningless."

"So, what do we do?" Elfwine asked.

Alphros gave him an odd look. "You need to stay out of trouble. You've been lucky so far, but if you keep poking around in matters of danger and mystery, you're likely to wind up dead. I'll speak to my father. He'll be able to come up with something."

Elfwine exchanged an annoyed look with Elboron. They both knew that there was nothing they could do to convince Alphros they were anything more than two foolish boys who had only succeeded in rescuing the governing house of Dol Amroth through sheer dumb luck. There was no point in arguing.

They spent the day swimming and sailing, and by the time they returned home they were all burned red from head to foot. Aunt Aeloth (Elboron had been told to call her that as well, since he was nearly family anyway) took one look at the bashful boys and went looking for a burn salve she kept in huge jars.

Three days later, Elboron and Fellfang were mended enough to make the return trip. They exchanged fond farewells with their hosts and told Alphros that they wanted to return next summer for more sailing. The Swan Prince appeared both startled and alarmed by such an idea. Raelus had volunteered to lead their escort. Along with five other junior knights, they rode at an easy pace north to Estel's Gate. The caravan horses accompanied them, of course, and the knights all seemed duly impressed by the way they followed along like faithful hounds.

The return trip did not seem nearly so long to them, passed with better food and softer blankets. Even the journey through the dark tunnel was not nearly so awful. They emerged into Dunharrow Vale amidst the fading light of day and made one last camp.

Noon of the last day of their journey brought them an encounter with a group of Riders, all of whom looked quite startled to see the strangers. The leader of the group was known to Elfwine—Gamling, a veteran and most trusted of the King's men.

"You seem to have found something of value that we lost," said the grizzled Rider.

Raelus grinned. "The oddest things wash up on our shore."

"Will you come to the Golden Hall? I am sure the Lady would like to convey her gratitude in person."

Raelus bowed low in the saddle. "I thank you for the offer, but I must decline. My men, few though they are, will be sorely missed back home." He grinned and winked at the two boys who were shrinking behind him. "And I've no desire this day to see two boys flayed open with sharp words."

Gamling smirked at him. "Then might I have your name, that my Lady can convey her gratitude at a later time?"
"Sir Raelus."

"I am Gamling. I am sure I do not overstep myself in saying, you have the gratitude of the Mark."

Raelus bowed again and turned to his charges. "Farewell. I fear the dangers I have warded you from pale in comparison to the one you now go to, but alas, I cannot shield you from this peril."

Sheepishly, the two boys nudged their horses forward. They bade Raelus farewell and then watched the knights trot back the way they’d come. With dread on their faces, they turned back to Gamling.

"Mother is very angry, isn’t she?" Elfwine asked.

The old Rider gripped his shoulder and grinned. "Anger does not even begin to describe it, boy."

Thus the two young heroes returned to Edoras as two going to their execution. No matter that they carried a scroll signed by Elphir himself stating they were heroes of Dol Amroth and their deeds had saved many lives—they were in very serious trouble.

There were two nightmares that plagued Faramir. One had him waking in the middle of the night, seeing his departed father looming over his bed with madness in his eyes. The last Steward would then burst into flames, his skin crackling and peeling away from his blackened bones. Wreathed in fire, he would reach a burning hand towards his son to drag him once more onto the funeral pyre.

The second nightmare was being back in Osgiliath, commanding a hopeless defense against the endless forces of Mordor. All around him, his friends died and the bodies piled high until the war was being fought on the backs of his friends. And still the dark forces came on….

That nightmare was suddenly real as he found himself once more hopelessly outnumbered by a horde of orcs. The sickening lurch of fear twisting his stomach was debilitating, and were it not for his friends Éomer and Aragorn, he would certainly not have the strength to hold.

The bridge was packed tightly with warriors on both sides, hacking, cursing and screaming hoarsely at each other. Many went over the sides into the Anduin below, there to be dragged down by their armor.

Aragorn was a frightful, inspiring force. Anduril flashed so fast it could hardly be followed. All around him, the enemy quavered and fell. Only the weight of numbers kept the orcs from being pushed back. Their vile demeanor was such that they did not hesitate to drive a spear through a friend if it meant slaying an enemy.

Beside the King of Gondor, the King of the Mark battled with equal ferocity. Though not nearly so deadly afoot as he was ahorse, Éomer was still a force to be reckoned with. He swept his sword in great arcs, sundering enemies with one mighty stroke after another.

Faramir had been separated from them by the intensity of the battle. He ducked, stabbed, punched and kicked with a desperate strength. Blades tore open his armor and laid open his flesh, but he did not falter.

"Aragorn!" Éomer cried.

Faramir paused to look over at his sovereign and saw something that made his blood run cold. The King had an orc on his back, choking him. More orcs around him struck, bringing him down until
he was buried beneath the hateful creatures.

"No!" Faramir screamed.

Éomer tried to reach his friend, but the press of bodies was too thick. The valiant Rider was dragged back and pinned against the side of the bridge. Faramir saw the King of the Mark fighting three foes at once and knew that the end was indeed near.

A crude club with spikes jutting from it tore open Faramir's shoulder, spinning him around. "Gondor!" he cried and slew the attacker. The orcs pressed in, mobbing him.

His foot caught on a twitching corpse and he went down to his knees. Relentless, the orcs pounced upon him. Their crude weapons hammered down upon his defenses, and his whole frame resounded with the power of their strokes.

A horn blew across the bridge. For a dizzying moment, he thought the orcs were calling for a retreat, and he wondered why the enemy would do such a thing. But the horn blasted again and this time, he recognized it.

It was a Rohirric horn call.

Strength flowed through him once more and he surged to his feet. The orcs, confused and surprised, fell under his sword. For a moment, he had space to breathe, and he looked across the river.

An éored was charging into the orc's rear flank. Panicking, the foul folk turned to meet this new threat. Their numbers were so great, though, that very soon a massive contingent had been diverted to deal with the Riders and still a vast horde assailed the forces of the King.

Faramir fought to get back to his friends, but not all his anger or loyalty were enough to sweep the ranks and ranks of enemies from his path. Surrounded, weary, he found himself unable to proceed.

The two flanks of the army fought on, hard and brutal, giving the foul folk a terrible beating even as their losses mounted. But gradually, they were overwhelmed. Faramir could no longer see Éomer either, and his heart sank with dread.

And then a miracle occurred.

With the setting sun behind them, a fleet of ships was sailing towards the fight. Their great sails proudly displayed the swan emblem of Dol Amroth. Faramir could not help but gape stupidly at the sudden arrival of the fleet.

They moored on the eastern bank and lowered their gangplanks. Knights on horses poured into the broken city and rode off to support the lone éored. Hundreds of men in gleaming armor, pennants snapping and war cries resounding, fell upon the rear flank and laid waste to the orcs.

Utterly dismayed, the foul folk broke ranks and ran, many falling to the vengeful strokes of the King's men. Faramir could barely lift his sword, let alone chase the unlucky orcs. He went instead to find his friends.

Aragorn appeared as if by magic, emerging from a throng of shocked soldiers. He was supported heavily by Éomer. The King was a mess. Torn flesh on his face and brow hung in tatters, and blood coursed down into his beard. He was hunched over, clutching wounds Faramir could not guess at.
Éomer himself bled from many wounds, but he still stood strong. The look he gave Faramir was both relieved and astounded. The Prince of Ithilien sheathed his sword and dashed over to them, taking up the King's other side.

"What has happened?" Elessar asked through gritted teeth.

"Reinforcements from Rohan, sire. And Dol Amroth."

Aragorn nodded unsteadily. "Can you yet fight, Faramir?"

"Yes, sire," Faramir replied without thought to his own weariness.

"Then lead the men. Press our enemies hard. Drive them back into their holes."

"Sire?"

"Don't let them regroup," Elessar ordered.

Faramir nodded stiffly. Though he wanted nothing more than to simply collapse, he could never deny an order given him by his liege. Éomer almost looked about to protest on his behalf, but he stopped short. It was a matter of honor now. There was no turning back.

"Faldor, Gael, gather men who can still fight. We're going across the bridge," Faramir roared and turned to do just that.

The boys were marched straight into the Great Hall. Huddled together, they approached the Lady Lothiriel and quavered in fear of their fate. She was attending a previous meeting, though, and with a look, bade Gamling to keep them back.

A dirty, older man was on his knees before her. His clothes were stitched together from animal hides and were decorated with bits of bone. His white hair hung in perfectly woven braids, though, showing he was not some common thug.

"We are not convinced by your protestations of innocence, Chieftain Educh. You say you had nothing to do with the attack on our caravan, and yet the men we found clearly wore the totems of your village. You insist you are innocent, and yet you made it very hard for my trackers to find you."

"Mother!"

The Lady's dark eyes flickered to her son, who could scarcely believe he had spoken. "I will deal with you in a moment."

"But mother!"

"Silence, unless you wish to dig your grave any deeper."

"But it wasn't the Dunlendings!"

She turned her full attention on her son, her face a mask of calm. "The court will hear the Prince of the Mark."

Her tone scared him dumb for a horrible moment. He stared at her, astounded by the rigidness of her posture and the stern tone of her voice. Elboron nodded encouragingly at him.
"Mother, we were there, right after it happened. Those Dunlendings weren't killed by our guards. The strikes were too precise. And it was orcs who chased us away from the scene, not Dunlendings."

Her eyes searched his face, gaging his sincerity and earnestness. Finally, after a moment which stretched on until he was visibly shaking:

"I see. Ecthain, what do you have to say to that?" she asked a nearby Rider.

He looked uneasy. "I ... did not look too closely at the bodies, m'lady. But I fail to see how the precision of the strikes matters."

"Because the men I sent could not have stabbed a cow with a spear," she snapped. "I did not want to deplete the house garrison, so I sent citizen volunteers."

Ecthain looked abashed. "If your son is correct then.... Yes.... I would say we were duped."

Lothiriel arched an eyebrow at her son. "You are quite certain?"

He nodded quickly and looked to Elboron. "Boro saw it too."

Looking more amused than vexed, she shifted her gaze to the other boy. "You agree with my son."

"Yes, Au— Um, yes, m'lady."

Lothiriel settled deeper into her seat and gazed speculatively at Educh. "Then perhaps the Mark owes you an apology, Chieftain."

Recognizing that he was on the verge of a narrow escape, the Dunlending chose conciliatory politeness over brash words. "Your people were killed and the evidence linked the crime to my village. And, well, we've never been on the best of terms."

She inclined her head in ascent. "Perhaps that is something we can remedy, and with that maybe we can prevent these misunderstandings in future."

"That ... would be welcome."

"You are free to go," she told him.

The Chieftain gave a slight bow and turned to leave. As he walked past Elfwine, he placed a hand on his shoulder and whispered into his ear, "You are the first Prince of the Mark to be granted this, but you have earned it; you are welcome in the village of the Elk as a friend."

And he slipped a necklace off his neck and onto the boy's. Then, with a serene smile at the guards, he strode from the Great Hall.

"Now, boys...."

Elboron and Elfwine winced and stepped before the Queen of Rohan. She regarded them sternly for a moment. Her flinty gaze moved from one to the other, as if judging which should be the first to feel her wrath. Unable to decide, she started pacing.

"Where have you been?" she demanded.

Elfwine cringed at her tone. With bowed shoulders, he told her the entire story, helped now and
again by his cousin. In the end, he handed her the letter from his Uncle Elphir and waited, petrified, as she read it.

"Was this your idea?" she demanded of Elboron.

The Ithilien boy shrank from her, looking uncertainly to Elfwine. He did not wish to hang his friend out to dry, but neither did he wish to bear the brunt of her anger alone.

"We decided together. We had no choice, mother. The orcs were chasing us." Elfwine’s look pleaded for understanding.

She pinched her eyes shut. "So, when given the choice between hiding and waiting for rescue and riding for Dol Amroth, you chose the latter?"

"Well ... yes." Elboron responded miserably.

"We did save Uncle Elphir and everyone," Elfwine objected weakly.

She sank down to one knee before them, and for the first time they saw the fear radiating behind her eyes. "Boys ... what you did ... it was truly very brave. But you worried me half to death. When Hama brought the message, I sealed up Edoras and waited for you to arrive. When you didn't, I sent out scouts. They found the caravan and tracks that looked like you had been there. But all they could tell me was that you were alive, possibly in the hands of the Dunlendings. I tore the Mark apart looking for you!"

Elfwine did not know how to respond to the naked fear in her eyes. "I'm sorry," was all he could think to say.

"Sorry? You think all can be mended with 'sorry'?"

"But, we helped people!"

Lothiriel's expression was stern. "The results of your actions are commendable—I really am very proud of you. But your judgment is seriously questionable. For all you knew, you were riding straight into a city ridden with plague. Do you know how easily plague can kill a boy your age?"

Elfwine looked down.

"I thought not. You're the Prince of the Mark. You have to take more care with your safety—unless you wish to have an armed escort everywhere you go."

Elfwine gaped at her. "Mother!"

She folded her arms. "I did not say I would, but your father may yet choose to do so."

"Father?"

The Lady gave him a bland smile. "Oh, yes, don't think this matter is closed. I am sure your father will have his own thoughts on your little adventure."

Elfwine paled at that. "I... Um.... Yes mother."

"You may go. But do get a bath before you raid the kitchens."

He gave her a sheepish smile. "Yes, mother."

"Oh, Win," she murmured, hugging him.
The boy gave his cousin an abashed look. Elboron smiled and looked away. Though he would never admit it, he certainly would not mind a hug from his own mother about then.

The very next stop was the kennels. In a way, they dreaded the visit to Galamund even more than they had the appearance before Lothiriel. They felt they had some ground to hold with the Queen of the Mark; they had done much good, after all, and that went a long way to gaining forgiveness.

Confessing to the kennel-master that they had brought one of his hounds to harm was another thing entirely.

Fellfang yapped happily as they approached his home. Galamund came out to greet them with his usual jovial air.

"Heard you boys got yourselves into a fair bit of trouble," said the kennel-master, kneeling down and ruffling Fellfang's ears.

"Yes, sir. Fellfang saved our lives, sir."

Galamund laughed and looked into the hound's eyes. "I'll just bet you did." His expression became studious. "You've been blooded, haven't you?" The old man's eyes tracked back to the boys. "Saved your life indeed."

"He killed an orc that was about to kill me," Elfwine said quickly.

Feeling it was his responsibility, Elboron told the entire tale, forcing himself to meet Galamund's eyes every second of the telling. The kennel-master waited until he was finished, his expression neutral.

"I'm sorry, sir," Elboron concluded.

"Sorry? What for?" the man asked, checking over Fellfang's injured leg.

"For getting Fang hurt. I... I know it wasn't very responsible."

Galamund snorted. "Sounds to me like you got the worst of it, lad. Fellfang showed his training stuck in that empty head of his. That makes me proud. And he doesn't seem too bad off. You gave him some rest, let him ride with you a bit on the way over. I'll put a poultice on it, but he seems almost mended already."

"You're... not angry?"

The man laughed. "Boys, I've raised the King's dogs for over forty years. I've had to deal with a great deal more than a strained muscle. You needed a good dog where you went, and Fellfang likes you. No harm was done, I say."

Feeling like a terrible wait was suddenly lifted from him, Elboron smiled at the kennel-master. "Then... perhaps...."

Galamund laughed again and winked. "You can take him out again? Of course, lads. I'd say that he'll be ready sooner than the Lady will be willing to let you out of her sight."

Elfwine and Elboron exchanged relieved looks. They patted Fellfang affectionately and bid him farewell. With a lighter air about them, they returned to Meduseld and the baths that had been prepared for them.
"Idiot."

Kaeliz winced at the tone. It was not the snarling, harsh, bitter sound it would have been if it had come from him. That would have been preferable, in his estimation, for the cold, soft way in which Orthale delivered the insult held a dangerous edge that made him sweat nervously.

The young man with the dark hair leaned forward on his seat of stone, dark eyes malicious and hateful. "I handed that city to you. All you needed to do, the only task before you was to keep Dol Amroth from the fight. And you failed."

"The Princes escaped, somehow."

"Your security is as lacking as your mental acumen."

Kaeliz stared blankly at him. "My lord?"

"Ancestors, why am I plagued by the service of cretins?" Orthale asked of the stone ceiling. His baleful gaze fell once more upon his trembling servant. "I waylaid messengers, caravans and heralds. I came very close to exposing myself to make your task that much easier. And you employ imbeciles who obviously forget to lock the cell doors behind them."

"A-Are you going to kill me, my lord?"

"Oh, by rights I should, but I have too few servants as it is. Every one is valuable, even the foolish ones."

"Then ... what do we do next, my lord?"

Orthale looked over at his scrying pool. It was blank now, but it had already revealed to him the defeat that was taking place. "We will wait. The King will be too alert now. We need to bide our time, await the proper opportunity—a chance we shall not squander a second time."

Kaeliz heard the threat and nodded immediately. Thanking the fates for his life, he quickly escaped the chilling scrutiny of his lord. Orthale watched him go and shook his head in disgust.

"Agar! Get word to Utuk. His task has taken on a new importance."

Summer had faded, and cooler breezes foretold the coming of autumn. The Mark still awaited the return of her King. But word had come by fast messenger that the miraculous arrival of Elphir’s forces had turned the tide. King Elessar’s army was driving the orcs back into their holes and seeing to it they did not threaten the west for a long time to come.

The two cousins had been granted leave to venture into the grasslands, with the stipulation that they stray not too far from the Golden Hall. Fearing the threat of the armed escort, the boys complied.

Fellfang bounded along beside them, happily chasing the sticks they threw and racing back to them. When Elboron tackled his cousin and wrestled him to the ground, the dog leaped on top and playfully tugged at their collars. They roughhoused back and forth, laughing and shouting challenges until they were out of breath.
Grinning, the boys collapsed on the grass.

"Those dreadful rains will be starting soon," Elboron said mournfully.

Elfwine folded his arms behind his head. "Soon, I suppose. We might actually have to start taking those lessons my mother was threatening us with yesterday."

"Oh, who needs to know geography anyway? I don't plan on being a cartographer."

Elfwine smirked. "Well, it helps to know if, say, you wanted travel quickly from Edoras to Dol Amroth."

"Very funny. All I'm ... saying—" Elboron sat up and looked around. "Did you hear something?"

"No. Oh, don't even start on this. I just got comfortable."

"Lazybones. Fine, you stay here and get your throat slit. I'm going to find out what that sound was."

Grumbling, Elfwine climbed to his feet. Elboron cocked his head and listened intently, looking so serious for a moment that it caused his cousin to giggle. Shooting Elfwine a dangerous look, he stalked off into the grasses.

"Oh, goat turds," the Prince of the Mark complained and followed.

His cousin walked a few dozen paces and paused, studying the ground. "These aren't orc tracks. Do you have any bandits in the Mark?"

"Just the Dunlendings."

Elboron caught sight of movement just to his left, but too late. A dark blur slammed into him and sent him sprawling. A second later he heard Elfwine's surprised gasp and then Fellfang's challenging bark. Cursing, Elboron scrambled to his feet and saw, to his surprise, whoever had attacked him was pinned under the hound.

Fellfang barked triumphantly and panted in the Ithilien boy's direction.

"Good boy," he murmured.

The attacker was a small, slender figure with extremely dark eyes and an even darker mane of hair. For all his rough appearance, though, their mysterious attacker looked to be no more than a boy their age.

Elboron checked on his cousin, and found he was uninjured—if a trifle embarrassed. The two brushed themselves off and returned to their prisoner.

"Fellfang, heel," Elboron ordered. The dog barked, sauntered over to him and sat beside him in a guarding posture. "Why did you attack us?"

Straightening his gray cloak and adjusting his pack and belts, the boy threw a glare at them. He looked very much like a feral cat, in their eyes. "You were almost on my hiding spot. I was trying to get away."

"Who're you?" Elfwine wanted to know.

"They call me Whisper," said the stranger.
Elboron and his cousin exchanged baffled looks. "Whisper is an odd name."

The boy flashed them a roguish grin. "People give strange names to us Rangers."

"Aren't you a little young to be a Ranger?" Elfwine asked dubiously.

Whisper waved his hand dismissively. "In training, yes, I am still in training. That is what I am doing, you see. I am traveling, getting the lay of the land and such. My blood is wild, you see. I am untamed, a person as free as the wind—"

"Wait a minute, I know you," Elboron said suddenly. "You're Eldarion!"

"The Heir of Gondor?" Elfwine asked, gaping.

Whisper seemed startled. "Road apples, you recognize me?"

Elboron giggled. "Well, I've only seen you once, but since most all the elves have left Arda and you've got those pointed ears under that mop—and the dark hair and all—not too hard to figure."

Eldarion looked vexed, and, perturbed, he settled, cross-legged on the dirt and sulked for a moment. "I had hoped to have escaped my name," he grumbled.

The two cousins flopped down beside him. "What are you doing here?" Elboron asked.

The Royal heir shifted uneasily. "Things are dull in the White City. I needed to breathe the free air."

"Does your father know?" Elfwine asked.

"Not as such," the Gondorian Prince prevaricated.

"Goat turds, you ran away?" Elboron gasped.

"Just for a while!" Eldarion protested. "I was suffocating behind those walls!"

Elfwine gave Elboron a disbelieving look. "Well, you can come back to Meduseld, if you'd like."

"More stone walls."

Elboron arched an eyebrow. "And warm meals and soft beds."

"Rangers do not require such comforts."

Elfwine could not help but laugh. "So, you, the heir of Gondor, are going to live rough off the land until it's your time to ascend?"

"Or longer."

"Lon— You're cracked, aren't you? All that elven blood just melted your brain or something," Elfwine observed.

Elboron snickered. "Come on. Come back with us."

Eldarion shook his long black mane and stood. "No. I've stayed too long already. I must go with speed." His expression was hunted. "Tell no one you saw me."

Before they could argue further, "Whisper" darted off, heading west through the grasses like an
elk who had scented a lion.

"Figure we should tell your mother?"

"Perhaps.... Though much later, I'm thinking."

"Why?"

Elfwine smirked at him. "Because.... We were ordered to hold our tongues by the Prince of Gondor. That buys him until sundown, at least."

Elboron rolled his eyes but his jovial grin flashed on his face. "Maybe we shouldn't say anything at all. If King Elessar finds out we saw his son running loose and didn't really try and stop him, we could be in a lot of trouble."

"That's true," Elfwine said thoughtfully. "Think maybe we should follow him? Make sure he's okay?"

"Well.... We're not supposed to go very far, remember? And short of knocking him on the head, I don't think we're going to be able to stop him. He made it this far, he'll be okay. And he'll probably get tired and want to go home soon anyway."

Elfwine nodded, glancing in the direction the Heir of Gondor had gone. Overly serious to the point of pretentiousness, there was still something inspiring about the free-spirited prince. A part of him hoped that he would run free forever.

Elboron shoved him. "Tag!"

Elfwine swiped at him but missed. "You know how this always ends!" he bellowed, giving chase.

"Yeah, with you lying, winded, in the grass!"

With Fellfang barking encouragement, they ran until the sun began sinking below the horizon, enjoying every minute they could grasp. Even then, they returned to Meduseld reluctantly. The days when they could play outside unburdened by foul weather were already becoming too few. But they dared not break any rules, and good food awaited them in the Great Hall.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Two become three as Eldarion, Prince of Gondor, joins the story.

14, 4A

For any number of reasons—some more rational than others—the two cousins chose to not mention their encounter with Gondor's Heir to anyone. They were, they felt, in quite enough trouble already and there were far too many ways their actions could be interpreted badly.

They came down to breakfast the following morning and encountered a stranger sitting at one of the tables, quietly eating bread and porridge. There was nothing exceptional about the man other than his height. Even Éomer would have to look up to him. But his clothes were nondescript; his face was worn, aged, but plain. In a crowd, they'd have never noticed him.

Curious, the boys approached him. "Good morrow, sir," Elfwine greeted him stiffly.

The man's reply was a low grunt.

"I am Elfwine, Prince of the Mark," the boy tried again.

The man looked up impatiently and then returned to his breakfast. "Course you are," he muttered.

"And you are...?"

The man did not reply for a long moment as he shoveled porridge into his mouth. "Hurin."

The boys started and exchanged amazed looks. "Hurin the Tall? Warden of the Keys?" Elboron asked.

The loyal servant to the throne of Gondor tore off a piece of bread and devoured it. "Indeed."

"What are you doing here?" Elboron asked excitedly. The stories this man could tell were endless, and he desperately wanted to ask many questions.

"Looking for someone."

The two went wary. "Oh?" Elfwine asked.

"Yes," the warden replied and returned his attention to his breakfast.

Servants brought bowls over for the two Princes and they sat across from Hurin. They affected an air of nonchalance as they dug in to the morning meal, not daring to look at each other. It could not be a coincidence that the King's best man was here, looking for "someone" the day after their encounter with Elessar's son.

"You're not going to ask me who I'm looking for?" Hurin asked.

Elboron dropped his spoon. Elfwine studiously picked out apple pieces from his bread.
"Well...we, that is...I didn't think it proper to ask," Elboron managed at last.

"That's right decent of you." There was an element in Hurin's tone that made the boy think the warden was mocking him. "Perhaps you've seen this person I'm looking for. He's a boy, about your age. Dark hair, dark eyes, wearing a gray cloak and probably calling himself 'Whisper.'"

Elfwine went white as a sheet. Elboron forced himself to look casual as he said, "No, I'm afraid not."

"So, you have seen the errant Heir of Gondor," Hurin pressed. He smirked knowingly. "Better liars than you have tried to pull the wool over my eyes, lad. I wouldn't bother if I were you."

Elboron bowed his head contritely. "Sorry, sir."

"Now, which way did the Prince go?"

"South," Elboron said with an absolutely straight face.

Hurin arched an eyebrow at him.

Elboron's shoulders sagged. "West, sir."

"Thank you," Hurin told him sincerely. "And don't fret on it. You've done the right thing. I swear I'll not tell his Highness you had anything to do with me finding him." The warden finished his tea and stood. "I'd best be getting on, then. Tell the Queen I thank her for her hospitality."

They watched the weathered man stalk from the Great Hall, feeling dreadfully guilty for no reason they could clearly define. They did not truly owe anything to Eldarion, but some part of them felt it violated an ancient code of honor among boys like them—boys that had a penchant for getting into trouble. No matter how unwise and unsafe it was for the Heir of Gondor to be running around in the wilds without an escort, it was a terrible thought to endure that they had been part of his capture.

Elfwine raced Elboron across the plain, urging Thornshoe to run faster than they had ever gone before. His lingering worries about his horsemanship would not cause him to delay in his goal. With permission from his mother, he and his cousin had gone forth this day and ridden far from Edoras. It was the only reasonable alternative, the Queen felt, to the boys shaking themselves apart with excited anticipation.

Today was the day King Eomer returned home.

The boys flew over hills and pounded across well-used paths, grinning and laughing in delight. This was the freest they had been since their return and it was wonderful.

After many leagues they halted on a hill overlooking a sea of grass. Down below, the men of Rohan rode in a long column, banners whipping in the wind and spears held aloft to catch the sun. The boys stared at them in awe for a moment and then rode down to meet them.

As they drew closer, they saw a familiar group of men at the head of the column. The tall, commanding figure riding unassumingly at Eomer's side was none other than King Elessar himself, seeing his friend home. As they drew close enough to make out the details of his face, they could see he bore many wounds—all inexpertly stitched. His manner was relaxed, however, demonstrating that his strength was undiminished.
Eomer looked mostly the same as when he had left, if a little wearied by the year's fighting. His begrimed face lit up when he saw that it was his son who had ridden out so far to meet them. He called a greeting and made a remark to Amrothos, who was riding beside him. The Dol Amroth Prince appeared in much better health than when the boys had last seen him, and in higher spirits as well.

The other figure they recognized caused Elboron to gasp in shock. "Father!"

Faramir flashed his son a bright smile. "I do hope you're here to meet us and not on your way to endanger yourselves elsewhere in the lands of Men."

Elboron beamed at his father, feeling a love in the words he had sorely missed but not known how much. He rode up launched himself at his father, hugging him fiercely. He did not see the way Faramir winced or the worried look Elessar cast in their direction. The boy's whole world was the familiar warmth, the unmistakable presence of his father that he had not known for a year.

Elfwine stopped before his own father, fidgeting awkwardly. "Hello, sir."

Eomer looked him up and down. "You ride that horse like you belong on it."

His son blushed crimson and looked down. "Thank you, sir."

"I understand I owe you a debt of gratitude," Elessar commented.

Elboron, reseating himself in Melefel's saddle, glanced over sharply. He did not quite know what to say to the King, so he instead shifted his nervous gaze over to his father.

The ruler of Ithilien winked at him. "Before he set sail for home, Elphir told us the whole tale."

"Oh," was all Elboron could think to say.

The King grinned at them both. "Your fathers have the unhappy task of gauging what punishment is appropriate for the two boys who saved the Army of the West. I am free to simply commend and reward you. Of that, we shall speak once we reach Edoras."

The Royal stables were frantically finishing preparations when the King rode in. Stableboys rushed to take their tired mounts, and there were a few happy reunions between fathers and their sons. There were some unhappy moments too, though, as men were looked for and not seen. The inevitable conclusion hit home for those who had so anxiously awaited word, and many of the lads worked with tears on their brave faces. Hama was too busy to console each one, but he took the time to grip the shoulders of some or offer an encouraging nod.

The Royal party filed out of the stables, Elessar in the lead. Eomer sought out Elboron, who was staying close to Faramir. "Might I speak with the young Prince?" he asked with a smile.

Faramir nodded, his eyes curious. "Of course," he hugged his son firmly around the shoulders and then trotted to catch up to Elessar. Relatively alone with his Uncle, Elboron was not sure what to expect or what he should say. He worried, briefly, that Eomer would blame him for the misadventure with Dol Amroth. It was fairly clear to him by now that no one could accept that Elfwine would ever get into trouble without encouragement.

"I wanted to thank you," the King said unexpectedly, walking slowly so as to let the party ahead
gain some distance. "I've not seen my son this happy in a few years."

Elboron had no idea how to respond to that. "I didn't do anything, really," he finally managed.

"Yes, you have. You've become his friend, and there will come a time when you realize how important friendship is." He smiled paternally at his nephew. "I am guessing you're planning on asking your father if you can return to Ithilien."

Elboron started, unprepared for the all-too-accurate guess. "Well, no insult meant to your hospitality, sir, but..."

"You miss your home."

Elboron nodded wordlessly.

"I understand. No, I truly do," he said in response to Elboron's skeptical look. "I was fostered by my Uncle when I was your age. I missed my home, too."

"Well ... how did you handle it?"

Eomer chose not to mention that he had been fostered because both his parents were dead. It was not truly relevant, since he had felt just as homesick as Elboron now felt.

"I ran away a lot," he said with a grin. "Not that I'm suggesting you follow my example. I guess I ended up telling myself that Aldburg would always be there and that I should make the best of my situation." He glanced down at the now-troubled Prince. "Do you like it here?"

"I... Well ...yes, but..."

"Then I would ask that you stay a while. You've spent your whole life learning how to be Gondorian. Maybe you could spend a few years learning about the Rohirric half of your blood."

Elboron had, in truth, been greatly looking forward to going home, but now that he was faced with a request by his Uncle, he found himself terribly conflicted.

"May I ask you something?" the King asked.

"Of course, Uncle."

"Win.... When I left, I could not even toss him onto the back of a horse. Now I return to word that he rode with you to Dol Amroth and to the surprise of you two coming out to meet us. What happened with him?"

Elboron stiffened. "He does not wish you to know," he said quietly, hating to have to deny his Uncle such a simple request. "But I can tell you that it's over."

Eomer smiled wistfully. "I did not think you would say, but I had to make the attempt." He paused and turned Elboron to face him. "Will you stay?"

Elboron was not at all prepared to make this decision, so he reached for the only wisdom he could think of: What would his father do?

From there, the answer was easy to arrive at.

"I will stay."
The Great Hall was decked out in celebration of Eomer's return, as well as the honor of hosting King Elessar. All the fires and torches were lit, making the customarily somber hall warm and inviting. The Marshalls were all in attendance, as well as many others who had distinguished themselves in the battle. Thaedenbrand was foremost among these men, boasting loudly and repeatedly of his many deeds of valor. At nineteen, he was anxious to prove his might to his fellow Marshalls.

Once the meal was concluded and they were enjoying honeyed teas, Eomer drew their attention and told the tale of the War in grandiose fashion. Both Elessar and Faramir shouted with encouragements or corrections, as the mood struck them. It was told with much smiling and humor, but at the end the King of the Mark raised his goblet in a toast to the brave men who fell defending the West.

Amrothos then told his tale, of the capturing of Elphir's family and how Dol Amroth was held hostage. Angry mutters rippled through the Hall as everyone imagined women and children being used as leverage by the cowardice of Warlord Kaeliz.

No one's expression was darker than Eomer's. His love for Amrothos was well known, though never spoken of. The Marshalls sensed their King was even now planning a vengeful strike, and in their hearts they gave him their support. Though bloodied and weary from this year's fighting, they would follow Eomer to the very gates of Mandos if he but asked.

At the end of Amrothos' tale, eyes shifted to two very surprised young Princes. Eomer raised his goblet to them, his smile warm and encouraging. "Many tales of daring have we heard this night, but we've yet to hear the story of the two who pulled the linchpins from Kaeliz's plan. Boys, we are all very anxious to hear the story from you."

Ecstatic at the attention, the two launched into a slightly exaggerated retelling of their adventure. They interrupted each other often and argued over details, but in the end the story came out mostly as it had happened.

As they concluded, Elessar stood and raised his goblet to them. "The King of Gondor toasts the heroes of Rohan and Ithilien."

All present saluted the boys, making them blush and grin stupidly. Lothiriel smiled blandly at them and leaned close to her husband. "I am as proud of them as you, but I trust you agree that our son acted most irresponsibly."

He nodded and kissed her. "But I shall not ruin this night for him. Tomorrow, I will speak to him."

Elessar quieted the crowd once more. "For such true service to me, I must reward the young heroes. Prince Elboron, Prince Elfwine, approach."

The boys felt all eyes upon them as they nervously approached Elessar. He was possessed of such a daunting presence, built from the legends spoken of him and augmented by the gravity of his features. Though they had no reason to feel anything but welcome before him, they both could scarcely keep from trembling.

"For your bravery which ultimately led to victory for the West, for the honorable nature of your intentions in trying to bring relief to Dol Amroth and your wit in rescuing the Princes of the city, I name you both Wardens of Gondor and friend of her King. Wheresoever you travel in my realm, you shall find shelter and hospitality. Bear these tokens as a symbol of this bond."
He took up carved wooden medallions hung upon leather thongs and placed one over Elfwine's head and the other over Elborons's. He smiled at them and applauded.

The Hall erupted in cheers.

Elessar held up his hands for quiet once again. "That is the debt of my House paid, but my honor must yet be appeased, for you saved my life." He unbound the bracers from around his wrists and held them out to Elboron.

"I have had these in my possession for many a year, as a reminder of a good friend lost in dark times. But now I think it is time they went to Boromir's nephew."

Elboron was stunned speechless. He did not need to even turn and see the astonished look on his father's face to know what a momentous gift this was. Woodenly, he bowed low at the waist and accepted the bracers, both intricately inlaid with symbols of Gondor, like the White Tree.

"Thank you, Majesty," he said sincerely.

Elessar gripped his shoulder and looked deep into his eyes, telling the boy without a doubt that he was worthy of the gift. Then the King turned to Elfwine and drew himself up. "For you I have this," he announced, unbuckling a knife-sheath. He pulled the small blade out and allowed the firelight to reflect off elvish runes. "It is a rare thing, this dagger. Forged by the elves and gifted to me by the Lord Celeborn, it has served me well in times of danger. May it guard you when you are in peril."

"Thank you, Majesty," said Elfwine with wide eyes.

More cheering and applause followed and the two returned to their seats. For the rest of the evening, they were treated with as much honor as Elessar himself. Even the boisterous Thaedenbrand came over to shake their hands. It was tremendously gratifying, particularly for the way Hama was glaring at them at every opportunity.

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Faramir was pacing agitatedly. Eomer was sitting with his head bowed and his hands on the back of his neck—whether this was because of the ample quantities of mead he had imbibed or because he was dreading the meeting with his son, his friend was not sure.

"I can't believe I'm in the position of punishing my son for saving my life," the King of the Mark complained.

"Well, we're not punishing them for saving us, specifically. It's really about the idea of them running off without guards and without telling anyone. Unless you fancy the idea of your boy running loose in the wilds these days, with all we've seen of the numbers of Orcs moving about."

"But getting that distinction across will be hard. I've told you I've not had any luck getting through to Win in ages."

"Well, we're in this together."

There was a knock on the door. "Come in," Eomer called.

The two boys shuffled in, eyes locked on the floor. Miserably, they sat upon a divan and waited for the lecture to begin.

"Do you two know what you did wrong?" Faramir began.
"We went to Dol Amroth without permission," Elfwine replied in a low voice.

"No, that isn't it," Eomer replied.

The cousins exchanged baffled looks. "We didn't tell anyone where we were going?" Elboron tried.

"No, not that either," Faramir told them.

"You endangered yourselves," Eomer said gravely.

The two looked guiltily at their fathers.

"Your lives do not belong to you," Faramir explained to them.

"They belong to the people of the Mark and Ithilien. If anything should happen to Faramir or myself, the people must know that our sons are ready to take our place—not gallivanting all over Arda as it suits them."

"Sorry, father," Elfwine said miserably.

"I am too," Elboron added. "We thought that, well..."

"You wanted to be heroes," Faramir observed. "And you certainly have become that. But sometimes people such as us do not have that luxury. Can you imagine what would happen if the people of Ithilien learned they had no one to watch over them? Chaos on the border of Mordor—chaos that would ultimately lead to many lives being lost needlessly."

"Or if the people of the Mark came to know that the long line of Eorl's people was ended at last, despair and confusion would take hold. That is exactly the sort of thing whoever organized this year's battle is looking for."

The boys looked up sharply. "You...think this was all done by design?" Elboron asked.

"Of that, we have no doubt," Faramir told them. "And that there is someone out there plotting evil for the men of the West is only that much more reason we have to impress upon you two how important your safety is. Now, you won't be doing this sort of thing again, will you?"

Both boys quickly shook their heads and said in unison, "No, sir."

"We take you at your word," Eomer told them. "And will consider this affair ended."

They gaped in astonishment at their fathers. "Ended?" Elfwine asked.

Faramir smiled and nodded. "You are not children to be sent to your rooms. You are already on the path to becoming men and deserve to be treated as such. We've explained the error of your actions and trust you won't make the same mistake twice."

"And if you do, the consequences will be grave," Eomer concluded.

The two boys cringed at the ominous note in the King's voice. Not knowing what to say, and fearing that if they said something they should not they would find themselves back in hot water, they fidgeted and waited for their fathers to finish.

"Boys?" Faramir asked. They glanced anxiously at him. "It was bravely done," he said with a grin.
"Most bravely done," Eomer agreed with a broad smile.

They started to smirk and thought better of it, choosing instead to mumble contrite "thank yous" and wait.

"You can go," Faramir told them.

Like leaves caught in a strong breeze, they vanished from the room. Once they were gone, the two men let out explosive breaths.

"That went fairly well," Faramir observed.

"It was hard enough," Eomer complained.

Faramir grinned at him. "You're not accustomed to disciplining your children, are you?"

"Well, no. Lothy takes care of the girls and Elfwine never left the library before."

"Consider yourself lucky. Boro's done more damage to Minas Ithil than the armies of Mordor ever managed."

Elessar came in, then, looking very much at ease. "Well, I crossed paths with your boys and they aren't weeping rivers, so I take it things turned out for the best."

"As well as can be expected," Faramir replied.

"Well, for what it's worth, I don't envy the position you're in. I think I'd lose my mind if I learned Eldarion were running around in the wilds with nothing but his wits to guard him. In fact, with all the orc activity of late, I would not be able to sleep at night if I were not secure in the knowledge that my son was home safe in the White City."

"Maybe we should send our sons to you, then," Eomer suggested.

"Now, that is an idea. I imagine it would take them at least a year to level Minas Tirith, between the two of them," added Faramir.

Elessar laughed.

"Majesty?"

Both Kings turned, but it was Elessar who spoke. "Hurin?" His eyes narrowed. "I would like to say how pleased I am to see you, but that your very presence precludes that. I fear to ask what—or who—has brought you to the Mark."

Hurin's expression was carefully guarded. "My reason awaits you in the Great Hall."

"I see..." Elessar turned to his friends. "Excuse me. I have an unexpected problem to deal with."

Elboron and Elfwine were in high spirits. They were heroes in the Mark, friends of the crown of Gondor and, apparently, liberated from punishment. The future was looking bright once more.

They raided the kitchens in celebration and headed for the Great Hall. Just outside the door, though, they paused because they heard a familiar resonating baritone. Elessar was within, and by
his tone, he was not happy at all.

"...ask you why I find you here in Rohan, but I fear the answer would only exacerbate the
headache plaguing me."

"Father, I was practicing!"

The cousins exchanged a look as they recognized the voice of Eldarion. Though eavesdropping
was not a terribly appropriate habit, they had discovered it was a profoundly useful way to get
information. Without a word spoken, they both stole into the shadows around the entryway to the
Hall and strained their ears to listen.

"Practicing, were you? That makes all the difference, then. Tell me, which of your Royal lessons
were you learning in the wilds? Diplomacy? Creating treaties between the wolves and the deer,
perhaps? Or, no, I have it, you must have been reviewing your history with some vastly
knowledgeable squirrels!"

"I'm practicing my Ranger training!" Eldarion shot back hotly.

"Why? Why, pray tell? Are you planning on being the King of the Rangers?"

"You were only a Ranger before you were King!"

"I was also raised by Elrond in Imladris. I learned my history from their songs and I learned it
well. Can you even tell me who was Steward before I took the throne?"

Eldarion made no reply.

"I did not think so."

"I don't see why it's so important."

"Because there is more to being King than swinging a sword or hunting Orcs," Elessar told him in
exasperation.

"I don't want to be King!" Eldarion stopped himself too late, shocked that he had dared to speak
the words he had hidden in his heart.

"What?"

"Father, you were free to wander the lands as you chose before they slapped the chains of
Kingship on you. I don't want to fall into that trap."

"Eldarion..."

"Hand the rulership back to the Stewards, as far as I'm concerned."

"Eldarion!" Elessar snapped. "You shame me with your childish selfishness. The Kingship of
Gondor is not some plaything to be tossed aside if it is not to your fancy. It is a duty...and a man
honors his duty."

"I'm not a man, I'm an elf!" the heir returned, baring one ear.

"You are both, and I know that is a burden to you. But I do not have the time to coddle you. The
throne will pass to you when I am gone, and I will not have you take it unprepared. That is my
duty and I will not fail in it."
"What are you saying?"

"That I will lock you in the tower of Ecthelion, if I must. You will be visited solely by your parents, your tutors and servants who bring you food. You think the Kingship is a prison? Well, I can show you what a prison is really like."

"You wouldn't!"

"For the sake of Gondor? For the integrity of a Kingdom many spilled their blood struggling to save? Yes, my son. Yes I would."

"Father..."

"I have had it, Eldarion. I am sorry you were not born in Imladris, free of duty and obligation, but your course is clear. You will learn your lessons, you will set aside these foolish notions and you will take up the throne."

Eldarion fought back tears. Elessar fumed, unable to give comfort to his son, as he sorely wanted to do, and yet angry with the position he was put in. After a long, awkward moment, he stormed from the Hall, walking past the cousins without noticing them.

Elboron and Elfwine looked at each other, shocked by the King's words. Uncertain if they should intrude, they lingered outside the doorway.

"You might as well come in," the Heir murmured.

They had forgotten to account for his uncanny Elven hearing. Feeling guilty for their eavesdropping, they shuffled over to him.

"Um...you all right?" Elboron asked.

Eldarion sniffled and wiped at his eyes, masking his broken heart with anger. "Of course. My father and I are always arguing." He started picking through the fruit and bread on the table.

"He didn't mean what he said, did he?" Elboron asked, who could not imagine anything more terrible than being locked in a tower.

"Maybe. I don't intend to find out," the Heir said, bundling up his selections in the folds of his tunic.

"What...what do you mean?" the Rohan Prince asked.

Eldarion shrugged, his expression dark. "I won't be here when he comes back with the shackles."

"You can't run away again!" Elboron protested.

"Shout it louder, he might not have heard you," Eldarion growled.

The cousins exchanged worried looks. "Hurin will come after you, you know," Elfwine told him.

"If you'll but give me a horse, he'll never catch me."

"If he doesn't, your father will do it himself. You don't think you can escape from Strider, do you?" Elboron argued.

"What would you have me do?" Eldarion snapped. "Go to my cell with a smile on my face? Sing for him like a songbird in a cage?"
Elboron looked down, feeling horrible for the Heir. Elfwine snapped his fingers, his face aglow with inspiration. "I've got it!"

"Got what?" Eldarion demanded.

"The answer. I'll ask the King to let you stay with us. You can learn anything you need to learn here. And, with us, you'll at least have the run of the Mark."

"My father won't agree to that." But the Heir's tone held the barest hint of hope.

"Your father has told us we're friends of the Crown," Elboron chimed in.

"But if he doesn't feel there's any guarantee I'll not run away again..."

"I'll swear on my family honor that you won't," Elfwine told him.

Eldarion smiled mischievously. "And how do you know I won't?"

"Because that would dishonor my entire family, and I don't think you'd do that."

"So, instead of being my father's prisoner, I get to be yours?"

Elfwine frowned at him. "It's your choice. A room in a tower, or all of the Mark."

Eldarion twirled a dark braid, pondering it. "And you trust your family honor to me?"

"I do. And if you try anything, Boro and I will track you down and beat the stuffing out of you, Heir or no."

Eldarion laughed, a high, musical sound. "If you can get my father to agree, I'll give you my promise."

"Do you have the slightest idea what you're asking?" the King demanded.

Elfwine blanched under Elessar's scrutiny. "Yes, sir. But, um, it's a better solution than locking him in a tower."

Elessar paced back and forth fitfully. "You think you can control him where even Hurin has failed?"

"He...has said he will promise to remain with us."

"My son's promises, you should know, are roughly as constant as the wind," the King informed him irritably.

"I...ah...well, I'd ask this is a boon, majesty. And, um, I'll swear on my family name...and stuff...to, well, to keep an eye on him and make sure he doesn't run off."

Elessar came over and went to one knee before the Rohan Prince. His intense gaze softened slightly. "That is a lot to gamble on my son's honor."

Elfwine fidgeted. "We can at least try it, can't we sir?"
Elessar gripped his shoulders and smiled benignly. "We can indeed, lad. I'll need to speak to your father, and Eldarion will need to make his promise publicly...but it is certainly worth trying."

Elfwine let out a huge sigh of relief, smiling slightly. "Thank you, sir."

Elessar winked at him. "Thank you, Prince of the Mark. I was not looking forward to explaining to the Queen why her son was being locked in the tower."

Very shortly, it was done. Words were spoken in the Great Hall and oaths were taken. Elessar thus placed his son and Heir into the keeping of the Mark. And soon after, the King of Gondor and Faramir took their leave of Eomer, leaving behind their most precious treasures.

Life was not returned to normal for the cousins after that, though, for Eomer assigned a formal tutor for them. Fearing some tiresome old bore, the boys were enormously relieved to find it was, instead, Amrothos. Though it was pointless to hope for mercy from him, at least they felt they could rely upon him to not put them to sleep.

The only other significant change was the need for a larger bed in Elfwine's room. Upon hearing of the sleeping arrangement the two had become so accustomed to, the Heir had announced, "That is fine. I certainly would prefer that to that cell you showed me earlier."

And that had settled that.

The surprises were not yet done, though. For Eomer called the boys before him shortly after Elessar's departure. Baffled, the three came to him in the Audience Hall, fearing what new rules would be imposed upon them.

"I have spoken to Galmund just this morning. He tells me he is having some behavioral problems with Fellfang."

"Sir?" Elfwine asked, unsure how they could be blamed for this.

"My kennelmaster informs me that it is not uncommon for a hound to develop an attachment to a human after a particularly stressful experience. In such cases, the hound will no longer take direction from anyone else."

Seeing that he had inadvertently ruined one of his uncle's dogs, Elboron felt awful. "It's my fault, sir."

"It is both your fault," Eomer corrected. His stern mask faltered, betraying the hint of a smile. "In any case, what is done is done. The only thing left to do, since Fellfang is of no further use to me, is to gift him to you."

"Sir?" both Elfwine and Elboron said at once.

A side door opened and Galamund came in, Fellfang beside him. The hound barked excitedly and ran over to them. Astonished and delighted, the cousins knelt to hug and pet him.

"You'll need to spend a few mornings with Galamund to learn how to properly handle him, but yes, he is yours," said the King.

"Thank you, uncle!"
"Yes, sir, thank you!" Elfwine echoed.

Eomer smiled to see them so happy. "Why don't you boys take him outside? He looks ready for a run."

Eldarion, standing just a bit apart, looked no less eager than the cousins. "He's a hunter if I ever saw one."

Elfwine nodded, smirking. "An orc hunter. And a true friend."

"I sense a story here," said the heir, interested.

The cousins looked furtively at Eomer, who arched an eyebrow. "There is indeed. I'm sure you'll have no trouble getting it from the boys."

Smiling sheepishly, Elfwine glanced at Eldarion. "We'll tell you outside. Wait until you see how fast he can run!"

The three boys departed, Fellfang yipping happily behind them. Galamund laughed and gave the King an odd look. "You lost possibly your best hound there, Majesty."

Eomer shrugged, his expression content. "But I've gained the security of knowing that whatever trouble they get into, they'll have a faithful companion to guard them."

"You don't think they've been scared off of adventures, after this last little experience?"

Eomer laughed, smiling warmly. "First and foremost, they're boys. They are born to find trouble. And, as if that weren't enough, King Elessar went and made them Wardens of Gondor. They're going to feel duty-bound to endanger themselves."

Galamund gave him an understanding smile. "Then maybe it's time they started learning to defend themselves."

Eomer waved a dismissive hand. "It's not nearly time, yet."

"No?"

Eomer was quite sure the boys would love to start their warrior-training, but he was not quite as certain that he was ready to see steel in his son's hands. But Galamund's practical eye had seen straight to the heart of the matter. If they were bound for trouble, then they should be ready for it.

"You're right, again, Gal. I'll start them on it soon."

There was only one man he would trust with the job—if he would consent to come to Edoras for a few years. Ordering him was not something Eomer was inclined to do. His respect for the man was too high to abruptly pull him from his hearth and home.

Eldarion lay upon a hummock, pondering the rolling clouds overhead. Elfwine was seated beside him and Elboron was just apart, wrestling with Fellfang. The hound was having a grand time, struggling to wrest a stick from Elboron's grip.

The Heir had gotten the story and was chewing over the details. "Heroes already," he remarked.

Elfwine grinned from ear to ear. "Well, it was really a lot of being in the right place at the right
"I wish I'd been there," Eldarion said seriously.

Elfwine's smile faded. "It really wasn't much fun while it was going on. Pretty scary, really."

"But you did it!" Gondor's Heir returned. "In the thick of it all, you saved the whole Army of the West!"


"It wasn't as bad as all that!" Elboron interjected, his pride stung.

"It was so!" Elfwine argued.

"Did you tell him about the Orcs spying on Edoras?"

Eldarion's eyebrow raised. "There are Orcs spying on Edoras?"

Elfwine glowered in Elboron's direction. "No, but he thinks there are."

"You've yet to explain the tracks!" Elboron shot back.

"And you've yet to explain how no one here has seen them." Elfwine rolled his eyes. "Boro insists these tracks we found were left by Orcs, which is ridiculous. No one's seen any foul kind here."

"Except for the caravan attack," Eldarion corrected thoughtfully.

"Well..." Elfwine looked disgruntled at the argument.

"Fellfang's an Orc hunter, Dar, and he found a scent around the howes," Elboron said, throwing the stick in a high arc and watching the hound race after it.

Eldarion looked very interested. "Where did they lead?"

"Nowhere," Elfwine informed him. "They went around the wall and then Fang lost the scent."

"Maybe there was a secret passage."

The Prince of Rohan frowned at him. "There aren't any secret passages in Edoras."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!" Elfwine grumbled to himself. "You're as bad as Boro."

"Maybe we should check it out..." Eldarion pondered.

"It was a year ago. I don't remember where the trail led."

Elboron came up to join them, Fellfang trotting along behind. "See, Win, Whisper thinks it was something."

Not sure if he was being mocked or not, Eldarion glanced from one cousin to the other. "Well, if a hound trained to hunt Orcs scented them outside your walls, I'd sure be worried."

"And inside the keep," Elboron added.
"Boro!"

Eldarion sat up, now keenly interested. "Inside?"

"You're making wild guesses about those tracks, Boro. Stop tossing your mane for Dar."

"Well, maybe Whisper won't think I'm jumping to conclusions."

"Is there something funny about my Ranger name?" Eldarion finally asked.

"No," Elboron said quickly. "I think it's neat."

Still not certain of the Ithilien Prince's sincerity, Eldarion arched a thin eyebrow. "All right, then, what tracks was Win talking about?"

"The floor was muddy," Elfwine cut in.

"They were tracks!" Elboron insisted.

"You slipped and made a fool of yourself and you've invented all this to make the whole thing mysterious instead of funny—which it was!"

Elboron glared at his cousin. "There were muddy bootprints...in the deep interior of Meduseld. Much further in than mud should have still been clinging to a person."

Eldarion fidgeted with one of his braids. "That's odd, I'll agree. I still say it might be a secret passage."

Elfwine rolled his eyes. "I can't believe you're even taking him seriously."

The Heir leaned forward, his eyes serious. "I've heard stories...old stories...about Orcs tunneling under cities...sneaking out at night like rats to steal food...or anyone not strong enough to fight them off. Orcs, you see, love the flesh of young humans—they say it's a tender treat."

Elfwine looked pale and uneasy. "You're not serious..."

Eldarion held his gaze for a long time, dark eyes twinkling. Slowly, a grin broke out...which grew into a laugh. "No, I'm not. But it was funny to see that look on your face."

Elfwine blushed and smiled a bit. "Tender treat indeed."

The Heir laid back down again. "What do you suppose the Orcs were doing outside the walls? You said they were near the howes?"

"Digging," Elboron replied before Elfwine had the chance to make a snide comment. "The earth on King Helm's barrow was disturbed."

"Buried treasure?" Eldarion asked, grinning. "I wonder what it is."

"Win says there wouldn't have been anything buried with the King that would be worth digging up."

The Heir considered that. "I don't, uh, well...I don't know anything about Rohan history."

"Well..." Elfwine leaped in, launching into the story with even more enthusiasm than when he had told it to his cousin.
Eldarion chewed on it. "And that's all the histories say?"

"Yes," the Prince of the Mark replied. "I've read everything in our library on King Helm."

"He has," Elboron agreed with a smile. "Probably more than once."

"At least I know Numenor was an island and not a boat," Elfwine shot back.

"You thought Numenor was a boat?" Eldarion laughed merrily. "Even I know it was an island."

Elboron blushed, giving Elfwine a sour look.

"You know what my father taught me, though," said Eldarion thoughtfully. "If you want to know the real history, ask the losers of the conflict as well as the victors. Between the two you will find the truth."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Elboron wanted to know.

"Just that I'm sure the Dunlendings have a different view on what happened with Wulf and Helm. We should ask them."

"They're savages!" Elfwine protested. "You don't just waltz into one of their villages and ask for a history lesson!"

"We could ask that man from the Elk tribe. He seemed nice enough," Elboron suggested.

"My mother would never allow it," Elfwine said seriously.

"So we don't tell her," Eldarion responded glibly.

Elfwine blanched in horror. "You...but... She'll flay us for sure!"

"If she finds out..." Elboron argued.

Elfwine stared from one to the other. "We're supposed to stay out of trouble."

"We're just going to ask a few questions," Elboron wheedled.

"From the sworn enemies of the Mark, yes. I can't see how this could possibly go awry."

Eldarion grinned. "Aren't you the least bit curious?"

"Of course I am, but that's hardly the point," Elfwine fidgeted. "It's dangerous. The Dunlendings have no honor, no sense of decency."

"But we're friends of the Elk tribe. That means they won't hurt us," Elboron reasoned.

Elfwine chewed his lower lip, giving them each a dubious look. "You do realize what will happen if we're caught, right?"

"We won't be," Elboron assured him.

"It could be a piece of the puzzle..." the Heir murmured.

Elfwine groaned. "But...oh, very well. I swear, though, I will blame this on the both of you if this adventure slips its harness."
And so the three friends put their heads together, plotting their foray into danger with the carelessness of children, not truly believing that anything could ever go wrong.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

The three heirs with a penchant for trouble pursue a lost legend. And the enemy continues to plot against the West.

14, 4A

It was very late when Faramir of Ithilien made it to his home. King Elessar had expressed a willingness to accompany him, but Faramir had politely declined. The King needed to be home with his wife, as did Faramir. It had been far too long since he had held Eowyn, and that longing only added to his weariness.

He climbed the stone steps of the main stairway with heavy steps. He had not really had any energy since the battle, and faking it was becoming too difficult even for a man of his pride to manage. There would be no point in trying to hide it from his wife — she always knew.

Eowyn was not waiting for him because he had not sent advance riders ahead. For some reason, he was infinitely weary of pompous fanfare. The idea of enduring a grand welcoming feast was simply too much to conceive.

This was better by far, in his estimation.

He stole silently through the corridors of his home, perfectly able to navigate in the dark after so many years here. He arrived at his chambers and slipped inside. The boots came off, quickly followed by his trousers. Wearily, he crawled into bed beside his wife, laying an arm over her.

"You...smell..." she breathed softly.

Smiling to himself, he kissed the back of her neck. "Sorry, my lady. I did not know you were awake..."

Eowyn snuggled back against him. "I'm not. I'm asleep...dreaming of your return."

"How strange, then, for I seem to be having the same dream I've been having since I left — holding you in my arms."

Eowyn rolled to face him, eyes bleary from sleep. "The bed's been cold without you," she complained mildly.

"Well, it's quite warm now."

She kissed him but noticed how he winced. Her face filled with grave concern. "And what new wound are you bravely enduring? Let me see."

Faramir wriggled out of his tunic and lay back while she inspected the linen binding his ribs. "The broken ribs hurt more than the cut over them, honestly."

"And who stitched this for you? Someone with skill or my brother?"
Faramir gave her a guilty look. "The surgeons were busy...."

Eowyn sighed heavily. "You'll have a scar for the ages, then." She laid a long, sweet kiss on his lips. "And how is our son?"

Faramir had written to her of their child's exploits. "He seems happy, actually. Your brother certainly has his hands full now, though. Aragorn gave Eldarion into his keeping."

Her eyes glowed with merriment at the thought. "That will keep him occupied." She settled down beside him, resting her head on his shoulder. "I was very worried, you know."

Faramir stroked her hair, verging on sleep. "So was I, for a bit. But's over now. I'm home."

Eowyn ran her hand gently down his chest, tracing the myriad of scars there. "Good. The children missed you."

Faramir smiled but did not respond, sleep dragging him into blackness. He was comfortable, safe and back where he belonged. For the first time since spring, he was able to truly rest.

Ostensibly, the three heirs were out for a good day's ride, taking advantage of the favorable weather while it lasted. With provisions packed and accompanied by the faithful Fellfang, the three headed north to the place where Elfwine believed the Elk tribe dwelled.

Knowing they were as good as dead if they were caught added to the excitement, of course. They were not so trusting, however, that they went unarmed. Sneaking the weapons out of the armory had been a feat of incredible teamwork and duplicity.

Their path took them into the rolling hills of the north, where wild cattle roamed and the wind raced freely through the grasses. Well away from Edoras, the landscape took on a desolate air — the lands of the Dunlendings were not as hospitable as those of the rest of the Mark.

They knew they were closing on their goal, for they passed totem markers that were decorated with feathers and bits of hide and were crowned with an elk skull. Keenly aware that they were far from safety, they pressed on with smiles on their faces.

It was not long before they sensed they were observed. Eldarion noticed them first, the rustling movements in the grass that bespoke of eyes watching them. Uncertain what they should do, they chose to not react at all and let the Dunlendings make the first move.

Time crawled by, and the uncomfortable feeling of being stalked grew worse. Now and again they almost caught glimpses of men — or thought they did — but when they turned to look, they saw only shadows and swaying grasses.

They stopped at a row of spears planted in the ground. Their hafts were heavily engraved with symbols, none of which meant anything to the boys. The inherent warning in the display, though, gave them pause. The token that Elfwine bore guaranteed their safety, but if they crossed this barrier they might not be given the chance to show them before they were cut down.

They were bold, but they weren't stupid. The ones watching them might very well have bows trained upon them at that very moment, waiting for them to cross too far.

They exchanged uncertain looks. "Now what?" Elboron asked.
"We don't dare go further," Elfwine responded instantly. "Remember what our fathers said, Boro. We have to be responsible."

"But going back makes this all such a waste," the Ithilien Prince returned unhappily.

"Let's rest here for a while," Eldarion suggested, glancing with his keen eyes at the surrounding grasses and scrub. "See what the Dunlendings want to do."

Elfwine frowned but nodded. "That seems sensible."

They dismounted and saw to the horses — though they did not remove the saddles or even loosen the girth straps, as they might need to make a hasty departure. With that done, they gave some water to Fellfang and stretched out on the grasses. Hard biscuits and water made a bland but sufficient lunch.

It was not very long after when Eldarion sat up, listening intently. His well-honed senses quickly tracked the sound of approaching footsteps and his eyes narrowed on a point beyond the row of spears. "Men approach," was all he said.

The boys did not make any sudden moves, but they did get to their feet and stand shoulder-to-shoulder to face their visitors.

They soon appeared, coming over a hill at an unhurried pace. Educh was in the center, looking far more imposing here where his word was law. He walked with a great staff of ash, adorned with an elk skull and many feathers and strips of cloth. Beside him were several strong men with hard expressions and armed with curved knives and crude swords.

There was also a girl, about the same age as the boys, walking just before Educh. Her long hair was a hopeless mass of auburn tangles and her face and hands were quite dirty, but the look in her eyes was one of precocious intelligence.

They stopped before the barrier of spears and the girl stepped forward. "Strangers to the elk-lands, by what oath-bond or spirit-quest do you come?" she said formally.

Elboron nudged his cousin, who was staring as if struck dumb. "Um...er... We..." He looked to his friends for support who nodded to him — rather urgently. "We're friends of the Elk village, by this token I bear," he said, fishing out the necklace Educh had given him.

"Token-bearer, present your friendship-symbol so we may see it is a true-spoken gift," she called out — rather smugly, they felt.

Elfwine swallowed hard. Certain this was all a formality, but nervous all the same, he walked the ten paces to the girl.

She had pretty eyes, he thought — for a girl.

The lass held out her hand and he placed the necklace in her palm. She turned and walked back to Educh, who gave the ornament only a cursory glance.

"This is a true-spoken gift, given in good-friendship to the Prince of the Mark," he said.

The girl took the necklace back to Elfwine and returned it. "You are welcome, then, as true-friends into the shelter of our gathering-place."

It finally occurred the Elfwine that her strange way of speaking, and her heavy accent, that she was unused to speaking the language. "Thank you," he said awkwardly.
She smiled at him and flounced back over to Educh. The Elk Chieftain grinned for the first time, and even his escort seemed to relax. "It's nice to see you again, Prince. I'm a little surprised, however." He looked beyond the boy to his friends. "Introductions first, though."

Elfwine called his friends over and gave their names, though not their titles. Educh did not seem to notice any duplicity. "You are all welcome here. This is my daughter, Magda," he said, putting an arm around the girl. "Now, what brings you here?"

Elfwine looked over at his cousin, needing to pass the burden of responsibility over. Elboron gave him an understanding look and smiled at Educh. "We want to hear the story of Freca and King Helm."

Educh looked nothing short of surprised. "Do you not have this tale in your books and your songs?"

Elboron's smile gleamed even brighter. "We do, yes, but we wish to hear it from the lips and hearts of the Dunlendings."

Educh gave them all thoughtful looks. "And you do not fear having your minds corrupted by Dunlending lies?"

"No more than we fear the lies of our own people," Eldarion said with a smirk.

Educh laughed a bit. "Then you shall come with us, to our village, and take your ease with us. Later shall my tale-speakers give to you this story."

The three led their horses, following Educh and his warriors past the barrier of spears and along a winding path. They crossed into a loose gathering of trees, their branches nearly completely stripped of leaves. They did not travel for long when the village came into sight. It was a collection of wooden huts, roofed in straw, that appeared very old. Scores of Dunlendings moved about, working at their daily chores. Everyone paused to look, though, when Educh arrived with his three guests.

There was both suspicion and intrigue in their gazes.

Educh paused and faced his daughter. "Keep our young friends occupied while I make preparations, will you?"

"Yes, father," she agreed readily.

The Chieftain smiled at them then and walked off. Magda smiled warmly at them. "Do you want to a game play?"

"Like what?" Elfwine asked, not sure why he felt so odd when she smiled.

"Kaparo," she replied. "I think you have no word for it in your language. Is fun."

The boys looked interested. "How do you play?" Elboron asked.

"Two teams, four people on each," she started to explain. She led them towards a small gathering of children about their age. "Each team has three...how would you say...person who must tag?"

"Tagger," Elfwine supplied helpfully.

Magda smiled. "Tagger, thank you and one run...ner?" Elfwine nodded. "The runner is to get the stakes, the taggers stop them must."
"Seems reasonably straight forward," Elboron put in.

They stopped before the children, who were coiling rope. They looked up at the strangers curiously. "These are Bahna, Kala, Rees and Daeor." She said something to her friends in their language, and they heard their names among the foreign sounds.

"Hallo," they said in halting Westron.

Magda looked apologetic. "They don't say in your language very well."

Bemused, Elfwine asked, "How do you say 'hello' in your language?"

"Umtu," she told him.

Elfwine held out his hand to one of the children — a burly boy several inches taller than he. "Umtu," he said carefully. He pointed to himself and said, "Elfwine."

The boy grinned hugely. "Umtu, Elfwine, ata Bahna sae nu."

Elfwine beamed, immensely pleased. He turned to the girl beside Bahna. "Umtu...a..ta...Elfwine see no."

She giggled. "Umtu, Elfwine. Ata Kala sae nu."

Enchanted, he moved on and tried once more. A boy, slender as a reed, took his hand and said, "Umtu, Elfwine, ata Daeor sae nu. Dapo ata dae Rees sae nu," he said, pointing to the last boy in line.

The Prince of the Mark rolled that around in his head. "Umtu, Rees," he said thoughtfully. "Dapo ata dae Elboron sae nu," he said, motioning his cousin over. "Dapo ata dae Eldarion sae nu," he said with more confidence as the Heir came forward.

Magda looked plainly impressed at Elfwine, who blushed. "You learn to say well."

"Speak," he corrected softly. "'You learn to speak well.'"

She blushed and nodded at him. "My father taught me to say — to speak your words."

"You speak them very well," he said quietly.

"Shall we play?" Elboron said impatiently.

"I think your cousin would rather listen to Magda speak all day," Eldarion teased.

Cheeks flaming, Elfwine glowered at the Gondorian. "I would not."

Elboron grinned. "Well, we could leave them alone."

"Boro!" Elfwine snapped.

His friends grinned at each other.

The group made their way to just outside the gathering of huts that made up the village, awkward because of their lack of understanding with each other. But through pantomime and gesture and a lot of Magda's help, they began to build the bridges of friendship.
The field was vaguely oval shaped, demarcated by an erratic line of stones. Bahna picked up a stack of stakes stained green and Magda took up another set of a red hue. They walked to opposite ends of the field and planted them in the ground.

"You three will team together with me," she informed the boys. "Eldarion, your seeming form has agility looking. You will be the runner. The line behind you stay is here." She indicated a length of old rope that sectioned off ten feet of the field. "When line you cross, challenge begins and taggers may you grabbed be. If they you tag, you must out of game be until other runner stake retrieves or other runner tagged is."

Eldarion nodded, smiling. "Seems easy enough."

She shifted her gaze to the cousins. "We be the taggers are. We must stop runner of Bahna."

They nodded, moving with her to the center of the field. She had them take up positions in a line, about ten paces apart. They faced off against Bahna, Rees and Daeor, who were grinning excitedly. The cousins took their lead from Magda, who did not move forward. Her gaze followed Kala at the other end of the field, waiting for her to start across the field.

The game started explosively, as everyone started moving at once. The cousins were suddenly locked with Rees and Daeor, vying against them and struggling to keep them from going after Eldarion. Gondor's Heir flew across the field on his fleet feet. The clumsy hands of the taggers could not touch him in the short time they had before his teammates intervened.

The game was enormously entertaining. There were occasional pauses to explain a few things — like that a tagger could tag the opposing tagger — but generally the game went along splendidly. Magda's team lost the first match, but they won the second two.

After which, they were all quite tired and ended up flopped in the grasses, talking (or trying) breathlessly.

As the sun reached its peak, word was sent that the story-tellers were ready. Excited and anxious, the three boys accompanied their new friends to the village's center. Most of the village was gathered there, and food and drink were being passed around a wide circle. Torches had been set up to delineate the stage.

The boys were ushered to the fore, like guests of honor. With their friends around them, they were given something to eat by smiling Dunlendings. Their attention was then drawn to the center of the circle by Educh. He spoke to his people briefly and then turned to the boys with a friendly smile.

"Now shall you see the story-telling as it is among the Dunlendings. My tale-speakers shall make the words, and Rana and I shall translate them for you."

Two people, one man and one woman, both aged, came out of the crowd and sat at the edges of the circle, facing each other. Educh came to sit beside the children, and Rana sat on the other side. She was around Educh's age, crow's feet nesting around her kindly eyes. Their expressions were friendly enough, but there was reverence there too.

A tall, massive man strode forward. His face was heavily painted with black and red. As he did so, the male tale-speaker's voice rang out, clearly and with resonance. Educh's voice followed, softly so only they could hear. "I am Helm, King of the Mark."

Another man, almost as large, replaced the first. "I am Freca, friend of the Dunlendings, master of much land and many men."
A younger, more willowy man came forth. "I am Wulf, son of Freca."

He was joined by a slender woman. The woman tale-speaker spoke for her, and Rana translated. "I am Theolen, daughter of Helm."

Wulf turned to Theolen and took her hands. "Theolen, friend of my childhood, long have I desired to speak to you of what is in my heart."

She looked bravely into his eyes. "Then speak, friend, for I think my heart would echo those words."

"My fondness for you has turned to love without my knowing it. I would have you as my wife, my companion and mother to my children."

The woman smiled happily. "I would have you as my guide and my guardian, Wulf, son of Freca. We but need the consent of our fathers."

"Then let us look to the happy time when we are together, for no doubt our fathers will approve of our union."

Theolen stepped back five paces and Wulf turned. Freca came forth and hugged his son. "You make me proud with this suit, my son. Our family will be much in greater glory for uniting with the house of Eorl. I shall speak to the King soon as I may."

Wulf stepped away, and King Helm came forward. He faced Freca with folded arms and his posture was arrogant and defiant. "What now, Freca, brings you drunkenly before me."

"Helm King, you have refused my every courteous plea for an audience. Perhaps you will listen to a less courteous plea, then, here before your men."

"I will not hear the plea of fat mongrel here or anywhere, Freca. Though your wealth is as vast as your stomach, you do not hold the power to command me."

Freca drew himself up. "I need to speak to you of a suit brought by my son. There must be a union between our houses."

"Must?" Helm postured. "Must? You, drunken fool, would tell me what I, Helm King must do?" Harsh laughter barked out. "Take your girth from my sight, mongrel, and speak no more to me of 'must.'"

Freca stepped forward. "I will not be denied."

"No? Then let us speak of this away from my court, as one father to another."

Freca bowed. The two walked about the circle and came to face each other once more. Helm's expression became dour. "Now, Freca, go from this place and do not return. You and your son are banished from the Mark for all time."

"You cannot do this."

"It is done."

"I will not be dismissed! I am Freca, my lands are vast and my allies are great in number."

"Do you dare threaten me? I am Helm Dragonbane, King of the Mark!"

"I demand the respect I am due!"
"I deny you!"

"Yield to this suit, or there shall be war."

Helm brought forth a hammer and raised it high. "I will not stand to be threatened!"

The hammer came down (slowly, barely tapping "Freca") and Freca fell to the earth. Helm looked down at the body and his rage left him. "Now much sorrow will come upon my house, for pride has guided my hand. Bring to me his son that I may try to mend what I have broken."

Helm departed from the circle, and Wulf came forward. He knelt beside his father with grief on his face.

"Beloved father...foully murdered by a coward's hand. I shall be revenged upon he who has done this. His house shall burn and his sons shall bleed. I hear his warriors approaching, come to kill me as surely as the coward killed my father. They shall not catch me so unawares."

And Wulf slipped away. The circle was empty. Now only the man storyteller's voice was heard.

"Time did pass. Wulf retreated to the hills to nurse his grief and his anger. He spoke to many leaders of men, enemies of King Helm, and he fanned the fires of their hate. Four years after the death of his father, he brought a great war to the Mark. Men on ships from the far south came and the foul folk poured in from the east. Wulf himself led his father's soldiers and many Dunlendings against the men of the Mark.

"Death and destruction swept over the Mark like a rushing river. Nowhere was safe. The fires of Wulf Frecason's hatred consumed everything they touched.

"While Helm King battled on the field, Wulf made his way to Edoras. The city fell quickly to his army, its gates sundered and its defenders overwhelmed by the implacable forces of Wulf. There, on the very steps of Meduseld, Haleth, elder son of Helm, did fall to Wulf's blade...."

Theolen and Wulf came into the circle again, meeting in the center. "Long have I desired to see you again, beloved Theolen."

Her bearing was cold now, aloof. "As did I to see you, but now you come before me not as a suitor but as a conqueror, with my brother's blood staining your sword. I do not welcome you."

"Your father murdered mine, your brother refused to yield to me. My course was not chosen by me, but I will see it through."

"And what does that mean? Shall all my family perish to appease your rage? Will you cut me down to end my father's line?"

Wulf's posture changed then as well. "I would not. I would rather fall upon my blade than raise it against you. I would have you as my wife, just as we once spoke of."

"You will have me as your trophy, your symbol of a conquered house, but my love for you is as dead and cold as my poor brother."

Wulf turned away, a great rage on his face. He stormed out of the circle. Theolen watched him go and then departed as well. Helm came forward, kneeling in the center, his head bowed.

"I was warned that this would come to pass. The hammer that was a gift to my line has turned into a curse, for with it I slew a defenseless man. War, famine and now a terrible winter has fallen on
the Mark. My elder son died defending our keep, my younger son has been swallowed by the bitter snows. My only daughter is now a prisoner. And my people freeze and starve. It may be that my life alone will purchase peace. If that is so, then let me go willingly. Let Helm King go to his death on his feet."

He stood and gazed proudly up at the sky. A long silence took hold, everyone's attention held by the powerful figure. Then the tale-speaker's voice sounded again.

"King Helm went out into the frigid storm, alone and unarmed. He wandered, no one knows how long, challenging the cold and any Dunlending brave enough to face him. His life did indeed end that terrible winter, and he was found still standing, frozen to his bones.

"Thus ends the tale of Helm King, Dragonbane."

There was much murmuring then among the Dunlendings. The boys stared around in awe, their faces slowly lighting up with excitement. "That was amazing!" said Eldarion.

"But I'm confused about a couple of things," Elfwine said, perplexed. "Helm did not wield a hammer. He was called Hammerhand because of his strength..."

Educh gazed thoughtfully at him. "The hammer of Helm is quite real. Many of our tales speak of its might — like unto the power of the very gods. It is said no wall could withstand it; nor any armor or shield."

Elfwine gaped, looking over at Elboron. His cousin's expression was knowing. They both were thinking of Helm's howe and the disturbed earth and the mysterious tracks. Things were beginning to make an awful sort of sense.

"Why do none of our tales speak of it?" Elfwine asked, almost to himself.

Educh shook his head. "To that I cannot speak. After Helm died, we never heard tell of the hammer again."

Elfwine's gaze became thoughtful. Beside him, Elboron started. "Win! We need to get back!"

Suddenly, Elfwine became aware of the rapidly-setting sun. They would not be back before dark, and his parents would be very angry. He leaped to his feet, his friends doing the same. "Sir, thank you for this, but we must return."

Educh rose and nodded, smiling in an understanding way. "No Prince has ever been interested in hearing our tales. This was a good day."

Elfwine bowed slightly. "It was. And I would like to return when I can, to see my friends again."

"You are welcome in the village of the Elk, Elfwine Eomerson," the chieftain remarked.

Very quickly, the boys were led to their horses and then led to the outer edge of the village's domain. They were given necklaces of beads and polished bone and bid a very warm farewell. With some reluctance, they took their leave.

They pushed the horses as hard as they dared, but it was still some time before they at last saw the homefires of Edoras blinking in the dark. Knowing what they were in for, they pressed on anyway, discussing what and how much they would tell the King of the Mark. The main difficulty was, of course, that Elfwine couldn't lie — especially to his father.
They rode into the city and stabled their horses. Then, feeling both exultant and anxious, they walked into the golden hall. It did not take long before the shouts could be heard, announcing the boys' return. They cringed and did their best to skulk in the direction of their room.

Such was not to be. Granild, one of the ranking house guards, intercepted them. His expression was cold and distant, not at all the laughing face they knew. "Prince Eldarion, Prince Elboron, the King of the Mark requests you repair to your room immediately. You, Prince of the Mark, are to come with me."

They exchanged despairing glances, their shoulders collectively slumping. "We should stay together," Elboron objected tentatively.

Granild shook his head. "My orders are clear, your highness."

Elfwine felt great trepidation at the idea of facing his father alone, and it showed on his face. His friends gave him supportive looks, which was all they could do. He nodded glumly and turned back to Granild.

"Very well then, lead on."

Elboron and Eldarion watched him go, following Granild with a proud stride that would be worthy of any Knight. They watched until he was out of sight and then they quietly went to the room they shared with him to wait, worry in their hearts.

Elfwine, who was not feeling nearly so brave as he tried to seem, followed Granild in nervous silence. The guard did not speak to him, nor give him any sign of hope. Lost in his own miserable apprehension, Elfwine stayed silent as well.

He was brought to his father's audience chamber — not at all a good sign. King Eomer was pacing frantically, dressed in wool and furs to ward off the chill. His gaze fixed on his son for a moment when the pair entered and then he dismissed Granild.

"Where have you been?" Eomer's voice was taut with fear and anger.

"We...lost track of time, sir," Elfwine said evasively.

The King's eyes hardened at the obvious prevarication. "You were not supposed to go far. And yet none of my Riders could spot you."

Elfwine could not bear to hold that gaze, so he stared instead at his feet.

"Look at me, son." Elfwine cringed. "Look at me." He could not disobey, no matter how much he desired to, so he looked up reluctantly. "Where were you?"

And he could not lie, of course. "We visited the Elk village of the Dunlendings."

Eomer's face drained of color. "What could possibly have possessed you to go there?"

The Prince squirmed under that stare. "We wanted to hear a tale of theirs."

Eomer clutched his head as if in pain. "Have you lost all sense? You were granted liberty with the understanding that you would take care with your safety. And the first thing you do is run off to the savages!"

"I wasn't in any danger, sir." Elfwine's words were low and measured. He found himself wrestling with a feeling he had never dealt with before in his father's presence: anger.
"You don't think so? Do you know what those animals do to people of the Mark?"

"I had a friendship token which guaranteed my safety."

Eomer shook with outrage. "I can't believe...as smart as you are...trusting those savages!"

"They're not savages, father," Elfwine disagreed firmly.

"No? Maybe you can offer another explanation then for the atrocities they've committed?"

"And what have we done to them?" Elfwine snapped back.

Startled by this display of defiance, Eomer glared at his son. "How dare you..."

"How dare I? You call them animals without even knowing them. I spent time with them today, I made friends. They're not so different from us. And certainly there is proof in that I have returned unharmed."

"Save that your reason has been damaged."

"At least I'm not blind!"

Eomer slapped him hard enough to stagger him. "Don't disrespect me. I will not tolerate it."

Elfwine's eyes were full of tears when he looked back. "Y-yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

"You and your friends will be confined to Edoras until Spring."

"Spring?"

"Yes, and be grateful it is not through the summer!" Eomer shook his head, fuming. "Tomorrow I shall have Amrothos bury you so deep in studies you won't have time for this nonsense."

"Yes, sir."

"You may go."

Elfwine nodded and started to slink out.

"Son?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Have you eaten?"

"Not in some while, sir."

"I'll have the servants bring you all something in your room."

Elfwine nodded glumly. "Thank you, father."

A hammer.... It was preposterous, Elfwine thought to himself as he looked out at the rain. He knew every story there was about the heroic King and none of them mentioned a hammer. Stories changed, of course, over time, but not to this extent. Somewhere, someone would have spoken or
written of such a thing.

And why did the Dunlendings call him Helm Dragonbane? The very name spoke of a grand tale, but he had never heard of a dragon coming to the Mark.

"Win?"

The Prince broke out of his contemplations and looked guiltily at Amrothos. Their mentor gave him an exasperated look. "I realize your lessons seem like a punishment, but it would be better for you to not treat them as such."

"Sorry, Uncle."

Elboron and Eldarion gave him sympathetic looks. They were in the library and had been all day. Amrothos was merciless when it came to the task of tutoring them. Over the last week, they had covered some of the most involved (and dullest) political and historical occurrences of the second age. Even the studious Elfwine had been pushed to his limits.

Amrothos was sympathetic. "What has you so distracted?"

Elfwine glanced at his friends, who nodded slightly. "How much do you know about King Helm?"

His uncle pondered it for a moment. "A fair amount."

"Did he ever wield a hammer?" Elboron blurted.

Amrothos started to laugh, but when he saw their earnest faces, he checked himself. "Where did you hear such a thing?"

"From the Dunlendings," Eldarion said, as if it should be perfectly obvious.

"Oh, I see." Amrothos was clearly amused. "What else did they say?"

Annoyed at the patronizing tone, Elfwine summed up the story for his uncle. Amrothos listened, fascinated, and then resolutely shook his head. "It's a fine tale, lads, but if it were true, surely it is something we all would have heard."

"Unless the story got changed so Helm didn't look so much like a murderer," Elfwine argued quietly. It was an awful thought that had been plaguing him.

"One doesn't just write history to suit, Win."

"The winners do," Eldarion put in.

Amrothos rolled his eyes. "It's just too much to be believed. I'd just forget it, if I were you."

The boys were not at all convinced. That night, as they took a late supper in their room, they mulled over what they knew and what they suspected.

"My uncle is right about one thing. It's too odd to believe that no record of this hammer still exists," Elfwine muttered over a chunk of gravy-soaked bread.

"But, that only means that some record might exist," Eldarion mused.

"But where?" Elfwine countered in exasperation. "Meduseld has the biggest — well, only library in all of the Mark."
"Unless it's not written down at all," Elboron added. "You've told me a dozen times how Rohan is still steeped in the tradition of oral tales. Maybe there's a storyteller out there who knows the real story."

"If that were true, it doesn't help us much," Elfwine told them glumly. "There are dozens of bards in the Mark. Tracking them down and asking them would take years."

"We'd have to narrow it down, then," Eldarion said as if it were just that easy. "Well, if we're right and King Frecalaf—"

"Frealaf," Elfwine corrected absently.

"Whatever."

"Freca was Wulf's father."

"And it's my fault all the names in your history sound the same?"

Elboron giggled. Elfwine sulked. "Go on, then," said the Prince of the Mark, glowering at his cousin.

"Fine, well, if King Frealaf had a favorite bard, someone he trusted, maybe he'd let hit him know the true story and maybe that bard could pass the story on, only in secret."

"That's a terrible lot of 'ifs,' Dar," Elfwine said dubiously.

Elboron nodded. "And we'd never be able to trace who he told the story to, even if you were right."

"Father to son?" Eldarion replied.

Elfwine sighed. "That's quite thin."

"It's a place to start," Eldarion argued mildly.

Elboron glanced at his cousin thoughtfully. "That is true. It will be more interesting than studying which King signed which treaty in which year."

Elfwine contemplated it, smiling a little. "I agree, there. I never really did any reading on Frealaf. I don't know what's in the library about him..."

The boys shared smiles of anticipation, wondering what this would yield. They retired early, aware that their weapons training would begin the following day. They did not yet know who would be in charge of their training, only that Eomer had brought in someone especially for them.

Orthale looked out at the rain and the darkness, thinking of the failed campaign, the failed search for the Hammer of Helm, and he cursed fate for treating him so unkindly. All his efforts had come to naught, and he was out of ideas for how to bring about his ultimate goals.

"My lord?" It was one of his orc servants, Gurug.

"What?"
"The Horse Lord, Aldurn, is here with news."

Aldurn had been utterly useless thus far, as informants go. It was curious for him to arrive in weather such as this, without summons. The oddness of it warranted a meeting, at least.

"Very well, bring him to me."

Orthale turned from the window and watched as the tall Rider was led into what served as his audience chamber. Aldurn was in his thirties, strong and confident. He was, though, an awful gambler with a need for a steady supply of coin. In other words, precisely the sort of person Orthale could use.

He was drenched from the rain and shaking slightly. "My Lord," he said and bowed deeply.

"Aldurn, you arrive in the late watches of the night, sodden and road-begrimed. Do tell us why."

"My Lord, you bade me bring you any word or mention of Helm's Hammer. Today I overheard the Heir and his friends asking their tutor about the Hammer. I listened at their door later and heard them speaking again of it. They mean to look for it."

Orthale considered that. "So, they can search without suspicion, and we can observe and wait to seize on any information they come up with. Very good."

Aldurn nodded. "Yes, my Lord."

Orthale smiled slowly. "Watch them, then. And closely. I want to know if they learn anything at all."

"Yes, my Lord."

Orthale dismissed him and started pacing. This was an interesting development. The boys' curiosity would drive them on to chip away at the mystery. And they had access to places in Meduseld and sources of information he did not.

All was not, in fact, lost. For the first time that day, Orthale Grimason smiled.

Edoras was cloaked in a thick fog. It seemed to dampen sound, leaving Elfwine in a world of silence. He looked around for his friends, but he could scarcely see two paces ahead. Worse, he had a sense of foreboding, like danger was close.

"Boro? Dar?"

He padded down the road leading out of the city, feeling cold and fretful. There were no replies to his hopeful calls, and soon the world was swallowed by the impenetrable murk. The feeling of dread grew stronger, slowing his steps.

But then he spied the silhouette of a figure standing upon a hillock, and he felt new resolve. Squaring his shoulders, he approached. "Hello?"

The figure did not turn. "You seek that which should be forgotten."

Confused, Elfwine continued to stride up the hillock. "I don't understand."

"Sunder should remain lost to the world of men. It brings only ruin."
"Sunder What is that? Who are you?"

The figure, a massive, towering shape, slowly turned, and a face Elfwine had seen in a dozen 
tapestries and statues suddenly stared back at him. "You know who I am, Eomerson, and I speak 
of this..."

He held up a war hammer, which looked like it might be beautiful — mithril engraved with 
dwarvish runes — were it not coated in gore that dripped in a pool at the king's feet.

Elfwine gasped. "It's real!!"

Helm's ghostly face darkened. "It not only destroys the man who dares to lay a hand upon it, but 
his whole house as well. Do not fall victim to it."

"But someone is looking for it. We need to find it to keep it safe! Where is it?"

The world tilted suddenly, spinning and breaking apart as Elfwine was forced from his slumber by 
being tossed out of his bed. He shouted a protest, a sound echoed by his two friends. Blinking 
sleep from their eyes, they tried to see who had so rudely awoken them — a task made more 
difficult by the fact that dawn had not yet pierce the veil of night.

"Morning lads," a deep, baritone voice greeted them. "Time's a'wasting."

The mountainous figure looming in the darkness flashed them a huge, feral grin.

Elfwine's eyes widened in astonishment. "Erkenbrand!!"
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

The boys get a bodyguard. Eomer rides off to war.

15, 4A

Edoras shone like a pearl amidst the grasses. Great pains had been taken over the preceding weeks to clear the streets of refuse, to rethatch roofs and to scour the animal leavings from every road and corner. The bright pennants of green were all new, dotting the skyscape with flashes of color. Even the people were wearing their best this day.

Not for the King of Gondor was this done, for all knew he was not overly fond of such overt courtesies. It had been done, because on this visit, the Lady Arwen, Gondor's flower, accompanied her husband. Ever since the messengers had arrived in midwinter, alerting the King of the Mark of the planned trip, the city had been in a flurry of preparation.

Now the King and his family awaited the arrival of Gondor's Royal party, standing before their city with a wide array of honor guards about them.

Eomer was wearing his best buckskin trousers and a shirt his beloved wife had sewn him. His long hair was neatly combed and corralled into even plaits. He was unarmed and unarmored, in a gesture of friendship and welcoming to Elessar and his Queen.

Lothiriel stood beside him, her gown of a pale blue. She held little Finduilas in her arms, which was somewhat of a chore, given the child's determination to free herself so she could explore. The pack of Royal daughters huddled close to their parents, all in fine dresses and cloaks to ward off the chill. Hanild was the oldest, just a year younger than Elfwine, then Theodora, then Eltheriel and finally Wynohael, who was only four.

The boys were there, of course, fidgeting and fussing with the finery they'd been stuffed into. Both cousins had shot up an inch over the winter, and with Erkenbrand's merciless training, were putting on muscle as well. Eldarion looked much the same, the elven blood from both his parents' heritage slowing time's hand.

The Gondorian party was huge — larger than usual with all the terrible events transpiring of late — with a full column of armored warriors flanking their sovereign. They came up on the city at an unhurried canter, shadowed by the looming clouds above.

"You're late," Eomer said. "We thought you'd gotten lost."

His wife nudged him hard in the ribs, and he grinned.

Elessar gave him a good-humored glare. "Don't you pick a fight with me, right now. I've been mired in this marshland you call a country for a month."

"Marshland?" Eomer protested.

Elessar dismounted, grinning. He helped Arwen from her horse, whispering something in elvish to
her. Her laughter was like the ringing of a dozen tiny bells. Eomer felt a familiar sensation of awe as the Queen threw back her hood and gave him a winsome smile. "And how are you, Eomer?" she asked.

He bowed deeply. "As well as can be hoped, your highness."

She graced him with a smile and turned to Lothiriel. "You are looking quite well, considering, well...." Her playful glance flashed to Eomer.

The Queen of the Mark laughed. "As do you."

Finally pushed past his somewhat limited patience, Eldarion surged forward and leaped into his mother's arms. "I've missed you."

"Hmmm, well, your fondness for me did not keep you in the White City, did it?"

He went deep crimson. "Well...I..."

Smiling warmly, she leaned down and kissed her son on the cheek. "I've missed you too, shooting star."

Elboron and Elfwine giggled. Eldarion shot them a warning glance. They mocked him with their eyes in response.

The Royal Party was led into the city at a casual pace. Up the winding avenues they traveled, smiling and speaking to some of the people who had come to watch. There was a great deal of murmuring and many awe-struck glances as Arwen passed.

Once inside Meduseld, the guards accompanying Elessar's party were led away by Eomer's chamberlain, off to rest from their long travels. Elessar and Arwen, Eomer and Lothiriel and the children all repaired to the audience chamber.

"Before I forget, I have a message for you, Master Elboron," Elessar remarked, pulling a neatly-folded piece of parchment from his pocket. He handed it over, the seal of Ithilien proudly showed upon it.

Elboron snatched it up, remembering belatedly to bow and utter a quick 'thank you.'

_Dear son,_

I am sorry that we have not as yet come to visit you, and that it may yet be some months before we may. Your father is not feeling well, and would not be up to such a journey. Also, with so much unrest on our borders, we simply cannot get away.

We send you our love and promise to come see you as soon as may be.

Love,

Your Mother

Elboron felt a vast surge of disappointment at the words, missing his mother so deeply. Even worse, he had no idea what complaint his father could be suffering from that would make him unable to travel. Faramir was indomitable. Elboron had never known him to even be sick.

He sat beside his friends, letting them read it in turn. They gave him supportive glances, not sure how he was handling the news.
"Shall we get Fellfang and go for a ride?" he asked finally, forcing a smile.

They nodded to him, eyes brightening at the prospect. "Can we?" Eldarion asked their parents.

Arwen smiled adoringly. "Be back in time to be cleaned up for supper, dear."

Lothiriel nodded as well. "Try to stay within the Mark," she told her son pointedly.

Elfwine blushed and nodded. They bowed quickly and exited the hall, trailed by their bodyguard — a new stipulation Eomer had added. It was not a glorious duty to pull, but still there had been a volunteer.

Aldurn followed his charges silently and at a distance. They were happier if he was less visible, and when they were happy, they didn't try to escape his eye. Both of his masters were extremely interested in the boys' comings and goings, and so he would do what he needed to do to endear himself to them.

After the boys had left, there was amiable talk of herds and expanding settlements and other such mundane subjects. Only once Elessar was rested did he broach the subject most prominently on his mind.

"You still intend to march into Harad?"

Eomer's expression shifted from one of slight bemusement to a hard, determined stare. "Yes, I do. My eoreds and a brigade of Elphir's knights will ride out to Kaeliz's city. It is time that he was made to pay for his crimes."

"Well, I certainly agree, but I wish you'd allow me to send along some of my men." Elessar's tone was almost petulant.

"This is a...personal matter, Aragorn. My wife's kin were treated most brutally by that barbarian. I want him to understand the King of the Mark looks after his own."

"I will, of course, yield to your claim in this. Just be careful. It would be awfully embarrassing for you if I had to come riding to your rescue."

Eomer laughed. "Yes, it would. But I don't anticipate this will even last the summer. The Haradrim are not so numerous or so intractable as the foul folk."

"Very well."

"And how long do you anticipate being in the north?" the King of the Mark asked.

Elessar looked to Arwen, who was speaking quietly to Lothiriel. "not uncommon, elven blood sometimes breeds true. Our daughters are, by contrast, quite human in appearance." Gondor's queen smiled briefly at her husband and went back to her conversation.

"We think a month, at least. It will largely be at the Mayor's discretion," Gondor's King said.

Eomer nodded. "Do bring me word on how Samwise is doing. And Pippin and Merry too, of course. I have heard nothing since that letter about Frodo."

A flash of regret came over Elessar at mention of the Ring Bearer. Frodo Baggins, the Hobbit
who had saved them all and yet had not been able to find his own peace...his name brought a feeling of terrible failure to the Gondorian King. Though he did not know what he could have done, he would forever feel that he should have somehow saved Frodo.

"I am sure they are doing splendidly," Elessar finally said, moving past the moment. "But I shall inquire for you."

Eomer nodded and turned the chat to his planned campaign, a subject Elessar was keenly interested in and supportive of. The King of Gondor had much advice and wisdom to impart, and Eomer was quite grateful for all of it. He intended this campaign to be quick and decisive.

"Where do you runts figure you're going?"

The boys stopped before Hama, looking both worried and frustrated. "We want to go riding," Elfwine informed, trying to not waver.

Hama laughed. "Do you? Well, sad news, lasses. You see, my father was asking me about your lessons and I had to tell him you had not reported for lessons in months. That genuinely upset him, so I am now under orders to not let you have the use of any horse until you're properly trained."

Elfwine's eyes went wide. "That's not fair!"

Hama laughed, shaking his head. "Oh, poor Whiner."

"You're making it up, aren't you?" Elboron snapped.

"Oh, you wish I was." Hama's eyes glittered with triumph. "I'll see you girls tomorrow afternoon."

Crushed, the two boys let their shoulders dip. Not understanding, Eldarion followed along as they walked from the stable yard. "Who was that piece of dung?"

"Hama," they both said.

Elboron kicked an unoffending stone down the path. "We have to tell your father, Win."

"I doubt he'll want to hear it. He's still mad at me."

"Hear what? Come on, I haven't been here but a few months," Eldarion whined.

Elboron glowered. "Hama is full of shite, but he's got authority and he uses it to embarrass Win and me."

Eldarion stared at them. "You let him get away with that?"

A large figure appeared out of one of the smithies, looming over them. They stared up at Erkenbrand with trepidation. "Did we miss a lesson?" Elfwine squeaked.

Their trainer grinned and shook his head. "No, believe me, I won't let that happen. I just overheard the little snot back there and I wanted to hear the answer to Dar's question."

Elfwine shrugged. "It's not a matter of letting him get away with it...."

Elboron did not offer him any help. "I told him to tell his father when I got here."
"He can't do that," Erkenbrand rumbled. Elfwine looked up at him in surprise. Erkenbrand shrugged his massive shoulders. "Just like I couldn't knock the disrespectful turd on his ass. This is something you have to deal with, Win."

"I don't know how," Elfwine sulked.

Erkenbrand's look was typically unsympathetic. "You cannot allow him to disrespect you. It is an insult not only to you, but to your father, to your forefathers...to the whole of the Mark."

Elfwine cringed. "What am I supposed to do? Challenge him to a duel?"

Erkenbrand's face split into a grin. "Well, that's what I would do, but your father would probably not approve. I can't tell you what to do, you have to find that for yourself. Your friends can be behind you, but this is something you alone must contend with. Soon."

Elfwine bowed his head. "Yes, sir."

"Good lad," he said, gripping the boy's shoulder. "Now, go off and amuse yourselves before I put a practice sword in your hand.

The boys smiled and made their way out of the yard.

"What are you going to do?" Elboron asked for what was probably the hundredth time.

The day had passed in idle play and dinner had been an unbearably formal affair. They'd been forced to endure an hour of minstrels before their parents had deigned to release them. With a trencher full of stolen sweets and free of their formal attire, the three flopped in their room.

"I told you, I don't know, dog-breath!" Elfwine curled his arms under himself and sulked.

Eldarion fidgeted with one of his braids. "I still say you should beat him. He deserves it."

Elfwine glowered at nothing. "I can't. It's not proper."

"Proper?" Elboron protested.

Elfwine rolled his eyes in that superior way of his. "A lord must never abuse the trust and faith of his men," he said, sounding like he was quoting something.

"Horse dung," Elboron retorted.

Eldarion nodded his agreement. "He's abusing your honor."

Elfwine struggled with it. "I know, but that's because he doesn't respect me. You don't get respect by beating on people. You just become a tyrant. And it wouldn't be fair, besides. He couldn't fight back. If he hit me even once, Aldurn would be honor bound to cut him down."

They stared at him. "It is high treason to raise your hand to a member of the Royal house."

Eldarion and Elboron exchanged looks. "I suppose no one's informed Erkenbrand," the Ithilien Prince said with a smirk.

"Well, like anyone would dare to swing a sword at that giant," Eldarion replied.

Grinning, they munched on bits of pastries. "So, what's the answer?" Elboron finally asked.
"I have to gain his respect."

"Oh, well, nice that you've got it all worked out then," Eldarion said with a smirk.

Elfwine gave him a sarcastic smile.

Eomer handed Elessar and Amrothos their drinks and then settled in his chair, looking amused. His fellow monarch took it with a grateful bow and then moved to his place at the Strategem table. Dressed now in less formal (and therefore more comfortable) clothing, the King of Gondor looked much more natural. The finery of court had never suited him, in Eomer's eye.

Amrothos had his customary confident smirk on his face as he faced off with Elessar. The youngest son of Imrahil had long ago moved past awe and towards friendship with Aragorn.

"Why do you do this to yourself, Aragorn?" Eomer asked.

Elessar smiled. "Incomparable stubbornness."

Amrothos arched his eyebrows at Eomer. "Just because you're afraid to face me anymore."

Eomer's responding look was direct. "Only because you refuse to play without wagering and I hate losing a bet."

"Even to me?" Amrothos asked innocently.

"Especially to you," Eomer retorted with a laugh.

Elessar grinned at the both of them and moved his first piece. "So, Eomer, has my son been behaving himself? Aside from that incident with the Dunlendings, of course."

Eomer rolled his eyes. "Amrothos and Erkenbrand have been keeping them too busy for mischief, thankfully."

Amrothos frowned a bit as he chose his move, but he said nothing.

Elessar caught that look and exchanged a concerned look with the Prince. "Mischief and boys are rather inseparable."

"As long as that mischief isn't about to wipe out the next generation of western leaders," Eomer argued.

Elessar countered Amrothos' play and took up his pipe. "It just occurs to me that if Boro and Win had been under such scrutiny a year ago, all three of us would not be here."

Amrothos nodded, sparing a glance at the agitated King of the Mark. "That is true."

The King glanced at the both of them, sensing a verbal flanking maneuver. "Why don't you just say what you want to say."

Amrothos smiled. "You're smothering them."

Elessar lit his pipe and took a few puffs. "You are, Eomer."
"And I suppose we're forgetting that they went all the way to Dol Amroth without telling anyone and only by sheer luck avoided death by Umbarian spears?"

"Not by luck, my friend," Elessar objected. "They showed resourcefulness, intelligence and courage. I'm not sure it's wise to discourage those qualities."

Eomer ran a hand through his hair. "You think I should encourage them to endanger themselves?"

Elessar grimaced and looked to Amrothos. The Prince positioned one of his Knights to take one of his opponent's pikemen. "I think you need to give them more trust," Amrothos murmured.

"They walked into a Dunlending village!" Eomer snapped.

"They had a friendship token," the Prince argued softly.

"And that is supposed to have meaning?"

"Friendship tokens are integral to their culture," Amrothos countered. "They were safe."

Eomer sighed wearily. Elessar gave him a supportive smile. "Win spent his time in the library before Boro arrived, so this is all new to you. I've been put through much worse by Dar. He doesn't exercise nearly the good judgment that Boro or Win do. I'm rather hoping that will somehow rub off on him."

"So, you think I should just let them run loose?"

"No, you've put a guard on them and I think that's wise," Elessar told him. "But Gandalf once told me that a life is a tapestry made up of the threads of choices. You can guide a person in the weaving, but ultimately, the pattern must be theirs to decide upon."

"I see. So...what do I do, then?"

"Teach them to take care of themselves—and each other," Amrothos put in.

Eomer looked dubious. "You really think that's wise, considering the strange events we've seen?"

"They have to make their own way, my friend," Elessar told him, smoking and focusing on the the board. "Otherwise, they won't be strong enough for the burdens of their heritage."

Defeated, Eomer nodded slowly. "Well, we'll give it a try then. But I do not think it wise." He smiled anew and took up his drink. "Now you'd better focus or Rotho will have you in two moves."

Elessar laughed and the tension left the room. Eomer watched, distracted by worries for his son. But some part of him knew his friends were right, as much as it would cause him headaches for years to come.

Hama was doubled over laughing. Elfwine, where he once would have been close to tears at his humiliation, picked himself off the ground and dusted himself off with a cool expression. His horse, Windfoot, was picking at a shrub and giving him apologetic glances. Elboron and Eldarion, having been told not to interfere, held back, looking furious.

"Maybe I should tie you to the saddle, Winer," Hama said, gasping.
Elfwine approached him, eyes hard. The stablemaster's son barely paid him any mind, still laughing uproariously.

The Prince shoved him over until he was flat on his back. Hama went from mirth to fury in seconds, rising to glower at Elfwine. "If you weren't the Prince..."

"But I am," Elfwine said coldly. "And it's time you were reminded of that."

"Hiding behind your father?" Hama sneered.

"If that's what you want to call it. I can't make you respect me, but I can make you obey me. You know this."

Hama bared his teeth contemptuously. "So, because you can't stay in your saddle, you blame me and send me off to the flogging post?"

Elfwine leaned in close. "That used to work, Hama, but you see, my cousin has shown me that the problem isn't me. It's you."

"And what does he know?"

"He is the son of my aunt, a shieldmaiden of Rohan. He knows quite a bit. Though not as much as you. I need you to teach me—and teach me right. No more games, no more trying to make me look like a fool."

"And if not?" Hama asked defiantly.

"Let me put it this way, if my father sees I am not improving, who do you think he will blame? The student or the teacher?"

Hama's eyes tracked over his, reflecting both anger and resentment...and a little bit of respect, as well. He snorted in derision and shrugged. "And when you keep failing? Is that going to be my fault?"

"I won't fail," Elfwine said with more conviction than he felt.

"Fine." He whistled for Windfoot. "But you're still not getting any special consideration."

Elfwine managed a smile. "I spend my mornings being knocked around the practice yard by Erkenbrand. I'm quite used to not being given special consideration."

Elessar and the royal party took their leave the next day. All of Edoras turned out to watch the procession, cheering and waving as the King of Gondor and his Lady depart. Eomer and Lothiriel rode with them, talking idly with their friends.

Life returned to normal.

Hama did indeed stop sabotaging their lessons, but the derision and abuse intensified. He gave them lessons that verged on the impossible, and excoriated them whenever they didn't do it exactly right. Having been cowed into cooperating, the stablemaster's son was looking to exact a heavy toll for it.

It wasn't pleasant, but they were learning.
Erkenbrand's teachings were having a dramatic effect on them. Their muscles were hardening, their grace was improving and their confidence was soaring. Sometimes Eomer would come and watch, and Elfwine knew he was pleased.

As spring reached its peak, Edoras was again invaded — this time by a phalanx of Amrothian Knights. They were commanded by Erchirion — Elphir had been convinced to stay behind. Alphros was with them, though, in his father's place.

Elfwine and Elboron greeted their older cousin warmly and introduced him to Eldarion. That evening, after dinner was finished, Alphros was prevailed upon to give them a story. With a somewhat bashful smile, Elphir's son took the stage — which was just the square between the three massive dining tables.

"Imrahil on the Seas," Alphros began.

Though famous, none of the boys had ever actually heard it before.

He paced the area before the royal table, a glint in his eyes and a cup in his hand. "It was the first year of a new age and peace was supposed to have been purchased with many lives of men. The Dark Lord had been cast down forever, the easterlings had been pushed back into the forgotten reaches of Mordor and King Elessar had restored the throne of Gondor.

"But peace had not come to the hearts of all men. Herusalin, dread King of Umbar, was filled with great rancor and much bitterness over his fortunes after the war. Much he had been promised by the Dark Lord, and much he had lost in the gamble. From the very day of defeat, he poured all his resources into one goal — crushing Dol Amroth and taking command of the western sea ports.

"It was a quiet moment at dusk, that day in Dol Amroth, when war came once again. White sails of friendly merchant ships on the horizons became the black sails of Umbar. The alarm went up, but not in time. Before ships could be organized into a blockade, the war galleons of Umbar made port in Dol Amroth.

"Prince Imrahil looked out from his palace and saw his city burning and his people dying. He summoned his knights to him, he ordered his the women and children of his house into the safety of the cellars and he took up his sword once again.

"Few knights came to his call. Most had fled in panic, young and inexperienced as they were. Only those left who had fought with their Prince at Pelinor and the Black Gate rallied to their lord. They, he and his sons marched into the burning city to meet the great host that had come to destroy them."

Alphros' eyes were afire with the imagery of it. "Impossibly outnumbered, Imrahil bravely did battle in the streets...even as all around them the people fled. Many noble men fell around him, each having won great glory for themselves.

"And then the miracle happened. The people who had fled in panic returned! Seeing their Prince covered in many wounds and struggling for his very life emboldened them. With sticks, with discarded spears, with rocks...anything they could get in their hands, the entire city turned on the invaders.

"The craven men of Umbar were thrown back in despair."

Amrothos smiled, winking at the boys who were wide-eyed in riveted attention.

"On the docks before his ships, Herusalin was met by Imrahil himself. The two bitter enemies
crashed against each other with such ferocity as has never been seen. Wounded and weary, Imrahil's strength was greatly diminished...but he did not falter.

"Herusalin managed, in the end, to get back to his ship. Barely half of the army he had bought against Dol Amroth made it out of the city that day.

"But Dol Amroth had suffered greatly as well. Imrahil blamed only himself, saying that his lack of vigilance had left his beloved city vulnerable. And on that day, he swore that his people would be safe from the depredations of Umbar ever more. He left the city to his eldest son and boarded his great ship of war and sailed off to the high seas.

"No one has seen him since, but rumors continue to be heard of a huge vessel seen on the horizon, and of pieces of Umbarian ships washing ashore. Dol Amroth sleeps peacefully, knowing Imrahil watches over her."

Alphros bowed and there was applause. As one, the boys were on their feet, clapping excitedly. The hall erupted then in loud conversation, warriors arguing the merits of the story or just trading boasts of their own. It was the brave talk of men about to ride off to war.

"I'll be gone at least through the summer," Eomer told his son.

Elfwine nodded, helping his father into his armor. "Yes, sir."

"You'll mind your mother?"

Elfwine sighed, working at a particularly difficult buckle at the side of the breastplate. "I promise." Eomer nodded slowly. "Good. And you'll not slack off at your lessons?"

"I promise," Elfwine said despondently.

"A little tighter, son. Armor isn't meant for comfort."

Elfwine tugged hard and buckled the strap. "I don't understand why you have to go," the boy said quietly.

"I'm the King, my place is with my men."

"But why go at all?"

"They hurt your uncle. They hurt Elboron as well. Our honor requires that we punish them."

Elfwine was quiet as he considered this. He strapped on his father's grieves and then went to get his sword. "Isn't there something in honor that says you should stay with your family?"

"Win...."

"Sorry sir, I know it's not my place, I—"

"Win."

The boy went quiet again, running his hand over the scabbard before picking it up. "It's not as heavy as I remember it."
Eomer cocked his head to one side. "You've gotten stronger. You're growing up."

Elfwine turned and walked slowly over to his father. "I suppose I am, sir."

Eomer gave him a compassionate look. "I know I'm not the best father one could hope for."

"Sir—"

"Ah, no, just listen. I know we've had a lot of trouble understanding each other...especially since you took up the habit of secretly visiting foreign peoples as it suited you. But I'm proud of you, son, and more than anything I want you to know that."

"You are?"

"By your surprise, I'm gauging I've done worse at this than I'd feared." Eomer gave him a paternal smile.

Elfwine looked down at his feet. "I just...with my books and...not riding and...I just thought...I'd disappointed you."

Eomer laid his hands on his son's shoulders. "Not even for a moment."

Elfwine looked up with a huge smile. "Thank you, sir."

Eomer smiled back. "And when I get back, you and I are going for a ride...and possibly fishing, if you're of a mind."

"And Boro and Dar? Can they come too?" Elfwine asked as he belted on his father's sword.

"Assuming your mother hasn't locked them in the dungeons at that point, certainly."

Elfwine laughed. "I'll try to keep them out of trouble."

"Don't try too hard."

"Sir?"

Eomer's expression turned serious. "Upon further consideration...and after more than a little prodding from Amro and Estel...I've decided that I should trust you more. Aside from the fact that you endangered yourself and your cousin, risked exposing yourselves to a plague and then later walked unguarded into a village of people who would have, by all accounts, enjoyed sending you home in pieces.... You've shown the sort of courage, intelligence and resourcefulness a Prince of the Mark is expected to have."

Elfwine felt like he might burst, either with joy or tears he had no idea. "Thank you, sir."

The King of the Mark nodded. "And I expect you to keep Aldurn nearby, to not stray too far without arms and to always leave word of where you're going. Fair?"

Elfwine gaped, nonplussed. "Yes, sir."

"Good." Eomer tested the fittings on his armor. "Well done," he complimented his son.

"Thank you, sir."

"I ought to be going, before the army rides off without me."
Elfwine nodded, still off-kilter. "Yes, sir." He bit his lower lip, fretting. Then he hugged his father, breathing in the familiar scents of oiled metal and leather and taking comfort in them. "Love you, father."

"I love you too, son," Eomer said with heavy emotion, holding his son tight.

Reluctantly, Elfwine released him. They walked together out of the keep and out to the stables. Hama stood close by the door, holding the reins to the King's horse. Elfwine stopped at the top step and watched his father from there.

Eomer paused and said something to Hama, who flinched and nodded, somewhat sulkily. At a swipe from the riding crop of his father, Haleth (who was sitting ahorse close beside), Hama knelt respectfully to the King and handed the reins over.

Lothiriel appeared from another door and glided elegantly over to her husband. "Next year, you stay home and I'll ride off to war, all right?"

Eomer and the men around him laughed. "My lady, if you were to do that, I would fear for any city in your path."

"You always know the right answer, my King," she said with a winsome smile. She kissed him sweetly and stepped back. "Don't take too much time in returning."

"Of course n—"

Just then, there was a flurry of motion as a small figure darted out of the keep and sprinted over to the King of the Mark.

"I'm going too!" Wynohael said, racing up to her father.

Lothiriel laughed and lifted the little girl up to her father's arms. Eomer settled her before him, grinning in amusement. "You are, are you?"

"Uh huh!" she chirped back at him.

"Do you have a helmet?" he asked.

"Uh uh."

"Then how will you keep that nose of yours from getting hurt?" he asked in wonder, grabbing it between two fingers and giving it a squeeze.

She giggled. "Da!"

"And what about armor? You have that, don't you?"

She shook her head, still giggling. "No!"

"Well, then how can you keep people from tickling you?" he asked, tickling her sides.

She shrieked. "Da!"

"Well, no one can go unless they have an armor and helmet, Wyny."

"But Da! I wants to go wif you!"

He hugged her and kissed her hair. "I wish you could, little hobbit. But your mother would miss
you awful. You don't want your mother to be sad, do you?"

"No..." she said sulkily. "But won't you be sad wifout me?"

"Of course, little hobbit. But I'll know I'll see you again soon, and I'll be able to think of you here with your mother and sisters and brother and that will make me smile. All right?"

"Ahright, Da." She turned and kissed him on the cheek.

Eomer lowered her into her mother's arms, and for a moment, something passed between husband and wife, something visible in their eyes. Then the Queen led their daughter out of the yard and the path of the horses. Eomer turned to his son and gave him a nod and a smile and then trotted his horse to the head of the column.

Elfwine ran to a high window to watch the army ride forth. The horse and swan banners were held high, whipping in the wind. He stayed there, watching, until only the dust from the departing column could be seen.

"So, where does that leave us?" Elboron asked, wrestling playfully with Fellfang.

"Without even the beginning of that scroll on the Battle of the Five Armies that Amrothos assigned to us," Elfwine mentioned cynically. He paced the length of their room, fretting anxiously.

"We have months and months to do that," Eldarion insisted.

"Yeah," Elboron agreed.

Elfwine gave them an expressive frown. It confounded him that he was the youngest and yet he was also the only one with a sense of responsibility. "Uthumar had two sons, one became a farmer and the other died in the raid of 2604."

Eldarion groaned in unbearable boredom. "Yes, yes, we know! Uthamar, son of Ethamar, son of Halanor, son of Banna, favored bard of King Frealaf. But where does the trail go from there?"

"To a daughter, maybe?" Elboron asked.

Elfwine picked up an old scroll and read over it. "It says he had a daughter, but it doesn't give her name."

"That's rutting useless," Elboron complained. "What's the point of writing down historical figures without giving the names that go with them?"

"Don't ask me," the Prince of the Mark shot back.

"How common are woman minstrels in your country?" Eldarion drawled.

"Well...I've never heard of one, personally," Elfwine replied.

"So...the chances he passed the story on to his daughter are...?" Gondor's prince pursued.

"Next to zero," the Prince of the Mark conceded.

"So where does that leave us?" Elboron asked, bringing them full circle
Elfwine let out a disgusted snort and flopped on the bed. "Face it, we'll never figure this out. It's hopeless."

"Now, hold on. We're smart enough to work through this," Eldarion pressed.

"Dar, we're guessing Banna had the true tale of Helm, we're assuming he passed that story to his son and so on down to this Uthamar person," Elboron complained. "At any point, that story could have been passed to someone else. Or even been forgotten all together."

"No," Elfwine muttered. He glanced at his cousin with a tired expression. "A story like that would be a priceless family heirloom. There is no chance it would be forgotten or given away."

Elboron let out an exasperated sigh. "This is the worst guessing game ever invented."

"What if the daughter married and had a son? I bet Uthamar would have made him his apprentice," Eldarion mused.

Elboron groaned even louder.

"That's a good idea," Elfwine agreed. "But we have no idea who the daughter was, who she married or who her children were."

"But other than that..."

Elfwine smirked at Gondor's Heir. "Tomorrow I'll see what records we have of that time period in Uthamar's home village."

"Are we finally done for the night then?" Elboron asked hopefully.

"Unless you want to start on that Battle of Three Crowns scroll..."

"No," Elboron and Eldarion said as one.

It was the late watches of the night, and it was excruciatingly hot. Elboron sat up and wiped sweat from his brow. On one side, Eldarion was hanging half out of bed. On the other, Elfwine had wriggled out of the blankets and was snoring blissfully. Fellfang was soundly asleep at the foot of the bed, his head pillowed on Elfwine's ankles.

Elboron wriggled out of the pile with some difficulty. He made his way over to the window and opened the shutters. Cool spring air washed over him, and he breathed a sigh of relief. The stars were shining brightly, and he watched them for a moment, remembering nights when he had sat and listened to his father tell him the stories of the stars. With a pang of homesickness, he walked away from the window.

He was thirsty and not ready to return to sleep. Thinking of cider that awaited in barrels in the kitchen, he threw on a tunic and padded out into the dark corridors. Stretching, he let his feet guide him through the now-familiar passages of Meduseld.

As he approached the stairs, he heard the heavy footfalls nearby. To his knowledge, there weren't any guards patrolling the halls, so he curiously walked in the direction of the sound. He realized he was in the same place the muddy boot prints had been — the ones Elfwine still refused to accept had ever existed.
Intensely intrigued, he hurried along and saw something he had to take a moment to reconcile. There was a hole in a wall that had not been there before. A grinding noise precipitated stones moving back into place. Seeing this, Elboron acted purely on instinct. He darted forward and barely made it through before it closed off.

Beyond was a low, cramped space. He crouched and listened carefully, since whoever had opened the secret door had to be close by. Long seconds slid by, but he heard nothing and so he crept forward.

It was not so much a passage as it was a gap between walls and rooms. He had to wriggle around support beams and climb down rickety ladder-rungs to make his way through. Tense moments passed as he navigated the tight and dusty spaces, worried who it was that knew of this secret crawlspace that even Elfwine was unaware of.

He dropped into a tunnel carved from stone and realized he had made it below the keep. It was utterly consumed in darkness, so he had to feel his way along the walls. It began to dawn on him that he might not know how to get back...but he pressed on anyway. This was vital to the security of the Mark, and more importantly, it was a chance to prove his cousin wrong.

He heard voices ahead of him and eased forward to make out the words.

"...grows weary of waiting."

"My heart grieves. What would he have me do? Ask the King over a mug of ale?"

The voices were not familiar to Elboron. One sounded deeper and, if he had to guess, orcish.

"What you do is your choice. But your usefulness is being questioned. If..."

"If what?"

"Hold, I smell something..."

Elboron wasn't sure what the speaker was referring to, but it gave him an uneasy feeling. He edged away, trying to be as quiet as possible. He had to get to Elfwine and Eldarion and tell them that he had been right all along. Elfwine would have to believe him now.

He heard the crunch of footsteps approach. Before he could move, something cold and sharp touched his throat. Elboron froze, smelling something foul in the darkness near him.

Harsh words he did not understand were spat in his face. Similar sounds replied from where he had heard the voices before. The sword was moved to his chest and, to his horror, he felt the steel pushing forward.

"Help!" he cried, even though he knew he was all alone.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Faramir is brought low by his injuries, while being plagued of visions of his son in mortal peril.

15, 4A

Eldarion woke when an ill-judged shift caused him to fall out of bed.

The Heir of Gondor groaned and shook off the last vestiges of sleep. Looking around, he judged it was not yet dawn, but close. He stood and stretched. Elfwine was still snoring peacefully. But Elboron was not to be found.

He yawned and stood up. It was not uncommon for the Ithilien Prince to wander at night, but usually Eldarion heard him leave. He frowned slightly, not sure if he should be concerned or not. He was, actually, hungry. The kitchens were awake, he was sure, and there could be eggs and porridge for a needy Prince.

He found a tunic that seemed clean (and possibly small enough to fit him without seeming like he was wearing a sheet) and pulled it on. He cinched it with a belt and decided that was enough for this hour. His gaze shifted to Elfwine, but he decided there was no need to wake his friend.

The keep was just beginning to stir when he stepped into the corridor. Meduseld was different in every way from the palace back in Minas Tirith. The home of Gondor's King never slept. Guards patrolled at all times, lanterns remained lit and servants waited and servants were ever ready to see to the Heir's needs.

Eldarion much preferred it here, he decided.

He did miss his parents—sometimes awfully. As much as he and his father fought, there was no one Eldarion loved or respected more. The times they'd spent tramping through the wilds around Minas Tirith, hunting and tracking, had been the best of his life.

But the trappings of royalty, the knowledge that he was always being judged for how good a King he would one day be, it made being home not so pleasant.

Here, he was just a boy—an important boy constantly under the watch of Queen Lothiriel, true. But he had the sort of freedom that he longed for, and good friends to share it with. Somehow, his life had skittered past a dark place and wound up more or less how he wanted it.

The smell of cooking ham wafted up the stairs, causing his stomach to rumble. He eagerly began to make his way down the steps.

Aldurn was making his way up the steps. It took a moment for Eldarion to realize their guard was carrying something. Another moment passed before he saw that it was the limp form of Elboron...and that his friend's body was covered in blood.
"My lord, urgent news!"

Kaeliz looked up from the documents he was studying. It was a particularly sweltering morning and he was already in a foul mood. According to all the reports he had before him, troop musters were not nearly where he needed them to be. Eomer would hit them soon and hit them hard, and he was not ready.

The messenger looked near to dropping dead from exhaustion. He glowered at the ragged young man, as if blaming him for this whole situation. "What is it?"

The messenger bowed deeply. "My lord, word from Master Orthael. He bids you well in your upcoming battle and regretfully informs you he cannot send aid."

Kaeliz felt the cold hand of terror on him. "He will not aid me? This is his fault!"

The messenger cringed, fearing the Warlord’s wrath.

"This is his punishment for our failure in Dol Amroth," Kaeliz muttered, shaking his head in fury. He swept the documents from the table and cursed loudly. Orthael.... He with his grand schemes and arrogant presumptions.... He had brought this ruin down on Kaeliz—or so the Warlord believed.

Well, he was not without his own plans. He could not keep Eomer from besieging his city, and very possibly conquering it. But already he was positioning an agent to see to it that the sons of the leaders of the west were dead before the end of summer.

He just needed to be sure he was alive to take advantage of the ensuing confusion.

Kaeliz saw the messenger still trembling, unable to leave until dismissed. "Go, take your rest," he told him.

Orthael...he would pay for this. He would be made to see that Kaeliz was not some lackey to be used and disposed of at will. And the lesson would be bloody.

Faramir of Ithilien was a descendent of Numenor; son of Denethor, who had been vigorous in his eighties all the way to his demise. Eowyn knew this and had thus expected age to come slow to her husband while she herself faded year by year.

But the wound that had brought him down at the Battle for the Bridge at Osgiliath was yet draining his life from him. His pallor was ghostly and gray was appearing in his fair hair. He could not ride for more than a few minutes without succumbing to pain. He could not even walk around his city without becoming exhausted.

Eowyn had consulted with her fellow matriarchs, Arwen and Lothiriel — for they were both wise in healing lore — and with their consultation she was fighting to heal her husband.

What made it worse, though, was knowing that for all the suffering he revealed there was inevitably ten times again more that he concealed. It was a trait inherent to nobility and one that had vexed her all of her life.

Today things were much worse.
Faramir's prophetic dreams had been rare and vague since the war. The last thing he had clearly foreseen was the birth of Elboron. Last night had been different. Disjointed as it was, the dream that had come to haunt her husband had been of their son: covered in blood and fighting, alone, for his life.

Faramir had been barely able to describe it fully, but what little he did say had made her blood run cold in her veins. Elboron was drawn to trouble, it seemed, and she could only imagine what terrible things he and the other heirs had gotten into.

Against all reason and sense, Faramir had tried to set out for the Mark that very morning. No subtle pleas or rational arguments citing his health had quieted him. In the end, the only thing that swayed him was her pointing out that he was not sure how imminent the danger was. Instead, Bergil, son of Beregond, had been dispatched with fast horses to check on the heir.

Having to send someone on this important mission had forced Faramir to confront how weak he had become, and that was a crushing blow. She knew, because she knew him so well, that succumbing to his frailty brought back to life the denigrating voice of his father and the self-doubt that had dogged him his whole life.

And every time she realized that the specter of Denethor was haunting and belittling her husband, she found the time to hate the old man a little more.

Fortunately, there was more for Faramir to do than sit and brood. Though the repairs to Minas Ithil were long since completed, he had a grander scheme in mind that occupied most of his waking hours; a lifelong dream that he could now bring to fruition.

Faramir had set about building a vast library; the goal being to make Minas Ithil the center of learning for the whole of the west. A daunting ambition, for certain, but one he had dug into with the same pragmatism and determination with which he planned battles.

She was not sure why it was so important to him, only that it had something to do with his brother. It was too private to speak more of it, even to her.

The grand library was only half-complete, but he had scholars and scribes hard at work filling it. Scrolls and tomes from all over Gondor arrived every day, ready to be meticulously copied and then returned to their proper owners. Others, too, were happy to contribute. At the behest of Arwen, Elladan had brought the writings of Elrond from far-off Imladris. Eomer had sent some of his Uncle's most treasured books with the promise of more later. And, much to her husband's glee, they were expecting Merry and Pippin to arrive with a few select works from the Shire — including the complete written works of Bilbo and Frodo Baggins.

Never a scholar herself, Eowyn was nonetheless in awe of the wheels her husband had set into motion. It would be a legacy he could proudly pass on to Elboron and generations beyond; a rich tradition of wisdom rather than the blood and death that had marked Faramir's life.

It was also poetic, in her mind, that was had once been Minas Morgul — the launching point for the Dark Lord's assault on Gondor — would be known henceforth as a place of learning.

"Your ladyship?"

Eowyn turned from the window at which she had been lingering and the thoughts which had been distracting her. One look at the page who stood breathless and pale before her sent a ripple of panic through her.

"What has happened?" she demanded.
"Lord Faramir has collapsed."

And without pause or consideration for what would be considered lady-like, she hitched up her skirts and ran. Fear blossomed in her heart as the worst possible occurrences ran through her mind.

"What happened?" Lothiriel demanded.

Aldurn flinched at the tone, gripping the mug in his hand even tighter. It was an unbelievably awful position he found himself in — lying was a skill he was still mastering and putting on a performance for the Queen so he could keep his head was making him break out in a sweat.

"I had gone forth for a brief morning walk — to get the blood going before my duty shift. I noticed what I thought to be a dead animal. I went closer and, well, it was Elboron."

"And you have no idea how he came to be there? You saw no one?"

Feeling himself sinking deeper into the mire, he shook his head. "There was no one about."

Lothiriel touched her fingers to her brow and sighed in frustration. "Well, I thank you for bringing him to us. We'll have to wait until he wakes to hear the tale from him."

Aldurn nodded, trying to disguise how that notion worried him. It had been very dark in the underground cavern, and Elboron had been knocked unconscious almost as soon as the battle had begun, but there was still the chance that when he woke, he would reveal Aldurn as a spy.

He should have killed the boy and brought the bodies of the orcs back with the story that he had come too late to save the Prince and that his killers were dead. But Aldurn was not yet ready to stain his honor so badly — a traitor he was, but no child-killer.

He doubted the King would care for the distinction.

"With your permission, I'll return to my duty, then," he told her.

She nodded gracefully. "Thank you, Aldurn."

He bowed slightly and headed off to the boys' room, where he took up his post outside their door. For now, there was nothing to do but wait and hope. Even if Elboron remembered nothing, though, there was still Orthael to worry about. No doubt, he would not be pleased to have two of his orc servants slain, and Aldurn would have to explain that. In his own mind, it was fairly clear he had done the right thing, but the keeper of his fate was not always reasonable.

Elfwine and Eldarion sat on the bed, watching Elboron anxiously. The blood had, in fact, not belonged to the Ithilien Prince. His only injuries were a large lump on the back of his head and a split lip — much to everyone's relief.

When the boy finally began to stir, both of his friends leaned forward anxiously. "Boro?" Elfwine asked in a hushed voice.

"Wha...? I.... Oh, my head..."
Elfwine exchanged a relieved look with Eldarion. "How are you feeling? Mother asked me to see if you were sick in your stomach."

"Head hurts too much to feel anything else, really." He squinted his eyes shut against the rays of sunlight that were searing his skull. "What happened...?"

"We were sort of hoping you'd know," Eldarion said seriously. "Since you were, you know, there and everything. Aldurn wouldn't say much."

Elboron struggled to pull his memories together. "It's such a blur. I was in a hallway.... No! A tunnel. The secret passage!" His eyes lit up. "I found it, Win. It does exist!"

Elfwine gaped at him. "Boro, you got a nasty bump on the head, how can you be sure...?"

"Because I am," Elboron said seriously. "I was in it. And there were foul folk there. And, then some sort of fight and ... I hit my head. But it's there, I swear it."

"Don't agitate, Boro," Eldarion told him worriedly. "You'll make yourself sick. If it's there, it will be found."

Elfwine was looking incredulous, but he nodded. "Just rest. My mother will be by to see you soon."

Elboron sank back to the pillows, yielding to the pain in his head. Elfwine patted his shoulder and Eldarion took his hand. The worst of their fears had been alleviated, but their friend's news brought with it a host of new worries.

Elfwine resolved to speak to his mother about it. This was something they could not keep as a secret.

A thorough search of the keep had revealed no sign of secret doors or hidden passages, much to Elboron's frustration. Days slid by and the Ithilien Prince mended. So much so that he was very quickly fussing about being made to stay in bed.

Four days later, he had had enough. It was a gorgeous spring day out, far too much so for three energetic youths to spend indoors. Lothirel was reluctant to let them go out so soon after the attack on Elboron. An endless barrage of wheedling did eventually wear the harried Queen down.

And so Aldurn led his charges to a nearby pond for an idle day of fishing. He experienced more than a little relief himself at the restful day. The anxiety that had grated on him of late had left him feeling bruised.

"You want to dig further from the water," Elfwine explained to Eldarion sagely. To their surprise, their worldly friend had never been fishing before and therefore knew nothing of the intricate art of obtaining bait. "Better worms."

"No way," Elboron argued. "My father and I have been fishing forever and he always digs close to the water."

"Do you think it matters to the fish?" Eldarion asked, bemused.

"Well, of course it matters," Elboron explained in exasperation. "You want nice fat worms to attract the fish."
Eldarion snickered. "Maybe we should dangle you in the water, then, Win."

Elboron laughed and Elfwine glowered. "At least I know where to dig for worms, dung-breath."

"Wart-face," Eldarion shot back.

"Goat turd!" Elfwine returned and pounced, wrestling with Gondor's heir.

Listening to the boys laugh and play, Aldurn could not help but smile. The resilience of children, their indomitable spirits, were a source of wonder for him. He was a man weighed down by countless flaws and mistakes, poor decisions and poorer facilities to cope with consequences. No matter how he tried, he could not recall a time when he was so carefree.

"Worms?"

Aldurn blinked and looked up. Elboron was smiling and offering a small clay bowl full of squirming bait.

"What...?"

"Are you fishing or are intending to lay about like a wastrel?"

Aldurn relaxed under that bright and friendly grin. "A bit of both, really. Thank you." He took the offered worms.

"Welcome." Elboron looked back at his friends, who were putting their lines in the water, and then back at him. Bonelessly, the youth plopped down beside him. "So, where do you dig for worms?"

Aldurn scratched his stubbled jaw. "Under a big tree, to be honest."

"Really? Well, that makes a certain amount of sense, I suppose. I still say by the water is better." He fretted for a moment, searching for words. "I owe you my life."

Aldurn quickly shook his head. "It was just lucky I found you."

Elboron did not agree or contest that, simply considering it for a moment. "I bet you wish you were off with your King, instead of playing nursemaid to a bunch of children."

"Protecting you three is more of an adventure than any war campaign," Aldurn told him with a wry smile.

Elboron's expression was rueful. "I suppose so. But, still…. I wish sometimes I were riding off to war. So, I'd guess you do too. Right?"

"Perhaps sometimes. But we all have choices we make and must live with."

"You sound like my father. He's always talking about choices and the paths we choose and other such things."

"Your father is known for his wisdom," Aldurn conceded, confused. Elboron was not usually this solemn.

Elboron beamed proudly at the compliment of his father. Then he grew serious again. "I miss him."
Aldurn was not sure how to respond to that. He could not even remember his father.

"You didn't find me outside Edoras."

Those six words hit him like a splash of icy rain. "Excuse me?"

Elboron’s gaze on him was direct and uncompromising, a hint of what he would be in years to come. "At first I didn't recognize your voice, but I've had time to think. I won't ask what you and the orc were discussing in the secret passage, but I know it was you. You saved me from him, which is why I keep this secret — even from Win and Dar."

Aldurn knew the color had drained from his face. "What ... do you mean to do?" This boy held his life in his hands and his helplessness was maddening.

The preternaturally mature gaze did not falter. "It is up to you, now. I know you're a good man at heart — otherwise you'd have let that orc kill me to save yourself. I think you've just gotten a little lost. It happens, or so my father tells me. He says that a man can find his way back if he wants to — he just needs to be given the chance. So, that's what you have to decide. If you want to be on our side, I'll never speak of this to anyone. But if you can't make that choice, then...."

Aldurn gaped at him. "Your highness, you're too gracious...."

"Really?" Elboron was pleased by this. "My father says it's foolish to flog a man who is lost. Save the whip for the ones who led the man astray, or something."

"Your father is a man of ... amazing forgiveness." Aldurn looked away. "I may be too far off the path."

"I hope not. I kind of like you. And you did save my life and everything. But, like I said, you have to choose."

And with that, the boy got up and returned to his friends, leaving Aldurn to sit and ponder and be amazed at the mercy and wisdom of Faramir's son.

The world was burning.

Around him all was shadow and haze. His arms and legs were like lead, too heavy to move. He took in air with difficulty.

The world was burning.

The nightmare image of his son, scored with wounds and surrounded by fell enemies would not leave him be. To see and be powerless to intervene was a brutal torture.

The world was burning, and from out of the shadows and flame stepped a familiar figure.

Faramir had longed to look on his brother's face for many years. Capricious as his dreams and visions were, though, he was never granted that simple mercy. He had only fading memories to hold on to.

And this was yet another trick of light. It was not his beloved brother who came to his bedside. Shadows yielded the details of his visitor's face, and though the man bore a strong resemblance to Boromir, it was in fact, Denethor.
Faramir hissed in panic. "Has death sent you here as my guide into the long sleep, father?"

"Nothing quite so dramatic."

"Are you then merely the product of my fevered mind?"

"More than that, I should say. And yet less than the ghoul you seem to fear. Just a weary ghost."

"What purpose then drives you from your rest?" A thousand ancient feelings of anxiety and inadequateness were churning his insides.

"Purpose?" He was clearly condescending. "Your assumption requires that I was at rest to begin with."

Faramir fought back a surge of sympathy. Why should he care if his father's ghost lingered, unable to find peace? But to refuse sympathy was to be other than he was. Moreover, it was to become the cold, ruthless person his father had always sought to make him into. This battle of purpose, this pitting himself against himself was the legacy his father had given to him.

"Why, then, do you come here? To mock me in my weakness?"

Denethor's expression took on a familiar edge. "Why should I trouble myself to do so?"

Faramir held his throbbing skull. "You never neglected an opportunity in life..."

"And should I be moved by your self-pity? You have risen much higher in life than I had ever hoped for you, won much honor for yourself, made yourself friend to the ... King." He said the last word with distaste. "Do not reduce yourself now to a simpering child."

Such as it was, it was high praise from his father. "Apologies, father."

Denethor nodded graciously. "Tell me of your dream."

Faramir shuddered at his father's choice of words. He had grown up being used as some sort of medium, one of many tools his father utilized to try and pierce the veil of the future. It had started after his tenth birthday, after a terrible incident one chilly winter's night...

"Why does he hate me, Mama?"

"He doesn't hate you, my galad. He just doesn't know how to show his love for you."

Faramir shook his head to banish the memory. Mama's dead, stupid. And she was wrong, He does hate me. And I hate him.

Even in his sulking temper, Faramir knew he was lying to himself about his feelings. He worshipped his father and felt certain that if he could become half as wise and strong, he would be counted among the great of Gondor. But it was beyond him. Boromir was the strong one. Boromir was the fast one. Boromir was the one the people loved.... The one their father loved...

Faramir wiped angrily at the tears welling in his eyes as he stomped up a flight of stairs. His father would thrash him good if he caught him crying. And Boro would be furious with father for it, and there would be a fight and it would be his stupid fault in the first place for crying. It would be awful.
All he wanted to do was sneak into his mother's room — which had remained untouched by all but him since her passing — and curl up in her blue cloak and try to forget about the latest catastrophe.

"Pick up the sword."

"It's too heavy!"

"Pick it up!"

"I can't!"

But he had tried. He'd tried... tried so hard to bring the huge weapon into a ready position that he had sprained both his wrists.

Why, he wondered, could he never pass any challenge his father put before him?

Faramir slowly came to realize that his misery had distracted him to the point that he had no idea where he actually was. He knew the palace fairly well by now, enough so that he had selected a circumspect route that would take him around the servants and guards who might inform the Steward they had seen the younger son crying in the hallways. The trouble was, though, that the corridors had not taken him to where he had expected and now...he had no idea where he was.

The palace was vast and there were entire sections that no one ever went into. He could be lost for some time. Panic threatened to consume him, but he stifled the cry for help that began to form in his throat. Sulkily, he resolved to die of starvation before he so much as asked for directions.

Bringing his sole asset to bear — his uncanny mind — he started choosing turns more carefully. There were no windows to help him get his bearings, so he had to rely solely on his instincts.

His hesitant steps led him to a tower, one which he had never been in before. But a tower meant windows and windows meant a chance to figure out where he was. He ascended the stairs to the highest level and passed through a heavy wooden door.

Inside, the room was impossibly dark. Only by feeling along the wall did he find a window, and then he discovered it was cloaked in a heavy drape and the shutter was nailed closed.

"Someone didn't want sunlight in here," he muttered and considered his options. More wandering was not something he was really eager for. So, he was left with finding some way to pry open the shutters.

There was a soft pulse of light behind him. Faramir turned, but the light was gone. He frowned worriedly, wondering what sort of room he had stepped into. The palace was very old and there was no telling what ancient secrets he might have stumbled into.

The pulse of light came again, but this time it sustained itself for a bit. He could make out a swirl of purple energy beneath a heavy gauze. Curious, the boy moved closer. Perhaps this was some great treasure, and his discovery of it would please his father.

He licked his lips and paused at a raised step in the floor. His small hands reached out and touched the dark cloth covering...whatever treasure he had found. The veil fell away and he stared fully into a dazzling array of colors and light. It caught him, mesmerized him and drew him in.

His fingers came to rest on the polished orb, and for a minute space of time all he knew was the pleasant sensation of the cool, smooth surface. Then, suddenly, something within the orb seized him, reaching into his mind, down into his very soul. It tore away all the layers of his being, left
him naked and vulnerable to the awful presence lurking within the orb.

Faramir screamed shrilly as the Dark Lord took hold of him, finding there was no escape and no shelter from the terrible and awesome power of the Deceiver...

Faramir snapped back to the present, wiping sweat from his forehead. His father's shade sat, looking at him with something that might be called sympathy. Faramir sank back down to his pillows.

"What do you care of my dreams now, father? They are of no further use to you."

"No further use to me, no. But I was always a bit better at gleaning the message in your dreams than you. My question was, actually, an offer of help."

Faramir was clearly dubious, but he could not deny his father's wisdom in these matters. He muttered out a description of the dream, his eyes going glassy as he described the image of his son, blood-spattered and surrounded by enemies.

"How old did he look in the dream?" Denethor seemed, in his ghostly way, truly concerned.

"Older than when I last left him, but not yet bearded," was all that Faramir could reply.

"So, it was not a portent of immediacy, but a hint of the near future." Denethor considered this for a moment. "And there is nothing unusual in that. Your son will go to war, that much is inevitable." He did appear regretful of that. "So, what was the purpose of this dream? What were you supposed to learn?"

Faramir tried to find the answer, but his head was throbbing and the fever was cooking him alive. "I don't know."

"Think. Look at the dream. Examine every detail. The answer is there, my son. It is always there, if you look."

Faramir squeezed his eyes shut, almost whimpering from the pain. He took a moment to regain his composure. "Do you know something of this?" He frowned when no answer came. "Father?"

But when Faramir opened his eyes, his father was gone and instead his beloved wife, Eowyn sat beside. Her bearing was strong and confident, but her eyes glistened with the tears she held back.

"You mutter much in your restless sleep, my lord," she told him softly.

He took her hand and brought it to his lips. His wan smile brought a loving one from her in response. Then he slipped back into the darkness of his fevered sleep.

Elfwine approached his mother, flanked by his friends and consumed by trepidation. The setting could not be less threatening; this was his mother's sitting room. The wolf-skin rug beside her had often been his place as a small child — laying there reading quietly while his mother embroidered. The hearth was the same where he had scorched his socks trying to warm his toes on a chilly winter night.
And this was his mother, who had never paralyzed him with awe as his father's mere presence ever seemed to do to him. Up until his excursion to Dol Amroth, she had never so much as raised her voice to him.

But today he had something to request that might well move her to ire.

She looked up from her needlework and graced him with a loving smile. "Good morning."

"Good morning," the three chorused.

"And what adventure have you come to ask permission for today?" Her look was direct, but the smile on her face did not lose any of its warmth.

Elfwine went crimson and looked down at his feet. His mother knew him entirely too well. "Mother... We want to visit our Dunlending friends."

She gave him a shocked look and then touched her fingers to her brow in a ladylike gesture of boundless exasperation. "Win, are you actively trying to give your father apoplexy?"

Elfwine shook his head, thoroughly uncomfortable with the idea of displeasing his parents. "Mother, they're our friends. Isn't it better to make friends than enemies?"

"It's not that simple, Win, and you know it." She considered it for a moment as they watched, anxiously. "Here are my terms, then. If Chief Educh comes here to give you an escort and his oath on your safety—and insofar as Aldurn accompanies you—you may go. Though how I will explain this to your father, I can't imagine."

The boys let out an excited holler, eyes bright. "Thank you," they each said in turn.

"Now, to your lessons. Rotho will be checking to see if you've kept up with your studies and if he is not satisfied, I shall not hear the end of it."

They looked longingly out at the window and the shining sun, their expressions pitiful.

"But..." Elboron protested.

"We can do them later!" Eldarion reasoned.

"Mother..."

She laughed and shook her head. "Spoiled, the lot of you. Spend an hour at your books and then you may go outside. Now, I suggest you get going before I come to my senses."

The three scampered out, grinning and flush with victory. Tomorrow would be a fine day indeed.

Educh arrived at dawn with a small honor guard, evincing surprise at the polite (if abrupt) invitation to Meduseld. He breakfasted with the Queen in private, and by the end of it she had made it so clear what would happen if harm befell the three princes that even the powerful chief was shaken to his core.

None of this concerned the three heirs. In the saddle, with the new morning sun shining Merrily down upon them, they felt only contentment. Aldurn was clearly less at ease; being their sole bodyguard left him no choice but to accompany them. Riding willingly into a Dunlending village,
however, was not a source of joy for him.

It took less time, with their escort, to arrive at the Elk village. Magda was waiting for them, and the excitement they felt was mirrored in her eyes.

"Umtu, Magda," Elfwine greeted her with a huge smile.

"Umtu," she replied with an equally bright smile. "You have been practicing."

He blushed at the compliment. "And you have with your Westron."

She nodded, holding his gaze for a moment before turning to the other two princes. "Umtu Eldarion, Elboron."

"Er..." Elboron was not even going to attempt Dunlending.

"Hello," Eldarion murmured.

"You will stay until tomorrow?" she asked hopefully.

They all grinned and nodded to her. Their other Dunlending friends came out to join them, then, more bashful and uncertain.

Her eyes drifted to their swords, which hung on their saddles. Seeing her frown in concern, Elfwine reassured her with a smile. "There are many dangers in the Mark. My father insists we be armed when we leave Edoras."

She still seemed a little unnerved, but she did not press it.

"Kaparo?" Elboron asked, eyes lit anxiously.

The children grinned with equal enthusiasm and nodded. Very soon, the small gang of youths were out in the field running, chasing and laughing together and whatever differences they had from birth were forgotten.

After a simple dinner, the Bahna and challenged Elboron to a wrestling match, which everyone thought of as great sport. Kala loudly proclaimed she would challenge the winner, looking eager for the prospect.

Elfwine grinned but did not volunteer. He had spent the whole day shoring up his courage and, finally, pushed himself to lean in close to Magda and whisper, "Can I walk with you?"

She ducked her head, smiling and blushing all at once. With the others paying rapt attention to Elboron and Bahna squaring off, the two were able to sneak off without being noticed.

Elfwine had to take a moment to untangle his tongue, which was painfully awkward. But Magda seemed equally uncertain what to say, so he did not feel like a complete fool.

"I like, um, well... I like your ... village," Elfwine hedged. He cringed at his utter lack of courage.

"Thank you," she said sincerely, glancing furtively at him.

"And I ... like coming here ... to see you." It was a small improvement, at least.

She blushed prettily again. "I like seeing you too."

"More than Dar and Boro?"
She laughed, which startled him so badly he almost bolted like a buck who'd scented a predator in the grasses. "Yes. More than Dar and Boro."

And he was flying, soaring above the mountains and the clouds and reaching for the sun. He wanted to laugh in pure, unfettered joy. "That makes me happy. I want to come and see you as often as I may."

"Does it not make your father temper?"

He frowned. "Temper? Do you mean angry?" He made an exaggeratedly angry face and she giggled. It was like the sound of a dozen little bells.

"Yes, angry. Sorry."

"No, it's fine. We both have a lot to learn." He smiled. "He does not understand your people as I do. He thinks ... bad things of you."

"For some of my people, he has the correct feeling." She seemed sad for a moment. "But my father perc...percify? Pac... Er, is hopeful that we can have friendship."

"I hope for that too." They walked along slowly as the sun began to set. "Will you teach me some more of your words?" he asked.

She ducked her head again, pleased by the gesture of respect. They sat under a heavily bowed tree and spoke softly for a long time, bridging the gap between them by slowly learning each other's language.

Late that night, as he stood on the precipice of sleep with no hope of going over, Elboron nudged him, his teeth flashing in the darkness. "Win? I know you're awake," he whispered. "You were with her, weren't you?"

Elfwine felt himself blush and for the first time since meeting his cousin he did not feel like sharing something. "We talked," he said neutrally.

"You were gone for hours."

"So?"

Elboron giggled hard enough to rouse Eldarion. "Wha...?"

"Win has a doe."

"I do not!" Elfwine hissed.

Eldarion flopped back down. "Good f'him." His subsequent snoring demonstrated his utter lack of interest.

"Go to sleep, Boro."

"Did you kiss her?"

"Boro, I'm going to hit you."

"I'm just asking..." Boro teased.

Elfwine nudged him hard in the ribs. "If I answer, will you leave me alone?"
"My oath on it."

Annoyed, Elfwine glowered at him for a moment first. "No, all right? Now go to sleep."

Elfwine stared up into the darkness, glad he had his cousin checked for the moment. He really did not want to answer questions on this right now. And he really didn't want to admit to Elboron that while he had not kissed Magda ... he had wanted to.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Faramir's illness worsens, forcing Elboron to return home. Lothiriel goes with him to lend her healer's aid, leaving Elfwine in charge of the Mark.

15, 4A

The three heirs arrived back home at noon the following day, feeling more than a little relief that they weren't having to sneak in like thieves. They were, of course, starved — not having eaten since that morning. Though it risked the Queen's wrath, they skipped the required wash and went straight for the kitchens.

They did not make it to their goal, though. Halfway across the great Hall, they were intercepted by Elfwine's eldest sister, Hanild.

"Mother needs to talk to you," she said she said with a haughty air that told them plainly she knew something they did not.

"Why? We aren't in trouble," Elfwine retorted.

"Are we?" Elboron asked, worried. He had been in trouble from birth, so he did not need to know what he had done wrong to believe he was in for a scolding.

"Have to find out, don't you?" she mocked and flounced out with a dramatic twirl of skirts and braids.

The boys exchanged rueful glances. "What could it possibly be?"

"Can't be about our lessons.... Can it?" Elboron looked mournful at the idea of being locked up with books and scrolls.

"I don't know," Elfwine responded.

"No help for it," said Eldarion. "Just have to go get it over with."

They headed to the Queen's sitting room like men heading to the gallows; stopping nonetheless in the kitchens for some bread and bacon, which they combined into greasy sandwiches. Mouths full and spirits low, the three walked together to face their fate.

"Mother?"

All three boys froze in the doorway of the sitting room, staring agape at the Lady of the Mark. Her customary courtly gowns had been replaced by a practical tunic and breeches, She was pacing and conversing with the other occupant of the room.

"Bergil?" Elboron asked in shock.

They turned to face the boys, neither looking happy. Bergil, in fact, looked exhausted and pensive. Before any of the boys could frame a question, Lothiriel broke into their confusion.
"Elboron, your father is very ill. I must go to him and see if I can help. You are to come with me."

Ithilien's heir paled, a host of sickening worries striking him dumb.

"But what about us?" Elfwine asked, giving his cousin a concerned look.

"Yeah, we stick together," Eldarion said resolutely. He and Elfwine had moved shoulder to shoulder with their shaken friend, lending him wordless support.

"Normally, yes," she told them with a fond smile. "But Faramir needs to see his son. There is healing to be found in the renewed bonds of love. But you, my son," she said to Elfwine, "must remain here. With your father at war and my leaving, the care of the Mark is in your hands. It is your duty."

Elfwine straightened. "Yes, mother. I understand."

She graced him with a proud look and then turned to Eldarion. "I want you with him so he isn't alone and miserable."

"But..." The Gondorian Prince looked from Elboron to Eldarion, trying to formulate a protest. In the face of their stoic acceptance of their duties, though, he could do nothing less. He nodded mutely, staring at the floor.

"Erkenbrand shall act as regent — I've already spoken to him. That way we can be sure there won't be any uprisings. And he knows enough about the Mark to help advise you." She looked at her son with great love and pride. "And that, sadly, is all I have time for."

Still stunned, Elboron found his voice. "Is he dying?" he asked fearfully.

"Not so long as we hurry," she replied.

Elboron winced and looked at his friends. "Well..."

"You have to go," Elfwine murmured.

"We'll be waiting for you," Eldarion assured him.

Elboron gave them each a strong embrace in turn. "I'll see you soon."

They nodded, not showing the fear they felt for their friend and his father.

Lothiriel gave her son a kiss on the brow and a fierce hug and then led the way out of the room. Elboron shuffled out last, his bearing huddled and his face a closed-off mask.

"It's a relief to find you well," Bergil told him as they headed for the stables.

"Why wouldn't I be?" Elboron asked sullenly.

"Well, I was actually sent here by your father, you see. He had one of his visions, before this ... collapse." Bergil had always been awed by the idea of prophetic dreams.

"And?"

Bergil frowned at his hostile tone but did not challenge him on it. "And it showed you in danger." He smiled wryly. "Though, I must say, highness, it does not take a prophecy to predict that you will find your way into trouble."
Elboron glared at Bergil’s back. "Don't start this now."

"I am not trying to cross swords with you, highness. I'm just expressing my sincere hope that your time here has run the wildness out of you—that on your return you will be a tad more mindful of your safety ... and others as well."

Bergil had been his sitter as a babe and his guard as a child. These arguments went back a long way. "I was never as bad as you made out."

"You set a room on fire."

"That was an accident."

"I'm only saying that you could spend more time acting like a prince and less time acting like a force of nature."

"You've been 'only saying' that as long as I can remember."

"You'd think I had some sort of motive...."

Elboron let out an exasperated growl. "Why are you starting in on me?"

"I've missed you?'

"Hardly."

Bergil cast a glance over his shoulder, and in his eyes was the same judgment Elboron had always had to deal with from him. "Because you're becoming a man and you should learn to act the part. You have a long, proud heritage—"

"Oh, spare me or flay me with a wooden spoon!"

"A long, proud her—" Bergil tried again with similar results.

"Yes, 'proud' like my grandfather trying to kill my father and then gibbering like a loon before flinging himself off the walls of Minas Tirith."

"He threw himself on the pyre. Honestly, where do you learn your history?"

"Burning, falling, what does it matter?"

"One is historical fact, the other is a false legend," Bergil admonished him. "Denethor was a great man before his disgrace. He held Gondor for years against the forces of Mordor."

"He still died a crazy, stupid man."

"It is not proper for you to say such things."

"Well, you can take proper and—"

"If you two are quite done — and even if you're not — shut your mouths. You're giving me a headache," Lothiriel reprimanded them.

Still glaring at each other, the two completed the walk to the stables in simmering silence. It was going to be a long, unpleasant trip, Elboron decided miserably. And it would be the worse because his friends were staying behind.
"How are you feeling?"

"Fine."

"Your color does look a bit better. But then, green never looked good on you."

Faramir sulked at his brother and wiped his running nose. "Very funny."

Boromir pinched his own nose. "Be grateful you can't smell anything brother. The reek of you would make roses wilt."

Faramir stuck his tongue out and folded his arms outside the heavy swath of blankets he was buried in. "Horse's arse."

Boromir snickered and stretched out his long legs. "Language, Farry, language. I'll have the servants scrub out your mouth."

Faramir made a rude gesture. "So... Is father terribly angry?" he asked worriedly.

His brother's eyes betrayed a moment of frustration, but his smile remained fixed on his face. Even at twelve, his brother had a remarkable gravity about him. "Father understands you're sick."

Faramir coughed and sniffled. "Really?"

"Really." Boromir pulled out a heavy tome that he had brought with him. "And it was just archery practice today. No real warrior uses a bow anyway."

"Maybe..." Faramir eyed the book with interest.

"I found this old book in the library. Thought you might like it. Nearly choked me with all the dust on it."

Faramir's eyes lit up. "You ventured into the library for me?"

"Well, no danger is too great for me to face for my little brother."

"You're the best." Faramir took the book and caressed the ancient leather of its bindings.

"Well, when I'm steward, I'll let you build a grand library where you and those musty old pages can stay together forever."

Faramir snickered. "Promise?"

"Promise," Boromir said sincerely, though he was still smiling.

The dream faded to gray....

Faramir smiled in his fevered delirium, taking solace in the happiness of the memory. It sheltered him from the misery and pain that had taken hold of his body and gave him some measure of peace.
Elboron slid from the saddle and nearly collapsed. They had ridden hard for days, barely resting, changing horses to conserve their mounts' strength. He was not used to such long rides, however, and the toll showed plainly on him.

Bergil made to support him, but he refused the help. He would not have his father seem him be carried to his bedside.

Lothiriel, looked peaked herself, followed Bergil into the stone manor that housed the Prince of Ithilien. For Elboron, it was oddly disquieting. He had not been home for two years, and to some part of him no longer it was home. The huge stone edifices of Minas Ithil, the narrow streets lending a claustrophobic air to the place, the patrols of soldiers keeping a tight rein on security ... it was a far cry from the freedom and relative safety of the Mark.

They marched up the stairs, but instead of his parents' room, they headed to the east wing and a room he had not been in before. It was warm, stiflingly so — the hearth was blazing, adding to the warmness of the late spring day. Eowyn was sitting in a chair, half-dozing, and Faramir was tossing fitfully on the bed, muttering nonsense.

"Mother!" Elboron said excitedly, remembering only at the last second to keep his voice down.

The Lady stirred and her haggard face lit up when she saw her son. "Boro!"

He ran to her and she took him in her arms, holding him like she had no intention of ever letting him go.

"You're growing like a colt," she told him, rocking him in her arms.

"I've missed you," he murmured, voice thick with emotion. "What's wrong with father? What happened? Is this the same sickness that kept you from visiting? How bad is it?"

She laughed and rested her forehead on his. There were tears of exhaustion and relief in her eyes. "Your father was wounded in the last battle and he never fully recovered, Boro. But he'll be fine, won't he Lothiriel?"

The quest for her own assurance was plain. Lothiriel looked into each of Faramir's eyes and then felt his forehead. She "hmm"ed and did not respond, instead looking at the wound for a moment. Finally, she looked mother and son in the eyes with an encouraging stare. "I am sure I can help him. Bergil, have a servant bring my saddlebags, won't you?"

"I'll do it, my Lady," he said and turned to go.

"No, you will have a servant do it. Then you will get a meal and find your bed before you collapse." He started to protest, but she cut him off. "None of that noble-martyr routine, if you please. I don't fancy having to attend two sick beds, and I will, if you don't do as I say. Also, please have the kitchens send something up here for us."

He blinked at her commanding tone, somewhat at a loss. Finally, he nodded crisply and departed.

She came over to Eowyn and clasped her hands warmly. "You are taking care of yourself, aren't you? Eating and sleeping?"

"When I have the opportunity," Eowyn hedged. "Thank you so much for coming. I ... did not know what else to do."

"You did exactly the right thing."
Elboron slipped out of his mother's arms and went to his father, staring at him in fear and uncertainty. "Can he hear us?"

"He has moments of lucidity, but mostly he is trapped in a world of broken images and ghostly visitations. He rambles in his sleep...."

Elboron looked worriedly into his father's face. "He's thinner."

"Yes, Boro."

"And there's gray in his hair..."

Eowyn rose and placed a hand in his shoulder. "He didn't want you to see him this way."

He looked up at her in perplexity. "Why?"

"Because fathers want to be strong for their sons," she told him gently.

That did not make much sense to Elboron, but he was used to being kept in the dark by his parents. He settled on the edge of the bed and fretted, wishing he could do something to help.

A servant brought up Lothiriel's saddle bags, and the Queen of the Mark quickly set to work. She asked Eowyn a series of questions and started measuring out herbs and compounds.

The food was brought and Elboron immediately tucked in — it seemed an age since he'd had a proper meal. Then, as Eowyn and Lothiriel conferred on Faramir's treatment, forgetting him for the time, he drifted to a chair and gradually slid into a troubled sleep.

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Elfwine sat upon the throne of Rohan, horribly mindful of the weight of the office he was representing, and bent all of his focus on the problems of the Mark. All matters of a non-vital nature had been commuted until either his mother or father returned.

But there were still disputes to settle, reports to take and an endless parade of decisions that someone had to make.

After only three days of this, Elfwine was ready to lock himself in his room. Only his sense of responsibility (and the knowledge that Erkenbrand would break down the door) kept him from taking that desperate course.

Eldarion stayed near, out of sheer loyalty. It was clearly even more agonizing for Gondor's heir to be trapped inside day after day. But his quiet presence and encouraging smiles kept Elfwine from losing his mind.

"Civil complaint," Erkenbrand murmured into his ear, handing him a scroll.

"I thought I wasn't dealing with civil complaints?" the prince whined, uncurling the parchment with a sulky expression.

"There are certain necessary exceptions, sir."

"There are? Why?"

"Because some have a time sensitivity...."
"I don't see how ... oh...." He read the scroll over and went red to the roots of his hair. "Ah.... But.... Do I have to?"

"I thought you'd take a certain delight in it, highness," Erkenbrand remarked with a wink.

"You have a sick sense of humor, then." He squirmed in his seat.

"Straighten up, highness. Shoulders to the back of the throne."

"When do I get to have you chop off peoples' heads, anyway?" Elfwine asked sarcastically.

"Oh, you know you can ask that of me anytime, highness."

"That's good. I think." He straightened and assumed his regal expression — at least, that was the expression he was struggling for. "Show them in, then."

His guards opened the doors to the hall and in walked two people. One was Huflisk, a man yet in his prime and one of the more prominent tanners in Edoras. His dark blond hair was in a hopeless tangle and so had been tied back for his auspicious audience. He also wore clothes that were somewhat close to clean.

Slinking in after him was none other than Hama, looking miserable and uncomfortable all at once. He bowed to the Prince, keeping his eyes on the floor ... and his distance from Huflisk.

Erkenbrand stepped forward to announce the case in his booming baritone. "Huflisk, son of Geflisk, son of Jorn, highness, coming before you with a civil complaint against Hama, son of Haleth, son of Hama, regarding the—"

"Er, yes," Elfwine cut him off. Though Hama's misery should have been a sweet display for him, it was really not. Watching the boy who had tormented him wilt as the accusations began was sad and pathetic. Either simple pity or some nascent sovereign instinct told him to spare the stableboy as best he could.

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Elfwine straightened in his seat again and cleared his throat. "So.... Hama Halethson, do you deny the charge?"

There was a very quiet "no" from the boy.

"I'm sorry, but you do need to look at me. And, um, speak up."

Hama gave him a pitiable look. "No, highness, the charge is.... Um, well, I did do it. I am the father, as best I know."

Elfwine was grateful he would not have to get into a paternity dispute. "Goodman Huflisk, please know that inasmuch as Hama is a part of our household, our house is ... partially responsible to you and this debt." He glanced at Erkenbrand, who nodded.

Elfwine knew a few things about the law. Dishonoring a man's daughter could earn you a flogging. Certainly, it would guarantee you a quick and sudden wedding.

"I will speak to Hama in private, first." He got up and headed for a rear door. Erkenbrand stared, watching him go and not at all sure what he was about. He could not and would not dispute Elfwine in open court.
Hama slunk after him, passing through the door before the prince. Elfwine went in after and closed the door. Once in the secluded antechamber, Elfwine dropped his regal manner.

"Idiot!" he snapped at Hama. "How could you do such a thing?"

Hama blushed and scuffed his feet. "I lost sense."

"Obviously." Elfwine paced. "Couldn't you mount another stableboy if you were that anxious? They don't have babies. I hope you know that."

Hama winced and nodded.

"You know what my father would do? He'd marry the both of you right now."

"Yes," Hama agreed miserably.

"But you don't want that, I'm guessing." Hama shook his head mutely. "I should make you marry her just for putting me in this situation." He fretted and considered his options.

"I suppose I'd deserve it, after all I've done to you and your friends."

Elfwine rolled his eyes. "The false humility isn't helping. This has nothing to do with that." He gave Hama a hard look. "I'm going to make this right, get you out of this. I can't say that will save you from the wrath of your fathers. They may want to skin you, but that's your problem, not mine. But if this happens again, I'll flog you myself. Understand?"

"Yes, highness."

Elfwine ushered him through the door and resumed his throne, feeling somewhat pleased that he had found a way to resolve this. "Goodman Huflisk, thank you for your patience." He straightened when Erkenbrand tapped his shoulder. "First, accept our apologies for this embarrassing incident."

"Your highness is too kind."

"Secondly, an award of ten gold crowns will be paid to you for your troubles. Your daughter will receive the best care from my mother's own midwife, and she will have the child here. If you wish, the crown will take the child to raise. Or, if your daughter wishes to keep the child, a stipend can be discussed at that time."

Huflisk bowed deeply. "You are very kind, highness."

"Thank you for your understanding."

Huflisk departed, looking satisfied. He gave Hama a glare that spoke volumes; Elfwine did not doubt Hama would not be allowed near the man's daughter again.

"What are those?"

"Commonly, they're referred to as clothes."

Sopping wet from a bath Bergil had forced him to take, Ithilien's prince was not in a good humor. Any moment he was not by his father's bedside, Bergil was pestering him; lessons, etiquette, manners, posture, washing and now, apparently, clothes.
"I already have clothes."

"They're a tad small, highness."

"The tunics fit fine."

"Running around half-dressed may serve in ... Rohan...." Bergil did not hide his distaste. "But not here."

"It's warm and a tunic is perfectly decent," Elboron told him waspishly. "And the next time you wrinkle your nose at the mention of my mother's people, I swear I'll hit you."

Bergil was unmoved by the threat. In fact, he seemed inclined to pretend Elboron had not spoken at all. "I had this made based on something already in your wardrobe."

"On what? Something I wore when I was five?"

It wasn't the breeches he was objecting to specifically—they were made of the same coarse wool he was accustomed to and they were dyed to a tolerable shade of blue. It was entirely too warm for them, however — and the same was true for the doublet. All truly fine, courtly wear that he was simply in no mood to put on.

It was the shirt that had his jaw hanging open and an outraged fire burning in his eyes. A pale blue in color, every inch of it had been painstakingly embroidered with a mixture of half, quarter and crescent moons.

"No," the prince said emphatically.

"Highness, while you are in my charge, you will do your best to not embarrass yourself or your family. Your mother does not need the added frustration of whispers about her wild son being bandied about."

"I would lay odds my mother would think you're being as much of a horse's ass as I do. And don't try to use my father's illness against me." He considered once more the atrocious thing Bergil had brought him and shook his head again. "No."

"Well, then, highness, please at least take the braids out of your hair."

"They are a custom among my mother's people—and before you make that face again remember what I said about hitting you."

"What face, highness?"

"The one when where you look like you just found half a worm in your apple."

Bergil tossed the clothes on the bed, admitting defeat on that front. "If they are not to your liking, we'll find others that you do like. It's time you had a valet anyway."

"Valet?"

"And a secretary."

"Why?"

"To keep track of where you need to be, of course." Bergil considered it. "And tutors, of course."
"I have tutors," Elboron retorted.

"Had, highness."

"Bergil, are you actually thinking I'm staying here?"

"Why ... wouldn't you, highness?" He seemed a bit alarmed by this idea.

"Because my father will be well soon and once he is, I'm going to return to my friends."

Bergil was positively despondent at the notion. "Well, we'll see...."

"No, we won't see. I've decided and my parents will agree and you, thankfully, don't have any say in the matter."

Bergil shook his head. "I'm not your enemy, highness. But I do have a few years on you. I'm just trying to prepare you for your responsibilities."

"Bergil, I'm twelve! I don't have to worry about that for a long time."

Bergil's reply was a noncommittal shrug.

"What?" the prince demanded.

"No one knows the future for certain, highness."

Elboron's eyes narrowed. "My father is going to recover."

Bergil shrugged again.

"He is," Elboron insisted.

"I hope so, highness — sincerely, But if he does or does not, this should show you that you're one illness or sword-stroke away from ruling Ithilien. You can't hide in childhood anymore, highness."

Elboron stared hard at him for a long moment and then turned sullenly away. "I'll deal with that when it happens. For now...just leave me alone."

"Yes, highness." Bergil bowed stiffly and departed.

Elboron finished drying off and set about finding a comfortable tunic. He supposed that Bergil was right, in his own infuriating way, and that he should dress more Ithilien and less Rohan. But in a way he could not really explain, dressing like he had in the Mark made him feel less distant from his friends.

"That's it, Dar, I've had it," Elfwine said as he stalked into the room they shared. "Let's skin out the window and ride as far and fast from here as horses will carry us."

Eldarion was flopped on the bed amidst a scattering of parchment. The window was open, which did little good save to allow the midges in. The air outside was not moving at all. "I thought you'd never ask. If it gets any hotter my hair will catch on fire."

Elfwine mumbled his agreement and started wrestling out of his courtly attire. It was no easy task, as every inch was stuck to him by sweat. "Maybe we could at least go for a swim?"
The heir of Gondor looked disappointed. "I thought your first idea was better."

"Yes, well, we wouldn't get very far. Erkenbrand would drag us back by our ears."

Eldarion sulked for a moment and then rolled onto his back. "Well, a swim sounds like a decent second choice."

"Anything new on Uthamar's line?"

"No." He frowned deeply. "I'm sorry to say, Win, I think it's futile. We've got letters back from minstrels in and around Stovall, several histories and even a census. We can't find this person."

Elfwine threw a tunic at him and slipped on one of his own. Together, they padded out of the room. Aldurn stepped from the shadows, looking aggrieved that they had decided to go abroad.

"We're going swimming. And so are you, before the heat drops you like a rotted fruit off a tree."

Aldurn would usually make some duty-related excuse at such a suggestion. However, the heat had him quite subdued. "Yes, highness."

They walked on, letting him follow at his chosen distance. Elfwine dropped his voice a little to avoid being overheard. "It was a wild horse, Dar. We didn't think we'd really be able to run it down."

"I know, but how are we supposed to find out the truth?"

"Well, we don't. Questions don't always have answers. Or, at least, answers you can find."

"That's nonsense," Eldarion said stubbornly. "There has to be somewhere we haven't looked; someplace a book on this would be kept. Does your father have a private library?"

Elfwine laughed, just thinking of his father with a library was absurd. "My father does not have my love for musty pages."

Eldarion made a face that suggested he did not either.

The three escaped the sweltering confines of Meduseld. A brief ride later, they were at their preferred swimming-hole. While Aldurn saw to the animals, the boys stripped off and slid into the cool waters. Eldarion, who had been deep in thought all the while, drew Elfwine to the other side of the pool.

He cast furtive glances at Aldurn and kept his voice low when he spoke. "Your grandfather was raised in Gondor, correct?"

"No, he— Wait, do you mean Eomund or Theoden?"

"Which one was king?"

Elfwine groaned. "You are so hopeless."

Eldarion glowered. "I am not."

"Are too. Honestly, you don't even know who ruled the Mark during the War?"

"I do too," Eldarion protested. "I ... just can't remember right now."
Elfwine snickered. "Your father will flay us both when he finds out you're as dense now as when you got here."

"Will you just answer the question?" the Gondorian heir growled, slapping at a midge. "Don't make me tie you into a knot."

"I am bigger than you, you know."

"Not all of you."

"What..." Elfwine saw Eldarion's gaze flick to below the water line and he flushed in embarrassment. "You are such a liar."

"Ha! You wish I was lying."

Elfwine's response was to shove his friend over into the water. Eldarion came up, spluttering.

"Don't start," he warned the Prince of the Mark.

"Or what?" Elfwine teased. "Will 'Whisper' throw a tantrum?"

"That's it!" Eldarion howled and pounced.

Elfwine responded with a challenging roar — or it would have been a roar if his voice had not broken halfway through it.

Eldarion broke away in a fit of giggles. "You sound like ... like a half-plucked rooster!"

Cheeks flaming, Elfwine seized his friend and tossed him deeper into the pool. "At least I don't have legs like a rooster!"

Still laughing, Eldarion tackled him again. "Take that back!"

"Chicken legs!"

"Rooster voice!"

Elfwine pushed him away, choking on laughter. "Rooster voice?"

Eldarion folded his arms and shrugged, somewhat embarrassed. "All right, not my best.... But still true."

Elfwine knelt, lowering himself to his shoulders in the water. He pinched water from his eyes and eyed the Gondorian heir. "You're a bit older than me. Why aren't you changing yet?"

"I'm not sure," Eldarion replied honestly. "Mother told me my elf blood is really strong and so I'd develop differently."

"What, are you going to grow leaves and roots?"

"Very funny. No, she said it would happen late, but when it did, it would happen quickly."

"Lucky you. Me? I can't wait until I have a full beard."

"Ew. Why?"

"Because that's how folks will know I'm grown up," Elfwine explained as if it should be perfectly
obvious.
"But beards are scratchy," Eldarion countered artlessly.

"So?"

The Prince of Gondor shrugged, eyeing him for a moment. Suddenly, he was overcome by a fit of giggles.

"What now?" Elfwine asked with thinning patience.

"I... I just... just ... pictured you with a ... a beard..." he gasped.

Elfwine splashed him irritably. "I'd smack you if you were worth the bother."

His friend flashed him a toothy grin and dunked his head under the waters. When he emerged, he swept his hair back and rubbed the water from his eyes. The subject suddenly returned to the forefront of his mind and he gave Elfwine a direct look.

"So, who was the King of the Mark before?"

"Oh, Theoden, who was my Uncle. Eomund was my grandfather."

"Theoden, Theodred. Eomer, Eowyn, Eomund.... Doesn't it get confusing with you all having almost the same name?"

"It's really not that difficult if you don't have butterflies for brains."

"I do not!"

"Besides, Elfwine, Eldarion, Elboron.... A lot of people have similar names," the Prince of the Mark pointed out.

"Well, I was first," Gondor's heir retorted hotly.

"Not that anyone would know."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Just that you haven't got a hair on your body below your nose." Elfwine grinned mockingly.

Eldarion leaned in close, posturing and challenging. Faster than the eye could follow, he swiped at Elfwine's chest, making a plucking gesture. Then he slipped out of arm's reach, grinning.

"Neither do you, now."

Elfwine took a belated swing at him, glowering. "Dung breath."

Eldarion splashed him in response. "So, anyway, your granduncle was raised in Gondor...."

"Yes."

"I don't even get a surprised look of admiration for knowing that?"

"You're still on a short tether for not knowing who the last king of the Mark was."

"Fine," Eldarion sulked. "Theoden was schooled in Gondor, where we've been writing things
down for ages."

"Are you insulting my people again?"

"It seems so. Anyway, maybe your granduncle kept a private library and it's still there in the royal chambers."

Elfwine considered the idea. "You could be right. But we'd have to ask my father about it."

"He's not coming back for a few more weeks at least."

Elfwine started to nod and then caught something in his friend's expression. "Oh, roadapples, you're not suggesting what I think you're suggesting.... Are you?"

"Win, stop sniffing the wind, will you? It's a lot less dangerous than visiting a Dunlending village. We sneak in, have a peek, and sneak out."

"But ... it's my father's chambers. I haven't even seen it since I was ... a toddler."

"Are you forbidden?"

"Not in the strictest sense of the word. But I doubt he'd fancy me snooping around in there..."

"Well, it's not like he needs to know...."

"Somehow, it never seems to work out that way...."

"Are you balking?"

"No, I'm fretting."

"But if we found Helm's Hammer...."

"Shhh!" Elfwine warned, casting furtive glances at Aldurn.

Their unobtrusive guard was lounging in the water, appearing immensely relieved and almost utterly unaware of them.

"He can't hear us," Eldarion argued. "And even if he could, he would think we're making up stories. He doesn't know the thing is real."

"I'd rather not risk it. Everything we know about that thing says it's wicked and dangerous, so the fewer people who know about it the better."

"Fine," Eldarion said testily. "All I'm saying is, if we find it, we'll be heroes."

"I'm not really interested in finding it. I just don't want anyone else—like this mysterious enemy of the west—to get his hands on it."

"But it's supposed to destroy walls!"

"So? You have any walls you're mad at?"

"Why are you being like this?"

Elfwine trailed a finger through the water, looking thoughtful. "There are no happy stories that involve magic. Even among your people ... their greatness faded with the destruction of Isildur's
Bane."

"You believe the Hammer is cursed."

"I only know that Helm's entire house was wiped out and the Mark nearly destroyed. So, I think we should be careful."

Eldarion shrugged carelessly. "As you say.... So, when do we sneak into your father's chambers?"

Elfwine groaned and looks up at the dusky sky. "Tonight. Most no one will be about, with the heat. But this really has to be the last bit of mischief you get me into."

"Me?" Eldarion laughed. "This is your mystery. I'm just helping. And if Boro were here...."

He trailed off, thinking of their friend so far away now. They did not speak for a time, quietly considering the Prince of Ithilien and how much they missed his laughing face. Tonight's adventure, they knew, would not be the same without him.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Danger comes to Edoras. And Alphros' skills are tested to their limits--as are Eomer's patience.

Year 15, 4A

Eldarion and Elfwine skulked through the darkened corridors. Their caution was perhaps more than was needed. Their night door-guard, Freth, had not even awakened. And no one who saw them gave them a second glance.

Still, they felt like burglars.

"What was that?" Elfwine whispered.

Eldarion frowned at him. "Nothing, just like the last three times you asked."

Eldwine muttered under his breath and continued to follow behind the slender figure of his friend. The door to his father's chambers was unguarded, and when they pushed, it opened easily.

Eldwine had an uneasy feeling in his stomach, though. He had not been into the inner sanctum in years and violating his father's privacy this way did not sit well with him. His only reassurance was the knowledge that he was just here to look for a library and he would not touch his father's effects.

They padded on bare feet through the sitting room, past the ornate stratagem board and through the door beyond. This was some sort of anteroom. It was very small and had numerous chairs along the wall.

The two boys shared a brief look and then pushed into the bedroom beyond.

The air was stale, having been closed up in here for weeks. It smelled of burned-out candles, oiled wood and his mother's perfume. It was dark, very dark, the moonlight blocked by the shutters.

Eldwine and Eldarion lit candles and separated to explore the room. The furs on the floor were very soft, so much so that their footfalls made no noise at all. The silence was eerie and unsettling.

Eldwine's gaze took in an array of trinkets; a hair-comb with swans on the handle, a helmet with Theodred's symbol upon it, a horse doll that could have been either Eomer or Eowyn's. Each one was a memory, a piece of the past.

"Win...."

Eldwine came to where Eldarion was looking in a large wooden chest. There was a swath of cloth crumpled on the floor next to it, something Eldarion had swept aside. The trunk was open and there were scrolls and bound stacks of parchment piled up inside it.

Eldwine took up one packet and studied it. "Definitely old...I can barely read it." He started sifting through the trunk, catching names and places he knew to be significant. Certain they were on the
scent now, they began to remove everything and examine it.

At the very bottom was a large leather-encased roll. The case was embossed with many symbols, one of which was definitely a dragon, and the other was a hammer. Elfwine took it out reverently and untied the laces binding it.

The leather came away to reveal a tightly rolled length of cloth. Elfwine's hands trembled slightly as he unfurled just the first foot of it.

"This is very old." He traced his fingers over symbols embroidered into the cloth. "This is how most of our people wrote in ages past." He gazed at it in wonder.

"Is it what we're looking for?" Eldarion asked.

Elfwine did not respond, simply pointing at the very first symbol his eye had caught. His fellow heir leaned in close and drew in an excited breath.

It was of a man leaning on a giant hammer.

Wordlessly, they wrapped the cloth back in the leather case and then returned the other scrolls to the chest. Careful to leave everything as they had found it, the two took their prize and stole back to their rooms.

The answer was in their hands. Now would come the difficult task of deciphering it.

Eomer studied the map intently, running options through his head and formulating plans for the assault. Strategy had always been Theodred's strength, not his. He pushed that old pain aside and bent his concentration on the task.

A comparatively cool breeze had replaced the miserable heat of the day. It was something the weary army desperately needed. The journey south into this unforgiving land had been brutally hard on man and beast. Now that they had arrived, they all required a day of rest before the fighting could begin.

Amrothos' light step was barely audible behind him. Strong, certain fingers began to knead the tight muscles of his shoulders.

"You can keep staring," Amrothos murmured. "But the picture won't change."

Eomer grimaced. "These Haradrim certainly know how to build a city."

It was bitterly true. The rear quarter was protected by a steep slope that fell sharply away from the city, nullifying the power of his cavalry and making siege engines equally useless. Both flanks of the city were wide planes of jagged rock with treacherous sinkholes. His men would have to pick their way carefully across these planes, under fire from arrows every step of the way.

The only possibility was a frontal assault — which was by design, he was sure. There was a narrow road leading up to the city. The ground around the roadway was uneven, but not impossible to traverse. There was some cover to be had, though not much.

The losses would be awful, unless he could think of something fairly brilliant. But he was a cavalry soldier in his heart. He was most comfortable with the simple and straightforward clash in an open field.
"Curse them for their fortifications anyway," Amrothos said lightly.

"This is not ... funny...." Eomer was having trouble focusing under the soothing assault of his friend’s deft fingers.

"No, it isn't, but you won't let me talk you out of this. So...."

"It's a question of honor."

"It's more than that, and while I am moved by the gesture, I don't care to have all the death on my conscience."

Eomer tensed. "They hurt you."

"Yes, and the ones who did it are quite dead."

"But not the ones who ordered it," Eomer said darkly. "And I can't really call things off now, can I?"

"I suppose not, but you could parley. They might surrender in the face of your earth-shaking might."

"Mocking me again, are you?"

"Old habit."

Eomer sighed and turned, taking Amrothos' hands in his. "It would be useless. Haradrim are stubborn, proud and fierce. They do not surrender."

"That sounds so familiar..."

"Stop that," Eomer complained.

"Very well ... but on one condition." Amrothos' eyes sparkled in the torchlight.

Eomer did not need to ask to know what his friend was referring to. Amrothos' mind could usually be found in the same filthy place. However, because it amused him, he asked anyway.

"That being...?"

"You come to bed."

Eomer stretched and grinned at him. "I suppose, if you insist...."

"I do. And I'll carry you bodily if I have to."

The King laughed. "I really doubt you could."

"Perhaps not," Amrothos said with a wry smile. "You have become somewhat ... padded."

"I have not," Eomer retorted with indignance

"But if we were to, say, shed all unnecessary weight..." Amrothos suggested, twirling his finger in the laces of Eomer's tunic.

"You're insatiable."
"Unashamedly so," Amrothos replied with a broad and predatory smile.

"He's from where?"

"Hijaz, Majesty."

"And how far is that from Rhaabeni, which I believe my father is reducing to dust at this very moment?"

"Some hundred leagues, highness."

"What do we know about Hijaz?"

"We know where it is on the map."

"That's not terribly helpful."

"Yes, highness, but the Haradrim have rather selfishly refused to share with us all the details of their country."

"Are you disrespecting me?"

"Never, highness."

"I will call for the headsman..."

"I am the headsman, highness."

"Point taken." Elfwine shifted uncomfortably. "And this emissary wants to extend to us the hand of friendship. Has this ever happened before?"

"You'd have to ask someone who paid attention to his history tutors, highness. My guess is that it has not happened for many generations."

Elfwine was wishing he'd paid more attention himself. "And this man knows I can't sign treaties or really even formally acknowledge his offer of friendship?"

"He was told so, highness."

Elfwine gave Erkenbrand a supremely confused look. "And you're ready to kill him dead if he tries anything?"

"Quite ready, highness," his regent said with obvious distrust and malice.

Elfwine straightened again — he wished the throne wasn't so polished, it was hard to maintain a regal posture — and smoothed out his shirt. "Well...very well...show him in."

The doors opened and the diplomat from Hijaz entered the great hall. He was a large man with a belly that strained against the sash tied gaily around it. A fine, well-manicured beard covered his face, which was as friendly and open as any Elfwine had ever known.

He was followed by his page; a boy about Elfwine's age. The boy was staggering under the weight of several saddlebags, his knees visibly shaking.
"The Mark bids — would someone help that poor boy?" One of the junior riders lounging against a wall came over, smiling, and offered his assistance. Elfwine returned his attention to the emissary. "Yes, uh...where was I? Oh, the Mark bids welcome to the ambassador from Hijaz."

The man bowed deeply from the waist. "And the ambassador thanks you most sincerely for welcoming me into your home. My name is Abula al Bakr and this is my son, Jijinn."

"I'm... er.... I am Prince Elfwine Eomerson. I am... well, I confess I'm not sure what I can offer you other than a place to rest after your long travels. My father is... away."

Abula smiled graciously. "That would most adequate, my young lord. It is my fault for delaying so long that I missed your father. I imagine he is looking upon the walls of Rhaabeni even now."

Elfwine paled a bit. "Er...."

Abula's smile did not falter. "It is no insult to me. Hijaz has little empathy for a man and a city who refuse to see the future."

"The future?"

"The dominance of Gondor. King Elessar's star is rising, and to oppose that is as foolish as to try to net the moon. The elders of Hijaz hope to cultivate a friendship with the men of the north and in that way to bring peace and hope to our people."

"That is certainly an admirable goal," Elfwine told him. "But I can't predict how my father or the King of Gondor will respond. However, they are honorable men, so I think you can rightfully hope for a bright future."

Abula bowed again. "Thank you, my young lord. Now, if I may refresh myself?"

"Of course." Elfwine stood. "Leuth, will you show him to some quarters?" The prince glanced at Jijinn. "And perhaps, if you can spare him, your son can join me for a small tour of the city?"

Abula glanced at the boy, who seemed vaguely discomfited by the suggestion. The emissary grinned and nodded. "I think I can indeed spare him."

"Sir!"

Eomer sat bolt upright in his blankets and reached for his sword, tumbling a deeply unconscious Amrothos out of the furs. There was a belated and muffled protest from the Dol Amrothian as he tried to collect himself.

Slowly, Eomer's exhausted mind focused on the voice and the face it was emanating from and then, with agonizing slowness, added that to the fact it was not yet dawn and so certainly not time yet to be awakened.

"Bared? What... what is it?" He winced, sensing an impending headache from having slept so little and waking so fast. Some part of him began inventing curses for the person responsible for keeping him up most of the night.

The youth who had done the waking, a junior rider and the King's standard-bearer, was looking very apologetic. "Eomer King.... The white flag flies above the city."
Eomer had to think a moment to comprehend what city Bared might be referring to. "What?"

"It's true, sir. There was a commotion in the city—"

"A commotion? Of what sort?"

"We thought it sounded like fighting, sir."

"Fighting?" Eomer swore under his breath. "And why did you not come and get me immediately."

Bared's eyes darted very briefly to the disgruntled pile of Dol Amrothian before he answered. "You were ... occupied, sir."

Eomer elected to not address that issue. "Very well... So, there was a commotion and then the white flag appeared?"

"Yes sir."

Eomer started getting dressed. "Wake the men. Tell Erchirion and Alphros I need to see them immediately."

"Yes sir!" Bared said crisply and departed.

"It's cold," Amrothos complained.

"Then I'd say you should put on some clothes, yes?"

"I think you bruised me."

"Rotho..." Eomer sighed, giving him an exasperated look.

Amrothos chewed on a nail for a moment. "Oh, very well. You're no fun at war, you know that?"

"Terribly sorry. But we may not be at war anymore." He threw a tunic at his friend and slipped out of the tent.

Still yanking on his boots, he stumbled towards the bucket of water set out for him. It was indeed bitterly cold, which confounded him. The weather in this part of the world was apparently not governed by any god or reason.

Around him, the camp began to stir to life. There were the usual sounds of complaining men—and complaining horses. Neither were excited by the early hour. He yawned and splashed frigid water on his face.

A white flag...what was this all about?

Eomer took care of his morning business and returned to the tent for a quick breakfast of hard biscuits and strong tea. As he ate, Bared started strapping him into his armor. He was just flicking the last crumbs from his beard when Alphros and Erchirion entered the tent.

"Surrender?" Erchirion asked in surprise.

"Well, we shall see," Eomer replied cautiously.

"It has to be a trick," Alphros said hotly.
Eomer smiled at the young man. "It doesn't have to be, but it may very well be. Let's go have a look."

Amrothos grinned at his nephew. "Don't fret. There might be one or two you can tussle with."

Alphros glowered at that but said nothing.

With the dawn sun starting to spill over the camp, the four of them took to their horses and rode forth to the city, their men following behind. They spread out before Rhaabeni, out of arrow shot, and waited.

It was not long before the great wooden gates heaved to and a column of men on foot issued forth. They were a mixed group; a few soldiers, some men in poorly fitting militia uniforms and still others who looked simply like armed commoners.

They marched fearlessly towards the army, white flag held high. They all showed signs of having been in a bloody fight, bandaged and limping as they were.

The bearer of the white flag came forward to within twenty paces of the army and planted the flag in the dirt. He shouted something in his own language and then prostrated himself on the earth.

The King of the Mark glanced uneasily at Amrothos, who was taking a moment to translate the words in his head. His brow was knitted with the effort of concentration.

"He says.... Yes, he says the people of Rhaabeni want no part of Kaeliz's wars and they offer tribute to the men of the west in exchange for mercy."

Eomer gaped in a most non-kingly fashion. "You are certain?"

"Well, possibly he said all westerners lie with pigs and wishes us to leave his lands and take our putrid stench with us."

"Rotho...." Eomer chastised tensely.

"Yes, I'm sure, Eomer King."

Amrothos only ever addressed him so formally in a teasing tone. Sighing, the King of the Mark gave him a look to inform him this was not the time for that and then he turned to Alphros. The youngest Prince of Dol Amroth looked absolutely despondent at the idea the enemy would forfeit on his very first command. He eyed the Haradrim reproachfully and nodded his assent to Eomer.

The King of the Mark returned his attention to the prostrated man. "Tell him we accept his surrender and we invite him to our table this evening to discuss terms."

Amrothos repeated the words in heavily accented Haradric. The man touched his brow to the earth again and murmured words even Eomer could tell were acquiescence. Then he got to his feet and, leaving the flag in the ground, barked orders to the group.

They turned and headed back to the city, parting around a group of prisoners in their center. These men were chained together and obviously badly beaten. Eomer was stunned for a moment before realizing these were the first tribute offered. With a hard look, he ordered the prisoners seized.

The King of the Mark then took the princes back to his tent for a quick conference. They all shared perplexed expressions, except Alphros who just looked angry.

"Can we be sure this isn't a ruse?" Eomer asked.
"Well, that certainly was Kaeliz among the prisoners. I recognized him even with all the bruises," Erchirion said with a satisfied smile. "So, I think we can be sure this isn't part of any grand scheme of his."

"But why turn on their leader now?" Alphros asked suspiciously.

"It's not inconceivable, from what we know of them," Amrothos murmured contemplatively. "He led them to a disastrous defeat at Dol Amroth and he's brought this army to their doorstep. They are fanatically loyal, but not in the face of weakness. So, if they deemed he failed them…. A revolt is certainly possible."

Eomer sighed. "Well, we'll meet with their new leader tonight and see if we can agree on terms. Until then, I suggest we keep our men on alert; two hour watches so no one gets fatigued."

They nodded their agreement and went to give the orders. If there was some wickedness looming, they would be ready.

Jijinn was a quiet boy, very reserved and somewhat uneasy with the utter lack of formality at Edoras. Even once the princes had separated him from his father, he held fast to his rigid stance. A tour of the city took the rest of the day, and while Jijinn seemed interested, he was also really worried that there were duties he was neglecting.

"Your father can get along without you for a bit," Eldarion assured him.

Jijinn shook his head. "It is not that he cannot, it is that he should not have to. It is a son's duty to assist his father."

Eldarion and Elfwine exchanged exasperated looks. "How about we go for a swim?"

Jijinn visibly perked at that, but he quickly clamped down on the display of emotion. "Surely there are things you must be doing, as you are in charge of your country."

Elfwine shook his head. "No. I gave myself leave to spend the rest of the day with you. Besides, the country can spare me for a few hours."

"Well.... I suppose my father did give me permission to relinquish my duties for the rest of the day...."

Eldarion grinned at him. "Indeed. And as the ambassador's son, you are almost duty-bound to make friends with us."

Jijinn almost — almost — smiled at that. "Your argument is very strong."

The two princes laughed. "Well, let's get to it then."

"I think my hearing might be failing me. Would you please repeat that?" Eomer asked, staring hard at Alphros.

The parley had gone very well. Ghazeri, the new lord of Rhaabeni, spoke very candidly about
what he wanted for his people — most of which surrounded being left alone by both their neighbors and the kingdoms of the north.

After everyone had departed, though, Alphros had lingered. The hot-blooded young prince had silently gone along with all that Eomer had said, which the King should have known to be suspicious of.

The Amrothian prince drew himself up to his full height — which was still not enough to look Eomer in the eye — and squared his shoulders. "My honor requires this. I must meet Kaeliz in single combat and kill him to avenge the wrongs he has done my family."

"No."

"Uncle, I must insist. My honor will not be appeased by his hanging." Alphros' cheeks were flushed with suppressed anger.

"And my honor will be forever sullied if I let you do this. To say nothing of how I would explain to your father why I am bringing your body home in a blanket."

Alphros flinched as if slapped. "You think I cannot defeat him?"

"Kaeliz may not be the most brilliant warlord in history, but he would not have gained his station without knowing how to swing his sword. He's a seasoned veteran."

"And I am well trained."

Eomer sighed heavily. He didn't think Amrothians came in this sort of unreasonable breed. His wife certainly knew the value of compromise. And Amrothos rarely if ever came to such irrational conclusions.

"You are captain of the Amrothian forces, but the command of the army is mine. As such, as your superior, I am declining your request for this boon. And as your Uncle I'm forbidding it."

Alphros' expression was flinty. "If you will not grant it to me as a boon, then I demand it as the price for Dol Amroth accepting the terms of surrender."

Eomer sat in his camp chair and gave him a disbelieving look. "You would be continuing the fight alone. The Mark is done here."

"So be it."

"You would kill people who have already surrendered. And get your own men killed as well. That's folly. A leader does not let pride—"

"A leader is nothing without his honor."

Eomer had the sincere desire to grab the young man about the shoulders and shake some sense into him. There were no good choices before him. Risking his nephew's life would go poorly with the stiff-necked Elphir.

But he could not allow hundreds of people to die....

"Very well, Alphros. But I hope you understand I think this is a very poor idea and certainly a betrayal of the trust you were given."

"Thank you, Uncle," Alphros replied coldly and turned on his heel.
Eomer watched him go, frustrated. If Alphros survived, Eomer vowed he would have a long talk with Elphir about this. The heir of Dol Amroth was reckless and rash, never good qualities in a leader.

In one of the nicer guest quarters of Meduseld, Akim al Jediah was very carefully adding liquids by the drop to the unction needed to complete the contract. Poison mixing was an art, one which he had practiced for many years and was considered more than competent at.

His carefully ordered thoughts were a tranquil pond, disturbed only by one small inconvenience: the absence of Elboron.

The contract was for three princes, but the contract did not include a trip deep into Gondor. This presented a small difficulty; leaving one of the three targets alive would mar a perfect record and possibly effect future contract negotiations. Taking the contract to Ithilien, though, would require an additional fee which might not be paid.

Additionally, with two princes dead, the third would undoubtedly be put under much tighter security. That would not be insurmountable to an assassin from Hijaz, but it would again require further effort, which was not part of the contract negotiations.

Akim sniffed the vial of poison, contemplating. There was no help for it. Once the deed was done, a return to renegotiate for the third target would be required. Kaeliz was not known for his honorable dealings, so taking on faith that he would honor further expenses was simply not wise.

Contented in his decision, he took out a brush and began to coat the cutting edge of a knife with his concoction. It would be tonight. When the castle was quiet, the deed would be done and tomorrow no one would think past grief to look for the Ambassador from Harad until it was too late.

The army of the west arranged themselves in a wide circle, jockeying for a better view of the fight. For them, this was a welcome victory celebration. The air was charged with their excitement.

Eomer and Amrothos stood by, anxious and uneasy. The King, as leader of this army, had no choice but to be here, and Amrothos would not leave his side. But he felt only a gnawing worry within him.

Erchirion had, by contrast, avoided the spectacle and instead was seeing to striking camp. Eomer had initially thought the Prince was as angry with young Alphros as he himself was, but the burning glares from Erchirion's direction suggested otherwise. He had no idea what the Prince was thinking, but he knew he had to find out as soon as time allowed.

Which would not be until this madness reached its end.

Kaeliz was brought into the circle and unchained. He stood proud and defiant, as if willing to take on the whole army himself. Only the angry bruises on his face marred this arrogant stance.

Alphros came into the circle, unarmored and carrying two swords. Eomer almost had to admire the bravado. Alphros was putting himself on equal footing with his enemy so no one after could say it was not a fair fight. It was the sort of thing Imrahil would have done, Eomer thought to himself.
Alphros raised the swords over his head and grinned cockily at his men, who shouted cheers of encouragement. He threw one of the swords at Kaeliz's feet.

"Kaeliz, you made war on my people, on my family. I challenge you, here before this noble company, to a duel to settle this debt of honor. Will you accept this challenge as a man of honor?"

Kaeliz sneered and very deliberately folded his arms. "And after I kill you they stretch my neck. I fail to see why I would want to ... entertain you."

Alphros tossed his head proudly. "In the unlikely event you are victorious...." The Knights of Dol Amroth laughed. Eomer felt ill. "Then you shall go free."

Eomer went ashen. He did not recall agreeing to that at all. He did his best to not react, though, knowing he had to seem united with the young prince in this. He began thinking, though, that if Alphros survived this he would put him over his knee.

Kaeliz still seemed amused. He glanced at Eomer with a mocking expression. "And if I kill your pup, will you in fact let me go?"

Eomer ground his teeth. How had everything slipped its tether like this? "My word as King."

Kaeliz looked around at all the men hungry for his blood. "A horse and water, as well."

"Agreed," Eomer growled.

"And not one of those Amrothian nags. A good Rohan steed."

Eomer's eyes flashed fire. "You'll get a mule, if I so wish it."

Kaeliz laughed at him and nodded, quite pleased with the bargain — or just happy to have annoyed Eomer, the King was not sure. The deposed warlord leaned down and picked up the sword. His expression remained indifferent as he swung the blade experimentally.

"A bit unbalanced.... Nice slice though." He continued testing the weapon, stretching his sore muscles as well. "I'd prefer my own sword, but I don't imagine there's much chance of that...."

"You could go ask the people in charge of your city for it," Eomer suggested pleasantly.

Kaeliz gave him a sour look.

"Are you quite ready?" Alphros asked impatiently.

Kaeliz leaned lazily on his sword. "Yes indeed. I am prepared for your righteous vengeance."

Alphros approached, blade at the ready. He took the first swing, and it seemed like Kaeliz was ready to accept the swift end, for he did not move at first. However, when he did react, it was with lightning speed. He parried the blow so hard it knocked Alphros off balance.

Then Kaeliz lashed out with his fist, smashing into the prince's face and sending him reeling. Two quick cuts from his sword and he had the prince bleeding from one arm and one leg.

Eomer watched and felt his fear deepen.
It wasn't long before they were at the small pond, immersed in the cool waters. If Elfwine had his way, he would never leave here — at least not until the blistering heat at last stopped cooking the Mark.

"So, what is your home like?" Eldarion wanted to know.

"Beautiful, but uncompromising," Jijinn replied softly, sweeping his wet hair back. "I suppose to an outsider, it would seem barren. But the red sands of the Fata Kezan are a wonder seen nowhere else in the world. And the colors of our sunsets take a person's breath away."

"Really?" Elfwine was now very interested. "I would dearly like to see that."

"Well, perhaps the next visit can be yours, then," Jijinn told him with what could be a friendly expression.

"I think my father would chain me up in a dungeon if I said I wanted to go to Harad," Elfwine said with a rueful look.

"I didn't know Meduseld had a dungeon," Eldarion remarked.

"It doesn't. But believe me, if I mention Harad, my father will have one made just for me."

"Your father's hatred for us is so great?" Jijinn asked.

"Oh, no," Elfwine assured him. "But his trust of me is ... less than great."

"Ah." Jijinn did give them the briefest of smiles. "You are not so dutiful a son, then."

"Well, I was, before the bad seeds started showing up on our doorstep," Elfwine remarked, throwing a reproving look Eldarion's way.

"Admit it, we made your life more interesting," Gondor's heir countered.

"Hrmph," was Elfwine's eloquent reply.

The two gave Jijinn amused glances to show they were only kidding. There were so many differences between them, but Elfwine really felt that given time, they could build a friendship.

Alphros staggered and slipped on his own blood, going down to one knee. His eyes were filled with hate, but his arms and legs were shaking with pain and exhaustion. He spat out blood and tried to rise.

His friend and fellow knight Raelus was shouting and pleading with him to get up, to kill Kaeliz. The red-faced knight was being physically held back by other knights from going to Alphros' side, his face raw with panic.

The prince got to his feet, to the cheers of the crowd. But it was no good and he knew it. Kaeliz was too fast, too strong and too skilled. It was like trying to battle a storm on the high seas—and Alphros knew his ship was taking on water.

Kaeliz knocked aside his next assault as easily as he had every one previous, returning with a contemptuous backhand that laid the prince out.

"Honestly, don't they teach you to use that weapon, boy?" Kaeliz mocked. He was barely
Alphros climbed wearily to his feet. Kaeliz wasn't just attacking him, he was attacking the morale of the whole army. He was seeking, with this one duel, to show that he was neither defeated nor neutralized.

And the despair on the warriors' faces showed he was winning.

"My father has given me permission to accept your offer of staying with you both for the night," Jijinn told them. Having dried off and changed, he was once more impeccably groomed. He had a small satchel with him.

Elfwine and Eldarion grinned at him and each other. "It's not a territorial summit, Jinn," Eldarion teased him.

Their somewhat stiff-necked friend shrugged slightly. "I am not sure what this is."

"We call it friendship," Elfwine told him.

"And you offer your friendship so easily?" This appeared to perplex him.

"If you call this 'easily,' then yes," Elfwine replied.

"Haven't you had friends before?" Eldarion asked.

Jijinn frowned, searching for the most honest answer. "Duty does not always leave time for such things."

"Well, there's no 'duty' tonight. So, you tell us stories of your home, I'll tell you stories of mine and Eldarion will make up stories about him being a ranger."

"I am a ranger, goat-face."

"Yes, Whisper, as you say."

Eldarion glanced at Jijinn. "And maybe you'll get to watch me beat the stuffing out of horse boy, here."

Elfwine laughed. "But very likely not."

Their friend eyed them both with vague amusement. "It sounds like an interesting evening, then."

"Well, let's get you settled, then. Dar? Care to run to the kitchens for some food?"

"Oh, well, as your majesty so desires," the Gondorian heir said with a sardonic smile.

"Good, good," Elfwine said airily, dismissing him with a regal wave of his hand.

Eldarion threw a glare at him and sauntered out. Elfwine laughed at his friend's departing back and showed Jijinn where he could set his things down. "I suppose our lack of formality is odd for you."

Jijinn knelt and began to meticulously lay out the change of clothes he had brought. "It is, very much so. In Harad, no lord or tribal chief would traipse around in poorly mended clothes — and
without a host of guards at his back. And every commoner kneels as his lord passes—even if that lord is very small."

It took Elfwine a moment to realize the taciturn boy had made a joke — and another moment to realize the joke was on him. "I am not small."

"When measured against the stature of your people...?"

Elfwine considered shoving his new friend — it was what he would do with Eldarion or Elboron — but he didn't think Jijinn was so comfortable with them yet.

"So, your people sound very orderly."

"Discipline. When you live in the harsh world we do, there is no room for disobedience or failure to complete your duties. Everyone must do what is asked of them or everyone suffers."

"Sounds bleak. " Elfwine looked around. "When my father is here, things are slightly more... ordered. He has a certain presence, you see—something about him that I can't match that makes people want to make him proud." He smiled faintly, remembering his father's departure and the feeling of, finally, being close to him. "I'm sure you know all about that, though, don't you? Having a father you have to live up to?"

"Not truly," Jijinn said softly. "I never actually met my father."

Elfwine's face fell and his brow knitted in confusion. "But.... Abula...."

"Is not my father. His name is Akim and he is simply my—well, your people don't really have a word for it, but I suppose you could think of him as my servant—though that is not accurate."

"I.... Is this an odd attempt at humor?" Elfwine asked.

Jijinn turned, a knife in his hand. "No."

Elfwine paled, stepping back. "I.... What...?"

"Oh, it's nothing personal. Your hospitality has been very kind. But I was sent here for this purpose and now my reputation requires I kill you."

The odd Haradrim boy he knew was now subsumed by a cold-eyed predator. Elfwine edged towards the door. "My guard—"

"Is already dead. Akim will have seen to it."

Elfwine called for him anyway, to no avail. He swallowed hard, blood racing through him. He had trained against Erkenbrand, honed his reflexes and readied himself for the day he would face an enemy in combat.

But this was his first test and he felt woefully unprepared.

"I welcomed you into my home," the young prince said with a glare.

Jijinn was done with talking. He lunged, faster than Elfwine had ever seen anyone move, and slashed out at the prince's chest.

Elfwine only barely escaped. He scrambled desperately out of reach, but the knife followed, cutting ever closer to his skin. The assassin was relentless, pushing him further and further back.
Aldurn finished offering his explanation for the death of Orthale's orc servant, wincing at the nervous quaver he heard in his voice. He hated how deeply the man's claws were in him, but he was helpless to change it.

Orthale listened without so much as a scowl touching his face. He waited until the rider was finished speaking and then shrugged carelessly.

"Be at peace. I am not angry. You did just what you should have, given the circumstances. At the moment, Elboron is more valuable to me than Utuk was."

Aldurn relaxed a little, feeling relief wash over him. "Thank you, sir."

"Utuk was a fool for attacking the boy." His alarmingly intuitive gaze measured Aldurn for a moment. "And since you still have your head, we can assume the boy saw nothing. My plans do not change."

Aldurn did not respond, terrified of giving himself away.

"And their search for the hammer...?"

Aldurn barely avoided flinching. He was drowning in lies. "With Elfwine shepherding the country, they have been too busy. Also, Elboron was the real troublemaker of the group. Without him, they are less motivated."

Orthale's displeasure showed on his pale face. "Well, the army will be returning soon. So, Elfwine will have idle time once more."

"H-how do you know?"

Orthale glanced at the scrying pool beside him and then back at Aldurn. "Its power has faded, but it still offers me glimpses into what is going on in the world. The army arrived yesterday and as per my plan, the city has surrendered."

Aldurn frowned, not understanding.

Orthale smiled patronizingly. "Kaeliz is largely useless to me, as rash and incompetent as he is. However, his people are valuable to me as future soldiers. When his messenger arrived with a plea for help, I sent him back with gold enough to buy the loyalty of some skilled men." Orthale's eyes glinted with satisfaction. "They deposed Kaeliz and handed him over to Eomer and offered their surrender. So now I still have what I had before, a warlord at my command and a city full of soldiers for when I need them. And Eomer gets Kaeliz's head, so everyone is satisfied."

The rider felt awe at his master's far-reaching hand. This was why he feared to defy Orthale openly. The man's power was vast.

"I am surprised you did not take advantage of the King's absence."

Orthale dismissed the idea with a wave of his hand. "That is because you fail to understand the merits of patience," he rebuked Aldurn. "I could take Edoras at any time of my choosing, but to what end? Elessar would sweep in before I'd even closed the gates behind me." He shook his head. "No, I need the hammer to cement my power. Or, failing that, things are almost in place to
throw Gondor into chaos so I can face off with Eomer without interference."

Aldurn gaped at him. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing you need concern yourself with," Orthale told him. "Tell me, what is happening in Meduseld?"

Aldurn searched his memory for some innocuous news to report. He was still trying to sift through all things Orthale had said. "Well, an ambassador from Hijaz has arrived with offers of friendship."

Orthale's posture straightened and his face tightened with worry. "Hijaz, you say?"

Aldurn nodded, confused as to why Orthale was in the least bit interested. "You know it?"

"Hijaz is a ruin surrounded by a wasteland. No one lives there—unless the rumors of it being home to a cult of assassins have any truth."

Aldurn went ashen, understanding what Orthale was suggesting. He could scarcely conceal his panic, so instead he just turned and rushed for the door. Orthale did not question, for the princes were important to them both.

Only for different reasons.

Alphros was down again.

Eomer could not bear to watch for much longer. If the proud young man would just surrender, Eomer could offer Kaeliz just about anything to buy the warlord's mercy. With enough gold and horses, the man would surely be happy to be on his way without killing Alphros.

But the son of Elphir would not yield. It had been almost an hour of humiliating torture, and still the prince fought on. Long past frustration and even condescending feelings for the boy's sense of honor, Eomer's heart ached.

Alphros of Dol Amroth was a Knight in every sense of the word, every bit as deserving of glory as his grandfather was.

And he was going to die.

Elfwine had thrown everything he could lift at the assassin, trying to keep him at bay. It was useless to try and engage him—he was too fast. His knife, the gift from King Elessar, was hanging in its scabbard on the wall—but it might as well have been in the Shire, for all the good it did him.

The door opened and Eldarion came in, his smile dissolving into a look of confusion as he took in the scene. He did not have long to ponder, though. In a flash, Jijinn had pulled and thrown a small knife from his sleeve.

Only Eldarion's superb reflexes saved him. He ducked and rolled out of the way, shouting for help.
The moment of distraction allowed Elfwine to dart out of reach. He quickly made it to Elessar's dagger and turned, feeling a bit more secure with a weapon in his hand.

Jijinn pounced on the confused Eldarion, hoping for an easier kill. He swiped and slashed with his dagger, narrowly missing the nimble boy. Fast as Eldarion was though, he was still in a state of shock and the assassin was not letting up.

A swift leg-sweep knocked Eldarion's legs out from under him, and the boy hit his head on a table on the way down.

Jijinn turned just in time to meet the attack of Elfwine. Their knives clattered against each other again and again, each gauging the other's skill. Elfwine was the first to make a mistake, though, and Jijinn's blade cut his hand open.

Elfwine grimaced and took a brutally hard punch to the face. He crumpled, stunned and trying to get up.

Jijinn glanced at Eldarion, making sure he was equally helpless. It was time to end this.
Elfwine and Eldarion are helpless before an assassin. Alphros’ skills are no match for his Haradrim adversary. And Faramir’s illness continues.

Year 15, 4A

Alphros, noble son of Dol Amroth, stumbled backwards and collapsed into the arms of his friends. They shouted, pleaded and begged him to rally, to drive his sword through Kaeliz’s black heart, but he was beaten.

Everyone could see it.

Eomer was grinding his teeth so hard he was giving himself a headache. As surely as if there were shackles around his wrists, he was bound and unable to do anything but watch. If only the stubborn, brave stupid boy would yield....

Amrothos was silent and still beside him. The only display of the anguish in his heart was the way his fingers were digging into Eomer’s arm. His eyes watched the fight with something that could only be called stormy serenity.

Eomer knew better. He knew Amrothos was as sick with worry as he himself was.

Kaeliz raised his sword high and sneered at the crowd. Though sweating from the long fight, he was in the very best of health. His eyes were bright with triumph.

"It seems the fight has gone out of your champion," he mocked. "Perhaps there is another who would take his place?" He turned maliciously upon Eomer. "The King, perhaps?"

Eomer bared his teeth. "You would allow me to stand in Alphros’ stead?"

Kaeliz bowed graciously. "For the honor of killing you, I will let the whelp escape with his life."

Eomer and Amrothos exchanged a brief look. The King gave Kaeliz a thin smile and then nodded slowly. "I accept your challenge. But as the challenged, I exercise my right to name a champion."

Kaeliz frowned in irritation. "Who...?"

Amrothos stepped forward and bowed floridly, a wide, friendly smile on his face. "That would be myself, my good sir. Amrothos of Dol Amroth, lately of Rohan."

Kaeliz spat on the ground. "I weary of slaughtering Princes."

Eomer shrugged and spread his hands. "Those are the terms. You have forfeited your right to Alphros’ life. Now you may either fight my champion or you may die where you stand."

"You're a coward," Kaeliz sneered.

"Not in the way you mean," Eomer said with a hateful look. "I simply have a healthy fear of my
wife and she has strictly forbidden me from dueling."

Some of the Rohirrim around him snickered at that.

Undone and frustrated, Kaeliz shrugged his shoulders and twirled his sword. "As you will."

Amrothos walked over to Alphros and knelt, looking into his eyes with an uncle's love. The young prince was simply crushed by his defeat, but the rebuke he was expecting to see in his uncle's eyes was not present.

"May I borrow this?" Amrothos asked, gripping the hilt of his nephew's sword.

There was a brief moment of quiet and then the young man looked away in shame and loosened his grip. Amrothos took up the sword and then dropped it. "Ah, a bit slippery from sweat..." He knelt and picked up the blade again, giving it a few lazy swipes.

"At your leisure...." he murmured to his opponent.

Kaeliz came at him, not playing this time. He stabbed and cut with his shocking speed, snarling hatefully in his own language.

Amrothos slipped out of the reach of his blade, looking aghast. "Really, now, such language is hardly appropriate. You never even met my mother...."

Kaeliz pressed him remorselessly, blade singing in the air as he sought to cut down the grinning prince. But for all his speed, Amrothos was quicker.

The prince slipped aside and tripped him, causing him to fall face-first into the dirt. The warlord returned to his feet in a towering rage. He launched a brilliant series of swipes and lunges, the very sort that had overwhelmed Alphros like a storm would do to a small skiff.

But Amrothos parried each one easily enough, his entire posture relaxed. His lack of concern was driving his enemy to even greater levels of outrage. As hard as Kaeliz came at him, though, he was always able to dance away.

He spun around the warlord and slashed out expertly. The sharp blade severed the tendons behind Kaeliz's knee, bringing the mighty man down to his good knee.

Amrothos stepped back, grinning coldly now. "You are quite talented, really. I suppose it would have only been fair to tell you I was trouncing my brothers in the practice yard when I was eleven...."

Kaeliz threw himself at Amrothos, and the prince this time did not step away. He knocked aside the sweeping sword and then plunged his blade into the man's chest.

Kaeliz collapsed on him, coughing up blood. He spat out something in his own tongue, the triumph returning to his eyes for just a moment. Amrothos shoved him away and turned away, not wishing to watch his death throes.

Eomer smiled at him, having known without a doubt that Amrothos' skill was far beyond that of the warlord. He saw concern in the prince's eyes, though, and he felt a cold worry begin to gnaw at him.

"What is it?"

Amrothos was picking distastefully at his blood-spattered clothes. "He said ... that he was stealing
your future as surely as you have stolen his.” He frowned, trying to make sense of it.

Eomer was a father and so it did not take him any time at all to translate the words. He went white, looking north and east, as if he could bridge the miles between him and Edoras.

"Win...."

Aldurn leaped off his exhausted horse and ran full-out into the keep. His long legs took the stairs two and three at a time. By the time he reached the floor where the princes dwelled, he had his sword out.

He was braced for the worst, fully expecting to come upon the corpses of the two boys and no sign of their killer. Such a failure to protect Elboron's friends was a sickening possibility to consider.

He heard the sounds of a scuffle and then silence. Wisdom told him that he should slow down, approach with caution, get a sense of what he was walking into. However, panic was ruling him and he crashed into the room without hesitation.

His limited faculties took in the scene. Two prone yet moving princes, a figure looming over them with a knife.... He reacted on instinct.

Even Jijinn's reflexes weren't enough to save him from the hurled blade of the enraged rider. It took him in the chest and sent him hurtling from his victims.

There was a moment of still silence and then Aldurn walked over to the assassin to retrieve his sword. He stared in horror to see it was nothing more than a child, unable to grasp what culture would turn a boy into a killer.

Then Elfwine was stirring, getting slowly to his feet with a pathetic groan. "Aldurn...?"

"I was passing by when I heard a commotion, highness," he said, using his pre-planned lie. He moved to help Eldarion up—the son of Elessar was holding his head and wincing.

Elfwine walked over to the still body of Jijinn, staring coldly. "Aldurn, rouse the guards. I want his accomplice—Akim or whatever his name is—brought to me in chains. Mostly alive." The prince shuddered violently.

Aldurn's brow furrowed. "Highness...."

"Didn't you hear me? Now! He'll escape! He'll go back to his people! They'll send more killers back here!" he shouted hysterically.

Aldurn's gaze fixed on the prince's bleeding hand. He turned back to Jijinn and snatched up the assassin's knife. The sticky green substance coating the cutting edge confirmed the worst of his fears.

"I'll do it myself," Elfwine snapped. "Ferth!" he called, stepping towards the door. Then, like a puppet whose strings had been cut, he folded.

Aldurn leaped forward and caught him just in time. "Ancestors...." he murmured. "Dar, hold him...."
Eldarion, dazed and still not sure what had happened, stumbled over and sat cross-legged beside their guard. Aldurn settled the Prince of the Mark in his lap and then went over to a wooden chair. His heavy booted foot came down on the fragile thing and broke it into pieces.

He returned with a piece of the wood and knelt. "You weren't cut?" he asked Eldarion.

The prince of Gondor shook his head. He was now aware of what was happening, as his ashen face attested to. He started murmuring to Elfwine in Elvish.

Aldurn put the wood between the delirious youth's teeth. "Bite down, lad," he ordered. When Elfwine complied, he took up the boy's knife and grabbed his arm by the wrist. Quickly, he sliced open the puffy wound made by the poisoned dagger.

Elfwine screamed and fainted.

Tossing the knife aside, Aldurn brought the wound to his mouth and sucked out as much of the poison as he could get. He feared he was already too late, but he would not surrender the prince without a fight.

Afterwards, he bound the prince's hand and felt his forehead. He was burning up.

"I think I've bought him time, but I don't know how much."

Eldarion fretted and then his eyes brightened. "I can help. Athelas... There was some growing on the howes."

Aldurn shook his head. "I don't—"

"Take care of him, I'll be right back."

He handed his friend off to Aldurn and bolted out of the room. The rider watched him go, confused. He picked up his fallen prince and moved him to the bed, placing him under the covers. Inside, his heart twisted with fear.

Only now did he really have time to think about things — about his reaction to his charges being in danger. A cynic could argue that their lives made him useful to Orthael, but he knew that was not the case. The idea of an assassin, here, preying on the two princes....

It had made him angry.

"I guess I've made my choice, Boro...." he murmured, feeling something like relief wash over him.

Eldarion returned quickly — no one could run faster than the slender youth — sweating from exertion. He went over the ailing prince and slipped a small clump of what looked like a weed to Aldurn under the prince's bandage.

"That should slow the poison even more. He needs a healer, though."

"The Lady Lothiriel is days away, and Queen Arwen is probably still in the far north...."

Eldarion nodded, fretting anxiously. "What about the Dunlendings?"

Aldurn made a sour face at the mention of the barbarians. "What about them?"

"Educh. His village probably has a healer."

Aldurn did not think much of Dunlendings, but he had to admit that it was possibly their best
chance. "We don't dare waste time sending for them. Go get some horses ready. I'll bring Elfwine..."

Eldarion nodded without hesitation and ran out of the room once more. Aldurn wrapped the Prince of the Mark in his blankets and carried him out. It was fortunate that most of the castle was asleep — he didn't fancy trying to explain himself to any guards or servants who spotted him.

Chest tight with worry, he went to the stables, the heart of the Mark dying in his arms.

Beregond had stood watch outside Faramir's door almost every hour of his illness. He had only taken food when it was brought and forced upon him, and gone to rest when Eowyn had threatened him with an armed escort.

Elboron could see the exhaustion the man hid behind his serene mask. He could see it, because every day as he approached his father's sick room, Beregond looked a little more chipped around the edges.

The boy was awed by the display of loyalty. He wondered if he would ever be able to inspire men in such a way, he knew he was a pale shadow beside his father. Faramir the Hero, Faramir the Legend, Faramir the Scholar...

He was just Elboron—which was quite enough for now, but he feared the day when his father would look at him with disappointment.

However, a small part of him would gladly accept being looked at in that way just to have his father look at him at all.

He passed into the stifling sick room and stopped dead. His father, gaunt, pale and ravished by illness, was sitting up and holding Eowyn's hand. Elboron was shocked motionless for a moment before darting over excitedly. "Da!"

Faramir gave his son a weak smile. "Finished leveling Rohan already, have you?" he rasped.

Elboron huffed and rolled his eyes, feeling like he had wings. "I actually remembered there were some towers here I left standing..."

Faramir chuckled and hugged his son to him. "I've missed you, boy."

"Missed you too, Da," Elboron said, hugging him tight and trying to hold back the tears stinging his eyes. "When...?"

"Just a moment ago, and please let your father breathe, dear," Eowyn told him fondly.

Elboron reluctantly let his father go. He stopped being embarrassed by his own fit of emotion when he saw Faramir wipe at his own eyes. "Are you all better, Da?"

Faramir nodded with a somewhat lopsided grin. "Of course, son. I'm ready to go fishing or whatever you want to do..."

"Pig swill," Eowyn argued. "You're not getting out of that bed and don't even think otherwise."

Faramir sighed mournfully. "Your mother is still against us having any fun, I see..."
"I'd just rather not pick you up from the bottom of the stairs you'll undoubtedly fall down in your condition."

Elboron was almost vibrating where he stood, he was so excited. All the worry, all the fear, all the anxiety was gone. His father was getting better and all would be well. For the first time in weeks, the future was not something to be dreaded.

The hunt had been bountiful. Educh's people would eat well for some time, something they could not always count on. The village was in a celebratory mood, everyone pitching in to dress the carcasses and ready the meat for the smoking huts.

Even the chieftain was assisting, blood up to his elbows from the work. His daughter, Magda, was taking the meat he passed to her and coating it in herbs, happy to be helping her father.

A commotion brought his attention around. A Rohirrim rider was entering the village. While his eyes weren't good enough anymore to make out the face, there was only one adult Rohirrim that would be allowed to make it to the village alive.

And, to prove his theory, another rider, much smaller, came into view behind the first. Educh frowned, his heavy brow knitting together. An unannounced visit was peculiar, but not extraordinary. However, Aldurn was carrying a blanket-wrapped bundle in his arms, and that could not mean anything good.

Wiping his hands on a rag, he went to meet the rider, Magda trailing after him. The one behind was Elfwine's friend, Eldarion, so he could only assume the Prince of the Mark was in the blanket.

"What happened?"

"The prince has been poisoned," Aldurn said perfunctorily. "There are no healers of any use left in Edoras. Can you help?"

Magda let out a little gasp. Educh turned to her. "Fetch Uktha, girl, now."

His daughter trembled, staring at Elfwine a moment, and then she dashed off. Educh held out his hands and after only the slightest hesitation, Aldurn handed over his burden. The chieftain looked at the pale face of the prince and was taken back to the days when he'd held his own son in his arms, rocking him in his fevered sleep.

Kalicht was long gone, but there was yet a chance for the son of Eomer.

Aldurn slid wearily from his horse and took the reins of Eldarion's mount. "Go on, I'll take care of the animals."

The heir of Gondor gave him a grateful look and followed Educh towards a hut at the other end of the village. Uktha met them there, Magda at her side. The healer was an older woman, thin as a reed and slightly hunched. "Bring him in."

Educh stepped into the small dwelling. He laid the boy down on a pile of furs and stepped back anxiously. "You have to save him..."

Uktha smiled gently at him. "If it is within my power. Now, my chieftain, go. The children can be of some use, but you will only be in the way."
Educh nodded, quite accustomed to being banished by the healer. He slipped out of the hut and went to find Aldurn. He was helpless to reverse the poison, but he would at least get the story on how this happened.

It did not occur to him how odd it was that he, a leader of the Dunlendings, should care about a Prince of the Mark so much.

Every day, his father grew stronger. By the end of the first week, he was taking short walks with Eowyn and Elboron. By the end of the second week, he was seeing to a few official affairs and taking meals in his feasting hall.

Elboron was so relieved and so happy he was almost uncontrollably giddy. Bergil despaired as the young prince tore through the halls at full speed, playing tag with his childhood friend Thormir.

The house of Faramir slowly returned to normal.

As autumn wrapped around Ithilien, Elboron's thoughts turned back to Rohan and the friends he had left behind. It was awkward, really, because he didn't want it to appear that he was anxious to leave his parents, but the fact was...he missed Elfwine and Eldarion something awful.

He struggled with this as he walked with his father in the gardens. Though far from the towering figure of his legend, the light was back in Faramir's eyes. "I think I might be well enough for a fishing trip soon..." he suggested to his son.

"Really?" Elboron asked excitedly.

"Very possibly." Faramir wrapped an arm around his son's shoulders. "I can't get over how you've grown."

"Less than a hand higher than the last you saw me, Da..."

Faramir shook his head. "Not just speaking of that, son. You're carrying yourself like a man, now. I guess being a hero of Gondor has gone to your head," he teased.

"Da!" Elboron whined, blushing.

Faramir laughed, mussing his hair. "Your mother is forever cooing over those plaits of yours. She's very happy to see you celebrating your Rohirric heritage."

Elboron snorted. "Bergil isn't."

Faramir smiled wryly. "Bergil is oddly different from his father."

"He's a horse's ass."

"Language, Boro," Faramir reprimanded him lightly.

"Sorry, sir."

Faramir shrugged the matter away. "I understand you two have been fighting a bit more than usual..."

"Who said that?"

"Bergil."
Elboron gnashed his teeth. "It's all his fault anyway. He wants to turn me into some sort of parade horse and he keeps insulting Mother's people. And he—" The young prince looked down.

"He what?" Faramir asked gently.

"He keeps talking about how if you.... That I could...." He kicked a stone into a bush. "He keeps talking about how you won't live forever and I need to be ready."

Faramir nodded. "Well, he's not wrong."

"I know. But I wish he'd shut up about it."

"Son, I hope to be around for a long, long time. But one never knows..." He eyed his son askance. "Are you ready? To lead the city?"

"I...." He flinched from his father's piercing gaze. "No."

"There is a lot I need to teach you," Faramir told him. "So.... I don't think I can let you go back to Rohan just now."

"But, Da!"

"Now son, you've had a couple of years of reckless fun. But it is time you learned a little about this city and how it works."

Crushed, Elboron walked along in sullen silence.

"Are you angry with me?" he asked the boy.

His son shook his head. "No, sir."

Faramir knelt before him so he could look into his eyes. "I know you miss your friends. Perhaps they could come here to visit?"

Elboron's face lit up. "Could they?"

"I suppose it is only right that I give Eomer a rest."

Elboron laughed and hugged him. "Thank you, Da."

"All right then..." Faramir said, hugging him back. "Just promise you'll listen to Bergil in lessons. Agreed?"

"Da...."

"Boro."

The young prince made a face. "Yes, sir."

"Good. Let's see what the kitchens are working on then, yeah?"

Elboron beamed happily and nodded, following his father back into the keep. The prospect of having his friends here filled him with excitement. No doubt, they had done nothing but lay about Meduseld without him there.
Elfwine moaned and cracked his eyes open. He was miserably warm but try as he might, he could not kick the blankets off. Worse, he could not tell where he was, other than that it was not his room in Meduseld.

"Stop, stop," a soothing voice told him pressing him gently back down.

His blurry vision focused somewhat on the face floating before him. "Magda?"

She smiled at him and nodded, mopping sweat from his forehead. "Stay quiet."

He looked around, trying to get his bearings. Eldarion was asleep nearby, curled up like a cat. "What... How...?"

"Your guard brought you here. The one who attacked you used poison."

"Poison?" Elfwine asked in a panic.

"Yes, please, do not worry. Uktha, our healer, she defeated the poison. You will be fine."

Elfwine propped himself up on his elbows, blinking at her. "I feel weak."

"You almost died," she confided with wide-eyed horror. "If not for your friends and for Uktha...."

He shivered. Death had never been so close. "Aldurn...I need to speak with him."

"He returned to your city to tell them what happened. He left instructions for you to stay here."

Elfwine winced and held his aching head. "I can't say as I want to argue..." He pursed his lips. "Um...where are my clothes?"

She blushed and pointed to a neatly stacked pile off to the side.

"Ah. Well... I need to...." He colored and struggled with his clumsy tongue, unsuccessfully.

"You need to...? Oh! Yes. Here...." She retrieved his tunic and handed it to him and then turned her back.

"Thank you," he murmured, untangling himself from the blankets and struggling into the tunic. He wasn't too steady on his feet, but he could not ask Magda for help with this. He nudged Eldarion. "Hey...."

The son of Elessar woke and smiled up at him. "Win!"

Elfwine smiled at the relief on his friend's face. "I need to take care of business. Can you help me outside?"

"Oh, yes, certainly." He scrambled to his feet and put Elfwine's arm around his shoulders.

Together, they staggered outside into the cool night air. Elfwine breathed in deep of the fresh air. His eyes turned to the bright stars overhead. "I can't believe it..."

"Me either," Eldarion agreed. "We were all scared witless."

"What happened after I fainted?"

Eldarion sketched out the details of what occurred, speaking in awe of Aldurn's decisiveness.
"I just...." Elfwine looked down. "Why would anyone want to kill us?"

Eldarion shook his head. "Might it have anything to do with your father and the battle he's in?"

"Perhaps. I mean, likely, yes. It would be an odd coincidence, him being in Harad and us being attack by a Haradrim assassin." He moved off behind a tree and saw to his business.

"I can't imagine ... turning a boy into a killer. What kind of a people would do that?"

"Monsters," Elfwine said. "They clearly place no value on life." He came back after a moment and leaned on his friend again.

"Perhaps. Still don't know why the Haradrim would want us dead."

Elfwine stopped and muttered a curse. "I'm so stupid..."

"What...?"

"Boro and I, we rescued the princes of Dol Amroth, basically upending the plans of.... What was his name? Kaeliz. Yes. I'll just bet this was his idea..."

"If that's so, I hope your father kills him extra dead, then."

They went back to the hut and Elfwine slipped back under the furs. He smiled gratefully at Magda. "Thank you."

"I am happy you are well."

He felt an odd fluttering in his stomach. "You look tired. Why don't you rest?" the Prince of the Mark suggested.

She looked to Eldarion and then shook her head. "I do not wish to leave you..."

"You need your sleep as well," Elfwine told her gently.

She nodded and smiled briefly. "Yes. Your friend can watch your sleep." She moved over to him and kissed him on the cheek, blushing. Then she scampered out.

Elfwine went very red. He threw a glare at the grinning Eldarion. "Not a word."

His friend laughed and affected an innocent look. Elfwine closed his eyes, seeing Magda in his mind. As much as any medicine Uktha had given him, that kiss had made him feel much better. Guiltily, he realized that he was in no hurry to return to Edoras after all.

Aldurn returned that evening, bringing along a horse for Elfwine to ride home. By that time, the boy was feeling somewhat stronger, walking about a little.

The rider saw this and smiled widely in relief. "Highness," he said and bowed. Elfwine smiled wanly and nodded. "I owe you my life...."

Uncomfortable with those words, Aldurn shrugged them aside. "Return the favor by barring Erkenbrand from taking my head? He was not pleased to hear I'd brought you to the
Dunlendings."

Elfwine laughed softly. "I'll speak with him." He sighed and looked around at the village, his gaze landing finally on Educh. He bowed low, solemnly. "The Mark owes you a great debt, and so do I."

Educh waved that aside and wrapped the boy in a fierce hug. "The Prince of the Mark has true friends here. He must never forget that."

Elfwine smiled, wondering why his father refused to see the nobility of these people. "I will not forget."

He moved aside and looked into Magda's eyes, feeling his stomach twist up nervously. It was truly inconvenient there were all these people about, because he had some things he wished to say to her.

She favored him with a bright smile. "Will you come back soon?"

He nodded awkwardly. "I promise."

A huge smile graced her face. "I ... want you to have something to remind you of me." She took his hand and pressed into his palm a single lock of her dark hair.

He stared in wonder at it for a moment. "Thank you...." He carefully tied it to his belt with a strip of leather. Then, on a whim, he took out Aldurn's knife and cut off a lock of his own hair, offering it to her.

The two of them stood blushing and looking around furtively as the adults smiled approvingly. Then, heart hammering in his chest, Elfwine leaned in and gave her a brief, chaste kiss on the lips.

An approving cheer went up from the crowd. Elfwine and Magda blushed furiously and stared intently at their feet. After a moment, Aldurn led the moon-struck prince to his horse so they could begin the journey home.

As autumn took over the Mark, Edoras once again became a swarm of activity. Queen Lothiriel arrived with an escort from Ithilien. Immediately, she took an accounting of all that had happened and, after seeing to her son, began the task of returning the house to order.

The army returned merely days later, road-weary and travel-stained. A very loud and long celebration was held, only after which did Eomer hear what had been done to his son. It took some persuading to convince him to not take the army back to Harad for more vengeance.

And the shock and disbelief showed plainly on his face when he was told that the Dunlendings had saved his son's life. Unwilling to accede to that, he chose instead to heap praise upon Aldurn for his quick-thinking.

Aldurn visibly paled at the honor.

Because it was necessary, Elfwine told his parents of Hama's indiscretion and the solution he had come up with. While Eomer seemed disappointed that his son had not ordered the customary wedding, he nonetheless approved his son's decision.

Haleth and Eothain, the stableboy's adoring fathers, were not so easily appeased. Elfwine did not
ask, but it was obvious from the pained way in which Hama walked afterwards, he'd received a thorough lashing for his mistake.

And then King Elessar's party returned from the north. They paused in Edoras for a brief rest before the final stretch to Minas Tirith.

might get it into his head to take his son home after recent events. It was bad enough Elboron was staying in Ithilien, but if they were separated from each other as well...

Locked in their room with a trencher of food, they returned to the business of the tapestry they had found. Elfwine was doubtlessly more fascinated by the find than Eldarion, who flopped on his back and sighed often.

"Yes, but what about the hammer?" he asked impatiently.

Elfwine threw a slice of apple at him. "Will you stop it? This takes time. These symbols aren't very specific."

Eldarion groaned. "Why couldn't your ancestors just leave a treasure map like regular people?"

"This is a treasure map, goat-face. Look at it. I can't believe this isn't hanging up somewhere...." He shook his head. "Besides, if it were that easy, the enemy would have it and then we'd all be in deep trouble, right?"

Eldarion snorted. "We still don't know how much is real and how much is legend."

"Well, I think we're close. Does that help?"

"I'm just—"

There was a knock on their door. Elfwine rolled up the tapestry and tossed it to Eldarion, who stuffed it under the blankets. "Yes?"

Eomer stepped in, looking a bit harried. He smiled at the two boys. "How are you feeling, Win?"

"I'm fine, sir."

"You realize I will keep asking you for some time, correct?"

Elfwine sighed, smiling despite himself. "Yes, sir."

"I was speaking with Aragorn...."

Both boys stared at him with their hearts in their throats. "Yes?" Eldarion asked weakly.

"How would you two feel about spending next year in Minas Ithil with Elboron?"

Their faces lit up. "Really?" Elfwine asked excitedly.

"Faramir sent the invitation back with your mother," he told his son. "But I wanted to speak with Aragorn before saying anything."

The boys exchanged huge smiles. "That would be wonderful," Eldarion said.

Eomer nodded. "It's settled then. Erkenbrand will be going along to keep up your combat training. But Faramir assures me he has scholars to spare for tutoring you."
They nodded, willing to accept any conditions for the chance to see Elboron again. The King took his leave, then, obviously pleased to have made the boys happy. If nothing else, it would place them further from the Dunlendings, for which Elfwine was developing an unsettling attachment.

Eomer handed the letter off to his wife, unable to read it a third time. He scratched his beard, pondering and fuming all at once. Gloomily, he stared into the blazing hearth and stretched out his long legs.

His wife's lips creased into a thin line. "Idiot," she muttered and handed the letter off to Amrothos. Her lanky brother read it quickly and sighed heavily. "You know he's always been an arse, Lothy."

"But this is absurd!" she snapped. She sat and picked up her embroidery, stabbing agitatedly at the cloth with her needle.

"Could either of you tell me what is going on in your fool brother's head?" Eomer asked plaintively.

Lothiriel muttered a curse more suited to a fishwife than a lady and stabbed the cloth some more.

Amrothos shrugged bonelessly. "Well, Elphir has always had a temper. And he's made it pretty clear in his letter that he blames you for what happened to Alphros."

"But why?" Eomer demanded. "I did everything I could to talk that boy out of it. You know that. Erchirion knows it too! Why can't Elphir accept that?"

"Ah, well, I think Erchirion presented a slightly different case to our brother," Amrothos informed him.

"Why?" Eomer grated.

"Because, like Elphir, he tends to lose sense in family matters. I think, in his mind, you should have stuffed Alphros in a sack and handed him over and let Elphir sort it out later."

"Elphir should never have put that hot-headed boy in charge of the army." Eomer grumbled and shook his head. "I'm getting too old for this."

Lothiriel favored him with a fond smile. "Let it be for now, love. Elphir is always at his most unreasonable during winter."

"That's true," Amrothos agreed. "When he can't go out on the seas, he gets out of sorts."

Eomer shook his head. "He says the friendship of Dol Amroth and Rohan is ended. That sounds a bit more than being out of sorts."

His wife exchanged a look with her brother and then said, "Perhaps he'll be in a more reasonable mood when his son is better."

Eomer stared into the firelight. "Amrothos, do you think you can talk sense into him?"

"I have never succeeded before...." His friend considered it. "I'll give it a try, as soon as the weather improves. All right?"
Eomer nodded impatiently. He did not like problems he could not immediately resolve. In the case of the overly-sensitive ruler of Dol Amroth, though, a certain degree of patience was required. If he could not resolve it on his own... Well, he would consult Aragorn only when he had exhausted all other options.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

The story moves to Minas Ithil, where new dangers and new adventures await our three princes.

Year 16, 4A

The royal escort from the Mark arrived at the gates of Minas Ithil at the beginning of February. Clad in furs, they made a colorful sight nonetheless. Green cloaks contrasting the snow on the ground, bright banners whipping in the cold wind, they inspired awe in any who looked upon them.

Eomer was at their head, Erkenbrand by his side. Elfwine and Eldarion were slightly further behind, faces red from the cold. Fellfang barking excitedly, ran beside them. Aldum, who had insisted on keeping his post as the boys' guard, was just a bit apart. The King's eored was at their backs, spears glinting dully. The company looked about at the soaring trees of Ithilien with a certain degree of dubiousness.

The gates opened and the procession was allowed to come within the walls. Elfwine gaped in slack-jawed wonder. Nothing in his experience had prepared him for the grandeur of Minas Ithil. Even the sprawling city of Dol Amroth could not compare to the city of the moon, with its soaring towers and ornate facades.

The royal party halted before the Prince's Keep, a huge stone structure proudly flying the colors of Gondor and Ithilien. As they slid from their weary horses, Faramir, Eowyn and Elboron came out to greet them.

And though the ravages of illness on Faramir were apparent to everyone, no one spoke of it.

"The Prince of Ithilien bids welcome to the King of Rohan," Faramir said with a formal half bow.

"And the King of the Mark thanks the Prince of Ithilien for his hospitality," Eomer responded in kind.

Then the two old friends exchanged a fierce hug, smiling warmly. Eowyn followed suit, face lighting up at the sight of her brother.

Released from the constraints of formality, Elboron rushed to his friends and clasped their hands in greeting. "I've missed you."

Elfwine pushed him lightly. "Missed getting me into trouble, you mean."

Elboron laughed. "That too." He winked at Eldarion. "Has he bored you to death?"

Eldarion responded with an uneasy smile. "Not really. We've a story to tell you...."

"And something to show you," the Prince of the Mark murmured with a conspiratorial look.

The greeting feast was something they were used to skipping, but this time they were not allowed.
Faramir informed his son that he would have to attend, to practice his manners, and neither of the other boys would abandon their friend.

It was a lavish affair. The feasting hall was, like much of the city, an ongoing work of art. Skilled artists had painted frescos on the walls and the ceiling; each telling a single piece of the story of the Last Alliance. Behind the Prince's table was a larger-than-life image of Isildur striking down Sauron.

Minas Ithil, having been an orcish city for so long, was being made into a jewel by her prince. It was a final stab at the darkness that had consumed her.

Minstrels played during the meal; simple tunes from across the entirety of Gondor. It was a pleasant way to pass the meal, allowing them to focus more on the food rather than on conversation.

Afterwards, there was mulled wine and ginger candy, enough so that everyone was thoroughly stuffed. Only then were the boys excused, and they took their leave hastily.

"I'll give you both a tour when I don't feel like my guts are going to burst," Elboron told them.

They grinned, following him through the corridors and looking about in curiosity. Guards and servants bowed to them as they passed, making them a bit uncomfortable.

At his door, there was a brief discussion between Aldurn and Elboron's usual door guard, Ameran. The Ithilien guard was young, bored and more than happy to relinquish the post to Aldurn. The two began to discuss schedules and duties as the boys passed into the room.

"You could fit a stable in here," Elfwine said in awe.

Elboron shrugged and looked around. "I suppose."

Eldarion flopped on the bed and stretched out. "So, Win almost died...."

"What?" Elboron asked.

Elfwine shrugged uncomfortably and rubbed the scar on his hand without thinking. "Oh, yes, we've had some time...."

Elboron flopped on a pile of furs on the floor. "Tell me." The fear in his voice was evident.

Elfwine settled beside him and told the story as only he could, bringing to life every detail and every moment. Even Eldarion, who had been there, listened in rapt attention.

"I can't believe it," Elboron said, glowering. "What a coward, sending an assassin after you."

Elfwine nodded, in full agreement. There was nothing lower than a murderer in his eyes. "A part of me feels bad for Jijinn. He was never given a chance to be anything but what his people made him."

"More reason to exterminate them," Elboron said with hostility.

Elfwine looked sharply at him. "That might be a bit much...."

Elboron shrugged, agitated. "Sending a boy to kill boys pretty much condemns the whole race, I think."

Eldarion frowned at him and then smiled anew. "We found something. Show him, Win."
Elfwine went over to where his saddlebags were and took out a leather-bound scroll. He brought it over and slowly laid out the treasure he and Eldarion had discovered. Elboron did not seem even remotely impressed.

"What is it?" asked the heir of Ithilien.

"As near as I can figure it, this is Theolen’s recounting of her family’s fall," Elfwine murmured reverently.

Elboron continued to stare blankly at him.

"Theolen?" Elfwine repeated. When his friend shrugged he sighed in exasperation. "The daughter of Helm? Don't you remember anything?"

"He's very defensive about that old tapestry," Eldarion warned Elboron.

The son of Faramir rolled his eyes. "Of course. The older and mustier the better...."

Elfwine glared at the both of them. "Just because it isn't a plan to go haring off into deadly danger doesn't make it any less important to our goal."

"Very defensive," Elboron said to Eldarion, who snickered. "So, what does it say? Looks like just a bunch of pictures to me."

"They're symbols, goat-face, and I don't know for sure. It's like a different language."

"Well, if it stumps you...."

Elfwine looked mildly offended. "I didn't say I was stumped. I just haven't had so much time to focus on it."

"Tell him what you've worked out so far, though," Eldarion encouraged.

"Well...." Elfwine considered; as usual, he was enjoying knowing more than them. "This figure, with the crown, is obviously Helm. He's also the largest figure in the tapestry." His finger moved to where the Helm figure stood beside two smaller figures. One of the smaller figures also had a crown upon his head; the other was surrounded by a scattering of hash-marks in yellow thread. "I thought these were his sons, but Hama and Haleth are represented differently. They must be halflings or dwarves, though I've never hear of either in the Mark before my father's time."

Elboron began to look interested, moving closer.

Elfwine reverently waved his hand over another symbol, a large black sword. "I'm pretty sure this means 'enemy.' So, it looks like Helm faced something evil."

"Like a dragon?" Elboron asked.

Elfwine shrugged. "Possibly." He waved his hand over the rest. "It looks like he protected the small people against it and was rewarded with the hammer."

"So, it is real...." the prince of Ithilien whispered in wonder.

"Almost certainly," Eldarion said with an excited look.

"Imagine a weapon that powerful...." Eldarion said covetously.
"Imagine it being used against us," Elfwine pointed out. "There's something out there, something with evil plans that involve this thing. We have to find it to keep it safe."

"You worry too much," Eldarion argued.

"I think I have to agree with him, Dar. Magic does things to people. The One Ring corrupted Isildur, the palantir drove my grandfather mad...."

Elfwine gaped at him. "Ancestors, have you actually read something, Boro?"

Elboron withered him with a glance. "My father and Bergil have been burying me in history. I'm doing my best to forget it all as quickly as possible."

"Shouldn't be difficult for you," Eldarion mocked.

Elboron surged to his feet. "You need a trouncing, it seems." He pounced on his friend and wrestled with him, laughing all the while.

Elfwine grinned, idly rolling up the tapestry for safety. It was good to be together again, the three of them. It had not felt right, without Elboron. More than just the fellowship they shared, Elfwine knew they were slowly preparing to meet the threat to the West, and they would need to be together.

Shaking aside such heavy thoughts, he went to rescue Eldarion.

The tour of Minas Ithil took most of the following day. Again, Elfwine was the one truly awed by everything he saw. However, it was when they reached Faramir's library that they truly lost the Prince of the Mark.

"Oh my…." he whispered looking around at the rows of shelves, the sweeping arches and majestic frescos. Even incomplete, Faramir's vision was a wonder.

"I think he's going to faint," Eldarion said with grin.

"I'm not catching him," Elboron replied with a wink.

"This is amazing...." Elfwine walked along the polished floors, his booted feet echoing in the cavernous room. "I didn't think so many books even existed."

"This isn't even all of it. There's crates more, I think. They are still building a place for everything," Elboron commented. He looked around and shrugged. "Can't say as I care as much as you do, Win, but it is impressive."

Their friend reverently touched the spines of leather-bound tomes. "Impressive is hardly the word... Can I live here?"

Elboron laughed. "No. Master Gendt is a fussy old bore who runs this place and I don't think he will like you even touching his books."

"His books?" Eldarion asked.

"That's how he thinks of them." Elboron shrugged. "Don't worry, Win, we'll be trapped in here for hours on end of incredibly boring and numbing study."

Elfwine smiled. "I always envied that my grandfather was educated in Gondor."
"Which one was he again?" Eldarion teased.

"I'll beat you later," Elfwine retorted. "Histories, stories, diaries.... This is a treasure trove."

"I think we have the wrong fathers, Win," Elboron commented. "My father would be so happy if I had your love for learning," he said ruefully.

"And mine would rather have someone more interested in fighting and armor," Elfwine agreed. "Fate works in strange ways."

"Mine would rather I was a little less like him," Eldarion put in with a grin.

They dragged Elfwine out of the library and engaged him in a snowball fight. They were going to have less freedom very soon, so a free day was incredibly important to them.

"How are you holding up?"

"I'm quite fine, as I keep telling you."

Eomer folded his arms and set his jaw stubbornly. "Yes, I keep hearing. But I have yet to start believing. You forget, I've known you a long time."

Eowyn sighed at her brother and looked out her window again. It was difficult for him, sometimes, to separate the headstrong girl he had known from the Lady she had grown into. The years in Ithilien had changed her, and not always in ways he approved of.

"It's over and done, Mero," she told him, using her childhood nickname for him. "No sense in drudging it all up again."

Eomer also hated the distance that had grown between them. It was not a chasm, yet, but there was no doubt that their relationship had weakened with the miles separating them. He went over and poured them both glasses of water and handed her one, smiling in a supportive way.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here."

"And that I never seem to be, he thought with a twist of pain.

She turned to give him a forgiving glance. "Your wife was. And no offense, she's much more useful in such matters."

He frowned and shrugged. "Not for Faramir. For you, Wynny. It was a lot to go through alone."

Her expression turned wry. "It's not something I am unused to."

Remembering the days of Grima's poisoning of Theoden's mind, Eomer winced. "That is very sad, sister."

She turned back to her window. "There's no point in lamenting over it. I long ago realized I had to accept life as it was, not as I wanted it. You go off to war, and I take care of the wounded. You suffer, I worry. It's the way of things."

Eomer knelt by her chair and took her hand, brows knitted together. "I know how much you wished you could ride off with me...."

She turned sharply to him, expression hard. "Mero, it's not about that at all. Ancestors, haven't you realized I'm no longer that girl with skinned-knees, chasing Theodred with a wooden sword? I got
a bellyful of war once and I've never regained my taste for it." She shook her head. "It's not that I long to ride along with you, it's that I wish you would stop riding out at all."

Eomer flinched, surprised by the vehemence in her voice. "I come at Aragorn's call. The lands of the West are forever in peril—"

"Is that what you call last year's business? I thought it was simply settling a grudge."

Eomer stood, on the defensive and irritated by it. "That was a matter of honor."

"Of course, Mero, there is always an excuse. A matter of honor, or a camp of orcs that could, if they get lost, invade an unused part of Gondor. I think you find excuses for these battles. I think you and Aragorn and even my fool husband cannot accept peace because you cannot find a use outside of war."

"That is highly unfair."

"No, a child growing up without a father is unfair, Mero," she said seriously. "Do you remember what it was like when mother told us? Do you recall at all what it was like, not having them there? When you downed your first buck, didn't you look for father? When you were named Third Marshall, didn't you just wish our parents could see? Didn't you miss them on your wedding day? I know I did."

"Wynny...."

"No, Eomer, this is not about me. It's not about us. It's about our children. They need their fathers, safe and whole. They are at the cusp of adulthood, and they need you there to show them the way, to help them to not be afraid. When I thought I would have to tell Boro that his father was dead...."

"What?" he asked softly.

She burned him down to his boots with a glare. "I hated you. Just for a moment, I hated the whole lot of you." She looked away again. "I want it over, Mero. For a few years, let the world run itself and just focus on being a father."

"There are things happening, sister...." he told her. "We think there might be a new enemy rising."

She let out a short, snorting laugh. "Of course."

"Wynny...."

"I won't sing at your funeral, Mero. I've buried too many people I love."

"Wynny...."

"Go on, get out."

Eomer, feeling heartsick, turned and left the room. He knew there was a lot of truth in her words, but the fact was, there were things happening. As King of the Mark, and as Aragorn's friend, his course was not always chosen by him.

But those rationalizations rang hollow now.
Only a few days after their arrival, the King of Rohan took his leave. Walking beside Faramir to the horses, he pulled on his gloves and gave his long-time friend a somewhat serious look.

"Now, no more fainting-spells or laying about for attention, agreed?" he asked the Prince of Ithilien.

Faramir laughed. "I shall do my level best."

Eomer looked around at the city. "I do hope the boys don't break too much of this. I like what you've done with it."

"The King of the Mark is too kind," Faramir said with a sarcastic smile.

"I sort of have to be. You're married to my sister, and she leaves bruises." He clasped Faramir's hand warmly. "Do take care of yourself, my friend. The fields would be a little less green without you."

Faramir smiled fondly at the King. "Assuming you and Elessar can refrain from attacking anyone for a bit, that shouldn't be a problem. Honestly, you two need to find a less dangerous hobby."

Eomer winced a bit, thinking of his sister. "Now you sound like Lothy."

"She is a wise woman."

"And I wouldn't disagree—anywhere she could hear me."

Faramir chuckled and they came to a stop before the King's horse. Elfwine was there, holding the reins. Eomer's expression was proud as he looked upon his son. "Well, it seems you're the one off for an adventure this year."

"Mine doesn't involve people swinging swords at me, sir."

"Oh, I know you," Eomer said with a grin. "You'll find a way. Or if you don't, that terrible influence Faramir calls a son certainly will." His amused expression clearly showed he was joking.

"Well, maybe I'll avoid the assassins this year."

Eomer started and then sighed. "I would hope so. You're giving me gray hairs."

"Apologies, sir."

Eomer gave him a fierce, strong hug. "Mind your Uncle, don't damage his city, pay attention in lessons and come home safe."

Returning the hug, Elfwine said, "Yes, father."

He swung into the saddle then saluted the Prince of Ithilien. Faramir and Elfwine watched them go, the long parade of horses trailing out of the city. Then Elfwine made his way into the keep to find his friends.

Erkenbrand's weapons-training grew more intense, now that the boys were truly emerging out of childhood. With Elboron and Elfwine in their thirteenth year and Eldarion in his fourteenth, they were ready for more serious challenges.

The bow, the spear, the ax...they were tested on each. Weaknesses were noted and worked
through; strengths were complimented. It was grueling, but all of them enjoyed it much more than the three hours per day they were trapped with Master Gendt.

The humorless scholar was about as far removed from the easy-going Amrothos as a person could get while still alive. He was obviously brilliant, but he was also condescending towards the boys with his teaching. It was clear he was not going to give them any room for misbehavior or failure to pay attention.

And then they still weren't done, for Faramir had them stay with him for an hour while he attended to city matters. Granted, it could have been far worse. The Prince of Ithilien was a man of great patience and humor and he knew that every dull moment was sheer torture for them, so he did his best to at least make them understand why they had to know these things.

"Dar and Win, of course, have whole kingdoms to run. But it's all basically the same," he told them in the beginning. "The big things are just made up of small things."

"It wasn't so bad, when I was shepherding the Mark," Elfwine said thoughtfully.

"Oh? I remember you whining like a cow with a thorn in its leg," Eldarion countered.

Elfwine narrowed his eyes. "No, sheep-brains, I was whining because I had to sit in court with court attire all day while the world was on fire."

"Oh, well, there was that."

Faramir taught them how he made decisions; how much was instinct, how much was compassion and how much was pragmatism. While not incredibly exciting, the lessons were important ones and even they recognized that.

Once the weather improved, the restless princes started making noise about being let out to have a little relaxation. Bergil responded with a request for an armed escort and the matter landed in Faramir's hands.

Utterly unable to defend himself from three pathetic faces, the ruler of Ithilien crumbled fairly quickly. He instructed them to not stray too far and ordered Aldurn to see to it. With everyone but Bergil in agreement, the three youths escaped the confines of Minas Ithil.

The very first place they visited was at Elfwine's insistence — the base of the winding stair. The Prince of the Mark stood upon the very first step, beaming happily. "I've always wanted to stand here; the very place where Frodo and Sam began to cross into Mordor. You can almost feel the history here..."


"More than a bit," Elboron agreed.

"You two are hopeless. Look at this!" He swept a hand up towards the steep cliff face. "Two halflings, smaller than us, with all of Mordor looking for them ... half-starved and exhausted ... climbing these steps..."

Elboron shrugged. "Well, yeah, but it's just a set of stairs now. We use it to get up to Amon Turm and keep on eye on Mordor, but that's about it. No one really wants to remember this used to be orc territory."
"That's sort of sad, really," Elfwine commented. He looked up again. "You think we could...?"

"Not today," Aldurn told them, looking very stern. "Let's have a week where you three don't give me heart failure, shall we?"

They laughed. "We shouldn't torture the old man," Elboron said with a gleam in his eyes.

"Old?" Aldurn protested. "I could trounce the lot of you. Old indeed...."

"Oh could you now?" Elfwine asked, posturing.

"Why don't we find out...." Eldarion suggested.

"Well, now, I'm not sure— Ack!"

Eldarion leaped on his back with a laugh and the other two boys piled on. Aldurn muttered ineffective curses and struggled against him. With a laugh, he collapsed under the assault. The boys crowed in triumph.

"All right, everyone listen, especially you three...." Agalon, the Ithilien hunt master, gave the three boys a very serious look. A vast, barrel-chested man, his sheer presence aborted any thought of inappropriate behavior.

Nevertheless, the three boys were almost vibrating with excitement. This was the day, their day, the day they would go out on a hunt not as learners, but as hunters. Clad in forest colors and each armed with knives, bows and arrows, they were more than ready to get underway.

Agalon frowned at them, as if reading their excited thoughts. "We're after venison, first of all. If you see a boar, well, best not upset it. I'll be taking a party out tomorrow for them. Use caution, and remember the hand signals. We don't break silence unless it is an emergency. Is everyone clear?"

The veteran rangers nodded in boredom. Their neophyte counterparts made more positive gestures, obviously terrified of failure.

"All right, then. Let's go."

The hunt master turned and led them away, his gait surprisingly light. The boys found themselves very much in the middle, like calves in a herd, which annoyed them to no end. Clearly, Faramir had left rather inconvenient instructions.

The excitement dimmed, though, as the time ticked away. Agalon led them deep into the forest, off the road and into the wild. Elfwine eyed the looming trees uneasily — it was something he couldn't help. The only forests neighboring the Mark, Lothlorien and Fangorn, did not give his people any love for trees.

As time passed, the group spread out more. The boys, by unspoken agreement, fell further back, making it appear they were looking for tracks or some such. Sometimes they were pushed along by one of the veterans, but mostly they were successful in breaking loose from the group.

Eldarion was clearly most in his element here. He made quite a show of examining patches of grass and bits of leaves. How much he actually knew and how much was just him putting on airs, his friends could not be certain.
Towards midday, the signal was passed that a trail had been found. The hunting party halted while Agalon examined the prints closely. Then they were moving again, slower and quieter than before.

Elboron kept his focus with difficulty. He had not expected there to be so much boredom on a hunt. The times he had been out with his father had been different, of course. Then there had been no silence, as his father had been teaching him. And of course, time spent with his father simply flew by.

Elboron suddenly noticed Eldarion had fallen behind and went to check on him. The heir of Gondor was kneeling and examining a patch of ground. Elboron squatted beside him and tugged one of his braids.

Eldarion glared at him for that and traced a finger around an odd bootprint. Elboron looked and could not deny something was unusual about the print. It wasn't any ranger's boot, for sure. Nor did it resemble any man's footprint at all, really.

He frowned heavily. It was too big to be an orc, too small to be a troll. And the print was deep enough to suggest a heavy sort of person; or possibly someone wearing armor.

The Prince of Gondor skulked along, following the tracks into the bushes. Elboron almost called him back, but he bit off the sound as he remembered the imperative of silence. He cast about anxiously for someone he could signal, but there was no one.

And he couldn't let Eldarion wander off alone.

He caught up to his curious friend and stopped him. Rather insistently, he pointed back in the direction of the hunting party. Eldarion flashed an amused look, pushed him lightly, and took off after the trail he had found.

Now what...? he thought. The trail would probably go cold soon and his mercurial friend would lose interest. However, letting the son of Aragorn wander the wilds of Ithilien all by himself did not seem the sort of thing a Warden of Gondor should do.

I'll thrash him if he winds up ruining my first hunt, he thought and ran after the rapidly-disappearing form of his friend.

Far from the careful, deliberate pace of Agalon, Eldarion prosecuted his hunt with barely a pause to check the trail. He had learned to rely so heavily and so well on his instincts, it was fascinating to watch him go.

Elboron would have been more impressed if he weren't being dragged further and further from the real hunt.

If Win gets a kill before I do, I'll break something.

When his friend did pause, it was to kneel beside a nondescript pile of leaves. Slowly, he ran his fingers through the pile, considering. Elboron looked around in frustration, trying to figure how much time they had lost. His agitation was tying his stomach in knots.

Finally deciding they were far enough away that he could risk a whisper, he turned to tell his friend it was time to go. As his mouth opened, though, he saw what Eldarion was pulling from the pile—a snare.

He squatted down and examined the rope; the coarseness of the fiber, the poor weaving, the
unfamiliar knot-work.

It was not a good sign.

He nodded to his friend, now wanting to see for himself who these tracks belonged to. If there were foul kind in his father's realm, he would see to it they were expunged.

They proceeded with more caution then, worried what they might find. The vastness of the forest seemed much more menacing, suddenly, making them more keenly aware of just how alone they were. If anything happened....

A noise brought them up short. It had been low, guttural. And it had not been far away.

*It could be an animal, but we have to be sure,* Elboron thought, creeping forward.

Eldarion was thinking much the same thing, he could tell, as they exchanged a long, fretful glance. They crouched low and proceeded towards the sounds and the answer to the questions.

Agalon caught sight of their prey and moved the hunting party into a full run. The soft-booted men flew over the ground, joining in the timeless spectacle of hunter and hunted.

Elfwine, who had started to wonder where his friends were, was instantly caught up in the thrill of the chase. Trying to remember all the lessons he had learned, he outpaced several of the other hunters and tried to catch sight of their prey.

He was rewarded with a flash of white tail, there and gone again. Grinning with excitement, he started imagining how much fun it was going to be, holding his triumph over his more experienced friends.

Slipping an arrow from his quiver, he leaped over a boulder and picked up speed on a downward slope. The clatter of cloven feet ahead told him he was closing, and the twang of a bowstring also told him he was not the only one.

*No, this is my kill...* he thought insistently.

Heart pounding and chest heaving, he darted through the trees and up a pile of rocks. As he had hoped, he had a clear shot at the buck as it passed through a clearing. He took aim, judged wind speed and direction, and fired.

Something large, smelly and orcish appeared out of the bushes. It was an Uruk, something Elboron only knew from stories. He had thought they were mostly dead, after the war.

But here was one, and more seemed to be appearing. He whipped out the knife in his belt, his reflexes honed now. As the Uruk’s sword swiped to take off his head, he ducked and dove, driving his knife up to the hilt into the thing’s belly and then rolling away.

Eldarion had another one down, but there were others. He took out his bow and nocked an arrow. This was Eldarion's strength, not his, but at this range he did not need to be an expert marksman to be dangerous.
But there were so many....

The buck tumbled as the arrow sank into its body. Elfwine raced down after it, shocked that he had done it. His father would be so proud of him. And, of course, Elboron and Eldarion would be jealous, which would make it even better.

The buck was still alive when he reached it, a fact he lamented. He did not want the creature to suffer. Grimly, he took out his knife and cut the animal's throat. It had been a fine hunt. The animal's spirit was free now.

Agalon and the other hunters caught up to the prince, looking amazed. "I've never seen anyone run so fast," said the hunt master.

Elfwine snorted and shrugged. "You haven't seen Dar, then. He's the wind when he puts his mind to it." He looked around with a frown. "Where is he? And Boro?"

Agalon looked around, eyes narrowing. He seized one of the junior hunters by the collar and hauled him close. "Where are the princes?"

"I.... Sir...."

"I did tell you to watch them, didn't I?" Agalon snapped harshly.

The young man blanched. "I swear ... they were with us."

Agalon shoved him away. "Kathwer, Flebrun, see to the kill. The rest of you, find our two errant boys."

Elfwine's triumph evaporated just that quickly. His worry for his friends was immediate; for he could not imagine anything innocent that would take them away from this day.

A massive, meaty fist took smashed into his face. He was lifted off the ground and sent crashing to the hard earth. The air was knocked from his lungs, and he just lay there in pain, struggling to keep up the fight.

Eldarion was flattened to the earth, a huge, a booted foot pinning him down. The Uruks brought their swords to the boys' throats. Not all of their struggling was going to save them, and they knew it. But they fought on just the same.

A harsh voice cut into the angry muttering of the Uruks. An older one had arrived, hair an iron gray and one eye missing. He snarled at his men and they brought the boys up to their feet.

A one-eyed Uruk came over to them, poking at them and looking over their belongings. He gripped the emblem of Ithilien upon Elboron's shirtfront and growled out something. Then he took a hold of the symbol of Gondor that Eldarion wore on his arm and nodded to himself.

"Pups of Kings," he spat at the boys.

They were quickly bound and dragged along. Behind them, the Uruks began to erase any evidence of the battle, leaving no trace for anyone to find.
"But we can't give up!" Elfwine shouted at Agalon.

The hunt master looked around at the fading light and shook his head. "We're not giving up, highness. But we aren't going to find them by stumbling around in the dark. We go back to the city and a search party will come back with torches and lanterns."

The Prince of the Mark looked around frantically, thinking it would be just like his two friends to show up at that very moment.

But there was nothing.

He slumped a little and nodded. "You're right. I just…." 

Agalon gripped his shoulders. "I'm confident your friends are fine, lad. Now come on, we have to get back."

Elfwine nodded and the hunters began the trek back to the city. He had no idea how he was going to explain this to Faramir. Even though he knew this really wasn't his fault, he still felt responsible. He was, after all, the voice of reason. If he had stuck by them, maybe they would all be safe now, exchanging boasts and insults over a warm fire.

Jaw clenched, Elfwine sank into himself and spoke to no one on the long walk back to Minas Ithil. The day, once so bright, had turned very terrible indeed.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Eldarion and Elboron must evade the orcs pursuing them. Elfwine rushes after them to help.

Year 16, 4th Age

Faramir paced anxiously, condemned to wait while others searched for his son. He had wished to lead the search party himself, but Eowyn—as she so often did—calmed him and reminded him he was not yet back to his full strength. Whatever trials this visited on him did not matter in his eyes. However, he refused to slow down the searchers. Every moment counted.

Eowyn watched him pace, her own heart aching for their son and for Eldarion.

Faramir saw that in her eyes, but there was no comfort he could offer her. His vision from last year was haunting him, still crystal clear. His son, battling for his life....

The face of his son in the vision was older, though, if only a little bit. He did not doubt that at all, but it was a slender hope to fight back his fears with. His son, his pride was out in the wilds and who knew what had happened to him.

It did not help that he had not slept. The hunting party had brought the news last eve, and the search had begun immediately. All night, his best trackers had scoured the forest for any sign of the boys, without success. Now it was the afternoon of the next day, and he still knew nothing.

But that itself told him something was terribly wrong. If they had somehow gotten lost, and that was hard to believe, their trail would have been easily found. If some tragedy had befallen them.... Again, they would have been easily found.

They had been taken, he was sure of it. By what or whom and why, he could not guess. The enemies of the west had been quiet of late, something he had hopefully attributed to the Easterlings finally giving up. As absurd a hope as that had been, he still could not fathom they would be behind this. Kidnapping was not an orc habit.

He glanced over at his wife, who was staring vacantly ahead. She had endured a great deal, over the last couple years. He stepped over to her and knelt, taking her slender hands into his calloused ones. "They're smart boys, beloved. You know that. And tough and resourceful. They'll come back to us."

Her eyes focused on him, glassy-eyed with anguish. "I see the fear in your eyes. I know what you're thinking, because I'm thinking the same thing. They've been taken."

He swallowed hard and nodded, not surprised that she had come to the same conclusion.

"My brother said something about a new evil, something plotting wickedness. Is it true?"

Faramir sighed, knowing how much she hated talk of war and danger. "We have nothing but our own suspicion—orcs acting in an organized fashion, that two-pronged attack where Dol Amroth
was neutralized while the King's army was ambushed. The strange happenings in Rohan....” He nodded. "It's almost certain, and not terribly surprising. There were many powerful warlords and orc chiefs who were promised a great deal by Sauron. Even with him dead, they still want what they feel is their due."

She shivered and looked down. "Is that the legacy we give to our son? War? Is that all we can leave him?"

He touched her face, his expression adoring. "No, beloved. There will be peace. I know it in my heart."

Eowyn's expression did not relax. She appeared forlorn and wistful. "Such a sad world for a child to grow up in."

Faramir's smile was gently humorous. "I think Boro might prefer to not be called a child."

Her eyes fixed on him and she managed to return the smile. "Not him, dear heart. I mean the child I carry under my heart right now."

The Prince of Ithilien gaped at her and then he smiled so brightly it lit the room. In the midst of all this dark, there was still joy. "Fear not, my lady. All our children will know safety and peace—"

The door swung open suddenly. Faramir stood, chilled down to his bones by the ashen look on the runner's face. "Orcs, sir. We found a trail, leading northeast. Agalon is leading the searchers."

Faramir nodded, his worst fears realized. "Understood. Take your rest, boy. And send Hubrik to me."

The runner nodded and departed. Faramir took his wife into his arms and held her, giving strength but seeking it as well.

Hubrik, his fastest and most trusted messenger, entered the chamber after a few minutes. "Highness?"

"Go to Minas Tirith. Tell the King his son and mine are in the hands of orcs. Send what aid he wills, we are on the trail."

Back in Rohan, in a small house near the royal stables, the master of those stables was finishing preparing supper. Haleth tasted the stew and, after a moment's thought, he added another pinch of salt. It was very nearly perfect. And, of course, he would settle for nothing less.

His companion Eothain sauntered in, grinning toothily. "Almost ready?" He began scrubbing his hands in the basin of water.

"Almost. Any sign of our errant son?"

Eothain laughed and shook his head. "He was helping me in the garden, and then I put him to repairing the shed. I assume, from the lack of banging, he's lazing about somewhere."

Haleth pointed the wooden spoon at him, almost like a weapon. "You're entirely too easy on him. Not sure if you were told, but parents aren't supposed to let their children escape their chores."

"I prefer a gentler approach."
"You prefer to let me be the troll so you can be the hero," Haleth accused.

Eothain attempted to look wounded. "Well, we do strike a balance, between us." He attempted to swoop in for a sample of the stew and took a wooden spoon to the knuckles for his trouble.

"Not yet. Don't make me boil your head."

Eothain retreated, leaning against the kitchen table. "You're in a feisty mood."

"You make it sound unusual."

"Point." Eothain scratched at his mane of blond hair. "So, little Faela and her family have decided they can't keep her and our son's baby. I understand her grandfather needs a lot of looking after and they just can't take the time."

"You gossip more than an old woman."

"That's not very nice," Eothain objected. "And it's not gossip. It's information. And the sort of information you might care to know."

"As you say." Haleth was finally satisfied with the stew and began to spoon it into bowls. Eothain took the bowls and put them on the table, assuming his seat across from the man he had loved for almost twenty years. "And I was thinking...."

"It worries me when you think."

"What does that mean?" Eothain asked defensively.

"Only kidding," Haleth said, bringing the morning's bread over and placing it on the table as well. He touched an old scar on Eothain's temple with a fond smile and then took his own seat. "I have this sinking feeling I know what you're thinking."

"That little boy is family...."

"I suppose one could make that hurdle of reasoning."

"He's Hama's blood," Eothain argued. "Don't get surly, deore."

Haleth glowered for a moment, focusing on the stew. "It was hard enough raising Hama, and we had your mother and sister to look after him when we were off at war. Now your mother has taken her final ride and your sister has a family of her own. And we can't hope our beloved idiot can care for a child." He was still angry with Hama for his indiscretion.

Eothain nodded, chewing thoughtfully on the bread. "Haven't we fought long enough? Isn't fifteen years of following the King from one bloody battle to the next enough for our personal honor?"

Haleth eyed him in surprise, swirling his stew pensively. "Fifteen years is a long time, léoft, " he agreed with neutrality.

Eothain smiled at him, sharing in that moment the years of memory, from Helm's Deep where they had met as children drafted into war, fighting side by side, to all of the battles that had followed—and much more tender moments between.

"You have an odd fixation with adopting orphans," Haleth accused finally.
Eothain laughed. "I seem to recall you being the one refusing to give up Hama when we found out his parents were both dead." There had been many war orphans, but Hama had been the one they had found in the caves underneath Helm's Deep and Hama had been the one who had stolen their hearts and bonded them together.

"Is that the way it was? I must be losing track of the details after all these years." Haleth's smile was brief and genuine; the most he ever had to give. "We'll need to add a room on to the back of the house, then. And Hama had best give up on the notion he isn't changing the nappies."

Eothain's eyes lit up. "You mean it?"

"Fifteen years is long enough," Haleth said with finality.

Elfwine stopped again, shaking his head. This was not right. He had already brought it up to Agalon, but the huntmaster had not been willing to hear it. Frustrated, he finally stopped Aldurn and knelt with him so he could whisper at him.

The Rohirrim was in a state of near-panic. Elfwine had never seen him like this, and he was touched by the concern. He had long suspected that Aldurn protected them more out of fondness than duty, but it was nice to know it was true.

"I'm telling you, it makes no sense," he murmured insistently to the rider. "Carefully wiping away their tracks for a mile and then leaving a trail a blind man could follow?"

Aldurn grimaced dubiously. "Orcs aren't terribly bright, highness."

"No, but if they're bright enough to know to conceal their trail, they're bright enough to know our search will go out at least that far."

"What are you saying, highness?"

"That we're being led away, taken off the real trail." He nodded grimly, certain that he was right.

"It's the only trail to follow, highness," he argued softly. "Unless you just want to wander around blindly in the hopes we find Boro and Dar."

Elfwine considered it. He was exhausted, having been a part of the search from the beginning almost without rest. But he could not—would not let his friends down.

"Tell Agalon we're going back to the city. Then we'll backtrack a bit, see if Fellfang can find another scent."

Aldurn did not hesitate for long. His concern for his charges and his faith in Elfwine's wisdom outweighed any nagging doubts. He nodded and went to confer with the huntmaster.

Elfwine called Fellfang to him, petting the agitated hound and scratching behind his one white ear. The hound knew something was wrong; Elfwine could sense how uneasy the animal was.

"We'll find them," he whispered. "We will."
Days went by, the Uruks almost never stopping. North and east they traveled, near as Elboron could tell. There were tales of how fast Uruks could move, of course, how they never tired, but Elboron had thought them just stories.

But now they were far, far from home and there was no sign of rescue. Escape seemed impossible; even when the boys were set on their feet they were watched constantly. If they did escape, they doubted they would have any success outrunning their captors.

The situation was very bleak indeed.

The air thinned as they climbed into a higher elevation, heading now on a course the boys new would lead them to Mordor. Once within that scarred land, they were sure they'd never get out again. Through glances and minute gestures, they promised each other that one way or the other, they would have to take their moment soon.

When they finally stopped for a real rest, they were on a small promontory overlooking Gondor. There were many orcs shuffling around what appeared to be a fairly large camp. In the midst of this camp, seated like a gargantuan king, sat a huge creature with a giant hammer at one side and an equally sizable axe at the other.

Elboron had heard all the stories of trolls, but he had never thought he'd have the misfortune of seeing one. Seated upon a massive boulder, the gargantuan creature looked very much like some sort of monstrous king. Indeed, the way the Uruks bowed and scraped before him suggested he was not a mindless slave like his brethren always were in the armies of the foul kind. This one was, impossibly, the leader.

The Uruks and he exchanged words that neither of the boys understood, of course, but the tone did not sound happy. The boys watched haplessly, unwilling to even dare wriggle in their bonds for fear of reprisal from the orcs standing guard over them. It was a terrible dilemma to wrestle with; cooperate and hope they did not get their throats slit or resist and almost certainly get cut down.

The lead Uruk who had brought them here tapped his own ear and pointed at Eldarion, making his case even more stridently. Whether it was anger or terror in his tone, they could not tell. The massive troll, however, was clearly not impressed by the tirade. After a few minutes, he broke into the litany with a few harsh, guttural words of his own. One hand moved to pat the hammer that was easily as big as both boys if one of them was to sit on the other's shoulders.

That seemed to end the argument. The Uruk bowed and turned to the boys, drawing forth his sword. There was no doubt what the decision had been.

"I need you to run, Boro. Fast as you can and don't look back," Eldarion whispered.

"What...?"

"Run!" Eldarion said and surged to his feet.

Elboron stared in shock as his nimble friend darted away from first one lunging grab and then another. Thinking they were making a break for it, and not being the focus of the Uruks at the moment, Elboron did as commanded and bolted into the tree line. It was not too long before the awkwardness of running with his hands behind his back caught up with him and he fell.

Gulping in the thin air, he squirmed until his arms were in front of him and looked around for his friend, certain Eldarion would be right behind him. His face fell, though, when he saw no sign of his companion. They had caught his friend—but they would not keep him, he decided.
He scratched up the crude ropes binding him against the rough bark of a tree, and chewed on them as well. They finally loosened to the point where he could pull a hand free and then he dropped them. Picking up a rock, he turned and ran back to the clearing, determined to free his friend or die trying.

It turned out to be utterly unnecessary. Eldarion had spent a good amount of time dodging, weaving and ducking to give Elboron a little time. And then he had bolted. He knew that he, unlike Elboron, could run fast and steadily even with his arms behind his back. So it was that he was running away nimbly, darting into the forest even as Elboron was rushing to his aid.

"I told you to run!" the Prince of Gondor hissed, drawing up short and looking wildly around. The orcs were right behind him.

"My father will tell you, I am no good at following orders." Elboron informed him and made quick work of the ropes. Then he spotted an orc bearing down on them and he hurled the rock in his hand, hitting the creature in the face and felling him.

"Well," Eldarion said with a bright smile. "You can stay if you like!" And the fleet-footed Gondorian heir shot off like a rabbit.

Elboron almost followed when the orc he had hit stumbled, half-blind, over to him. Elboron ducked under the flailing arms and grabbed a knife at the orc's belt. It was instinct, it was a question of survival. Elboron slashed the knife across the orc's throat and then ran without a second glance.

The orcs were right behind them, shouting in their guttural snarls at the boys. It was a contest of longer legs versus lighter bodies, and it was a dead heat. The trees gave them a small advantage, as they were able to maneuver through the underbrush without losing speed. But it was hardly enough, and they knew it. Even if they managed to pull out of sight, the Uruks would track them, hunt them down and kill them like a brace of rabbits.

It was fear of that which kept them going, long after they could not seem to get air into their lungs or find strength in their legs. Pure, primal terror made them run blindly and foolishly, more concerned with what was behind them that what was in front of them.

Eldarion reached the edge of the long, steep slope before Elboron, and he was already teetering when his friend crashed into him. They tumbled downward, rolling and, at times, plummeting helplessly. They came to rest, finally, at the base of a clump of trees, and they were already out cold.

Above them, the orcs began to look for a way to follow....

For Aldurn and Elfwine, their initial task had proven easier than they had hoped for. In less than an hour, Fellfang found a second trail, and an hour of following it was enough to be sure that it was not a false spore. Of course, once they had this certainty, a new dilemma faced them:

To follow it or to retrieve Agalon and his men.

The trail was already faint enough that it took Fellfang's keen senses some time to find it, and the hours it would take to round up the huntmaster and his men and convince them they were following a false trail could be time they could not afford to lose.

However, there was absolutely no denying that Aldurn and Elfwine were not up to the challenge
of taking on a raiding party of orcs.

In the end, the inevitable decision was to split up—and Elfwine had already tried and failed to get Agalon to listen to him.

"I'll just be blazing the trail, after all," Elfwine explained rather reasonably. "You and the others should be able to catch me fairly easily."

Aldurn was not too excited about the idea of sending off the third of his charges alone, but he actually did not vocalize his protests. His look was grave as he eyed the youth up and down. "A man looks after his friends," he told the boy and then went off to get help.

It was the first time anyone had called Elfwine a man and the compliment put his head in the clouds for an hour. Having the respect of someone as brave and honorable as Aldurn made Elfwine puff up proudly. And the words, well, they did ring of truth. These were his friends, his responsibility.

Elfwine was not nearly so versed in outdoor survival as Eldarion, or even Elboron, but he had picked up a thing or two just being around them. With the dried meat and hard biscuits in his pack, a full waterskin and a warm cloak, he braved the wide wilderness of Ithilien without hesitation. This was for his friends—though that word truly failed to encompass the bonds they shared. Elfwine was quite sure he would cross Mordor and back to help them, and equally certain they would do the same. His love for them was so profound that he could scarce comprehend it, but he did not have to.

He made good time, day after day, his lanky, sturdy frame carrying him swiftly through the deepening forest. Fellfang led him and set a hard pace, seemingly as desperate (or more) to find their friends. Ever since Dol Amroth, Fellfang had been especially fond of and loyal to Elboron. As anxious as the hound was, however, he never went so far that Elfwine could not see him. The dog's training was simply too good for that.

As he walked (and when he was not wracked with worry for his friends) his thoughts kept turning, with a somewhat disturbing consistency, to Magda. He had been missing her, truthfully, since leaving the Mark. However, it had been a formless, nameless pain somewhere in the vicinity of his heart. After all, there were a lot of things about his home that he missed and he had not had the time to sort through them all.

Alone in the wilderness, though, with thoughts of friends hanging heavily upon him, her face came unbidden to his mind. And once there, the ache became more pronounced and took on a very definite form. Elfwine was not simple, by any means, and he knew very well what these feelings meant. But he did not dare to entertain them much; a Prince of the Mark and a Dunlending Chieftain's daughter would not be a match accepted by either people.

Which left him sighing often and mooning about like a lost calf. Elfwine had begun to find girls interesting in many ways, but he was also a bit daunted by them. There were a pair of kitchen girls, about his age, back at Minas Ithil, who had the most discomfiting habit of giggling whenever he walked by. It was nerve-wracking. Was there something about him that was funny?

Beyond the incomprehensible bursts of mirth in his direction, though, he was also somewhat put off by their manner. They gossiped and nattered about things he could not imagine one structuring a whole conversation around. And they did so as if those things were of a paramount importance.

It baffled him.

Magda, though, was not like that. She was unlike any Ithilien or Rohirrim girl he had ever met.
She was, for one, incredibly easy to talk to. And she had a love of learning new things that rivaled his own. He could talk to her about things he could not even broach with Dar and Boro without an undue amount of fun being had at his expense.

More and more, as he walked, he found himself wishing she was with him. The endless, lonely hours of trudging would have been a lot more bearable with her company, he was sure. It would certainly help to distract him from the growing terror of what he would find when he did track down his friends.

And then he would touch the lock of hair she had given him, which he kept in a pouch at his belt, and he would think of the softness of her lips and he would not be able to think about much of anything for some time.

Elboron stood on the bluff and looked down at the world far below him. He at least had some idea of where they were now, but that news had no joy in it. A hundred miles from home, by the most hopeful estimation, and that was if they had wings. Getting out of the mountains would take them through numerous switchbacks that would almost double the distance. The orcs were looking for them, almost certainly, and Eldarion was hurt.

They had wakened not too long after falling, and after assessing things, had determined that Eldarion's right arm was fractured. A quick splint job did nothing for the pain, of course, but they were both glad it was not a leg. They had so far to go….

Elboron saw the Anduin in the distance, gray in the morning light. He had his bearings and while it was a hideously long journey, he knew how to get home. Resolved, he turned and came back to where Eldarion was waiting.

The Prince of Gondor gave him a bright smile, undaunted by the pain he was in. "So, over hill and over dale and home?"

Elboron smiled right back at him. "Even your skinny legs can make it."

"Lithe, goat-spunk, the term is 'lithe—I realize you never actually read..."

"It all means the same thing, dung breath." Elboron knelt and picked a pine needle out of his friend's hair. "It's a long way. Especially since the orcs will try and get ahead of us and head us off. And we've no supplies."

"So? One step in front of the other..." Eldarion got to his feet with a smile. "The sooner we start, the sooner we get there."

Elboron smiled as well. "I still blame you for this mess."

"I suppose I can't really dodge that," Eldarion replied with a laugh.

"Still.... Still.... Orcs should not be prowling about that close to Minas Ithil." Elboron frowned thoughtfully and started to walk. They lived in dangerous times, certainly, and Mordor loomed just on the other side of the mountains... But still, a large scouting party?

"I always thought trolls were the slaves of the orcs, but that one, he looked like he was the one in charge," Eldarion said, breaking into his thoughts. "That's passing strange."

"There's a lot of strangeness to be found these days. Orcs in Rohan, orcs near my home, that
attack that was meant to kill our fathers.... It's almost like the Dark Lord is rising again."

"Don't even joke about that," Eldarion replied with a look of horror. "Don't even think it. The One Ring was destroyed, his power was broken. He can't ever come back."

"Well, I'd guess you would know more than me, but.... Well, how do we really know? He was one of those Maiar, wasn't he? How can you kill something like that?"

"The legends are pretty clear, Boro. He bound his fate to the Ring when he forged it, pouring his power into it."

"That never made sense to me," Elboron argued. "If I was a powerful being, immortal and so on ... why would I want to make something that could destroy me?"

"Because it would mean controlling the other nineteen rings and their bearers," Eldarion told him, reciting it by rote.

"And that worked so well, didn't it? He wasn't able to control the elves or the dwarves, and even the Kings of Men who took the Rings brought little to the field. Most of the humans followed Elendil, right?"

"Well.... Yes.... But he did not know it would fail." His brow furrowed.

"Maybe not, but even so, once it was proven that it didn't work, why not just unmake the thing?"

"Maybe he couldn't...."

"Maybe, but he was called the Deceiver, right? What if the whole thing was a trick, a way to get people to think he could be killed when he really couldn't?"

"Boro...." Eldarion stared at him for a long moment before shaking his head. "No. That can't be true. The elves and Mithrandir would never have left if there was any chance...."

"All right, if you say so. I certainly hope you're right. But all this activity from the foul kind is making me nervous." Elboron gave him an uneasy look and then started to climb down a slight slope.

Eldarion picked his way down after him, his balance keeping him from having to strain his arm at all. "I know. It' really unsettling. They're obviously up to something big, but I'm sure our fathers are ready for them."

Elboron desperately wished that were true. But if it were, would he and Eldarion even be in this predicament? Clearly Faramir had no idea how bold the orcs were getting, or he never would have let his son and his charges roam so far from the city walls. Surely Eomer would never have agreed to foster his son in Ithilien if he knew that forces of the dark were skulking through the wilds that surrounded Minas Ithil. No, the leaders of the west must not know anything about how grave the danger was.

Now their sons had to somehow survive long enough to tell them.

A storm swept over Ithilien, sending howling winds and driving rains down across the forested country for two days. It was a nightmare for Elfwine in more than one way. He lost time, for one, which had him fretting and agitating in the small shelter he had made for himself. It also put him
through two days of worry over whether or not the trail would still be there when the storm passed.

There were times he screamed into the storm, as if that could cause the skies to clear.

Sure enough, once the storm blew itself out, Elfwine and Fellfang discovered the trail was broken. Rather than scream and throw things as he was first inspired to do, Elfwine paced the ground and looked around. It was time to put the wisdom that he prided himself on to use.

Assuming he was not more than a few days behind the Uruk-Hai and assuming they, too, had been bogged down by the storm, the trail would resume a few dozen leagues ahead. The boy did not want to think too much about how large of an assumption that was. His friends were in danger. He had to try and keep going.

"They were headed north, more or less," he murmured to Fellfang. "So, let's keep going that way and hope we find the trail." Giving up was simply not something he could stomach.

Four anxious days passed. Elfwine moved as fast as he could for as long as he could, trying to make up time, driving himself to the point of collapse. Desperation drove him on when his strength failed him, and when he could not run anymore, he stumbled and sometimes crawled. In the back of his head he knew that no matter what his will stated, if he could not find the trail again, his quest would end in defeat.

On the morning of the fifth, he was just breaking his spare camp when Fellfang bounded up to him, barking excitedly. Elfwine had thought his canine companion had merely been off chasing rabbits. He should have known better. The hound had been looking for signs of their friends and the orcs that held them, as he had constantly for four days.

And he had apparently found them.

Rejuvenated by hope, Elfwine took up the chase again. Already the rigors of this hunt had added to the toughness from Erkenbrand's training and hardened the Prince of the Mark to where he could run most of the day. It was a terrible irony, considering he was the heir to the throne of the Horse Lords, but then, Elfwine was shaping up to be rather different than any previous heir of the Mark.

His elation at finding the trail and his determination to locate his friends caused his judgment to slip—and he became quite a bit less cautious. It was possible to argue that he had, perhaps, no reason to watch for danger this far along the trail—the orcs would surely not think they are being followed, would they?

Unfortunately for the brave young prince, unbeknownst to him, this area he was racing through had become more orc territory than man's. There were eyes watching him, surveying both his intended route and the progress he was making. And those eyes belonged to orcs who did not wish anyone to be blazing a trail for more men to follow.

Flying over the ground at top speed, Elfwine never even sensed the snare he had sprung until the flexible branch that had been bent back at an impossible angle snapped forth. It struck him square in one shin and then went on to sweep his legs out from under him. Elfwine screamed and crashed to the earth, tumbling over and over again.

Tears tracked down his face as he gripped at his wounded shin - if there wasn't a break, than it was surely almost so. Cursing with every word he knew, he rolled back and forth, unable to think beyond the pain.
Which was a lucky thing for him, because otherwise he would have realized he was alone in the wide wilderness and he could not even walk.

Elboron cupped the water into his mouth frantically, feeling he could drink the tiny brook dry. A sentiment, he could tell, that Eldarion shared. They had gone for days with only the morning dew to quench their thirst. It was weakening them and making them vulnerable, wandering lost in a haze of dehydrated misery.

Which was the only thing that distracted them from the pangs of hunger.

Elboron finally sat back, wiping his chapped lips with the back of his hand. As weak and tired as he was, he knew Eldarion had to be much worse off. But his friend bore up under the exhaustion and the pain of his injuries with sardonic humor. Only his pale, drawn features told the real story of how the young Heir of Gondor was faring. It hurt Elboron deeply to be so helpless while his friend suffered, and the intensity of that feeling seemed out of place in his head. As a rule, Elboron did not have a lot of deep feelings.

"Well, at least we're not going around in circles," he murmured to his friend.

Eldarion grinned wanly. "We would be if not for my unfailing sense of direction. You'd be in Mordor if not for me."

Elboron tossed a few pebbles in the prince's direction and laughed a little. "Maybe. I don't have all that convenient elf-blood running through my veins. How much do you have, exactly?"

"The math defies reason," Eldarion replied glibly. "My mother's side of the family is pretty clear, but tracing my father's bloodlines gives the most staid scholars fits of apoplexy."

Elboron grinned. "I just bet." His stomach rumbled and the Heir of Ithilien sighed. "I'm going to set up a snare and hope to catch something. We need food. You want to try and get a fire going?"

Eldarion sighed and rolled his eyes. "You ask so much of the Prince of Gondor. And me injured, at that."

For a moment, Elboron felt guilt stab him, but then the joking tone removed the barb and he just gave his friend a lopsided smile. "His lordship forgot to bring along his servants, so he will just have to carry his own weight."

"I brought you," Eldarion replied with a smirk.

"Yes, and?" the Ithilien Prince shot back with raised eyebrows.

"I am merely reminding you that your family has served mine for many years."

"Actually," Elboron replied dryly. "We took care of your country while your family ran around in the forest like heathens for a few centuries."

Eldarion laughed and yet managed somehow to look horrified. "When we get back, I intend to have you flogged for that."

"Hardly any incentive for me to drag your scrawny carcass back, then." Elboron grinned at him.

Eldarion sniffed and waved his hand pompously. "You will, I command it."
Elboron genuflected and bowed, getting a strange feeling as he did so. Some part of him did recognize Eldarion as his lord and knew that one day he would be swearing an oath of fealty to him. And his being seemed to yearn to do so. Shaking off the feeling, he smiled at Eldarion and started to look about for things he could use for a snare.

Some time later, as evening took over them and the smell of cooking rabbit (and one very unlucky squirrel) filled the air, the two boys laid back and looked up at the sky. Lost and far from home, they found that strength to go on came from each other. So all did not seem hopeless.

Off in the distance, they heard a throaty howl. It sounded somewhat like a wolf and yet ... not quite. They exchanged worried glances. After dinner and a short rest they would have to be on their way. Their pursuers had not given up.

As two lost boys struggled to find their way home, a son of Dol Amroth was at last fulfilling his promise to the King of the Mark. The change in Elphir was as stark as it was disturbing. Amrothos stared in shock at his brother for the longest time before remembering to do him the honor of a half-bow. It had been two years since last they had seen each other, but that was not unusual. Years tended to pass without them coming face to face. Elphir tended to stay close to home, while Amrothos had made his home at Edoras.

But at each meeting, it had always seemed that his brother remained the same—face perhaps a bit more windblown, eyes nestled a bit deeper in crow’s feet, but nothing so noticeable that Amrothos had paid it any mind.

The man before him, though, was nearly unrecognizable as his brother. Eyes sunk in and smoldering with anger, hair tied tightly back in a severe braid and so thin. Elphir was painfully, shockingly thin. And pale, as if he had not stepped out into the sun he loved for many months.

"How does the day find you, brother?" Amrothos asked carefully.

Elphir snorted and shifted on the sandstone throne. "Do not put on the face of diplomacy for me, Rotho. It does not suit you and it insults me."

Amrothos approached his brother cautiously, put on edge by his tone and his bearing. In truth, they had never been close. As the youngest son, Amrothos had been doted on and allowed a great deal of leeway in regards to things like responsibility and proper behavior. Elphir, by contrast, had always been so obsessive about rules and etiquette that sometimes it had seemed they were speaking different languages.

And Elphir had never had even a modicum of tolerance for his brother's more intimate proclivities.

In the end, though, they had always been family, and that bond had seen them through some very serious differences. Amrothos counted on that holding true for this as well.

"Very well, Elphir, may I ask at least how Alphros is doing?"

A shadow passed over Elphir's eyes and he shifted even more uncomfortably. "He is recovering very slowly. The healers suspect he will never again be as strong as he was." The bitterness in his tone cut through the air like a swing sword.

Amrothos nodded slowly. "But he lives."

Elphir's glower deepened. "You needn't mince about, Rotho. Eomer sent you here to purchase
back my friendship. Which is clearly not terribly important, since he did not come himself."

Amrothos bristled at the sneering attack on his lord. "He did not come, brother, because he did not want to upset you further. He sent me to plead his case."

"My son's broken body pled his case fairly effectively already."

Amrothos shook his head and gave his brother a level look. "Your son is no child. He is a man; you made him so by putting him in charge of your army."

Elphir's eyes sparked with rage. "Do not, I warn you, seek to place the blame for the debacle in Harad on myself. I gave Alphros a duty, yes, but Eomer was charged with the care and guidance of the whole army. As such, he was my son's guardian in that miserable land and he blithely faltered in that duty when it was most important."

Amrothos had not wanted to go in this direction, but Elphir was forcing it. "Your son left Eomer very little choice."

As expected, it threw Elphir into a rage. The man stood up and shook with red-faced fury. "My son is but a child in the world. He needed guidance from Eomer and instead he was thrown to that barbarian."

"Alphros threatened to keep the entire Amrothian force there and fighting if Eomer did not grant his request. What would you have had him do? Let our men linger there and fight and die in a battle that had already been won?"

Elphir's lip curled in disdain. "My son would have seen reason. He may be full-sailed in a strong wind, but he listens to men he respects. Did Eomer really try that hard to convince him? Did Eomer order him to rescind the request?"

"Shoals, brother! You know Eomer loves Alphros like he was his own son."

"And his son he allows to traipse all over Arda without any sort of protection... You'll forgive me if I am not comforted or assuaged by your words."

Amrothos reined in his temper and looked away for a moment, gathering his thoughts. On the side of the audience chamber was a great fresco; the scene was one from legend, the great Ulmo standing amidst giant rolling waves as a storm raged all around. Amrothos felt rather like that, at that moment, as chaotic as everything had gotten.

"Elphir.... This is madness. You can't blame Eomer for what happened. Lothy and I would not stay loyal to a man who would so negligently put a loved one in the path of danger."

"You and our beloved sister are blinded by your love for the man."

Amrothos gritted his teeth and looked into his brother's haggard face. "You should know our love is not given lightly. Eomer would not be worthy of it if he were the man you seem to think he is."

Elphir laughed nastily at him. "Rumors once abounded that your 'love' was given for a smile or a mug of ale."

Amrothos paled, shocked that his brother would sink so low. "What are you saying?"

"Merely that were you not sharing the King of Rohan's bed, your loyalty would reside more consistently where it belongs—with your family. The sneer in his voice became even more obvious.
Amrothos was, for the first time in his life, tempted to take a swing at his brother. He met that disdainful gaze with a frigid one of his own. "Even were I not so close to Eomer, I would find it difficult to find any sense in your position."

"Perhaps if you had ever had children, brother, my position would not be so very difficult to understand." His bitter expression did not shift or falter.

Amrothos shook his head, not willing to be dragged into an argument of hypotheticals. "I do not wish to put it this way, brother, but you aren't listening to anything else I have to say. He is a King. You are a vassal of his friend, the King of Gondor. Eomer will not grovel before you for your forgiveness and he does not need to. He has expressed his regret and made overtures of friendship, and now as a Prince, it is time to do the wise thing and swallow your pride and put this away."

"Do not seek to lecture me on my duties, Rotho. You have never been interested in learning to rule and do not have the slightest idea on how to do so. You lived your life as the vapid fop, Rotho, as was your choice. The time to be a Prince, for you, is long past." He drew himself up. "Return to Rohan and your King. You are not welcome in this house or this city."

Amrothos gaped at his brother, stunned beyond words or even thought for a long moment—in all of their fights, in spite of all of the rancor and disagreements, Elphir had never gone this far. Under all the bitterness had always been the incontrovertible truth that Amrothos had always known he had a home here.

"You cannot be serious. Elphir, we're family."

"You should have considered that before you broke with me, brother." Elphir settled in his chair and glowered darkly. "I will do you the courtesy of giving you the chance to leave without an escort, but that courtesy will not be extended overlong."

Amrothos was rigid as he stared in pale-faced shock at his brother. He searched that merciless face for some hint of the brother he knew, but there was only coldness. "As you will, then, brother. But know that even in spite of this, I still love you."

Then he bowed again and turned on his heel and walked away from the brother who had forsaken him.

Amrothos was checking his saddle and making sure his things were all packed, a dark, angry expression on his face. The betrayal of Elphir cut far deeper than he wanted to admit. He wanted nothing more than to be on his way, to get far away from this city and that cold, baleful man who had replaced his brother.

"Uncle?"

Amrothos turned to see a very pale Alphros standing at the entrance of the stable, leaning heavily on a walking stick. Gaunt and pale, much like his father, his eyes did not hold the simmering anger of Elphir. They were, instead, placid and even thoughtful as he regarded his uncle.

"Alphros...." Amrothos closed the distance between them and enfolded Alphros in a gentle hug. "Nice to see you up and moving around."

Alphros returned the hug fiercely, leaning into his Uncle and sighing into his shoulder. "I am
"Don't even think on it." Amrothos got the sense that his nephew was not anxious to leave the embrace so he did not make him. Amrothos certainly knew Elphir was no great dispenser of physical affection.

"But it's my fault. This whole mess is my fault. But the more I try to convince father, the angrier he gets."

"I got that impression." Amrothos stroked the young man's hair back. "My brother is, possibly, the most stubborn man ever born."

"Please tell Uncle Eomer that I'm sorry. That I should have listened."

Was the boy crying? Amrothos blinked and led his nephew over to a bench and sat him down. From the way Alphros surreptitiously wiped at his eyes, Amrothos realized he had been right. "I will tell him, but I know he doesn't blame you. Don't be upset."

"It's not ... that. Not just that, Uncle. I.... I should be dead, really, and I would be were it not for you and Eomer. You should be given a parade in your honor and instead my father is treating you like you are the butcher who...." Alphros shuddered. "I'm so ashamed. I thought I could defeat him. I thought I could beat anyone...."

"You're young, Alphros," Amrothos told him gently. "And it is the habit of the young to think themselves invincible. You survived and you'll learn from the mistake. It is how men make their way in the world."

Alphros smiled faintly and leaned against him. "Why couldn't you be my father?"

Amrothos elected to not explain precisely why that would not be likely. "Don't say such things. Elphir is a good man and he loves you. I know he thinks the world of you and that is why this has him all sort of rudderless. It will all be okay."

"But he's cold and you're warm," Alphros told him quietly. "I don't want you to go. Or I want to go with you."

Amrothos hugged him around the shoulders. "I have to go and I really rather doubt that taking you to Rohan will improve relations between Eomer and your father."

The young man laughed a little. "I suppose not."

Amrothos kissed his hair. "We'll see each other again soon, I promise." He was very worried for the young man, sensing so much vulnerability in him now. The experience in Harad had clearly shaken him to his bones.

"I'll hold you to that promise," his nephew told him sternly.

"May I never see the sun touch the ocean, should I break it," Amrothos swore eloquently. He did not make to get up, though, content to share this quiet moment and let his nephew store up as much comfort and affirmation as he could in the short spans of time. Banished he was, but he could dally a little bit longer for his nephew. The long road home could wait.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

The boys return to Minal Ithil, where a new unexpected twist comes into their lives

Year 16, 4th Age

Hunger and exhaustion gnawed at the two princes, dragged them down and made them stumble - but the howls of wolves that were more than wolves spurred them on. They went to their limits and then they went beyond. And when they couldn't walk separately, they leaned on each other just to make a few more steps.

The wilderness was vast, but Elboron knew the signs to look for to keep them heading south. A poor student he had been, without a doubt, he had always raptly listened to the stories of his father, told by blazing hearths over mugs of warm cider. He had heard every story at least a dozen times, and many of them talked about his father's adventures in north Ithilien.

So Elboron knew where he was going, even if it seemed impossibly far. Every day that ended without him seeing a hint of the markers he was looking for drove him deeper into despair. Safety was beginning to seem like a wonder they would never again behold.

Eldarion was less impacted by the way they continued to not reach their goal—due entirely to the fever and subsequent weakness brought on by his injuries. Day by day, he grew more incoherent, his steps grew less sure. When they would finally catch a few spare hours of rest, he was always asleep as soon as he curled up on the cold earth.

Elboron worried, but there was naught he could do but hope their strength would hold out.

It was a hope that was dashed one day as Eldarion slid limply out of his grasp and down to the soft ground. Elboron knelt and checked him, heart hammering in panic. His friend's pulsebeat thrummed under his skin, defying the weakness that had consumed his body. But there was no rousing Eldarion. The injuries from the fall, the lack of rest, the hard, long flight and the lack of proper food had drained the last of his brave young friend's strength.

There was no thought in it, really. Elboron gathered sticks and branches together numbly and constructed a very crude pallet. Worries about how he could manage to do what he knew he had to do simply did not enter his head. Eldarion was his friend, his lord and his companion. Elboron would do what had to be done.

With the pallet together, he bound his friend securely to it and then took up one end. The weight did not even register at first. Elboron looked defiantly back over his shoulder and murmured, "I deny you your prize."

Then his gaze turned south again. One foot after another, he started up once again. There were hours left of daylight, after all, and he clung to hope that he would run into rescuers if he just kept going, just kept a little bit ahead of their pursuers. In his heart, he just knew Elfwine was out there, right now, bringing help.
Elfwine had managed to drag himself into the shelter of some bushes and, after looking at his leg, had come to the conclusion he would not be walking home. At first he had been afraid, but slowly his rational mind took over—Aldurn and the hunters could not be far behind him. He would just have to wait them out.

His emotions turned to anger—at the orcs for their treachery and at himself for getting so careless. Now he would not be able to reach his friends at all—never mind that he had never come up with exactly what he would do upon finding them. He belonged with them, sharing whatever danger they faced. In truth, and while he would never admit this to himself, he was a little jealous that they were having an adventure without him.

Now, though, his adventure had reached its end. Still in a great deal of pain, Elfwine was not motivated to be gracious about things. He wrapped himself in his cloak and brooded for a good long time, wishing he could get his hands on the orc who had set that trap.

Fellfang came back and whined at him, looking as panicked as a dog could look.

"I know. But I can't go anymore. I'm sorry." Elfwine glowered and held his hurt leg.

Fellfang sat back on his haunches and barked, tongue lolling out. He barked again, somehow sounding insistent, and then bounded off along the trail. A long moment passed and then the hound returned, slinking up to Elfwine on his belly, soulful eyes fixed on the Prince of the Mark.

"I can't!" Elfwine snapped and shook his head. There was no point on getting angry with the loyal dog, and, really, no sense in keeping him here. Boro and Dar needed him a lot more than Elfwine. "I'm sorry," he murmured and reached out to scratch behind the dog's single white ear.

Fellfang whined a little more and licked Elfwine's hand. His body was quivering with the need to run.

Elfwine pointed to the trail. "Go on, find our friends." Fellfang did not budge. "Go on!"

At the order, the dog took off, but he only ran a few paces before stopping and looking back. The loyal animal's heart was clearly divided.

"I said go!" Elfwine stabbed his finger in the direction of the trail. "Go!"

Fellfang ducked his head and loped along reluctantly, casting miserable looks back at Elfwine until he was totally out of sight. The Prince relaxed a little. Fellfang was an uncommonly bright animal. Elfwine did not doubt the dog understood what was being asked of him.

Agitated at being left behind, Elfwine set about making camp. He would need to make sure his location was known so the Hunters would find him. Which meant a fire, which meant getting some wood together. It was not an easy task but he managed it, and with the little blaze countering the coolness of the growing night, he felt somewhat better.

Elfwine was gnawing on a biscuit when he smelled something foul on the breeze. A trickle of ice slithered down his spine. Somehow, he managed to keep himself perfectly still, not betraying at all that he knew something was approaching. Casually, seemingly, he stretched his hands out to the fire, making no show of the fact that he could now easily reach Elessar's dagger, which he kept in a boot sheath.

A minor creaking sound filled the night—a branch swaying in the breeze or the movement of well-oiled leathers, he did not know. He swallowed hard, feeling much more alone at that moment.
than he had yet. How stupid had he been to think he would be left alone out here, after they had
gone to all the trouble of setting a trap.

Elfwine battled down his fear and tried to gain some clarity, just as Erkenbrand had taught him. In
a fight, the one who keeps his wits about him was most likely going to come out the winner. He
could not stand and fight, so he had to bring the orcs to him.

The stench disappeared—apparently the orc realized he was upwind of his prey and changed
positions. Elfwine's heart hammered in his chest, adrenaline coursing through his body. It was
survival now, the most primal instinct any human had.

Some instinct he did not even know he possessed made him move, suddenly, rolling to the side.
The orc behind him stumbled forward, only avoiding pitching forward into the fire by jabbing his
spear into the ground and bracing itself. It was a moment where it was off balance and nothing
more.

It was all Elfwine needed.

With brutal accuracy, he drove upwards, the knife plunging into the orc's side, right under the
ribs cage. The cleverly curved blade ripped right through everything vital and the orc collapsed into
a twitching heap.

Elfwine collapsed as well, unable to support himself on his wounded leg. He stared at the dying
orc for only a moment before making himself look around for others. He could feel eyes on him,
predatory eyes that saw a wounded mark. Elfwine somehow managed to not panic, crawling over
to a tree slowly. Bracing himself on that, he could stand. And with his back to it, the orcs would
have to come at him head-on.

Silence reigned for a long few minutes as the orcs gauged their prey. Elfwine's wide eyes rolled
from one direction to the next, wary of every motion and sound. Oh how he wished his friends
were here. Or his father. Or an eored. One thing which a Rider is never used to and that is facing
an enemy alone.

Elfwine's rather inspired plan came apart when an orc stepped from behind a tree, a short bow in
hand and an arrow drawn back. There was an ugly sneer on his face. Elfwine stared at him
fixedly, trying to figure out if he could throw his knife fast and accurate enough to save his life.
The orc was apparently weighing the same consideration.

It became depressingly moot as another orc stepped into the campsite, and then another. Elfwine
now had three bows trained on him and he knew he needed a miracle. But there was no way he is
going to just give up. He had too much to live for, too much to get back home to.

A sudden crashing sound brought the orc's attention off of him and he used it to duck around the
tree and out of the way of those arrows. Moving was hard, as he could not put any weight on his
bad leg, but he did get around the tree enough to shield himself.

The darkness exploded as Fellfang flew out of the trees and smashed into one of the very
surprised orcs. Strong jaws locked around the orc's soft throat and viciously tore it open. The other
two orcs brought their bows up to deal with the savage hound, but Elfwine would not let them kill
his loyal friend.

"Hey!" he yelled and threw a rock at one of them, connecting with the creature's head. They both
paused and turned and Elfwine let his dagger fly. Aiming for the throat, his shot instead went into
the orc's upper arm.
The orcs dropped their bows and drew instead their long, jagged knives. Fellfang faced them, growling and snapping at them, his hackles raised. The orc blood dripping from his sharp teeth definitely gave the two opportunistic orcs pause. Suddenly, the easy prey they had been seeking had turned into something entirely too costly.

They began to back away, but Fellfang was not trained to accept surrender. He pursued, step by step, looking for an opportunity to get his teeth into one of the would-be-murderers.

Elfwine rushed to help. He hurled stones at the orcs’ heads, forcing them to divert their attention for a fraction of an instant—time enough for the agile hound to get through one of their defenses. Fellfang bit down on the wrist of the weapon-wielding arm of one of the assailants, and the sound of bones snapping echoed in the small clearing. Giving in to fear and a sense of self-preservation, the other orc turned and ran.

Fellfang yanked the orc he had to the ground and then pounced on it, his training showing through. Faster than Elfwine could follow, the hound had killed the orc and then was off, chasing after the last one. As sweet and affable as Fellfang was with the boys he loved, there was in him still the best training Edoras had to offer. With orcs, no quarter was given.

Elfwine winced as he heard a scream off in the dark somewhere. He then slid to the ground and tried not to shake himself to pieces. Now that it was all over, he could let the panic and terror he had been suppressing run its course. He had very nearly died and only the loyalty of one very special hound had saved him.

Shameful as it was to admit, in that single moment, Elfwine very much wanted to go home.

Elboron's arms trembled with weariness. His hands were scraped raw and bloody from dragging the pallet behind him. And there were knots in his shoulders he was fairly sure would never be banished. But he did not stop - slow to a crawl, yes, but never stop.

His mind was blank. He was simply too tired and wrung out to focus on anything more than putting one foot in front of the other. And sometimes, that truly was an effort of supreme concentration.

Elboron stumbled and fell as his worn-boots sank into mud. He could barely so much as croak as he suddenly pitched forward into the rushing waters of a small stream. The shock of the cold water brought him around and he started to drink thirstily. It was no illusion. They had reached what had to be the stream that led to Henneth Annun.

Tearing himself away from his own seemingly-unquenchable thirst, he scooped up water and poured it over his friend's chapped lips. Eldarion did not rouse, but his mouth opened and welcomed in the cool drops. Elboron retrieved more, slowly pouring it into his friend's mouth. Eldarion swallowed convulsively—but did not wake.

Elboron rested there for an hour, making sure they both got plenty to drink during that time. Then, revitalized by the idea that his goal was in sight, he picked up the end of the pallet and started to drag it once more, paralleling the stream.

Henneth Annun was a sanctuary. They would be safe there until rescue came.
It took two miserable days to reach the place where the water cascaded down in crystal sheets to gather in a crystal pool. Faramir's fond descriptions of this place made it almost familiar to Elboron. He was easily able, therefore, to find the concealed path and the rough-hewn entrance to the place, but that was not his immediate goal.

Some spoke of the mythic properties of the pool here and while Elboron seldom put stock in anything he could not see or touch, he needed to believe. He brought his friend to the pool's edge and removed him from the pallet. Cradling Eldarion's head gently in his lap, he scooped cool, pure water from the pool and poured it over the Heir of Gondor's face, washing away the road-dirt and fever-sweat.

"Come on.... Please...." Elboron was too twisted up and worn down to keep his emotions in check. He blinked away tears that stung his eyes and kept gently laving his friend's face. "My lord, I beseech you.... As your servant and faithful liegeman, awake," he murmured shakily, not even knowing where the words came from.

Eldarion coughed suddenly and his eyes fluttered open slowly. There was a moment before consciousness transformed into lucidity, and then he stared up at Elboron for a little while. "Boro?" he asked faintly.

"Yes?" the Prince of Ithilien replied just as quietly.

"Why are you pouring water on me?" Eldarion asked with a weak smile.

Elboron choked back a sound that had far too many emotions wrapped up in it. "To wake your lazy bones up. I'm tired of hauling you around like a sack of turnips." His grin was a window to his utter delight and relief.

Eldarion was apparently in no hurry to move and Elboron did not have the heart to budge him. The Prince of Gondor licked his lips and blinked a few times. "Where are we?"

"Henneth Annun. We should be safe here."

"Safe?" Eldarion asked meekly. Elboron had never seen his reckless friend so vulnerable.

Elboron nodded slowly, smoothing back the Gondorian prince's dark hair. "Yes ... my lord. Safe."

No word had ever sounded so good to either young heir.

Elfwine snapped awake, certain this time he really had heard a sound. Fellfang, in a profound display of watchdog capabilities, remained sound asleep on his back. The Prince of the Mark drew his knife and started to look around warily.

It was early morning, a day after the incident with the orcs. They had moved camp about a mile backwards on the trail, a feat of willpower that Elfwine was incredibly proud of. Once settled, he had endeavored to stay awake, though that had turned out to be much harder than he might have figured. And every time he did doze off, he was awakened by what he was sure was the approach of prowling orcs.

It had never ended up being true.

There was a crack of a branch nearby. That settled it for him. He nudged Fellfang and struggled to get to his feet. The hound whined and rolled up to his feet, sniffing the air. He did not seem
disturbed, but Elfwine knew that the orcs could be approaching from downwind.

A motion to his right brought him around and the death-grip he had on his knife slackened and he even smiled. It was Aldurn and the hunters.

"I thought I'd lost you," the Prince of the Mark told them casually, concealing his abundant relief at the sight of them.

Aldurn started to smile, but then he noticed how the young man was barely standing. He rushed over and helped support Elfwine before the lad fell over. "What happened?" he asked anxiously.

"Orcs set a trap. I hurt my leg...." Elfwine was a young man in the presence of veterans—he was determined to put on his best face.

Aldurn lowered the boy to the ground and pushed up the leg of Elfwine’s trousers. His shin was an ugly purple. Aldurn frowned and gently probed at the wound and as much as Elfwine was trying to be stoic, that really hurt and he screamed.


The huntmaster came over, looking more than a little haggard. "How is he?"

"His leg needs to be splinted and he needs to get home," Aldurn replied tersely.

Agalon nodded grimly and called over couple of his men. His eyes on Elfwine reflected a deep respect. "You did good, lad. We'll take it from here." From a man like Agalon, that amounted to gushing praise and the prince knew it.

Elfwine wanted to protest. He wanted to insist that he could go along, but that would be selfish and childish. He would only slow down Agalon and his men and Elboron and Eldarion could not afford the time. The heir of Rohan let out a small sigh. "Please find them."

"We will, Win. My oath on it." The way Aldurn said it made Elfwine secure that the search would go on as long as it would take.

And so the Prince of the Mark relented and accepted that his part in this adventure was done. It was now up to others to save his friends. He just hoped they were in time.

Elboron had rested and regathered himself for a while, but once he had Eldarion safely ensconced in the secure depths of Henneth Annun, he went out foraging. And for two days, he and his friend lived fairly well off the plentiful berries and edible roots around the former ranger hideout.

Eldarion beamed at him when he returned from one such excursion, the color having returned to his face. "I do fancy all this fetch-and-carry service," he approved as Elboron started cleaning off some of the roots in a bucket of water. Henneth Annun had supported Rangers for years and there were a number of supplies left behind.

"Oh, don't grow too accustomed, majesty," Elboron shot back. "I expect you to be returning the favor when you're better."

"Perhaps I can just grant you some land and a title, instead...."

"I sort of have both, if you'll recall."
"Well, yes, but not your own," Eldarion reasoned. "There are some rather nice parts of southern Gondor...."

Elboron threw a root at his head, grinning. "Southern Gondor is a wasteland, you swindler."

"Is it? My knowledge of geography is a bit ... incomplete."

"Uh huh." Elboron popped a berry into his mouth and grinned. "What happened to 'Whisper' — daring ranger of the wide world?"

Eldarion laughed. "Fair enough. I still—" He paused and frowned.

"What?" Elboron fretted. His friend's hearing was much better than his own, and he knew Eldarion did not raise false alarms.

"Something is happening outside. A battle, I think."

Elboron frowned and went to investigate. A battle did not seem likely. There was only the occasional orc and a few deer in this part of the world. He treded on bare feet (the boots were a total loss now) up to the opening of the cave and peered outward. His eyes went huge in shock.

About a dozen orcs lay dead or dying on the ground, as well as three wargs. Most of them were either filled with arrows or cloven so deeply as to make their bodies almost two pieces. That was a sight that almost caused Elboron's stomach to rebel—but he was too distracted by the amazing display before his eyes.

A short figure, but one who was almost as wide as he was tall, was planted in the midst of several infuriated orcs. He wielded a massive axe, and when no orc offered itself up to be his next victim, he simply took a smaller axe from his belt and hurled it at one.

"Six!" he bellowed when the axe sundered an orc's head.

Two others fell as arrows went through one and into the other. They collapsed in twitching heaps. A clear, melodious voice rang out with a single word: "Nine!"

"Cheater! That was mine!" the raging axe-man snarled, cutting down another hapless orc. "Seven!"

"Which one?" the elegant voice asked. Another orc fell under a rain of arrows. "Ten."

"The one on the right!" An orc head flew threw the air. "Eighth!"

"Whose right?" the higher voice queried gamely. An orc who had attempted to escape, fell with an arrow in the eye. "Eleven."

"Mine!" The smaller figure cut an orc's legs out from under him and then finished him off. "Ten!"

"You were just at eight!"

"Are you calling me a liar, elf?"

"If the helmet fits, dwarf."

There was only one orc left and he seemed paralyzed. Fighting was a death-sentence, but so was running away. He eyed the squarish axe-wielder nervously and dropped his sword in a sign of surrender.
But for a dwarf, an orc was a usurper responsible for stealing his home. For an elf, killing an orc is a mercy. It was anyone's guess if the arrow or the axe felled that one, though both of the rescuers clearly had their own opinions.

Elboron watched them approach, gaping in awe. There was no way to not recognize them, of course. Gimli was a bit gray in the beard, but he moved as agilely as Elboron himself did. And appearing out of the trees was, of course, Legolas. The smiling elf was showing the signs of the fade that had come with the end of the elven rings—his beautiful face was now marred by a few lines and his complexion had lost the unearthly luster it had once held.

Both of them, however, were grinning like boys who had made off with fresh-made cherry-tarts. They approached Eldarion casually, as if they were all old friends having a chance meeting.

"You owe Aragorn five crowns," Legolas murmured to Gimli. He winked at Elboron companionably. "He doubted very much that orcs would have any more luck containing his son than he himself has had. Elboron, isn't it?"

Elboron nodded dumbly. "Eldarion's in the cave," he said stupidly. The sight of the legends had put his brain to sleep.

Legolas inclined his head regally and went to check on his friend's son. Gimli stood, cleaning his axe and watching Elboron measuringly. "Smart thinking, lad. We hoped that if you had escaped, you'd find your way here. I may not dislike trees as much as I once did, but running all over these woods looking for you had me pulling my beard, let me tell you."

Elboron grinned a little bit. "Thank you. I hoped.... How did you get here so quickly?" The messenger to Aragorn could not have arrived that quickly, and even if Legolas and Gimli had been lounging about Minas Tirith...

Gimli gave him a look that was both indignant and wounded, somehow. "Well, I might not be as young as I once was, but when the son of a friend is in the hands of those foul creatures, you find you can run mostly forever."

Elboron's grin broadened. "A fact I am grateful for. Is his majesty taking care of a different band of orcs?" In Elboron's hero-worshipping mind, he saw the King of Gondor slaying a platoon of the monsters who had dared to lay a hand on his son. After all, where these two were, was Strider not also to be found?

Gimli shrugged a little. "Aragorn wanted to come with us, but after all the effort it took to put a King back on the throne, we all decided it was best that one of the line stay safe." At some point, apparently, Gimli had learned the rudiments of tact.

"Of course he did," Eldarion said as he emerged from the cave, supported by Legolas. His expression was inscrutable. "My father takes his duties very seriously."

Elboron sensed a well of hurt under those words, but this was not the time or place to address it. For now, they had to get back home and recover. Then they could talk—Elboron felt certain they had a great deal to talk about.

Eomer stared into the fire disconsolately, mulling over the news from Dol Amroth and brooding. Clearly, Elphir had taken leave of his senses—his anger with Eomer had tenuous grounds, perhaps, but transferring his ire to his brother? It defied reason.
Amrothos and Lothiriel were not in a better humor about it. Amrothos was still stinging from the rebuke and his sister was, of course, taking the side of her favorite brother. So it was a very tense meeting between the three of them.

"I will have to speak to Elessar," Eomer concluded. He hated having to drag his friend into a dispute, but it did not seem that he had any choice. This was no time for there to be rivalries between kingdoms of the west.

"I think that would not be a good idea," Amrothos told him. Eomer glanced sharply at him, shocked. "I've had time to think on this, on the road back, and I think that should be our very last option."

"Of course I trust your opinion, but why?" Eomer asked. The whole situation was straining Eomer's not-so-astounding mental acumen. He wanted it very much to be over. Arguing with irrational people made him want to break things.

"My dear, idiot brother is stubborn to the point of madness, as we are seeing. If his King demands that he stop being such a fool, Elphir will obey as much as he has to—but we will never see a thawing of relations with him. And he will do everything he can get away with to make our lives difficult."

Eomer swept a hand through his blond mane and counted backwards from ten. "I assume throttling him is not an option either...."

Amrothos smiled at him in understanding. "Satisfying, but no, I don't think that will help the situation any."

"What about Kiro" Lothiriel asked. "He's always been loyal to Elphir, but he has a good head on his shoulders."

"You're forgetting he was the one who reported back to Elphir in such a way that gave your oldest brother fits. I don't really think I trust Erchirion," Eomer remarked dubiously.

Amrothos and his sister exchanged a look. "He may be right, sister dear. Erchirion isn't stupid, but he tends to forgo thinking in favor of listening to Elphir."

Eomer gritted his teeth. He was beginning to think that he should go down there with a few eoreds and settle this issue the old-fashioned way. It would be altogether more satisfying bashing Elphir's head into a wall a few times, after all, than all these courtly games. "I should remind him he owes his life to my son."

Amrothos blinked and suddenly started to laugh. "Brilliant!"

"What?" Eomer replied testily.

"He's being clever, dear, best to just let him have his head." Lothiriel picked up her needlework and put on an air of serenity.

Amrothos was too busy exulting to take offense. He grinned and stood up, pacing languidly back and forth as he ordered his thoughts. "We can't compel Elphir and he has rejected me as an ambassador. But he has not closed the doors on all envoys from the Mark. And there are two he more or less has to listen to."

"Boro and Win," Eomer mused, thinking on it. "Of course, like as not the boys will spark a war between our kingdoms, but that could be fun too. My riders get fat if they don't have a fight every year or so," he joked.
"You might not want to be so eager to declare war on my homeland, dear," Lothiriel scolded him mildly.

"Apologies, dear."

Amrothos was still smiling. "Win is a bright boy and I can teach him what he needs to know to negotiate a peace. And if Boro and Dar are there, it will be sort of like an official envoy of the west without the daunting crowns and honor guards."

"Oh, there will be a sizable honor guard," Eomer countered.

"No, there won't. An eored should escort them, of course, but the eored should not enter the city. Elphir needs to be given an escape that does not look like he was muscled into giving up."

"I seem to be making a lot of compromises for a man who has insulted me so deeply," Eomer complained.

"Yes, but it will all be much better for us in the end. I'll head for Ithilien and start teaching Win what he needs to know. I'd say we should be ready by next spring. And by then, maybe Elphir will have calmed down some."

Eomer looked from his wife to his friend and then sighed heavily. "I suppose there isn't much choice." He was not at all pleased by the solution, but he was also desperate to end this feud. The Knights of Dol Amroth were critical to the safety of the West.

Sometimes, a King had to do what is best, not what he prefers.

Agalon's party met up with Legolas, Gimli, Elboron and Eldarion and as a group, they made their way back to Minas Ithil. Eldarion and Elfwine were properly tended and all three boys ate ravenously until their bellies were almost distended.

Tension that had gripped the city slowly eased. With the weather turning decidedly chill, the citizens of Minas Ithil turned their attention to the task of preparing for winter. Their Prince, however, was not quite ready to relax. He sent out scouts into the wide forest to find the rest of the orcs and the strange troll the boys had spoken of.

With Elfwine more or less immobile (a fact he endured stoically once Faramir brought him a pile of rare books to read) Elboron and Eldarion were more or less left to keep each other entertained. So, once the Gondorian Prince's whinging got him out from under Eowyn's watchful eye, the two set out exploring the city.

"It's odd, really," Eldarion commented as he looked around the wide avenues. "Minas Tirith is a fortress first and foremost—the entire city is designed to fend off attackers and the people just sort of had to make homes where they could. But this is more ... open." He grinned at his friend. "I think I prefer it."

"Really? I kind of miss Rohan, myself. I guess for the same reasons. I don't like being behind walls." Elboron chattered aimlessly, telling his friend a little of the city's history, about the building projects that had been completed as well as the ones still underway.

Eldarion listened without his characteristic eye-rolling. He was, in fact, quite bemused by the stories. When Elboron paused, Eldarion smiled at him. "And here you made us all think you never
learn anything."

Elboron colored. "My father has been telling me stories and ... I tend to listen to him."

Eldarion laughed a little. "Perhaps you can teach me the trick of that. I think it would astound and amaze my father if I were able to repeat anything he tells me."

Remembering his friend's expression at finding his father had not come to save him, Elboron moved a little closer, nudging him in the shoulder. "I think your father is pretty amazed by you already."

Eldarion shrugged it off and started walking again. "Amazed, perhaps, at my ability to get myself into trouble. I'm surprised he has not sent someone to fetch me after this latest catastrophe."

Elboron felt a stab of fear and something close to pain at the idea of Eldarion being summoned home. "I'd go with you," he blurted.

The Prince of Gondor started and then grinned a little more. "My faithful liegeman?" Oddly, there was no sarcasm in the words.

Elboron colored a little again and shrugged. "You.... I didn't think you were awake when I said that."

"Said what?"

"Oh! You didn't...? Never mind." Elboron went through a gate and into a wide, public park.

Eldarion eyed his back as he followed, frowning, pondering, fretting. "No. .. what?" There was a little authority in his tone now.

Elboron stopped and looked back at him. "When I was trying to wake you.... I called you my lord and said I was your faithful liegeman. I thought that's what you were talking about."

Now it was Eldarion's turn to grow red. He shifted from foot to foot, not really sure how to face the fact that someone he was very much in awe of being so utterly subordinate to him. "Oh."

"It's true, you know," Elboron said, almost pugnaciously. For some reason, he felt he had to bluster to keep himself steady. "I would follow you anywhere."

Somehow, Eldarion managed to become a darker shade of red. "What you did..."

"Don't...."

"No." Eldarion looked him right in the eye, a wealth of unfamiliar (and uncomfortable) emotions reflected in that gaze. "What you did was extraordinary. I owe you my life."

Elboron turned from the gaze, his own emotions a bit difficult to pin down. "I only did what anyone would do," he evaded.

The Prince of Gondor stepped over to him, his gaze unwavering. "Anyone may well have tried, but you actually did it. I can't imagine where you found the strength, Boro." Though, on some level, he thought he actually could.

Ithilien's heir shrugged uneasily. They were treading on ground he was not familiar with and was not, truly, quite ready to handle. He met that piercing gaze for only a moment before averting his eyes once more. "I would not have left you," he said simply. "You are my liege, Dar."
Eldarion smiled at that, his whole expression softening. For a moment, he looked much more the Prince and much less the reckless youth. "Yes, I know. And you are my man."

Elboron felt a peculiar roaring in his ears at those words and his heart started to hammer in his chest. "Yes," he agreed faintly.

The Prince of Gondor almost let it go at that. He was already so far out on a limb that he was sure there were only leaves under one foot. But he was compelled to be brave—inspired perhaps, by the courage his friend had shown in saving him. "But it was not only that which gave you the strength to save me, was it?" He reached out impulsively and took one of Elboron's broad hands in his own slender one.

Elboron stared down at their joined hands, struck stupid by it for a moment. It was not unpleasant—not by a mile. In fact, his friend's narrow hand seemed to fit rather nicely with Elboron's awkwardly-huge grasp. It felt ... right. And it sent the oddest tingle all through the Prince of Ithilien's nerves. "I ... suppose not."

The connection was tenuous, but it was there and they both felt it—like two puzzle-pieces snapping together. Eldarion smiled broadly, grinning like an idiot. He led his friend over to a bench and sat with him, their fingers still intertwined. Elboron did not resist or even say anything.

For once, the two boys were content to just sit side by side, unspeaking. They had crossed a bridge and both of them were trying to process what, exactly, it all meant.
Chapter Summary

The orcs come to Minas Ithil. Their devastating onslaught has dreadful consequences that will change the lives of the three boys forever.

Year 16 & 17

Amrothos arrived in Minas Ithil just ahead of the first serious storm of the season. He spoke at some length with Lord Faramir and then went to find the boys—all three of whom were overjoyed to see him. By nightfall, an impromptu sort of welcome feast was underway—which was mostly an excuse to fraternize and drink.

At Amrothos' request, a messenger went out the next day, riding hard for Dol Amroth. The letter he carried was for Alphros, though it was written in such a way that Elphir could read it without suspecting anything untoward. It was, essentially, an invitation for the heir of Dol Amroth to come to Minas Ithil to finish his education.

The verbal message that the trusted courier carried was from Amrothos himself to his nephew—and that message contained a fond wish from his uncle to see him in Minas Ithil as soon as possible. Amrothos was worried about the boy, after all, and this was the best opportunity he would have to look after him. Additionally, Alphros could give them an update on Elphir's mood.

It was midnight and the feast did not display any signs of slowing down. Partly because the storm had begun outside and no one was anxious to make their way home. Eldarion vanished—almost literally. One minute he had been going on in great detail to a drunken soldier about the size of the troll they had seen and the next, he had simply not been there.

Elfwine was about to ask Elboron about it, but his friend was already moving, heading for the door—presumably in search of the Gondorian prince. Something had happened between the two that Elfwine was not privy to. And it was a bit hurtful to be excluded, but he refused to let himself go down that road. When they were ready to talk to him about it, they would do so.

Amrothos slipped into the chair beside Elfwine and grinned at him. "So, I hear your penchant for getting into trouble remains as sharp as ever."

Elfwine rolled his eyes and shrugged a little. "I think trouble finds me, honestly, uncle. Or Boro and Dar. And, well, once it finds one of us...." He left it hanging.

"I don't recall having that problem in my youth— but then, I was both lazy and self-indulgent." He shrugged easily. "We have something fairly serious to talk about, Win. You awake enough to listen?"

"I stay up nights reading, uncle, and sleep late." Elfwine nodded to his uncle, worried now. He had wondered why his uncle had shown up here so soon after the little debacle with the orcs and now the prince's mind was awhirl with possibilities. Was his father worried Win was not looking after Eldarion closely enough? Or had the pilfering of the scroll out of Eomer's chambers been discovered?
"My brother, Elphir, seems to have liberated himself from reason," Amrothos told him, getting straight to the point. "You recall the business in Harad where his son was hurt?"

"Yes, uncle." Now Elfwine was completely confused. What did Elphir and his moods have to do with him?

"Well, Elphir has taken the incident as a personal affront. He has broken his friendship with Eomer and indicated that he won't help the Mark if it comes to it. And, incidentally, he banished me."

"What? Why?"

"I have to suspect he has been wanting to for a very long time. I tend to wear on his nerves. That is a minor issue, though. Your father cannot afford to let Elphir sulk for however long my brother intends to keep this up."

"I don't understand this, uncle. Why does Uncle Elphir think this is my father's fault?" Sometimes adults were impossible to fathom.

"He has his reasons—which really only qualify as reasons in his own head. It does not really matter. What matters is putting an end to this before it gets any further off its tether."

"I'm almost afraid to ask," Elfwine murmured, eying his uncle worriedly. "What does this have to do with me?"

Amrothos gave him an understanding smile. "You've been named special envoy to Dol Amroth, lad. Congratulations."

Elfwine winced. That did not sound like the sort of duty anyone should have to face, but he assumed there was a terribly good reason for it—better than simple revenge for all the grey hairs he had given his father. "Why me?"

"I suppose I could flatter you shamelessly by telling you that your father and I are overwhelmed with your good sense and wisdom, and while that is part of it, there is a more basic reason—Elphir owes you his life."

Elfwine nodded slowly, feeling the uncomfortable weight of responsibility settle on his shoulders. While he himself was in no hurry to grow up, the world apparently could not be so patient. "I... I mean, of course I'll try, but if he wouldn't listen to you..."

Amrothos patted him on the back. "Never fear, lad, we'll arm you with all the fancy words and false platitudes any good ambassador needs to have. And as for listening to you, he more or less has to. His honor will demand it. He won't like it, but he'll do it."

"I don't know that I'm excited about turning him against me, Uncle."

Amrothos gave him a sympathetic look. "It won't be as bad as all that. Elphir may be a bit off course right now, but he is still a man of honor. By sending you, we save him from having to back down under force of arms or by order of the King. He'll see that and, once he is done sulking, he'll be grateful."

"I've seen the dungeons beneath the palace, Uncle. I'm not anxious to revisit them," Elfwine replied dubiously. Obviously, he would do his father's bidding, but this did not seem like an exceedingly solid plan. "Won't he be insulted that a beardless boy is telling him to stand down?"

Amrothos laughed out loud. "I imagine he would, so we'll avoid 'telling' my brother he must do
any particular thing. In the world of diplomacy, we prefer to merely 'suggest'—strongly, at times, but rarely more than that."

"Oh," Elfwine replied, embarrassed by his foible. "You see? I haven't even started and I'm already making mistakes."

"That's called learning," Amrothos assured him kindly. "In all seriousness, Win, I know you can do this. I'd have more doubts about your friends, to be honest—and I'd ask you to not repeat that—but you managed affairs in the Mark remarkably well. With a little training, you can put out this fire and save your father from an enormous headache."

Elfwine felt his sense of responsibility weld the shackles around his ankles—he was going to do this despite any of his doubts and fears. "Of course I will, Uncle. But if I get tossed in a cell, I expect a very swift rescue." He grinned as he said the last, assuring his uncle he was not truly afraid.

After all, Elphir was no scarier than a pack of orcs.

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Elboron asked a few guards and servants and in that manner managed to track his friend's movements through the keep and out into the driving rain. That utterly baffled Elboron, but then, Eldarion was a bit on the strange side. Donning a cloak, he made his way out into streets only occasionally lit by a flash of lightning.

The storm was raging so hard it was impossible to even walk in a straight line, and he knew he outweighed Eldarion by a good three stones. By rights, he should find the daft prince plastered against the side of a building.

Not sure why he was bothering—after all, Eldarion was completely safe within Minas Ithil—Elboron nonetheless plodded on through the wet and the cold. Fortunately for him, his friend was moving down a single avenue, and when the skies lit up, he could make out his silhouette.

"Elf blood's unhinged his mind," Elboron grumbled, pulling his cloak tighter.

No one was about but them. The citizens of Minas Ithil knew better than to venture out into a storm this intense. The only thing to be done was to lock the doors and shutter the windows and wait it out. Even the patrols of the city's guards were limited and perfunctory.

Another flash showed his friend up on the walls and Elboron sighed. The prince of Gondor was apparently eager to get himself blown right over the battlements. Cursing inventively, Elboron carefully mounted the rain-slick steps and made it up to the wall. The absolute dark caused by the storm had turned everything beyond the wall into an endless see of black.

A hand fell on Elboron's shoulder and he turned just as a flicker of light illuminated the ecstatic features of his friend. "Isn't the storm glorious?" he shouted.

Elboron shook his head. "What are you doing out here?" A peal of thunder boomed overhead.

"What?"

"Why did you come out here?" Elboron demanded. He was sodden and cold and he really hoped his friend had a good answer for all this.

"Why?" Eldarion laughed, as if the question were just that absurd. "Feel it, Boro! Feel the thunder
"I can't feel anything, you loon." Elboron had no idea why he was grinning so broadly, unless it was that Eldarion's madness was catching. "I'm frozen through."

"Nonsense!" Eldarion rather mischievously peeled his friend's cloak off and tossed it over the wall, laughing delightedly.

"Hey!" Elboron shivered and glowered at Eldarion. It was time to throw his friend over his shoulder and haul him back to the warmth of the castle before they both caught their deaths.

But just then there was another flash of lightning and not only the sky glowed—Eldarion himself seemed to glow. Elboron was awed by the sight of it, and suddenly the cold did not seem to touch him. The thunder that followed hard upon ... it shook the ground, echoed up through his bones and set his chilled skin to tingling. His eyes went wide.

Eldarion giggled and slipped his arms around the stunned young man's neck. There was a slight height difference between them, but it was not terribly significant. The prince of Gondor's eyes seemed to sparkle, even in the dark. Elboron was definitely no longer cold—rather the opposite, actually.

"Um...." The heir of Ithilien was looking a bit spooked.

Eldarion leaned in, nose to nose with his friend. He was almost vibrating, so charged by the storm was he. The Gondorian prince felt wild and free and every bit as reckless as he was reputed to be. And in the midst of those crazy thoughts was the complete certainty that if he leaped into the unknown, Elboron would catch him.

The Gondorian Prince was surprised, though, when it was Elboron who moved the last couple of inches closer, pressing their frozen lips together. There was another flash of light and a clap of thunder and they were still locked in that embrace. Neither had the faintest idea what they were doing, but that hardly mattered. It was, for them, better than any dream or wish they had ever had.

The storm raged around them, but neither of them felt it upon them any longer.

The storm blew itself out in a few days and preparations continued for the long chill of winter. Firewood aplenty needed to be set aside, meat needed to be cured and house walls needed to be resealed to keep out the wind. It was a yearly event, so the city went about it with tremendous efficiency.

Faramir barely had to give any orders or settle any disputes. He was grateful, really, that his people were not as boisterous as the Rohirrim. If he had to constantly put down brawls in his streets, he was sure it would drive him insane. As a rule, Ithiliens settled things in an orderly way.

Faramir was thus able to spend more time on his personal affairs—such as his studies and his family. Though, of late, it had been somewhat difficult to so much as locate Elboron, and when he did, getting his attention had proved near impossible.

He mused on this as he walked into the chamber he shared with his wife. Something odd was afoot. Faramir paused and just watched her for a moment—she was facing away and brushing her glorious blonde hair and he rarely saw it out of its braids anymore. He doubted she knew it, but he often found himself just watching her and thanking the stars that she had consented to be his wife.
As she set the brush down, he resumed his approach. "Evening, beloved," he murmured, leaning over to kiss her on the cheek.

"Well, hello," she replied with a bright smile.

She, too, had been a bit odd of late. He doubted it was coincidence, but he still could not fathom what was occurring with his family.

"I was starting to think that smile of yours had gone into the west," he told her with a little grin.

Eowyn laughed and turned to look up at him. "Hardly. But it has been a very stressful year, has it not?"

He took a seat beside her and reached out to touch her hand. "And more. For which I am sorry."

Eowyn waved her hand dismissively as she often did when talking about her worries and fears. "Not entirely your fault."

Faramir smiled and stroked the back of her hand with his thumb. "There is a peculiar malaise afflicting my family. First my son goes starry-eyed and starts running into walls and then my wife starts to smile for no obvious reason. I wonder when I might catch this pleasant ailment...."

Eowyn arched an eyebrow and then gracefully moved from her seat to his lap. "You might catch it very easily. I was just assuming you would figure it out on your own, as obvious as the boy is being about it."

"I have the unfortunate habit of missing important things," he remarked to her.

Eowyn stroked her husband's cheek and looked happily into his eyes. "Our son is in love."

Faramir blinked, not quite sure he had heard right. However, now that it was put in front of his face, all the signs surely fit. "Isn't he a might bit young?"

Eowyn laughed. "Young love is the best, dearest. Didn't you have a sweetheart when you were his age?" She thought of Theodred, briefly, and the infatuation that had consumed two years of her life. The pain of his death did not diminish the brightness or sweetness of those two years. Even if Theodred had not returned her affection, just having those feelings had been wonderful.

Faramir laughed a little, relaxing. He had, of course, had such an experience. But he was not about to bring that up now. "And who is the lucky person?"

Eowyn's laughter was like the ringing of silver bells. "Oh my dear, blind husband. Have you not noticed similar strange behavior from another of our charges?"

Faramir gave her a forlorn, apologetic look. "I think perhaps I have been paying too much attention to my books. Help me, please?"

"Eldarion, beloved."

Faramir stared at her. He was happy Elboron was happy, but this had disaster written all over it. "Eldarion is the heir of Gondor. There are expectations about his future."

Eowyn smiled gently. "They are young, and as you know, young love can pass as fast as a summer storm. But if not, then I am sure they can find a way to accommodate all those expectations."
"I just don't want Boro hurt."

"But you can't protect him, either, dear heart. Some hurts must be endured so that one can grow."

Faramir grunted, not liking it but seeing the reason in it. "I suppose I should talk to him about some things..." It was, he realized, past time for that discussion.

"You could, if you want to embarrass your son to incapacity and make him self-conscious," she replied, eyes sparkling.

Faramir worried at his lower lip. "Then what should I do?" He very much felt that he should say or do something.

"Let him come to you, dear heart. When he is ready, he knows who he can go to for advice and ... explanations."

Faramir laughed a little, remembering when he had badgered Boromir into explaining all those interesting facts to him. While he, the scholar, had been raptly fascinated, his brave, stolid brother had been a squirming, stammering mess of fourteen-year-old nerves.

"Well... Then I suppose I'll do just that." Faramir ducked in for a kiss, fingers trailing along her throat. "Might I entreat my wife to join me in bed?"

Eowyn lowered her lashes and smiled demurely. "Why yes, my lord, I think you might succeed in that..."

As the storms worsened to an icy sleet, one more visitor came to Minas Ithil—a very sodden, very weary Prince of Dol Amroth. Alphros was greeted warmly by his uncle, by his hosts and by a very excited Elboron and Elfwine, who had been much anticipating his visit.

Winter in Ithilien proved to be a much colder and much more violently stormy season than it had been in Rohan. Happily, the keep had stout walls and warm blankets and so they were not made to suffer, really.

To while away the winter nights, they had Legolas and Gimli to tell them tales of their adventures. The two had not made any significant efforts to leave Minas Ithil before winter, and once the storms hit, Faramir certainly wasn't about to evict them. Despite the fact that Gimli appeared bent on draining his host's beer stores.

With Amrothos in the keep, there was absolutely no escaping lessons for the entire bitter season, and while the boys did not appreciate it (with the exception of Elfwine, of course) they did learn a great many useful things about how the world had come to be the way it was and how the modern kingdoms of men interacted with each other.

To keep them from growing restless, Erkenbrand worked them extra hard, but none of them objected to this at all. They had each been in fights for their lives and they wanted to be ready the next time it happened.

Elfwine, also, spent a lot of time closeted with his Dol Amrothian kinsmen, learning how best to ply Elphir and bring the Prince back to the path of reason. It was quite mentally taxing and even his thirst for knowledge wasn't enough to make him really enthusiastic about the task. He would rather be with his friends, raiding the kitchens or whatever mischief they were up to.
Elfwine was aware that there was a bond between them that he was not included in, and that every day that bond grew tighter. There was something between his friends that he was simply not a part of, and for the first time since they had all come together, he felt like he was not completely one of them.

And yet, in many ways, things had not changed. They were still close, they still spent hours talking and joking and laughing and, though they were really getting a bit too big for it, they all still piled into one bed. Something fundamental had changed in their friendship, but the bonds of love and brotherhood had not faded.

The deathly chill of winter gave way to the more forgiving climes of spring, conveniently just as the winter stores were almost gone. Ithiliens were remarkably skilled at stocking and rationing their larders—never too much, never too little. When one had to hunt or harvest one's meals, one tended to avoid waste.

Agalon and his hunters went out and the boys were invited along—with numerous admonishments placed upon them. There was little to fear—none of the three were eager to repeat the misery of the past year. Adventures seemed grand things, but pain and starvation took the shine right off of them.

Each of them brought down game over the course of several hunts—Elboron taking the biggest prize of any of them; a huge stag with a daunting rack of antlers. The antlers were, of course, mounted and displayed proudly in the main hall—but not before a piece had been removed by Ithilien’s heir.

A few weeks later it was noted that Eldarion was sporting an exquisite knife, the hilt artfully crafted from just such a stag’s horn.

Early that spring, the Lady Eowyn gave birth to her second son. She and Faramir named the babe Barahir and even as a newborn, his strength was noted. The father was exceedingly proud.

Elboron reacted with vast uncertainty. Children were all well and good, but he was not really sure what to do with them. When they pressed the babe into his arms, he looked much on the verge of panic. A while later, though, he and Eldarion were found doting on the happy child.

Legolas and Gimli, who had apparently stationed themselves at Ithilien for the time being in hopes of encountering more orcs, took to ranging out to the north for days at a time. For Legolas, the woods were a welcome haven. For Gimli, it was somewhat akin to climbing into a dragon's mouth.

In mid-spring, the two reported spotting numerous large scouting parties, and that was what brought an end to the boys’ hunting expeditions. They were not confined to the city, thankfully, but the forest was deemed too dangerous for them.

It was Eldarion who proposed the idea of climbing the Winding Stair.

"It's perfectly safe," Eldarion said by way of response to their startled looks. "Boro tells me his father has a watchtower up there. We'd get to see the spider's lair, Win, and the place the hobbits crossed into Mordor..."

The Gondorian prince sure did know how to pique his Rohirrim friend's interest. Elboron had no objection aside from the insanely long climb. He looked pitifully at Eldarion. "Could we do it some other day?"

Eldarion laughed and shoved Elboron a little. "You mean a day when you're less lazy? I don't
know that day will ever come."

Elboron made a face and lounged back in his chair. "I suppose it is a way to escape that lecture on the construction of Osgiliath..."

"There you go!" Eldarion approved. "Shall we then?"

Aldurn reacted with a long-suffering look and little else. So, with packs and supplies and word left with Faramir, the three boys and their much put-upon protector made for the legendary stair.

It had been worked on over the years, as it was a passage used by the guards heading to and from their duty stations as well as the workers who brought supplies up to the tower. So the steps were more sturdy, mortar shoring up cracks and crumbling portions. And there was a length of rope that was secured at the top and threaded through rings in metal spikes that were driven into the stone. This provided an easier means to make it up some of the steeper portions of the climb.

Eldarion was easily faster than any of the others, taking the stairs two and three at a time and showing no sign of tiring. Aldurn, by sharp contrast, was trailing further to the rear than perhaps was prudent for a bodyguard—not that they expected trouble. So Elfwine found himself trudging along side by side with Elboron and it brought him back to the times it had been just the two of them.

"How's the leg, Win?" Elboron asked, helping his friend up a particularly tall step. Of the three of them, Elboron was currently the tallest and the strongest. It was a fact he often lorded over them.

Elfwine shrugged and adjusted his pack. "It aches a bit now and then."

"Did I ever thank you for coming after us?"

"I.... Probably...." Elfwine knew his friend had not, but Elboron had been much distracted lately and Elfwine had been very busy.

"Win...."

"It's not terribly important, Boro."

Elboron smirked at him. "Don't try to throw up walls in front of me, Win. I know you a bit too well, eh?"

Elfwine nodded, feeling sheepish. "You didn't, but it's fine. I know you're grateful. I know you pretty well too, eh?" His grin was as boyish as ever.

Elboron laughed and nodded. "Well, thank you anyway. I think you might be more reckless than Dar for pulling a stunt like that, but it means a lot to us both that you would risk that much."

"Well, I could hardly let you hog all the peril for yourselves, could I?"

"I suppose not," Elboron conceded.

The heir of Ithilien's gaze drifted to Eldarion, his expression shifting to something Elfwine had never seen on his friend's face before. When the Gondorian Prince half-stumbled, Elboron leaned forward and his hand came up, as if he could catch the young man at this distance. The moment passed as Eldarion righted himself, but it was not lost on Elfwine.

The prince of the Mark eyed his companion as they labored up the stone steps, suspicions forming and understanding beginning to trickle over him. "Is there.... Is there something between you
Elboron coughed, laughed, blushed and shrugged in quick succession. "Ah..." It was not that he had any shame over whatever it was he shared with Eldarion, it was more that he had no idea what it was, exactly.

Elfwine grinned at him, elated. He actually felt a lot better. The fear had been that he had been excluded from something because his friends were distancing themselves from their cautious, bookish companion. Now that he knew what he was shut out from was something he could not be a part of at all, he felt a weight lift from him. "Go on, out with it. Don't make me dangle you over the edge here to get it out of you."

Elboron gave him a look that told him he was free to try—but that the attempt might prove hazardous. He did, however, relent. Because he had been dying to tell someone. "We.... Well, we kind of think we might have ... some feelings." He still did not quite know how to put names to the things going on in his head and his heart.

"That sounds pretty kind of not really certain," Elfwine teased, punching him in the arm.

Elboron stammered a little more. "Well.... It's not something I know a lot about. But.... I care about him and I feel kind of sick in a good way when I'm alone with him."

Elfwine clapped him on the shoulder. "And how does he feel?"

"You know Dar—he doesn't take a whole lot seriously and he thinks even less than I do, so for him, it's all about the moment, I think. Which ... I sort of like." He gave Elfwine a nervous look. "Is it like that at all with you and Magda?"

"Well, I hardly got to spend any time with her, but...." Elfwine blushed and grinned. "It was more or less exactly like that."

The two of them built onto the foundations of their friendship with this sort of talk as they made their way up, finding new common ground and drawing close once again. It made the arduous climb pass much easier. When they at last reached the top, most of their secrets and hidden thoughts had been exchanged—which made an odd moment for Eldarion, for both of them started giggling when they finally caught up with him.

The heir of Gondor loftily ignored them.

To their immense disappointment, the entrance to the spider's lair had been blocked by a massive stack of boulders. While everyone was fairly certain Shelob was dead, no one felt it was necessary to take unnecessary chances. After a brief rest, the group pressed on, heading up the winding path that lead over the lair and up to the peak where the watchtower was.

Eldarion stopped them, though, just as the tower came into view. His nostrils flared as he smelled the breeze wafting over them. His friends grew serious and they gathered around him in a show of unity.

"What is it?" Elboron asked in a whisper.

"Blood," Eldarion replied grimly.

The Gondorian prince picked his way along the path a few dozen paces, his friends close behind him. Following his senses, he veered off the path and picked his way through the thick underbrush. His keen gaze swept over the ground, seeking and searching intently.
Elboron and Elfwine, meanwhile, kept a keen lookout for orcs. They would not be so foolish as to get mixed up with the foul kind again if they could help it. They had already pushed their luck as far as sanity and youthful exuberance would take them. Prudence was something they were beginning to appreciate.

Eldarion stopped and knelt beside the body of an Ithilien soldier. There were ugly black arrows imbedded in his back. "Orcs," Eldarion murmured.

Aldurn looked the man over and then turned his gaze to the tower uneasily. "He hasn't been dead long. Boro, if there was an attack at the tower, even unsuccessful, what would the soldiers there do?"

"Light a signal fire and send a runner down to the city," the Ithilien prince responded, already reaching the conclusion Aldurn hinted at.

"And if they took the tower, the only reason would be so they can attack the city," Elfwine added.

As one, the three youths and their protector turned and made for the stairs. Eldarion lead them through the underbrush, paralleling the trail, just in case there were prying eyes in the tower. Of course this was all guesswork, but their guesses had usually been right before. And it was better to put the city on alert than have a tragedy.

Descending is always faster than ascending, and the little group had need for haste. They dropped their packs to lighten the load and then made their way down as fast as they safely could. Along the way, Elboron made some very difficult but very important decisions.

This was the moment his father had been training him for.

They reached the city as dawn started to creep over the land. They were all exhausted and cut and scraped from their panicked descent, but none of that mattered. Elboron shouted for the captain of the watch, and no one saw a half-grown prince when he did so. They saw the son of the leader of their people.

"Bring me two fresh horses, saddled and packed with supplies enough for one rider for two days," Elboron told another soldier, who obeyed without question. He had always wondered why anyone would listen to him. Now that he needed them to, he did not even pause to see if they were following his orders. He just expected them to. "Aldurn, go to my father. Tell him the city is going to be under attack by the end of the day."

There was no point in qualifying his statements—his father had taught him that a leader just has to risk being wrong. It saved lives.

Aldurn nodded and ran off for the palace. Elboron turned to his two friends, his expression more intense than they had ever seen. "I know it in my gut," he told them seriously.

They nodded as one. Trust between them was as natural as breathing. "What do you need us to do?" Elfwine asked.

Elboron gave them a grateful smile. "Win, I need you to go to each of the garrison captains and tell them I'm calling them to arms. You're the fastest runner in this city and you know it as well as I do."

His friend nodded and took off. The soldier returned with the two horses he had been ordered to fetch. Elboron looked to Eldarion gravely. His friend was looking like he was already prepared to balk. "I need you to do this for me, Dar. No one can catch you on a horse and I have a feeling in even an hour it will be too late to send for help. Get to your father."
"My place is with you," Eldarion replied fiercely.

Elboron hated to do what he was about to do, but he had little choice. "I saved your life, my friend. Now I need you to save mine—and that of my people. Please...."

Eldarion could not refuse a demand on his honor, of course, but even harder to deny would be that desperate note in Elboron's voice. He hugged the young man who held his heart and kissed his cheek. "I'll be back soon."

"I know," Elboron replied certainly. Then he stepped back and watched as his friend leaped into the saddle of one of the horses. They exchanged a brief but heartfelt look and then he was gone.

Elboron turned to find the captain of the watch approaching, looking harried and confused. "Seal the gates, captain, and get all your men on duty. The watchtower has fallen. The orcs have come to take their city back."

Faramir read over the report despondently then crumpled it up and threw it in the fire. The orcs had indeed come pouring down from the mountain, and Faramir's archers had been waiting for them. He had hoped they could choke the narrow pass with bodies and delay the approach of the army, but his archers had only lasted until nightfall. The raiding parties in the forest had gathered into a cohesive unit and had taken his men by surprise.

Agalon and two hundred of Ithilien's best archers had been lost.

"Father?"

Night was rapidly fading, giving way to the earliest hours of morning. They had lasted a day, but things had barely begun. Faramir was here in the council chamber with Beregond and a few of the city's guard captains and his son. Elboron was here because he had earned his place—and Faramir had told him so. His son had proven himself worthy of all his father's faith in him. Because of Eldarion, Ithilien had a chance.

"Agalon and his men were overwhelmed." Faramir looked around at his loyal men, his grave expression reflecting only determination. "We don't yet know the size of the force we face, but we do know we have strong walls and good swords. And thanks to my son, King Elessar will know of this attack by now. We need hold only until tomorrow morning at most. Let's not throw everything at them yet, lads. I learned my lesson in Osgiliath—hold something back for the final fight. Make sure your men rest in shifts and keep a sharp eye out for shirkers. I'll have more orders when I know more about the enemy."

They saluted and made their exit, filing out of the room silently. Only Elboron stayed—he was reluctant to part from his father's side. Faramir smiled fondly at him. "You need to get some rest yourself, lad."

Elboron shrugged and shook his head. "I don't think I can. I'm all wound up...."

Faramir put a hand on his son's shoulder, gripping it firmly. "You learn to get rest where and when you can, lad. And you'll be grateful for it later, believe me." His gaze became sober once more. "I want to tell you again, Boro, how proud of you I am. This city owes you a great debt."

Elboron managed a smile. "I had a great teacher."

Faramir laughed softly and tugged on one of Elboron's braids. "Go get something to eat and try to
rest. I'll need you later."

The knowledge that his father was actually entrusting him with responsibility made Elboron almost giddy and it showed. He nodded to his father, murmuring a "yes sir" and then made his exit.

Faramir watched him go, his heart swelling with pride. For a few months, he had been weighed down by doubts over his son’s ability to bear up under the responsibility of command. He loved his son deeply, but there seemed to be a part of Elboron that defied growing up. And much as he wanted to let Elboron take shelter in boyhood for many years, he had known the time for that was gone.

Faramir had finally ferreted out the meaning and purpose of his prophetic dream about Elboron. It had had, in fact, nothing to do with the danger Elboron was in or even the orcs surrounding him. It was a minor detail that held the key—and how Faramir hated to admit it had been his father who had taught him to examine every detail of the dreams.

Faramir reached down to touch the hilt of his sword—the sword of the Ithilien Prince. It had been a gift from Elessar as part of the office, intended to pass from father to son on the death of the elder, as such traditions went.

In his dream, he had seen his youthful, unbearded son wielding that sword.

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It was actually disturbing the patience with which the orcs arranged themselves before the city. A few dozen paid the toll for finding out how long the range was of the Ithilien archers atop the walls. But then the creatures just drew back out of range and waited while their numbers grew.

And grew.

Thousands of orcs crowded the field before the city, cutting down trees to make a gargantuan battering ram and clear a path for their approach. The people of Ithilien could only look on in dismay as the army prepared to lay waste to all they had built. Fear and more than a little rage permeated the city—the Ithiliens were not giving up their home without a fight.

Last to arrive was the troll Elboron and Eldarion had reported on. He came to the field in grand style; on a great iron throne resting upon a massive wooden platform that was, in turn, resting on huge wooden wheels. It was pulled along by a platoon of Uruk-Hai, all of them straining under the weight.

The arrival of the troll signaled the beginning of the conflict. The orcs brought forth their catapults and let trolls load them with huge boulders brought from the mountains. These giant rocks were then sent hurtling at the walls, crashing into them again and again, scattering the defenders.

The Ithiliens responded with a barrage of their own, though their catapults lobbed much smaller boulders. The accuracy with which they were utilized, though, more than made up for the difference.

Armored trolls went after the gate with the battering ram, and nothing the archers did was able to hinder them. Minas Ithil had been built to be the first line of defense if there was ever to be war again in the West, but no one had ever expected to see a force this large or this well organized.

Faramir quickly accepted that he could not hold the walls. He instead took to the streets and started organizing his soldiers into smaller squads. They knew the city and knew where the places
for ambush were, where the most defensible positions were. It was not a plan he favored, but it was what was left to him. They would have to fight the orcs in the streets and hope to save as many people as possible while waiting for relief.

It was Osgiliath all over again, he realized with a sickening turn of his stomach. Only this time, there were women and children in danger.

They were in the center of the city when they heard the gates sunder. Faramir turned to his squad; Elboron, Elfwine, Beregond, Bergil, Aldurn, Erkenbrand and a half dozen soldiers. There was no more question about seeing to the safety of the princes. They were men, now, Marshalls of Gondor. They had a duty to fulfill and he would not demean them by keeping them from it.

"Let's go, men," he ordered and led them off to waylay the invaders.

The excitement had worn off and now there was really only horror. Elboron had lost track of all the orcs he had killed—and all the townsfolk he had seen grotesquely murdered. In fact, the sickening images from this day alone made him sure he never wanted to be in a battle again.

He stayed close to Elfwine, and the two created a fairly daunting pair to face. Elfwine was quicker and more accurate, but Elboron had power. Aside from some minor cuts, the two had escaped serious injury.

They had been fighting for hours, and there did not seem any end in sight. Elboron understood now what his father had been referring to about rest—he was wishing profoundly that he had gotten more when he had had the chance.

Of a sudden, there was a deep, chilling roar and then a sickening crunch. The mangled corpse of a soldier landed at Elboron's feet with a nauseating splat. He looked down and then looked up, paling at the shadow falling over them.

The leader of this army, the troll with the uncommon intelligence, loomed over them with an awful sneer. He wore armor that was a series of plates held together by heavy chain—providing both protection and mobility. Both his axe and his hammer were dripping with gore.

Faramir was not as paralyzed as his son. He shouted at his archers to take the creature down, but that proved futile. The monster moved too fast for the arrows to reach the tiny openings in the armor plating that covered vulnerable spots. And then a sweep of that hammer wiped out most of the bowman in one strike.

"That thing can move," Erkenbrand told Faramir conversationally. He was grinning as he charged at the creature.

Faramir turned to Aldurn. "Get the boys back to the castle."

"What?" Elboron gaped. "Father!"

"That's an order!" Faramir roared and charged the creature.

His father was not waiting to see if Elboron obeyed and that faith alone got the young man moving. He could not stop himself from looking back, though, and for the rest of his days, he would wish he had not.

As agile as Erkenbrand was, a glancing blow from the hammer sent him reeling. Beregond and his
son assailed the monster's flanks and sparks flew as they wailed uselessly on the heavy plating. The troll ignored them, focusing his attention on the man facing off with him—the man he knew to be the Prince of the city.

Faramir ducked and dodged one crushing blow after another, all traces of his injuries and his weakness gone. He was back in his glory, displaying the grace and skill that had won him praise and accolades in his battles beside Elessar. No matter how fast or how clever the troll attacked him, Faramir was always a step ahead.

The Prince even succeeded in defeating the armor, cutting a deep gash in one of the troll's sides. But that was as much as he was able to do, for the creature was very fast and it was suicide to be too bold. Elboron knew, because his father had taught him the tactics of combat, that his father was waiting for the creature to tire before making a killing strike.

But the foul kind do not believe in honor and would not even understand the concept if it was explained to them.

An orcish archer shot Faramir in the back, the arrow going right between his shoulder blades. "Father!" All thoughts of obedience vanished at the horrible sight. Elboron turned and started to run to his sire, heedless of the danger. And he would have, had Elfwine not seized a hold of him. Then Aldurn had him and was dragging him bodily away. "We can't leave him!" Elboron protested.

A second arrow took Faramir in the lower back, and that staggered the noble prince enough that the troll was able to finish the job. A sweeping blow from the hammer took the lord of Ithilien in the chest, crushing the life from him and sending the body hurtling into a wall.

Elboron's world shattered.

Alphros shook as he slid the chain mail shirt over his head. It had taken Amrothos hours to convince the boy he had to take up a sword again. The defeat in Harad had quite effectively crushed the young prince's spirit. Amrothos very much approved of the more thoughtful, more reasonable man his nephew was growing into, but the primal terror of going into combat was not something that a Prince could allow himself.

Outside, the fighting was raging in the streets. Amrothos was honest enough with himself to admit that he himself was scared—this army was ever bit as determined and well-equipped as the one they had faced during the War. They were tearing through the city's defenses like a hurricane, leaving wreckage behind them.

But Amrothos had lived his life to the fullest and he would face death with as much courage as he could.

"What should we do?" the younger prince asked meekly.

"Well, first I'd say you want to straighten your shoulders, lad," Amrothos replied with a broad smile.

Alphros did so miserably. "Sorry, Uncle."

Amrothos gripped his shoulder and looked directly into his eyes. "Courage, lad. The skill you showed in your fight against Kaeliz is more than enough to handle these monsters."
Alphros bit his lower lip, obviously desperate to believe. "Thank you, Uncle."

Amrothos beamed proudly. "We don't have an assignment, but there are people out there who need us. Erkenbrand and Elfwine are representing Rohan. You and I should show these marauders that Dol Amroth stands with Ithilien, hmm?"

Alphros nodded, his sense of patriotism bolstering his faltering courage. The two princes left the keep quickly, then, heading to where the sounds of battle were loudest. Amrothos noted with some alarm just how close the fighting had gotten to the keep. The situation was even more desperate than he had feared.

The elder prince kept an eye on his nephew, worried that fear would overcome his better judgment. But there was no need for any such worry. Amrothos watched, his heart full to bursting with pride, as Alphros' fear melted away in the face of people in danger. The youthful face took on an expression of indignant outrage and he launched himself at the orcs with a throaty war cry.

Amrothos grinned and joined him, his own somewhat indolent style of swordplay making a sharp contrast to Alphros' fierce savagery. The orcs were equally overwhelmed by both, and both princes of Dol Amroth distinguished themselves that day.

"...then Erkenbrand led the creature away, but it was too late, your ladyship," Beregond finished, his voice heavy with emotion.

Beregond and Bergil had brought Faramir's body back to the castle, and now it lay on the royal bed, arms crossed, hands wrapped around the hilt of his sword. Eowyn had cried through the entire tale, and now she stood staring at her husband's lifeless body in mute horror. Her heart was even more crushed than Elboron's was.

The heir-apparent stood apart, barely hearing anyone speaking. His eyes were locked on the impossible sight of his father's dead body, and no matter how he tried, he could not make sense of it. The notion that his father could be dead and the world could go on—that he could go on without Faramir—it was absurd.

The young man did not cry, however—could not seem to find tears. All he felt was cold. Something of incomparable necessity to him had been shorn away and the wound was painful in ways he could not even understand. The battle outside, Ithilien's now imminent fall, none of it mattered. The world had simply stopped when the troll's hammer struck down Elboron's father.

Elfwine was watching him worriedly, but did not say anything. The situation had quite overwhelmed him and he was barely holding himself together as it was. Elboron was not aware, though. He did not once shift his gaze to his friend.

The silence stretched out, marred only by the distant sounds of the citizens fighting for their lives. It was Bergil who first dared to disturb the stillness. He stalked over to Elboron, looking all the more imposing due to the blood caked in his hair and the hard look in his eyes. He shook Elboron slightly.

"Your people need you."

Elboron barely even met that gaze. "Leave me alone," he murmured faintly.

Bergil slapped him. "Come on, boy, enough of that. You can grieve later. This is your city now."
You have to give the orders."

"Bergil..."

"No whinging, my lord. People are dying. What do we do?"

Elboron's eyes slowly focused on the man in front of him—a man he had never been too fond of and was liking much less at the moment. But some part of Elboron recognized truth when he heard it—and it was a bitter irony that the day had come when Bergil's dire warnings had come true; that Elboron would come into his birthright entirely too early.

The young man stepped over to the bed and the broken body of his father. How many things would now remain forever unsaid between them? How many disappointments would he never get the chance to make up for?

"Goodbye... father..." Elboron took the sword from his father's grip, feeling the weight drag at him. He cut off a piece of his father's cloak and tied it around the hilt and then turned to Beregond, who was watching him with apparent calm. Anyone who knew the man, though, could see he was devastated. The decision on what to do was simple, because it was the next part of his father's plan. Faramir had laid it all out for his son, anticipating this very possibility. "King Elessar should be here soon. We can't save the city, but we can save our people. Beregond, I want you to have the captains organize a fighting retreat. Bergil, organize squads of volunteers. Anyone who has not fled the city already, get them out the south gate."

Bergil nodded and left quickly, bowing slightly to his lord. Beregond moved somewhat more slowly, pulling on his gauntlets. "I won't be seeing you again, my lord," he told Elboron calmly.

Elboron actually knew this. Beregond would follow his lord into death, his oaths and his love would allow him to do nothing else. "I know." Elboron had slipped into an eerie, numbing sort of serenity. His gaze on the noble knight belied his mere fourteen years. "Thank you for all your years of service. Go with honor... and love."

Beregond bowed then and went to organize the last defense of Minas Ithil. The men's maniacal loyalty to him would inspire them to fight all the hordes alone and never ask why. It was why Beregond was uniquely suited to this final duty. He would buy Elboron the time he needed.

The Prince of Ithilien stepped over to his stricken mother. "Get your armor on, mother. I need every sword I can get."

Eowyn finally turned her gaze from Faramir, weary acceptance closing around her. She who had lost more loved ones than could easily be counted had learned how to pack away her grief. She had dreaded this day, but she had also secretly braced herself for it.

Night was coming to Ithilien, literally and figuratively, as Elboron oversaw the flight of the last few townsfolk. The defenders of Ithilien were doing well, guarding the citizens' escape, but their numbers were dwindling. It would not be long before the orcs swept over them and came after the civilians.

Elboron gave the order to those with him to run. One brave man stayed behind, closing the gate and jamming mechanism. It would not keep the orcs off their backs for long, but every minute counted.

The refugees fled through the forest, staying together as much as possible. They only had a few
dozen guards, but no more could be spared. Legolas, Gimli, Alphros and Amrothos, though, counted for three men each at least.

Elboron stayed to the rear, watching out for stragglers as well as advance scouts from the orcs. He knew enough about the foul kind to know that their chief goal here was not the city, it was the people. It would not be very long before the monsters came looking for fresh innocents to butcher.

The young prince's grief had transmuted into something much darker, sharper and more dangerous. It was rage, but it was terribly focused. His whole being suffused with an aching need to make these creatures pay for what they had done. He would dedicate himself to that very task.

The orcs were not silent in their approach. A dozen of them came racing out of the forest, snarling out whooping calls to their fellows. They launched themselves at the fleeing townsfolk, but none of them reached their targets. Arrows and blades cut them down in midair.

"To me!" Elboron yelled as more orcs appeared. A dozen and then a score and then too many to count.

The battle for Minas Ithil was lost, but the battle for survival was now joined.

Elboron was exhausted from spending endless hours, but that well of rage inside him fueled his arm and drove him onward. A one-eyed orc leaped at him, spear driving forward. Elboron moved aside easily and cut the monster down. The sword of the Prince of Ithilien was slathered in gore.

All around him, any who could still fight did so, rallying around their prince. Elboron became increasingly less aware, focused on killing as many of the creatures as he could reach. He did not even notice how hard Bergil and Elfwine were fighting to keep up with him and to keep him from getting flanked in his manic state.

Suddenly, a booming note from a horn broke into the din of battle. It was quickly repeated and the orcs grew dismayed. The thunder of shod hooves echoed outward in the wake of the horn-call.

Gondor had arrived.

Elboron grinned, brought from his obsessive rampage by the sound the subsequent appearance of the King’s banner. The Gondorian knights and their exhausted mounts ran over the murderous orcs, crushing them under their hooves. The fight quickly turned in the defenders' favor.

An orc almost had Elboron, though, in a single moment of distraction. The bent, drooling creature threw aside an Ithilien soldier and brought up a wicked-looking axe to cleave the young prince in two. Elboron did not even notice, his sword plunged into the heart of another orc, his back to the treacherous creature.

But his would-be-murderer's attack failed because a slender, saddle-weary figure flew from his horse and buried his knife into the orc's back —again and again. The knife, incidentally, had a handle carved from stag-horn and had been a gift from the prince himself. Eldarion's eyes blazed with fury as the orc who would have butchered his friend fell dead.

The three boys thusly reunited proved to be an impregnable ring of steel and youthful determination. They moved with a synchronicity that would have made Erkenbrand very proud.

The orcs broke and ran, fleeing back to the city to lick their wounds. They had come for easy prey and had found the opposite. They needed to regroup and confer with their leader on what to do next.

Elboron started to pursue, his bloodlust not sated by half. He wanted to find the murdering troll
and cut out his heart. His friends had to seize a hold of him and wrestle him to the ground to make him stop. He raged at them, cursing them and struggling futilely, but he was too worn to fight off the both of them.

"Elboron."

All three boys looked up at Bergil. The knight was covered in blood, most of which did not seem to be his. The gravity of his expression had deepened to something more akin to crushing sorrow.

"What?" Elboron asked, panting and glowering.

"It's your mother."

Elboron went limp and his friends relaxed their hold. The world started to spin again. He slowly got to his feet, shaking from exhaustion and worry. "Mother?"

Bergil nodded and led him through the littered battlefield, over corpses and around those grieving over a loved one. Victory had come too late for too many. And more yet would succumb to their wounds.

The boys followed Bergil towards a large tree, around which there were many men, living and dead. Elboron saw a pile of dead orcs to the side, Erkenbrand laying still in their midst. Under the tree knelt King Elessar, his blood-grimed hands clasping those of Lady Eowyn.

There was a spear through her belly.

"Mother...."

Elboron knelt, his heart cleaving again. How could the world hold this much sorrow? He looked to Elessar, whose eyes were bright with his own grief. The King did not return the look, his focus on one of his dearest friends.

Eowyn did not turn her head or even move her eyes. She took a very shallow breath and whispered, "my wonderful son" and then the Lady Eowyn took her final ride.

Behind him, Elboron heard Elfwine break down into tears. Elessar murmured an elvish blessing, his face a mask of sorrow and loss. Elboron, however, felt that coldness grip him once more and this time it went deeper.

Elessar put an arm around his shoulders. "Take your time here, lad. I'll go remove the murdering fiends from your city." There was a note of grim ferocity in the King's tone.

"No," Elboron said faintly. He looked gravely at Elessar—at his King. "You don't have enough men. I'll come back with an army and I will take my city back." He looked into his mother's beautiful, still face. "It's my duty, now."

Elessar was quiet for a time and then he nodded. "So it is, Prince of Ithilien. So it is."
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of the loss of Ithilien may be too much for the heirs to endure.

*Year 17 and 18, 4th Age*

The refugees from Minas Ithil went with their Prince to Minas Tirith and there they were granted shelter by the citizens of the White City. Lady Eowyn was laid to rest there, a ceremony attended by her brother and his entire family. King Eomer had taken the news every bit as hard as had been expected. Before the ceremony even got underway, he was in talks with Elessar about how to exact revenge on the foul kind.

It was Elboron's decision that Bergil stay in Minas Tirith and watch over the refugees as well as Elboron's sisters and the babe, Barahir, while the Prince went with his friends back to Rohan. No one argued or questioned the young man's decision—whatever he needed to heal the wounds of his heart, the people who loved him would struggle to provide.

So, late in the year, Eomer's party returned to the Mark with the young heirs plus Aldurn, Amrothos, and Alphros all in tow. It was a very somber procession, naturally; even Elfwine's young sisters seemed to pick up on the mood and remained quiet during the journey.

The eighteenth year of the fourth age dawned with the kingdoms of the West girding for a new war. No one was more eager for it than Elboron. The boy practiced his fighting and riding skills obsessively.

His friends began to worry about him.

"Everyone grieves in their own way, Win," Eomer told his son.

They were in one of the upper rooms of Meduseld, where Elfwine had come to find his father going over maps of the north. His concern for Elboron had grown to the point where Elfwine was not entirely sure he had confidence his friend would not try and harm himself. It was a wild concern, and he did not dare bring it up to Eldarion. The heir of Gondor was already sick with helpless worry for the young man who held his heart.

"But that's just it, father. He *isn't* grieving at all. We had a celebration in Aunt Eowyn's honor; we sang songs of her glory and told tales of her adventures. Boro won't even talk about it."

"His father was much the same," Eomer told him quietly. He had lost a sister, yes, but Faramir had been almost a brother to him. The loss to him was impossible to quantify. "He rarely spoke of Boromir—even to his wife, or so she told me. Some people grieve on the inside."

Elfwine sat on a bench and fretted anxiously. "I don't know, father. I know Boro pretty well and, yes, he's always been a little guarded about his feelings but ... this is different. He's even avoiding me and Dar."
Eomer sighed heavily and looked over at his son. "You need to give him time, lad. His world has come apart around him. When your grandparents died, I was about his age. It is a very turbulent age for a boy in the happiest of days. Having to cope with all this on top of that ... it can make a boy close-mouthed."

Elfwine slumped, defeated. "If you say so, father. I just wish he would scream or cry or hit me or something."

Eomer's expression was weary but understanding. "Patience, Win. I have a feeling there is a flood of tears waiting to come out of that boy. But only when he is ready."

Elfwine was not satisfied with the advice, but he would not argue with it either. If this was what his friend needed, then he would make himself be patient. It rankled, though, because Elfwine liked to believe that solutions could always be found if one looked hard enough. Waiting and hoping seemed like giving up.

But what choice did he have?

It had taken a long time for Elboron to get his head together enough to realize there was someone he needed to talk to. And it had taken even longer to manage to get the man alone. Much as Elboron loved his friends, they were being altogether too clingy for his liking.

Elboron cornered Aldurn and told him they had to talk, privately. The rider was startled, but he followed Elboron without question to an unused guest room. His expression clearly showed his confusion.

"Did you know about the attack on Minas Ithil before you went to the city?" Elboron demanded harshly.

They had not spoken of Aldurn's divided loyalties since that day by the stream, so the guard was understandably shaken by the question. "No, Boro," he replied honestly.

Elboron scrutinized him, trying to peel away the layers of deception by sheer instinct alone. Aldurn was the key, he felt, to the future Elboron was planning. "And would you have told me had you known? Would you have warned me so I could warn my father?"

Aldurn paled a little. The time to declare where his fealty lay had come upon him out of nowhere—the game of placating Orthale while protecting his charges as quietly and unobtrusively as possible had ended. "I swear on my life I would have," he told the young prince with emotion.

Elboron felt the sincerity and let it put him at ease. "The orcs who pay you, where are they?"

Aldurn blinked and frowned. "Why do you ask?"

"Because they need to die," Elboron said through gritted teeth. "Where are they, Aldurn? I want to know where they nest, I want to know who leads them and I want to know how many of them there are. And I want to know what their connection is to the butchers who took Minas Ithil."

There were simply too many things flying at Aldurn for him to keep up with. He stared at the angry, determined young man for a long, silent moment. He knew where his loyalties were, now, and he knew that he was Elboron's to command. But he was still the young man's bodyguard. "I will find out for you, sir." It was the first time he had ever addressed the young man formally. "I will find out and give you that information when you are ready for it, sir."
Elboron's expression darkened at being diverted by the man. "I am ready for it."

Aldurn went down to one knee, looking up at the young prince who had spared his life and pointed him back to the proper path. All of the fierce dedication in his heart burned in his eyes. "I am yours to command, sir. And when you leave the Mark to take back your city, I shall ask to be freed from King Eomer's service so I may formally enter yours. I will stay by your side as long as you have need of me. But I won't provide you with information you will use to bring yourself to harm, sir. Not even if you threaten me with the noose."

Elboron fumed for a bit, but slowly the eloquent speech seeped into his revenge-obsessed mind. His anger was leading him to mistreat those that least deserved it. "I accept your promise," he said in a low voice. "And I apologize for my temper."

His revenge could wait for a little while longer, but not terribly much. Killing orcs was about the only thing he could imagine distracting him from the void in the pit of his stomach and the pain that he still could not face.

Eomer was loathe to ask anything of the boys, but the problem with Elphir was not solving itself and clearly, the kingdoms of the West needed to be united at this time. Lothiriel also suggested that it might be good for the three of them to take on a responsibility —sometimes being productive could ease the pangs of grief, she advised.

Alphros went with them, as did an eored by way of escort. Eomer was not taking any chances with his charges.

Elfwine found his mind tracking back to the time when he and Elboron had made this journey all by themselves. Stupid, reckless, glory-minded kids, he decided with a rueful grin. The disturbing thing about that, though, was that had been only a few short years ago.

They had both grown up a lot—they had been forced to.

Eldarion rode alongside Elboron, chattering aimlessly about this and that. His desperate efforts to draw the sullen youth into conversation met with limited success. Elboron listened listlessly, as if trying to reach past the misery he was locked into and reconnect with his friends. The Prince of Ithilien did not yet seem to have the strength within him to do so, however.

Eldarion grew more despondent, but only Elfwine seemed to notice.

They made good time to the city and, as Amrothos had suggested, they left the eored behind before coming within sight of the harbor. Even Aldurn was made to stay behind. Alphros led them, then, down along the road into the wide marbled streets of Dol Amroth. It was even more grand than the last time Elfwine had seen it, but it did not seem as huge to his eyes. That realization made him smile to himself. Childhood was fading into the mists of time.

They stabled their horses then followed Alphros into the palace—and they made quite a procession, the four heirs of the West striding through the corridors purposefully. Those who saw them stared in wonder and whispered after they passed. Dol Amroth was being honored indeed, they all decided.

Word had raced ahead of them, so Elphir awaited them in his sitting room. That he was meeting them in a less formal forum than the audience chamber was, Elfwine thought, a very good sign. The four entered the warm, cozy room and stopped while Alphros went to confer with his father.
Elphir was relaxing in an overstuffed chair, a blond toddler in his lap. He smiled at his son, the gauntness of his features fading when he gazed at Alphros. "You've been missed," he told the young prince.

Alphros bowed slightly, his smile nervous. "Thank you, father. We have guests of some note. Will you see them?"

Elphir smiled tiredly and nodded, glancing at the stiff-backed boys. "Come in and sit," he invited them.

All three princes strode forward as one, taking seats on the low divans before the master of Dol Amroth. Eldarion and Elboron were almost completely deferring to Elfwine here, their presence mostly just for appearances. It was, after all, the prince of the Mark who had received the training for this.

"Thank you for seeing us, your lordship," Elfwine told him in a clear voice. He had practiced this with Amrothos a dozen times. The form of address with Elphir would be very important—respectful but not granting him any authority he did not already have by means of his station.

"I think you may call me 'uncle,' boy. Or is this an official state visit?" Elphir smiled faintly as he bounced the toddler on his knee. There was a hint of the scathing humor he had assailed Amrothos with behind those words, but only just barely. He would look very bad indeed if he treated these honorable princes with disrespect, especially in light of his debt to them.

"It is more along those lines, your lordship," Elfwine told him, his expression close to being apologetic. He could not show weakness here, but he was horribly intimidated and he was fairly sure that Elphir could see that.

"Ah.... Your father sent you then." He shrugged and looked to Elboron. "Dol Amroth grieves with Ithilien. And her Prince has our swords when he needs them."

Elboron blinked and looked to Elfwine. There was something about that offer that did not sit right with him. Dol Amroth's swords were at Elboron's call regardless of any poetic declarations. As a fellow vassal of Elessar, Elboron had the authority to call Dol Amroth to arms when needed. As Dol Amroth could with Ithilien.

So why bother saying it?

"Thank you, your lordship," Elboron replied stiffly.

Elfwine was just as surprised as his friend was and it took him a long moment to work it all out in his head. As much as he had hated the lessons Amrothos had drilled into him, they had stuck. He knew something of politics and maneuvering. Elphir had just subtly informed Elfwine that the subject was not open to debate and then had changed the topic to Ithilien.

Elfwine had to change the subject back quickly. "My father did send me, your lordship. He is hoping we can find a solution to our problem."

Elphir shrugged indifferently. "Your father should come to me himself, rather than sending messengers. As important as this seems to be to him, he continues to use go-betweens."

Elfwine bristled at the implied insult to his father. "This is the way things are done, your lordship. My father wants to renew the friendship with Dol Amroth. He wants to know what needs to be done for that to happen."
The master of Dol Amroth looked him in the eye seriously. "I want him to come here himself and offer a satisfactory explanation for what happened in Harad. And then I want an apology."

Elfwine gritted his teeth. He understood now why his father was so fed up with this man—was anyone really this stubborn? Only Amrothos' careful teachings and Elfwine's desperation to not disappoint his uncle kept him from saying something truly inflammatory. "My father is not compelled to do any such thing, not by his code of honor and not by the laws of men."

"Then he may send emissaries of all shapes and sizes, but he will not have the peace he is looking for." Elphir's hard-eyed gaze did not falter for a moment.

"Father...."

"Silence, Alphros, I am speaking with the envoy from the Mark," Elphir remarked caustically.

Alphros shut his mouth and glowered, turning his gaze to a window.

Elfwine sighed and fretted for a moment. "My father will have peace, your lordship. Either I will insist on it in payment for the debt you owe me or King Elessar will step in and settle this dispute and you shall be forced to relent. My father does not want it to be that way, but there are too many things taking place to allow this division to continue."

Elphir bridled at being thusly threatened. His gaze turned flinty. "If your father wishes to take that route, than he is welcome to. But the seas will freeze before I welcome him into my house again."

Elfwine winced and struggled to find some way out of the corner he had been backed into, glumly concluding there might not be any. His father had given him permission to compel Elphir if it came to it, but it was a last resort.

How had they reached it so quickly?

"I've had enough of this, Elphir," Elboron said suddenly, using his elevated station to address the man familiarly. That shadow was back over his eyes again and he looked every bit as unwell as Elphir and decidedly more dangerous. "You are angry with Eomer because he almost got your son killed. My parents are dead, Elphir, killed by the real threat. And that threat will tear us all down if we fight amongst ourselves. You cannot blame Eomer for the mistake of one young man." His gaze shifted to Alphros for a moment. "I suppose you've forgotten, but sometimes young men have to learn by making their own mistakes."

It was obviously much harder for Elphir to be so cavalier with the devastated prince of Ithilien. His gaze grew inscrutable. "That is why they need guidance," he argued uneasily.

"Did Lord Denethor put Prince Imrahil's feet to the fire when you and Boromir took a skiff out in rough seas and capsized it, nearly drowning the both of you?" Elboron challenged, pulling a tale told to him by his father out of the darkened recesses of his memory.

Elphir actually stammered a moment and then shrugged it off. "Hardly the same situation."

"I don't think so. It was a foolish thing done by boys trying to prove their bravery, wasn't it?" Elboron pressed.

Elphir glowered for a moment, boxed in and not at all happy about it. "If my son was trying to impress anyone, it was the less-than-prudent King of Rohan."

"No," Elboron said in a tight voice. "It was you he wanted to impress." For a moment, that dam holding back that flood of emotions in him almost crumbled. His voice became thick with pain.
"Young men live to impress their fathers."

Elphir was completely undone by those words. He looked over at his son, really looked at him for the first time in a long time. "Son?"

"You gave me command, father," Alphros said faintly. "You put your faith in me and I did nothing with it. Of course I wanted to bring you Kaeliz's head."

Elfwine and Eldarion both looked to Elboron, but the stony mask was back in place. The prince of Ithilien was watching Elphir, waiting to see what would come of this little revelation.

Elphir was a stubborn and a proud man, but he now had to face the fact that if blame were to fall on anyone but Alphros, then it would be on his own shoulders. His grudge against Eomer no longer had any foundation.

"Please inform the King of Rohan ... the Prince of Dol Amroth conveys his apologies."

All three young princes breathed a unified sigh of relief.

The night air was pleasantly cool, blowing in off the sea and wafting through the open window. Elboron breathed it in, looking out over the city of Dol Amroth and beyond, to where the stars touched the water. It was incredibly serene. He wished he could take that peace inside of him.

Eldarion came into the room he had been given and stepped up behind him—Elboron could always tell now when it was the Gondorian heir's footsteps. He felt himself smiling, not aware that it barely registered on his grim face.

"You were amazing, Boro," Eldarion told him, laying his hands on his friend's shoulders and leaning in close. "I think you stole Win's thunder, but he'll get over it."

Elboron reached up to touch one of those slender hands. "I was too plain-spoken. I'll never make much of a prince if I can't learn to act any better than a bricklayer in a tavern-brawl."

"I think you make a fine prince, Boro. Sometimes it's better to speak plainly—bruise a few egos, but at least they understand you." The tension in Elboron's shoulders radiated up through Eldarion's fingers. The heir of Gondor wished Elboron would talk to him like he used to. This distance between them hurt more than he would like to admit.

"I think you're biased," Elboron argued gently.

"I'll admit that. I'm also tired. You think you're ready for bed?"

"Not yet. I think I'll walk about some more." Elboron turned and gave Eldarion a brief kiss on the cheek. Then he slipped out of the room, off to try and find some way to quiet the chaos in his head.

Eldarion was left staring after, his heart so wrung out over this he just felt numb. He wanted to be angry or bitter or resentful, but all he could really manage was sorrow. Events had conspired to poison something that had just begun to bloom in his life.

The young prince looked out the window at the sea and felt a strong sense of longing, though he did not quite understand it. Something, though, was calling him to a place where pain like this did not exist.
Orthale went over everything one last time, sitting in the shadows and staring at an aged map of the West. Years of maneuvering had yielded him a tremendous advantage in this conflict with Eomer of the Mark. Though recovering Helm's hammer had been the most certain route to victory, it had never been the only route.

Careful negotiations with Garchuk, the ambitious troll with uncanny wisdom and foresight, had earned him a very useful ally. And by providing the troll with a great deal of information on Minas Ithil, he had almost handed victory to the powerful chief.

Now, with Ithilien overrun by orcs, Gondor's attention would have to be on its eastern border. Elessar would not be able to spare the men to help Eomer—doing so could cost him his own throne.

By pure convenient happenstance, there was also a wedge at this time between Elphir and Eomer, so there would be no help from that quarter either. That, Orthale felt, was a very good omen.

His forces were in place, patiently gathered over many months. They had the numbers, they had the opportunity, they had the strength of arms.

Eomer would never know what hit him.

After taking a day to rest, the young heirs took their leave. Alphros decided to stay at home, though he sent a message with the boys that he intended to visit sometime during the summer.

The return journey was uneventful, and within a few days, they were all back in Meduseld and each pursuing different interests. Elfwine sequestered himself with the scroll they had pilfered from his father's rooms and put himself to the task of finally wringing some meaning from it. Elboron went back to practicing combat, sparring with anyone who would take him on.

Eldarion took up the habit of ranging out into the grasslands, polishing his old ranger skills that had fallen into disuse. He would disappear in the wee hours of morning and not return until well after nightfall.

Things were odd enough with the heirs that no one paid it any mind.

Life around Edoras returned to some semblance of normalcy as summer approached—that was until Magda showed up on the steps to Meduseld.

Elfwine was just returning from the kitchen when he heard the commotion through a window. He was, of course, curious, so he chanced to look out the window. The Dunlending girl had been stopped by the guards and they were sternly interrogating her.

"Oh road apples.... What is she doing here?"

The guards had grown somewhat accustomed to seeing Educh approach the Golden Hall, but all other Dunlendings were treated with the customary suspicion. To most Rohirrim, Dunlendings remained the terrifying creatures who ate babies and defiled women.

Elfwine flew down the stairs and burst out the front doors just as the guards were started to get a bit brazen with the girl. "Stop! Don't harm her!" he bellowed, skidding to a halt before them.
The guards frowned at him, clearly thinking he might be daft. "Highness?" the older one asked.

"She's fine. She's Educh's daughter," he explained.

That mollified them somewhat and they stepped aside. Elfwine moved closer to her, wild-eyed and yet smiling stupidly. He was so happy to see here he had the irrational urge to start dancing.

"What are you doing here?" he asked her in Dunlending.

"You are in danger," she explained simply. Her dark eyes on him were full of worry and her face was taut with strain.

"Again?" Elfwine asked, slipping back into common Westron. "What is going on? Why did your father send you?"

"My father stays with my people to give Black Soul the idea we are cooperating. If we do not, Black Soul said all the children would die and our animals too. I slipped away to come and warn you. Black Soul is sending an army against you."

Elfwine sucked in a panicked breath. First Ithilien and now the Mark.... "Who is this Black Soul? No, never mind. No sense explaining it twice. Come. You need to speak with my father."

Magda nodded and followed with obvious trepidation into the Great Hall. They received more than a few curious and dismayed stares as they hurried along, but they did not have time to settle peoples' nerves.

Along the way, they met Elboron, who was on his way back to the practice yard, his head bowed in thought. Elfwine stopped him and looked into his eyes. "I need you to find Eldarion and bring him to our room. We have things we need to talk about."

Elboron looked from him to Magda and then back. There was curiosity in his eyes, but the stony mask did not slip. He nodded slowly. "I'll find him."

Elfwine smiled gratefully and then led Magda off to his mother's sitting room, the last place he had heard of his father being. In the back of his mind, he was seeing the fires that had engulfed Minas Ithil touching Edoras and that made him sick with fear.

The prince of the Mark knocked politely and waited to be granted permission to come in—this was his mother's sanctuary, after all. One did not barge in no matter how dire the news was that they carried.

"Come in, dear." His mother recognized his knock.

Elfwine gave Magda a supportive smile, trying to convey courage, and then led her inside. His mother sat in her usual place, sewing idly as she chatted with the King of the Mark. They were smiling a little, sharing some joke, but that quickly faded at the sight of Magda.

"Win...." Eomer started to say, just dumbfounded at his son's audacity.

Lothiriel said nothing, but the look on her face told Elfwine that he had best have a fantastic reason for this breach of protocol. He met both looks as steadily as he could, as always intimidated by his father. Not even the vital news he carried seemed to justify bothering his parents.

"Father.... This is Magda, Chieftain Educh's daughter. She has word of an attack being planned against us. I think you need to listen to her."
Eomer did not scoff or bluster. Elfwine had earned his trust, even though Eomer did not always understand what Elfwine was up to, he did usually find that it was for the best. So he leaned forward and laced his fingers together. "All right..." His harsh gaze bore into Magda. "Tell me."

"...orcs and Dunlendings? How many orcs?" Elboron asked anxiously.

"She wasn't exactly sure..." Elfwine responded, brows knitted together. His friend was entirely too excited about the impending attack.

"But more than a few, right?"

Elfwine nodded slowly. "Now, where is Dar?" The bloodthirsty look in his friend's eyes made him nervous. Elboron shrugged a little. "I told you, he'll be here...."

The prince of the Mark was not at all satisfied with that answer. "Did you actually find him?" he demanded.

Ithilien's heir-apparent looked away, not seeming concerned. "You know how he likes to roam. The Mark is a big place. I looked about but didn't see him. He always comes home every evening."

Elfwine stared at him, shocked by his friend's coldness. "Always.... Boro, there is an attack planned against us, orcs and Dunlendings are out there plotting death and destruction and our friend—your lover—is out there all by himself. Will you stop thinking about killing orcs for a moment and put your priorities straight?"

Elboron flinched and then reacted with his customary hostility. "Dar is fine, Win. No orc or man could find Whisper when he doesn't want to be found so get your spurs out of my flanks."

Elfwine's emotions boiled over—his own grief, his heartsickness over his friend's descent into fanatical hate and terror over what was about to befall the Mark pushed him well past reason and straight into a much more Rohirric mindset. He hauled off and punched Elboron. "Burn you!"

Elboron rolled with the strike, but it still staggered him. He was shocked, but his instincts took over and he tackled Elfwine into a wall. "What is wrong with you?" he growled.

The prince of the Mark grunted and grappled with his friend. "Me? You're the one who has thrown his halter. You don't care about anything anymore but killing orcs!"

They crashed to the floor and rolled back and forth. Elboron had some bulk on him, but Elfwine was surprisingly strong. "That's not true," Ithilien's prince snapped at him.

Elfwine threw him off and got to his feet. "No? How long has Win been taking these walks of his, Boro?"

Getting to his feet as well, Elboron shook his head. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"I want to know if you know."

Elboron looked irritated and uncomfortable. "A few weeks...."

"Six weeks, every day, ever since we got back from Dol Amroth," Elfwine returned, seizing his
friend by the tunic-front. "Six weeks and you haven't even asked him why."

Elboron glared at Elfwine, trying to pry his hands off. "He likes to wander," the young man reasoned, not at all liking being put on the defensive.

"He didn't used to, not when it was the three of us. The last time he took to running away for long stretches was when he was back home and he was miserable."

Elboron took that as an accusation and he snarled, seized Elfwine and threw him forcibly aside. The prince of the Mark crashed into a chair, which collapsed under him. "Don't saddle me with this, Win. I have enough on my mind."

"What? What do you have on your mind, you stud-headed idiot? You never talk to us anymore, never let us know anything that is going on with you."

"I would think that's pretty obvious!" Elboron snapped.

"It's not!" Elfwine growled, picking himself up. "Something horrible happened to you, Boro, and that's all we know. We have no idea how you are coping with it, what you want from us, what we can do ... or anything that's in your head."

"I don't know!" Elboron screamed, face flushed with rage. "I am sick to death of people asking me how they can help. As if it is my responsibility to help them cope with the fact my life has been destroyed. You want to help, Win? Then give me some peace."

"I've been doing that, Boro. I've been giving you space for months and all it gets me is further away from you. I don't know if that's what you want, but that's what has happened, and it's rutting awful. We're closer than brothers and now I barely recognize you." Elfwine took a moment to catch his breath, staring into his friend's hard, implacable face. "I'm going to go find Eldarion. You can stay here and dream about all the orc blood you plan to spill or you can come with me."

Elboron massaged his hand and looked away, more affected by his friend's words than he was able to show. Everything was spinning out of control and no matter how he wished and hoped for things to stop long enough for him to catch his breath, there did not seem to be any such moment. So he did the only thing he knew how to do—he stuck with his friends.

"Of course I'll go with you," he breathed, rubbing his sore jaw.

Elfwine breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you."

Eldarion did not return during the evening as usual and none of the scouts or sentries or herdsmen were able to offer any information on where he could be. Already on alert from Magda's warnings, alarm was quick to spread. Eomer sent out search parties in all directions, but Elfwine and Elboron knew they would not succeed if this was Eldarion's choice and not the result of foul play.

Elfwine made sure that Magda was safe and secure under his mother's eye and then he had a word with his father. King Eomer had a great deal to worry about and was therefore actually much more amenable to his son joining the search party.

Before dawn lit the Mark, the two boys and Aldurn took to horse, Fellfang at their head, hot on the Gondorian heir's scent. The trail meandered this way and that, but once they were a few miles from Edoras, it pointed due west. After an hour of following it, there was no doubt any more that
this was a deliberate action by Eldarion.

"Go back to my father and tell him to call off the search," Elfwine ordered Aldurn once they halted to confer.

Aldurn shook his head—it was difficult to find the line between obedience to the prince of his country and obedience to his duty. "I can't send you off alone, highness."

Elfwine gave him a weary smile. "A few years ago, I gave my oath to King Elessar that I wouldn't let his son run off. I have to keep that promise to uphold my family honor."

"And this is sort of a ... family affair," Elboron added. He had been taciturn and thoughtful during the hours of riding, and even now his mind was clearly somewhere else. Elfwine's tirade had sent him down the thorny path of introspection, and it was a journey the Ithilien prince was not familiar with.

"Lads...." Aldurn looked them over and suddenly realized they really were not the children he had guarded for so long. They did not need his sword. They had their own. He was surprised by how much that pained him. "I will inform King Eomer."

And he turned his horse and raced back towards Edoras.

As they knew Eldarion had taken a horse on his journey, they knew they would not be able to catch him quickly—not with the lead he had on them. They rode swiftly, though, hoping to overtake him before he got himself into trouble.

Elfwine was relieved when they reached the Gap of Rohan and found the trail went to the south bank of the River Isen. With all the trouble with the Dunlendings, it would be suicide to try and cross their territory. As little sense as there seemed to be in Eldarion's actions, he was apparently at least taking some precautions.

It did, however, make Elfwine wonder how long the Gondorian heir had been planning this and how many of his "aimless wanderings" had actually been scouting missions for this little trek.

Elfwine began to feel guilt eating away at him. He should have paid more attention.

Elboron remained in his self-inflicted prison of silence, brooding the hours away to the point where Elfwine began to worry about him too. Had he been too harsh on his friend? Had he added more weight onto those already overburdened shoulders? It was impossible to know for sure, since Elboron would barely answer any of his questions.

Elfwine just wanted things to be back like they used to be.

Days passed and their course did not change. Eldarion's course had been to parallel the river, following it as it headed out to the Belegar Sea. Elfwine was completely baffled what this was all about, and the odd behavior just added to his worries. When they reached the juncture of the Isen and the Angren rivers, they found a ford and made their way across. The trail was easy to pick up again, the path predictable: to the west.

Eldarion, clearly, had gone with great haste, for they did not catch him before he reached the sea.

Two weeks after leaving Edoras, they came over the horizon and looked out over the vast sea. The Angren was shallow here, marshy, and the pungent smell of those shallow waters hit the young heirs hard. They wrinkled their noses and started towards the horse they saw searching for tufts of grass or something else that might be edible.
They had finally found their friend.

Eldarion was sitting in the sand, knees curled to his chest, watching the waves crash over the shore. He did not turn when Elfwine slipped from his saddle and started trudging across the sand towards him, but the heir of the Mark did not doubt his friend knew he was there. As relieved as he was to see Eldarion, he was still not put entirely at ease because he still did not understand why his friend was behaving this way.

Elboron followed Elfwine, but he kept his distance, almost as if he did not feel he had the right to get too close. His expression had become somewhat haunted. The prince of the Mark decided to let him be. He had to deal with one problem at a time.

"If you needed to get away for a little while, Dar, you could have just said. We'd have been happy to come with you, instead of you running off alone and worrying everyone sick." Elfwine knelt down behind Eldarion and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"It's not here," Gondor's heir confided mournfully. "I was sure it would be."

"What's not here, Dar?" Elfwine asked gently.

Eldarion's gaze upon the sea was filled with desperate longing. "In my dreams, I see a ship. It waits here for me, to take me into the west, to my mother's family."

Elfwine stared in shock, horrified that the young man would even consider such a course. "I think Gondor might miss you when your turn on the throne comes up," he argued mildly, trying not to sound judgmental.

Eldarion shook his head. "My father can have another son. I've always felt I was never really going to be very good at being King anyway. And when the sea called to me, I understood why. The elf blood is too strong in me."

"And you weren't even going to say goodbye?" Elfwine chided him. There was a knot of pain in his chest at the idea that Eldarion wanted to leave them. Nothing would be the same without their grinning, reckless friend.

"I sort of felt ... it wouldn't matter." Gondor's heir chewed his lower lip. "I'm sorry, Win ... it just felt ... right..."

"You were really going to leave me?"

Elfwine started and looked up and back. Elboron's face was sheet-white and the hard-edged, bitter look in his eyes was replaced by a lost, terrified gaze that more resembled that of the boy they had once known.

Eldarion looked over his shoulder and then back out at the sea. "Would it matter, Boro? You made me think it wouldn't."

Elboron started to shake all over, like a castle wall that had been battered by catapults a few too many times and was now on the verge of collapse. "That's not.... That isn't...." He sank to his knees, shaking his head in denial. "Please.... Please don't ... don't you leave me too," he whimpered and then, at long last, the tears started to fall. And once they started, he could not make them stop.

All the barriers that had been erected over the past several months fell away. Elfwine and Eldarion scrambled over to their wounded, broken friend and enfolded him in sheltering, comforting embraces as he sobbed.
"I'm sorry," he babbled over and over again, and they knew it was not only them he was addressing.

And in the face of that torrent of immeasurable loss and heartache, they could do nothing but shed their own tears in sympathy.

"I was so scared ... so scared to hurt any more ... I didn't want to care about anyone ... didn't want to lose anyone again..."

"Shhh..." Eldarion held him close, hurting deep in his heart. His eyes met those of Elfwine. The wound had been re-opened so it could heal properly now. They both understood this—just as they knew that Elboron would never again be the boy they had known, not completely.

For Elboron of Ithilien, boyhood was over.
The battle for Edoras is joined. And the identity of the heir's enemy is at last revealed.

*Year 18, 4th Age*

Orthale wiped blood off his sword and sheathed it, glowering like a thundercloud. The battle had shifted away from him, so he was able to wheel his horse and ride off a bit, stopping upon a hilltop and surveying the incomprehensible sight of the battle that had so rapidly turned against him.

Things had begun perfectly, his army of man and orc working together as best as he could possibly hope—perhaps the object lessons he had provided prior to the fight had assisted in that. In any case, his army had comeo before Edoras after sunset and been met by a mere two eoreds. Hopelessly outmatched, the riders of the Riddermark had showed their quality, blocking his army's path.

Then things had started to go impossibly wrong. One of the Dunedain Chieftains—Educh was his name, and Orthale would remember it, for he had plans for the man and his family—led his people in a revolt at the very center of Orthale's forces. That apparently was the signal, for another clan responded by doing the same. Educh's clan was tied very closely to Chieftain Achteg, as it happened, and the two had somehow engineered this little betrayal.

That alone was not a total disaster—Orthale had considered the possibility of treachery or, at the very least, widespread cowardice. He had the manpower to compensate, but it had forced him to call in his reserves.

The trap was too clever for Eomer, Orthale knew. He sensed the hand of Amrothos in the scheme that had brought everything to ruin. That was another name on his list of people in line for horrible deaths.

Ten eoreds came at his flanks, five to either side. Still not insurmountable, but definitely more resistance than he had bargained for. But they were only the beginning of the end for the attack force. On their heels came Gondorian infantry, and from behind Orthale's army appeared a legion of Dol Amrothian knights.

Someone had warned Eomer, and Orthale was fairly certain it was Educh. And Orthale had been too cautious, moved too slowly. As a consequence, his carefully laid plan was coming apart.

Orthale looked about, assessing his forces and looking for a way to salvage the situation—if only he had given himself the time to bring in the Haradrim. There was no help for it now, of course. But the next time—and there would be a next time—he would be sure to be better prepared.

A Rider was bearing down on him and he glanced over, startled. His sword was out of its sheath at the speed of thought and he parried the savage cut easily. He and the Rider circled each other, and Orthale stared balefully at his opponent.

"Aldurn," he sneered. This day was marked by treachery, apparently. "Was I late in a payment,
perhaps?"

"Your gold is too heavy for me, you bastard." Aldurn swung again and again, but each time, his former master blocked him.

Orthale eyed him with incalculable indifference as he fenced with the impassioned Rider—not many living actually knew that Orthale was an expert swordsman. He took the man's savage attack and turned it aside callously. "So, you've decided to buy back your honor with a noble death?"

"I'm not the one who will die here, Orthale. Your scheming ends today."

Aldurn was not filled with the vigor of youth, but he had the fires of righteousness to fuel him instead. His strong arm powered one blow after another against his enemy's defenses, certain that he could smash his way through.

Orthale was not entirely sure how long he could last, if he allowed the man to keep battering him. "No, traitor, the fight does not end today." He whipped Aldurn's blade aside and brought his sword down across the man's helm. Blood flowed and the noble guard slid to the earth. "I am descended from Kings, traitor. I do not give up."

It was tempting to leave the army that had failed him to suffer butchery at the hands of the enemy, but Orthale was more wise than vengeful and he knew he would need another army one day. He could not afford to get a reputation for needlessly sacrificing lives.

He took up his horn and sounded the retreat. And then he simply rode away, back to his hiding place, to look for and await the next opportunity.

The boys returned home a week after the battle, and the signs of it could still be found littering the field before Edoras. They noted it with some alarm, but the city still stood and it flew the white horse banner of the Riddermark. So, while all was not normal, it was at least safe, by appearances.

"I'm sorry if I cost you a chance to kill orcs," Eldarion told Elboron with a wry expression as they entered the city. Everything certainly seemed as it should be.

Elboron managed a smile—he had gotten better at them on the way back. "Maybe King Eomer was nice enough to save some for me."

Elfwine laughed. "I wouldn't count on that. My father is very selfish about orc blood."

They left their horses with Haleth, who was looking a bit wooly-headed in the manner men do when they have been drunk for longer than is generally advisable. Curiosity gnawing at them, they rushed into Meduseld and headed for the Great Hall.

Even though it was midafternoon, the hall was littered with the inert forms of men sleeping off their drink. This was not precisely unusual, save for the hour, but there was one thing they all noticed that made their eyes widen—some of the men laying about were very obviously Dunlendings.

Eomer was at the King's table, gripping a mug of water and looking in a happy sort of mood. The King of Rohan tended to view hangovers as a badge of honor, and the worse one was, the better the celebration had been. It was a perspective that caused Lothiriel to sigh often and roll her eyes.
"Good morrow, boys. You missed the fun," Eomer told them with a grin.

"Good day father..." Elfwine corrected and could not help but smirk a little. "I take it the war is over already then?"

"War?" Eomer snorted. "That hardly even counted as exercise. I think I invited too many soldiers." His brows knitted together and he pondered his son owlishly for a moment. "Remember that, boy. Be careful how many men you call for. You might not have enough sport for all of them."

Elfwine relaxed visibly. His home was safe. "And I take it Educh helped out?"

Eomer grinned and patted a snoring lump of a man who was face-down on the table next to him. There was a muffled protest. "The enemy was most dismayed. They started killing each other in an effort to get away."

Elfwine leaned in close to Elboron. "I told you he was bloodthirsty."

Elboron grinned back in a feral way. "I see nothing wrong with that."

"Oh." Eomer grew more somber. "You should head up to the healer's wing —south wing, upper floor, I think. Aldurn was hurt...."
others were like that. Eltheriel was a quiet, sensible girl and Wynohael just adored her big brother. "Well, that would make two of us," he lashed back.

Hanild glared daggers at him. "You're a horse's ass, Win."

"At least I don't have a horse's ass, Nily," he snapped. Then he turned and stormed off, not willing to put up with this right now.

It was amazing how quickly a good day could go bad.

Elfwine was stomping down a flight of stairs when Magda caught up to him. He heard the light patter of her step, but he did not slow. He was in a passionate sulk right now and he had been kicked in his tender pride.

"Win, please...."

He stopped and did not face her.

Magda slipped around in front of him and tried to take his hand, but he snatched it back and simmered at her.

"Win, we weren't laughing at you..."

"It seemed like it from this end of things." He knew he was not coming off well here, but this had come as such a total surprise. It stun—a lot. "I thought you were different than the girls here, Magda."

She sighed and took his face in her hands, looking seriously into his eyes. "I'm sorry, all right? I didn’t mean anything by it."

Elfwine tried to hold onto his sulk, but it was impossible when looking into her eyes. "You didn't?" he asked contritely.

"No, Win. Your sister makes me laugh, but not about you."

"Then what about?" he asked suspiciously.

Magda blushed and looked down at her toes. "That's not really important."

"I'd still like to know."

"I'd still like to not tell you."

Elfwine frowned but recognized that he was not going to get anywhere and it was probably time to stop misbehaving anyway. "Er.... I.... You want to walk, um, with me? A little?"

Magda lit up, smiling at him (and still flushed) and nodding fervently. "And maybe you can tell me about all the grand adventures you've been having without me."

Elfwine looked pained for a moment. "I'll tell you, but they weren't very grand...."

She gave him one of her sweet little smiles that made his knees turn to liquid. Then she took his hand and let him lead the way through the corridors. Telling her about the incident with Eldarion and Elboron being kidnapped and the more prosaic adventures the three had had in Ithilien took some time, and helped him build the courage to talk about the fall of Minas Ithil.

He wound up sitting with her on a bench, leaned in very close as he spoke, recounting every
nauseating, horrible detail. He told her about the lives that had been lost—Erkenbrand, Beregond and Elboron's parents and the hundreds of others who had either died fighting or died running. And the telling drained him in a way he was not prepared for.

But it was also cleansing and healing, having someone he could just talk to about it without feeling like he was adding to their own burdens.

"I'm sorry, Win," she murmured to him.

"I-It's not even about me. Elboron, he's been destroyed by this and my father.... He loved his sister almost more than anyone."

She smiled and pushed a strand of blond hair behind one of his ears. "They have their burdens, but it hurt you too. It must have been very alone ... lone ... some? Yes, lonesome, going through it all."

Elfwine nodded slowly, his eyes meeting hers and his teeth worrying at his lower lip. "I am glad you're still here."

Magda blushed anew and smiled. "Thank you. I am ... glad as well."

Elfwine's fingers gently caressed the back of her hand. "I, um, would worry you don't like being behind stone walls."

Magda eyes his fingers and shrugged a little. "They frightened me at first—but I feel ... safe within them."

"Oh... Good.... I don't want you to ever be afraid, you know." He was suddenly desperately thirsty and he could sense a tremor coming over him.

Magda's smile was glorious. "I feel safe with you," she confided. "And ... sad." And just like that, her expression shifted to one of melancholy.

"Why is that?" he asked her, alarmed that he could make her sad.

"Because..." She pulled her hand away with an effort. "I cannot let my heart fly where it wishes. Our fathers ... they will never allow it."

Elfwine's brain stopped on the "my heart fly where it wishes" part of that. Utterly unable to suppress the absurd grin that split his face, he captured her hand again, feeling ten times larger than he was.

"What if.... What if they did? What if I talked to them and made it okay?" And send my father into a frothing, convulsive fit in the process....

Magda's expression shifted again, and this time there was fierce determination. "If you could convince your father, I could do so for mine...." Her eyes reflected a turbulent desperation. "Is it even possible, Win?"

"I don't know.... But it's worth fighting for...." He was falling into those dark eyes of hers, unable (and unwilling) to make himself look away. "Isn't it?"

Magda swallowed hard, her hand coming to lay on his shoulder.

Elfwine did not realize until then just how close they had become. His heart hammered against his ribs. Nothing had ever been this exhilarating, confusing or momentous. He dipped in closer and
then shied away, blushing and smiling at his nervousness. Magda was grinning too, chasing his lips with her own and then moving back, like a mare prancing before a stallion.

It made the hairs on his arms stand up, all this pent up energy. Elfwine touched their noses together, his thoughts scattered like road dirt under a wild herd. Magda nuzzled at him, her face aglow with happiness, enjoying the play.

She was, truly, the most gorgeous thing he had ever laid eyes on. The soft curve of her lips called to him and finally, finally, he touched his to hers. The jolt that hit him was even stronger than it had been the first time. This was no brief peck between nervous children under the gaze of their elders. This lingered, their lips gliding clumsily over each other gently, nervously, more wonder than passion in it.

His arms slowly slid about her, and hers about him, and for a time, they just let themselves fly away on an impossible dream.

A discreet cough brought them leaping to their feet.

Eldarion was leaning against a wall, looking tousled. "Let's to dinner, friends, unless you fancy having Educh carpet his tent with an Elfwine-skin rug."

Both blushing youths laughed and nodded their agreement.

"Well..." Elfwine yawned mightily and put the scroll back in its case. "I think I figured it out, but it still doesn't help us very much."

Elboron and Eldarion looked up from the Strategem board they were contesting over, both looking equally tired. The game, though, compelled them to stay put. Hours of careful maneuvering had left them in a stalemate, and that made the both of them that much more determined to come out the victor.

"Well, out with it then," Elboron urged, eying Eldarion closely to be sure his opponent did not try and swap pieces suddenly.

Elfwine's brow furrowed. "It seems to say that the hammer was hidden, but that if it is ever needed, Helm will always have it—or that he will have it at hand. Like I said, it's not very precise, but that is the best meaning I can make of it."

"You said whoever was looking for it checked Helm's grave, though, right?" Eldarion asked, watching Elboron move a Rider into position to pin his King.

"Yes, he did," Elfwine agreed.

"So, was it maybe stolen earlier? By someone else?" Elboron asked.

"That would seem to be the only sensible assumption," Elfwine conceded dubiously. "Though that leaves all the questions of who and when and where did they take it. I don't like the idea of that thing out there somewhere."

Eldarion cursed nastily. "I can't believe it!"

Elfwine nodded. "I know. After all the work, we come up empty...."
"No...." Eldarion glowered at the smirking face of Elboron. "I can't believe you pulled the Havrik Feint. I can't believe you know the Havrik Feint."

"I'm full of surprises," Elboron confided loftily.

Eldarion fumed and struggled to find a way out of the trap he was in. Then, not being the least bit gracious about it, he tipped his King over. "Cheater."

"How was that cheating?" Elboron demanded.

"By you being smarter than you look," Eldarion returned with a little grin.

Elfwine chuckled, the scroll and the mystery of the hammer forgotten now. "I don't think that counts, Dar."

Eldarion threw a reproachful glance at Elfwine. "Traitor." He sighed and stood up, sulking impressively. "What would my lord like from the kitchen?" he asked, undoing his belt.

Elboron laughed and lounged back, thinking about it for a bit. "Let me think....Win, do you think there are any raspberry tarts down in the kitchen? I thought I smelled some in the oven earlier."

Elfwine blinked as Eldarion started to struggle out of his tunic. "I think there might be, yes. Why is Dar naked?"

"Because I made a bet with our unscrupulous friend, Win. And now he's King for a night and I'm fetching something from the kitchen for him, naked."

Elfwine looked from one of them to the other and then fell over into a fit of very boyish giggles.

Eomer settled himself in a chair in his wife's sitting room and folded his large hands in his lap. The celebration had finally wound down and so he was not only sober but he was not suffering a hangover either. As was his custom when coming to see his wife, he had put on a clean shirt and scrubbed his beard. Lothiriel was not obsessive about cleanliness and in exchange, he tended to make certain concessions.

Lothiriel smiled warmly at him and set aside her tea cup. "You're looking a might bit less green, my lord," she mocked him gently.

"I can't really justify being drunk anymore, dear." He looked positively mournful at the prospect. "How are you?"

"I am a bit tired. I think I might be catching something," she admitted.

"That would explain the rather nasty smelling brew you are drinking today," he admitted with a wry smile. His wife's moods and health could be read by her teas, he was sure. Had he a better nose for them, he might be better able to gauge her temper by whatever she had in her teacup, and that would be a useful thing.

"It is hardly foul-smelling, dear," she argued with a little smile. "I needed to speak to you about something and I need you to try and not react how you usually do to when given a shock."

"How would that be?"
"It usually involves broken furniture."

"That was just the one time and Amrothos can drive anyone to that," he countered, brooding just a bit. "I take it this is bad news."

"No, dear, but it is not news you will like very much. A girl has caught the eye of our son, you see." She gauged his reaction carefully.

Eomer beamed—at last, something he could talk to his son about that he had some understanding of. "Well, he is of an age, dear. It is quite right and proper, actually, that he should start courting. Why would I—" He stopped dead and his eyes narrowed. "Who is she?"

Lothiriel sipped her tea and then tried to calm her husband with a look. "The Dunlending girl, Magda."

Eomer swore eloquently and put his face in his hands. "I knew he had fool ideas in his head, but I never thought he would go this far...." He sighed heavily. "Well, best to end it quickly then. I'll speak to him right away." The King started to rise.

"No, dear. Please, stay seated."

Eomer remained where he was, his gaze becoming suspicious. "Did Win ask you to talk to me?"

"I can't actually answer that. He made me promise." Lothiriel's gaze was pointed. "Would it harm anything to let him court her? Nothing may come of it."

"Would it harm...? Lothy, I love you, but you have no idea what you are—what he is suggesting. The hate between our peoples is so deep, so much a part of us.... It cannot just be shrugged aside."

"You and Educh were getting along well enough," she pointed out primly.

"Yes, and there were also a dozen brawls with serious injuries during that little celebration. And to be honest, I still don't completely trust Educh. I like him well enough, but some part of me is deeply nervous about turning my back to him."

"Don't you think it is about time to start changing that?"

Eomer gritted his teeth. "No, I don't. Two clans joined us. Ten tried to wipe us out. The Dunlendings are not some poor, misunderstood group of nomads. They are killers and I can't expect my people to just forget all that."

Lothiriel eyed him for a long time, unmoved by his frustration. "It's what our son wants, dear."

It was a brutal strike and it had the intended effect. Eomer stared at her for a long time, his prejudices vying with his love for his son. In the end, the decision really did come to be that simple. "All right," he sighed. "But this will not end well. Mark my words."

Educh was not all that much more enthused by the situation than Eomer, but he kept his peace about it. It was not that he disapproved of Elfwine—quite the opposite, really—but he was aware that his people had a hard time seeing the Rohirrim as anything but usurping butchers. Allowing his daughter to be courted by their prince would gain him the suspicion (and enmity) of a great many of the clans and could very well cause a clan war, if it got bad enough.
All of that just ceased to matter, though, when he had looked into his daughter's pleading eyes.

Educh and some few of his clan abided a while at Meduseld while the rest returned to their lands. The palpable tension in the keep abated as people who could not quite forget centuries of feuding finally no longer had to face each other every day.

So it was that Elfwine of Rohan and Magda of Dunland began their courtship with all the official royal and clan traditions—including the obligatory chaperone everywhere they went. It was a wonderful and yet maddening time for them, being able to learn more about each other and entertain the chance of their being more between them.

Having their hormones kept in check, though, made them both quite jittery.

Summer ended and autumn came over the Mark quickly, bringing cool breezes and early showers. Much to the dismay of the young lovers, Educh insisted it was time to return home. Elfwine promised to visit soon and then there was a wrenching goodbye as she was marched off home, casting frequent glances back at him.

The moping that followed drove Elboron and Eldarion to distraction. Nothing would rouse Elfwine from his frequent bouts of sighing and looking out windows or the odd habit of laying about, staring at the lock of Magda's hair he still held. At one point, they threw him out into the icy sleet to shock him back to normal, with marginal success.

Two familiar figures showed up at Meduseld one damp night—neither of whom were terribly effected by the weather. Legolas seemed rather unaware of it, in any real sense, and Gimli shrugged it off much like a mountain would. They were welcomed in and invited to supper with the King and his family.

"No, nothing of any real importance," Legolas replied when Eomer asked if they were here as messengers for Elessar.

"Not to you, elf, but there's a debt for you to repay. I endured all of those fell woods you dragged me through-"

"And were much amazed, as I recall."

"Nevertheless, you've put off going with me to see the Glittering Caves long enough," Gimli argued, tearing a massive bit out of a shank of lamb.

Legolas sighed and looked to Eomer with a little smile. "Dwarves have a depressingly long memory. Show them something shiny and they never forget."

"Hah! As if your people aren't descended from magpies," Gimli retorted, waving the shank like a weapon.

Eomer laughed. "So, you'll be going to Helm's Deep, then?" he asked, wiping ale out of his beard with his sleeve.

"Yes, tomorrow, I think. This storm seems to have just about had it," Gimli told the King around another mouthful of mutton.

"Would you mind some company?" the King asked speculatively, glancing at his sullen son briefly.

"In the mood to survey some old ruins, Eomer King?" Legolas asked curiously.
Eomer shook his head, grinning. "Not I, my friend. However, I have a son whose long face needs remedying. Perhaps a little ride, some fresh air and a historical landmark will get his mind off his troubles."

Elfwine actually perked at that. He had not seen the ruins up close before. Helm's Deep had not been reconditioned after the battering during the war and now stood vacant, a grim reminder of sadder days. "That is an idea..."

Legolas looked to Gimli, who was draining his third tankard. The dwarf belched and shrugged indifferently. " Makes no difference to us."

Elfwine looked to Elboron and Elfwine excitedly. "Could we?"

They both grinned at him. "Well, of course," Eldarion said. "Anything to get you to stop with all the sighing and whinging. Honestly, Win...."

There was some good-natured laughter at that, and the prince of the Mark blushed and looked rather surly about it.

It was grey and windy the next day, but the rain had indeed come to an end. Gimli absolutely refused to get on a horse, a peculiarity that Legolas entertained by not riding either. That left the boys with little choice but to do the same.

The two stalwart adventurers set a hard pace, though, pushing the boys to their very limits hour by hour. There was no doubt that the two could easily have gone even faster, but they weren't in an exceptional hurry. And it would hardly be polite to run the boys into the ground.

Afternoon of the fourth day brought them before the vast fortress. There was a moment of silence as they all stared at it. For the boys, it was simply looking upon a place of legend, a visual reminder that the tales they had been raised on were actually history. The ugly cracks in the giant walls gave startling testimony to the violence of the attack that had occurred here.

Legolas and Gimli were also somewhat humbled by it. They had been in the very thick of the fighting, and though they had faced it all with a humorous flare, the blood that had been shed here had stained them forever. For a little while, they were both just frozen in the grip of vivid, troubling memories.

The group slowly picked their way forward, heading through broken gates and along cluttered walkways. The bodies had all been burned long ago, but there was so much debris about that it would take a month to clean it all up. The Rohirrim preferred to leave things as they lay, a small monument to the bravery of those who had fought and died here.

They entered the main hall which was lit by shafts of sunlight slipping in through broken windows and cracks in the walls. This room was actually freer of detritus, a fact that none of them paid any attention to. Most of the fighting had taken place elsewhere.

"We're going to head down into the caves," Gimli announced. "You lads stick together and try not to get lost."

Legolas looked somewhat disconsolate, but he did not argue. "We'll be back in a few hours."

The three boys watched the two make their way down another corridor, heading for the entrance to the cave, and then they turned to each other. Amidst the awe and wonder they felt at being in
this place of legend, there was a very palpable excitement.

"Let's get some torches lit," Elfwine suggested practically, slipping off his pack. They had wisely
thought to bring some, knowing the keep would be mostly dark.

"This was the first major defeat for the Dark Lord, wasn't it Win?" Elboron asked as he took out
flint and tinder. "I mean, right here is where it all changed."

Elfwine nodded taking out two torches and handing one to Eldarion. "History was made here.
Twice, actually. Helm withstood the forces of Wulf here. Some say his ghost still roams these
halls...."

"That's a cheery thought," Eldarion put in with a nervous look. "Though if we see him, maybe he
can tell us what happened to his hammer...."

His friends laughed uneasily.

With Elfwine in the lead, holding one torch, they proceeded on through the darkened, dusty
corridors of the Hornburg. Elboron was in the center, and Elfwine held the other torch behind
them.

It was an eerie sort of place, silent in a way that did not seem entirely natural. The deeper they
went, the more aware they became of just why no one had come back to rebuild here; this was a
graveyard. Just walking here felt like a terrible violation—and an unwelcome intrusion.

They came into one of the old barracks and paused, staring about. There were old pallets here,
easily enough for an entire eored. There were also a wealth of old spears and broken helmets, all
scattered about wildly. Something scuttled about in the shadows, and the tiny squeaks of vermin
could be heard.

"I smell something," Elboron said suddenly, his tone urgent. "Orcs!"

Elboron leaped to the side, meeting a lunging orc head on. The efficiency with which he
slaughtered the creature was both a wonder and a horror to his friends' eyes. Clearly, his obsession
had forged him into the perfect killer; ruthless, bold and swift.

More of the things appeared and all three were soon engaged with them and they unabashedly
called for help, hoping the winding halls of the Hornburg would carry their message to Legolas
and Gimli. For there were too many of the orcs to contend with on their own, to be sure.

The three were pressed into a tight circle, fighting desperately back to back. As skilled as Elboron
was, as fast as Eldarion, as clever as Elfwine, they could not find a way to break loose of the
murderous mob. The stench of their enemies drew horribly close until all they could see where the
ugly faces of the monsters.

And then the attack suddenly stopped at someone's barked order.

The boys looked around wildly, exchanging uneasy glances. They were caught and they were
outnumbered. The only hope lay in buying time.

A single human figure appeared out of the shadows. Tall and not that much older than they were,
he had a sort of austere handsomeness about him. He eyed the boys, each in turn, and then
laughed a little.

"All my careful planning...and you just hand yourselves over to me. Remarkable." His smile was
not the least bit comforting. "If you are holding out for rescue from the elf and the dwarf, they are
dealing with a sizable squad of my more vicious orcs. And, if by some miracle they survive, the
door to the caves has been barred and quite firmly secured, so we have some time to get to know
each other." His eyes glittered in the torchlight. "I am Orthale, son of Grima, son of Galmod, son
of Eowald, son of Hatha, son of Freawulf, son of Eothain, son of Eothol son of Hale... son of
Wulf and Theolen. I am the heir of Helm, and you boy," he said to Elfwine, "are between me and
my kingdom."
Chapter Summary

The epic conclusion to the story, where all is revealed.

*Year 18 and 19, 4th Age*

Elfwine stared at the man, a chill running through him as he realized he was looking at the nemesis who had defined his childhood. Orthale was somewhat disappointingly human—no aura of magic about him, no taint of the Dark Lord. He was just a man—and if he was to be believed, he was a man descended from a line long believed extinct.

"You're him, then," the prince of the Mark commented. "You were the one who sent Kaeliz to Dol Amroth and then tried to wipe out the army of the West."

Orthale smiled thinly and nodded. "You are the clever one, aren't you? Yes, that plan was mine. I was most upset when you caused it to come undone." He shrugged a little and looked into each of their faces. "For years, I have watched and waited for the opportunity to take back what is mine. At first, through arcane means that still lingered after the destruction of the Ring, and once that power was gone, I used my spies, always seeking my moment."

"You killed my parents," Elboron said thickly, his eyes burning with a dangerous, obsessive malice.

Orthale's hand drifted to his sword, braced for anything heroic from the young man. "I did give that order, though Garchuk would have come against your city anyway. I merely helped him plan his attack." His indifference was palpable. "My claim is the Kingship of the Mark and I truly have no dispute with Gondor. However, Elessar's loyalties require him to interfere with me claiming my birthright."

"Even if you are telling the truth, your claim at this point is not really valid," Eldarion argued, his hand gripping Elboron's arm to keep him in place and prevent a tragedy.

Orthale smiled. "Obviously, I feel differently. It is not your concern anymore, however. The death of all three heirs should open up an opportunity I can exploit...." Orthale nodded to the orcs and they started to press in again.

"You can't take the throne without the hammer," Elfwine said desperately, ducking under a lashing blade. "You need Sunder and you know it."

Orthale halted the attack again, looking intrigued and even a little bit desperate. "You know the weapon's name. You are clever. What have you learned?"

Elfwine chewed his lower lip and looked around uneasily. "We found a record ... left by Theolen. It took me a long time, but I translated it...." He took a deep breath. "Dwarves came to the Mark seeking safety. Helm offered them shelter in the Glittering Caves, which they took. The minions of the Dark Lord came and demanded Helm give up the Dwarves, but he refused. They brought a dragon down upon the Mark, and in the face of that, the Dwarves showed Helm the hammer, Sunder, which he used to kill the dragon. But the hammer was cursed and it brought ruin to him.
and his family. After the defeat of Wulf and his armies, it was put in a safe place."

Elboron and Eldarion gaped at their friend. He had not yet told them all that he had gleaned from
the scroll. Elfwine had been saving it to tell them in grand fashion ... but necessity had a way of
upending plans.

Orthale's expression became more interested than anything else and then he actually laughed a
little. "A pity you have to die. I would very much like to see this scroll and discuss it with you."
His dark eyes bore into Elfwine. "Where is Sunder now?"

Elfwine looked around. "Let my friends go and I'll tell you."

Orthale laughed. "You are stalling, biding time until rescue. And time is not something I have an
abundance of anymore. So, tell me where Sunder is now or I shall carve up your friends in front
of you."

"You'll do that anyway, once you have the hammer," Elfwine returned boldly.

The heir of Helm froze him with a stare. "I have no need to kill them if I have the hammer—
leaving them alive might even serve to help me bargain with Elessar when it comes time to make
peace with Gondor. So, if you tell me where Sunder is and we find it to be there, your friends
shall go free."

"We're not going anywhere without Win," Elboron snarled.

"Be quiet, Boro. There's no sense in all of us dying." Elfwine was thinking fast, trying to plot out
the best way to survive just a little bit longer. His faith in Legolas and Gimli was iron-clad and so
he was certain rescue was only a little way off. "Your word that they will be allowed to go free?"

"Yes, my word, now tell me," Orthale snapped.

"Ah...." Elfwine could have simply made up a location on the far side of the Mark, but he had a
feeling that would alert this clever man to the reality that he was making this all up. "I'll need to
show you."

Orthale drew his sword and put it to Elboron's throat. "I weary of games, Eomerson."

"Look...." Elfwine thrust his chin out hostilely. "We came here to retrieve it, all right? I know a
few marks to look for and I can find it pretty quickly, but it will take longer if I try and describe
the marker symbols."

"How convenient...." Orthale glowered at him, obviously caught between his need for the weapon
and his complete suspicion of Elfwine.

The prince of the Mark had some practice at half-truths, thanks to his unscrupulous friends, but
complete lies were still beyond him. So he decided, to be safe, to stick to the facts as much as
possible. "The tapestry said the hammer was being kept safe by Helm—"

"I've had that howe taken apart a dozen times," Orthale argued harshly.

"Yes, exactly. So, what the tapestry had to mean was that it was safe in Helm's stronghold, the
Hornburg. Now, do we have an agreement?" Elfwine kept his expression as harsh as possible to
hide his nervousness.

Orthale clearly did not entirely believe him, but he was too desperate for the chance to risk
refusing Elfwine's offer. "Very well, boy. Lead on. But you have a very short while to bring us to
Sunder before I start carving up your friends." He sheathed his sword and turned to an orc. "Take a dozen of your men to the entrance to the caves. If the dwarf and the elf do make it back through the door, make sure they go no further."

The orc snarled a response and selected his squad. They trotted off down a darkened corridor, heading for their new assigned post. Their departure evened up the odds a little, but not nearly enough. Orcs took their weapons and then Elfwine was shoved ahead of the group.

The prince of the Mark led them down a corridor, towards the main courtyard. He knew they did not have a great deal of time—Orthale’s patience were already worn thin. If he drew this out too long, the killing would start regardless. He wanted to get them into more open ground—if it came to it, that would increase their chances of survival.

Elfwine feigned searching the walls for the markings he had invented, refusing to let himself look back for his friends. The sight of them with orc spears to their backs would have been too much to bear on top of everything else. Heart hammering against his ribs, he took them step by step to the crumbling courtyard and looked around.

The walls had been badly damaged during the war, and subsequent rains and frosts had widened the cracks in the stone. Most of the battlements looked on the verge of collapse, the stone sagging in several places. The courtyard was littered with broken standards and rusting weapons, fading reminders of the days of glory.

Above them towered a massive statue of Helm. Elfwine glared at it, cursing his ancestor for bringing this all down upon them. The curse of the hammer clearly had not gone away with the end of Helm’s family. It plagued the members of the ruling house of the Mark to this day. Elfwine truly wished he had never even heard of Sunder.

His gaze drifted to the replica of said hammer, gripped in the statue's hands and his brow suddenly furrowed. For it was strange, if one thought about it, that King Frealaf would go to all the trouble of removing all mention of the hammer from Riddermark lore—to the point of creating the legend of "Hammerhand" to explain Helm's might—and then to erect a statue with the man holding a massive war hammer, contradicting the legends he had worked so hard to spread. Surely such a monument would serve as a reminder....

Ancestors.... It couldn't be....

Elfwine stopped himself from gaping and started to look around the ground a little bit, his mind racing with an impossible notion. The prince was simply too stunned and amazed to manage to hide it effectively, and a trickle of fear went down his spine.

Orthale was staring at the statue. "Under my nose the whole time...?"

His clumsy cover had failed to have the effect he needed it to have.

Elfwine was about to call upon his friends to do something incredibly heroic (and most likely fatal) when there was a burst of noise from the level below them. Gimli and Legolas crashed through a door and came into the open air, battling orcs every step of the way.

"Hold them!" Orthale ordered, pointing down at the two former Walkers—most of the orcs ran to do just that.

That was all the breathing room that Elboron and Eldarion needed to act. Cries of "Ithilien!" and "Gondor!" filled the air and the young princes surged to the attack. Now they had the body mass and the experience to be a match for a pack of orcs and they used it. In short order, they had their
swords back and were clashing with their enemies.

Orthale ignored them. He turned and headed for the stairs to the battlements, his prize now within reach. Elfwine lunged after him, tackling him around the shoulders. At fifteen, he was as tall as a young tree and his hands could easily encompass a man's head. Just because he did not enjoy fighting did not mean he was not versed in it.

Orthale, however, would not be denied. After falling under the prince's assault, he rolled and kicked out, shoving the young man from him. They both rolled to their feet, but Orthale still had his sword and he lashed out with it so fast Elfwine was almost not able to react in time. Leaping backward and arching his body away from the deadly steel, he was still sliced right along the chest by it.

The prince of Rohan fell to the ground, gripping his wound and struggling to rally against the pain.

Orthale raced up the steps, taking them two and three at a time. His entire concern and focus was the hammer. The prince could be dealt with later. Elfwine watched him and knew that if he was not stopped, it would be the end of the Mark, and possibly all of the West. A man with Sunder at his side would hardly be satisfied with one kingdom, after all.

Elfwine forced himself to stand, spots appearing in his vision from the pain. He looked to his friends who were being hard pressed by the orcs and very much needed his help. His heart ached to join them, but he knew he had to let them face the orcs on their own.

Even if all three of them died today, it would be well as long as Orthale's ambitions were foiled.

The prince of the Mark mounted the steps quickly, one arm around his bleeding chest. He stepped carefully onto the battlements, testing the stone before putting his weight on it. A misstep now would mean disaster for everyone. His gaze drifted briefly to Orthale, who was preparing to leap a gap in the walkway.

Time was almost out.

Elfwine took a deep breath and prayed to his ancestors for some luck and then he ran as only he could, flying over the stones even as they trembled and disintegrated underneath him. The pain in his chest was excruciating, but he kept his focus on Orthale and stopping the man from claiming his prize.

Elfwine reached the gap in the walkway and flew over it, his lighter frame and his momentum making it much easier than it had been for Orthale. Finally, he skidded to a halt before the massive statue, just as Orthale was tapping the hammer with his sword.

The clay that had been artfully disguising the hammer for centuries chipped and fell away, revealing a shiny surface beneath. Orthale grinned in triumph.

Sunder had been found.

"Orthale!" Elfwine screamed, ripping Elessar's dagger from his boot-sheath and slashing the man across the back.

The man cried out and turned, his sword parrying the next swipe of the prince's knife. A look of incomparable rage filled the man's eyes as he started to assail Elfwine with one vicious attack after another. He was not about to be stopped now. He was too close.

Elfwine was driven back, the limited reach of his dagger making it dangerous to try anything more
than defense. Had he not been trained by one of the finest weaponmasters of the Mark, he would have been dead a dozen times over. As it was, though, he was able to at least hold his own.

For a little bit.

Elfwine cried out as the man's booted foot connected with his wounded chest, sending him reeling. He tripped over a piece of debris and very nearly ended up flailing right over the wall. The prince caught himself, but only just barely. Gripping the wall's edge, he stared in numb horror at the harrowing drop before him.

Orthale had once again left him, single-mindedly trying to get his hand on the thing that would end this fight and any other in future. Elfwine turned and stared in horror as the man slid the huge hammer from the statue's grip. Orthale's expression was beatific as he felt the power in his hands, the absolute victory....

"No!" Elfwine cried out.

Orthale brought the hammer against the great statue, which exploded into shards of stone and a cloud of dust. And when the dust cleared, the clay mask upon Sunder had fallen away completely, leaving behind a bright mithril sheen. Orthale laughed in absolute glee, the power in his hands overwhelming.

Elfwine rushed him, desperate to tackle the man straight off the battlements if nothing else—Orthale had to be stopped at any cost. The man reacted with astonishing speed, bringing the hammer around in a blow that surely would have crushed Elfwine's body had it connected. The prince of the Mark narrowly dodged, though, slipping to one knee in the process.

If the hammer weighed anything at all, Orthale did not show it. He whipped Sunder around and down like a toy, bringing down one awful blow after another. Elfwine scrambled out of the way, his reflexes barely saving him.

The massive blows shook the walls and caused huge chunks of them to fall away. The entire structure seemed to groan in protest of the abuse, threatening to disintegrate beneath them.

Elfwine wished his friends were here—he desperately needed help. But they had their own problems so he was forced to meet this challenge alone. As he struggled to stay one step ahead of the deadly swings, he searched back to all the lessons Erkenbrand had taught them.

"A large weapon can kill you in one blow, but the disadvantage is they need you to be at a certain distance to be effective. If you're lucky, brave and fast, you can use a dagger to kill a man wielding a broadsword."

Elfwine paid very close attention to just how quickly Orthale moved; once he had that mapped out, he chose his moment. After one vicious swing, Elfwine leaped forward instead of backward, something that clearly shocked the heir of Helm. He clutched at Orthale's tunic and smashed his head into the other man's brow, a little trick Erkenbrand had taught him.

Orthale tried to shake him off, but Elfwine's grip was too strong. They struggled back and forth a little bit, snarling and cursing at each other. If Orthale had been able to bring himself to drop Sunder, he would have easily been able to overpower Elfwine, but his hunger for the weapon overruled his good sense...

Elfwine plunged Elessar's dagger into the man's belly, staring pityingly into the man's wide eyes. He had never killed a man before, and in that moment he vowed to never do so again. In Orthale's eyes he saw a lifetime of dreams and schemes turn to dust and it made him profoundly sad.
Sunder slipped from the man's hand, clattering to the stones with a metallic clang. Even with his fingers too numb to hold it, Orthale was weakly reaching out towards it.

Elfwine stared, transfixed, as the man slid off his knife. Orthale Grimason staggered backwards, clutching his bleeding gut. His gaze turned from Sunder at the last moment, staring at the boy who had defeated him.

And then he pitched backward off the wall.

"How's that? Too tight?"

Elfwine shook his head, smiling a bit at Eldarion. Legolas and Gimli had set them up with a small camp in the lee of one of the more solid walls and then gone off to be sure the orcs were not coming back.

The prince of Gondor smiled back and tied off the bandage.

"You sure Boro will be all right?" Elfwine asked.

Eldarion looked a bit troubled. "His body will heal,..." The cloud of worry on his face was painfully obvious.

"But...?"

"You should have seen him with the orcs.... He was ... inhuman..." Eldarion sighed and looked over to the pallet where there friend rested. The blankets covered the bandages that he was swathed in. "His need for vengeance...worries me..."

Elfwine sighed. "Me too. Maybe once he takes back Minas Ithil ... maybe that will be enough."

"I can hope so." Eldarion handed his friend the waterskin and settled back, looking into the small fire they had built. "So, I guess it's all done then. Our great adventure..."

Elfwine laughed a little and then winced as his wound protested. "We're not even twenty yet, you know. I hardly think we've seen the high point of our lives."

Eldarion shrugged moodily. "I know, but.... Well, this whole business is done. The enemy is dead, the hammer has been dropped down a deep hole in the caves, the orcs have been scattered.... No more sneaking about, looking for clues...."

"No more giving my father apoplexy by haring off to the most dangerous places in the West," Elfwine returned dryly.

Eldarion gave him a sour look. "You're entirely too practical." He sighed again. "Next year, Elboron will take back Minas Ithil and he won't really have any business staying here in the Mark. I'm sure my father will decide it's time I came home and started learning to be a prince of Gondor. It.... Nothing will be the same, Win."

Elfwine felt a pang of loss at that and he nodded. "Childhood isn't forever, Dar. But we sure had some times."

"We certainly did," Eldarion replied with a grin.
"We certainly did," Elboron echoed, not opening his eyes, but smiling beatifically.

The three boys did not tell Legolas and Gimli the entire tale of who Orthale was; not out of a lack of trust, more as a precursor to not telling Eomer. Elfwine loved his father deeply, but he knew the Eomer was not prepared to deal with the idea that Helm had been a murderer and that an entire line of Kings had been lurking in the shadows, seeking the moment to retake their throne.

The story was simplified to the fact that Orthale had been Grima's son and he had been carrying on his father's misdeeds. Eomer listened to the story—over several mugs of ale that had served to calm him after learning of his son's latest brush with death—and then loudly toasted his son and the other heirs for their bravery.

Elfwine was noticeably uneasy with being commended for killing Orthale.

The young heir rather manipulatively used his moment as a hero (as well as all the fuss over his wound) to gain permission to winter with the Elk tribe. It clearly stretched Eomer's patience to the very limit, but the King of the Mark capitulated. Not graciously, but he did capitulate.

So it was that the three heirs were allowed to go and spend the winter with their friends, and Elfwine was allowed to continue his courtship of Magda. As the weeks went on, doubt slipped away. This was no mere infatuation or fleeting affection.

Elfwine of the Mark was in love.

Year 19, 4A Spring

Within the council chambers of King Eomer awaited a small gathering of his most important men. Amrothos was there, of course—he held no official rank but no one disputed his mastery of strategy. Thaedenbrand, Lord of the Westfold, was there, as was Elfhelm, Lord of the Eastfold. Various other captains, clan-chiefs, and herd-masters were there as well, the very elite of the Mark.

Eomer strode in wearing full armor. Everyone scrambled to their feet in respect, eyes collectively wide at the sight of their King thusly ready for battle. His eyes were dark as thunderheads, and his jaw was set.

The King threw his sword down on the table. "I called you all here for two reasons. One, I am ordering you to make ready. The Mark rides to support Prince Elboron reclaiming Ithilien in one month. I will have five thousand men, no less."

The others nodded their assent, caught off guard by the King's foul humor.

"Good. Second, my son is marrying Magda of the Dunlendings. Any man who wishes to argue should speak up now." His eyes drifted meaningfully to the sword he had dropped on the table.

They all stared at him in horror, but the threat of naked steel and the warning in Eomer's eyes gave them pause.

"It ... is an abomination, Eomer King," Thaedenbrand told him in a deep, uneasy voice. Ever bit as big as his father had been, he was still quite boyish in looks. But anyone who had seen him in the practice yards knew he was a foe to be feared. "Surely you cannot approve of this."
"No, I don't," Eomer told him seriously. "However, I cannot deny that Dunlendings saved us all. I may not be able to bring myself to trust them, but my son can. And when he rules, maybe he can finally put an end to the war that has plagued us for centuries."

"Peace?" Elfhelm snapped. "With those dogs?"

"The Mark's future Queen is one of those 'dogs' so I would choose your words more carefully," Eomer warned him.

"This will tear the Mark asunder," Thaedenbrand warned.

"Perhaps," Eomer said, his tone slightly more calm. "But really, lads, how many times has my son saved our necks? I don't feel this is a wise idea, but I do feel it is time to put our faith in him."

The men in the room looked very dubious, but they each nodded in turn. Their respect for Eomer and their affection for Elfwine was enough to buy their acquiescence, if not their approval. It would be their sons' problem anyway, and the sons to follow.

Privately, many were concerned about giving command of the army to Prince Elboron, even though it was his by every right. Most everyone knew or had heard that the son of Faramir had been made a bit unstable by the fall of Minas Ithil. Such a leader could create disaster for the army of the West.

Much to everyone's surprise, though, Elboron was quite amenable to all suggestions in plotting out the campaign. He listened to and incorporated ideas from Elessar and Eomer and, of course, Amrothos. In turn, he surprised them with the deft and subtle twists he added to the strategy, showing a glimmer of his father's brilliance.

True to his word, Aldurn begged Eomer to be released from his oaths, and Eomer regretfully complied. He cited Aldurn's years of loyal service and expressed the gratitude of the Mark to the Rider, all of which made Aldurn deeply uneasy.

Immediately following, Aldurn swore his sword to Elboron—"Until death take me" as he put it.

It was late spring when the army of the West topped a ridge and looked down at the Minas Ithil—now Minas Morgul again. The orcs had been quite busy in the last year. The forest had been stripped away for leagues around the city and several rings of defenses had been set up. A line of sharpened stakes was first, and then a two separate walls, each a hundred meters high, and beyond that was a massive trench.

All of which had been in the reports, so the army was quite ready to face them. They started their assault at noon, with the sun high in the sky and the orcs at their least effective. They loaded the catapults with burning pitch and lobbed it down upon the first perimeter—causing panic and confusion as well as burning a path through the stakes.

A lightning strike of Dol Amrothian knights swept into the breach, scattering the terrified orcs before them. Very few of the foul creatures made it behind the first wall—Alphros was leading the knights and he had been at Minas Ithil when it had fallen. There was no pity in his heart for the monsters.

The massive army of the West arrived at the first wall precisely on schedule and immediately placed their catapults. The timber walls could not long stand the battering, but the orcs held their
ground anyway. They ineffectually fired arrows at the army, howling out their challenges.

The wall fell quickly and again, the orcs fell back. Elboron watched coldly as the plan was carried out, sitting a'horse beside his two friends. They could see the bloodlust in his eyes, but he was biding his time. And he seemed to be enjoying crushing the orcs, line by line, and filling them with the same panic the citizens of Minas Ithil had suffered. His coldness caused Elfwine and Eldarion to exchange worried looks.

The second wall fell as easily as the first and then the orcs fled, streaming across the bridge spanning the trench and heading for the city proper. The bridge was, predictably, collapsed behind them—no matter that hundreds of orcs had yet to get across.

Elboron watched dispassionately as the Riders of the Mark wiped out the foul-kind who were thus trapped.

The men of the West used the orcs' own timber walls as bridges, throwing them down over the trench and riding or marching right across. It had taken only a few hours to breach the defenses the orcs had spent a year building.

The sun was behind them when they reached the city—and the stench of it was the first thing to bring a truly volatile reaction from Elboron. This was his boyhood home and now it looked and smelled like nothing but an orc nest. He rode agitatedly before the walls, waiting impatiently for the siege engines to be brought up.

The purpose of the defenses had been merely to exhaust and slow any attacking army, but that had been the reason Elboron had brought so many men. Now the ones who had fought so hard all day could take their rest and those he had held in reserve could man the siege engines.

Nightfall would bring no solace for those who had killed his parents.

For generations, the story of the retaking of Minas Ithil would be told beside hearths and in great halls. The shocking brutality with which the campaign was executed was the sort that could only be achieved when vengeance was involved. And no one leading the army would have denied that being true. Elessar, Eomer, Elboron, they all wanted blood for what had been done to those they loved.

And the streets ran with rivers of blood before it was all said and done.

The gates of the city fell just after dark and the men of the west poured into Minas Morgul, screaming war cries. The problem of light to see by was solved by an idea of Elboron's—set fire to the roofs. He was going to have to rebuild anyway.

The slaughter went on for hours. Orcs were rooted out of cellars and beheaded, they were surrounded by horsemen in the market square and speared, they were chased into burning buildings. Those who tried to flee into the night found that Elboron's malice had inspired him to cover all escapes with woodsman who had taken time to adjust their vision to the darkness.

The darkened forest sang with the sound of bowstrings and no orc who sought escape found anything but death.

By the time the sun came up again, it was over.

Elboron walked the streets with his friends, each of them covered in blood. Only Ithilien's prince seemed ready to continue the fight. The other two were looking a might bit sick from the night of destruction. And his grimness did not set them at ease.
Eomer and Elessar were in the square before the Prince's manor, looking around in horror at the macabre display the orcs had put up. Dozens of bodies—citizens of Minas Ithil—had been impaled and the spears had been planted in the ground.

Elboron stared, numb to blood and horrors now. He looked around, noting that some of the bodies were "fresher" than others, suggesting the orcs had kept prisoners for a while after taking the city. Any slight bit of remorse for the night's brutality evaporated in the face of that.

"Oh no...." Eldarion's voice was barely a whisper.

Elboron turned and choked, unable to believe or comprehend the barbarity of these disgusting creatures. It was not just that they were utterly devoid of anything good or honorable, they were also consumed with the need to descend to further depths of depravity.

Faramir's head hung from the doorway of the Prince's manor.

"Bury them," Elboron murmured and stormed from the square, an idea he had been considering cementing in his mind.

This evil had to be expunged.

"Minas Ithil is no more," Elboron told Elessar that evening. He had still not fully recovered from the sight of his father's head mounted like a trophy. "We'll tear it down so the orcs have no more use of it, but I can't ever come back here, sir."

Elessar nodded, smoking his pipe. They were alone in his tent, a conference between the King and his too-young vassal. Elessar wished desperately that this burden had not fallen on Elboron so young. "As you wish, Elboron. Where will you go?"

"Emyn Arnen," Elboron answered. "There is a small town there now with good walls. My father often talked of it as possibly a more central place to rule Ithilien from."

Again, Elessar nodded. "That would have been my suggestion. You will, of course, be offered every assistance, Elboron. But you know there is no hurry.... You can set the builders to work and return to your Uncle's kingdom, if you wish."

Elboron was momentarily wistful, wishing he could turn back time to return to those simple days of running wild in Rohan. Aside from a pitiful need to take shelter in boyhood, however, he had no justifiable excuse.

"Thank you, sir, but those days are over. The West is not safe, sir. That troll is still out there, and I am sure he is rallying more orcs to his cause. He will come at us again and again. He won't ever stop...." Elboron's gaze became haunted. "Won't ever...."

"Elboron...."

Ithilien's Prince looked to his King with a deep and unending sorrow. "My family's charge is to guard against invasion from the East, and I will carry out that duty. Rather than sit and wait while their numbers swell and their plans take root, I will bring the war to them. I will take an army of men—anyone who will follow—into Mordor. And I will exterminate every orc I find."

"Elboron, this does not need to be your course," Elessar argued urgently. "Your family has been avenged, your city has been purged. Your honor should be satisfied."
"It has nothing to do with that, sir." Elboron swallowed hard and looked him in the eye with a gaze far too old for his sixteen years. "I have to do this, sir. Barahir, my sisters... I have to keep them safe."

Elessar sighed and shook his head sadly. "Very well, Elboron, I won't stand in your way. I just hope you do not let this quest consume you."

Autumn of that year saw Edoras swarmed under by visitors of the highest rank from all over the West. King Elessar and the Lady Arwen were there, as were Elphir, Erchirion, and Alphros. Elboron, Prince of Ithilien, was there, and he brought along his little brother Barahir. And of course, as was becoming custom, where one found him, one found Eldarion.

Eomer's marshals were there, as were a host of Dunlendings. The tension in the city rose to a critical level, but everyone did their best to respect the solemnity of the occasion. And they all seemed to be trying to accept that they wouldn't be allowed to kill each other anymore.

A very nervous Elfwine stood in the back of the Great Hall, flanked by his two friends, who were very amused by his nervousness. Elfwine looked out over the assembly, picking out the faces he knew. Magda's friends, Bahna, Kala, Rees, and Daeor, could be seen over on the Dunlending side of the hall. Bahna and Daeor had grown into massive young men, though their attempts at beard-growing were yet only marginally successful. Kala was heavy with child, and Rees was staying close by her, very protective of his wife.

Across the hall, Elfwine saw Hama sitting between Haleth and Eothain, a small child in his arms. He caught Elfwine's gaze and gave him a very amused glance in return. Whatever childhood rivalry had existed between them had been washed away simply by growing up.

Educh was there, of course, sitting in the fore of his people. He was looking both happy and sad, as fathers do at weddings, and his gaze on Elfwine was completely approving. The prince of the Mark smiled uneasily back at him.

There were noted absences, of course. Elfwine wished desperately to be able to look out and see Erkenbrand sitting beside his son, Thaedenbrand, grinning and anxious for the drinking to start. His death had left a void Elfwine knew could not be filled.

And, of course, not having Eowyn and Faramir there was very sad. At every family gathering, of course, there are faces that were missed, but his aunt and uncle had been taken far too soon.

The doors at the back of the hall opened and Magda came in, flanked by two of Educh's best friends, in the Dunlending tradition. She was radiant in her simple dress of homespun wool. Again, per tradition, she had made the dress herself—though Lothiriel had stood in for the girl's mother to help out. Elfwine's mother's touch was seen in the beautiful embroidery—elk and horse symbols decorated the simple cloth.

Not that Elfwine could think much about such subtle details. His knees suddenly seemed too weak to keep him standing.

"No fainting, Win," Elboron murmured beside him, grinning hugely.

"Yes, save the being on your back for later, Win, really," Eldarion added with an equally bright smile from the other side.
Elfwine blushed, glowering at his friends. "I invited you to stand up for me here, don't make me thrash you in front of all these fine people."

His friends laughed.

Magda was suddenly before him and the two young people smiled at each other. Nervousness, relief, excitement, all were vying for space in his head and he almost vibrated with the swell of emotions. Elfwine remembered Eldarion saying their adventures were over. But for him, this very much felt like the beginning.

There was one guest not on the list, one who had not come through the main entrance or even the gates of the city. The man had other ways to get into Meduseld—secret passages that his minions had used for years. On a day with so much activity and so many different people running around the great keep, no one paid him any mind.

Orthale had survived, barely, but his injuries had left him a broken wreck of a man. Using healing lore long lost to men to piece himself back together, Orthale had managed to recover enough to come here to ruin this special day.

It was a petty gesture and he knew it—but nothing else was left to him. His body was failing and time was running out. Killing the prince of the Mark would not only be sweet vengeance, it would be a perfect final blow from the descendants of Wulf Frecason.

Orthale limped into the Great Hall through a servant's door and he stood in the shadows, watching and looking for the best place to get a clean shot. He would, after all, only have one chance, a single knife-throw. It had to go through the prince's heart.

Orthale's eyes widened in shock as he saw the girl that Elfwine was standing beside. A few mysteries suddenly became clear—how the Rohirrim had known about the attack, why Educh had betrayed him—and he stood stunned for a moment as he sought to comprehend the full meaning of what he was seeing. The feeling racing through him was not rage, though.

It was peace.

Wulf's dream had been to unite Dunlendings and Rohirrim under one King, and that goal had been driven into every son who had come after him. Rationales and justifications may have varied, but the goal had always remained the same. Dedication to that dream had pushed Orthale on through all the many defeats.

And now it was coming to pass and Orthale had no part in it, ironically. Which would have filled him with jealousy or spite even a year ago. After all, who could better fulfill Wulf's legacy than Wulf's heir?

But Orthale was weary now and he was happy to give over the chore to Elfwine's son.

Orthale Grimason, the one the Dunlendings called "Black Soul," turned from the gathered throng and slipped out of the Great Hall, going to seek a place where he could quietly allow death to claim him.

The ceremony had gone on interminably, seemingly—but smoothly and now the Great Hall was
filled with noise as everyone celebrated. Eldarion found Elboron outside, sitting on a bench with Barahir in his lap. The gentle, adoring look on his beloved's face as he talked to his little brother was something Eldarion saw far too rarely.

"Did the party move out here?" Eldarion asked, sitting on the bench and offering his companion a mug of ale.

Elboron took it and sipped, wincing. "I can't understand why people like this stuff," he murmured, setting the mug down. "The party was a bit too loud for the Princes of Ithilien. Wasn't it, Baro?" he cooed at the child in his lap.

Barahir giggled.

Eldarion sipped his own ale and licked his lips. "I am assured it gets better the more of it you drink." He eyed Elboron for a long time. "You really mean to do it, then? Next spring, you're heading into Mordor?"

Elboron nodded, his eyes never leaving Barahir's face. "I have ten thousand volunteers from across Gondor and Rohan."

Eldarion sighed. There was really no point in arguing with his companion when he got like this. "Well, make that ten thousand and one." His fingers entwined with Elboron's.

The Ithilien Prince smiled sweetly at him, a hint of the innocent he used to be shining through. "When was the last time I told you I love you?"

Eldarion actually colored. "I'm not sure...."

"Well, then...." Elboron reached out to take one of the Gondorian prince's braids in his fingers, tugging him close for a kiss that would speak far more eloquently than words.

The celebration grew more boisterous as the patrons grew more inebriated. There was a lot of dancing and carousing and eating and even one or two very brief fights—not always between Dunlendings and Rohirrim. Both peoples enjoyed fighting amongst themselves at least as much as they enjoyed fighting others.

Elfwine was not sure when Magda vanished. He had finally managed to extricate himself from a throng of weeping girls—all wishing him the very best while jealousy burned in their eyes—and had gone looking for her. Only, there was no sign of her. And when he asked, people had the oddest habit of snickering at him in response.

"Hey, Win?" Eldarion asked, bringing his attention around.

Elfwine turned and saw both of his friends, both of whom were grinning in a way that definitely spelled trouble. "Yes?"

"It's time you got on with the business of being married," Elboron told him.

"Hmm? Oh, yes, well...." He looked around as Thaedenbrand and Hama stepped up to either side of him.

Definitely trouble.
"Come on lads!" Eldarion shouted and the four of them hoisted Elfwine up onto their shoulders and carried him from the hall.

"What are you idiots doing?" Elfwine demanded, struggling a little bit and, unable to help himself, laughing.

"Just what we're charged with doing," Elboron replied.

Several other Rohirrim helped carry the struggling heir along, all of them shortling drunkenly. The first stop was a horse trough—the Rohirrim had their own traditions, of course. They tossed Elfwine in and, once he was nice and soaked, they then carried him back into Meduseld, heading up the stairs.

"Dar! Boro!" Elfwine was trying to warn them of dire consequences, but just then the drunken mob started divesting him of his sodden clothes. "What...?"

The naked prince was then tossed into the wedding chamber and the door was securely shut. He was too shocked to even sputter all the indignities springing to mind.

Magda was waiting for him, wearing only a very thin dress. She giggled hysterically at the sight of her soaked, naked husband.

"They said they would fetch you, beloved.... I didn't think they meant literally," she told him with a sparkle in her eye.

Elfwine began to stammer, blushing and, strangely enough, trying to cover himself—all of which was just silly, of course. He tried to make some witty response to her, but then she was kissing him and suddenly, no words really seemed all that important at all.

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Here the story itself comes to an end, gentle readers. If, however, you wish to see what becomes of the lads, then move on to the epilogues. Thank you so much for reading.
Epilogue, Elboron

Chapter Summary

The tale of the life of Elboron, after the events of Heirs of Arda

In the years that followed the retaking of Minas Ithil, Elboron held fast to his vow, bringing war to the denizens of Mordor. And so fierce were his attacks that orcs spoke in fearful whispers of him to each other as huddled in their caves.

Elboron ruled from Emyn Arnen, though he spent but four months a year there. The city grew to even greater stature than Minas Ithil over time, and Elboron saw to it his father's dream of a great library was given new life.

While he was home, Elboron was known to be a wise and patient leader, seeing to the needs of all of his people as best as he was able. The people of Ithilien flourished under his rule and new much peace. When he was off at war, he left Bergil in charge, who managed the city precisely as directed.

The yearly battles in Mordor were ugly, vicious fights. When the orcs tried to stand their ground, they were trampled under. When they tried to hide in their caves, they were smoked out and slaughtered. Elboron was utterly callous about it, his mission so clear in his mind that no savagery was beneath him.

And always he sought the troll, Garchuk, who had killed his father.

Elfwine rode with him for a few years, but the slaughter quickly grew too much for him to stomach. He returned to Edoras where he served as his father's chief marshall. The danger for the people of the West was now from Harad; Elessar led many campaigns against the southerners, Eomer always by his side.

Elboron and Elfwine's friendship grew somewhat strained, but it pained either of them to talk about it, so it lay unspoken between them. And emotional distance slowly developed.

Eldarion fought beside Elboron unfailingly, his skill and fierceness on the field an inspiration to the men. Privately, he pleaded with Elboron to put an end to the slaughter, but when his pleas were turned aside, he did not abandon his companion. He stayed with Elboron year after year.

Barahir grew into a thoughtful, happy young man—and wise, under Bergil's teachings. By the time he was fifteen, he was already helping to rule Ithilien in his brother's absence. Never more than was proper, though. His devotion to Elboron was boundless and he would gladly have gone to war with Elboron if his brother had asked.

The ruler of Ithilien, however, wanted his brother to know nothing of war.

As the years passed, the hunting in Mordor grew more sparse, a fact that many noted with relief. Elboron's volunteer army shrank from the ten thousand it started with to a mere thousand of the most hardened, loyal veterans; men from all over the West who had forgotten all former ties and instead created their own brotherhood.
It was in the year 41 of the fourth age that Eldarion went to speak to Elfwine and beg him to help stop Elboron's crusade. They met in Elfwine's private chambers—the very room the boys had all shared once upon a time—and the heir of the Mark greeted Eldarion warmly, glad to see his friend. When he heard the reason for the Gondorian prince's visit, though, he grew more somber.

"You know as well as I do, when Boro gets something into his head, you can't get it out again. I tried to get him to see sense and he ignored me."

Eldarion sighed and gave him another pleading look. "But that was years ago. He is wearing out, Win. I can sense he is ready to quit. If you and I were both there, we could talk him down. I am sure of it."

"Dar...."

"Win, it's been a decade since you've seen each other," Eldarion pointed out, trying not to sound accusatory.

Elfwine looked pained. "I know.... It's hard to get away."

"I'm saying.... You might want to give this a try before you lose your chance entirely."

Elfwine gave him a sharp glance, worry and anger mixing in his eyes. It was a thought that had already struck the heir of the Mark and it was one that caused him a great deal of pain. "Don't pull my tether, Dar. I—"

The door burst open and a small dark-haired three-year-old bounded in. He was followed by a pup, all black with a single white ear. Fellfang's line all had the same recognizable trait, just as they shared the beloved hound's fierce loyalty to their masters. "Da! Da! I found a lizard!"

Elfwine grinned and swept his son into his arms. "Did you now? And what did you do with it?"

The young Prince Theomund grinned impishly and clutched at his father's shirt.

"Please tell me you didn't put it in your sister's bed," Elfwine asked with a sigh.

Theomund giggled and looked up at Eldarion. "Hello...."

The heir of Gondor grinned at the child. "Hello, your highness. I haven't seen you since you were very small."

"How small?" the boy asked.

Eldarion grinned and held his index finger and thumb about an inch apart. "This small."

Theomund laughed. "No!"

Elfwine laughed as well and kissed the boy's dark curls. "I love Elboron, Dar. You know that. But I have ... responsibilities here. Maybe this winter..."

Eldarion nodded slowly, accepting. "I had to try, after all...."

And so Eldarion left Edoras without Elfwine and very soon Elboron led his army forth into Mordor once again. Though their numbers were smaller, they were no less devastating in their results.

After several hard-fought victories that season, Eldarion's pleas for peace were finally heard. Elboron of Ithilien decided to leave Mordor for good. After lauding his men and their courage and
Elboron of Ithilien decided to leave Mordor for good. After lauding his men and their courage and all their years of loyal service, he led them forth on the long road home.

Along the way, though, they were harried viciously by ambush-parties of orcs. The intensity of the assaults forced them to change course again and again, and before they were quite able to muster necessary resistance, they found themselves trapped in a dead-end canyon.

Elboron did not call for his captains. He only called for Eldarion. The two of them rode off a piece and spoke quietly.

"I have a duty here, Dar, and you know it. I have to get you out of here alive. My men will punch through whatever they send at us, and then I want you to ride like there's a fire behind you."

Eldarion shook his head. "I'm not leaving you."

Elboron took him by the shoulders and shook him. "Dar, stop it. You are the royal heir, my prince. I can't let you get yourself killed. So, you will either swear to me to do what I ask or I'll have you tied to your saddle and I'll have someone lead your horse through the fray. Understand?"

Their eyes met, a clash of steel between them. Both of them had wills of absolute stone, in all honesty, each displayed in a different way. But there came between them another of those rare moments where they both recognized they were not just men, not just companions, friends, lovers—they were prince and vassal, and Eldarion would forever dishonor Elboron and his family if he insisted on dying along with him.

Eldarion drew himself up and nodded slowly. "Just promise me.... Promise me you will fight to live."

Elboron saluted him formally, a bright grin on his weather-beaten face. "As my liege commands," he murmured and went to give his orders.

There was not much unsaid between them, so there was not really any need for long-winded goodbyes. And they were out of time anyway. The orcs had massed at the mouth of the canyon—fully two thousand of them—and they were ready for war.

Elboron was giving his orders when Aldurn—faithful, grizzled, loyal Aldurn—touched his arm and pointed out to the field of enemies. The Prince of Ithilien went cold.

Garchuk was leading the attack.

Elboron was suddenly fifteen again, suddenly screaming again as his father was slaughtered before him. It took him a moment to realize that he really was screaming—his sword raised, his horse charging.

And to a man, his army followed, their hearts knowing no fear as they went once more into battle behind their beloved prince.

There was no finesse, but there was valor and there was glory, that day. His men crashed into the orcs with such force that the first five ranks of the enemy were utterly destroyed before the men's momentum slowed. Then the brutal hacking and slashing began as they sought to either win or make sure the orcs paid a very dear price.

Elboron's focus was on Garchuk, and he knew that was all he need concern himself with. For Eldarion, his prince, his heart, would be taking the first window that opened to escape. And with him safe, Elboron could seek a way to destroy the creature whom he had hunted for years.

But it was not so easy to reach one massive troll with so many orcs between them. It was like
trying to swim upriver, and though Elboron did strive mightily, he could barely inch forward. The press of the enemy was just too strong. And slowly, his men were being flanked and cut to pieces.

A man with friends is never truly alone, it is said, and that day, that proverb proved true, for just as defeat seemed imminent, a great horn blast echoed over the field. Five hundred Rohirrim topped a rise and came down upon the orcs with terrible fury.

The battle quickly turned.

Elboron surged forward, his horse vaulting or trampling orcs to get to Garchuk. He sheathed his sword and drew his spear as he closed with his enemy. This moment he had practiced for many times during the last two decades. His horse made a great, surging leap and Elboron hurled his spear with all the force of his arm (and twenty years of pain).

The spear went right between two plates in the troll's chest armor, sinking in deep. It was a perfect shot, but it was not enough. Garchuk spun—his speed diminished but still terrifying —and with his axe he cleaved Elboron's horse in midair. Horse and rider went tumbling.

Elboron blacked out for just a moment, and when he came to, the troll was looming over him, ready to finish the job. Elboron scrambled out of the way and drew his sword, snarling into the monster's face. This was the creature who had inhabited his nightmares for years and years.

Elboron of Ithilien leaped to the attack, darting in and cutting and then dancing right back out again. The creature was slower, but he was still too quick to risk closing with him for long. Elboron kept on the move, circling behind Garchuk every time the troll moved, keeping himself out of range of the axe and the hammer.

As good as he was, though, he was not infallible. One clever attempt to sever a tendon in the back of one of the troll's knees caused him to overbalance. Garchuk was able to get ahead of him at last and turn, striking him underhanded with the axe.

The blow was not as mighty as it would have been, had it been struck overhand or sideways, but it was still staggering. It tore open Elboron's breastplate and sent him hurtling backwards to land in a dazed, crumpled heap.

Garchuk roared as another spear penetrated his torso, this one thrown by a charging Rider. Elfwine had grown into a more-than-adept horseman. And his friend was in danger. He quickly came around behind the troll and slashed its leg wide open.

The troll was turning, slowly and painfully, to meet this new threat when yet another horseman appeared out of the fray. Eldarion had indeed gone to make his escape, but seeing Elfwine's charge had brought him back to fight beside his friends. So it was that he came at the troll and, launching himself from his saddle, struck such a blow against the monster's shoulder that his blade sundered the plating and sunk deep into flesh and was then stuck there.

Eldarion landed and quickly ran to see to his companion, finding Elboron struggling to get to his feet. Ithilien's Prince's eyes were filled with wonder as he saw his friends rallying around him, and even the blood seeping from his chest did not detract from his amazement.

"Boro, sit down, well finish him," Eldarion told him.

Elboron shook his head and hefted his sword—his father's sword — and looked up at the monster. "No, he's mine."

"Boro..."
"He's mine!"

Elfwine's second charge brought the troll to his knees, groaning in pain. The massive hammer fell and Garchuk swung clumsily with the axe to ward off another charge by Elfwine. He never even saw the battered figure racing towards him with vengeance burning in his eyes.

Elboron ducked under one feeble swing and then plunged his sword through Garchuk's neck and up into his brain.

The troll, his enemy, fell dead to the earth with a tremendous crash.

The battle, however, was once again turning against them. The orcs had rallied around one of their lesser chiefs and were making use of their greater numbers. Even the loss of Garchuk did not send them running.

Elfwine slid from his horse and ran to Elboron, who was swaying on his feet. Eldarion got there before him, easing the wounded prince to the ground. "Is he...?" Elfwine could not find the courage to ask what was in his heart.

"He'll be fine," Eldarion vowed, peeling off the ruined breastplate.

The wound beneath was truly ugly, but Eldarion did not even flinch. He had many times had to patch Elboron back together. He called his horse over and took items from his pack to see to the bleeding. "We have to get him out of here."

Elfwine nodded and looked around for some means of escape. Swift riders might be able to make a run for it, but a wounded man would never be able to do so safely. They would kill Elboron trying to save him.

Aldurn galloped over to them, panting hard from his exertions. His steel-grey hair and weathered features testified to his age, but the face seemed oddly unchanged. He saluted Elfwine and then looked to Elboron with deep and profound worry.

"Will he be all right?" the former Rider asked uneasily.

"He might.... If we can get him out of here.... We need time, though. We don't dare try and move him very fast." Elfwine gave Aldurn a helpless look.

Aldurn rotated a sore shoulder and nodded slowly. "Then time you shall have. When the crescent-moon banner falls, you will need to run." He then turned his horse and started to head back to the battle.

"Aldurn," Elfwine called.

The man paused and turned. "Yes, Win?"

Elfwine stared at him for a moment, so many questions going through his head. "Will I ever know why you love him so much?"

Aldurn actually smiled. "You might—if you can get him to tell you."

And then Aldurn, formerly of the Mark, known to be Elboron's most valued and trusted man, rode off for his final battle. He had but to tell the men what they needed to do and they all rallied around him.

They gave the orcs a fight that legends pale in comparison to.
Elfwine helped Eldarion get Elboron into the saddle with him and then mounted up as well. They walked their horses away from the fight, the Riders of Rohan slowly rallying around them. The prince of the Mark looked back often, and he was awed by just how long Elboron's banner remained in the air.

The orcs received such a battering that day that they chose to let the Riders go in peace, though their scouts were seen often along the road home. The orcs' main desire seemed to be to have the invaders leave, and if that could happen without a fight, they were willing to hold back.

Elboron slipped into a fevered sleep, held securely in Eldarion's arms as they made their way over the Ephel Duath mountain range. His condition did not improve, but Eldarion's ministrations did keep his breathing fairly steady and his pulse constant.

They crossed into Ithilien and the prince of Gondor directed them to head for Minas Tirith—his mother and the healers in the Houses of Healing would know best what to do for the wounded prince.

At the banks of the Anduin, they stopped and made camp and it was there that Elboron awoke and called for his friends, late in the night. They arrived in the tent, relieved and elated that he was back with them.

"Not ... in Mordor anymore?" he asked them, seemingly desperate.

They shook their heads, each taking one of his hands. "No, Boro," Eldarion assured him softly.

Elboron face took on a beatific light and he smiled. "Good.... Didn't want to die there...." He sighed and licked his dry lips. "Baro is safe now. Monster's dead."

Eldarion smoothed back his lover's hair, feeling the burning forehead. He then felt the pulse at the man's wrist and he shivered a little. "He stopped fearing the monster a long time ago, Boro," Eldarion murmured. "Barahir is all grown up now. He just fears his brother not coming home."

Elfwine caught the look in Eldarion's eyes and he went pale. "Boro, you know.... I'm sorry we haven't spoken in so long, I—"

Elboron squeezed his hand and gave him a weak but lopsided grin. "Just because I'm dying, Win ...y'don't have to apologize for me being an ass."

There was silence as the words were spoken. Both of the other princes smiled through a gathering of tears.

"Aye," Elfwine managed. "You were an ass. But so was I."

Elboron winked at him. Then he brought Eldarion's hand to his lips and kissed it and then strength seemed to leave him. Peace such as he had not known for so very long suffused his being and he eased back down onto the pallet. "We had some times," he said with a broad, boyish smile that had not been seen in many years. And then he just stared blankly ahead as his final breath left him.

And such was the end of Elboron son of Faramir and Eowyn; Prince of Ithilien, Marshal of Gondor. He was thirty-eight.
Epilogue, Elfwine

Chapter Summary

The story of Elfwine, after the events of Heirs of Arda

After Elfwine's marriage to Magda, the young prince's habitual recklessness came to an end. He stayed home for three years before going to join Elboron's campaigns in Mordor, and then he only participated for five years. He came home to his wife and was named by his father Chief Marshal of the Mark, charged with organizing and mustering both the Eastfold and the Westfold when Elessar called.

Elfwine's first child, Eoril, a daughter, was born in the year 26. Blonde and fair (a fact noted with relief by Eomer) she grew into a beauty that sundered the hearts of many hopeful young riders.

Her sister, Imalaeth, was born two years later. Not so fair as her older sibling, she was still clearly the daughter of Elfwine the Fair. Her interest was not so much in needlework and dresses, though, as it was in armor and shields.

After her there was no issue for some time and the Mark grew nervous. Eomer was still strong, though, and his son was yet young, so all such concerns were kept quiet. As anxious as the Rohirrim were for the line to continue, they were still contending with the reality that the child would be half Dunlending.

In the year 34, an urgent message came to Edoras from Dol Amroth. Imrahil's ship, the flagship of the fleet he had commanded for so many years against the corsairs, had come to Dol Amroth under a black sail.

Prince Imrahil had passed and his youngest son was called home.

There was a great and raucous celebration that night in Meduseld as everyone bid farewell to the transplanted prince they had all grown to love. All were told this was not merely a visit home, Amrothos was taking leave of the Mark for once and for all. He departed the next day and rode off home for his father's memorial. And then Amrothos took charge of his father's fleet, sailing forth to keep the corsairs away from the fair city of his home.

In the year 38, Magda gave birth to Theomund, the first of Elfwine's sons. When it was known that the heir of the Mark had hair as dark as coal, Eomer took to drink for a fortnight—and it was not from celebration. He was heard to mutter such things as "end of the Mark" often to himself.

Elfwine spent as much time as he could with his family, but he did ride out with his father in service of King Elessar, for the Haradrim caused much strife and discord for the people of the West. Known to be a patient and implacable strategist, Prince Elfwine helped to bring about many victories for his father and Elessar.

In the year 41, after the death of his beloved friend, Elboron, Elfwine grew heartsick and did not venture from the Mark. He was able to share his grief with Prince Eldarion and no other, for no one but they could encompass the vastness of their loss.

In time, the wound did heal somewhat, as these things do. Eldarion stayed much with Elfwine, but
he did also visit Prince Barahir in Emyn Arnen, who he was very fond of. The youngest son of Faramir and Eowyn had grown into a bright young man with grand designs for his city and his people. Though versed in tactics and combat, King Elessar did not call him to the wars. He instead preferred Barahir keep watch on Mordor—a duty of little importance, after Elboron's reign of destruction.

However, Elessar firmly believed Barahir's family had sacrificed enough on Gondor's behalf.

In the year 48, Theomund was sent to live with his mother's people for a few years. The ten-year-old heir was already showing signs of possessing his father's wit and it was agreed that he should know the Dunlendings and their ways better.

The year 50 saw Eomer, aged but still keen of mind and strong of limb, ride home from his final campaign. Elfwine led the eoreds forth behind Elessar's banner himself after that, and all of the men of the Mark followed their prince as much out of love as fealty.

Theomund married Heletha, Thaedenbrand's daughter, in the year 59. The Rohirrim were surprised (and relieved) at the match. The Dunlendings reacted with suspicion in some cases and anger in others. Many had come to think of the heir as more Dunlending than Rohirrim and had expected him to strengthen the Dunlending bloodline in the Royal family, and they wondered if he had been forced to marry a Rohirrim girl.

The sixtieth year of the fourth age saw Elfwine assume most of the kingship duties for his aged father. Irascible and cantankerous in his old age, Eomer took much more joy in regaling his grandchildren with exploits of heroic deeds from ages past than with sitting on his throne and listening to complaints and pleas.

Two years later, at his father's request, Elfwine sent word to Elessar that Eomer King had requested to see Meriadoc Brandybuck and Peregrin Took, the Hobbits, again, and no one doubted what that meant. It was no sooner asked for than it was done. And more.

Merry and Pippin arrived in the summer of the following year, and soon after came Elessar, Arwen, Gimli, and Legolas. It was a gathering of friends, a reunion of heroes. There was much laughter and pauses to remember details of the old adventures. And, of course, there were the light-hearted disputes of who had really done what and when.

Eomer took his final ride as the first frosts touched the grasses of the Mark that year, surrounded by all those who loved him.

Most of the Mark turned out for the beloved King's funeral, for there were few in the Riddermark whose lives had not been touched by the man. Wynohael sang before the crowd, her voice as clear and beautiful as notes from a harp.

It was an opportunity that their enemies could not let go by.

Dunlending clans who had come together over the years, joined by bitterness and unwillingness to leave off their grudges, chose that day to make war upon the Mark. It was a brave and bold gamble, one that had been planned for years while they awaited Eomer's death. With the Mark paralyzed by the loss of its long-time King, a swift and decisive victory could be achieved.

The only thing between them and their day of bloody triumph was Theomund, the new Chief Marshal. And he was few in years and, more importantly, was known to have a great love for his mother's people. He would not offer them more than a token resistance, they were certain.

Five thousand screaming berserkers came at the Rohirric town of Edelmon even as Wynohael's
voice was raised in song for her departed father some hundred miles away. The guards in the town slammed the gates shut, but they were very few against so many.

Theomund, however, offered more than a token resistance. He personally led the charge of a thousand horseman that cut the Dunlending assault in two. But that was only the first part of his plan. For he knew that were this merely Rohirrim putting down another Dunlending uprising, the feuds would spark back to life.

So the next wave of his assault came from his own contingent of Dunlendings—men who were better trained, better armed and better armored than their discontented cousins. Those men loved the prince and the ferocity of the battle showed that.

The rebellion of the year 63 was crushed in a matter of hours.

King Elfwine assumed his throne with a heavy heart. At sixty, he was hale and hardy and ready for the challenges of his rule. His beloved wife, Magda, remained a strong presence by his side. And after the unequivocal victory in the uprising, Theomund had been elevated in the eyes of both Rohirrim and Dunlending.

Father and son set about trying to settle the old feuds once and for all. It was an effort of supreme diplomacy, backed with the arm of Rohan's military might, but both sides were eventually appeased.

Theomund's son, Caeldred, was born in the year 67, and Elfwine doted much upon his grandchild. The aging King took every opportunity to spend time with the child, reading to him as a babe and, as the boy grew up, taking him out for long rides and fishing trips.

Lothiriel of Dol Amroth lived out her reclining years surrounded by her family, all of whom stayed close by. Wynohael spent many hours with her, carefully writing down every one of her mother's memories so that they would not be lost. Hanild, Finduilas, Theodora, and Eltherial and their families were also about, filling Meduseld with activity.

In the year 71, the Lady Lothiriel caught a sickness of the lungs, and not all of her remedies were able to fight it off. Her spirit took sail out of the Mark for once and for all.

Elfwine's united Mark was rife with tensions and distrust, but they gave way in time, as neighbors married and barriers fell away. That is not to say there were not clashes and skirmishes, but they were few and easily dealt with.

In the year 90, Elfwine gave up his throne to Theomund and retired to his library, where his books awaited him. Barahir had sent many copies of rare tomes that he had found along to his cousin, and Elfwine wanted nothing more than to spend time with those musty pages.

Eldarion still visited, though it was painful for him. The heir of Gondor had grown into a tall, strong man, and though there were the faint signs of age lines upon his handsome face, time had left him largely untouched. It was something Elfwine teased him about, but Eldarion did not find it particularly amusing.

The one hundredth year of the fourth age dawned and it pleased the doddering Elfwine to have lived to see the year come. In all, he was a very happy man who was very happy with his life. He had achieved peace in the Mark, he had lived to see Elessar bring peace to Gondor, he was content.

When his strength finally faded, he took to his bed with only minimal regret. Eldarion came as soon as he was informed, nearly flying across the miles that separated them. And he sat beside his
old friend and they talked of things past and present and they laughed.

"...and when we got back, my father was ready to skin me!" Elfwine recalled, remembering the look on his father's face when he had told him the three heirs had gone off to visit the Dunlendings.

Eldarion nodded, grinning. "We were responsible for most of your father's grey hairs, I am sure." He shook his head. "It's a wonder he didn't lock us in a dungeon."

Elfwine laughed and coughed. "I'm sure he wanted to. Oh we had some times...."

We had some times....

Elboron's final words echoed in the silence. They were both sure they felt him there, between them, smiling with them.

"Dar...."

"Yes, Win?"

Elfwine reached out and patted his hand. "You think you'll ever find that ship you dreamed of? The one that would take you into the West?"

Eldarion looked wistful and he sighed in longing. "I still dream of it, Win. I hope it's real."

"I hope so too...." Elfwine's smile lit up the room. "That's an adventure I wish I could share...."

Eldarion's heart hurt and his eyes stung. "You and Boro will be with me ... if I ever make it there."

The old man on the bed laughed dryly. "I meant for real, you old poet." He let out a long sigh. "I have loved my life, Dar. Every day of it. This.... This isn't so bad."

Eldarion smiled through his tears and nodded. "You are loved ... by us all."

"What more can any man ask for?"

Eldarion nodded and took his friend's frail hand in his. There was an awkward silence and he had nothing to fill it with.

Some time later, with Magda, Theomund and most of the rest of Elfwine's family crowded into the room, Elfwine murmured his words of love and benediction. Then he fell into a deep sleep and, after a time, took his final ride, leaving behind a legacy of peace for the people he had served and loved so long.
Epilogue, Eldarion

Chapter Summary

The tale of Eldarion, after the events of Heirs of Arda

For three years after the death of Elfwine, Eldarion was not seen by men.

The heir of Gondor came out of Meduseld after leaving the grieving family, and came across a sight that drove a barbed spear through his heart. Three boys, two with dark hair, one with a fair mane, playing outside Edoras. They were, inevitably, Elfwine's grandchildren, or possibly children from Dol Amroth or even Ithilien that were being fostered in Edoras—the tradition had become popular—but that was not what Gondor's prince saw.

He saw three boys, strangers in the world, in search of glory and grand adventures and unaware that boyhood did not last forever. Eldarion suddenly could not breathe. Time had stolen from him all that which mattered and he could not cope with the agony. He took to horse and left Rohan, never to return. He did not go to Arnor, which he had been shepherding for decades, but instead went into the forests of Ithilien and vanished.

Eldarion ceased to be and Whisper emerged.

Alone with his grief and his loss, the prince went deep into himself in those three years, seeking and finding a strength he had never known he possessed. Seemingly, with the last anchor to his childhood severed, Eldarion was at last able to truly grow up.

He returned to Arnor in 103 and dug into the chore of reforging the northern kingdom with boundless energy. He had learned to plan and organize from Elfwine and Elboron had taught him everything he needed to know about leading men. It was a task of epic proportions, but he never once paused or faltered for seventeen years.

As has been written before, King Elessar felt his strength eroding and in the year 120, he summoned his son home to pass him the crown.

Eldarion gazed sadly at his father, knowing that arguing was futile. And loss was something he had made a home for in the hollow of his heart. But there was some part of him that could not yet let go.

"Father.... Can you not wait a few years? You are strong and healthy yet. Let me take the burden of the crown from you. Give yourself a few years of idleness with mother, at least...."

Elessar, gray of hair and much reduced in stature, smiled fondly at his son. "I thank you, Dar, but such time is not mine. The years are rapidly catching up to me, I fear."

Eldarion squared his shoulders and nodded, moving to hug his father. "Thank you, father, for all you gave me. And all you taught me."
Elessar hugged his son tightly, clapping him on the back. "You have always made me proud, my son. Gondor is yours, and I know she is safe with you."

There was a great deal more that Eldarion wanted to say, but there was not truly anything else that needed to be said. Though he had his father had never been very good about speaking to each other, their feelings had never been hard to determine.

The love between them was too heavy for words anyhow.

And so Elessar took the Gift of Man, as has been written. And afterwards, Arwen made ready to depart Gondor forever. She spent time saying goodbye to all of her children and did her best to set their hearts at ease.

Eldarion's pleas were as futile with her as they had been with his father. She allowed him only to escort her as far as the border and then she insisted they say goodbye.

He clung to her like the little boy he had once been and squeezed his eyes shut, as if by doing so he could block out the truth of her leaving.

"Always my little star," she murmured in Elvish.

"I love you, mother," he told her and then he made himself let her go. He turned his horse and rode back to his kingdom, the hollow in his heart that much deeper.

Eldarion ruled Gondor with the same mixture of compassion and strength his father had always demonstrated. The peace he had inherited he made endure, staying in constant contact with his vassals and the King of Rohan. The Haradrim were quiet and Mordor remained barren and empty.

The matter of a wife and heirs was a difficult one, for his heart would truly only ever belong to one person, no matter how long Elboron had been dead. Eldarion met and courted one of Barahir's descendents, and he grew very fond of her. But he did not deceive her about the fidelity of his heart, and he was relieved to find that she was accepting of that. After all, the romantic tales of Elboron and his princely love were family treasures.

The two were wed in 135 and their son was born but a year later. He was named Elboron and he brought to Eldarion a tremendous sense of peace. The King of Gondor was often found sitting in the babe's room, in the dark, just staring at the crib with a happy smile upon his face.

King Eldarion did many great works during his reign, but he easily conceded his father's rulership had been greater. He would laugh when comparisons were drawn in his presence and ask who exactly could hope to compare to Aragorn Elessar?

Elboron grew into a strong and thoughtful leader, and Eldarion was proud. He was also aware that the bloodline that had bred so true in him had not done so with his son. His heir would live a long time, but not so long as his father or grandfather.

That was a loss Eldarion was quite certain he could not take.

He chose the year 200 to surrender his throne to his son. Elboron was, at that time, already starting to grey. Eldarion's own hair had barely begun to turn, a fact many were regarding with wonder and jealousy.

In the year 201, he decided to abandon Gondor for good. He and his son bid each other a warm farewell and then Eldarion, no longer King, struck off west. He skirted the northern border of Rohan, staying well away from areas that would bring up memories of innocent days of careless fun. His course was unspecific, his purpose more in the journey than the destination.
His wandering steps, though, brought him to the faded glory of Lorien, and he stood before Cerin Amroth and knew he was at the place his mother's grace had come to its end.

Rather than sorrow, he felt peace, and he laid down upon the green grasses and closed his eyes and slept. And in his dreams he saw a great ship awaiting him, which filled his heart with joy.

When he awoke, it was nightfall. And he was not alone.

There were two figures silhouetted in the moonlight, and he knew them immediately to be elf-kind. And more. Their identical faces bore too strong a resemblance to his mother to be anyone but Elrohir and Elladan.

Their smiles put him at ease.

"Your wandering steps have carried you far from home," Elladan told him serenely.

"Please forgive my brother. He feels obligated to speak in prose," Elrohir remarked, helping Eldarion up. "We've been waiting for you."

"Waiting...? For me? But how could you know I would come here? I didn't even know...."

Eldarion had spent decades among men and had forgotten much of the more subtle workings of the world.

"She told us you would come, years ago. She told us to watch for you, that she would guide you to her." Elladan shot his brother a warning glance, daring him to make another sarcastic comment.

Elrohir rolled his eyes. "He did, actually, sense you coming. He's very proud of himself."

Eldarion laughed a little, still disoriented and confused. "But ... why? What is this all about, uncle?"

"We have lingered long to catch the last ship from these shores." Elladan remarked.

Elrohir sighed, tucking a braid behind his ear. "We've been waiting for you, nephew. I imagine there has been a ship in your dreams, eh?"

Eldarion's heart began to hammer in his chest. "Yes...." Oh the longing within him was almost enough to make him weep. "But ... is it not forbidden?"

"Not forbidden, just ... restricted," Elrohir conceded.

"Do you think your mother would not bestow what grace she could upon you? All of our family who went into the West, never to see her again, they all anxiously await the arrival of her firstborn."

Eldarion's heart filled, and at last that aching void within him subsided. His weathered face split into a boyish grin, the likes of which had not been seen in many a year. "Then, pray tell, what are we waiting for?"

His uncles laughed heartily at that, for they were still boys themselves. The three traveled quickly south and then west through the Gap of Rohan. Their path became a familiar one to Eldarion, who recalled fleeing along the banks of the Isen to escape an insurmountable pain.

In some ways, he was still doing so. But this journey was not just about escape. It was about realizing a dream.
They arrived at the inlet where the Angren emptied into the sea—the very spot where Eldarion had stopped all those years ago—and found there a ship waiting for them. It was the ship that the son of Elessar had dreamed of since boyhood.

With a great enthusiastic smile, Eldarion followed his uncles aboard. The years of loss, the decades of responsibility, they all fell away. He was off on another adventure, and his beloved friends were with him in his heart. All was just as it should be.

So the last of the three friends departed Arda forever. His life after reaching the White Shores was one of happiness and peace, and while it did not last forever, it was a long and wonderful life.

However, as happy as he was, and as content, he never again knew such happiness as he had when the heir of Ithilien and he had kissed on one lightning-torn night in a place that now no longer exists.

The End

End Notes

This story was written and posted back in 2004 on FF.net. This version is edited and cleaned up. A few slight alterations to the text have been made.

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