

The Long Way Home

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Prolog: Prologue

The Long Way Home – Prologue

January the 18th, Year 3019 of the Third Age.

Caras Galadhon glittered in the evening sun as Boromir, son of Denethor, Captain and High Warden of the White Tower, returned from his aimless rambles to the camp their hosts had set up for them on the green lawn, frown firmly in place on his forehead. He didn't like it... didn't like it one bit – that they were staying here, among those Elves, under the close eye of Lady Galadriel... that Aragorn was listening to her, seeking her counsel... that he wanted to take the Ring to Mordor instead of using it like he should, betraying his weakness of character and lack of determination... that he should have claims to the throne of Gondor... he shook his head, then froze as upon rounding the last bend, he was greeted by a sight he had not expected.

A little bit away from the other companions, Aragorn sat on a bench, talking quietly to the woman next to him, whom Boromir had never seen or met, but who looked like she belonged to his kinsfolk from the North – dark-haired, tall and proud. Who was she? What was she doing here, in Lórien of all places, among the Elves? Suspicion immediately rose inside him, and he took a quiet breath and shoved the objections his honour insisted to make aside, then continued in his path, slower and more careful than before. They had not yet noticed him, and maybe he could catch a few words of their conversation, discover the matter they were so earnestly discussing... after all, he had a right to know where they were going and when, be Aragorn their leader a thousand times.

They noticed him when their voices were no more than a mere murmur in his ear, and both stood as he approached them, openly now, quelling his disappointment. "Aragorn."

The frown on Aragorn's face came and went so quickly that he was not sure he really had seen it, but the tension lingering in the air between them was only too real, even though this was neither the time nor the place to act upon it.

"Boromir."

He was the first to look away, his eyes flitting to the woman next to the Ranger, whose gaze was much too perceptive for his taste, and Aragorn caught it. "May I present, Arnuilas, daughter of Afreloth, from the North. This is Boromir, son of Denethor, of Minas Tirith."

She curtseyed, without the flourish and elegance of the women at his father's court, and he bowed, but that did not keep him from examining her carefully, nor her from regarding him with equal intensity. She had no claims to Elven beauty, but there was intelligence shining from her eyes, and a knowledge of the world that made him rather uncomfortable only a day after Galadriel's interrogation. Nevertheless, he forced a tight smile to his lips. "Pleased to meet you."

She returned it, more naturally than he. "And I to meet you. You have come a long way from the South."

"As have you from the North." He paused for a moment, considering if he should leave them to their debate, but he was still curious, and sure that Aragorn would not give him the answers that he desired – or at least not ones he could trust. Maybe she would be more forthcoming. "What brings you to Lórien? For you are the first of the

race of Men besides my companion whom I have seen here."

She tilted his head, pondering his question for a moment before she answered. "I was sent from Rivendell by Elrond to scout the Pass of Caradhras for the Fellowship. I was wounded and left here, while my companion returned to give news of our discoveries."

He hid his surprise at her words and nodded. "You know of our mission then."

"She does," Aragorn answered softly, "even though even here, it is unwise to speak of it without need."

"As you were doing before I arrived." It was only a guess, but it made Aragorn frown again, either from the surprising sharpness of his voice or because he was startled that he could draw even such easy conclusions. Boromir grit his teeth.

"As we were," Aragorn agreed, "but not without need. The likeliest course for us to follow will be down the Great River, either on foot or by boat, and we will need to know how far the enemy has advanced on the Eastern shore, or maybe even on the Western."

"And she is to be our scout." The doubts in his voice darkened Arnuias' face as she stepped forward, answering with more intensity in her voice than really necessary.

"One of them. The Galadhrim are sending theirs as well, but they will need all of their forces to defend their borders soon, and I am not one to sit idly now that my wounds have healed."

He nodded, unwilling to respond to the obvious challenge in her tone, as it would only serve to heighten the tension between him and Aragorn to doubt her abilities now, but part of him still wondered. *Are the Rangers of the North so desperate that they have to send out their women now?*

Aragorn nodded, intent on defusing the tension. "I take it that I will hear of you, Arnuias."

"With luck, yes." Boromir could hear that it was only half of a joke, but her words, spoken in that soft soprano, reminded him too much of the battle-worn soldiers he had commanded in Gondor that he could even smile at them.

"Stay safe, then."

Arnuias nodded, clasping Aragorn's arm like a man would, and tapping his shoulder briefly, before she pulled back. "And you."

The ranger departed, turning to follow the path that led to their encampment, and Boromir had already started to leave himself when he noticed that she was waiting for a farewell from him.

"Do you not have to leave?" he asked rather harshly, and she nodded, stepping back from him. Surely he had scared her off – but at the moment, he did not think that he was fit for company. There was too much to ponder and brood over, and she would only distract his thoughts. They needed to come to a decision, and soon, and if Aragorn was not the one to make it, then it had to be someone else. Most likely he. He had no faith in the strength of Elves, Dwarves and Hobbits and...

"My Lord?"

The woman had obviously spoken to him and expected a reply, and he forced his attention back on her. "Forgive me, I was... distracted."

She did not smile, only gazed at him with an expression in his eyes that told him he had given too much of his thoughts away, even though he had not spoken. "Farewell, Arnuias of Arnor."

"Farewell, My Lord." She smiled tightly and then turned, striding away determinedly over the short winter grass, Elven dress rustling quietly, a sound that faded in the

ever-present voice of golden leaves.

Kapitel 1: Chapter One

The Long Way Home – Chapter One

February the 26th, Year 3019 of the Third Age.

She saw the Orcs, she heard the Horn and the vicious clashing of steel, and yet there was nothing she could do about it. Their foes were everywhere, surrounding her hiding place in the ruins of a forsaken settlement, and she only dared to peek out, seeing them pass her by, reinforcing their allies up the Rauros at Parth Galen. She was of no use dead, she knew that, reminded herself of that fact every half minute as she watched out and listened, but it did nothing to quiet her feelings of guilt and cowardice as she sat in safety while friends died. It had to be friends – everyone attacked by Orcs these days was, or at least very nearly.

And then there was silence, descending upon her like a thick, heavy blanket. The Orcs were gone, had left for the Eryn Mui to the West, the fight had abated, and the Horn had ceased to call out to her with its own magic. She only heard the deep roar of the Falls of Rauros upstream, not far from the forgotten Númenorean ruins she had taken cover in, and carefully crept out, looking around, albeit she still held herself low amidst the crumbling walls. It was almost as if nothing had happened, and yet... yet she felt that evil had proceeded at Parth Galen, that blood had been shed, and not only that of Orcs. She hoped that it had not been the Fellowship under attack... but hope was not what would tell her. She would have to travel upstream, to climb the steep stairs, and take a look, find out if there were any survivors.

She turned around to face the small camp that had been her home for the previous weeks, but it was well hidden and even if Orc stragglers would find it, there was nothing hidden in it she couldn't do without... and hesitation wouldn't bring her the clarity she desired. Pulling her travel-worn cloak over her head, she begun her way towards the falls, always keeping in the shadows of the crumbled settlement, then finally leaving them to hide in the bushes lining the riverside, her fingers locked around the hilt of her dagger. Even the birds had left the shores of the great Anduin as they felt Sauron's evil approach, and only the gulping sounds of slowly running water broke through the heavy, menacing silence besides her quiet footsteps. She had travelled both Eriador and Rhovanion, but not even the Icebay of Forochel in the depths of winter had seemed so completely and utterly deserted as this marshland, and she suppressed a shiver. Something *bad* had happened here, but she quelled the urge to hurry, to break her cover and speed her steps – Orcs could still be near, and an arrow would kill her as surely as a sword. That she saw no trace of them as she observed her surroundings did not mean that they were not there, watching her, and... she froze as her wandering gaze turned towards the marsh at the feet of the great Falls of Rauros. A boat floated upon the calm, slow waters, guideless and seemingly empty, but even from her vantage point, she could see that it was of Elven origins, or it would never have passed the Falls unscathed. Aragorn had said that the Fellowship might travel in boats from Lothlórien, and her heart nearly stopped, but she cursed herself for the foolish sentiment – there was no time for these things. If one of them had tried to flee in it... she quickly and quietly broke through the thick bushes she had hidden in and slid down the bank to the narrow, muddy shore of the Anduin.

She was lucky that the marshes into which the Great River broadened after falling down from the lake had not much of a current, or otherwise, the boat would have been long gone by the time she reached the water. Despite the time she had lost in her approach, she still had a chance of reaching it, and she took a quick glance at her borrowed elven-made dagger. Its edges only shone lightly, and she decided she could take the risk – a rash decision fuelled by her own guilt that she had not been there to help during the earlier battle. In one moment, she had divested of most of her weapons and her mail and dived into the water.

It was so cold from the first melting snow from the North that she nearly forgot to swim, but quickly discovered that it kept her muscles from clenching, with every stroke hoping that the forces of the enemy would not spot her in the calm water. She allowed the weak current to help her, let herself be drawn into the middle of the stream so she could reach the boat, but without its help, she would never have made it. It seemed to sense her purpose, because it gently drew nearer until she could reach out with her hand and grab the frame, and did not topple as she pulled herself up, taking a look inside. The effort was nearly too much for her cold, clenched muscles with the additional weight of her heavy, soaked cloathes, and she nearly lost her grip again as she saw who lay inside the boat, put to eternal rest with the broken weapons of his enemies at his feet. She knew this man, had met him in the golden gardens of Lothlórien a month ago, the memory hazy and distant like those of all mortals returning from that land of magic... seeing his noble features now in the harsh, grey light of the approaching evening, blood staining his tunic and death darkening his face... it was a shock.

She barely managed to hold on the wooden frame, but dipped under water, struggling to return to the surface as the current was picking up and she had to cling to the boat so she would not be swept away from it. But even as she coughed and spit, her mind was racing. He was dead. He certainly looked very dead, not only because of the dire wounds to his chest, but also because he had been laid to rest in this boat by his companions. But the experience of long years of fighting in the North, and more, a hollow feeling of foreboding whispering in her stomach, made her check. She pulled herself upwards once more, ignoring how exposed she felt and grateful that the boat did not even tilt, then tried to still her own breathing, her own racing pulse, to feel his on his neck, and thought she detected a faint fluttering behind her fingertips. It was enough to make her pull out her wet dagger, dry it on the grey fabric of his cloak and hold it in front of his mouth and nose. He was breathing; it was unmistakeable, but as grateful as she was that he was still alive, that his friends had been wrong, on another level, she hated the thought, because it posed a whole new set of threats and problems for her. How to get him to the shore? She could not carry him through the water swimming, and she saw no paddles around... so she would have to direct the boat out of the river swimming. It was her only chance.

She slid back into the water, groaning as its clenching cold hit her again, and tried to steer the small ship to the shore. If it had been anything else than Elven, she would never have made it, but the magic in it, or maybe the magic of its builders, made it sense her purpose, and it slid gracefully through the water, nearly without her guiding hand. Even so, it was an arduous task to return to the shore, and by the time she crawled up the muddy bank and pulled the boat's keel up so it would not be swept away, she was thoroughly exhausted. She pushed the feeling away, just as she tried to do with the thought of the rocky, debris-clustered way up to her hideout as she regarded the heavy man before her. He was wet, and it was probably a miracle he

hadn't drowned during his way down the Rauros, Elven boat or not... she halted her pointlessly racing thoughts and checked his pulse and breath again, just to be sure, and then carefully pulled him onto the bank, trying not to moan as her arms and back and legs protested. She would run out of time quickly – this was far too loud and obvious, her small sounds of pain not helping the matter, and she had to decide what to do, and now. His cloak would have to go, just as his chainmail and his doublet... and anything else that was not completely necessary to keep him alive, or she would never be able to drag him up to her camp.

Quickly, she scanned the contents of the boat and cut his clothes open around his wounds with her dagger, then stripped him down to his shirt, his pants and his boots, putting everything that she did not intend to keep into the small ship – his now damaged, useless garments, his gear, the trophies his friends had given to him for his final rest. She was glad that her dagger was Elven, for, though with a little bit of effort, it cut through the tightly-woven rings of the mail, allowing her to pull it off without moving him too much... considering what was to come, it seemed a futile effort, but one she was determined to take. Only when she saw the the broken halves of his horn hesitated she, recognizing it from their short meeting in Caras Galadhon when it had hung on his belt, and then decided to take it with her. It seemed to be of worth to him... and it was not heavy enough to hinder her overtly in her endeavour.

She wrapped it into the grey Elven cloak he had been wearing and stuffed it into her belt before she gave the boat a last kick and sent it back into the current, then knelt behind him and pulled him into a half sitting position against her body, threading her arms around his chest. For a moment, she hesitated, nearly overwhelmed by his weight and her pain, but then she grit her teeth and mustered her courage to carry on. She had no choice if her other efforts should not be in vain and she was very determined that they should not be. Even if he was to die, if they were to be shot by an Orc arrow, it would not be because of her lack of trying to save him. She pulled herself up and backed away, up the hill, staying as much in the shadows of the crumbling Western settlement as she could manage without leaving her course. Her muscles screamed after only a few steps, and then there was the risk of doing further damage to his body by moving him... but it could not be helped. She needed to get him out of the open, to relative safety, before she could tend to his wounds, and there was only one way to do it.

Though she had turned upstream from her hiding spot to head to Parth Galen, the boat had carried her far from the half collapsed cellar her camp was settled in, making her way not only tedious but also long, but she dared not rest too often. The Orcs were not gone long enough for her to feel safe in plain sight, and even hidden, she would not dare to light a fire for fear of being spotted from the Eastern coast. Though she did not give much for Orcs' marksmanship, even they could get lucky, especially in the dark.

What seemed to her like an eternity as she bit her lip and summoned all her strength was possibly not much more than an hour until she had carried Boromir into the cellar, rested him upon her own makeshift bed and cut his shirt off his body. Several arrows had struck him, standing out black and vile from his pale, now reddening flesh, and she was only glad that the damage to his lungs could not be too severe – he was still breathing, after all. How he was still alive was a mystery, and she was not sure that, even with all her arts and the experience of years of war, he would stay such.

White and cold as he was, she was sure that he had lost too much blood, but for now, it had stopped to flow. At the moment, it was only a matter of keeping his weak,

rattling breaths going and his faint heart beating until she could remove the shafts and, hopefully, the tips that had entrenched themselves deep into his right chest and shoulder. She had to get her weapons that she had left on the upper shore, and then start to treat him.

She turned him to lie on his left, uninjured side to prevent him from suffocating in his present, senseless state, and then quickly rummaged through her pack, searching for the Elven draughts she had been handed for cases of emergency, until she found the one she needed. He was unconscious, and making him swallow would be a dangerous thing, so she just had to hope that it would work without it.

Carefully, she pulled open his mouth and dropped some of it inside, and to her unmeasurable relief, he took a deep, rattling breath, and gained a little bit of colour, though she could not very well discern it in the dim light of the cellar. Despite these helpful signs, she did not feel comfortable leaving him, but she had to – her things lying out there would surely attract attention from any sentient creature passing by, and what was even more important was that without her sword and bow, she was completely unarmed save the Elven dagger she was carrying more to detect Orcs than to actually fight them with it.

The cloak from Lórien she had pulled from her belt caught her attention, and even though it was dripping wet, she picked it up, slung it over her shoulders and streaked the hood over her head, hoping it would render her invisible through its magic.

Being able to walk without dragging a tall, heavy man behind her made her feel light and fast despite her trembling, aching muscles, and she quickly reached the shore and gathered her things. Relieved, she noticed that they had been undisturbed, all of them still there, and in the growing darkness and beginning rain, she hastened to return. She had to remove the arrows as long there was at least a little light for her to see her hands and his wounds, and hopefully the shower would take care of the rather tracks she had left when she had dragged Boromir to her hideout.

She returned to find him still on his side, Elven draught dripping from his mouth, and breathing, and she swiftly knelt besides him in the dwindling winter evening light, turning him on the back again.

The cuts and wounds the arrows had left were narrow, and they had managed to pierce through the chainmail... with any luck, the heads were small and tapered, and she could pull them back out the way they had come, rather than pushing the arrows through... carefully. Very carefully.

If he was not dead yet, he had not lost too much blood, no major vessels were injured, but with just one wrong movement, she could easily accomplish that. *Absolutely no pressure*, she thought with more than a hint of sarcasm that was completely misplaced at the moment, and tried to steady her trembling hand, tried to quiet her aching muscles. *Slowly... and carefully.*

She did not want to listen to the sickening sound the wood and steel made as they slid through his flesh, and when the arrow had come out completely, she breathed a sigh of relief as she saw that the head was still attached to it and had not come off during the process. *One done, three to go.* She tried to work as quickly as possible, for she knew that her already protesting body would soon cease his cooperation entirely, and then, she could abandon any ideas of him living the night. The thought that she had to carry him down to the water to lay him to rest again at the bosom of the river made her concentrate harder, work faster, determined that he would leave this place on his own two feet, to keep him alive by the sheer force of her will. She had taken the additional burden of carrying his boots with her, so he would do well to use them!

She removed the arrow embedded not an inch away from the first, reluctantly admitting that this bunch of Orcs were better marksmen than their kin in the North, and then moved on to the one stuck in his lower abdomen that came out more reluctantly than its brothers, but nevertheless it did. The last one was on his thigh, just below where the edge of his chainmail had protected him, and she carefully tugged it out of the flesh, for this one had penetrated deeper than the last. She supposed that, even if he were under the care of better healers than herself, he would retain a limp, that was, if he lived.

Blood had flown freely as she removed the arrows, but not so much that she feared he would bleed to death in her arms, and that he was unconscious helped the matter. Though he did occasionally groan, these were weak sounds of pain, and he did not thrash or move as she had other patients seen do, making her work easier and limiting the loss of blood.

Her next move was, again, taking some Elven medicine out of her pouch, some that would clean the wounds, taking care of any poison on the arrows, and burned as fire, as she knew from personal and very painful experience. Only a few droplets made his flesh smoke, and she breathed deeply through her mouth to avoid the choking scent, but then it was over, and still... still his chest heaved in the now dark cellar, still she heard his soft, nearly indistinguishable breathing over the sound of the Falls. Still.

She stood up and cleaned her hands and arms, as well as the cloth she had used, and pulled out a fresh roll of bandages, glad that she had taken enough of them to tend to her own wounds if the need arose. She used nearly all of them in bandaging his wounds, and then she set back, fighting against the exhaustion that threatened to overtake her now. There was nothing she could do, if he lived the night or not was up to him and those Elven healers she had met in Lórien, who had made the draughts she had just used, infusing them with their magic in a way she could neither understand nor reproduce.

When the deed was done, when only the stench of blood remained and she could sit back, urging her eyes to stay open, she almost thought that she had preferred it when her craft was needed, when there were things she could do, when her hands were in motion, no matter how disgusting her duties were... now, she was useless, just as useless as during the battle at Parth Galen, and she keenly felt it while she watched out from the only exit of the cellar, invisible in her Elven cloak save the times when she moved to check on him.

She longed to hasten back to the glade at the top of the falls, to carry out her initial plan of looking for survivors, but she did not dare to leave him alone for such a long time, and knew that in the moonless dark of the night, she would miss the clues to tell of the fate of the Fellowship. All trails were gone now with the rain settling in over the river valley, and there was no use in hastening up the stairs looking for injured friends when she risked the man she had found might die for her neglect. Some of them... some of them had to be alive and at least reasonably uninjured, as they had been able to lay him to rest – but the thought was a weak consolation, and did little to assuage her fears and her concern as to the state of their cause.

The fever set on a few hours later, and she could not keep her guard in the ruins, but had to return to him, cooling his head and his feet with water from the river, dripping Elven draught into his mouth and trying to give him comfort while he murmured incoherently, fear gripping his unconscious mind. He was frightened... he spoke of failure in the few words she could distinguish, of Minas Tirith... but there was only so much she could do while his body fought against the Orc poisoning raging in his body.

Kapitel 2: Chapter Two

Chapter Two

February the 30th, Year 3019 of the Third Age.

It was two days until he leapt from feverish delirium into actual sleep, and another one and a half until he finally woke up at dawn, opening his eyes and instantly closing them again as the dim light blinded him, then trying to raise his arm – his right. He groaned as the pain hit him, and that was what alerted her, made her rush to his side and grab his left, uninjured hand.

"Boromir," whispered she, and his hurt, tense body relaxed a little bit when he heard that she was no Orc. She could see him take a deep, rattling breath, composing himself, before he slowly blinked, allowing his eyes to accommodate to light again.

"Ar... Arnuiilas." His voice sounded harsh and raspy, but she smiled nevertheless down at him and pressed his fingers carefully, glad that he had recognized her even in his state and after so short a meeting.

"Yes..." He started to stir, and her fingers flew to his uninjured shoulder and arm. "Do not move. You were wounded severely, and you need to rest."

He started to talk, but when he did, coughed violently, throwing up blood, but to her relief, it was not fresh and red, but rather of a more brownish tinge. Elven healing could do a lot, but she was no Elf, and if his lung was lacerated again, he would be closer to death than to life without her being able to help.

"Carefully, carefully..." whispered she as she cleaned his mouth and chin with a clean cloth, and then sat back next to him. "Do you want to drink? I did not dare to give you any water..."

He nodded only slightly, she noted with relief, and pulled her water bag from her bundle. "There. Only small sips, no matter how thirsty you are. You should not move more than is necessary, and I do not want you to cough again."

It was only a trickle of water she poured into his mouth, and he faithfully swallowed, then another sip and another, until he raised his hand and she stopped, smiling.

"There. That did work quite nicely. How do you feel?"

"It hurts." His voice sounded stronger and more natural now that he had drunk.

"That is to be expected after the arrows you took – and the fever you caught."

"Fever?" He eyed her with alarm. "How long... have I..."

"It is three and a half days since your battle against the Orcs."

Though she knew that he had to be exhausted, tired and weak after his ordeal, she saw alarm creep onto his features, alarm and fear. "What about..."

"Your companions?"

He nodded.

"I fear that I do not know. I was on my way up the path when I discovered you, and then I could not leave you long enough to search for them or any trails leading to their whereabouts."

She saw the pain in his eyes, but it was mingled with the knowledge of how dire his situation had been, how close he had come to death, things that she had not planned on revealing so early in his convalescence. But now that he knew... she shrugged nearly motionlessly. "At least some of them must be alive. They put you to rest in a boat and sent you down the Rauros."

Immediately, his face lost all expression and he stared at her with wide eyes, motioning to sit up. "They... they thought... me dead?"

"Yes."

After a moment of tension, he sank back on her blankets, and she sighed with relief as he took the strain off his weak body. "Maybe it was for the best," he murmured, and she pulled his left hand into hers.

"What was for the best?"

He looked up at her not like the man and hero of Gondor that he used to be, but more like one that had lost everything that was dear to him, and now doubted the values and morals he had adhered to before. "That they left me. The Orcs... they took the Hobbits. Aragorn would have been forced to make a gruesome choice, had he known that I was alive."

She pressed his fingers, trying to infuse him with a confidence she did not feel herself. "And it all turned out for the best. You were found, the worst is over, and by now I am sure that you will live."

When he looked up at her, she found that her words were only a small consolation for him, and asked herself what had happened to him that at least part of this proud man had obviously preferred to die. The concern she had pushed back when the fever abated now returned in force when she watched him carefully as he lay on his bed, eyes closed, deep lines of pain etched onto his noble face. *Did he still prefer to die?*, she wondered, but as she knew not and had no intention of asking him, she just shrugged and filed the thought away for later consideration.

Soon after their short conversation, after she had given him more water, exhaustion took its toll and he fell asleep again, leaving her to ponder their situation. During the long nights while she had watched over him and tried to keep the fever at bay, she had been focused on the present and had pushed away all thoughts of the next steps; it had not even been sure that he would survive, how could she plan ahead?

Now, things appeared quite differently, and she could allow herself to think. The more she did, the clearer it became that they could not stay here in the wilds. She had only taken provisions for one, and as soon as Boromir would start to eat, which, she hoped, would be after he woke up next, they would dwindle faster than she cared for. Yes, she could hunt, but with the shadow creeping in from the East, most wildlife had left the shores of the Great River and travelled westwards, away from the disturbances of Orcs and shadows overhead. Furthermore, she would have to leave him alone to hunt, and she was loath to do that – he was without weapons or armour, and still weak as a child, though she would certainly not tell him so, lest she injure the pride he hopefully had still left. If Orcs, or only a wild wolf came upon him while he was alone, he was as good as dead.

No, they had to leave as soon as he – or she – could drag him forward, but the question where they would go remained. They could turn west for Rohan, follow the river south to Gondor, or travel upstream to return to Lórien. Without asking him, she knew which of these options he preferred, but using her own boat to turn south was, despite the fact that it would be the easiest route for him, the one she loathed most. The South was at war, and the Anduin was the border between Mordor and Gondor – and both sides would be likely to shoot first, and ask questions later. No, she did not fancy being killed by one of the brave men of Minas Tirith, and the prospect of tramping through the Mouths of the Entwash with an injured man likely to catch an infection from all the dirt was just as appalling. If she had any say in this – and she intended to have a lot to say, as he would in all likelihood not survive without her –

they would turn North and retrace their steps to Lórien, travelling part by boat and part on foot, depending on the current of the river and how well she was able to paddle against it. She could then leave him in the care of the Elven healers and head to the northern border, helping their allies to fight the Orcs pouring out from Moria, and then... she shrugged softly. The war would be over, one way or the other, and depending on the outcome, she would either return North, or die in Lórien's last stand.

It was not the most cheerful prospect she had ever faced, but then again, she had been living and fighting in Eriador for decades now, and death was always a possibility. Too many Ranger camps had been raided by Orcs, too many of her brothers not returned from their travels, that she could still indulge in the childish belief that she of all the good, honest people of Middle Earth was the one infallible and immortal.

She must have dozed off, despite the dark thoughts intruding, because when she was startled by a quiet rustling of cloth, her eyes snapped open and she looked around, searching frantically for the intruder. Only when she noticed that she was alone with Boromir, and that his dark grey eyes were trained upon her, she allowed herself to relax. The few rays of sun peeking in through the remnants of a staircase had not wandered far yet, and nobody had been here. She allowed her breath to flow out of her lungs and pushed her aching body up to tend to her patient.

"I am sorry, I did not intend to wake you up," murmured he as soon as she reached him, but she shook her head and smiled.

"In truth, I should not have slept at all, so do not worry."

His creased brow and his thoughtful gaze were enough proof that he would not take this advice to heart, but there was nothing she could do about it. Healing his body was a task that most likely was beyond her abilities, and his mind was something he had to take care of himself, but this fact could not keep her from worrying about him. Too often had she seen strong and brave men and women succumb to the darkness that came with an injury and the accompanying feelings of helplessness, and with him, there seemed to be guilt lingering beneath his composed features as well.

She nevertheless smiled, grabbing the water bag and a bundle of *lembas*, tightly wrapped in their leaves, when he spoke up again. "I can do this myself, you do not have to help me."

She shook her head. "With one arm? Hardly. You would choke and cough, and my efforts in dressing your wounds would all be in vain."

He was neither in a state to argue nor to hinder her, and even he noticed that when he tried to raise his left hand to her forearm and it fell down heavily onto her limb. His cheeks started to burn, she could see it even in the dim light, but she valiantly tried to ignore it while he swallowed the drip she poured from her water bag, and then she unwrapped the piece of elven bread and handed it to him, hoping that it would help to preserve his dignity. "Here. Try this."

"Thank you." His movements were painfully slow as he drew his hand back from her arm and raised the bread to his mouth, chewing carefully, while she turned around to store the water away, desperately hoping for something else to do that could serve to distract her from his aching motions. There was no fire to stoke, no food to prepare, no weapons to clean – she had done all of this and much more while he was unconscious, anything to take her mind off the creeping fear that soon, she would be alone in this godforsaken stretch of land just south the Eryn Mui.

After he had finished breaking his fast she turned around and sat next to him again.

"How is your breathing?"

He inhaled deeply. "Hurts a bit, but I can manage it."

"Good. I imagine you barely feel it with all the other pains you can focus on."

She saw the crease on his brow deepen until he realized that it had been sarcasm speaking and his lips curled, at least a little bit. "I will last."

"Yes, you will. I hope you do realize how incredibly lucky you have been." He nodded under her stern gaze, though what prompted him to do so she knew not. "Do not throw that gift away."

He listened to the distant sound of the Falls for a moment, as did she, hoping that her words of care would be heeded, or, better yet, that they spoke of a useless concern, before his hand found her arm again. "You... you know of our task."

"Yes. Yes, I do."

"Do you think..." He hesitated, summoning all his strength, but not because he was so weak, but because of the nature of what he intended to say. "Do you think that they have already... failed? That... it is already in the hands of the enemy?"

The intense fear in his words also clawed at her heart, but she shook it off as quickly as she could, not only for her benefit, but also for his. He needed her clear and alert, not cowering in the shadows like a child might. She drew her lower lip in to chew on it, thinking hard, forcing the intruding dark thoughts away with the feeling of her teeth on her flesh, until she softly shook her head. "I think not. It is now near four days since I found you... if the Orcs had been able to take the Ring, they would have handed it to the Nazgûl immediately, and with their flying mounts, it would already be on Sauron's hand. This has not happened yet, or we all would have felt it, so there is hope. Do not give it up."

He nodded at her, though her words could not lift the dark, sombre air around him, whispering despondently of things he had not told her yet, and she doubted that he would. "Where are my things?" asked he, and she sighed, taking the Horn of Gondor from her bundle.

"Your sword is broken, just as your helm, and I left them, with the other things your companions had given to you, on the boat, to send it down the Anduin. I only took this, as I recognized it from your belt in Lórien."

She carefully handed him the cut halves and turned away as she saw the stinging pain in his eyes, the tears preparing to fall, knowing that this was an heirloom of the stewards of Gondor, given from father to eldest son, worth much more than the gold and silver attached to it.

"Thank you." His voice sounded raspy and not at all if he really meant it, the words more born from obligation than from true feeling, but she nevertheless smiled at him as she turned.

"I am only sorry that I could not take more. I had to carry you up the shore, and I feared that I would not make it."

She could feel that he looked at her with new, albeit grudging respect, and resolved to pay it back by refusing to fuss overtly much over him. No matter where she was and what she did, she knew that she was still a healer at heart, and that the temptation to do every little thing for him to save him the effort sometimes was strong. Yet she had to keep herself from it, or they would be at each other's throats quickly, or at least, she at his throat, and he trying to get to hers. He still was no match for her, despite his imposing physique.

"It is of no matter," replied he finally, carefully fingering the metal bands clasping the

horn, and she thought she detected sadness in him. "They were lost doing an honourable deed at last."

"At last?" asked she without thinking, but as he turned away and would not answer, she decided it was best to leave him to what little peace he might find with his injuries.

He regarded his rescuer carefully as she busied herself with he knew not what, and then returned to her lookout post at the entrance of the nearly toppled structure she had hidden him in, and when he finally thought she was out of earshot, he sighed deeply. Yes, he was grateful that she had saved his life, yes, he felt bad for repulsing her so, for driving her away from what seemed to be her own camp, but despite all his regret, he could not bring himself to change his behaviour. Too much had assaulted him in the last few days before he was injured, too much had happened – and he had done too much wrong to easily cast it aside now that his time with the Fellowship lay behind him, probably for the rest of his life.

If they survived, they would probably hate him for what he had done, especially Frodo, who must be terribly afraid of him by now, and the other Hobbits would follow suit. That... would hurt. That Aragorn despised him, for he had seen the repulsion in his eyes just before he passed out, he did not care for – he had never thought highly of the Ranger of the North, and probably never would. But the others... he sighed.

His only consolation was that, despite his folly that had broken up the Fellowship, he had not been the cause of Sauron's second and complete victory, for that burden, he knew he could not bear. For folly it was – he could see that clearly now, after the heat of the moment had passed, the icy water and the grasp of death had cooled his ardour, for he could not understand himself and his reasoning that led to his trying to take the ring away from Frodo. It was as if a black veil had been lifted and he was master of his thoughts and actions again, leaving the past days when his mind had been darkened behind.

Yes, he knew he was reputed to be an unsparing and reckless man, but there were limits to what he would do to those he called friends, and assaulting Frodo as he did, that was not like him, no matter what the stakes. The amount of his own treachery still shocked him, and that he, who had boasted of the loyalty and glory of the men of Gondor as they departed Rivendell, and then again in Lórien, had broken up their Fellowship, was a stain on his honour he would never be able to remove.

It seemed that, no matter how much he loathed her, that Galadriel had been right in her estimation of him, that she had seen right into his soul and recognized his weakness before even he did, and that he had better listened to her thinly veiled temptations of might and power. Refusing them consciously, after he had seen them, might have prepared him better for the lures of the Ring of Power, lures that he had thought to be his own, good and sound reasoning at that time. He could not rebuff the Ring's offerings as he had done to Galadriel's when he had broken her gaze, as it whispered to him day and night, reached out for him from the chain on Frodo's neck... He had thought himself exceedingly clever, that he had recognized this great gift fate had bestowed upon them to crush their enemy once and for all, but now he saw that the only thing he had destroy were his friends and allies, those who trusted him. He shivered at the thought of relinquishing everything that was dear to him, the mores and principles he had been taught at the knees of his parents, of giving it up to destroy Sauron, only to find out that he had become the greater evil.

His rescuer hurried to his side, had obviously noticed his slight motion. "Are you cold?"

He shook his head. "Only my thoughts are."

"Do you want to talk to me then? It would serve to distract you."

He really did not feel the need to speak to her, being one of Aragorn's Northern folk, but could not very well refuse her offer, that, he hoped, was kindly meant, and not to uncover his folly. As loath as he was to admit it, alienating her would be detrimental to his situation, as he needed her to return to health and safety.

"What would you have us talk of then? The war? Our cause? How best to kill and roast a rabbit?"

She smiled as she noticed that he had picked up her habit of sarcasm. "None of these. I had hoped that, if you are strong enough, you might tell me of Gondor."

His surprise and the bit of resentment he felt must have shown on his face, for she quickly added, "You do not have to, if you do not want it."

He sighed. Yes, he would love to tell of Gondor, to about anyone – except to those whose loyalty belonged to the man who held a claim to its throne. It felt like treachery, to give them more information on the land he loved, and, he admitted in the secrecy of his heart, wanted to keep for himself. In his eyes, Gondor needed no King, and he would be content to continue the line of the stewards, on to his son and their sons... but the tides were turning, he could see that now, and he feared that his father would be the last of the Reigning Stewards. Then again... maybe that was not such a bad thing, after having seen what he had nearly done not only to Gondor, but the whole of Middle Earth. "I think I want."

She smiled and sat next to him, facing the door, her sword and dagger next to her, before she eyed him expectantly from the side, making him begin, though he scarcely had a notion of what to say. He strongly suspected that she knew everything that there was to know about the history of Gondor, and so focused on other things, mostly on that what he had seen and experienced in person. The banners on the top of the White Tower, the bells that sounded the hour, how Minas Tirith glittered in the sun when he returned from a long ride or campaign and could see his home again... At least she should feel that not only the Kings, but also the Stewards of Gondor held a love for their country, and perhaps even more so as they had spent the last centuries there, and not gallivanting about the North, while it fought for its survival.

She listened to him attentively, though if it was only because she wanted to calm him, or if she was really interested, he did not know, until his voice had turned raspy and his eyelids heavy, and he had arrived at the end of the Battle of Osgiliath, which he and his brother both had barely survived. "Rest now," she said, and handed him more water, this time allowing him to drink it himself, and not forcing him to be fed like a child, before she helped him to move to his more or less uninjured right side, where only his thigh had taken the arrow. "I will check your bandages when you wake up next, and I have light again."

"When will you sleep?" asked he with worry, but she shook her head.

"When it is safe again."

Despite his concerns, despite his fear that they might be attacked unawares because she had dozed off during the night, he quickly fell into a slumber, and though he was plagued by dark, menacing thoughts and dreams, he managed to draw some vigour from his rest.

Kapitel 3: Chapter Three

Chapter Three

March the 1st, Year 3019 of the Third Age.

Boromir, having slept through much of the day and the whole, long late winter night, woke the next morning to the first rays of the sun peeking into their hideout from the East, and Arnuilas carefully approaching his side. Her relief in having lived another night without Orcs or other servants of the enemy attacking them was palpable, though, as he had recently found out, daylight was by no means a guarantee for safety in these dark times.

"Good morning to you," said she, and only when she came close to him, he could see through her false cheer and noticed the bone-deep fatigue that had settled into her face during the night, the pale, puffy skin, the dark circles under her eyes... she did not look good, and that she did not look good did not bode well for him either.

"Have you slept at all since you have found me?" he asked brusquely and she looked up from the bundle that she had pulled over to her.

"Dozed a few hours during daylight, when you looked less feverish than usual," she replied, and he just managed not to roll his eyes. Scolding him into not moving a limb, and then taking such risks herself!

"And when do you intend to rectify that?"

"As I said, when it is safe."

This time, his displeasure must have been visible, because she glared at him, and then huffed. "Let me check your bandages."

"If you rest afterwards, I will."

Fierce grey eyes met tired and pale blue ones, and finally, she sighed. "Fine. But you will wake me as soon as you get tired or you hear or see anything strange *at all*."

It was not a request, but an order, and Boromir did not react well to taking orders, not being accustomed to them... but he thought that in this case, he could make an exception, even though she was a woman, and even though he had doubted her abilities before. After all, the fact that he was still alive after taking four arrows that were probably poisoned spoke volumes of her skill and knowledge. "I will."

Now that she had stipulated her conditions, she even condescended to smile at him again, but, as she pulled out fresh bandages, he knew that might have been only because she was about to inflict new pain on him. After stubbornly trying to move the first, and even the second time, he had found out that her order not to stir had been given with good reason, and the thought of shifting now, or rather of being handled, and having cloth torn out of the dried blood of his wounds was not very appealing.

She seemed to notice his hesitation that stemmed chiefly from previous experiences and smiled. "Would you like to sit up?"

"Sit up?" That she would allow him such, considering her overtly protective attitude, surprised him deeply.

"Yes. It would help me tending to your wounds, and you could watch out better, that is, if you still want to keep your vigil afterwards."

He knew that her last condition had not been given lightly – the pain she was about to inflict on him would grate on and tire him, but nevertheless... she needed the rest more than he did, after all, he had slept long enough in the past days. "Then I will."

She turned around and scratched something big, heavy over the dirty earth of the floor until he could feel it next to his head. Uneasiness drove him to try to turn around to see what it was, an endeavour that he paid for with a sharp stinging pain in his right shoulder. "It's my boat," explained she, when she noticed that he had tried to twist in nervous curiosity. "You can lean against it instead of the walls. It will be more warm and comfortable, though comfortable is a relative notion in this environment."

He nodded carefully. The dirty, cold stone did indeed not look very inviting, and he was aware that his chances of sitting on his own for a longer period of time were... slim, at best.

He did not feel ready at all when she pushed her right hand under his back and placed the other on his left side, as far away from his injuries as possible, and readied herself, apparently untouched by their forced closeness. "Help me as much as you can. You will have to sit on your own for a moment, so I can pull the boat close."

That a warrior of Gondor would think the task of holding his own weight, and only sitting, as a challenge, was a notion Boromir could not easily entertain, though it was undoubtedly true now, and so he just wished to be done with the matter as expediently as possible. "I will." He idly thought that he was acquiescing to a lot of things lately, when he felt her body tense next to him and she pushed him to sit upright. He tried to help her as he could, but his torn, agonized muscles screamed, and he feared that it was a good thing that so much power was hidden in her slender frame.

He felt her left hand move, from his side to his back, next to the other, giving him a moment to steady himself, to get accustomed to his own weight that rested now on his own strength again, then looked at him quickly, searching for a reassurance that he could hold himself upright. Though he was not at all sure that he was capable of it, he nodded faintly and then felt one of her hands leave his back, gathering the blankets where his upper body had lain.

A moment later, the other was gone too and he struggled not to fall down on the hard earth as if he were boneless, until he heard the scratching sounds of the boat being pulled over cease and felt the assistance of her hands on his back again.

"Ready?" she asked, and when he nodded, she lowered him carefully down into a half sitting, half resting position on the cool, grey wood. He was thankful that her arms were there, or he would have fallen down unceremoniously and hit hard, because the muscles on his waist and abdomen were no more up to the task of lowering his upper body steadily and slowly than of holding himself upright. Every time he tried to tense them, the arrow he had taken brought itself forcefully to his attention, and pain screamed in his abdomen. A lot of pain.

He tried to slow down his breathing while she watched him with sorrow in her eyes and fussed over him, putting some scrunched article of clothing, one of hers from the smell of it, under his head as a pillow. To her credit, she did not ask if it had hurt, thereby not forcing him to state the blatantly obvious, and just pulled back the blankets from his chest to do what had to be done, though he regretted the necessity even now, futile as his reluctance was.

The late winter air was still cold, even though she had kindled a small fire in a hidden corner of the damp cellar, and he tried to keep himself from shivering, to preserve his dignity, but there was nothing to do against his hairs, who seemed to have their own will and straightened themselves, an effect that was only increased by her cold fingers finding the bandage at his shoulder. She pulled out her dagger, and he instinctively shrank back. "I will cut it off. I will not have to move you so much this

way.”

He nodded and eyed the blade warily, trying to concentrate and draw relief from the fact that the edges shimmered only lightly now, indicating that any Orcs in their vicinity were far, far away, probably on the other side of the river. The metal on his skin was not as cold as he had feared as she severed the bandages and raised his body lightly to remove them, but when he tried to twist his head in order to see the wound, her fingers found his chin, turning him back to face her for a moment. “Better look at the entry, will you?”

He doubted that she only asked this of him for security purposes, but nevertheless complied, hoping that it would make the pain and the growing feeling of anxiety inside him more bearable this way. As long as he could, he stayed silent while she examined his flesh, prodding and cleaning his wound with some burning concoction that made him very nearly retch, but then, as she reached for the next bundle of bandages wrapped in leather, he could not hold it any longer. “How is it?” forced he out through gritted teeth and she stilled her movements to look him in the eye, a small smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

“Remarkably well. There is no infection, so any poison from the tips is burnt out, and considering that five days ago, you were on the brink of death, it is healing quite nicely.”

If how he felt now as she raised his shoulder slightly from the boat so she could bandage it was *quite nicely*, he really did not want to know what *really bad* was in her kind of world. Definitely not. True, he had experienced his share of injuries during the twenty-five years he had fought in Gondor's army, and bore a number of scars to prove it, but he had never been wounded as badly as this time, not even when, during one of their campaigns in Ithilien, a scimitar had slashed his leg open and the wound had become infected.

She tied the bandages and smiled. “One done, two to go. Would you like me to pause for a moment?”

He waved the notion off immediately, though part of him wanted to stop the pain tearing through his flesh, but his ratio disagreed. “The sooner it is over, the better.”

She did not answer, but instead cut the next bandage off, this one around his torso, where his chest and stomach met, for the arrow had hit his side. He was probably very lucky that it had missed any major organs considering where it had met with his body, or if it had, that it had not struck the most important parts of them. This time, he could have looked at the wound without twisting his head in an awkward direction, but when he saw his own red, torn and blood-crusting flesh, he decided to watch the entry instead as she had told him. It was important to have her back while she tended to his wounds, or at least he could convince himself that it was, to have a reason not to stare at the gashing wound in his side until she had bandaged him up again.

“Still fine? No Orcs in my back?” asked she when she had finished, and he appreciated the attempt at humour, though he could not join in it, aware as he was that next would be his thigh, the deepest wound he had received in his vain attempt at defending the Hobbits. On every other day, in every other situation, having a tolerably pretty – and she was not only tolerable, but rather handsome – woman touch him around the middle of his thigh would have elicited very different responses. Now, he only clenched his teeth to refrain from crying out loud and therefore render all their efforts of not attracting enemies in vain, and tried to think of anything else. The dull, throbbing pain in his shoulder proved quite effective, and he concentrated on it, feeling every heavy thud of his heart in it, until he felt her pull the blankets up again

cautiously.

"And?"

"You will be fine. At the moment, it is an ugly mess, but I am confident that it will not infect again, thanks to all the draughts I am administering." She hesitated for a moment, and he growled.

"Out with it, woman."

She shot him an admonishing glare, but answered nevertheless. "I do not know if you will ever retain full use of your leg or your right arm."

He had to admit that this was a blow, but knowing it now, being aware of what could happen, was better than finding out the hard way.

She continued, obviously unsure of his reaction, but he barely noticed what she said, while he dealt with the shock. "Conditions here are not ideal for you to mend, as is quite obvious, and I fear that I will have to drag you up and about way before you are ready to walk again. But I dare not stay here longer than necessary."

She did not have to elaborate her reasoning, but he noticed that she carefully omitted where she wanted to go with him. *Lórien then. She must be aware that I do not like that Elven witch and her cursed land.*

His heart drew him South, but the knowledge of his failure, of his treachery, held his longing to defend the country he loved at bay. Could he really return to his father and brother, knowing what he had done? Could he meet Aragorn again, who would be his king, and look him in the eye, if both of them survived this war? He did not know, and, part of him was glad for the respite his injuries gave him. They were a reason, an excuse, to fail to appear in the heat of the battle, to collect his thoughts and find out his next course of action. "When do you want to travel North?"

She eyed him with no little amount of surprise. "As soon as you are able. I hope that the Elves will be able to mend your injuries better than my skills can accomplish."

The thought of owing not only her his life, but also the Elves, and maybe even Galadriel herself, his health, was not one he liked to entertain. "Maybe it is of no matter in which state of health I die as soon as we reach Lórien."

She smiled sadly at him, though he thought that he could detect a deeper concern lingering in her pale and tired eyes. "That may be. But as long as our treasure is not on the enemy's hand, there is still hope, and I do not intend to give it up."

"I fear that I already have."

She reached out and pressed his uninjured hand. "I can understand you, Boromir. I have lived under and fought the shadow in the North for so long... maybe it is not hope that I kindle to my heart, but sheer defiance and the desperate wish that all I have done and suffered has not been in vain. Then again, what is the difference? It keeps me on my feet, it keeps my fighting, and at some times, hopelessness does as much for your fervour in battle as the promise of a better future."

Her words rang a quiet bell in his heart, and he smiled back, despite all the things he had done lately that he had to be ashamed of. "Sleep, will you?" he asked quietly, hoping that he could give back some of the care she had exercised onto him, and relieved when she nodded after a moment of consideration.

"If you feel up to guarding us, yes." She carefully handed him the elven dagger to keep near, to watch out for signs of danger, and placed sword and bow in her reach before she curled into a ball next to him, wrapping herself in the only blanket that was still left.

True to his word, he let her sleep as long as he dared and could keep his vigil, but as

the early dusk of late winter set in, he felt his eyelids grow heavy, and, as her sleep had become more restless in the last few hours, he felt little remorse in waking her. His hand on her shoulder obviously startled her, and he saw her reach for her sword until she obviously remembered where she was and the tension left her body. "How long have I slept?" she murmured as she sat up again and judged the little light remaining.

"Long," replied he, and she eyed him curiously.

"Has anything happened?"

"Nothing, fortunately, or you would have known."

She grabbed her dagger, nodded and excused herself for a few moments, throwing his elven cloak over her shoulders and nearly disappearing in it, and returning as a darker shadow among the others until she threw it off again.

"Thank you," she simply said, and her words immediately brought to his attention that he had not expressed his gratitude for saving his life yet.

"It is nothing compared to the service you have done for me."

It was not a proper thanks, but all that he could manage to say with his heart behind it at the moment, still not sure if surviving was a good thing after all... but maybe they would have time for that later. If there was a later, and if he managed to make up his mind in the time that was still left for them, not only with the constant threat of an attack on their little hideout, but also with the greater fear of losing this cursed war. She did not seem to mind his lukewarm gratitude, though. "How do you feel? Has anything changed for the worse?"

"No, nothing."

"Good."

He had eaten and drank some while she had been asleep, and now felt that with the growing darkness outside, he struggled to stay awake. She helped herself to some of the water and sat besides him, also leaning back onto the boat, humming to herself quietly and off-tune, and obviously not in the mood for a conversation. It was the last sound that he heard this day, and oddly, he found the thought that even the Rangers of the North were not perfect quite comforting as he drifted off.

Kapitel 4: Chapter Four

Chapter Four

March the 2nd, Year 3019 of the Third Age.

He was woken just as the sky began to grey the next morning by a hand on his shoulder and started, reaching for his sword as the instincts of decades of sleeping lightly in a tent next to his troops kicked in again, a definite sign that he felt better.

"What is it?" asked he, shaking off his natural propensity for deep slumber and waking slowly, aided by the alarm he felt at this unexpected touch. She had always let him rest as long as he could, and he feared that something had happened.

"Calm." She had detected his unease and pressed his shoulder, even though she looked concerned herself. "We are safe. I am only going for water, and to look for hints of where your companions have gone." In his tired, sleep-befuddled state, he could not stem the tide of relief that washed over his face, visible even in the dim light of the cellar. He would find out... finally, or at least he hoped so. He would get the closure he needed, hear of the fate of his companions, even though he doubted that he would see them again. Arnuilas smiled feebly. "Keep the sword at your side, in any case. I will conceal the entry with the cloak, and hope the best."

She had already picked up her bow and arrows, the water bag and her Elven dagger hung at her belt, then slid out through the entry to spare both of them further embarrassing displays after she had made sure he was wide awake and had understood what she'd said. "Take care, then."

The words reached her as she took the last steps towards the surface, and she turned one last time, hand braced on the crumbling walls, and nodded to him, before she slipped outside into the receding darkness of the night, and there was nothing he could do but sit and wait for her return. He thought it ironic that she had taken such measures to ensure his safety, when the chances of his survival without her help were so slim... but maybe that was only his feeling of helplessness as he sat in his nest like a freshly hatched bird, entirely dependent upon another.

He hated it. He had been so used to being the one in control and charge, to deciding the course of his future himself, be it at home in the White Tower or on the battlefield, despite his father's constant attempts at influencing him, that he despised the feeling of helplessness that accosted him. With his weakness constantly at the back of his mind, Arnuilas' absence was the catalyst that brought it forcefully back to his attention, and he fought against resenting her for it. After all she had done for him, after all she had risked, it was deeply unfair of him to despise her for things she could not help... especially as she was doing him a favour by searching for his companions.

His guilt and helplessness were only made stronger by the fact that, even in a situation where he *could* have chosen the right thing, his mind had been weak enough to succumb to the quiet, seductive whispering of the Ring, while others, especially Aragorn, had not. Especially he... whom he had despised so much, whom he had ridiculed and belittled for hiding in the North when the South needed him. He shook his head, raking his fingers through his hair – maybe she was right in deciding herself, in not seeking his council, in putting her trust in Aragorn instead of him, even though his pride protested the thought. He had proven at Parth Galen that he could not be

relied on, and she had been very capable of taking care of him while he was injured, or at least he tried to tell himself that as he settled back into his uncomfortable position of waiting. Even though the thought lowered his self-esteem even further, placed him even more in her debt, he hoped that she would return, would coax him out of his darkening mood, maybe listen to him as he told her of Gondor, so he could forget his terrible guilt for a time... but part of him thought that he did not deserve even that little relief, that he should have died at the Falls of Rauros defending the Hobbits, clearing his legacy by dying for a worthy cause at last... but he knew that after all was said and done, he was a selfish man. A proud man. A man too weak to follow his own thoughts to their inevitable conclusion – for he could not even *fully* regret that he was still alive, much less do what he ought and end that miserable existence of his. No, he wanted to live, wanted her to return so he could, even though he did not deserve it and there was nothing he could do but trust her instinct and skill, and so he settled back onto the boat, hoping that his vigil would not be in vain, as he knew it very well could be.

She slid through the ruins of the old settlement of the Men of Gondor, quietly making her way upstream as she had a few days before, hoping that she would not find another boat with another near dead man on her way up – one was really as much as both she and her dwindling supplies could take. This time, much to her relief, she reached the stairs that were carved into the stone near Rauros without incident, and, hidden in the mist and spray of the great falls, slid upwards while the sky began to lighten.

Her first goal was the camp side near the river, where the Fellowship had rested for the final time, and where she found the last of their boats turned over, carelessly hidden under some bushes. Whoever had done this had obviously not intended to return, and she felt no qualms in helping herself to the provisions they had abandoned here. The preserved bread, meat, fruit and nuts would help her stretch her stock, making their departure from their camp a less urgent affair, and therefore giving Boromir more time to recover before they left. Even in a few days, he would still be too weak to walk, and she could not drag him, the boat and all they wanted to take with them up the stairs, the first obstacle they had to overcome on their way north.

That he had not protested more as she had decreed that they would go to Lórien worried her; she had expected it from him, just as she had anticipated his exhausting what little strength he had in useless attempts at moving, but so far, he was a remarkably compliant charge, and that distressed her. Something must have happened to him to change him so much, to make the stubborn, headstrong man she had thought him to be in Lórien disappear, something more than the wounds that had been inflicted on him, but she knew not what. In Caras Galadhon, even in the few minutes they had met, she had found him distracted and brooding... now, he seemed merely deeply and quietly in thought, but there was deep pain hidden inside him, pain that frightened her more than the near palpable darkness she had felt back in Lórien. Could he act on it, do something truly and thoroughly stupid? She hoped not, considering the pains she had gone through to keep him alive, but she could not be sure, and part of her reluctance to leave him alone stemmed not from his weakness of body, but that of the mind.

She shook her head softly to herself, knowing that it was not wise to dwell on such things in the open while she tried to gather useful information, but not having the

strength to rein in her errant thoughts after the many sleepless nights behind her. Considering that he obviously did not care for Aragorn much, and with her being one of his kinsfolk, he tolerated her presence remarkably well, better so than during their brief introduction now near a month and a half back. But that did not mean that he confided in her, or ever intended to tell her what ailed him. She was quite sure that it pertained to the Fellowship, even the Ring, considering the particular way he had asked about the possibility of the enemy having it... but besides that, she could not ascertain what it was. It was only clear that it had seriously hurt his poise and confidence, and made him quite a different man compared to who he used to be, even considering that she had only known him for a few moments before he had been injured, and not given much thought to the grave man from the South in the weeks she had spent in the wilds.

She softly shook her head as she followed the old, nearly ruined trail up the hillside of Amon Hen. Brooding about him would not help her in her endeavour, she needed a clear, sharp mind and all of her concentration if she wanted to find out anything useful at all from her quick detour to the Hill of the Eye. There were reasons she had not told Boromir about it, especially that she did not want him to hope too much, for chances were good that she found out nothing at all, or that she would alert *something* to their presence here; yet, now that he was considered dead, and with her not playing a key part in this war in the first place, she hoped that Sauron thought both of them of little or not importance to his plans.

She reached the old stand on the summit and quickly ascended, being instantly pulled into its magic, its wish to show her faraway things, and it took all of her strength to direct its course. She looked North first, searched for threats on their way back to Lórien, and found hordes of Orcs that had poured out from the eastern Gates of Moria and crossed the Nimrodel west of the Golden Forest, now roaming between the Misty Mountains and the Great River. She saw the Wold of Rohan, empty and deserted by its people, and the Orcs that invaded Fangorn from Isengard.

So Saruman truly has fallen, she thought, and steered her gaze to the West, to Rohan, but only quickly; she shuddered as she saw the army readied to destroy it, and a weak king Théoden, not fit to rally the men of his country.

South was no better. A man, so like Boromir in looks and countenance that he had to be the brother he had told her of, was leading the rangers of Ithilien into war against Mordor, but he was outnumbered by the forces still behind the Gates of Mordor and the Southlings marching north to attack their arch enemy. Though she felt the temptation to also cast her glance to the East, searching for Frodo and the Ring, she quickly resisted it and stood, breaking the spell of the place. There was hope still, as she had said – but drawing attention to what was now their *only* hope was a sure way to destroy it.

Sun had risen fully while she had idled on the summit, and she hastened to return to her camp, filling their water bag on her way, and hoping against better judgement to pick up a trail or two, or any hint who had gone where. It was pointless. Rain had washed away all footprints, and her best sign was the fact that one boat had been left on the shore. At least some of the Fellowship must have continued their travels on foot, and on the Western side of the river, while others seemed to have crossed it; she hoped that the Ring-Bearer belong to the latter group, but could not be sure.

The lack of knowledge tugged on her as she sneaked back to their camp, but at least her detour had not been in vain, for the provisions she had found would come handy, allowing her to keep more of the *lembas* for Boromir. He was healing remarkably well,

as she had told him, and she reckoned that was an effect of the Elven nourishment he got, as well as the time he had spent in Lóthlorien with the others. The place was so soaked with magic, maybe he had carried some of it with him to the South.

As she slid inside the cellar through the cloak of Lórien, only able to find the entry because she had known where it was, Boromir was sitting upright, sword in his left hand, holding it a bit awkwardly. He relaxed and sank back against the boat as soon as he recognized her, putting the blade down with caution. "You have been long."

"I was at the summit, Looking."

The fire her words had kindled in his eyes made her doubt the wisdom of her telling him, as the news she bore were chiefly dire. "What did you see?"

She sank down next to him, putting the bundle and the water sack on the floor and helping herself to some of the meat; she was hungry, and she needed a moment of stalling to consider what to tell him, and what not.

"Your brother," she answered eventually, and was rewarded with a smile that spoke of great affection.

"He is alive?"

"Yes. He is in Ithilien, fighting Mordor."

"And what of Gondor? And Minas Tirith? Have you seen my father?" The eagerness that had returned to him was more comfortable to her than the desperation she had witnessed earlier, and she began to hope that her concerned musings had been in vain.

"I have seen neither of them, but as there are still troops deployed to Ithilien, I think that, at least now, there is no immediate concern for their safety."

He nodded, thoughtful. "What about... my friends? Have you seen Frodo?"

She eyed him carefully, because asking for Frodo also meant asking for the Ring, but then decided to answer. "I have not dared to search for him, fearing the Eye."

"Yes, yes... that does make sense."

"You were travelling in three boats, were you not?"

The sudden question shook him from his thoughts, but after a moment of surprise, he answered quickly. "Yes."

"I have accounted for two of them now; one was with you, the other I found at your last camp site at Parth Galen. That means at least some of the Fellowship have turned west."

He frowned deeply as his face darkened. "I hope that they are pursuing the Orcs then; you know that they have captured Merry and Pippin, and I do not want to think of them in the hands of Mordor."

She nodded softly and with an affection for the Hobbits that stemmed from long years of guarding their homeland. "I hope that, too, though I cannot be sure. All footprints were washed away by the rain. But, whoever continued west, has left a lot of their provisions and equipment with the boat, so I think that they desired speed more than anything else. That is where I found the food."

He smiled, reassured by her words. "And what about the third boat?"

"I do not know, however, I do hope that the Ring-Bearer has turned east, to Mordor."

His countenance darkened, and she frowned as suspicion dawned upon her as to the cause of his black mood. "So you think it is out of our reach."

"Yes. Frodo, and whoever has gone with him, is now several days into the Eryn Muil, or even beyond them, and there is no chance of finding them there."

He nodded thoughtfully, staring at the blankets drawn over his lap so intently that

she doubted he would answer her, before he finally spoke. "Thank you."

Her eyebrows rose of their own volition. "For what?"

"For telling me."

She was not entirely sure to what he was referring, as a matter more grave than just her report seemed to linger under his words, but, seeing that the matter made him uncomfortable, she decided to leave it, at least for the moment, and instead settled herself next to him, hoping to pass some time while he was awake. "How do you feel? I hope yesterday and today were not too much of an exhaustion?"

He shook his head. "If you call sitting and doing nothing an exhaustion, what is a fast march in full gear over several days to you?"

She grinned, determined to lighten their mood. "Too much?"

He looked at her with surprise. "True. But speaking of this, why are you even here?"

"What do you mean? I set out from Lórien to scout for you, as you well know."

"Any man could have done that; why you? Are the Rangers of Eriador so desperate that they need to send their women to battle?"

There was mocking in his question, but despite the fact that he seemed to take his suggestions not very seriously, he had squarely hit the truth, and she told him so, though it pained her to admit their sad state of affairs. "Indeed. Our greatest weakness has always been that we are few, Boromir, and that our numbers dwindle. Life in the North is hard, do not forget that. If you return from war, you can rest in Minas Tirith. You have a bed and a warm meal waiting for you, a city full of people to tend to your concerns willingly, for you are their hero. We... are despised by all save our own kin and the Elves. We can take refuge in Rivendell, or, if we go West to the sea, at the Grey Havens, but between that, our friends are few and far between. There are some settlements and camps of our own, and many of our children grow up with the Elves, but there are mostly women and our old staying in one place. Our men are at war, though they do fight their battles alone, and if it were not for us women, who would forge their swords? Who would hunt their game? Who would cultivate the soil? We cannot simply turn down a pair of hands, even if it belongs to a woman."

She sighed heavily. "I saw my own father maybe twice or thrice when I was a child, and only when I myself was approaching adulthood, he returned from his travels to stay with his family, too injured to ride out again into the wilds. I was trained both as a hunter and scout and as a healer, as you might have noticed."

"It seems that I have to be grateful that there are so few of the Dúnedain."

She snorted. "If you are looking at it from that point of view, yes. If I had only learned to mend your clothes and kiss my children's scraps, you would probably be dead now."

"Have you?" He looked at her with surprise.

"Mended your clothes?" Though she had a fairly good suggestion of what he meant, deflecting his questions by sarcasm was easier than face the ghosts of her past.

"Children," he explained, and she shook her head.

"No. As I said, there are few of us, and our numbers are dwindling." Though he looked at her questioningly, she did not elaborate, did not want to, for explaining the reasons would have opened up scars she did not want to touch now; not while they needed her awake and alert, and ready to fight. She forced a smile upon her lips. "Have you thought me so old?"

"No, surely not." The way he raised his hands in defence made her grin.

"Not the smoothest way out of this predicament, I dare say."

"Would you want me to flatter you?" asked he, and she smiled.

"Surely not, if there is no reason for it."

He grabbed the bundle of *lembas* next to him to avoid that particular line of questioning, and she chuckled.

Boromir let her sleep again, and, despite her initial reluctance and pride that made him realize how very much alike they were in some aspects, when she had dealt with the resistance she deemed necessary to preserve her pride, she jumped at the opportunity, and made up for the many nights she had waked at his side. With Arnuias curled up next to him, her head resting on the blankets he half sat, half lay on, he took the opportunity to look at her. Truth to be told, there wasn't much else that could hold his attention in the cellar, for he did not exactly want to ponder the old wooden supports of the ceiling that looked ready to crumble every moment, or the cold, wet and mossy walls. Yes, she must have checked the space they camped in for stability, but that did not mean he had to like it, or feel comfortable in it, and he was ready to take up every train of thought that would keep him from pondering the possibility of suffocating under the dark, wet soil and stones above them.

He turned back to a more pleasant sight, for, he had to admit, she was pretty. Nothing to the countless Elven beauties he had met while he visited Rivendell and Lothlórien, but nevertheless pleasant to look at, with her dark hair, light blue eyes, and the noble features of one descended from those of Númenor. The impression was marred by the first shadows around her mouth and eyes, announcing that she was closer to him in age than she could possibly like and that soon, there would be the first lines and wrinkles, but she looked appealing despite them.

She sighed softly and turned around, murmuring quiet words in her sleep that he could not make out, and he pulled the sword she had handed him closer with his left hand. It was two-handed for her, but more like a bastard sword for him, for though he wasn't that much taller than she, his hands definitely were bigger. Then again, a small sword was better than nothing, especially as his dominant hand was now pretty useless, and, though he was used to fighting with his left, he was not nearly as apt with it. Having failed at protecting the Hobbits, he was determined at least to stand his man to defend her, should the occasion arose, even though he was painfully aware that the sword would be of more use in her hands than in his. And yet... yet his pride refused to let this woman, this seemingly fragile creature next to him fight for his life, where he should keep her safe – he would take care of her to pay back the debt he had incurred with her when she saved his life, come what may. At least in this small matter, he wanted to quiet the guilt and shame he felt when he thought back of his last actions, even should his companions never find out what he had done because they died in the wilds.

Kapitel 5: Chapter Five

Chapter Five

March the 3rd, Year 3019 of the Third Age.

The next morning, she was so impressed by his recovery that she allowed him to stand, pulling him up from the blankets in his blatant state of undress, and, though he had to lean onto her shoulder heavily at first, he then managed to stand on his own, carefully balancing his weight between his fit and his injured leg. It hurt, but that was to be expected, and pain was something he was familiar with, something he could deal with... not like the magic that had snatched his mind and driven him to do unspeakable things.

He banished that thought as fast as he could, for it was too close to denying his own share of guilt in driving Frodo away to be comfortable with. Aragorn must have felt the pressure as well, must have been drawn to it as well, and yet, he had resisted, had not been taken in by its lures. *So the fault lies with me, and with nobody else. It was the Ring who has drawn me in, yes, but it has only uncovered a weakness in my character that has been there from the beginning.*

"What is it?" asked she with concern, and he focused his attention back on her face, on her fingers on the bare skin of his arm.

"My apologies, my thoughts were elsewhere."

A shadow of apprehension flashed through her face, but it was gone as soon as she noticed it and could pull herself together, and he sighed inwardly. She did not know what he had done. It was selfish of him not to confide in her, to tell her what his treachery was, but the fear in him was still strong. When before, he had feared for Minas Tirith, he now feared for himself and his security should he dare to speak of his despicable deed. It was her fate at stake just as everyone else's in Middle Earth, and he had nearly thrown her into the chasm of despair with his thoughtless, unguarded actions. If she found out, she could very well leave him here for death, alone and helpless, and no one would be the wiser. All who knew him thought him dead. For all intents and purposes, he *was* dead to everybody but her, and maybe word of his demise had already spread to Gondor and his family and people mourned him. Her abandoning him would not even hurt them, for the pain was already there – and there was nothing he feared more than a lonely death in the wilds, even though he knew that he should have died for his deeds.

"You can stand. That is a reason for joy." Her voice was determinedly cheerful, though very quiet, just as every word they had spoken since he had woken up was hushed. "Would you like to try to walk a few steps?"

He was sure that she would not have proposed such had she not seen his gloom, but was nevertheless happy for the opportunity. Maybe more pain, for he was sure it would hurt, could distract him from his guilt; could even be his atonement for his sins. She carefully positioned herself in front of him, grabbing both of his arms now, and smiled. "Try."

He first put forward his intact leg, wincing at the pain that shot through his thigh, and leaning heavily on her arms, bare feet clenching the fabric of the blankets he stood on, but he did not stop there. He braced himself and pulled his injured limb to stand next to the other, now softly groaning, but nevertheless ready to make another step.

She did not allow it. She had not moved back as he had expected her, but held her position, and was now looking up at him as he could feel the warmth of her body through her clothing. "I think that is quite enough. I do not know why you are so determined to torture yourself further, but I will not have it. You now know that you can walk, and that has to be enough for now. Sit down again and rest."

Her stern, piercing gaze met his, but he held it only for a moment, until his courage and determination faltered and he allowed her to help him settle onto his bed again. Just another sign of his weak will, he guessed... he wanted to suffer for what he had done, and yet, when met with her determination, he did not even struggle to find the pain he thought he deserved.

"It will hurt enough on our trip back north."

He looked at her thoughtfully. "When do you plan to depart?"

"As soon as I do not have to drag or carry you, because for all the determination in the world I cannot do that. I think that we will be able to travel the lake by boat, as there is not much of a current, but then we have to leave it and walk. Twenty days, I'd reckon, maybe a few more if we are slowed down much by your injury, until Lórien."

"A lot of things can happen in three weeks."

She sighed and raked her hands through her hair. "I know. But there is nothing to be done about it now, and we will just have to go, and hope that Lothlórien is still there when we reach it, and not overrun by the enemy."

"You think that it could... fall?" Though he did not like Galadriel, and had never felt at ease during his month at Caras Galadhon, always under the threatening powers of the witch that, in the end, were nothing compared to the Ring's seduction, he did think her a force of good, not evil, and, more importantly, able to withstand the forces of the Dark Lord. That, and Lórien was a beautiful place... a pure place. He did not prefer it to the woods of Ithilien, where he had spent so many months in camp, hunting for the Orcs and Eastlings of the Dark Lord, but he would nevertheless regret seeing it destroyed.

"Dol Guldur is not far, and even Galadriel's powers are limited. Though the Elves will never again be deceived by Sauron, he can defeat them, as he has proven as he slew Gil-galad."

He nodded, not wanting to admit that he knew not much about the lore that she seemed to remember as her own history. He had heard, countless times and again, the accounts of the great battle at the end of the Second Age, where Isildur had cut the Ring from Sauron's hand, and the glorious Last Alliance of Elves and Men, but other than that, and what had been told at the council in Rivendell, he knew nothing.

"If her sorcery cannot withstand him, who then can?"

She sighed. "Yes... who can?"

Their talk about their future travels to the North, about the time they would lose, had only awakened her own feelings of guilt and regret. She had, after the Fellowship had passed her vantage point, planned to return to Lórien, to join the battles of the Galadhrim at their Northern border, or, if the forces of Sauron really crossed the Anduin, helped them to protect the Naith of Lórien, their homeland. Now, she was stuck in a cold, damp cellar of a centuries old Númenorian settlement, protecting an injured man who, with bad luck, would never be able to fight again, or be killed on their long and arduous trek to the North. But as much as she did not like it, as much as she wanted to contribute to the defence of Middle Earth, as much as she wanted to kill Orcs for what they had done, time and again, he was her duty. A duty she could not

shirk, for he would not survive alone, that, she knew clearly.

And, as she looked at him staring blankly at the wall, deep in his thoughts now, a man that might have a chance to heal when they returned to Lórien. That his wounds were not only those of the body, but also of the soul, became clearer and clearer to her the more she talked to him, and she was surprised that, despite being mortally injured, he had found the spirit to fight. He wanted to live, or rather, he needed to live, or he would never have woken up from his fever, but now that he had, he seemed not very keen on regaining what he had lost when he had travelled North to join the Fellowship. He had asked about Gondor, but not pressed her to take him thither. He cared about his home, but obviously did not want to help it in what would possibly be its greatest hour of need, an alarming sign in a man as proud in his home, his ancestry and, more importantly, his feats in the countless battles he had fought.

She sighed softly. In the North, when she had treated the wounds of Rangers returning from their duty, she had seen men succumb to injuries far less severe than his, only because they would not fight for their lives, because they had seen such terrible things that they had lost all of their spirit, and she shuddered to think of them. They had been friends, all of them, with some, she had played as a child, and yet, she could not help them, because it was not in her power to give them what they needed, to cure what ailed them, as their wounds lay deeper than she could reach.

She feared that, despite the fact that he had lived, his case might be one of them. For what was his life worth without duty? From what she understood, he had fought for Gondor since adolescence, had no wife, no family to return to besides his father and brother. If he could not fight again... what would he do? What had he to live for if he returned from this war crippled, not able to use half of his limbs? Suddenly, she hoped even more that the Elves would be able to do what she could not.

March the 5th, Year 3019 of the Third Age.

He ignored the hand she had offered him and instead turned to brace his left arm against the boat that was steadying him, hoisting himself to his feet on his own, and even though his face was a mask of pain and he swayed slightly, she almost thought that he looked pleased with himself. Initially, she had wanted to scold him for his obstinacy, but she swallowed the words as she remembered his pride, a pride that wasn't so much unlike hers that she couldn't understand it. There were some things he needed to do for himself after the weeks she had been nursing him, and she hoped that regaining his control over his body might help him to fight the darkness she knew was lurking in the deep recesses of his mind. And so she made herself smile and pulled back her outstretched hand. "How do you feel?"

He grimaced. "Just as terrible as expected."

She banished the pity that threatened to appear on her face and smiled at him instead, a bit mischievously even. "Well, considering that you are able to stand, that is a definite improvement."

He reluctantly returned her grin as he slightly swayed on his feet, carefully balancing his weight between his legs, and then took a step forward towards her, and another. His limp was pronounced, shaking his whole upper body as he approached her so painfully slow and without the grace and poise of the experienced swordsman he had once been, but he walked... and considering the state she had found him in, that was really more than she would have expected.

"Improvement indeed," he muttered, but his disgust for his weakened state blended

with the joy of his recovery and the near exhilaration of being able to move properly again. He turned as he reached the opposite wall of the small cellar, then limpingly retraced his steps back to his blanket as Arnuilas followed him, watching his halting, pained movements. He had paled considerably in the few minutes since he had stood, the pain etching deep lines into his already rugged face, and when he turned to pace the small room again, she halted him with her hand on his forearm. "It is enough for now."

Stormy grey eyes met her blue ones, but just as she thought that his stubborn pride might win their battle of wills, he winced and lowered his gaze as the pain finally caught up with him, and worry flashed over her features. "What is it?" In retrospection, her question sounded stupid even in her own ears, and the look on Boromir's face only confirmed her own assessment. "I am sorry."

He jerkily shook his head, then carefully lowered himself until he felt the cool, smooth wood of the Elven ship under his hand and braced himself against it to sink down on his blankets. "It hurts," he replied through gritted teeth, the sarcasm in his answer quelled by the all-encompassing pain, and she knelt besides him, her fingers scurrying over the bandages on his thigh. She hoped that the strain on his wounds had not opened them again, but for now, she could see no signs of additional blood, and so she moved on to his shoulder and, finally, his stomach. When she finally looked up, feeling the awkwardness of the situation as she had no duties left to distract her, she caught him frowning and with worry in his eyes, which she thought a good sign – at least he wasn't indifferent to his survival.

"And?"

The angry, spiteful part of her that blamed him for being struck in a damp cellar wanted to ask what he meant so he had to elaborate on his feelings, a pain for a man so intensely private as himself, but she fought the urge and smiled instead. "You will be fine. Nevertheless, I will check on you in the next hours, just to be sure."

He nodded softly, but did not answer at first, and she had already turned away, allowing him as much privacy as was possible in such a cramped space, when he finally spoke. "Thank you."

She closed her eyes and swallowed, for even though his words might seem ungrateful and shallow, she knew him well enough to hear the deep, pained feeling hidden beneath them. "You're welcome."

March the 7th, Year 3019 of the Third Age.

His wounds had not opened up again, and so she had allowed him not only to stand and walk as he had two days before, but also to dress into the remnants of his shirt and pants. He had also carefully put on his boots, struggling with the pain in his abdomen as he bent, but too proud to ask her for help, and was grateful for her forethought. They were the best part of clothing he had left, which was fortunate. He could be kept warm without his fur-lined cloak, he could fight without his mail, but he could not walk to Lórien on his bare feet.

He fought for his balance, then carefully weighed the borrowed sword in his hand and swung it, gingerly going through the parries and blows he had been taught as a child by his father, in the courtyard of the White Tower, all those years ago. He felt rusty despite having rested only for two weeks, and he was glad for the respite her absence gave him to train a bit, to relax his clenched muscles that had been forced into one position too long. He knew that his movements were not perfect, that, despite his

intention to move just as he always did, he often fell into a relieving posture to ease the pain, which annoyed him, but all of that was annulled by the good feeling of a sword in his hand, of a body that, though not perfectly, obeyed his commands. He felt better just for having stood, despite the fact that he had to neglect his footwork and that he winced every time he tried to move naturally. This was what he could do, this was what he was good at, his area of expertise – not devilish magic or tales of old bards or deciding the fate of Middle Earth. That, he would gladly leave to his father, his brother and Aragorn, if he only got a few good men, a sword in his hand, and a destination to conquer or defend.

What annoyed him though was the fact that, after a few minutes of wielding this sword that was so light in comparison to his own, he was covered in sweat and panting, and had to sit down quickly, hoping that no Orc would chose this exact moment to attack him. Thinking about it, he concluded it would also be unfortunate for him should Arnuilas to enter now, because she would scold him like his old nanny, and that woman had been fierce, as she had to put up with two unruly boys after the death of their beloved mother.

He wiped the sweat from his brow with the cloth she had kept near and then breathed in deeply, trying to ignore the stinging pain at his right shoulder where two of the arrows had hit him, and then shook his head. Maybe Faramir should have been the elder... maybe he should inherit his father's seat, should Gondor not have a king after the end of this war. He would be a good steward, he knew it, wise and just, and beloved by all. He would have the patience to put up with foolish citizens and foreign envoys talking the matter at hand to death, unlike him... he shook his head. He had never been a patient man, and, even as a boy, had cared more for the tales of great heroes than of good kings, driving both his father and his tutors to distraction, and then, as he grew up, also the nobles of Gondor. Some of them had told him that a wife might moderate his effervescent spirit, but he doubted that. The women of the South were pretty, elegant and docile, but in his experience, they had more bowed to his wishes than he to theirs, the natural reaction of their weak tempers to his strong.

That Arnuilas was *not* and would never be a daughter of Gondor was evident, and he was glad for it – he would be dead but for her will and determination. Her temper was as strong as the cold winter winds coming from the North that was her home, and he very nearly smiled at the thought. He would not get lost or be left behind on their trek to Lórien. If there was only a spark of life in him, she would kick and scream and drag him back to his feet. In his current situation, with his life at stake, that notion was comfortable indeed, more so than the idea of being stranded here with a frightened slip of a girl whom he needed to protect, though he doubted that he would have liked a woman like her at any other instance – and certainly not for a wife.

She returned from her detour to the top of the Falls and the Hill of the Eye after he had had time to cool himself and even his breathing, but the look on her face, her eyes shining with hope, nearly made him jump up again. "What is it? What have you Seen?" She grinned like a child, the first time that he had seen her with such joy, such unguarded relief on her face. "Rohan has defeated the forces of Isengard, and Saruman is prisoner in his own tower."

"What? How has that happened?" He could not keep the incredulity from his face, but her answer did not dampen the joy he felt, only increased it, though part of him thought he had no right to such relief after all he had done to undermine the efforts of the Fellowship.

"I do not know; Amon Hen shows only the present, and neither past nor future. But it is true, and with the aid of Rohan, Minas Tirith stands a chance of defeating the first wave of Sauron's assault." She knelt on the blankets besides him, the strength of her happiness barely contained in her rash movements, and grinned up at him as she grabbed his forearm. "There is still *hope* for us, Boromir!"

A part of him wanted to frown at her, but her happiness was contagious, and he allowed himself a small smile. "So the Riders of Rohan will come when the beacons call them?"

"Yes. Aragorn will see to it; he is with Théoden King, and they are riding to Isengard to call Saruman out for his treachery."

All her hope and enthusiasm vanished as he only replied with silence so grave and dark that it sprang over to her, wiping the glow of happiness from her face. But no matter how much he tried to convince himself that Aragorn was a better man than he, that he would lead Gondor through the tides of war that threatened to sweep it away, it still hurt... hurt to hear this woman, whom he had come to respect in the past few days, talk about him with so much blind faith, ignoring all the man's faults. He sighed internally – was she truly neglecting to see Aragorn's deficits, or was he the one to be blinded by his jealous anger? He knew not – and despite the hope he had seen on her face and felt in her words, there was a fair chance of him never finding out, because either of them could find their death in the oncoming battles before they met again. He belatedly forced a smile to his face and finally met those blue eyes again, eyes that told him he had given away too much, and his only consolation was that she made no move to ask, or call him out for his petty, spiteful disdain. "I am sure he will." If he went through the motions of trusting in Aragorn's judgement and leadership often enough, maybe he would even believe in it himself one day. The knowledge that he himself would not do better than he, as he had proven his weakness when he had tried to take the Ring, was no consolation, but at least it forced him to try harder to trust the man who, fate willing, would one day take the Throne of Gondor as his own. She tilted her head and softly pressed his hand, in a gesture that whispered too much of pity for his taste to give comfort, but at least she had seen his discomfort and was merciful enough to speak of different things, things that did not pertain to the future King of Gondor, but to their own, immediate concerns. "I have taken a look at your camp at Parth Galen again; the boat is still there and untouched, besides what I have taken, so we can leave mine here and will not face the challenge of carrying it up the steep steps. We are lucky indeed – it would have slowed us down considerably."

He nodded mutely. "So when shall we depart?"

She sighed. "You know that I told you we would go when you are ready? I fear that I cannot keep that promise. Orcs are creeping near, and my heart tells me that we have already lingered too long. Tomorrow at nightfall, we will depart. I hope that I can paddle us to the end of Nen Hithoel so you can rest after we have ascended the Falls, but I cannot guarantee."

Boromir had his doubts about this course of action – he had seen how he felt today after only a few minutes of standing and wielding a sword, how would it be to trek upstream through the wilds? But there was nothing he could do about it – she was right, he knew from the hours he had watched the edges of the Elven dagger shine in the darkness, the glow slowly becoming stronger as the night passed. He just had to endure it, to prove that the Men of Gondor were just as hardened and durable as he always claimed... and maybe at the end of it, there would even wait a little bit of safety for him, and a purpose other than defending his homeland from its arch enemy.

Kapitel 6: Chapter Six

Chapter Six

March the 8th, Year 3019 of the Third Age.

She had let him sleep as long as possible, and Boromir appreciated it, because he would need the additional rest, although she was making the next days and their travels a lot harder for herself by her sacrifice. When she woke him shortly before sunset, he saw that she had put the time awake to good use. His shirt and trousers were as well-mended as was possible under the conditions, and she had converted both some of the blankets and a spare coat of hers into something that would at least keep him warm. It did not look good – in fact, it looked downright ridiculous, but it would have to make do. As for his feeling of embarrassment, well, *she* had seen him very nearly naked, and he doubted that they would encounter anyone on their trek that would care for his state of dress. He could think of nothing to meet but Orcs, and Orcs would be much more interested in killing him slowly and painfully than in assessing his attire.

The thought must have curled his lips, albeit slightly, because she halted in packing their things and putting those she did not intend to take under the boat, looking up at him. "What is it?"

"Nothing," replied he, because he really appreciated her efforts, and would even more as soon as they were out in the open, cold and wet, and did not want to offend her.

"Well, I guess I can imagine." She grabbed the thick cloth that had formed his bed to put it into her bag. "Not even an Elf would look gracious in this."

She delivered the line so drily that at first, he did not know how to react, until he slowly started to chuckle. "I guess you are right. Nevertheless, I thank you."

She smiled up at him and then stood to pat his arm carefully. "It is of no consequence."

He thought differently, though at the moment, he did not want to tell her so, could not bring himself to. She had saved him, and he owed her his life. That was not a debt as easily discarded as being handed a goblet of wine, or having his horse brought out for him, not one he could repay just with his thanks and a smile, walking away afterwards and continuing his life as he had before. However, he had not even done that properly, he remembered with a sudden surge of guilt towards her – he had not even told her how grateful he was that she had saved his life. At first, when he had woken up, and pain, guilt and helplessness gnawed at him, it would have felt too much like a lie, thanking her for something that he had neither wanted nor asked of her... and now that he thought himself lucky having survived, and even hoped that there would be a future for him, though a bleak and lonely one, should they win this war, the right time had passed. His neglect was draining him... and yet, what should he do? Just stand in front of her and thank her, then carry on as if nothing had happened? The very idea was ridiculous. She would feel that he had just said it to alleviate his lingering feelings of guilt and debt towards her, and rightly so, and that, he did not want. It tasted too much like selfishness, and he hoped to leave that feeling behind, though he knew that he had a long way ahead of him – just like they had, in their wish to return to Lórien.

They had packed their things and hidden as many traces of their presence at their

camp as possible, and now, there was nothing to do but wait for nightfall. Boromir was clad in his makeshift attire and the hood from Lórien, and looked over to her, who was peaking out through the entry into the growing darkness.

"What about your sword?"

"My sword?" She looked at him with surprise.

"Would you mind lending it to me for the moment? I would be in danger if we were to be separated."

She tilted her head. "You are in danger nevertheless, and I do not think you strong enough to carry it yet. In a few hours, you will think even your Elven cloak too heavy." He shook his head, hiding the gritting of his teeth at her insinuation to his weakness that he still resented. "What is a swordsman without a sword?"

Her annoyance was clear, but she nevertheless opened the leather straps that held her scabbard at her side and handed it to him. "What is a swordsman with a sword, but panting on the floor? You will remember my words."

He turned proudly, though he could already hear the truth ringing in her assurance, and attached the blade to his own makeshift belt, instantly enjoying its comforting weight, although it hung at his wrong side. "Thank you." He had sounded haughty, he knew, and, maybe as a means of retaliation, she declared the dusk dark enough to leave and begin their journey.

"Come." Her voice was calm as she slipped out into the night with an ease and grace he envied, as pain still shot through his body with every move and every step and he fought to calm his ragged breaths and small sounds of pain. He nevertheless turned with her as she halted her feet for a last look back at the camp they had spent so many long days and nights in, and he shook his head – from here, it seemed like a miracle that the cellar had not collapsed over their heads!

With a last, encouraging smile from her side they set off as quietly as they could, Arnuilas drawing her dagger every few minutes out of its sheath to see the first signs of Orc presence while she waited for him to catch up. It gnawed at him, that he fell back so often, even though she had considerably slowed her steps from her usual, brisk pace, and he tried to keep himself from panting as he dragged himself onwards. They were slow... so slow. The pain in his wounds was burning as he forced himself onwards, and yet, his sacrifice seemed in vain. They were merely crawling towards the Great Fall, and even though he had been hearing its roar since the day he had woken up from his fever, it seemed immeasurably far away, so far that he could never reach it, much less climb the stairs to its top.

"Boromir?" Her quiet voice called out through the darkness towards him, and he realized that he had fallen back again, then forced his legs to carry him further.

"Yes?" He pressed out the single word, and he thought he could see the pity in her eyes even in the dim moonlight.

"Shall we rest?"

He grit his teeth, then shook his head – they hadn't even walked for a full half hour! "I am fine."

That she did not believe him was apparent in the way she turned and looked at him every few steps, not trusting him to follow her pace, but where once, he would have found her over-zealous care annoying, he now realized that the way she watched out for him and waited until he had caught up made him carry on in a way he could not have done had he relied only on the strength of his own will. She was there... and he mattered to her, and that was enough to push him forward until they reached the uneven steps carved into the rock at the bottom of the falls, even though his

breathing had become heavier and heavier and the occasional cough had racked his frame.

"Sit," she whispered as she herself sank down onto the first steps, where the last remnants of the spray cooled his heated face, and he joined her, closing his eyes immediately and only opening them again when she pushed a vial into his hands.

"Here. Only a sip, but it will help you."

Even though his mind insisted that reluctance was in order, especially as both the bottle and the draught were obviously of Elven origin, he opened it immediately and had to keep himself from drowning it as a whole, so desperate was he. What had been a mere stroll two weeks ago seemed now to be an impossible task that loomed before him, and even though he hated the idea of needing sorcery for what should be easy for him, he was not enough of a fool to believe that he would last the night without it. That he enjoyed the feel of it, the gentle, caressing warmth that spread through his limbs, loved the way it eased his breathing and made the strength return to his limbs, made him resent his own weakness even more, but he just handed it back to her and nodded, hoping that none of his shameful feelings had shown in his countenance.

"I am ready."

Despite his brave declaration, the stairs were hell, and every step seemed like the whole of the Misty Mountains to him, with his lungs burning and his right leg crying out every time he moved or put weight on it. At first, he tried to walk, preserving his dignity in front of Arnuilas, who had chosen to take the rear this time, undoubtedly so she could catch him should he stumble and fall, but soon, he felt so weak, so exhausted, so tormented by his wounds, that arrogance and pride lost their grip on his mind. He just wanted to go on, though the distant goal at the top of the stairs lost focus in his mind until he only knew that every step forward brought him closer to safety, whatever that was, and that his torments would let him survive. He told himself that he had to take just one more step before he could rest, and when he had forced his feet to rise and placed them as steadily as possible on the stone, when he had pushed his body upwards with all the strength he had left, needing all of it for every small movement, he drove himself to take another, and another, until his mind was only a haze of pain and desperate determination to reach a goal whose importance he had already forgotten.

He had not one single thought to spare for the woman behind him, as, after a few minutes, he was reduced to using his uninjured hand to crawl up one step after the other, and he found it easier to forget her presence altogether than entertain the notion of someone – *anyone* – and especially a woman seeing him in such a state. She was tactful – or herself tired – enough not to bring herself to his attention, and only when he stumbled upon a platform of sorts, high above the river and about halfway from the top, and nearly fell over, her arm shot out and grabbed his elbow to prevent him from hitting the ground and tumbling down into unseen depths.

He must have stared at her like a wild, wounded beast, for she instantly pulled back, and instead spoke to him quietly, but with an urgency that let him dimly realize that she feared not only for his body, but for his mind. "Let us rest here for a few minutes." As much as every fibre of him had craved a few minutes of repose, as efficient the mere idea of it had been when he tried to drag himself onward, now that he had what he wanted, it did not feel that good. His lungs hurt, he fought to regain control over his breath, and exhausted as he was, he only sipped a few drops of water and refused the waffle of *lembas* Arnuilas wanted to hand him, for the thought of food made him near violently sick. The few minutes they stayed, he sat on the cold, rough stone floor,

wet from the spray and mist of the fall, panting hard and trying to forget about all the pain he felt, and that it would intensify as soon as they got up again and moved onward. That he had not stumbled in his fatigue and dragged them both down into the depths was a miracle in itself... or had she stopped him, and he just did not remember? He knew not... and he cared not... he was too tired, too exhausted, too...

He must have dozed off or briefly slipped into unconsciousness, for as he felt her hand on his shoulder, gently shaking him, he startled and opened his eyes, not aware that he had ever closed them. "What is it?"

"We must go."

In that moment, as she spoke those words, he hated her, no matter how indebted he was to her for saving his life, and would probably have snarled and insulted her, had he not been far too weak and in need of all his strength to keep his eyes open. So he just allowed her to pull him up from the floor and steady him with her body, and then he walked on, took the few, painful steps until the stairs started again, leading steadily upwards into the darkness of the moonless, cloudy night.

Of the second leg of their journey upwards to the Nen Hithoel, he only remembered a haze of pain and the growing darkness at the edges of his vision that had nothing to do with the night, and when they reached the top, she still dragged him onward, to the boat that his companions had left there. While she readied it and carried it over to the slowly flowing water, a good bit away from the dangerous currents of the Rauros, he dropped himself unceremoniously to the floor, not caring what parts of him he could injure in the process. All of him hurt, his entire being screamed, and no additional wound could make it worse.

March the 9th, Year 3019 of the Third Age.

He woke up lying in a boat just like the one he had travelled so many miles downstream in, his head propped against one of the benches, a blanket carefully draped over his body, and the soothing gurgling of the Anduin just nearby.

"Good. You're awake." Her voice made him squint and focus his blurred vision, and he found her sitting at the bow, where she had dragged the ship up a muddy piece of waterside to prevent it from making leeway.

He slowly moved his hand to his forehead, searching for the pain that nested behind it, and groaned at the movement. Everything hurt. *Everything*. He could not move, he could not think, he dared not to speak... he had not known that he could feel so terrible *at all*. Not even when he had first awoken in the cellar to the pain of his wounds, not even when she had moved him the first time, had he felt like this, and he sincerely doubted that waking up was *good* as she had claimed. At the moment, he would have vastly preferred to die while unconscious.

"When...", murmured he finally as he thought he detected increasing worry in her blue eyes, and she leaned forward in the reeling boat to catch his meaning.

"You have slept through dawn and the whole morning."

He had worried that they had been delayed by his insupportable weakness, at least for a moment, but it seemed that she had managed to get him to the boat somehow.

"Where?"

"At the Anduin, near the outlet to the Nen Hithoel."

"You brought us... far."

She grabbed the water bag carefully and led it to his lips, this time not even giving him the opportunity to object; then again, he wouldn't have. He might be a fool, but even

so, he was not misguided enough to truly think he could grab it, or even raise his hand a second time after his first, painful attempt, made before he painfully realized the extent of his weakness. After he had swallowed, he felt better, and his throat was not as parched dry as before. "What are you going to do now?"

She shrugged. "The current will be getting too strong for me soon, and we must decide if we keep the boat and you help me, or abandon it all together and continue on foot. At the moment, I'm more inclined to the first option... you are not fit to walk at all."

"Do you regret departing now?"

She instantly shook her head, and he felt his temper flare at her instant dismissal of his sufferings, but before he could call her out to it – or more whisper her out to it – she sighed. "No. I saw smoke rise from the South when we were crossing the lake, and I fear that its source was our resting place. Even now, I can feel the Orcs are approaching."

He sank back on his improvised cushion, feeling his desperation rise inside him. If Orcs were on their trail, it was only a matter of time until they found them, even with a guide as experienced as her, and then they were as good as dead. He had no hopes of outrunning a band of Orcs, not in his current state, and as soon as they left their boat, they would not even be able to cross the river to escape them.

"Maybe you should continue alone." It was his guilt speaking, his lowered self-esteem that made him think or propose such a possibility, but he knew that it had been a bad idea as soon as she stared at him incredulously. After all, his proposal did not only reflect on him, but also on her – and how could he suppose her to give up the man she had nursed for so long so she could survive?

"You surely must be joking." He could hear no amusement in her voice at all, only cold disdain. "I have not dragged you so far only to abandon now." She eyed him intently. "If you want to give up on yourself, that will not happen. You have cost me too much of an effort that I would let you die just like that."

She was drawing heavily on the debt he had incurred with her when she saved his life, and at this moment, he hated her for it, but he felt his pride and sense of honour rise to the occasion. "I will not. But neither will I make you sacrifice your life in a vain attempt to preserve what will not last."

She glared at him coolly, but in carrying this point he was as stubborn as in climbing the stairs up the Rauros, and when he saw her lip tremble only the slightest bit, he knew that he had won. "Fine," she spat out, but her tone was in stark contrast to the gentleness with which she brushed over his cheek as she fed him another few drops of the concoction.

"I believe I shall continue as long as the Orcs are still far away."

He nodded and tried to make himself as light as possible while she paddled, exertion clearly visible in the way she forced her body to move and audible in the way her breathing became strained after the first few strokes, and he dozed off again in an uneasy slumber into which the ceaseless sounds of the river intruded. More than once, he thought he was drowning, and only when he could feel the smooth, cool wood of the Elven boat under his hands again, he remembered that he was safe and that he could trust the woman who was steering it.

As the afternoon passed and his fatigue receded with the aid of more of the Elven draught, he pushed himself up and also grabbed a paddle, even though he regretted his decision after the first few strokes when his muscles protested and bile rose in his throat. But his pride made him continue, made him raise his arms again and again and

again, dipping the blade into the cold, grey water of the Anduin and drawing it back at his side where he felt his barely healed wound open up again. Part of him hoped that Arnuilas would sense his pain, that she would tell him to rest, but the current of the water had picked up while he slept and he could hear her strained breath behind him and felt her fight to keep the rhythm she had set. She was too tired and too exhausted herself to care for his suffering, and so they both struggled alone.

When the Argonath with the swiftly flowing waters between them forced Arnuilas to concede that there was no chance of continuing their travels by boat even with his help, night had fallen around them, and Boromir hoped that finally, he would be allowed to rest. His wounds at his side and shoulder had bled again, he could feel it beneath the thick bandages, and his whole upper body hurt, the exhaustion of his lately underused muscles nearly drowning out the pain of his injuries. He stumbled out of the boat as they landed at the Western side of the river, and Arnuilas joined him, pulling it up the shore so they could take out their bags, and then she sighed as she stretched and gingerly touched her shoulders. "It really is a shame."

He frowned at her, his mind befuddled by his exhaustion. "What?"

"The boat." Only when she grabbed her small axe, brought primarily for making firewood, he understood what she meant, and even though he could not fault her logic, he shared her sentiment - it hurt to destroy such beauty.

"Yes. Yes, it is."

The blade hit the smooth, grey wood with an ugly sound, chopping a hole into the boat's hull, then Arnuilas pushed it out into the current. But even dying, it seemed to sense her intent, because it did not sink near the shore, but allowed the Anduin to drag it into the depths of the river, where the Orcs would never find it. It had not been an encouraging picture, and that Arnuilas handed him his pack before she pulled out the bottle with the Elven draught again, made his heart constrict in fear of the coming torture. He was too tired and hurt already to continue, and yet continue he must if he valued his life, even though the Northern outskirts of the Eryn Mui rose threateningly before them. He took a deep gulp, then handed it back to Arnuilas, and that she only shook her head and did not berate him spoke of her own exhaustion.

"Thank you."

She chuckled mirthlessly. "Do not thank me. Before the night is gone, you will hate me with all your soul."

The first drops of rain, coming out of dark, heavy clouds that reminded Boromir uncannily of the eternal, looming darkness over the enemy's land, pounded down on them as Arnuilas led him up a small, slippery path from the river's shore to the ridge of the first of the hills. Despite the potion and its gentle caress, despite the *lembas* he had eaten that strengthened not only his body, but his mind, he wanted nothing more but fall to his knees and die right there as they reached the summit, but she urged him onward, first to take cover to rest a few minutes, then to walk further, until he could see the glow of the early morning in the East. But even then, she could not let him sleep, could not accept that he was at the end of his tether, that he could not take another step, and he understood again what she had meant with her earlier words, for he really and truly hated her, until even she and the way she made him carry on faded from his mind. He barely saw the path in front of him, barely felt his feet, and he made himself take step after step after step, promising himself that he could rest if he only reached that rock, or that tree, or even that puddle of dark, muddy water from the rain pounding down on him.

He had thought that his journey to Rivendell had been long and exhausting, and then

he had followed Gandalf to Moria... but this, this was worse than anything he had ever experienced, made him go further than he had ever gone. Every time he thought that he had reached his limits, she stood behind him, pulled him up, told him that he could not sit, could not stop, could not sleep, despite the pain, despite his exhaustion, despite his fatigue. By the end of the night, he resented the weight of the sword at his side, hated even the light cloak from Lórien, but only the knowledge that she had been right all along and his wish not to give her the satisfaction of gloating over him made him continue carrying it, just as his pride made him carry on, take step after step, as the pursuing Orcs gained ground.

Kapitel 7: Chapter Seven

Chapter Seven

March the 10th, Year 3019 of the Third Age.

He woke up after an uneasy slumber of what could not have been more than a few hours, and at first, he thought that he was still dreaming of happier times, because the warm flames of a small fire basked him in heat. It felt like heaven, soothing his sore, protesting muscles, and he slowly straightened up to rub his hands over it, enjoying it while it lasted, though now he was realizing that he was not asleep.

"Why this?" asked he the woman that sat besides him and now looked just as exhausted as he felt, her face haggard and the shadows he had noticed on her face before hardened into dark lines around her mouth and eyes by her exhaustion.

"The Orcs are already following our trail, and speed is of more importance than secrecy now, so we can at least enjoy a fire, even though I can't offer you any broth."

He nodded stiffly, the muscles in his shoulders protesting, even though he now almost regretted that they had left their small kettle behind at their camp, where the Orcs had undoubtedly found it by now. When he did not continue, his lips as heavy and unresponsive as the rest of his body and talking too tiring for him to make the effort, she did, and now that he was fully awake, he could hear how much she had to pull herself together to sound as calm and detached as she did. "I have redressed your wounds while you slept."

That she did not scold him for carrying on even as he knew that they had opened again spoke of her quiet desperation, of her real assessment of the situation, and when she pulled her dagger from her belt, he could see for himself how the glow had strengthened, how the Orcs had gained ground on them. "Thank you."

She stared into the flames silently, rubbing her slender, calloused hands so they would warm, and he turned away, hoping to now give her the privacy she had so often allowed himself when he had wanted to be alone with his distraught thoughts and his fears. The movement made his muscles protest, and he shrugged his shoulders carefully, hoping to relieve some of the tension from them, but failing miserably, and irritating his wound in the process. It hurt... it hurt so much, and idly, he wondered when he would reach his limits, when he would just stumble and fall, without the strength or the will to stand up. Of all his journeys, of all his marches with his troops, this was by far the hardest, and he knew that the moment wasn't far – if the Orcs would not catch them before.

As he reached up to gingerly touch the hardened muscles of his neck, he grimaced, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw Arnuilas look up, and noticed with relief that the silent fear in her eyes had receded and that she even smiled at him, though only slightly. "Here, let me."

She crouched over to him, finally settling herself behind him, and before his still slightly befuddled mind could comprehend her intent, he felt her still cold hands on his broad shoulders and closed his eyes. It felt... good, so very good, as he could feel her behind her, her fingers moving over the thick, rough cloth of his makeshift tunic, nearly caressing his tense, clenched muscles. She did not do much more than stroke, softly, or maybe prod a little at this or that sore point, but his body ached so much that even the small contact felt like exquisite torture. It hurt, yes, but at the same

time, he relished the feeling so much that he never wanted her to stop so she could, at least for a moment or two, ease the tension that had gripped his body for so long, probably even since his brother had first dreamt of Isildur's Bane.

He only heard his grown when it had already escaped his lips and instantly felt ashamed for it, but she did not draw away, did not even still her movements, but continued, her voice soft in his ear, and he could feel her sincerity seep directly into his soul. "You are a strong man, Boromir. Never doubt that."

He very much doubted her words at that juncture of his life, and had started to do so even longer ago, but the simpleness of them made him smile. They were not spoken to rally his spirits for a last fight, to make him continue on an arduous road, but born out of the feeling of the moment; knowing that, despite everything he had done, at least one being on the face of Middle Earth respected him still was worth much, and he thought that could make him continue in the worst moments.

That she still did not know of his crime, that he still hadn't told her of his treachery, dampened his joy, but her soft hands on his shoulders kept him from wallowing in his self-pity, reminded him through their touch that she was there, and that she would not go away, at least until they reached the end of their journey, either way. They were not friends – not yet, and maybe they would never be – but she was here, here for him, and he for her should she need him, and that companionship gave him strength in a way the Fellowship had never had. He had been alone among them from the beginning, and even more so when they had approached the end of their journey together, but with Arnuilas, he wasn't, and it made all the difference in the world.

"You are stronger than me." His voice sounded hoarse from exhaustion, betraying his weakness, and he heard her sigh behind him as her hands stilled on his shoulders.

"No, I am not." For a faint moment, he thought she would continue, but she did not, and instead stood, then held out her hand for him to take it. Mere days ago, he would not have accepted her aid, but his pride had long ceased that hopeless struggle, and so he just reached out and allowed her to pull him upwards, not letting go of her arm until he had steadied himself.

She stepped back when she was sure that he would be able to stand on his own, then looked upwards into the cloudy late winter sky. "We must go."

"I know." The words pained him because by now, he knew all too well what continuing entailed, but he had no choice, and no matter how desperate he was, he would not give up his life lightly, if only because she had fought so hard to preserve it.

She smiled at him, then they set to work together, killing the small fire and gathering their few belongings, and within a few minutes, they were under way again, steadily travelling North through the rugged hills. But fake confidence could not belie the fact that his strength was waning after the days of exhaustion behind him, while his injuries still pained him and sometimes bled, and will could only do so much when the body refused to take another step. For the moment, it might carry him onward, but he knew all too well that he would falter, and the sorrow in her blue eyes told him that Arnuilas had understood that as well. When she gauged his speed and his movements, his strained breath and his stumbling steps, he could not shake the feeling that she was estimating when he would cave and she would have to continue on her own. Only the beginning darkness shielded him from her eyes as they crossed the last foothills of the Emyrn Muil and then stumbled down a steep slope until they could hear the slowly running waters of the Great River behind the line of trees on their right.

Where before, they had fought their way over the mountainous terrain of the hills, they now had a narrow path to follow that led them over the soft, leaf-covered forest

floor, and Boromir felt his feet grow lighter after the arduous trek over the rocks. Even though it should have been time for a rest, they continued, spurred on by the way they could speed up now that Boromir did not stumble with every step, and they followed the Anduin until he barely felt his feet any more and just continued because he knew he must, without any reason beyond that vaguely felt purpose.

March the 11th, Year 3019 of the Third Age

They camped shortly before nightfall near the river, but he did little but stumble to the point she had chosen and then fall to the ground, only rolling onto the blankets she had spread on the muddy ground at her insistent prompting. Arnuilas pushed an unruly strand of dark hair behind her ear and stared into the growing darkness, unsure if she should risk a fire tonight, then decided against it. It was one thing to warm up a little in the late afternoon, but another altogether to light a beacon that would lead the Orcs directly to them in the middle of the night. She sighed and grabbed her blanket, then draped it around Boromir's shoulders. He was so brave and so strong in the face of his injuries, and yet, it would not be enough. Though she did not tell him, and doubted that he would understand her if she did, the band of Orcs that was following them crept nearer and nearer with the hour – but there was nothing she could do about it. They could not, would not outrun them, not with his wounds, not in the weak state he was in, and, if she was honest, she slowly approached the point when she would be in no better state. She ate little and slept less, and there were limitations to what even Lembas could do for them. Fact was, they were good as dead. After all she had done and achieved, after her success in tending to his injuries, after he had overcome his fever... they were dead. The futility of it all nearly made her cry and she bit her lip, forcing herself to calm her breathing and compose herself, to *think*.

There had to be something, *anything at all*, that she could do to save his life, but her tired, exhausted brain could think of no way, and in all likelihood, there was none. She was alone and the Orcs behind her many, he in no state to fight... she sighed and pulled closer to where he lay, watching him in the growing darkness beneath the leafless branches of the trees above them. He was a good man, strong and noble, but all of it would not help him. He would die here in the wilds with her – a waste of life that she bemoaned quietly to distract herself from her own fear. She had contemplated death often enough, for living in the northern wilds, there was no way to avoid that thought, but now that her own was imminent, she could not deny that she was afraid. Terribly afraid.

Careful fingers found his parched cheek and she caressed it gently, feeling his grown beard under her fingers and then the soft skin at this neck. He mumbled in his sleep or unconsciousness, she was not sure, and felt silent tears dripping down on her tunic, which, together with the warmth of his body, oddly calmed her a little. Perhaps feeling that he was alive, though exhausted, helped her not to lose her hope, and she intended to use this fact to her advantage. She rested at his side, her small hand carefully placed on his shoulder, feeling as he moved in his uneasy sleep, and drawing comfort from it, though she knew that she could not give him all that he needed, that she had failed in giving him the chance to heal the wounds that had not only afflicted his body, but also his mind.

Part of her wished to be alone in this desperate last flight, without an injured man hampering her progress so the Orcs would catch her, but no matter how much she

feared death now that she could feel it deep in her bones, she knew that she could not have left Boromir behind. It would have killed the woman she was, the woman she had always striven to be more efficient than any Orc arrow, and she was not ready to continue her life with such guilt loaded onto her shoulders. And so she settled herself onto the blankets, the Elven dagger's glow hidden by her hood, and began her restless night.

She had not slept, but only dozed for a few minutes at a time until darkness had settled around them and midnight approached and she knew she had to wake Boromir, but before she could move, an arrow hit the ground next to her with a whizzing sound. She knew not if it had found its way by sheer luck or the keen Orcish senses of her adversaries, but she knew she had to be quiet to stand a chance of survival, and so she pushed the savage curse from her lips. Boromir was still clad in his cloak from Lórien, and she pulled the hood over his face to render him invisible, then grabbed the bow and quiver lying at her side and looked up into the darkness. The light of moon and stars was dim, not enough to properly see, but the Orcs had approached them over the ridge just behind them and she could make them out against the night sky, and she smiled coolly.

The first of the creatures fell before it had realized that its prey was armed and ready to fight, and the second followed suit, while the third stormed towards her, scimitar drawn. It was upon her before she could even nock her next arrow and she pulled the Elven dagger, edges gleaming viciously, and then did what all of those who had taught her to fight would probably have slapped her for: she charged.

The Orc's first blow missed, so surprised was it by her sudden attack, and it stumbled back as she hit it with her weight, knocking it off balance. It would have gotten her though, had not a strong hand caught its ankle and torn it to the ground, an opportunity she used to stab it in the chest once, twice, thrice.

When it was dead and black blood clung to her fingers and had crept into every fine line on her hands, she pulled up quickly and helped Boromir stand, then picked up the bundle with the medicine and the lembas, leaving everything else behind. "We must hurry."

He nodded and stood, though he reeled a little, and she jostled him forward. "Go, I'll take the rear!" The dagger's edges had dimmed a little as she had killed their attacker, but still, the Orcs were near, and they had to run for their lives.

They hastened over their path, sometimes struggling through dense undergrowth that had tried to reclaim it for the forest, both of them soon out of breath and sweating, but they couldn't stop. But neither could they continue running infinitely, and while she fled, ducked behind trees and hoped that the Orcs wouldn't catch up with them soon or have competent archers, she asked herself where this should go. They would catch them at some point of their flight, and then they had to fight for their dear lives... but she could not think of that now. They had to run, run as fast as they could and as far, even though they had lost all hope of escaping the Orcs, but she was not prepared to give up her life yet, and neither was Boromir. And maybe... maybe they would meet some of the rare forces of good in a world steadily darkening. Maybe.

March the 12th, Year 3019 of the Third Age.

Their desperate attempt at flight had bought them a day with little rest and much

running, and their way had taken them further North following the course of the Anduin, but now, they both knew that it was over. She could hear the raucous laughter of the Orcs in their back, the rattling of their armour and their weapons, and she could feel fear gripping her heart tightly. She was afraid, afraid of dying, and from the look in Boromir's eyes, it was the same for him, although he had very nearly expired before.

She had climbed up to the lower branches of a tree, and pulled him up with her so he sat at the opposite side of the trunk, her Northern sword unfamiliar and clumsy in his hand while she adjusted her stance so she could shoot her bow at their attackers. It would buy them time, but not much of it – the Orcs would reach them eventually, and they knew it.

"Thank you."

She heard his deep, resonating voice from the side and turned to get a glimpse of him, and her heart nearly broke as she saw him smile.

"For what?" Her voice was raw with exhaustion and croaked out of her throat, but she did not mind – her bow hand was steady, and that was all that mattered now.

"For trying to save me. It would not have worked out, even if we had survived all of this, but thank you nevertheless."

She reached out and gently pressed his large, calloused hand that was cold as death, despite their exertion before. "Do not thank me. I failed."

"You might not have saved me, but you have not failed me. You have given me freedom in those last days, and for that, I thank you."

She smiled sadly, then let go of him and stood nimbly on the broad branch that she had chosen, nocking her first arrow, waiting for them to come, and come they did. When the first of the monsters appeared from the dense undergrowth at the bottom of the small valley she had chosen as their last stand, aimed and shot, picking out the first, vicious looking Orc that raced towards them screaming. He stumbled as her arrow hit him squarely in the chest, and his fellows, pushing from behind, trampled him as they approached further. She fired so fast that she did not have time to aim properly, but then again, she did not have to. They were coming towards them so densely packed that any shot that missed her target hit its neighbour, but it wasn't enough, and when she tried to pull an arrow out of her quiver that wasn't there, she only smiled sadly. She had always known that it would not be, but had nevertheless tried, and now, she drew her dagger, edges gleaming viciously, hoping that it would allow her to fight at least some of them off before she died. If they killed enough of them, they might be forced to return to their vicious master, and could not plunder the meadows of Rohan further. Even in her death, she would then protect good people, just as she had done for so long in her life.

The Orcs quickly noticed that she had run out of arrows and reached the trunk of the tree they stood on, the first of them trying to climb up, but hindered by their companions who jumped to grasp them. She felt her fear grow at the mass of enemies beneath them, but quickly stilled it, telling herself that by now, they were still in a position of vantage.

The first Orc had managed to grasp one of the lower branches and pulled himself up, but she just kicked it as it tried to pull on her ankles while she ducked one of the stray arrows that were aimed at her – thanks to all the powers in Middle Earth, they were short on archers.

The next sound she heard made her blood freeze, and when she looked down, she saw all her fears confirmed – the Orcs had pulled out their axes and had started to

hack at the tree they were sitting on, chopping it down to get to them, and she cursed in a way that no lady should have known.

"UP!" she cried out and Boromir heard her, grasping a higher branch and pulling himself up even though he screamed with pain as he did so. Maybe, if they got high enough, and the Orcs stupid enough, they could be able to flee further. He followed her up and up, into the crown of the tree, keeping up with her through her longer limbs, and she used one of the moments when she had breath enough to hiss, "To the river. We must stay together!"

He nodded at her choppily and then continued on, until their tree reeled dangerously, as the orcs hacked at it with vicious spitting sounds. "Lean down," she whispered, pressing his hand and not knowing from where she gathered her fighting spirit, and he smiled at her bittersweetly.

"You are the bravest woman I've ever known."

She wanted to thank him for his words in the few seconds of respite they had, but the tree had started to tilt, and they both used all their weight to lean it to the direction they wanted it. It worked – the tree fell down the hill, and they tumbled down in a haze of dry dirt and leaves while the Orcs still stood at the tree stump they had created. She thought she heard something crack that sounded suspiciously like bone, but could pay the thought no heed, and instead ran, ran with all the might her fear and her terror could lend to her screaming, overused muscles. Boromir remained at her side, running though he was crying out with pain, and they both plunged forward as they reached the waterside, hitting the cool water of the Anduin while she could hear the Orcs pursuing them and the hissing of arrows next to her ear.

She let her soaking clothes drag her under, and he did the same, hoping that diving would put the Orcs off their trails, but knowing that it was only a glorified form of killing themselves without falling in the clutches of their pursuers, which would have meant a death more terrible than she cared to imagine. She grabbed his coat in the muddy water of the Anduin, not wanting to lose him, trying to retain a sense of direction, but the current quickly overtook them and they were swept away, in vain trying to swim or only to hold their head over the surface so they could breath.

Kapitel 8: Chapter Eight

Chapter Eight

March the 13th, Year 3019 of the Third Age.

She woke up to the low crackle of a well going fire, but after the first moments of relief when she realized that she was not dead, panic took hold of her. Had the Orcs found her and Boromir in the river? Had they taken them and were now nursing them only to deliver them as prisoners to Sauron?

Training and experience allowed her to battle her growing fear with her eyes closed and her breath steady so her capturers would not notice that she had awakened, and then, when her heart had slowed down again and she could think, she slowly took stock of her numb limbs. To her surprise, neither her wrists nor her legs were bound – had they thought her too weak to resist them? Then they would be in for a surprise.

She listened and heard light feet shuffling over the ground, and then words spoken in a language she knew – Sindarin! Relief washed through her – no servant of the enemy would dare speak in that tongue – and she allowed herself to relax her tight control over her reactions and sighed. She was safe. Elves had found her, and she was safe. Safe and alive... Whoever was watching over her had noticed her reaction, because she could feel movement nearby, and she opened her eyes and looked up into the face of Haldir, Marchwarden of Lórien. "You are awake. Good."

She bit back the tears that welled up in her eyes as she too vividly imagined the darkness that had surrounded her, the way the murky water of the Anduin had filled her mouth and her lungs, her desperation as her grip on Boromir's tunic had weakened... "Boromir!"

She coughed violently after she had spat out his name, and Haldir's face instantly darkened, making her stomach clench nearly painfully. She had lost him in the dark, swift water, had let go of him because she needed all of her strength for herself, and what if they had not...?

"We have pulled him from the river as well, and he is being taken care of."

She fell back onto the Elven blankets as her fear vanished and left behind only bone-deep exhaustion after her long flight to the North. "Thank Elbereth! He is alive... that is more than I have dared hope for."

Haldir handed her a bottle of water and she took it, swallowing a few sips carefully as not to irritate her sore throat, and watching the Elf in front of her with the distinct feeling that something was... wrong. It made her stomach knot tightly, and she pushed herself up again, trying to ignore the blackness approaching from the corners of her vision. "Are his injuries so severe?"

Haldir frowned at her. "They are not. He will recover in time."

She wanted to ask him what troubled him, because she needed to know, had the right to know after she'd borne the weight of their survival on her shoulders for so long, but she quelled the urge and the words did not reach her lips. She had dealt with enough Elves in her life to know the look on Haldir's face, that firm resolve, and even though he was more warrior than sage, she doubted that she could persuade him to tell her, at least not now and not in her current, weakened state.

"You need to rest." For a moment, she tried to resist the firm hand on her shoulder, but then she allowed him to push her down onto the blankets again, acknowledging

that today was not the time to get the answers she needed to push away that terrible feeling of dread in her stomach. Instead, she forced herself to smile up at him with only the slightest trace of sarcasm – she now knew how Boromir must have felt when she had taken care of him, and she could sympathize. “I have not expected to meet you here, Marchwarden. You are a long way from Lórien's borders.”

Haldir nodded, accepting that for now, she had given up on her previous line of questioning. “That we are. But our Lady has sent us to the South by horse, telling us there would be those in need of our help, and now we have found them.”

She breathed a sigh of relief that both fate and Lady Galadriel had deemed her and Boromir important enough to be saved, albeit she had seen Lórien under attack even before they had departed from their camp at the Falls. “Then we have to thank you, and the high Lady, Haldir, Marchwarden of Lórien.”

He acknowledged her words with a graceful half-bow and smiled at her. “It was both my duty and my honour.”

She sighed softly and leaned back into her makeshift pillow. “What day is it?”

“The thirteenth.”

The answer relieved her, because she now knew that she had not been unconscious very long, and she looked up at the slightly swooning, but bare branches of the trees above, while thoughts of another tree intruded into her mind and she tightly shut her eyes, as if she could get rid of them this way. She truly had nearly died, and the thought still made her shiver.

“What about the Orcs?”

Despite his Elven intransigence, Haldir was enough of a warrior to understand what she was asking for. “There were only thirty of them left. We apprehended them as they were following you down the River, and slew them all.”

She took a deep breath and tried to find solace in the knowledge that all of their pursuers were dead, but it was proving harder than she had thought. Too deeply ingrained were the memories of their hunt, of the constant fear and terror she had to battle, fear not only for herself, but also for the man she had saved, and she could not shake them off at will as she had hoped. “Where did they come from?”

“They all bore the mark of Sauron, and most likely came from Mordor. Our scouts have found tracks of many more of them, and they are roaming freely West of the Anduin, until they reach our Southern borders and unite with their brothers from Mordor.”

“So this is not the end of a dangerous journey, but the beginning.”

“Indeed. We will depart for the North on the morrow, and even though my forces are strong enough to dispatch any group of stray Orcs, you know the vagaries of war as well as I.” She nodded jerkily, not fancying the thought of another forced march up the Anduin, and Haldir smiled again. “Do not concern yourself for now, and rest. You will feel better in the morning.”

Her exhaustion silenced every protest she might have been inclined to make, and even her restless thoughts and her worries did not keep her from falling into deep, dreamless sleep only minutes later.

March the 14th, Year 3019 of the Third Age.

She was woken by a slender Elven hand on her shoulder and looked up at Haldir, who was sitting on his heels next to her, staring down at her with a deep frown. “It is time to wake up. We have to go.”

Even though she could only see the first tendrils of pink on the Eastern sky, she felt

more rested than she had in weeks, maybe since she had departed Lórien so long ago, so she nodded and pushed herself up with only the tiniest hesitation and much less pain in her overstrained muscles than she had expected. Now that she sat and could survey her surroundings, she understood that the evening before, she had greatly underestimated how many of his men Haldir had led South. At least two dozen Elves were busying themselves around her, breaking up the camp they had set up two days ago, and they had brought many of the white and grey horses of the Galadhrim with them.

Arnuilas smiled, but not her companion, who looked as grave and concerned as he had the evening before. "We do not know what to know with the Man," he said in Sindarin, and she startled, frowning at him.

"What is the meaning of this, Haldir?" replied she in kind, her words a mere whisper as he clearly wished not to be overheard, and especially not by the object of their conversation. "Why do you speak so of Boromir? He is to come with us, without a doubt."

"We fear his treachery, and are concerned for his mind."

For a moment, she asked herself what he had done while she had slept, and her fear caught in her features, plain to see for Haldir until she composed herself, summoning the incredulous mask her growing loyalty for Boromir demanded. "His treachery?" asked she, electing not to tell him about her own concerns for his sanity during the last, long weeks.

Haldir sighed, aware that she was carefully guarding her reactions. "He will not have told you."

Her annoyance grew, fear and flight clearly taking their toll on her patience as she contemplated what the Elf was obviously proposing. "And you have not, either, Haldir. But nevertheless, no matter what he has done or not done, I have not nursed him back to life and then hauled him through the wilds for two weeks just to leave him behind now. It is either both of us, or none."

She had spoken more fiercely than both she and Haldir had expected, she could see it clearly on his surprised face, but after glancing around quickly, at his people readying their horses just out of earshot, he nodded jerkily. "If that is your wish, Ranger, then we will take him with us, but keep your eyes on him. He is a dangerous man even wounded, and I would not want mine to be injured because of your carelessness."

She doubted that Haldir would appreciate her sarcasm, and so she turned to gather what little of her belongings were left after their long flight up the Anduin with angry, jerky motions. The Elven dagger she had carried for so long was still attached to her belt, and her bow was lying besides her bed, but even though she feared that the water had damaged it, the Elves had filled her quiver again. Besides that, and her sword she hoped Boromir had held onto as the river swallowed them, she had nothing left but her well-worn Ranger's clothes. If Haldir changed his mind and actually decided to leave them behind, she would be in a terrible position. *Well, maybe I will get used to it after all.*

His pale eyes were following her every movement intently, and when she had finished packing, the exertion to her still sore body had also served to cool her growing anger and allowed her to answer him as she knew she should. "I will, Haldir."

He nodded again, the slight crease on his brow slowly matting out, and even managed to smile at her. "As you wish." For a moment, he turned, observing his men's preparation and ordering them to ready a horse for her, before focusing his attention back to her. "Though we have defeated the Orcs pursuing you, the wilds are still a

dangerous place, and I do not want to linger now that you have recovered. Will you ride with Boromir? None of my people will, and we are short on horses."

"Of course."

When Haldir had given his orders, she had searched for Boromir among the tall, flaxen-haired Elves, but not found him, and only now, when the Marchwarden gestured towards the river's shore, she saw him. He was standing away from their rescuers, staring out at the dark, slowly gurgling river with a posture that spoke of deep thought, but if he had distanced himself or had been driven away because of the Elves' disdain, she did not know. Slowly, she walked over to him, observing that he had shed his makeshift clothing, only keeping his grey hood from Lórien, his boots, and her sword at his side, and was now clad in a lent Elven attire that seemed to tight in places, but nevertheless was an improvement. "Good morning."

He turned towards her, away from his intense study of the Anduin whose proximity still rendered her uncomfortable, and directed the ghost of a smile at her. "You are awake."

She nodded softly, but did not answer, sensing that there was something that bothered him still after weeks of learning to read him, but nevertheless surprised when she actually continued. "I was worried for you. The Elves told me you would be fine, but you swallowed so much water, and when I lost you in the river..."

He did not speak further, but then again, he had not to. She remembered only too well how she had felt at that moment, even though she had been barely conscious, and she reached out and softly pressed his forearm. "I know." She waited for him to turn and acknowledge her gesture, and then smiled up at him. "But we are here, and we are not dead. Against all odds, we have survived, and we soon will be in the safety of Lórien."

He nodded, though the thought obviously did not hold as much appeal for him as it did for her, and reached for her hand that was, contrary to all the other times he had seen her, rather clean, and pressed it softly with his own, before he let go of her and turned to rejoin the others who had nearly finished breaking up camp.

"The Elves told me that we will have to ride together."

"We will." She followed him up the muddy shore. "Or would you walk?"

He shook his head. "I have walked enough to last for a lifetime."

The Elves had already saddled a horse for them, as even Arnuilas could not ride as was their custom, and when they approached them, one of the soldiers handed her the reins.

"What is his name?" asked she in Sindarin, as she knew most of Haldir's men did not speak the common language, and the Elf affectionately smiled.

"Cilian."

"Then I hope you will carry us well, Cilian, and that we will not be too much of a burden to you." Cilian did not answer, but only snorted, then turned to face Boromir curiously as its keeper disappeared to attend to his other duties.

Arnuilas grinned. "At least good for him that we were on tight rations for the last week."

Boromir only shook his head in mild annoyance as he stretched out his hand to let Cilian smell it, then patted its nose and took the reins from Arnuilas's hand. "You should rest for a while."

For a moment, she was tempted to point out to him that he still sported a rather pronounced limb and was not doing very well pretending he was not in pain, but in the end, she just stepped back so he could mount, and then followed him up into the

saddle behind him. Carefully, she entwined her arms around his chest to find purchase without touching his wounds or hurting him further, and adjusting her position after she'd accidentally touched the sensitive area on his abdomen where one of the arrows had hit him and he'd flinched rather violently. "Forgive me."

He just shook his head and tightened his grip on the reins, watching as the last of their Elven companions mounted their horses with an effortless grace that made Arnuilas envious, then allowing Cilian to fall into step near them as they proceeded on the path near the river's shore they had been following since they had left the Eryn Muil. Arnuilas could dimly remember some of the landmarks they passed from their hurried flight two days before and hoped that they would not pass their last battlefield as they travelled North, but her shudder went unnoticed by all but Boromir. The path was too small to admit more than one horse at a time, and so none of the Elves were close enough to witness her reaction, but even Boromir chose not to comment on it, and his silence felt natural to her as darkness was intruding into her thoughts. The relief she had felt when she had understood that she was safe, at least for the moment, had worn off, been replaced by a heavy sense of foreboding that stemmed from her knowledge of the ongoing war in the South, the dire situation of Lórien, and, more recently and even more relevant to her current situation, Haldir's mysterious words about Boromir's treachery that haunted her still.

She could not very well ask him about what he had done, but yet, what the Marchwarden had told her acquired an eerie credibility by her own conversations with him. Boromir had seemed so disheartened at times when she had talked to him, and hinted more than once that she should not have saved him, because he felt that he was not worth saving. It fit to him having done something terrible to the Fellowship, something that had caused it to break, thereby not only destroying their bond of friendship, but also his self-esteem. She longed to find out, but she had nursed him long enough to understand his fierce sense of pride, knowledge that now made her sure he would not talk to her, and not here of all places, where sharp Elven ears could listen in to their conversation.

"You should sleep," said he after about an hour or so, as the constant rocking of the horse's movement began to lull her and she had to focus her attention on keeping her posture straight. "For once, I should take care of you instead you of me."

She nodded softly and placed her head on his strong, broad back, clasping her hands together in front of his chest firmly, and, very soon, fell asleep to the horse's motions and the sound of his breath.

The weight of the woman sitting in the saddle behind him had not been uncomfortable, though he had been forced to steady her various times lest she slide to the ground, and he smiled as she lay besides him on the blankets that the Elves had put out for her. He, he of all people, was the one who knew best how tired and exhausted she was, and how lightly she had slept during all the time she had guarded him, waking up at the slightest sound even though she knew that he watched out for enemies. That she now felt so secure, when resting at his back, that she would not even stir in the evening, when they set up camp again, was a compliment he could not value highly enough.

"Boromir." Unnoticed by him, Haldir had approached their bedside and now towered behind him, glowering down at him with the look of disdain he had sported constantly since he had woken up, sputtering and nearly choking on the water he had swallowed. Undoubtedly, the man knew what he had done to Frodo, had possibly been informed

by his witch of a mistress, and now acted accordingly, giving him just a taste of what he had to expect when he met those of the Fellowship again who had survived. He could not blame him – he himself thought every possible punishment acceptably, but there were those moments when his old pride still advanced and insisted on hating Haldir for his disdain.

"You seem intent on staying at her side." Barely concealed distrust seeped from the few words, and he stood as he heard them, tall enough to look the Elf in the eye.

"She has saved my life at least twice. You may think me a man without honour, but I know I am indebted to her, and I intend to repay that debt in full."

Their gazes crossed, but here and now, against this elf, Boromir held his own, knowing with absolute certainty that this woman would always be able to call on him, his sword ready at her command, no matter what it was she needed him for. He would even go to the fires of Mount Doom for her if she asked, as it was his duty now... just as it had been his duty to Frodo, whom he had failed. But he would not make the same mistake again.

Haldir finally nodded and, to his surprise, was the first to look away, but still Boromir had the feeling that he had gained favour in his eyes, and his suspicion was confirmed when one of the Elves, a woman just as tall as her fellows, approached and handed him two bowls of soup. "Wake her. She will need it."

He nodded and turned to her even before he smelled at his own portion, carefully shaking her shoulder while she tried to turn away, obviously intent on ignoring the disturbance. He smiled, he just had to, but finally she opened her eyes to face him and then rose to sit. As she looked at him, he noticed with satisfaction that some of the healthy colour had returned to her cheeks and that she was not as pale as before.

"They have cooked."

She nodded and he handed her the warm, steaming bowl, her still shaking fingers holding his own for a moment before he pulled away, finally sure that she would not let the vessel fall. He watched her take the first sip and close her eyes in delight, before he remembered his own soup, and took it up, the first warm meal in what felt like months, but probably were only weeks. It not only smelled, but also tasted delicious and he instantly felt revived in a way that reminded him both of a warm fire and a smile on a cold winter evening and the refreshing coolness of a bath in the pond in the midst of summer heat.

She seemed to feel it too, for the corners of her lips tugged upwards slowly in the first hints of a sincere smile, not the hopeless grin that she had presented him so often with during their days of travelling, which she probably had only donned to reassure him. The dark shadows under her eyes and the puffiness of her skin were gone either, and though she was far from clean, just as he, she looked better than she had even back when he had woken up from incoherent, feverish dreams of demons of the Dark Tower torturing him, which had probably only been her tending to his wounds.

"We are making good time," he observed while she drank and when he remembered that she probably had no idea of how far they had come during their day's travels.

"I have expected nothing else." She tilted her head, then put the bowl aside. "But how are you?"

"I?" With all the Elven disdain, he had, much to his shame, forgotten that there was one person here who truly *cared* about him and how he felt, though why was beyond his understanding.

"Yes, you." She smiled a little.

"I am better with every day. The limp is still there, and all of it hurts, but riding instead

of walking, and the care of our rescuers, have made things much better."

She nodded. "I hope that you will keep nothing back... and that you can forgive me for driving you through the wilds so relentlessly. It was hell for you, and I am sorry that I had to force it on you."

"Do not be; even if you had not succeeded, I would have forgiven you. As it is, there is nothing for me to do but thank you for saving my life a second time."

"You have saved yourself, Boromir. I was only there to lead you."

She sounded and looked sincere, which, in his present state of mind, surprised him immensely, and simultaneously made him feel guilty. She still believed in him because she did not know what he had done, and his sense of honour demanded that he tell her with fierce determination. Nevertheless, he held his tongue and just smiled at her – he needed this, needed at least one person on the wide planes of Middle Earth who still believed in him, still respected him, because he himself could not. "Thank you."

She smiled and continued to sip at her soup in silence, looking out thoughtfully over the Anduin through the darkening evening. "You do know that I fully expected us to die when I lead us into the river?"

He nodded. "I did."

"And you still followed me?"

"Dying alone at the hand of the Orcs is a horrible fate, one that I wished neither on you nor on me."

The tears that suddenly shone in her eyes surprised him, and he did not know what to make of it as she swallowed heavily and turned away. "It is." Her voice sounded thick and heavy with pain, and now it was he who reached out to touch her cold, shaking fingers.

"I am sorry."

She sighed and roughly wiped away the few tears that had escaped to her cheeks with her sleeves. "Do not be; you are right, and I was glad that you were with me."

He laughed harshly, the emotion in his voice raw in the hope that he did not sound like the old woman he felt at the moment. "I was also glad not to be alone."

She seemed to understand and looked away thoughtfully before she turned back to him, staring at him in a manner that told him she was determined to speak of better tidings. "How long until we reach the borders of Lórien?"

Well, that was not the merry matter he had hoped to hear of, because he feared that he would see Galadriel again, be forced to face her piercing gaze again... if her people's behaviour was any indication, she already knew, but he thought there was still this tiny chance of hiding his disgrace, and part of him very much wanted to seize it. It would mean that Arnuias would not find out for what kind of man she had risked her life multiple times and even braved a band of Orcs for, and part of him wanted to tell his conscience that he did not want to do that to her... only that he knew that he had already, and that he was only making it worse by every day of silence. He shook his head slightly and pulled himself together, remembering her question. "Haldir spoke of about seven days until we reach the Nimrodel, maybe even less."

She nodded softly. "So you think there will be a chance for us to do good in this war?"

His eyebrows rose at their own volition. "You are going to fight?"

"If there is any chance to do so, yes." She looked surprised at his reaction. "Why?"

"Have you not done your part?"

She laughed harshly. "I have done my part many times over in the last fifteen years out in the Northern wilds, but I fear that knowing this is only a small consolation when those I love die because I do not fight at their side."

He knew not why he asked, but ask he did. "And is there one up North you love?"

The pain returned to her eyes immediately, and he then knew that it had been wrong of him to try prying such personal things from her. "My mother and my brother are still alive."

There was more to this than she told him, because there was the sadness of a previous loss in her eyes that he knew all too well from experience, since the time he had lost both his loving mother and his father on the same day, even though Denethor was still alive.

"I am sorry." He was not sorry for what she had told him, but for what she had omitted, and she seemed to understand, for she nodded softly.

"You could not stand by and let the world burn if you still drew breath, and I cannot either."

He was on the verge of telling her that he was a man and she a woman, and that this difference gave them different occupations and duties, but then he remembered the last weeks and what she had done for him, how she had kept him safe. He had known men back in Gondor, good men, capable men, in whose hands he would surely have died, and who would have shown less strength and bravery in the face of battle and certain death than she had. No, he had no right to belittle her, and tell her that there was no place for her in this war, for there was, and she had already claimed it.

"You are right... I could not." *But what else is it that you are doing now?* asked the nagging voice in the back of his head, the one he usually tried to either ignore or drone out, because it told him the truths he did not want to hear. *You have not even tried to fight for Gondor, but return to the relative safety of Lórien now, and even if you arrive there, healers will want to keep you, to tend to your injuries again. You will not fight, while she returns to the front. She even has new arrows already.*

The thought of her returning to the heat of the battle without him gnawed at him and took his peace of mind, though why, he could not understand. She had proven to be very capable of taking care of herself, so he should not be worried about her – but yet, he was, and very much so. *If she dies, you will carry this debt to the end of your life, no matter how long it will be. You do not want that, do you?*

She sighed softly and put her bowl aside. "Nevertheless, I have to admit that I am tired – the months in Lórien after I had explored the Misty Mountains and the pass of Caradhras were the first rest I had in years, and I have been from home for far too long. I want to breath the cold Northern air again before I die, I want to see the sun set over the Nenuial, and maybe I will even see the time when ships sail from Belfalas to the Grey Havens, and I will be on one of them."

"You will." He smiled.

"Either I will, or there will be more rest than I care for – the eternal kind."

The thought was none of those he cared to ponder longer, bringing their conversation to an end, and soon, both of them had fallen asleep on their blankets to rest, making up for the times they had lacked it.

Kapitel 9: Chapter Nine

Chapter Nine

March the 15th, Year 3019 of the Third Age.

The rode again together the next day, and now Arnuilas was awake behind him, making a much more enjoyable companion than before. While silent brooding was certainly suited to him and his temper, knowing that she was there, sitting behind him, pointing out the ruins of old settlements or the first flowers of the approaching spring to him, or just humming quietly, greatly improved his mood. That she was staying with him instead of joining the Elves, maybe even Haldir, improved his spirit even further, because in their trek of about thirty, she was the only one he cared about enough to actually talk to, and was comfortable doing so. But after all those weeks they had spent together, even silence between them was not awkward – they were both not very loquacious, and when they spoke, he enjoyed telling her of the South, and she was expanding his knowledge of the legends of both Númenor and the First and Second Age, which he had not studied as diligently as his father had wished when he was a boy.

From her mouth, in her soft voice dripping over his shoulder from behind, the tales suddenly held an interest he had not felt before, even those without great warriors and heroic battles. Maybe it was because she narrated them in a way totally different to that of his schoolmasters, with feeling and enthusiasm, and with a keen eye for the characters in them, their thoughts and motivations. He thoroughly enjoyed listening to her, and was faintly disappointed when the sun began to set and Haldir fell back to them, holding his horse next to theirs on a slightly wider strip of the path.

“Are you exhausted yet?”

They both answered in the negative, and the Elf nodded. “We will be riding on then. My heart is telling me that I have to return home soon, and we will only be resting briefly to eat before we continue again.”

He could feel her nod at his back, and Haldir called out to his people to halt. They had to content with *lembas* this evening and forego the pleasures of a warm meal, but Boromir had done without much more in the last weeks. When they returned to their horse after they had eaten, Arnuilas extended her hand and took the reins just when he wanted to, their fingers meeting on the leather. “Let me ride; you must be tired.”

His hand still held hers, unwilling to pull away because it would have admitted defeat, but the way she looked at him, nearly entreated him with her eyes to accept her generosity made him finally give in, though reluctantly. “If it is your wish.”

She smiled softly and leaned closer to him as his hand left hers, making sure none of their companions would hear her. “I know you are strong; you do not have to prove it to me every day.”

Her smile made it possible for him to take her words in jest, to ignore the barb they contained, but he felt their sting nevertheless. Did she think him so proud? Was she not appreciating his efforts to help her, to honour the service she had done to him? He sighed inwardly, but did not answer, not knowing what to say. Instead he stepped back, allowing her to mount, and then followed suit to sit behind her. Only now, with her in front of him, her body pressed against his and his arms around her waist, felt he that, though tall, she was not a broad woman, but rather slenderly built. He had not

remembered her as such from the time he had met her in Lórien, but maybe she had lost weight; who would not have after the trials they had been through, the long hours of walking and the lack of nourishment.

"Are you comfortable?" asked she from the front, and he nodded.

"Yes."

They continued into the night, at a slower pace than during the daylight hours, because their path, though better than before, was still treacherous and small, and the horses had to take care with their steps, just as they would have, had then been on foot. They only rested in the wee hours of the morning, before at dawn, after too little sleep, the Elves roused them again, so they could continue their travels at first light. Arnuilas insisted on taking the reins again, but after a few hours, he could feel her body relax, and, without waking her, he took over, enjoying the comfort of feeling her sleep in his arms.

March the 17th, Year 3019 of the Third Age.

When Boromir had departed their bedside the next morning, citing his need to refresh himself, she saw Haldir approach her, and smiled at the Marchwarden, her grudge soothed by time and their peaceful trek. "What is it?"

"I need to talk to you."

Her eyebrows rose, but she nevertheless followed him to the other side of their little encampment, not only away from Boromir, but also from the other Elves, and could easily guess the topic of their impending conversation.

"Are you going to tell me now what action of his makes you condemn him so?"

Haldir nodded. "We are nearing the Nimrodel, and before we can enter our lands, you must know the truth. Ten days after the Fellowship had left Lórien, the Lady Galadriel called me to Caras Galadhon and assigned me to travel South, for she had seen the Fellowship break and Boromir attempt to take the Ring of Power from the Ring-bearer."

She gasped, and could not avoid that her gaze travelled over Haldir's shoulder to Boromir, who stood next to their blankets, staring in their direction, with a steadily deepening frown on his face, and obviously very uncomfortable. But, to her own disdain, she could not bring herself to feel pity for his distress; she was too busy sorting all the pieces that now fell into place, furthering her new understanding of his character and actions in the last weeks. This was what had bothered him so, had driven him to tell her that it would have been better had he not lived, why he had seemed so preoccupied when he had asked for Frodo... *So much guilt*, she thought as if feeling it all for herself, and sighed heavily.

"So this is his treachery."

"It is. Lady Galadriel has seen it, and sent us out, looking for those of the Fellowship that might not have survived the breaking of it. I fear that she has not seen your intervention, though. You have saved his life, have you not?"

"I have."

Haldir sighed heavily. "Maybe it would have been better had he died; he could have rested in what little peace he will find after what he has done, and I would not be forced to decide what to do with him now."

"What to do with him?"

"I will not let him cross the Nimrodel and enter the soil of the Naith."

She clenched her jaw, feeling her resolve strengthen despite what Haldir had just told

her. "I have told you once, and I will tell you again, I will not leave him unless I know he is safe. No matter what he has done, he is alive, and he deserves a chance to redeem himself, but he cannot, if he dies in the wilds. He hides it well, but he is still in pain, and his wounds will never mend properly if he is not treated, and soon."

She knew that she took a risk in saying this, and Haldir frowned. "You are still speaking out for him after all he has done?"

"I am." She was nearly surprised to hear herself, but felt the truth of her words as much as Haldir did. "I do not know what has driven him to do what he has, to commit such treachery against all Free Peoples of Middle Earth, but I have seen him, Haldir, in a way you have not and never will. He *suffers* for what he has done, he suffers and longs to redeem himself, and..." She closed her eyes and swallowed, remembering what she had thought would be their last moments in the high branches of an Oak tree. "Even though you might not see it, he is a good man, Haldir, and he deserves a chance... to heal, and to do whatever good he may to erase the stain on his honour his treachery has left. I will vouch for him."

"Lórien is at war, and those who cannot fight have fled to the woods. This is where we would send him, if he indeed were allowed to cross the river. You would have to escort him there, to ensure that he does not harm those of ours who are without defence."

She swallowed harshly. Even now, her forced idleness and inaction were grating on her nerves, making her feel useless and coward, and this feeling would only grow in the days, maybe even weeks, months or years that would pass until Lórien was at peace again, or the Galadhrim could decide what to do with Boromir. But still... she was his only chance, or he would be doomed to near certain death.

"So be it."

Haldir looked at her thoughtfully, until he softly nodded. "I see that you are willing, but consider this: He is a proud man, and yet he feels his debt to you keenly. You will only add to it, and there is a limit to the obligations he can stand. It might make him resent you, despite all that you have done."

She frowned, wondering how he had gained this surprising insight into Boromir's mind she should have considered herself, but finally only shrugged. "It might, and maybe it will, but you know as well as I that I do not do this to gain his services."

"You and I might know, but does he? Have you not seen how he looks at you, how he tries to ease your burden?"

She looked over his shoulder again, to the man she had spent so many hours with, and thought of the many instances he had tried to help her, those she had not noticed before... the night he had let her sleep, not waking her, though she had expected it and later berated him for it, and sighed.

"I have, Haldir, and I will consider your warning."

He did not seem fully content with her answer, but yet seemed to have no need or desire to carry his point any further. "Then he is allowed to enter our lands, and you will retreat to the woods with him, away from ours, until the Lord and Lady of the Galadhrim can decree his fate."

"I will." She felt the slow trickling of fear in her stomach as she told him so, a feeling that was entirely new for her, at least where Boromir was concerned. Haldir's revelation and, more so, his cautioning words, had made her wary of his presence, and even though she felt ashamed for it, the thought of staying with him in the woods, alone, was not very appealing. Yes, their tempers had not clashed in the long time they had spent together, something that had surprised her immensely, for the weeks

and months she had often passed without talking to a friendly soul had made her sometimes wary of human company, but then, he had been weak and injured, and did not resent her, as Haldir had insinuated could happen. It would be different with him being in good health – despite her strength, despite her reflexes, he was still a tall, imposing man, and a formidable warrior. If he intended to hurt her and the Galadhrim, there would be little she could do about it.

Haldir seemed to sense her doubts, for they mirrored on his own, beautiful features, but looking like he remembered something, he reined himself in just as he was about to speak, and instead turned, leaving her to return to her travelling companion, who, by now, watched her with a clouded mien.

“What did he want?”

“He said that we are approaching Lórien.” It was not a lie, and yet, he seemed to feel that she had not told him the complete truth either, for he looked doubtful, and the heavy silence that descended upon them did not lift the whole day. They did not speak despite the barest necessities, and she tried to sleep to rest for her leg of riding, but even that failed, as her whirling thoughts and feelings refused to come to a halt, even when she commanded them to. When, at first, she had considered him a mystery, one she longed to unravel, she now wished that she had not found out, that she could continue to hold him in the high esteem she had felt for him during the weeks when he had recovered. Now, she asked herself if she could trust him, if she even wanted to trust him, or if he would betray her at the first opportunity as he had done with those that had relied on his friendship and strength for an endeavour so much greater than her insignificant dreams and fears.

March the 19th, Year 3019 of the Third Age.

After one day and one night, her silence began to grate on his nerves. He knew not what had happened, could only strongly suspect that it had something to do with her conversation with Haldir that fateful morning, but he felt fear gripping his heart ever since he had returned from the river and saw her looking at him with such... fear? Disdain? Mistrust? He did not know, and part of him did not want to find out, hoped that time would return them to their previous state of easy companionship, but he doubted that this would happen. Something had changed irrevocably between them, he could easily feel it in the way she held herself rigidly behind him in the saddle, did now allow herself to relax against his body and sleep as she had done previously. Oddly, he missed the feeling of it, and the place where her head had rested against his back felt unusually cool as they rode day and night, their Elven guides obviously intent on reaching Lórien in better time than Haldir had estimated. He could feel his still recovering body resent the exertion, but was too proud to ask Arnuias to take his place, even when the path before him fell into hazy darkness and the Elven stead was forced to find its way on its own during the course of the evening.

It was only hours later, when a slender hand touched his forearm in a gesture of familiarity that bittersweetly remembered their former closeness that he jerked his head upwards again. “What is it?”

“Watch out.” Her voice was only a pained whisper as she gestured towards the night sky over the receding tree line, and then he saw the black smoke dance in the reddish light of burning fires. “The Golden Forest is burning.”

Their Elven companions had not missed the signs either, and even though Boromir did not speak their tongue, he could hear their love for their home and the pain they felt

on its destruction in their mournful cries. He sped his horse, as their group had picked up speed, was racing through the last trees, and as they left the forest, they could see the fires in the distance, the burning pyres of mellyrn and the swathes of destruction breaking into the golden canopy of leaves. "Ai!" cried Haldir before them. Even from the single syllable, his pain was just as palpable as that of his companions, and even though he was not fond of him, Boromir could understand his pain better than he cared for. Sauron's iron fist had long ago reached the woods and meadows of Gondor, but he still remembered his anger when he first saw Orcs sully the beauties of Ithilien. Haldir halted his horse, and Boromir approached him. "My heart told me to hasten my steps, and yet have I been to late. I should have defended the Naith instead of riding South."

"By Lórien has not yet fallen," replied Boromir, seeing the golden light that still opposed the darkness longing to seep over the river from the fortress of Dol Guldur, and being surprised by his own words of comfort. "What was lost can be reclaimed, what was destroyed be built again, and, in time, Lórien might return to its former glory."

Haldir sighted deeply. "I fear that time is what Lórien does not have, even if the Dark Lord should be brought down; but now we must hurry, or the forces of the enemy will find us before we can join that battle and help defend what is dear to us."

They rode hard, harder than in all the days and nights of their travels north, though Elf, Man and horse were tired, rushing to pass the Northernmost edge of the field Field of Celebrant, and hoping that it were not many Orcs that had made their way into the edge between the three rivers. But their promises of safety were in vain, for as they approached what used to be the southern border of the woods of Lórien, they found Orcs and Goblins cutting, burning and pillaging the beautiful trees which had only been hinting at the first salute of spring. Boromir found them beautiful even toppled and torn to pieces, and knew that the Elves would mourn them, and would have done so now had they not been under attack by the forces of Sauron.

Boromir had seen Legolas fight, who was a strong and capable warrior, one he would always like to see at his side in battle, but Haldir was different. He rode front, coaxing his exhausted horse to even more speed, sword drawn and upraised, and the Orcs that found themselves in his path fled his presence, and dared not approach even as the Elven warriors and Arnuilas at his back showered arrows down on them, killing plenty. But no matter how bravely the Elves fought, their battle was still a retreat, no excursion, and as soon as Haldir had seen the last of his companions pass into the woods, he turned, the near palpable glow of his power vanishing, and followed them onto the hidden paths of the Galadhrim the Orcs had not discovered.

Even in the growing darkness of the forest, Boromir could see that not all of their party had made it to safety. A quick count revealed that at least two Elves and one horse were missing, but they were not of immediate concern to him; he was worried for the woman behind him, and as soon as Haldir called them to a halt, he turned as much as he could in the saddle. "Are you injured?" His breath was still ragged, and he had to press out the words, but at that moment, he cared not.

He heard her exhale with force and felt her draw nearer to his back, her voice a mere whisper in his ear. "I am not. You?"

Breathing a sigh of relief, he shook his head, and she quietly pressed his arm, waiting in silence as Haldir assessed the state of his troops, finding what Boromir had already seen, before they continued through the darkness of the night until they reached the river of Celebrant. Even in the dim starlight, Boromir could see that its clear, cold

waters were now marred with the blood of what Boromir hoped were Orcs, not Elves, and they dismounted as Haldir approached them and bade them to follow him down to the river. His whistle, clear and loud, echoed through the night, and nearly instantly, an Elven woman, clad in the grey garb of Lórien, appeared at the other side of the river from the dark shadows, only visible when she moved. She cried out in Elven, and Haldir answered, but even though he wanted to know what was spoken of, he dared not ask Arnuilas to translate, until Haldir turned to face them again. "Our ways must part now."

Arnuilas nodded, like she had expected him to say that, and again, he wondered what she and Haldir had talked of two days back. "I will go East, to defend Caras Galadhon against the threat from the East, and you will travel to the heart of the forest, where our people hide from the dangers of war."

Boromir looked up in surprise. Nobody had told him of this plan – he wanted to fight, to redeem himself by dying protecting the Elves of Lothlórien, though probably, from what he had seen just now, they had no need for his hand on a sword that was not even his own. And that Arnuilas would not go to the front, when she had told him that she longed for her idleness to end, was another mystery to him – why would she do such a thing, let herself be hidden away like a child or a feeble, old woman? That was so unlike her that it increased his worry. Maybe she had been injured? Maybe she was not as fine as she seemed, and there was something he had missed...

"Please." Arnuilas stepped forward and touched his arm, her blue eyes looking up at him entreatingly, and he swallowed his pride and his protest, and nodded at Haldir tensely.

The Elf turned to face Arnuilas. "Are you sure of this?"

"I am."

"Then it is settled. You will have to leave your mount behind, as it cannot cross the river, and continue on foot." Both he and Arnuilas nodded, and then watched as Haldir and the woman swiftly constructed a hovering bridge like the one he had crossed the Celebrant on the last time. When they were finished, Arnuilas stepped forward and clasped Haldir's arm, then, after some whispered words in Elven he did not understand, released it, eyes dark and grave in the receding light, as the Elf turned to him. "Farewell, Boromir, son of Denethor, until we meet again in these uncertain times."

"Farewell." His mouth was parchment-dry as he nodded, watching Cilian be led away by the Elves, and he heard Arnuilas sigh next to him, before she climbed the rope to cross the river. Boromir followed her, more hesitantly, as the pain in his shoulder and his limp, pronounced now after so many hours of riding, hindered him, but they nevertheless made it to the other side, and silently watched Haldir on the other side disconnect the ropes from the trees.

After his work was complete, he stood, raising his hand in one last greeting, before turning away and leading his group towards Caras Galadhon, where the golden light of Lady Galadriel's power was still opposing the forces of Dol Guldur. Boromir longed to join him, but for reasons he could not understand, his path was a different one, and he and Arnuilas followed their Elven guide into the golden darkness and silence of the woods.